Bringing story and gameplay together

Responding to game design changes is a key skill for a game writer. In this scenario, I took a pair of gameplay mechanics and a creative pillar and created a story concept that incorporated both of these elements. I then imagined that later in the development cycle, the designers wanted to add a new mechanic to the game. This allowed me to explore how this would affect the story and consider some potential modifications to the initial concept.

Creative Brief

Development scenario: I'm working on a horror game with a development team. The designer has developed two mechanics; **run** or **fight**. One of the game's creative pillars is to "motivate the player to embrace the horror."

Initial story concept - the house of haunted mirrors

The player is trapped inside a gigantic house of haunted mirrors and must find their way out. They must **embrace their fears and paranoia** as they work out which spaces to pass through. Figures or creatures may appear from within the mirrors at any time. Some will take corporeal form, meaning players can **fight** them or **run** from them. If they run, the creatures will continue to hunt the player through various sections of the mirror maze.

Other mirrors will at times show faces or figures that cannot harm the player physically, but look terrifying or unsettling nonetheless. The player will need to find the courage (embracing the horror) to interact with these mirror-dwelling beings, as doing so will be the only way through that part of the mirror maze. The player's objective is to escape the house of mirrors and destroy it forever.

Edit: on reflection (sorry), I can imagine this concept may be technically difficult to implement, in terms of what's possible with designing mirrors and reflections in games. However, for creative purposes, and the fact that I'm not an expert on how this might work in a development situation, I ran with it.

Modifying the concept based on design changes

Scenario: later in development, playtesting shows that users really want to be able to **crouch**, so the game designer adds a crouch mechanic. How does this change the story, and what modifications could be made to it as a result?

Exploring the crouch mechanic further

Adding a crouch mechanic shouldn't affect the story negatively. If anything, it should make the overall story better. I'd probably make some segments of the mirror maze crucial to the story but only accessible by crawling/crouching, with some key mirrors visible at crouch height.

The addition of crouching could make the player experience more fun by adding another layer of hide-and-seek into the main story. This could be woven into the narrative by encouraging the player to embrace their fears by hiding, or by learning to be stealthy and attack their adversaries to escape the imminent dangers.

The original concept would work with walking and running, but it would also work well with crouching. It'd be a good way to incorporate some stealth-based content into the story, especially if the player is trying to hide, avoid or even sneak up on one of the enemy mirror creatures that are stalking them through the maze. This could also present an opportunity to create some hide-and-seek-based backstory for the mirror-dwelling creatures, giving them a motive for their actions beyond just being 'evil and deadly'.

Crouching would work well with the existing fight mechanic as well as the central "embrace the horror" pillar, as the player could use their crouching skills to turn the tables on the evil mirror creatures and attack them using stealth tactics. However, because the setting is a mirrored maze, this is also quite a risky strategy, as enemies could potentially spot the player from any angle. Risk-taking players might really enjoy this, but it's completely optional for those who prefer to play things safe.

Adding the crouch mechanic would also work to heighten the sense of fear and excitement for players as they experience the story. Hiding from a creature that's trying to hunt you down feels inherently creepy and high-stakes. So does having to squeeze or crawl through small spaces, which is something I'd also write into the story to enhance the feeling of claustrophobia and ensure parts of the story's pacing are slowed down from time to time.

Potential story modifications to suit the gameplay

Modifications to the original story concept, based on the inclusion of the crouch mechanic:
- The player is trapped in a gigantic house of haunted mirrors and must escape from it. They must embrace their fears and paranoia as they work out which spaces to pass through on their adventure to safety.
- Creatures or evil figures can appear/crawl out from within the mirrors at any time. These frightening beings will take on corporeal form and try to attack the player.
- The player will discover more about these creatures/spirits through careful exploration of the mirror maze. Crouching to find old journal entries attached to the backs of certain

mirrors, for example, could provide insight and backstory into the wretched spirits hiding within, and how the player can defeat or evade them.

- Players can choose to fight these creatures, run from them or try to hide by crouching.
- **Stealth movement style:** crouching will allow players to move much more quietly, perhaps even silently, which is useful if they're trying to avoid enemies.
- These creatures will continue to hunt down the player through sections of the mirror maze if the player doesn't kill them first.
- **Stealth attack style:** players can sneak up behind these creatures by crouching and performing stealth takedowns. However, this is a high-risk strategy, as there are mirrors everywhere!
- **Crouch-based exploration:** some areas of the house of mirrors can only be accessed by crouching, for example when the player tries to explore a crawl space or tries to find a way out through a ventilation duct, only to discover that it's blocked by yet more mirrors for the player to interact with (this is something I'd want to discuss with the designer but it's an idea).
- Some key interactive mirrors are only accessible at crouch height.
- Other mirrors throughout the game will at times show scary faces or figures that cannot harm the player physically, but look terrifying or unsettling nonetheless.
- The player will need to find the courage to interact with these mirror-dwelling beings, as doing so will be the only way through that part of the maze.
- The objective of the game is to escape the house of haunted mirrors and once safely outside, the player will have the option to destroy it forever.