

Post-Mortem: Chinatown Fair



What Went Right

Ψ **Advanced Movement**

One of the big goals from the beginning of the project was to incorporate advanced ways to move through the environment. I incorporated this in three key areas – a jump on top of the giant martini sign with a health pickup, a shortcut from the second floor to the top that requires Impact Hammer jumping, and Jump Boots that enable several shortcuts between level tiers. Immediately after adding these, there was a large improvement in level flow – advanced players were able to chase down targets and escape from other players but the paths were vulnerable to weapon fire, which prevented them from being free “outs” from bad situations. Feedback after playtests was nearly unanimous in enjoying these new routes.

Ψ **Developed Aesthetic**

During development of this level, the aesthetic was not coming together well enough. It felt like an Asian market, but it also felt lifeless. I looked back on the reference images I had gathered and noticed what made the scene feel so off – in all of the reference images, there was a common trend of Asian architecture covered in bright neon lights. I had neon lights in key areas, but after looking through these images I did a full pass across the level, coating it in neon lights and getting a feel for what the level would look like when complete. Additionally, I removed the roof from the arena to get a better view of the skybox, which immediately made the map feel much more open and like a cyberpunk Chinatown. Many of the visual highlights of the map originated during this pass, and it was when the aesthetic of the level really came together.

Ψ **Diverting Flow**

As the level came together, two major flow problems existed:

First – the Sniper Platform was a dominant position, as the path to it was a long bridge, during which you move directly towards the platform – making for relatively easy defensive sniper play. Though the walls meant it was easy to use rockets to cause splash damage, the sniper platform still became a place that players did not leave. To help improve flow to and from the platform, I gave some cover to the bridge in the form of a small altar. This blocked some of the sight-line for the approaching player, but did not benefit the already-powerful sniper position. I also added two additional jump pads leading to the platform, one on each side of the second floor. These routes made the sniper platform a much more dangerous place to stay, which helped keep gameplay flowing along.

Second – the top platform with the uDamage spawn was too dominant a position. There was only one route on to the platform, and the platform had clear sightlines for a wide range around this jump pad. To give players a chance to dislodge an opponent from this platform, I added two additional balconies – one on each flank. Each of these balconies had two jump pads that landed on it – one from the fourth floor and one between the second and third floors – as well as a jump pad on the balcony that led to the top platform. The end result was that the position was still very strong, but the flanking attack paths kept it from being overpowered.

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Ψ **Jump Pad Orientation**

One of the big problems in this level was a lack of information on where a jump pad would take the player. Playtesters frequently gave feedback that they were confused by which jump pad lead where, and the sheer number of jump pads throughout the level meant that flow was becoming jumbled. I addressed the problem in a few different ways – I added small health vials across some jump arcs, I loosened up the jump pads on the sides of the center platform so players had more control over where they landed, I placed the alternate jump pads leading to the Sniper platform between gargoyles pointed outwards. These all helped the problem, but many of the jump pads were still confusing to new players, and it took a few rounds on the map before they learned where each went. In the end I was unable to fully solve the problem, but did make some substantial progress in understanding why they were confusing and learned a few tools to help alleviate the problem.

Ψ **A Door to Nowhere**

Originally, the room with the Berserker powerup was closed when the powerup was not spawned, and with it the secondary jump back to the main arena from the Sniper platform. There was repeated feedback through early playtests that players had trouble identifying when the room was open. I added some countdown lights and chimes, but the feedback persisted. After iterating on various ways to clue players in, the problem lessened but did not go away. Then I considered the root of the problem – leaving the room closed was denying a vital back exit from the platform and the limited cover of the doorway. Once I realized this, I removed the door mechanic and flow improved immediately. A good amount of time was spent iterating on alternate solutions before I considered that I was focusing on the wrong problem.

Ψ **Double Powerups**

For a majority of development of this level, the jump pad from the back of the Sniper platform bounced the players off jump pads on the middle platform, sending them sailing back up through the air to the fourth floor. This jump was a lot of fun for playtesters, and gave a nice sense of momentum. However, two problems existed with this: the jump took a substantial chunk of time that kept players with the Berserk powerup out of combat for the duration, and the final landing area was too close to the uDamage powerup, which meant that at times players could easily grab both and become nearly unstoppable. After opening the door on the Sniper platform permanently, the in-air time of the jump became glaringly obvious, and I reworked the jump to land the player on the second floor of the main platform. Players could still double-jump to the middle and get to the fourth floor with relative ease, but getting to the uDamage powerup left little time left on Berserk and the level no longer forced players to sit through several seconds while they had no movement control. I needed to cut something that was enjoyable in order to better balance the map and avoid taking control away from players more than was necessary, but the level became significantly better as a result.