Master of the Katana

Melee Combat in Ghost of Tsushima

Chris Zimmerman, GDC 2021

TALK OVERVIEW

- Introduction of Speaker
- Five Rules
- Tech Notes

GAME OVERVIEW

- I suggest playing Ghost of Tsushima
- Open World Action RPG
- First Mongol Invasion of Japan
- One samurai learns to fight dirty
- Immersive
- Grounded
- Accessible

CENTRALITY OF MELEE COMBAT

- The katana is central to the samurai fantasy
- Overwhelmed by numbers
- Duels to big battles

THE SAMURAI FANTASY

GHOST

- Discipline and precision
- Hard work leading to mastery
- A master of the katana

PLAYER SKILL

- How to show skill
- Precise timing
- Quick and accurate reaction
- All under pressure
- Limits of human reaction time

DANCING ALONG THE EDGE

- NPCs can react instantly
- Movies are a lie
- Players can anticipate perfectly
- Perfect execution, perfect results
- NPC windups and combos
- Fast player attacks

CASE STUDY: SQUARE SPAM EXPLOIT

- Hammering Square too effective
- Players not happy
- Shieldman
- Brutes
- Overlapping attacks

CASE STUDY: BLOCK FLUTTERING EXPLOIT

- Timing-based parry
- Fluttering the block button parried every attack
- Many players can't leave the cheese alone
- Foundational once fixed

Rule #1
The most effective way to play your game
should be the most enjoyable way to play

ENCOURAGING A VARIED EXPERIENCE

GHOST

- Players with varied playstyles enjoyed the game more
- Content variation
- Ability variation

VARIED ABILITIES

- Player agency
- Discourage vs encourage
- Restrict?
- Carrots over sticks

CASE STUDY: HEAVY ATTACKS

- Light attacks really dominated
- Obvious value proposition for heavy attacks
- Clear communication
- Make heavies easier + more effective

CASE STUDY: GHOST TOOLS

- Story relies on Ghost tools
- Looking for a carrot
- Focused on usability
- Throw multiple kunai
- One Ghost tool at a time
- Ammo safety

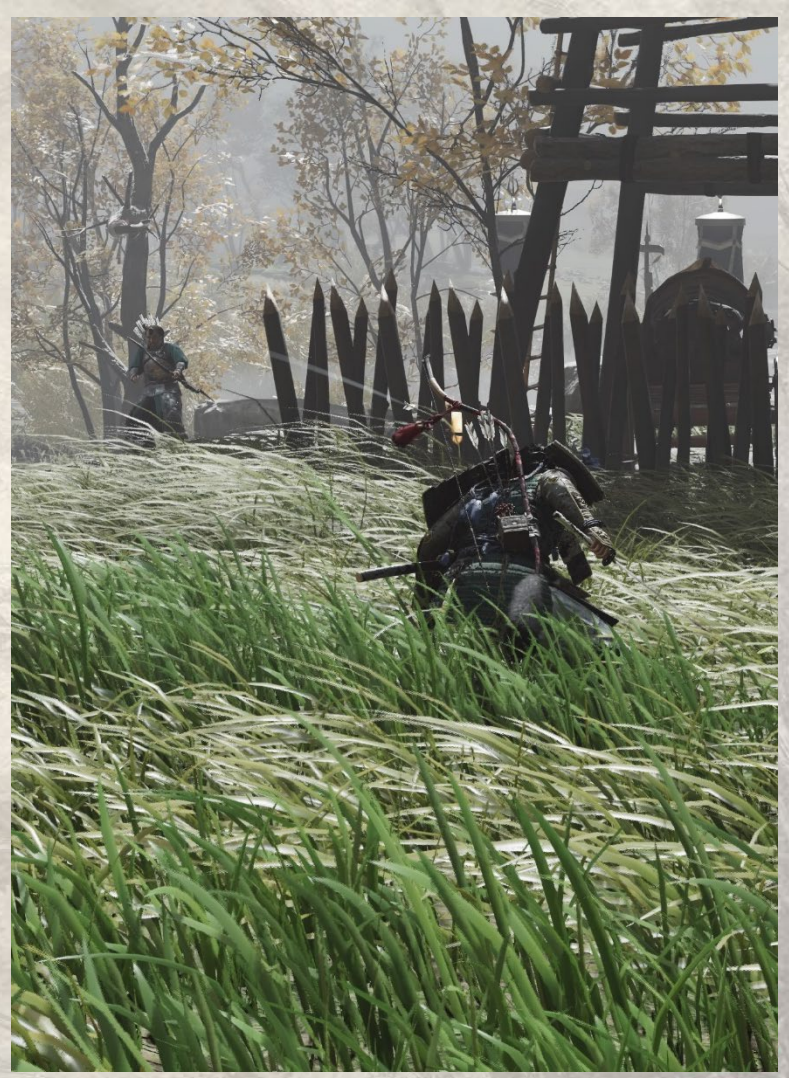
Rule #2
Players respond better to carrots than sticks

COMPLEXITY AND REACTION

- Decision-making speed depends on complexity
- Simple context, simple choice
  = fast reaction
- Complex context, complex choice
  = slow reaction
- You can dial player reaction times up and down by adding or removing complexity

CASE STUDY: ARCHERS

- How does a mixed fight work?
- Firing into melee scrums
- Not firing into melee scrums
- Everybody duck!



Rule #3
Players can ignore variation in abilities, but they can’t escape variation in content

PROGRESSION

- Discipline and hard work lead to mastery
- Players become more skilled
- Players become more knowledgeable
- Both of these parallel Jin's journey

A MODEL FOR PROGRESSION

- Character growth
- Player skill
- Player knowledge
- It's useful to consider them separately

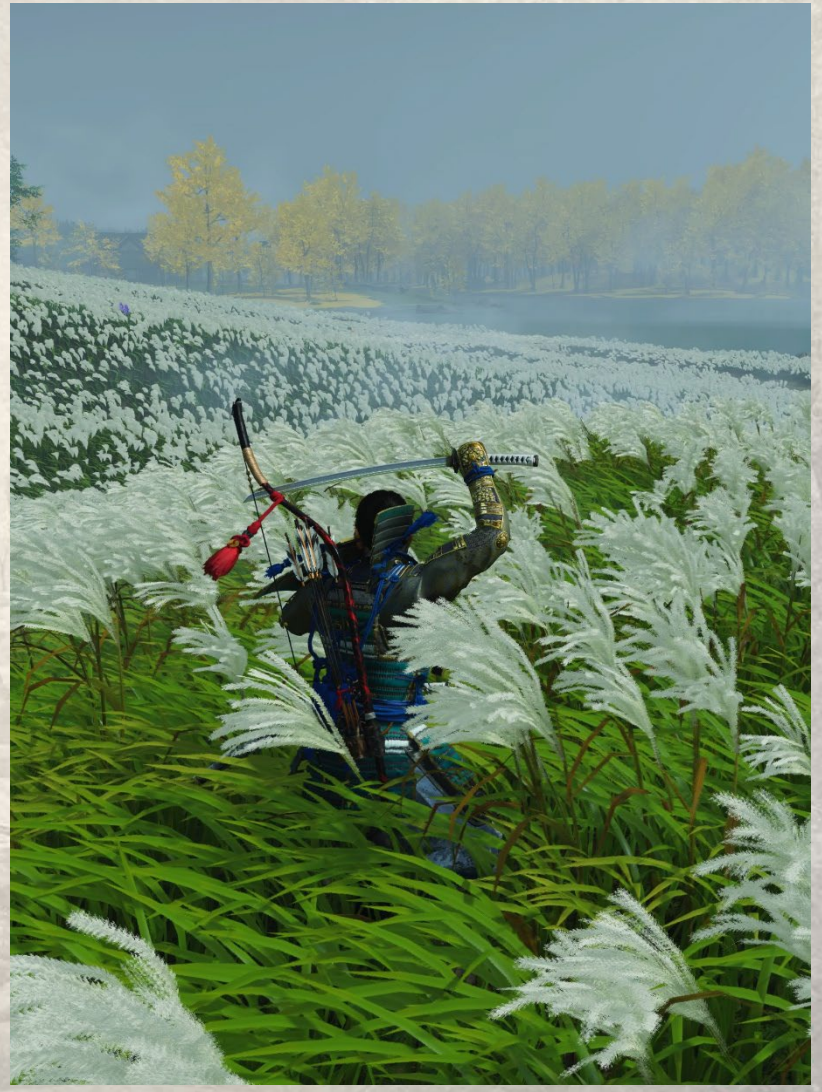
FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER

GHOST

- Players are reluctant to try new things
- First experience sets the tone
- Don't let progression ruin the first experience
- Front load your best ideas

CASE STUDY: STANCES

- Complexity was scary
- Appeal was high, take up was low
- Failure modes
- Making value obvious
- Putting player at advantage
- Anticipation



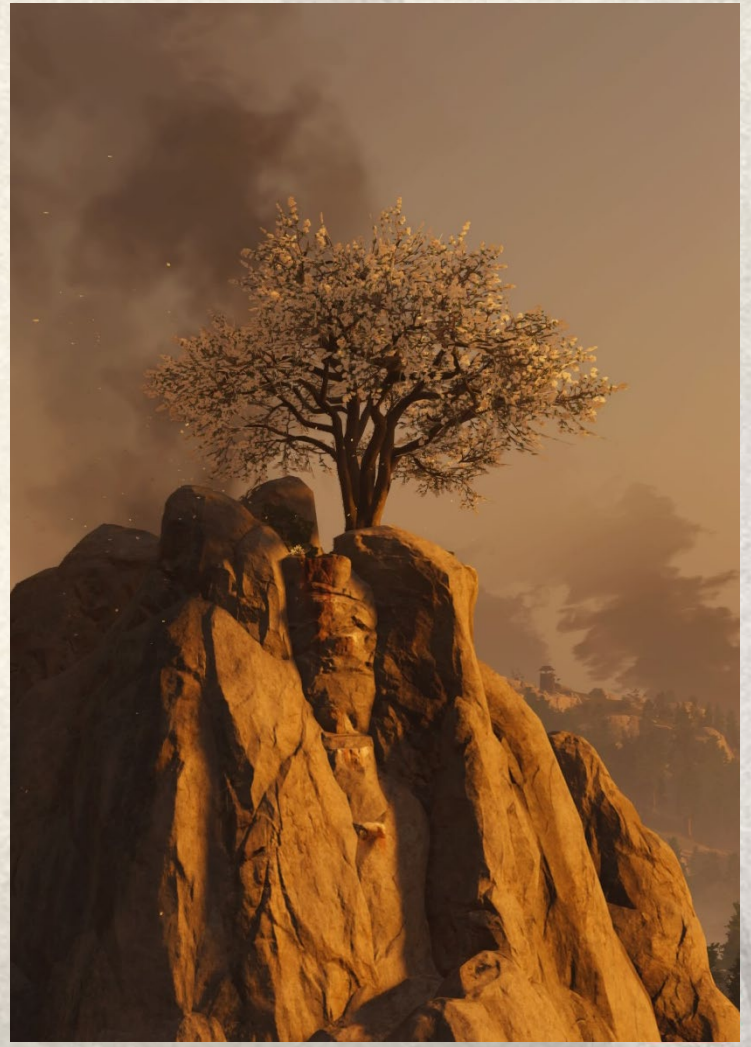
Rule #4
The first experience is the one that matters

PROTOTYPE AND ITERATE

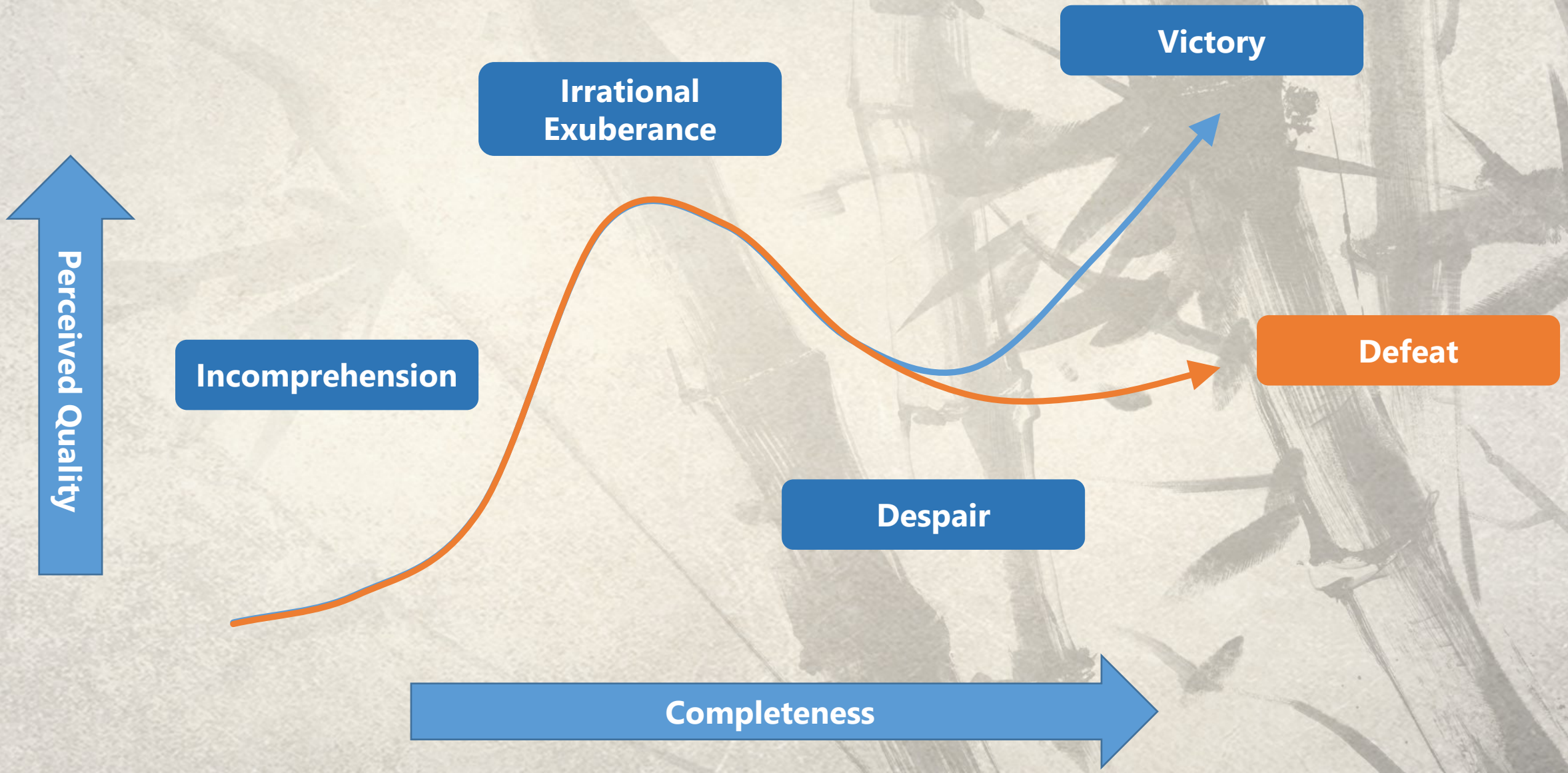
- Test-driven process
- Quality bar for assessment
- Missing winners is painful
- Counting on losers can sink you
- Early decisions are necessary

PROTOTYPE AND TEST

- It's a failure of imagination
- Players round up on underbaked ideas
- … and round down on nearly final ideas



STAGES OF PLAYTEST INCOMPREHENSION



HOW DO YOU AVOID THIS TRAP?

- Experiential target
- Identify the key part of your idea
- Minimize distractions
- Clear path to victory
- Cut everything else

CASE STUDY: STANDOFFS

- Inspired by *Sanjuro*
- Building tension
- E3 2018 demo was just a prototype
- Lots of engineering work to finish

CASE STUDY: CHAIN ASSASSINATION

- Another E3 2018 prototype
- Naturally limited
- Anticipation and spectacle
- Easier to push to complete

Rule #5
Find the magic first

FIVE RULES OF GAME DESIGN

- The most effective way to play your game should be the most enjoyable way to play
- Players respond better to carrots than sticks
- Players can ignore variation in abilities, but they can't escape variation in content
- The first experience is the one that matters
- Find the magic first

Want to work on problems like these?

WE ARE HIRING!

https://jobs.suckerpunch.com/