Playtest Report 3/27/21:

Design Goals: Player controls which flow with and enhance gameplay, which allow the audience to seamlessly interact with the game and don't cause issues with engagement.

Object(s) of Test: The current editor build of the game, with two prototype control schemes for players to test.

Method of Test:

> Players will be asked to try the game with the current primary control scheme (WASD/IOP), their responses and points of struggle being observed. We will then repeat the process with the secondary control options (Arrows/QWE). Afterward I will discuss the experience with the tester to receive their direct feedback.

Test #1:

Test took place at 2:02, March 26, 2021

Notes:

When shown a still of the game and asked what kind of controls they might expect to use, they discussed how in most games they preferred to use WASD to move, which would be appropriate to an action game, though if this were something more similar to Final Fantasy (turn based, using menus) as the layout suggested, they would gravitate more toward using the arrow keys and ZXC.

Testing was paused between 2:06 and 2:13 to debug an issue preventing testing from proceeding.

When the first control scheme was explained, they stated that this wasn't a layout they had ever heard of, but that it interested them, wondering how natural it would feel given the positioning of the hands involved. When asked after testing about their experience, they stated that the use of IOP for attacks worked well for them and that they might prefer it to using a mouse, enjoying the natural, symmetrical position – it was something new, but something they could see being successful.

While testing the second control scheme, they had some difficulty with the movement, though this was due to an issue with the equipment (one of my machine's arrow keys is prone to jamming) which they acknowledged, understanding it was not a problem with the program. They had no issue with using the arrow keys to move, given their previous familiarity, but had difficulty retaining which keys were used to attack, finding the layout unintuitive and preferring their typical ZXC setup.

They had other comments about the game experience beyond the control scheme as well. In terms of the combat, they approvingly noted their large attack range, and later showed engagement with learning different combination of attacks and mentioned how satisfying they found figuring out how to stun opponents. However, they showed dismay and later frustration at how easily they found themselves "stunlocked" by enemies, caught in attacks which rapidly ate away their health from which they couldn't escape.

In terms of feedback, responses were mixed. They did notice and praise the dust kicked up at the player character's feet as they moved, but other instances of feedback or lack thereof created confusion. Due to testing in person in a public space and it being discouraged to share audio equipment at this time, we weren't able to test with audio, which they noted may have been a blow to the feeling of the attacks. They found that, with only the animations, attacks looked weightless and stiff, with what were intended to be devastating blows feeling generally ineffectual with little sense of impact. In addition, upon completing a screen, they were reluctant to proceed further, as they believed the stump throwing particles was a spawn point and prepared to face a new wave of enemies and not an indication of where to move next.

Test concluded at 2:21.

Test #2:

Test took place at 3:18, March 26, 2021.

Notes:

When shown the game, he quickly concluded that the game was combat based going by the layout and presence of health bars, though he did wonder at first based on the two characters if it might be multiplayer. When asked how he would think to control the game, once ascertaining that the game did not use a gamepad, controller, or mouse, his first instinct was to move with WASD, while attacking could potentially be controlled in various ways. He suggested ZXC for easy one-handed reach from WASD. He mentioned the arrow keys and number pad could also possibly be used for movement, but noted that some computers didn't have the latter.

He appreciated the first control scheme, appreciating the spacing and use of both hands, going back on his original theory stating that the one-handed setup would likely end up feeling cramped. He appreciated the use of IOP as attack keys, liking how their order aligned to their attack strength. To the second, his reception was somewhat mixed. In terms of movement, he found the arrow keys less satisfying to use and noted how arrow key setups could be different between computers (specifically noting his machine's full-sized buttons versus the half-scale ones on mine) while WASD is generally consistent. He didn't note any particular preference between attack setups, as the order and position was functionally the same, though he did note that he found the second easier to find as those keys are more commonly used in gaming. Overall, he stated a slight preference for the first set of controls.

He also had additional thoughts on the combat and feedback. As stated, he found the connection between controls and attacks to be rather intuitive, and he positively noted the dust particle effects. He seemed surprised and a bit impressed at the amount of knockback that could be generated. During the second test, he experimented a bit more with the angles of attack, and noted how the game seemed to prioritize combat in a horizontal space with little opportunity to attack enemies if they went above or below, though it's unclear if he considered this an issue needing addressing or a quirk which added interest. It felt strange to him that attacking rendered him immobile, as he'd have liked and expected to be able to move while attacking, at least with some of the lighter blows.

Test concluded at 3:25.

Test #3:

Test took place at 3:34, March 26, 2021.

Notes:

When asked about her expectations for the controls from the game's appearance, she stated that based on its seeming like a combat game or dungeon crawler, she'd likely be using WASD to move, and possibly using the mouse for other forms of interaction.

Testing the first set of controls, she "kinda liked" using IOP for attacks, agreeing with their arrangement in order of strength and how they complemented the standard WASD motion controls. Testing the second, it seemed to take her a moment to find the attack keys. However, she stated a preference for the second control scheme, explaining that she most often uses arrow keys to control games and that this configuration felt more familiar to her.

While her critiques were generally light, she did give some useful reactions to the combat and feedback. At first, she assumed she'd be playing as the enemy character, likely because of the villainous appearance of our protagonist. During play, she reacted to backing her enemy into a corner with "oh no," possibly indicating a lack of engagement in a stationary conflict, or maybe a continued sympathy for the antagonist character. Upon completing the stage, she reacted positively to the particle burst, finding it an interesting reward, though while she did approach them, she didn't pass through to access the next stage, further indicating how the effect doesn't convey its guiding purpose.

Test concluded at 3:38.

Conclusion:

Based on players' reactions to the different control schemes, I believe the WASD/IOP setup will be our primary setup. Given the unconventional attack buttons, we cannot rely on past player knowledge, so this will need to be effectively tutorialized, but the overall positive reception to this setup makes me confident in its value. However, for other players we will have a secondary option available, likely controlled by Arrows/ZXC. While WASD is standard, there are those who prefer to use the arrow keys to move, so this will be made available as an alternative, with ZXC alongside them to control the attacks based on the suggestions of playtesters and a similar keyboard symmetry to the primary setup. We will continue to keep an eye on and adjust players' interactions with the game space as necessary but based on the data collected here, I believe this will be a good basis to work from. Aside from the controls, the information gathered here can help us to balance the combat system – preventing momentum-killing stunblocks, varying the battlefields to prevent cornering, etc. - and improve the effects of feedback – ensuring the impact of attacks, guiding the player through doors, etc. – ensuring an engaging play experience through both smooth controls and immersive action.

Retrospective Notes, October 2021:

Playtesters' identifying information and testing locations have been removed for reasons of privacy and safety.

Concerning the control scheme, I had attempted to research fighting game controls for keyboards, but as this is an unpopular combination of genre and controller, I wasn't able to find the information I needed in a timely manner. As such, I assigned the attack keys to I, O, and P based on hand position and testing, as opposed to the more common J, K, and L, which may create confusion among wider audiences, even if the two schemes are similar. As for the Arrows/ZXC scheme, while I had hoped to include these controls as a secondary option for accessibility, the team ultimately did not have time to implement this option.

The data from these tests also helped us to adjust the UX and combat systems to improve player engagement – stun effects and knockback were adjusted to maintain the pace of action, and the audio-visual effects received further polish.