

Hop, Skip, and a Jump

Game Analysis: Platformer

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<https://cdn.elegantthemes.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/woocommerce-vs-magento.jpg>

It's interesting how one can take the basic principles of walking and jumping, things almost anyone can do in the real world, and turn it into a difficult and challenging concept in virtual space. It's easy to see the inspiration behind platformers, as many athletics and contests around the world revolve around the concept of parkour. The Ninja Warrior challenge is an example of such a thing. Why are we so fascinated by physical ingenuity and reflexes? Mainly, it's a viewpoint of entertainment, but also the results of hard work and dedication like anything else. Like the athlete in the real world, players whom control a character in the virtual world work hard to master the controls of platformers and make it to the end of each level/section without trouble. This is where one would start when developing a platformer: the controls.

Unlike most games, platformers require extremely precise movement controls in order to "feel right", referencing the ideal discussed in the FPS article. If the controls are even a little bit off, players will immediately notice this and it will detract from the overall experience. That slight discomfort in the controls can lead to many game overs and failures, due to how most platformer require pixel perfect jumps and precise angles of motion in order to traverse the game. Jump height, fall speed, angle of control, walking and running speeds, and other such mechanics all need to have a very delicate balance of "floaty" and "heavy" control. It only takes

a single degree of motion being off in order to cause more difficulty than intended, and is the main reason why there are so many platformers that just don't work.

In addition to the controls, Platforming is probably one of the most important game genres to truly need level design expertise to pull off properly. The level layout of the game needs to convey to the player exactly what needs to be done, or at least give a general direction of understanding without needing to resort to words or cut-scenes that divide the action. Every single little degree of distance and height between platforms is needed to be calculated for the level to flow seamlessly. Every trap and obstacle needs to be positioned in such a way that becomes challenging yet possible. This also includes enemy placement, as every position, movement, and attacks of the enemies can make or break a level in platforming. There are too many examples of platformer levels that do not convey such a progress path, and thus leads to players being easily confused, frustrated, and eventually quitting the game (See many troll levels in Mario maker).

All of these concepts are relative to both 2D and 3D platformer games, only the layout is much more important when it comes to 3D, as the player does not have a singular view of the area, but multiple. The 3D levels have to take into conversation additional factors that a 2D platformer would not have, such as camera angle, depth perception, and more complicated controls. 2D platformers have an easier time with placement and level design, as they only need to design the level for a single angle. It is advised that if one is a game designer wishing to practice platformer level design skills that they start with a 2D game style, as 3D requires a lot more practice and understanding of the mechanics to pull off.



<http://nimg.gamesalad.com/learn/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/06032541/platformer.png>

I try to love platformer games, and occasionally I find a gem that I greatly enjoy playing, but my own reaction timing is not really good enough to handle the precise timing a lot of platform games have. I also don't have a good enough attention span to play a game that is /just/ platforming without something else to drive my direction through the game. Platforming is one of those genres that I feel truly shines when it has something else to accompany it. This is just a matter of opinion, however, and pure platforming games that have no other attribute have been seen to be rather popular as well, including the success of games like N++ and VVVVVV. Platformers that add additional ideals, such as Castlevania, Mario, and Metroid are the kind of platformer games I can get behind, simply because it is more than traversing obstacles, it is also about beating enemies and surviving to the end. I know there are games that have both of these ideals as well that I just can't keep up with, such as "I wanna be the..." games, where you need to have absolutely precise pixel perfect motions in order to pass a screen.



https://i.ytimg.com/vi/obi_mVlcv-o/maxresdefault.jpg

Crash Bandicoot is a call back to my childhood when I first started playing PlayStation games. I remember how absolutely difficult this game was, mainly because I was a young child who didn't grasp the reaction timing and angles needed to traverse the levels. It wasn't until I was a little older did I relish and understand the ingenuity this series had back then when 3D platforming wasn't that common. Crash bandicoot took a unique aspect of platforming and gave it an interesting camera angle and sprawling level style in order to challenge the player. This game wasn't friendly, giving you at most 1-2 hits before your character died and restarted at the last checkpoint. The controls were very smooth, feeling both floaty in speed but heavy in jumps, enough so that the player could get a feel for them within the first few levels. It was never the game's fault that the player died, but the player's own mistakes and "being bad" that lead to defeat.



<http://android-apps.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Dragons-Lair.jpg>

Dragon's Lair will always have a small spot in my heart to be cherished due to childhood memories, but at the same time this game's controls were astronomically terrible. The entire game was designed to be an interactive 80's style cartoon, where players were given a second to push one of the directional buttons or a button for sword and shield in order to traverse many obstacles, rooms, enemies, and eventually save the princess from the mighty dragon. Players had no other input other than this and were given no knowledge on which was the right option aside from the occasional tiny flash of light that you have to know of preemptively before traversing on. This focused the players to die in order to understand the room, hence the catch phrase of the game requiring the player to need millions of lives to survive millions of traps. It was never the player's fault on why they lost aside from memory, as the game didn't have good tells. Still, the game is infamous for this, and maybe it's okay for it to be infamously bad.