

Ink's Battle System

Created and designed by Josiah Lebowitz

Basic Details

- Enemies are shown on the screen before battle.
- Battles begin once the enemies and party members make contact.
- Both enemies and the party can be ambushed if touched from behind or otherwise outside of their range of vision.
- Player characters and enemies can perform normal attacks outside of battle. Connecting with an out of battle attack starts a battle. The side that attacked automatically makes a free strike when the battle starts.
- There's a screen wipe when battles begin, with the battles taking place on a battle screen.
- All in battle text is written as if it's part of a novel. i.e. "Charging forward, Jessie thrust her sword at the monster's chest." and "Falling back, Ralin raised his arms, shielding himself from the coming attack." There will be a large variety of potential phrases for every action.

Comments:

With the power of current generation consoles, random battles with invisible enemies have fallen out of favor. There's no need for a screen wipe when transitioning into battle, or a screen swap (though it would prevent the problem of battle layout on oddly shaped terrain), but it can be used as a stylistic choice to help show that transition between exploration and battle. Since enemies can be seen before battles begin, the options to avoid them, sneak up on them, and score the first attack are natural additions. Of course, it wouldn't be fair if the enemies didn't have those same abilities.

The unusual (for a video game) text style is used to help convey the fact that the events are taking place inside a book and isn't limited to just the battle system.

Turn Order

- The basic system is similar to that of Final Fantasy X.
- Characters and enemies take turns acting based on their speed stat.
- A gauge on the top of the screen shows the order of the next eight turns.
- The next character cannot act until the current turn is completed.
- Turn order can be affected by what actions are taken. The change is shown in the turn order list when an action is selected (but before it is confirmed). (The time between a character's turns is modified by their chosen action and its charge time (if any) for certain actions.)

Comments:

Most console RPGs base their battle system at least loosely on some version of either Dragon Quest's turn system or Final Fantasy's ATB system. While I could come up with something entirely unique, there's no need to throw out such tried and proven starting points and Ink's battle system has plenty of other unique aspects to set it apart. Final Fantasy X's CTB system (a more strategic take on the ATB) is one of my favorites out of all the RPGs I've played so I've decided to use it as the base for Ink's battle system. It allows the battles to move as fast or slow as the player wants and the varying time between turns, combined with the upcoming action gauge,

allow the player to plan ahead for better strategizing. Though I'm still working out some of the details, such as whether the system will completely mirror that of FFX or change things up by introducing a charge time for various actions.

Basic Attacks

When the attack command is chosen, the combo bar and attack key are displayed. Four different attack types will be available, mapped to up, down, left, and right on the left analog stick (the attack key will show which is which). The four attacks are Slash, Thrust, Feint, and Reverse. Chosen attacks are placed on the combo bar. The player can chain any combination of the four basic attacks, so long as it doesn't exceed the length of the combo bar (the same attack can be used multiple times). At any time, as long as there is at least one attack in the combo bar, the player can choose to execute the current combo. Once the combo is executed, the attack is carried out and the character's turn ends.

The combo bar for each character starts out able to hold up to three attacks. The length can be increased to a maximum of eight. At least most of those increases are gained through story events (though some might be obtainable through leveling up).

Basic Attack Details

Slash: A simple slashing motion. It deals a bit more damage to unarmored or lightly armored enemies and a bit less to heavily armored ones.

Thrust: A powerful thrust. It deals a bit more damage to heavily armored enemies and normal damage to all others.

Feint: An attack designed more to create an opening than to deal any serious damage. It does low damage but increases the chances that the following attack will be a critical hit.

Reverse: A quick reverse strike that can catch opponents off-guard. Has a higher chance of dealing a critical hit when used as the opening attack. Does a bit more damage when it follows a Slash or a Feint but does a bit less when it follows another Reverse.

Comments:

For Ink, I wanted the characters' standard attacks to be a bit more interesting than the usual "select attack and watch the attack" method. It also ties heavily into other aspects of the battle system such as special techniques, dual techniques, and magic usage, which are covered in their respective sections.

This attack system bares some similarity of that of an old Playstation RPG called Legend of Legaia, in which you can chain together attacks using different body parts to create combos. Ink uses the same basic concept but takes it much farther (particularly in regards to how it ties into the magic and dual attack systems).

In a real battle, any half decent fighter generally isn't going to just throw one attack and wait to see what happened, he'll chain together several moves. That way, if the first attack is avoided, blocked, or just doesn't take his opponent down, there's some more strikes on the way. The goal of this system is to replicate that flow of attacks. Proper animation will be important to ensure that all the attacks flow together seamlessly regardless of the combination chosen.

Special Attacks

When attacking, certain combinations of basic attacks will form special attacks. When the correct combination of attacks is entered, the character will perform a special attack instead of the basic attacks that form it. Each character has a unique set of special attacks. The attack combinations used to trigger special attacks range from three to eight attacks long.

When a special attack is used for the first time it is added to a shortcut list. Selecting a special attack from the list will automatically enter the correct series of attacks into the combo bar (as long as there's enough room left in the bar).

Multiple special attacks can be used in a single attack combo, as long as there is enough room in the combo bar. Basic attacks can also come in the combo bar before or after the special attack combination and will be performed normally.

Comments:

Being able to perform special moves by chaining certain attacks in a standard feature in fighting games. Since regular attacks in Ink involve chaining multiple movements, this makes for an obvious extension of the system. It also adds the fun of discovering new moves and will encourage players to experiment and try many different attack combinations each time they increase the length of the combo bar.

This is also similar to the special attack system used by Legend of Legaia. Though, as previously mentioned, Ink takes the idea much further due to its integration with the magic and dual attack systems.

Magic

When the magic command is chosen, the combo bar and magic key are displayed. Four different magic elements will be available, mapped to up, down, left, and right on the left analog stick (the magic key will show which is which). The four basic elements are: Earth, Fire, Wind, and Water. Chosen elements are placed on the combo bar. The player can chain any combination of the four basic elements, so long as it doesn't exceed the length of the combo bar (the same element can be used multiple times). At any time, as long as there is at least one element in the combo bar, the player can choose to execute the current combo. Once the combo is executed, a spell is cast and the character's turn ends.

The combo bar for each character starts out able to hold up to three elements. The length can be increased to a maximum of eight. At least most of those increases are gained through story events (though some might be obtainable through leveling up). Note that the length of the magic combo bar is not related to the length of the attack combo bar. Their length must be raised separately.

Different combinations of elements combine to form spells. If a correct combination is not entered a generic spell will be performed. There are five generic spells (basic earth, basic wind, basic fire, basic water, and basic non-elemental) each with several levels of power. The generic spell cast is determined by the type and number of elements used in the combo.

When a spell is cast for the first time it is added to a shortcut list. Selecting a spell from the list will automatically enter the correct series of elements into the combo bar (as long as there's

enough room left in the bar).

Only one spell can be cast per turn. If extra elements are added before or after a spell combo, a different spell or a generic spell will be performed (depending on the elements).

Comments:

Ink's magic systems operates in a similar way to the attack system. However, instead of chaining a series of attacks, the player is weaving together threads of elemental energy in order to create a spell. Because all the threads combine into a single spell, multiple spells can't be chained the way special attacks are. Of course, it would be annoying if entering an incorrect combination resulted in a failed spell and a wasted turn, which is why the generic spells are there. They may not be the strongest spells, but at least they'll be good enough that players shouldn't be discouraged from experimenting to find new spells.

In the world of Ink, weaving elemental threads in order to form spells, require an immense amount of concentration on the part of the caster, so a character can't combine both magic and physical attacks in the same combination. On that same note, since magic and physical attacks are two completely separate things, there's no logical reason for them to share the same combo bar. The combo bar for physical attacks can be increased by things such as weapon training while learning to weave more magical threads into a spell requires training in magic.

From a story perspective, anyone in the world of Ink can learn to use magic. But the training is expensive and, as Ink's magic has rather limited practical uses outside of battle and several specialized fields, the majority of people don't bother to learn. I haven't decided yet whether or not Josiah, being from a different world, should be able to learn to use magic. If I decide to allow him to fight directly, I'll probably give him magic as well, though the reverse is also true.

Dual Attacks & Special Attacks

When two party members have consecutive turns (as shown in the turn order list), the first character can initiate a dual attack. Doing so uses both characters' turns. When performing a dual attack, the length of the combo bar is extended to 1.5x the length of the initiating character's combo bar. Basic attacks are placed on the combo bar like normal, but every other attack placed on the combo bar will be performed by the second character.

As with ordinary single character attacks, certain combinations of moves will trigger special attacks. Dual special attacks may require a sequence of attacks at least four long, with a maximum of twelve. Newly discovered special attacks are added to the combo list. The available dual special attacks are different for each combination of characters.

Magic & Dual Attacks:

When initiating a dual attack, one or both characters can use magic instead of physical attacks.

When only one character is using magic, the combo bar will be equal to 1.5x the length of the attacking character's physical combo bar, whether that character initiates the attack or not. If both characters use magic, the length will equal 1.5x the initiating character's magic combo bar.

Certain combinations of magic and physical attacks will trigger special dual attacks, which work the same way as regular dual attacks. They are different for each combination of characters.

When both characters are using magic, they can chain their elements to form the same spells that can be cast by a single character. However, there are additional spells that can only be triggered

during a dual attack and some spells which require the additional combo bar length available during dual attacks to cast. However, the combinations are the same for every combination of characters.

Comments:

No reason to attack one at a time when you're part of a group. In addition, everyone seems to love it when RPGs have multi-character special attacks, even though it's not all that common of a feature. Though characters can not perform dual attacks unless they have consecutive turns, I don't want to force the player to be stuck hoping that the characters he wants end up together. That would just be annoying. Instead, the player can always choose to have the currently active character wait instead of performing an action. A waiting character's turn immediately ends and he gains a new turn immediately after the next person on the turn order list. This will allow easy preparation for dual attacks and add yet another element of strategy to the battle system.

Like regular attacks, the system encourages experimentation to find new special attacks. Physical dual attacks and physical and magic combination dual attacks will give the player a large number of dual special attacks to find and use. Naturally, when balancing the battle system, it will be important to ensure that such attacks are strong enough to be worth using two characters' turns to perform. If a regular attack from both characters routinely deal more damage than a dual attack would, then the entire system would be a waste of time. Special techniques, no matter how flashy, just aren't much fun if they aren't strong enough to be useful.

While dual magic attacks may seem a bit less exciting, the presence of a few unique spells should help. Also, the increased combo bar length will allow the player access to far stronger spells than he can cast with a single character.

Whether or not Josiah will be able to participate in dual attacks will depend on whether or not I decide to allow him to fight directly in battle. I'm also considering the possibility of triple or even quadruple attacks (depending on the maximum party size) but haven't made any decisions yet.

Moments of Power

Story Teaser Text:

A strange feeling came over Jessie as she felt the power flowing through her, suffusing every part of her body, her very being. She had never felt anything like it before, never heard of anything like it. And yet, somehow, someway, she understood. It wouldn't last long, already the power was beginning to ebb away like the tide on a distant beach, but she knew that, until it vanished, there was nothing in the world that could touch her, nothing that could stop her. Right now, for this single moment, the power was hers, and she was supreme.

Overview:

Each party member, other than Josiah, has a unique moment of power ability which can be used in battle. A character can activate their ability on their turn. Depending on the character, activating their moment of power may or may not end their turn. Once activated, a moment of power ability will last for a certain amount of turns (the exact number will vary depending on the character and possibly certain other factors as well) or until the end of the battle.

After a moment of power ability has been used, it must recharge for a certain number of

battles/rounds (not yet determined) before it can be used again. The recharge time carries over between battles and varies depending on the character. They are fully recharged whenever the party members sleep (either at an inn or as part of the story). Certain other factors may also cause them to recharge sooner than usual (details to be added later on).

Comments:

Moments of power could sorta be compared to the Final Fantasy series's famous limit breaks, though they're actually closer to Final Fantasy IX's trances. Moments of power aren't big fancy super attacks. Instead they're special abilities unique to the individual characters that last for a short time once activated. Unlike trances, however, moments of power can be activated at will as long as they're fully charged. I'm still deciding exactly what the best way for them to recharge would be, but most of them are probably going to take quite a while to recharge (though it will vary depending on the particular moment of power).

Moments of power are not only an important part of the battle system, but a key element of the the plot as well. Josiah is the only member of the party without a moment of power, due to the fact that he's from a different world.

Sample Moments of Power by Character

Ralin:

MoP: Future Sight (Distant)

Duration: 5 Turns

Recharge: ??

Description: Modifies the turn gauge, allowing the player to see what the enemies are planning to do on their upcoming turns. Note that planned actions can be changed based on what the player does. In that case, the gauge will update to reflect the new actions.

Comments:

Ralin has what may initially seem like the weaker half of the Future Sight ability. And, admittedly, it lacks the power and "coolness" factor of Jessie's future sight. But while Jessie's is designed for combat, Ralin's future sight is a very powerful strategic tool. While it's likely not necessary in normal battles. In boss battles and other difficult fights, knowing what to prepare for can be the difference between life and death. Due to its emphasis on planning and strategy over direct power, it's one of the longest lasting moments of power in the game.

When deciding on the various characters' moments of power, I decided on Jessie's first and created Ralin's to be a counterpart to it.

Jessie:

MoP: Future Sight (Immediate)

Duration: 2 Turns

Recharge: ??

Description: Jessie's turn ends immediately upon use. On the next two enemy turns, she'll automatically intercept and counter attack any actions taken. For melee attacks, she'll be shown expertly evading and countering every strike in the combo, for magic and item use she'll charge and attack. Certain special attacks may be uncounterable. In that case, she'll grab the party

member most likely to not survive the attack (or, if none, the one who will take the most damage) and pull him or her out of harm's way, allowing both of them to avoid all damage.

Comments:

Jessie's version of future sight is extremely powerful, allowing her to evade and/or counter any move made by the enemy. It's so powerful that I'm considering decreasing its duration to one turn, instead of two, though I'd probably have to do a bit of actual play testing to decide for sure. In many ways, she has the "strongest" moment of power in the game, which is intentional. The idea for Jessie's moment of power is based off the affects of atium use in the Mistborn novel trilogy. Namely the ability to see the immediate future and the mental speed and clarity to react to it the moment before it happens. It's a power that, in battle, makes its wielder all but untouchable. Aside from its power, Jessie's future sight also plays a key roll in the plot.

Xavier:

MoP: Supreme Strength

Duration: 2 Turns

Recharge: ??

Description: The damage dealt by Xavier's physical attacks (regular and special attacks) is doubled. This is applied after all other damage buffs and debuffs are calculated. If Xavier takes part in a dual attack, the damage is increased by 150%.

Comments:

Much like his fighting style, Xavier's moment of power is very straight forward and focused on raw strength. It lacks the strategy of Ralin's MoP and the versatility of Jessie's, it's all about dealing a whole lot of damage. Xavier is a pretty powerful melee fighter to begin with and, since his MoP stacks on top of other damage boosts such as some of Josiah's writing skills, his attack power can be raised to extremely high levels with a little bit of preparation.

Items

In battle, all characters, including Josiah, can spend their turn using an item from their inventory. Items can be used on allies or enemies and activate immediately. The party's main inventory will be capable of holding one hundred of every item. However, each character may only carry ten items (not counting their equipment) into battle. These items can be set in the main menu outside of battle. Each item slot can also be set to automatically replace used items between battles (assuming another copy of the used item is available in the party's inventory).

Comments:

Item usage in battle works pretty much the same as it does in every RPG, so there's little need to elaborate. However, limiting each character to a few pre-chosen items during battle, instead of giving them access to everything in the party's inventory, is a fairly uncommon design choice. While giving every party member access to all items in the inventory is really convenient, it's also highly unrealistic. From a gameplay perspective, while limited inventory access isn't as convenient as the usual "use whatever you want" approach, it adds an additional layer of strategy to the game. Having to choose which items to give to each character, and when it's really worth

using part of the limited item stock in battle, encourages players to plan ahead and consider their movements a bit more carefully.

Defense

When a party member is attacked, they will try to evade and/or deflect the attacks. By performing properly timed button presses, the damage taken can be reduced by approximately 30%. For larger attacks that would normally be extremely difficult to block or evade, damage is only reduced by 10%.

On their turn, characters can also choose to defend instead of attacking or performing any other actions. When defending, damage from regular attacks and spells is automatically reduced by 30%, which can be increased to 60% by properly timed button presses. For attacks that are difficult to defend against, damage is reduced by 10% and 25% respectively.

Comments:

Although you get used to it, it always looks a bit strange in a game when someone just stands there and lets their enemies attack them. Letting the characters defend themselves, at least somewhat, makes it more realistic and gives the player something to do instead of just watch his party get attacked. The trick here is balancing both the numbers and how the interactive parts work. If defending is too easy or reduces the damage by too much, battles will become far too easy. On the other hand, if defending is too hard or doesn't make much of a difference, there isn't much point in using it. While the numbers I have listed right now sound ok on paper, it's quite possible that, while testing the game, I'd discover that they need to be modified a bit.

As for the timed button presses part of defense, I'm still figuring out exactly how that system will work. There's plenty of other games I could draw inspiration from (the Paper Mario games, the Mario & Luigi games, God of War, Magna Carta...), but I haven't decided if I should modify one of those systems for Ink or come up with something more unique.

Escaping from Battle

The option to run from battle will be available as part of the standard command menu for every character. In non-story battles, escape attempts will always succeed. However, 25% of the time, the party will have difficulty escaping. In these cases, Josiah will intervene to ensure the party's escape, but doing so will use a small amount of ink.

After escaping, there will be a three second period where the player cannot be forced into or initiate a battle. Depending on the enemy type, they may or may not give chase.

Trying to escape from a story battle will, depending on the battle, result in one of two possibilities. In some battles, escape will succeed but will always require Josiah's aid (and the required ink cost). Occasionally, the player will be able to fully retreat and/or escape from the enemies. However, in most cases, the player will only have a few moments before the enemy forces the party back into battle. In other story battles, Josiah will try to help the party escape (using ink in the process), only to find his abilities blocked by the mysterious force that is rewriting his story.

If Josiah's aid is ever needed in an escape attempt and he lacks enough ink, the escape attempt will fail.

Comments:

In most RPGs, trying to escape from battles is a rather risky prospect. It often fails and a failed attempt typically wastes one or more characters' turns and/or leaves them open to taking additional damage from enemy attacks. Seeing as a lot (possibly most) players don't try to escape from battle until they're in serious danger of losing, that's a pretty big risk to take. I've always had a fondness for Chrono Cross's system, in which escaping from battle always worked, at least temporarily. One of my goals in Ink is to shift the strategy in ordinary battles from resource management (make it through the entire dungeon without running out of healing items and spells) to actual battle strategy (fighting well in order to win the battle). With that in mind, I can't think of any good reason to heavily penalize the player for trying to escape. In addition, from a story perspective, Josiah's special abilities as the author of the story should allow him to help the party escape in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

While there is a chance that an escape can fail if Josiah's aid is needed and if he doesn't have enough ink to do so, the required amount of ink is very low so such a situation shouldn't come up very often.

What I haven't decided yet is how much (if at all) the party members and enemies will be healed after escaping from battle. And, in the case of temporarily escapable story battles, what the player will be able to do before being forced back into battle.

Writing in Battle

Overview:

In battle, Josiah has the unique Write command. Writing something uses Josiah's turn. Josiah starts with a very small number of things he can write but he learns new phrases by repeated writing and through story events. Different phrases have a variety of effects including increased attack, defense, and speed for party members, guaranteed critical hits, and more.

Each phrase requires a certain amount of ink to write. Josiah's special pen absorbs ink from defeated enemies (the amount of ink earned depends on the type of enemy). Defeating enemies is the only way to gain ink.

Comments:

Josiah's writing abilities are very versatile and can do anything from provide a giving party members a little boost to completely changing the tide of battle. Naturally though, it'll take him a while to learn the more powerful phrases.

Just reading the overview above, it may seem like writing could make the game too easy, at least if some of the phrases are as powerful as I say they are. But that's not the case. First off, Ink can only be gained by defeating enemies. And, while the player could always grind for ink, they can do the same thing for EXP in most RPGs if they want to, that's just the way RPGs are. For everyone else, ink will need to be managed carefully. While this isn't the place to go into detail, ink is used for other things as well and if the player uses all his ink in battle, he'll find himself without ink for other important parts of the game.

Writing in Battle: Types of Phrases:

Following are brief summaries of the types of phrases that Josiah will be able to use in battle.

Damage Boosting Phrases: These phrases focus on boosting the power and/or critical hit rate of melee attacks.

Defense Boosting Phrases: These phrases focus on increasing defense and evasion.

Accuracy Boosting Phrases: These phrases focus on increasing attack accuracy.

Magic Boosting Phrases: These phrases focus on increasing the power of magic spells.

Speed Boosting Phrases: These phrases focus on allowing characters to act sooner and/or more frequently.

Moment of Power Related Phrases: These phrases have various effects related to Moments of Power.

Other Phrases: These phrases don't fit into any of the other categories and include effects such as reviving unconscious party members and instantly killing certain enemies.

Comments:

As you can see, Josiah's writing in battle covers a very broad range of abilities. Most are fairly standard, although there'll be some rather interesting ones in the Other category. The available phrases will range from a mild boost to a significant (possibly battle changing) improvement. But, as I previously said, Ink is not only in limited supply but tied into other aspects of the game as well. The player will need to think carefully about how and when to make best use of his Ink. Ink plays a very important role in both the story and many aspects of the gameplay. Since the game is taking place inside a book, in a way everything in that world is made out of ink. Specifically, a much different ink than the kind you buy in stores. Josiah's magic pen can absorb the ink from defeated enemies, increasing his stock.

Victory & Defeat

Defeat:

The player loses a battle and is taken to the game over screen when Josiah is defeated, regardless of the condition of the rest of the party. If all the other party members are defeated, the player still won't lose as long as Josiah remains standing. From the game over screen, the player will have the option to return to the main menu or load a previously saved game.

Victory:

Every time an enemy is defeated in battle, Josiah will get ink. The amount of ink gained depends on the type of enemy defeated. Josiah keeps all earned ink even if the party escapes from the battle afterwards. When all enemies are defeated, the battle is won and the party gains any money and/or items that the enemies were carrying (exact rewards depend partly on the enemy type and partly on luck).

Comments:

While losing the game whenever a certain party member dies, even if the others are ok, might seem harsh, it's actually a fairly common condition in strategy RPGs. This leads some people to keep their "main" character hidden in the back where he'll be safe. Personally, when faced with

that kind of handicap I tend to make my main character as strong as possible so he can take care of himself... Anyway, since Josiah probably won't fight enemies directly (haven't made my final decision on that yet, but still leaning towards no) there's no reason for him to be on the front lines in battle. He'll be staying behind the rest of the battle party, where he can normally only be targeted by certain long range and magical attacks. Though, if the rest of the party is defeated, enemies will be able to target him with any type of attack. If the rest of the party is down, Josiah can still heal them (he can use items, and will have certain other skills) or escape from battle. The goal is to make protecting him part of the player's strategy without it becoming a serious annoyance, so he needs to be able to take care of himself fairly well and, even if he can't fight, he'll still be able to gain HP and become stronger.