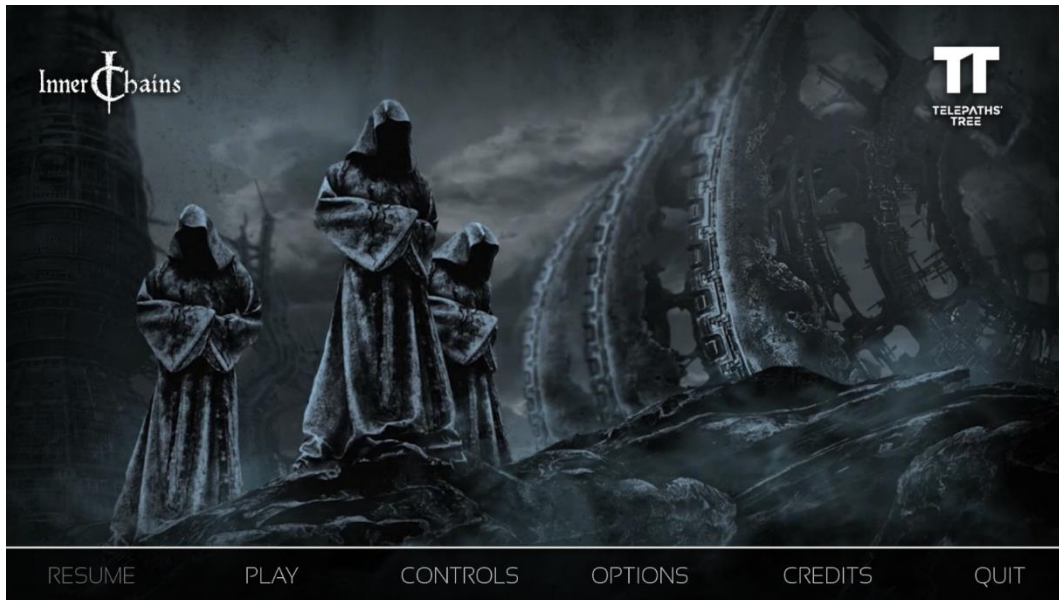Game Review/Analysis: Inner Chains

Information: Telepaths Tree – 2017

Overview:

This is a First Person game set in an imaginary world. The player must discover the secrets of this world by exploring levels, solving puzzles, and engaging in combat with different kinds of opponents.



The world is highly detailed and cast as a hellish environment with dead bodies, various kinds of plant-like dangers, walking zombies, and other opponents.



At the end of the journey the player must defeat a boss character and then take on the role of the ruler of this land.

Description:

The main game mechanics include the First Person perspective, environmental puzzle solving, resource management, and combat mechanics. The First Person perspective requires the player to carefully inspect the environment to avoid enemies that tend to blend-in with the surrounding landscape. The player must also make sure that enemies don't attack from behind without warning and must position their character in places that can be defended.

Environmental puzzle solving primarily relies on finding paths though areas:



Sections are blocked off until the player presses on a "head" that opens up a section:



These heads power on/off various sections and the player must selectively turn on or turn off these controls in order to navigate through the areas.

In addition to these section dividers the player can use a "plant" that will create a floating arrow that directs the player. This floating arrow sometimes goes through walls to directly indicate a destination and the player must then find the path in this general direction.



Along with these environmental puzzles the player can decode messages printed on the walls by finding and activating message boards that convert symbols to letters.
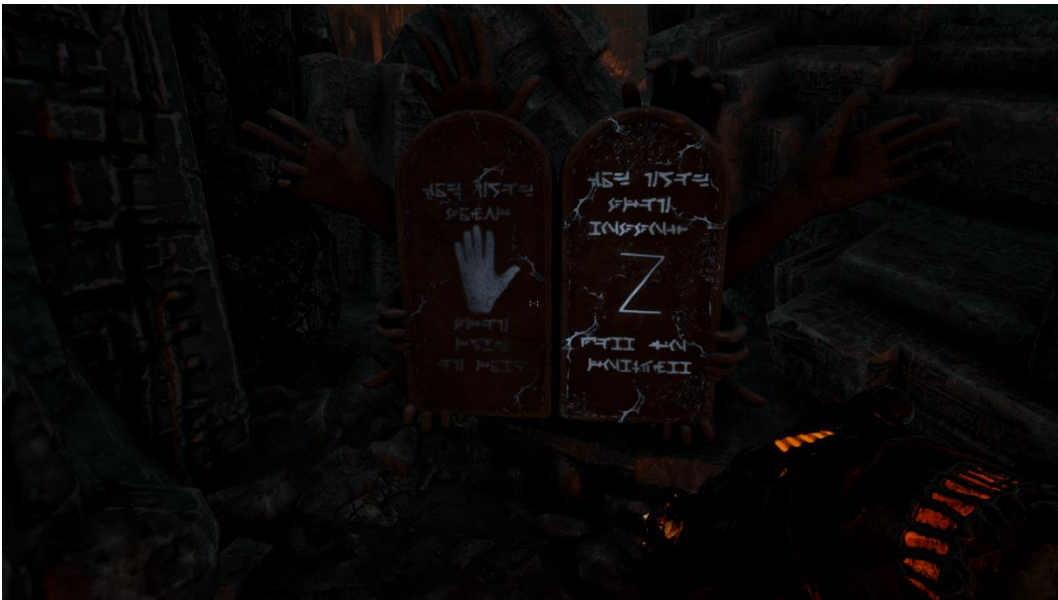
Along with the environmental puzzles the player must also avoid environmental enemies. These are stationary objects that will damage the player if the player gets within their proximity. These consist of electric and fire plants that have a defined area within which the player is attacked.



Resource Management is done by filling up the three weapons that can be wielded. Each weapon is collected during gameplay and must be refilled as it is used. Player health can also be refilled. The refilling stations are unique to each kind of weapon but all will refill health:



The three kinds of weapons are electric, fire, and bullet. Opponents and environmental enemies respond to different kinds of weapons. For example, the electric plant opponent can be killed by fire but only disabled by electric.

The player must manage among the weapon types by using the correct kind of attack on various opponents so as to preserve the resources they need. If they are in an area containing a lot of electric trees they should manage the fire weapon resources. If they are in an area containing a lot of human opponents they likely want to manage the bullet weapon resources.

Along with static opponents this game also include mobile opponents that include zombie like humans as well as guardians that will actively attack with their own weapons.



There is a crude melee mechanic that allows you punch or push people away with your weapon.

Analysis - game story:

The game story is told primarily through the environment. The game is divided into four sections. The first section the player basically walks around in the world (through a directed path) and learns about the environment. They see various opponents in action such as the plants and zombies. They also see the weapons wielded by the guardians in action. At the end of this introductory section the player is cast out as being a heretic and ends up in the sewer (part 2). The third part takes place in the catacombs while the last part takes place in the tunnels and in the open world.

While the story is primarily environment-driven the player is never given a very good idea about what the story is. Even the ending, in which the player assumes the leadership role of the world ?? (this is not clear), is never explained. The environmental story telling is not very successful because the player is not given enough background information to tie the various environmental elements of the story together. Even the ending is not very well explained.

Analysis – puzzle solving:

Puzzle solving primarily depends on finding your way through the various levels and areas. The word/message translation progress is never really explained. While alternate paths are provided to the player in some sections in the game, for the most part the player is put on a linear path. In some combat areas the player is blocked from retreating and forced to fight. There is minimal puzzle solving mechanics in this game.

Analysis – resource management:

Resource management rests primarily with the refill stations and the weapons. Since some weapons work better with some opponents than others, the player must employ some strategy to decide which weapons to use and which weapons to keep in reserve. In addition, the player can refill their health at these stations. Since there are plenty of stations placed in the game and balanced with the kinds of opponents in the levels, the player never fills at odds with the resources (until the very end boss battle).

Analysis – combat mechanics:

Combat mechanics rely on the weapons supplied to the player and the actions of the opponent NPCs. The basic NPC action is to either slowly amble towards the player (the zombies), which makes them easy to kill with head shots. The second kind of movable opponent are the Guardians which all have a weapon that they will use to shoot back. After the

initial attack the NPCs will charge directly at the player. This forces the player to strategically choose combat areas that allow for retreat areas. The player also has a crouch mode but this does not seem to supply any stealth benefits.

All three weapons are ranged. Each has a primary and secondary fire mode. Each weapon and secondary mode is collected during the course of the game and are placed to balance the kinds of opponents the player will face. By the last boss level the player has collected all weapons and weapon upgrades.

The designers made the bullet weapon longer range than the electric or fire weapons and have placed various opponents in ranged areas to encourage the player to use the bullet gun. As the NPCs charge the player (since the bullet weapon does minimal damage) the player can switch to a more damaging weapon for close combat.

Combat mechanics are fairly simple and the opponents have a standard set of behaviors when attacked. This allows the player to strategically engage in combat. There is no initial difficulty level for the player to select.

While the First Person perspective is used in this game, there are times when opponents pop-up behind the player with no warning. This was not designed into the game and is likely a result of random movements by the NPCs. When levels are replayed, some of the NPCs are in different positions but generally in the same area. NPCs will attack until they are dead.

Player movement in the FPS mode is slow. The player cannot run very fast, gets winded, and has very little stealth.


Analysis – level design:

Levels consist of fairly constrained paths through areas. The player can backtrack but typically only has a single direction forward. Later levels consist of more than one path through the area. The plant direction animation does not follow the defined path but often goes straight towards the destination (and through walls) leaving it up to the player to find the path through the level.

In some cases, the player has doors close behind them in order to force the player to fight and to prevent strategic retreats. In other cases, the levels are designed to provide a choke-point so enemies can be handled one at a time. There did not seem to be any environmental reason for these differences.

The final level has some real design problems. The final boss is unlike any of the other bosses or opponents up to that point. The final level is a room with a stationary boss. The player must fight off random opponents that appear in the doorways of the room while at the same time avoiding damage from fire and electricity. There are weapon recharging stations in the room. The boss must be killed by killing several separate parts of the boss. The problem is that the player can run out of ammo because the recharge machines don't refill. The boss fight cannot progress until the boss is attacked but the player cannot attack the boss without ammo.

The game does go out of its way to teach the player how to defeat enemies and use weapons in the course of playing the game. Often, the game shows a stationary enemy killing an NPC thereby warning the player how the stationary enemy works. The game also provides areas where the player can look ahead to a nearby area (perhaps a hole in the wall) and see the enemies or rewards which will be accessible in the near future. The tutorial levels are playable and nicely integrated into the design.


Design Review:

Story problems

The game story is told through cut scenes consisting of text and environmental storytelling. The main problem is that the story is never clearly presented . While the graphics are striking and lend a strong sense of horror and dread, there is not enough content in the environment to connect with a linear story. The unravelling of the mysterious messages which is

done by getting the "translating" stones is unreadable until near the end of the game and, for those that don't want to get the stones, completely unknowable. Even at the end of the game, after defeating the boss, the game story remains unintelligible.

The game mechanics and level design elements are not strong enough to carry the game without some kind of game story to provide the player with some guidance.

Puzzle problems:

There are minimal puzzles in this game. The only real puzzle is finding the various translation stones and exploring levels.

Resource Management problems:

Resource management issues focus on weapons and ammo. Different enemies respond to different kinds of weapons and the player must be taught (with some more good tutorials) how to use kinds of weapons. The other resource management mechanic is keeping the weapon charged with ammo. Sometimes, refill stations are positioned so that the player can backtrack to refill ammo in order to defeat enemies.

Combat mechanics problems:

The combat mechanics are fairly simple. The stationary NPCs can be avoided while the zombies are slow enough to kill. The guardians will run towards the player or directly attack. Killing zombies is done by headshots along with the fire-based guardians (causing their flamethrowers to explode). The problems are the lack of variance in the NPCs and their predictable behavior. Since there is little stealth and no cover based combat the player is forced into a direct attack combat mechanic. The NPCs are killed by volume of damage with little tactical decision making required of the player.

Level design problems:

Perhaps the most glaring problem with this game is the Level Design. Levels are repetitive in design. The player is presented with a linear path with a number of stationary opponents and several zombie/guardians. Each level has a gated section which allows the player to move to the next section but not go back. Players complete sections and move to the next section. Opponents will level up but very slowly and the player is left a fairly boring game.

While the tutorial levels are well laid out the remaining levels don't present the player with enough challenge to make the game interesting. The typical sequence for skill/challenge building is:

- Basic tutorial level
- Test tutorial level
- Simple challenge
- Hard challenge
- Introduction to next level skills

In this game the last two, hard challenges and introduction to the next level, are never done.