



DUNGEON CRAWLER

Genre Summary and Analysis

- Games of within this genre are generally characterized by players exploring through a complex series of semi-linear levels often made up of different rooms with varying floor layouts. These rooms often must be cleared or navigated through for the player to progress, and contain a variety of challenges and rewards:
 - A series of enemy combatants in these rooms that will attempt to stop the player's progression through the level and to test player skill and provide challenge.
 - Traps or obstacles that the player is rewarded for navigating through, or is forced to navigate around as an extra element of challenge when fighting enemies
 - Rewards in the form of power-ups or resources, either permanent or temporary, that will give the player greater ability to progress through the level.
 - Narrative, worldbuilding elements, or other collectable objects that increase the player's knowledge about the game or provide a hint or physical key connected to other puzzles in the level.
- Many examples in the genre feature a top down or isometric camera view, looking down on the action from above and playing primarily on the x axis and z axis.
- They also tend to borrow core aspects of other genres to add flavor or a unique twist, like the “stat leveling” based combat and progression elements of Role-Playing games or the dangerous terrain and movement / jumping challenges of Platforming games.

ESSENTIAL GAME ELEMENTS

- Multiple levels or worlds with varying aesthetics and themes that make up the “Dungeon” - different unique or upgraded enemies and mechanical challenges in each variety of level.
- Mix of puzzles, traps, and enemies that challenges players to learn combat patterns and timing of player actions or movements to succeed.
- Challenging “Boss” enemy at the end of each level that must be defeated to progress, usually incorporating a skill test based on the specific mechanics introduced or used widely in the level.
- Unique characters, weapons, or ability options that change the general game/combat mechanics and allows players different ways to express how they play and visualize their character.
- Rewards of items or resources that strengthen the player either temporarily or permanently, or that allow for aesthetic customization. This increase in power tends to allow the player to slowly progress further into the game with each play session.



VARIATIONS AND HOOKS



- “Roguelike” mechanics in the game - involving procedurally generated levels or enemy layouts that change each time the player loses - are increasingly popular in this genre and allow for increased replayability.

{HADES, ROGUE LEGACY, ENTER THE GUNGEON, BINDING OF ISAAC}

- Multiplayer cooperative play - allowing players to enter the same level instance and complete the challenges within as a team. Scoring elements can allow players to compete while working together, seeing who can get the highest score.

{GAUNTLET, HEROES OF HAMMERWATCH, NOBODY SAVES THE WORLD}

- A unique example of this lets extra players control the enemies in order to defeat the main player and take their place, creating a more competitive experience {CRAWL}
- Turn-based Combat can replace the more classic Real-time Combat - This shifts the required player skills from faster paced correctly timed reactions and pattern matching - to slower paced methodical planning ahead, setting up ability or positioning synergies, and strategizing with maximum resource efficiency.

{SLAY THE SPIRE, GLOOMHAVEN, DARKEST DUNGEON}

USER GENERATED CONTENT OPPORTUNITIES

- One of the more common forms of user generated content in Dungeon Crawlers tend to be player created Dungeons and Levels.
 - An in-game Level Editor allows the Player to set up rooms and terrain obstacles of various sizes and shapes, and to choose where monsters, traps, and rewards are placed
 - These custom levels can be uploaded to an online database where they can be accessed and player by other players.
 - Fun and engaging levels can be rated to allow them to appear to other players more often, whereas poorly made or intentionally unfun levels can be reported and appear less frequently.
- Players can design costumes or outfits for specific character classes or unique weapons and armor they find through playing the game that can be freely uploaded to a virtual marketplace for other players to use freely or purchase for in game currency.
- A more simple form of user content is to allow players to share or upload high scores or fast level completion times to an online database accessible by other players. This allows players to nominally compete against other player's fastest times or highest scores.

WHAT MAKES DUNGEON CRAWLERS FUN?

The most engaging aspects of these games are the ways in which they challenge a player's skill with the core combat or game mechanics, incentivize exploration of the level, and reward the player with greater power or new mechanics and playstyles.

- It feels inherently good to struggle against an enemy or trap type and use perception and pattern recognition to learn what the enemy does and in what ways the player can change their approach in order to defeat that enemy consistently and progress through the game.
- Learning how levels are laid out and using that to the player's advantage rewards the player's increasing game knowledge and gives the feeling of increased competency. Designing small clues players can exploit that lead them to hidden rooms or shortcuts rewards the player for that knowledge competency and keen perception.
- Feeling like the player is getting consistently or statistically stronger through the rewards they gain based off of competency with the above aspects builds into the game's power fantasy and creates a challenge/risk and reward loop. New ways to play (special unlocked weapons or character classes) increases replayability by allowing the player to learn new mechanics and combat patterns and gives an increased sense of personal investment by allowing them to organically discover their preferred playstyle.

BEST OPPORTUNITIES FOR GAMES IN THIS GENRE

- **Stronger Narrative Mechanics** - games in this genre are typically more focused on combat mechanics and moment to moment gameplay, but there are up and coming examples that has achieved critical success and included strong character and world narratives. These increase player engagement and furthering the story can be a strong incentive towards player progression in tandem with rewards that increase the player's power. - {HADES, BOYFRIEND DUNGEON, DEATH'S DOOR}
- **Different Camera Perspectives** - there are some old classics that use a first person camera perspective, and there is a lot of love and nostalgia for these games. With modern, higher fidelity graphics there's good space in this niche for new games and mechanics. - {RETURNAL, LEGEND OF GRIMROCK}
- **Level Creation and Customization** - there are a few games that allow players to create Dungeons, but not many that do it exceptionally well. While difficult to implement, this level creation aspect allows for players to express their creativity and provide a deep well of additional user generated content. - {SUPER DUNGEON MAKER, DUNGEON KEEPER}
- **Multiplayer Integration** - there are some great classic and modern examples of multiplayer implementation in this genre, and connecting with friends and working together is a strong replayability incentive to come back and finish what the players started together. There is design space to be explored in competitive multiplayer aspects, giving players control of enemies and traps, in order to test their skills against each other and incentivize replayability in order to become more skilled and best your friends. - {GAUNTLET, CRAWL, HEROES OF HAMMERWATCH}

NOTABLE EXAMPLES WITH EXCEPTIONAL GAME PROGRESSION

- HADES - It does an expert job as seamlessly mixing a compelling narrative with straightforward game mechanics, teaching you how to play the game better and unlocking new weapons and abilities as you also uncover more details about the characters and story of the world.
- ROGUE LEGACY 2 - This game has simple mechanics that expand and unlock in a really satisfying way. The more complex character classes unlock as you gain more resources in each dungeon run, and new areas are connected to special mechanics that allow you to explore them better as you master them.
- DIABLO (SERIES) - These games are well tuned to keep enemies and encounters challenging even as you progress further in the game's story. There is a constant steady climb in power and difficulty that always leaves the player feeling like they are powerful at the end of a major level, and then increasing the difficulty in the next to force the player to continue getting better at using the mechanics and abilities the game provides.



Takeaways - Most of the exceptional examples in the genre have at least a reasonably compelling story or characters as an overarching incentive to complete the whole game. They do a great job as introducing the main mechanics and gameplay loop quickly and then slowly expanding and adding to those mechanics organically as the player gets further in the game and becomes stronger. Skill tests to unlock new abilities are great for teaching an added mechanic, and having a training mode or option to learn how to use more distinct weapons or abilities is always welcome. They should always strike a balance between being too easy and being too hard.

FUTURE OF THE DUNGEON CRAWLER

- These days Dungeon Crawling elements are often being mixed with other genres of games. The basic building blocks (levels with enemies and traps and loot) are flexible enough to fit well with many other genres of games. Add a resource gathering and building can take the place of typical leveling up and allow the player to exercise more creativity. Add complex characters to find and talk to in the dungeon and you creating compelling narrative hooks through game elements found in Dating Simulations. Change the camera to first person and add shooting / aiming elements to open up the design space for types of enemies, traps, and player power ups.
- More procedural generation will continue to add to the general replayability for this genre. There are already many games that include randomly generated aspects to the point where they themselves have developed into their own minor genre - “Roguelikes.” The use of random generation allows the Dungeon and enemies within to feel different and unique each playthrough. Randomized temporary power ups and abilities allow the player to explore / craft more interesting power fantasies and ability combinations that can break the game in fun ways without being unbalanced, since these usually reset between playthroughs. The more advanced procedural generation becomes, the more variety and replayability these games can have.

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