

Kill all Goblins! A critical view on Tutorials in Video Games

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Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Creation of Goblin Smasher	3
2.1	Visuals	3
2.2	Level Design	4
2.3	Gameplay	5
2.4	Sound Design	6
2.5	The Tutorial	6
2.6	Restart?	7
3	Reflection	7
A	Third party assets	10
A.1	Sprites and Animation	10
A.2	Audio	10
A.3	Fonts	10

1 Introduction

I chose this course as a small side quest from my main path of becoming a game programmer. While I still wanted to apply my programming skills, I was also interested in exploring the unconventional sides of game design. When we were introduced to critical design, I was especially inspired by the idea that “critical games use the medium to critique the medium” as described by Grace(2014). This concept really sparked my creativity. I liked the idea of challenging established game conventions and playing with player expectations. One convention that stood out to me was how killing in games is often treated as just another gameplay mechanic. In contrast, taking another human life in reality is one of the most morally serious actions imaginable. Spec Ops: The Line (Yager Development, 2012) tackles this contradiction head-on, giving players an experience of what Jørgensen(2016) describes as “positive discomfort”. It forces players to confront the emotional and ethical weight of their in-game actions. On the other hand, this issue is also addressed in a more tongue-in-cheek way in Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End (Naughty Dog, 2016), where players can earn an achievement titled “Ludonarrative Dissonance” after killing 1,000 enemies. This ironic reward highlights the gap between Nathan Drake’s character as a relatable, good-hearted hero in the story, and his absurdly high body count during gameplay.

In the paper ”Critical Games: Critical Design in Independent Games” Grace discusses a game called The Visit (Marius Fietzek et al., 2012). The game plays with the player’s expectations in platformers, where jumping on enemies is typically the standard way to defeat them. In The Visit, you encounter a crab very early on, and if you jump on it, the crab dies. As a consequence, the player is taken to court and sent to jail. I really appreciated how the game breaks this common convention in 2D platformers and encourages the player to feel bad for doing something that usually goes unquestioned in games. That idea inspired me to create something similar. As an amusing side note, the game was developed during a Game Jam in Stuttgart, Germany, which is very close to my home town and also where I completed my bachelor’s degree. So I have a bit of a personal bias in favour of this game.

As I continued thinking about the idea of challenging the common convention in video games that killing during levels has no real meaning, I came up with a new direction: breaking a player expectation that appears right at the beginning of many games, the tutorial. My idea was to present a standard tutorial where the game explains the controls and the player is expected to follow the instructions. Among these instructions is a command to attack. The twist is that this instruction is not mandatory. The game can be completed without following it, allowing the player to take a more pacifist approach. However, if the player chooses to follow the command, it triggers a battle that forces them into a cycle of killing. At the end of the level, the player will then find themselves in a burning village with the families and friends of the just-killed enemies. Which should bring the player into a moral questioning of their actions.

2 Creation of Goblin Smasher

The creation of games is always an intense experience. Even for small games like this I really like to shift my focus to only doing this one project. That's why I choose to develop the game during the Nordic Game Jam. This also had the positive side effect that I was able to let people test the game during and after the jam.



Figure 1: Goblin Smasher title image

I chose the Godot game engine for implementation. It is the engine I have the most experience in and because I knew this would be a solo project I did not want to spend time on learning a new technology.

2.1 Visuals



Figure 2: Goblin corpse after the goblin was defeated by the player

I wanted to give this game a very generic feeling to shift the focus away from its moral message. That starts with the title, Goblin Smasher. I mean, how more bluntly can you describe a game about killing goblins? The idea of using a fantasy setting with knights and goblins mainly came from the asset pack I chose to use. Since I'm not an artist myself, I rely on pre-made assets to make my games look decent. In this case, I used an asset pack created by PixelFrog (App. A.1), who made these fantastic sprites. The cute, cheerful look of the art style also gave me another idea. By combining that visual style with violent gameplay, I could create a stronger contrast. That's why I decided to modify one of the animations to make the death of a goblin look more gory (Fig. 2). My idea here was to instantly give the player a bad feeling when killing the first goblin in the tutorial. As the player continues and kills more goblins, the world slowly turns into a blood-soaked battlefield, which in my opinion helps reinforce that uncomfortable atmosphere. Another small visual detail that ties into the idea that the goblins aren't the bad guys is the way they behave. As long as the player doesn't attack them, they won't even draw their weapons (Fig. 3). That's meant to make it even clearer that the player is the one who starts the conflict.

2.2 Level Design



Figure 3: Level design of the farm area

For the level design, I wanted to create a cosy-looking world. The player walks through bright green meadows filled with trees and small mushrooms scattered around. I also added little points of interest to give the world some context. For example, right at the beginning near the hut, there's a small field that looks like it's being farmed. That's meant to imply that the goblin standing

nearby is just a farmer. Later in the game, if the violent path is taken, one of the goblins will actually mention that. The most important part of the level design is the two different versions of the goblin village (Fig. 4). Here is where the player gets confronted with their actions. Depending on whether the peaceful or the violent path was chosen the village will change. In the destroyed version of the village, everything is burning and some huts are completely destroyed. The goblins will yell at the player about how cruel their actions were and that they killed the families and friends of the goblins remaining in the village. On the other side of figure 4 the peaceful version of the village can be observed. The Goblins are welcoming the player with greetings and happiness. Now there are also more goblins in the camp as they have not gone out trying to kill the player.

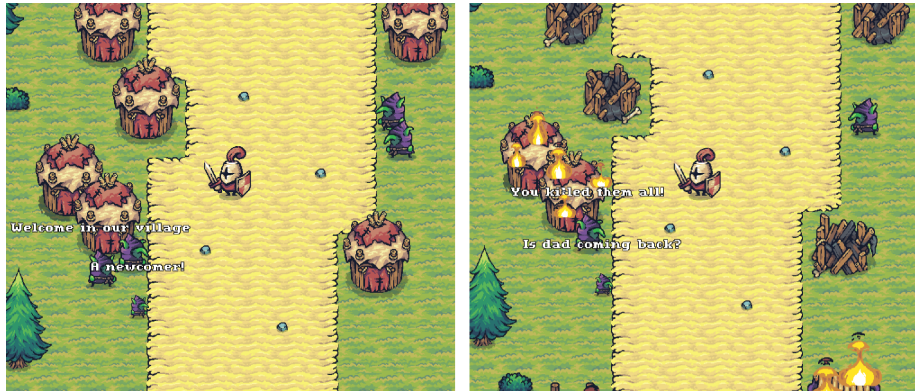


Figure 4: Comparison goblin village destroyed and peaceful

2.3 Gameplay

The gameplay of Goblin Smasher centres around a simple combat system. The player can move the character using the "WASD" keys and perform a dash in the current movement direction using the space bar. Attacks are executed with the "K" key. When the player chooses to attack the goblin standing in the tutorial area, in the next stage, a wave system is triggered, spawning goblins over time. The amount of goblins is limited to a specific number of enemies, and once all goblins are defeated, the next area becomes accessible. Goblins require three hits to be defeated, while the player character is invincible. This was a deliberate design choice meant to emphasize the disparity in power between the player and the enemies and again adds to the premise that the player is the evil force when choosing the violent path. When a goblin manages to hit the player, it only results in a knockback effect accompanied by a muffled sound, suggesting that the player is wearing heavy armour. To make combat feel more fluid, short dashes were added in the direction of attacks. The attack system uses a two-hit animation, which contributes to a smoother and more satisfying

visual experience. When a goblin is hit, it flashes visually and a hit sound plays to provide clear and immediate feedback to the player. As I wanted to be as close as possible to games of a similar nature (Top-down action games), I implemented a small dash to pace up the gameplay. Although as already mentioned the player does not need to dodge enemy hits, which means the full purpose of this dash is to make the movement more engaging and fun. The combat system was one of the first things I implemented and I let people from the Game Jam try it out. In this testing, the goblins spawned infinitely and I could observe how players just continued killing the goblins even without a reason for it. Which proved to me that the combat system in itself was engaging enough for this prototype.

2.4 Sound Design

With the music, I wanted to communicate a clear change in mood throughout the game. At the start, a cheerful fantasy soundtrack plays, creating a warm and inviting feeling. But once the player hits the first goblin, the tone shifts. Combat music begins to play to signal a more intense and action-focused gameplay experience. Combined with the bloody death animation, this moment is meant to show the player that something in the world has changed, and the mood is now more centred around combat. After defeating all the goblins and entering the goblin village, the music changes again. A sinister soundtrack starts playing to create a much darker atmosphere. Together with the sounds of burning buildings, this sets the feeling that something evil has taken place. The player quickly finds out that this evil is themselves. If the pacifist path is chosen instead, the cheerful fantasy music continues to play the whole time, which in my opinion gives the game a cosy and peaceful exploration vibe.

2.5 The Tutorial



Figure 5: Tutorial prompts

A key point of this prototype is to create a critical view of how we, as players, interact with tutorials. That's why I wanted to put a special focus on how the tutorial is designed. My goal was to keep the tutorial as free as possible, meaning there are no gameplay restrictions or features that only get unlocked later. The player can do everything right from the start, and the instructions are communicated through small prompts placed on the ground. I chose this

approach because I wanted to give the players full freedom in how they interact with the game. The different prompts used to explain the mechanics can be seen in figure 5. Picture one and two (Fig. 5) show how movement is introduced through two simple text prompts placed along the player's walking path. In the last image, the command to attack is shown. What I want to highlight here is that the tutorial never explicitly tells the player to kill the goblin. It only explains that the "K" key is used for attacking. I intentionally placed the goblin directly above the prompt to imply that they should be attacked, but as discussed earlier, this is not necessary. The player can simply walk past the goblin and still finish the level.

2.6 Restart?

If the player continues walking through the village, they will eventually reach a prompt that says "Restart?" (see figure 6). I added this end screen to subtly suggest that there is more to the game. The question mark in particular is meant to invite the player to reflect on their actions and consider why the world responded the way it did. At this point, the player can press any key to restart the game. The character will then respawn at the beginning of the tutorial area, giving the player a new opportunity to explore and possibly choose a different path.



Figure 6: End screen asking the player if they want to restart the game

3 Reflection

I'm really happy with the outcome of this little prototype. I managed to include all the details I wanted and polish the experience. Even though my art skills are quite limited, I was pleased with the visual appearance thanks to a great asset pack that I was able to work with very effectively. If I were to continue working on a game like this, I would probably prefer to involve an artist to help with visuals or focus on improving my pixel art skills myself. Using Godot

made it easy to quickly build a working proof of concept and iterate on it. I didn't run into many issues during development. There was only one problem when I used a plugin for enemy AI, which ended up bloating my codebase. In the end, I decided to remove it completely and build the enemy state machines myself, which turned out to be the better solution. As I mentioned earlier, about 90% of the game was created during the Nordic Game Jam. This gave me the chance to have people test the game while it was still in development, and I also got to show it at the final showcase. Seeing how people interacted with the prototype, especially during the showcase, was incredibly valuable. At that point, the end screen (Fig. 6) wasn't implemented yet, and people were a bit confused when the game suddenly restarted. So I started asking them, "Why do you think the goblins attacked you?" Most didn't really have an answer and just assumed that's how the game was supposed to work. When I explained that it was actually their action that started everything, many were surprised and immediately wanted to try the pacifist path instead. That moment inspired the idea of adding the end screen to subtly communicate that there's more to the game than what they just experienced. Another interesting observation was that out of 10 testers, only 1 person chose not to kill the goblin on their first try. I really enjoyed seeing how differently people interacted with my game and how their eyes lit up once they realized they could have made a completely different choice. To me, critical design in video games is a powerful way to make players question their actions. Breaking the rules of well-known gameplay conventions can reveal how we, as players, engage with games and how much we assume about a game before even playing it. This prototype is a small example of that. It challenges the idea that we just follow tutorials without thinking about what we are being told to do. While this is a more extreme example, since it involves a choice between life and death, I believe this approach can also work in less serious designs. Games that break conventions, even without a moral message, can still create memorable and meaningful experiences. That's something I appreciate in games: when a familiar mechanic is presented with a new twist that makes it feel fresh and exciting.

References

- Grace, L. (2014). Critical Games: Critical Design in Independent Games. <https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.2607.3603>
- Jørgensen, K. (2016). The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line. *Game Studies*, 16(2). <https://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/jorgensenkristine>
- Marius Fietzek, Benedikt Hummel, & Irina Gross. (2012, January). The Visit.
- Naughty Dog. (2016). Uncharted 4: A Thief's End.
- Yager Development. (2012, June). Spec Ops: The Line.

A Third party assets

A.1 Sprites and Animation

- Tiny Swords, by Pixelfrog
<https://pixelfrog-assets.itch.io/tiny-swords>

A.2 Audio

- Soundly: The Complete Sound Effect Platform, by Soundly AS
<https://getsoundly.com>
- Fantasy Game, by Epicstockmedia
<https://www.gamedevmarket.net/asset/fantasy-game-9226>

A.3 Fonts

- Bitmap font - Romulus, by Pix3M
<https://www.deviantart.com/pix3m/art/Bitmap-font-Romulus-380739406>
- Pixelcastle, by Leonhard Katschner
<https://myfontlib.com/font/pixelcastle-font>