Sandbox games

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I played the demo of Uncharted 2 and didn't like it. While there is a lot in the game that is very good, the one thing that bugs me is the lack of a sandbox approach.

I'm not saying I only like sandbox games, it's more complicated than that. In the old days level design was more driven by the limitations of the technology. Which means that instead of a big open space outside where a lot is happening the player usually was inside in corridors with corners so whatever was invisible around the corner didn't need to be rendered, and to keep the number of polygons down the environment had to be clean, so when there was a ventilation duct somewhere you could be pretty sure that was the only way out. The best setting for games with these limitations is inside some futuristic spaceship where the layout of the corridors doesn't even have to make sense for anything else than the gameplay. In such an unrealistic environment those limitations aren't perceived as flaws.

But when technology moves on and games can move beyond those technical limitations and depict a realistic and recognizable environment the realism often collides with the logic that is needed for the gameplay. In the futuristic spaceship environment it is totally believable that even when the player has a grenade or a rocket launcher, the player can't just blow open locked doors with it. In this futuristic spaceship the fact that all the doors are robust enough to resist any attempt to open them using explosives isn't a flaw. But when the environment is just some very realistic looking random village and the very realistic looking normal doors behave the same as the indestructible futuristic spaceship doors, that is more like a flaw.

One way to solve this is to make everything in the level indeed as destructible as expected, which severely changes the gameplay. The other way to solve this is to try to keep the player from trying to do things he isn't supposed to do in the first place. That means the level design has to be clear about what the player is supposed to do, but with games like Uncharted 2 I can come up with about ten solutions that should work before I find the one that actually works because the level designer thought that was the obvious solution. Games like this don't work when the player is more creative than the people who made the game and the increased realism doesn't show the difference between decorative and functional objects in a level anymore. Creative players are then constantly trying to use decorative objects to only find out they are not functional. You can see there is a ventilation duct, but instead of being the only way out it's only a totally useless decorative object that just distracts from finding the only way out the level designer had in mind.

I don't mind the restrictions of a more linear world, but not in an environment that doesn't fit those restrictions. If the level is looking like a realistic village I don't expect every alley to be magically blocked so the village is reduced to just one street which appears to have a sewer system beneath it, but turns out to be there just for decorative reasons.

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