

Action Order in Turn-Based Games and How It Influence Design

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Two action order systems:

In the past few years, I have played different kinds of turn-based games and noticed there are mainly two different kinds of action orders, which affect the player's strategic/tactical choices.

#1: Action Order depends on specific status

This happens in games such as Divinity Original Sin 2, XCOM: Chimera Squad, For the King.

#2: Round by round, Player's turn then Enemies' turn.

This happens in games such as Into the Breach, XCOM 2, Disgaea.

Any way to affect the action order during the battle?

In most turn-based tactical games I have played, there are skills/actions which are able to affect the action order by 'disabling' the enemy. It can be:

#A: Change the action order directly by lowering the specific status such as speed.

Most turn-based tactical games have this.

#B: Cause a special effect such as stun, silence, etc.

Most turn-based tactical games have this.

#C: Change the position of the enemy to make its attack miss.

For example: Into the Breach (This is special since players will know what enemies' next actions are in this game. The enemies' attack action is based on direction and range instead of a specific target. If the enemy's position changes, the be-attacked target will be changed too.)

#1 style games always contain #A and #B methods of changing Action Order.

#2 style games will contain #B sometimes. #C is a little bit uncommon since most turn-based games will not tell you the enemies' next actions to increase the difficulty: Uncertainty in turn-based games such as randomness & unpredictable enemy actions will force players to make trade-offs(or save & load) and think about the game more.

How does action order influence players' actions?

#1: Action Order depends on specific status

Pro: More fun in utilizing skills that can change the order.

Con: Not that friendly to newbie players, this is hard.

It seems to be more often that players are encouraged to utilize the order-changing system to win a battle in a #1 style game by using #A. Of course, sometimes players will choose a more 'direct' way: eliminate everything that is going to attack you, but it will not always work in the harder mode. Changing the action order of the 'strong' enemy and deal with that later is a common strategy for experienced players. Building a tutorial to guide this will be great, new players in this genre may need a better learning curve to maintain their interests.

#2 Round by round, Enemy's turn and player's turn

Pro: A Better sense of 'control'. Sometimes there will also be an "Undo" choice.

Con: Players may take a huge advantage at the beginning, which is not always good.

#2 also has two different sub-styles:

#2A: The player needs to set all the actions first, then things will happen in order.

#2B: The player can see the result of each action without "End Round".

In **#2**, the player is more welcome to change the position of one character (but be able to attack later), leaving space for other characters to attack (to avoid the ally damage, make combo by position-changing skills).

In my opinion, **#2A** is supposed to be harder than **#2B** but also has a more realistic sense of "tactical battle". After the player sets all the actions, the players' units will act in order, the enemies' units will make responses, all these things happen without the player's interruption and make this battle more realistic and coherent.

#2A style also combines with the "Missing" mechanic frequently. Calculation plays a big part in turn-based tactics, but randomness kinda forces the player to make trade-offs: Play safer or expect to be lucky?

#2B is the easiest one and presents the turn-based tactics directly to new players. Players can get feedback immediately, which means even if there is a miss, there is room for players to save the situation. Although this may lack some strategic thinking and trade-off, this is the most friendly way for new players.

How does action order influence encounter design?

As I mentioned in **#2 Round by round, Enemy's turn and player's turn**, players will get a huge advantage at the beginning since they can do whatever they want, utilizing all the units before the enemies can do something.

How to balance this?

#a: A bigger level.

Most turn-based games' level is big, players' units will not encounter enemy units at the beginning. Sometimes enemy units will also be in the fog so players will not know where the enemies are. In this situation, the player may start looking for advanced terrain (such as a higher place for better vision, some covers for higher defend status, etc.) at the beginning instead of killing everything (nothing to kill though). This minimizes the player's advantage and makes it a 'fair' fight.

#b Higher enemy health but also special mechanics.

Enemies are harder to kill directly by damage, but special mechanics such as terrain damage can kill them instantly. The terrain as part of the level can be designed further away, letting the player 'lead' the enemies to where they want to take advantage. This makes sure players can not kill all the enemies at the beginning. Adding mechanics also increases the tactical thinking instead of 'players are too strong, let us just nerf them or make enemies stronger' this kind of design.

#c More enemies.

More enemies will join the fight round by round or appear at the same time.

If all the enemies appear at the same time and there are so many, they are either too weak or 'not smart' to make sure the game is balance (only applies to turn-based tactics, turn-based RPG will be different since there will be room for players to 'farming' their units to make them stronger in numeric.). Special terrain effects or other mechanics can also be used if there are a lot of enemies appearing at the same time in the beginning.

More and more enemies join the fight round by round or during the progress of the certain battle is also a common way. In some games, enemies will be assigned to different waves and waiting for the players, the terrain advantage may change to disadvantage in different waves when facing different enemies.

Overall

All the 3 above ideas apply in most kinds of turn-based tactics no matter how the action order will be. But generally, they need to be considered more in **#2 Round by round, Enemy's turn and player's turn** compared to **#1: Action Order depends on specific status** to make sure the game is 'balanced'.