Fiery Catacombs Level Design Document

Fiery Catacombs is the tutorial level for a dungeon crawling game prototype I'm currently developing. The game is top-down, isometric and fully 2D, and also features basic combat and dungeon exploration. The player can move around, perform a melee attack with a sword, and dash a short distance. While dashing, the player is impervious. Gems can be collected in levels and spent on shops to earn new items.

The target of the game will be fans of retro action games, and the game is meant to be played on PC, though since it's intended to be played with a controller, it could be released for any console (as long as the controller has face buttons, an analog stick and triggers).

A simple GDD of the game can be found here.

1.   Level Goals & Summary

1.1.   Intrinsic Goals

The main intrinsic goal of this level, as per usual in tutorial levels, is to teach the player the main mechanics of the game, so that they have a basic understanding of them and are ready to proceed forward. Specifically, the level wants to teach players that they can attack and dash, and become used to performing these actions.

Additionally, the level teaches players about enemy behavior and avoiding damage (which are dynamics directly related to the mechanics that are also learnt), and finding and using keys to open doors.

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1.2.   Extrinsic Goals

Extrinsically, the goals of Fiery Catacombs are to teach spatial awareness and put reaction time to the test. The former refers to the level design requiring precision when using the dash in order to avoid fire tiles, and the latter to the ability to avoid enemy attacks, also dashing.

Also, and because this level will serve as an introduction to the game's story, this level tries to entertain and amuse the player in order to catch their attention so that they'll see what the rest of the game has to offer.

1.3.   Level Summary

Images found here.

The player spawns in an open starting hall. In order to show to the player that the character can attack, the starting area is full of crates that are half-broken. A quick experimentation with the controls will reveal the attack button, which allows the player to break the boxes. If they don't acquire this knowledge, a wall of crates blocks their way, serving as a skill gate.
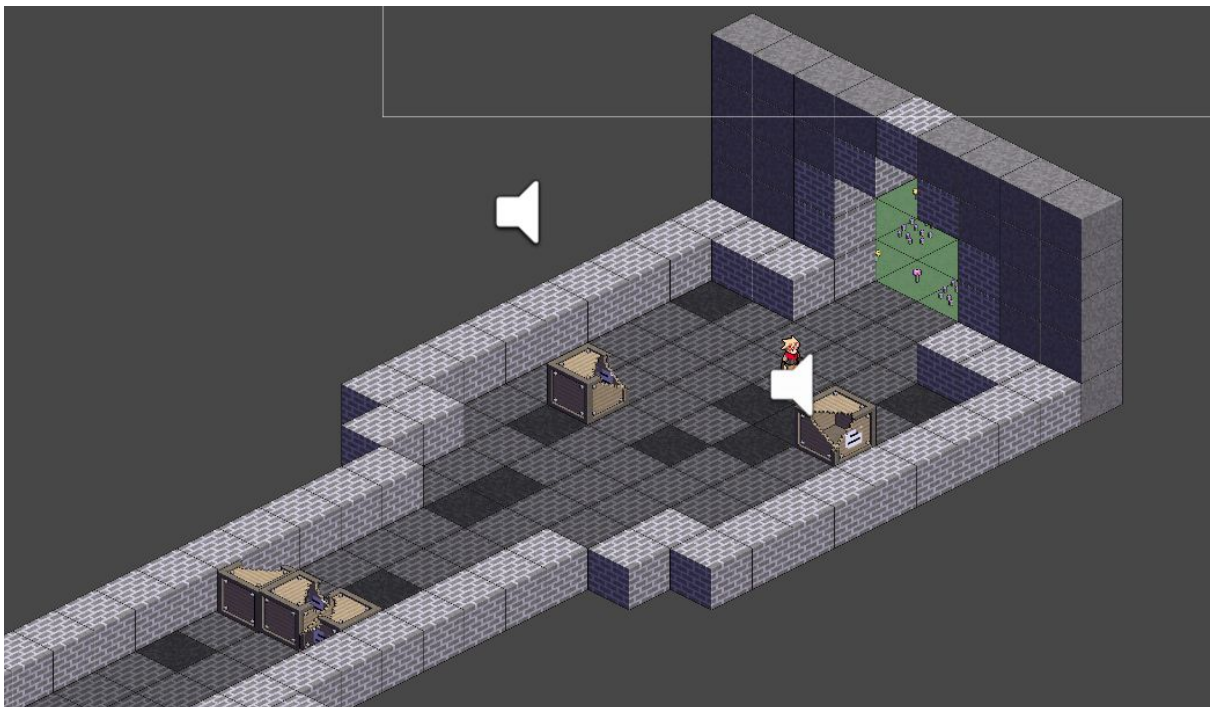
Following up, an enemy skeleton is stuck inside a cell. The enemy can't reach the player, but will detect them, making a specific sound and running towards them. This summarizes enemy behavior in a way that doesn't threaten the player at all, so that they can learn that without being punished for any failures. Just after this, the first

"real" enemy appears, and hopefully the player will already know what to expect when hearing its audio cue.
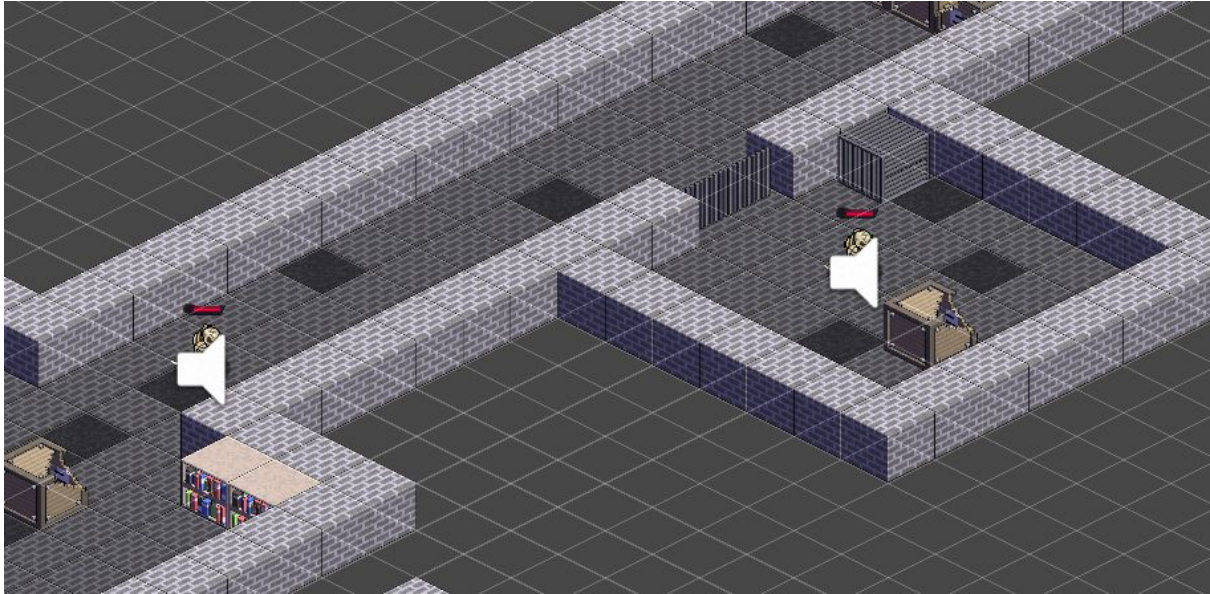
Then, the path forward (indicated by a path on the floor tiles) is blocked by a door with a lock. If the player then goes through the only available path (shown with a subtle arrow in the floor tiles) they'll reach a key, which they can use to open the door.


After this, there is a climactic challenge in the form of a room containing four skeletons, which test the players' learnt combat abilities. If they succeed, not only they can move forward, but there's a small reward in the form of a chest (which awards 300 gems).

The following section is where the player learns the dash ability. There are red tiles with fire on the floor, and if the player steps on them, he'll be damaged and a burning SFX will play, teaching the player to avoid these tiles. However, the path forward is full of these tiles, which can't be avoided by simply walking. Here, the player is expected to find a way to cross the tiles unscathed, and they can do this by dashing.

The first part of the section is devoid of enemies, so that the player can use the dash safely, with their only worry being avoiding the tiles, but the last third of the hallway contains enemies. This is so that the player can apply their new skills to the combat

learnt earlier, wrapping up all of their learning throughout the level.
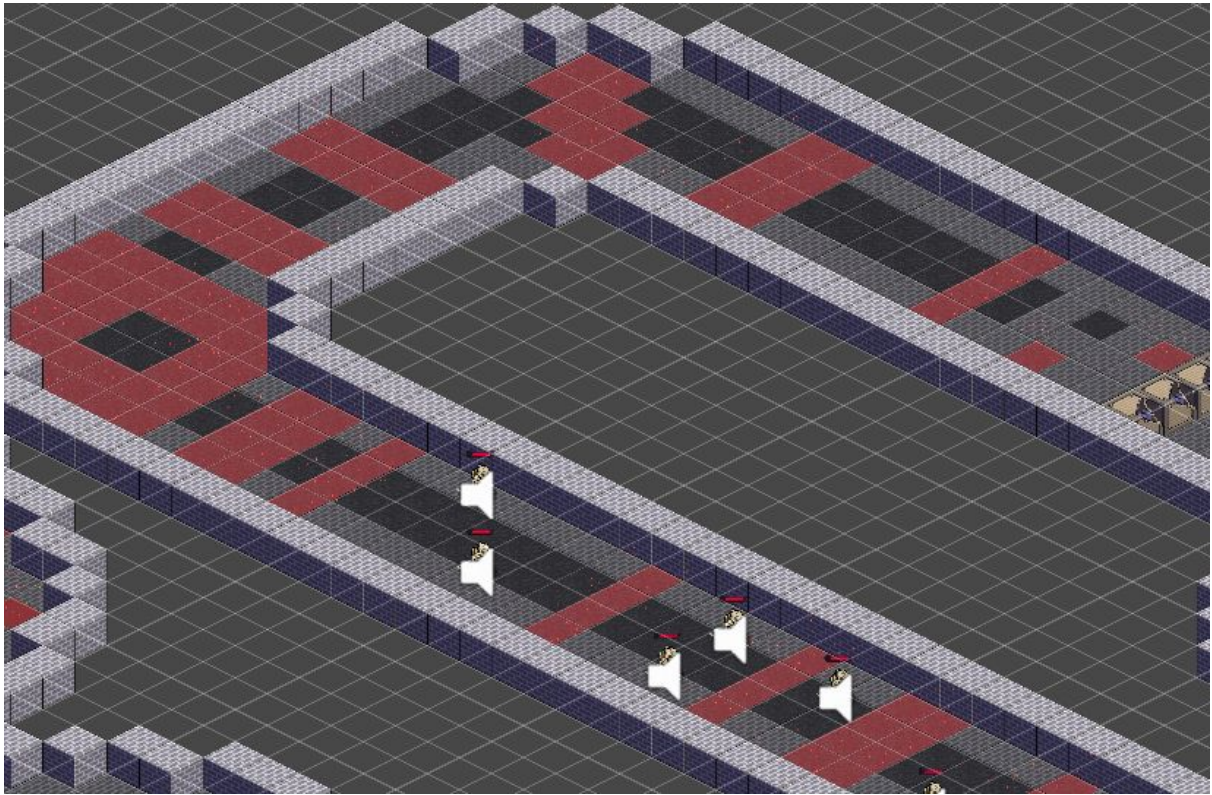
The next room also has fire tiles and enemies, but being much more open makes it easier for the player to fight. There's a key on the middle of the room, resting on fire tiles, easily grabbable by dashing over them. However, the door blocking the path has two locks, and with only one key it won't open. The player has yet to find another

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key, located in a side room, also subtly indicated with tiles on the floor.

In order to find the key, the player must navigate a labyrinthic room, with sparsely placed skeletons and fire tiles. Some of the dead ends contain chests (with 300 gems each) so that exploration is not unrewarded, while others have enemies. One dead end has the remaining key, and the player then has to backtrack to the door. This serves as a basic introduction to the dungeon crawling the player will need to do further in the game.

Finally, the player opens the double-locked door arriving at a green checkpoint, which will fully heal them and save their progress (this is intended, but the

functionality for saving isn't actually developed yet). The floor tiles depict a skull (universal videogame symbology for "boss"), and after entering the following room, iron bars block the way back, and the boss battle starts.
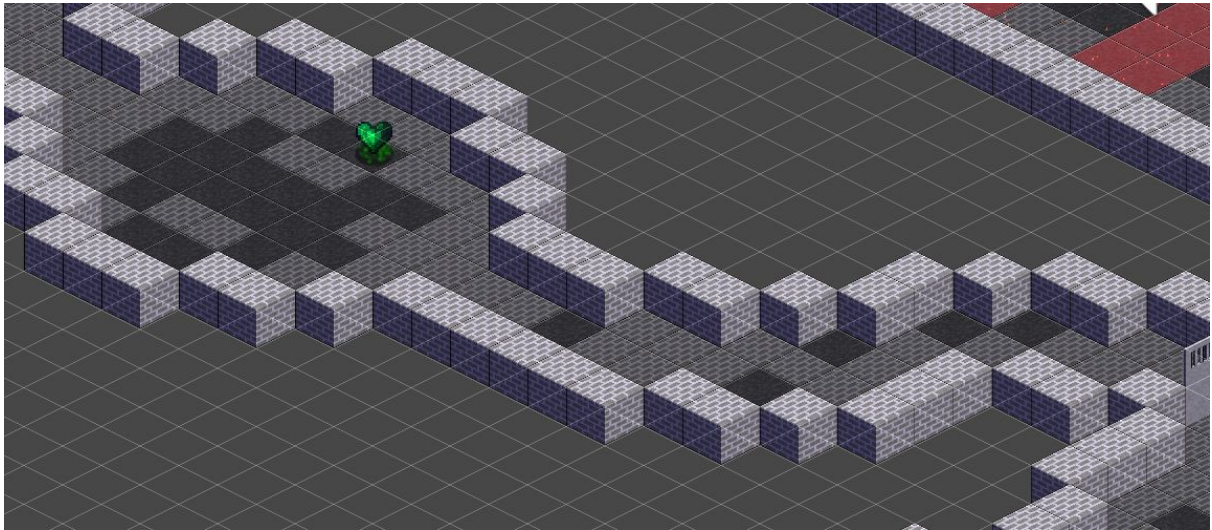
The boss can damage the player in four ways. First off, the fire tiles on the floor. These, the player already knows. Second, the fire walls that intermittently appear and disappear in a counter-clockwise manner, indicated by black tiles and the orbs. Third, the boss constantly emits fire waves the player can dash over. And finally, the boss damages the player if he touches them.

Beating the boss will require working knowledge of dashing and attacking, but mostly the former; the player will need to constantly avoid fire tiles, the waves from the boss, and keep track of the fire walls (or dash through them). Managing aggression is also important, since attacking will leave the player locked in place while the animation plays.

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2.   Constraints

The biggest constraint when creating this level was technical. I programmed everything myself, so including new mechanics was limited by my ability to develop them in Unity. Also, the game is rid with minor bugs that can ruin the experience, like clipping through walls when dashing, though it's a work in progress.

3.   References

The main references for Fiery Catacombs were the first levels in Enter the Gungeon, in terms of pacing, and retro Legend of Zelda (i.e. A Link to the Past), in the visuals and simplicity of combat.

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