

3rd Person Melee Combat in 3D Games

Research Document

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Introduction

This research document aims to enhance game designers' understanding of crafting engaging and rewarding melee combat systems and mechanics for third-person 3D games. It begins with an analysis of several successful titles where third-person melee combat serves as a central mechanic, examining the strengths and weaknesses of each game in delivering enjoyable gameplay and ensuring responsive, satisfying controls. Following this analysis, the document identifies commonalities across these games, highlighting key standards for designing effective melee combat systems while also showcasing opportunities for innovation and improvement within the genre. Finally, the document concludes with recommendations for choosing an approach with designing and developing a 3rd person melee combat system, based on the insights gained from the analysis.

Analysis of 3rd Person Melee Combat Systems

Elden Ring

FromSoftware's Elden Ring is famous for having difficult but rewarding melee combat systems, with fighting being the core element of the game. Elden Ring allows players to customize builds and fighting styles quite extensively, leaving room for creativity and skill expression. Regardless of choice of combat style, all melee combat builds will include the ability to perform a certain set of attacks with various defensive options.

Attack

Attack	Description
Light Attacks	Lowest damage but with the highest attack speed. Light attacks can be used consecutively to perform combos with different attack animations.
Heavy (Charged) Attacks	A slower, higher damage attack which will allow the player to charge and release it for higher damage at the opportune time.
Jump Attacks	Jump attacks can be performed by jumping and light attacking while in the air.
Skill Attack and Ashes of War	Skills are weapon-specific attacks which can sometimes be substituted with Ashes of War. Ashes of War are skills which can be utilized with a variety of weapons, allowing for more

	customization of combat choices. Some weapons cannot have Ashes of War equipped, however, and are made to only be used with the available skill.
Critical Hits	Critical hits can be performed when an enemy's stance is broken, where the player will need to then attack on a specific spot to perform a critical hit.

Defense

Defensive Ability	Description
Dodge Rolling	A defensive ability which allows you to dodge any attack if executed at the right time. The animation speed will change based on the carrying capacity, where heavy loads will lead to slower rolls.
Jumping	Jumping is a less common method of dodging, but can be used to dodge low attacks, as the bottom part of the player's collider will be disabled during the jump.
Parrying	This can only be done with shields. If timed correctly with an enemy's attack, parrying will break the enemy's stance.
Guard Counter	This can only be done when holding a weapon with both hands. Instead of having to time a block with the enemy's attack, guard counter can be triggered when successfully blocking an enemy's attack by holding guard.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths

- Satisfying movement and intuitive camera controls
- Variety of weapons and combat styles
 - Good adaptability for player preferences
- High skill expression
 - Learning enemy attack patterns and dodging/attacking based on the patterns
 - Fast reactions and risk vs reward gameplay

Weaknesses

- Attack types can be unbalanced (e.g. Jump attacks are usually better than heavy attacks)
 - Leads to spamming of strongest attack, especially in boss fights

- Players will tend to spam the dodge roll ability as the game fails to teach you how other defensive abilities can be useful.
- Some skills and Ashes of War feel useless, leading to complete neglect of them.

Conclusion

Elden Ring has a strong, satisfying combat system with a wide variety of weapons and customization options. The game allows for choosing several ways of attacking and defending according to the situation, but players will often find themselves prioritizing one option due to imbalance.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild & Tears of the Kingdom

The Nintendo Switch's exclusive installations of The Legend of Zelda as open world RPGs introduced unique combat mechanics that raised the bar for player skill expression. The two games push players into using a variety of weapons due to them having limited durability apart from the master sword.

Attack

Players can perform a good variety of attacks which are dependent on input, weapon type, and situation.

Attack	Description
Light attack	Pressing and releasing the attack button will perform a light attack, a quick attack with the equipped weapon. Attack combos can be done if the attack is performed consecutively.
Spin (charge) attack	Performed by holding down the attack button and releasing it while holding a single-handed weapon. Releasing the button will create a spin attack, damaging all enemies hit by the attack.
Great spin attack	Performed by holding down the attack button while holding a two-handed weapon apart from Spears and few other special weapons. This attack makes the player continuously spin and hit enemies while the button is held and the player has stamina. When the button is released or when the player runs out of Stamina, the attack will end in slamming down the weapon,

	creating a shockwave and damaging enemies hit by the shockwave.
Spear charged attack	Performed by holding down the attack button and releasing it while holding a spear. This will make the spear quickly thrust forward with good range.
Flurry Rush	Can only be performed after executing a perfect dodge (refer to defense below).

Defense

Defensive Ability	Description
Basic Dodge	By pressing the dodge button while holding block, the player can dodge in different ways depending on the direction of the dodge relative to the enemy. If dodging sideways, the player will do a hop to the side, which is good for vertical attacks. If dodging backwards, the player will do a backflip, which is good for dodging horizontal attacks.
Perfect Dodge	If a dodge is performed at the perfect time during an enemy attack, time will slow down for the player, where they will be able to counterattack with an attack of their own. During the slowed down time, players can perform flurry rush or any other attack they see fit, such as shooting an arrow.
Block	The player can hold up their shield or two-handed weapon to block incoming attacks, which will consume stamina.
Shield parry	The player can also try to parry with a shield, swinging their shield outwards. If done at the right time, it can make the enemy vulnerable, or it can even deflect projectiles.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- Very rewarding and satisfying perfect dodge mechanic with good skill expression
 - Choosing different types of dodges or parrying depending on the incoming enemy attack
 - Options for staying close or creating distance
- Ability to use different weapons for different uses during a fight
 - Options for single target damage, AOE, holding distance
 - Quickly switching weapons to adapt for situations

Weaknesses

- Gameplay can become repetitive
 - Telegraphed enemy attacks

- Using the same attacks repetitively
- While it can lead to diversity of play, players can find it frustrating how weapons break as it forces them to change weapons.

Conclusion

The Nintendo Switch's 3D Zelda installations have engaging melee combat mechanics, primarily due to the flexible use of different weapons and to the perfect dodge mechanics. The combat system does not allow for extended combat customization and build paths, but will allow players to explore all combat options in one playthrough, as all weapon types will have their use at one point in the game.

The Witcher 3

Attacks

Attack	Description
Fast Attack	Quick and efficient attacks that can be used in succession for attack animation combos.
Strong Attack	A heavy, slower attack that ignores an enemy's armor.
Whirl (skill)	An attack skill which allows the player to spin and hit enemies around.
Rend (skill)	A heavy stamina consuming attack that deals more damage in one blow.

Defense

Defensive Ability	Description
Block & Parrying	Holding down the parry button to block incoming attacks with the sword. Timing the block perfectly with the enemy's attack can stagger them.
Sidestep	A short and quick dodge
Dodge roll	A longer dodge that covers a longer distance than the sidestep.
Quen sign	A magical shield to absorb damage.
Yrden sign	Magical traps that slow enemies, useful for controlling the fight and repositioning.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- Smooth and satisfying combat without a steep learning curve
- Multiple options for defense

Weaknesses

- Lack of options for weapons and attack types
- Combat gameplay can become repetitive

Conclusion

The Witcher 3 has accessible combat with smooth animations and easy to learn mechanics. It allows for limited customization and no variety of weapon types, but delivers on what it provides to players.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

Sekiro is another classic FromSoftware game that is known for its difficult but interesting combat system. Unlike Dark Souls and Elden Ring games, Sekiro's combat is centered around parrying and the "posture" mechanic, which involves breaking an enemy's posture to inflict a deathblow on them.

Attack

Attack	Description
Regular attack	The player's primary attack.
Deathblow	A finishing attack that can be performed through stealth or by breaking an enemy's posture. These will usually be fatal to enemies except for some tougher mid-bosses (mini bosses).

Defense

Defensive Ability	Description
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Blocking	Blocking is done by holding the corresponding button and will block some of the damage done by enemy attacks.
Parrying	Blocking within a certain time frame during an enemy attack will successfully parry the attack, leading the enemy to take damage to their posture, and not doing damage to the player. Some attacks cannot be parried.
Dodging (sidestep)	A short side dodge can be performed to dodge certain attacks.
Jumping and bounce off attack	The player can jump into the air to avoid low sweeping attacks, where the player can jump again to perform a downward kick on the attack, damaging the enemy's posture.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths

- The game rewards confidence and risk taking, making it satisfying and adding incentive to master the mechanics.
- Unlike Elden Ring (dodge roll spamming), the different defensive maneuvers allow need to be used appropriately, adding an extra layer to defense in terms of applying the best input for the situation.
- Players can take two paths in terms of how to defeat enemies, either by depleting enemy health bars or by breaking posture and inflicting deathblows. This links again to risk vs reward, where parrying will be more difficult but will often lead to defeating enemies faster.

Weaknesses

- Not beginner friendly, the posture and parrying mechanics are difficult to get a grasp of and can get very frustrating at first.
- Not much variety of combat choices and can get repetitive in terms of how fights are played out.

Conclusion

Sekiro has a very innovative melee combat system, which excels at providing high risk, high reward mechanics with potential for high skill expression. The posture mechanic is quite unique and makes the game very satisfying, but can also be intimidating for new players and get repetitive along the way.

Melee Combat Systems: Conclusion

Through the analysis of the 3rd person melee combat systems, multiple conclusions can be made. Melee combat seems to be defined by satisfying controls/input, risk vs reward mechanics, and allowing for the players to learn and to increase their skills in the game. FromSoftware's games excel at these aspects, pushing players to always improve and to gain a stronger grasp of mechanics. A challenge for developers is to create meaningful and balanced variety of combat options, which is something that the Zelda games do best out of all 4 analyzed games, where creativity is heavily encouraged. Lastly, it is important to make players feel like they are playing a fair game, where their success/failure are results of their own skill, and not unbalanced systems/enemies.

Melee Combat Design Recommendations

1. Attacks

Provide a variety of attacks, each having their own strengths and weaknesses, and balance the attacks so they can all be used at the appropriate moments.

2. Defensive skills

Have a few interesting defensive options that can be used for different situations and communicate with the player (make it clear) how these abilities can be used.

3. Weapons and Customization

Allow for combat customization and push players to try different things. This can be done by giving different weapon types that will feel better in different situations, such as certain weapons being better for certain boss fights.

4. Satisfying controls and input

Spend time designing and developing the basic controls, such as movement and camera control, and make sure to make it as intuitive and satisfying as possible.

5. Risk vs Reward

Push players to take risks by rewarding them. This can be done by making certain mechanics riskier but have amplified results, like slow heavy attacks, or perfectly timed parries.

6. Juice

Add juice, such as nice attack animations, satisfying sounds and visual effects for feedback and making the player feel good.

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