Endless Knight Development and Evolution

I created the prototype for what would ultimately become 'Endless Knight' in 2016, but the seeds of this new take on the fighting game genre began many years before...

Back in the 2000s, I was a big fighting game enthusiast, as well as a disciplined student of the martial arts. After consuming the many fighting games of the time, I was surprised to find that while these games were extremely fun, they seemed to ignore some core aspects of real world competitive sport.

Largely, fighting games focus on 2 things:

- mastering the moves and combos of fighters
- anticipating the moves of your opponent

What they seemed to miss out was the concept of reacting to your opponents' attacks. While most games offer the concept of blocking and parrying, the extreme speed required for these usually means that players are required to guess or anticipate the attacks their opponent will use.

And so, an idea was born. Could a game be made in which players actively 'react' to specific attacks? I discussed the idea with my friend (later my co-designer) Tony Punter and found that he felt the same way. At this time, I was still in a fairly junior position in the industry, so we were only playing with the idea in casual chats.

Over the years I discussed the idea many times with Tony. One idea was that a 'pure' reaction game could be made in which players reacted to dots moving along lines. While this idea had conceptual merit, it was quite apparent that it was likely to be extremely dull. Other early ideas involved the use of the classic '!' markers on characters to show the attack they were about to use.

In 2016 I had become an indie developer, and finally had the ability to create a workable prototype. The focus was on creating animations that 'telegraphed' the type of attack fighters were using. We found that so long as each attack featured a sufficiently distinct gesture at the start, reacting correctly to these attacks was not only achievable but also surprisingly fun.

To ensure that this mechanic worked across a range of speeds, the 'telegraphed' part of the animation was split from the actual attack so that more skilled players could be shown the 'telegraphed' hint for less time, thereby allowing a balance to the difficulty to get that 'one more go' feeling.

Having proved that such a fighting game could work, I set out to try to create a full game from this mechanic, with the hope of creating something genuinely different and new.

Given that the game was geared towards successful blocking, it felt only natural that some form of 'insta-death' be present. This immediately conjured the memory of the decapitation move from the game 'Barbarian', which Tony and I had played together many years before. However, we wanted all of the attacks to have consequences, so limb removal seemed the obvious choice. I began working on a system where this would be possible without ending the fight. It was during this process, and in discussions with Tony and other friends, that I decided that the combatants should be knights.

At this point the game was fundamentally two player only and, as we had hoped, the limb removal system proved extremely funny to us both. It seemed only right that the game itself should be aware of how silly it was and thus provide some form of comedy backdrop to enhance the experience. It was impossible at this stage to not see the obvious parallels with the classic black knight scene from the Monty Python film 'The Holy Grail', and so the tone of the game was now established.

Until this time, I had thought that the single player mode would not need a great deal of depth, given the templates set by other fighting games. The single player mode had evolved based on the 'Street Fighter' model, having fighters travel the world to encounter different styles. Upon implementing this, however, the experience felt quite hollow, and we thought that some bard-like songs might add a sense of depth and add some tonal flavour.

Tony and I quickly came up with a simple melody that seemed fitting, and then spent many hours attempting to write songs that could be used to provide a sense of adventure and amusement to the game's story. This in turn led to the need for animations to compliment the songs and enhance the sense of comedy. The result is some very silly songs and a truly absurd story.

Since the core game-play had not been tested before, a great deal of design consideration was required. In some cases, entire days of development were spent trying to work out how best to tweak the mechanics and style with the very limited resources available. In the final stages of development, a regular 'spit-balling' meeting was required, I made changes to the game each day and then had a long conversation with Tony about how to make it better afterwards.

Eventually, after a great deal of consideration, everything came together, hopefully offering gamers a new genre of fighting game.