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7 notable puzzle-platformers every dev should study



January 17, 2018 | By Richard Moss

The puzzle-platformer is, at its core, a contradiction — a fusing of two disparate schools of game design: the platformer, with its arcade roots and twitch-action emphasis, and the puzzler, with its roots in more cerebral pursuits.

January 17, 2018 | By Richard Moss

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Yet dozens or perhaps even hundreds of games have proven this a popular and compelling combination.

Still, it remains a difficult one to do well, an important one to explore — as its best innovations tend to find their way into the broader remit of game design — and a crowded area to enter.

That's why we reached out to developers with experience in the genre to help us assemble a list of seven puzzle-platformers that offer important lessons, insights, or reference points to those willing to put in the effort to study them.

Braid's ever-changing time-manipulation puzzles

The game that kickstarted the indie resurgence and birthed a thousand retro-throwback-with-a-twist puzzle-platformers remains an essential title — even as it begins to pale against the latest standouts in the genre. *Projection: First Light* lead developer Michael Chu notes that *Braid* is a good study in how you can incorporate a unique mechanic into an established genre. "It is a good way of teaching you the mechanics and explores various limits to what platforming is capable of," he adds.



Unravel designer Martin Sahlin is more critical, suggesting that it makes challenge the only meaningful reward and stops being interesting once each puzzle is solved, but he concedes that it does handle itself well: "It manages to be extremely puzzly without totally losing the experience part," he explains. "It still

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feels like a story rather than a collection of puzzles. It's impressive how they could make something so complex so intuitive, and when you figure some of those puzzles out you feel like a damn genius."

TAKEAWAY: A single innovative mechanic may be all you need to make a formulaic genre feel fresh, and it doubles as a fantastic vehicle by which to explore the limits of the genre's conventions. (Plus Braid is so influential you should study its failings and triumphs for context on current design trends.)

Iteration and ramping up challenge in *Portal* and *Portal 2*

Both *Portal* and *Portal 2* reinvent platform traversal by turning it into a three-dimensional puzzle built around three core concepts: interacting with objects, controlling the player's momentum, and making temporary wormholes that allow novel behaviors like walking through the wall on one side of the room in order to fall through the ceiling on another side of the room.



The original *Portal* expertly taught this mind-bending concept and built more complexity on it with each puzzle until the final boss, which required the use of all the tricks learned from the puzzles, while its sequel managed to pile on several new mechanics without overwhelming — most notably the ability to shoot paint-like gels onto surfaces to impart physical properties onto them that then affect the player's movement.

Chu recommends looking at *Tag: The Power of Paint*, a student project made by members of the *Portal 2* development team (before they did *Portal 2*), for another, more organic way of approaching this surface-altering gun idea. It offers players greater freedom by concentrating on the question of where to put the paint rather than how to transfer it (or the player's character) through portals.

TAKEAWAY: With the right mechanic, platforming and puzzling can be one and the same, and when it comes to new gameplay concepts it's best to build complexity methodically and never let a design element overstay its welcome.

Light and shadow in *Limbo* and *Inside*

Both of Playdead's atmosphere-laden puzzle-platformers make for great studies in design, audio, and realizing a creative vision. *Inside* especially excels in its use of action and aesthetics to both tell its story and tease out its puzzles.



Teslagrad level designer Peter Wingaard praises their "extreme determination to realism within the context of the game" as well as their technical excellence and sound design, while Chu points to the way they create puzzles "with nothing more than an interact button."

Chu also commends them on their use of lighting and other design tricks to show players what they need to do or use in order to complete a puzzle — and in some cases even to make the light and shadow an actual component of the puzzle.

TAKEAWAY: A game's aesthetics can double as a key component of its core loops, and if it does that will enhance its story, theme, and internal consistency.

Thomas Was Alone - Story, puzzles, and action on equal footing

Sahlin puts *Thomas Was Alone* in the middle of a puzzle game scale that has things like *Uncharted* and *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light* on the experiential end, where puzzles are fun and come with plenty of spectacle and visual reward, and then games like *Braid* and *The Witness* at the other end, where it's purely a battle of wits against the designer.



Thomas Was Alone strikes a fine balance, he suggests, by "constantly switching up how you're supposed to play," and it has fantastic storytelling to boot.

It's a game that does a lot with a little, with both its characters' personalities and abilities defined by their color and (rectangular) shape — the puzzle at each level being to devise a way to get all of the shapes past every obstacle and hazard and safely to the exit.

TAKEAWAY: Each component of a game should drive the experience forward and impact upon each of the other components, and as a result all should be constantly changing to meet the needs of this evolving player experience.

Increased agency and fun body movements in Fru

Metrico designer/art director Geert Nellen recommends *Fru* "for its creativity with using body movement."

It's a Kinect game that makes the player's silhouette a kind of portal between two overlapping worlds. When outside of the player's silhouette, the main character moves according to the rules and geometry of one world, while inside the player's silhouette they adhere to the rules of the other.



As the player shifts their body position or moves their arms and legs, new paths appear or disappear, and the puzzle becomes in part a question of what is needed from the silhouette world in order to successfully traverse the platforms and in part also a question of how a player can manipulate their body to achieve this need — which, in typical Kinect fashion involves bending, stretching, contorting, hopping and waving in comical fashion.

TAKEAWAY: *An out-of-the-box twist on a tired design idea (in this case that's overlapping dimensions), well executed, will delight and engage players and immediately stand out.*

Fez - forgiving, challenging, and innovative

Surreal, clever, and immensely influential, not only within its subgenre but across the whole industry, *Fez* is important to play and study for both its design — which layers mystery and secrets and platform-based exploration around a core mechanic that has the player rotating between four 2D planes of space — and for its broader impact.



Fez is also notable for its determination to let the player take their time and not worry about failure.

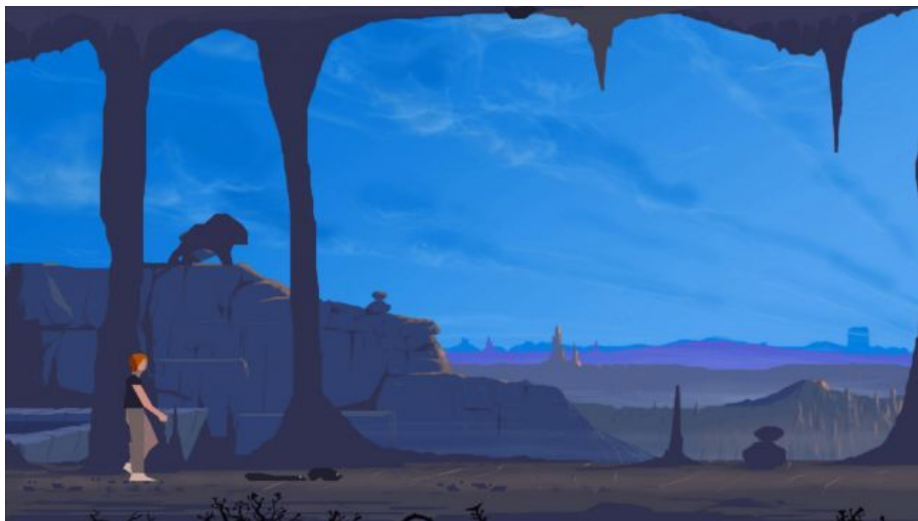
Whereas most platformers, even of the puzzling variety, frequently throw perilous jumps and dangerous foes at the player and severely punishes their inevitable failures, *Fez* forgives mistakes with a quick respawn and strips out the bad guys altogether. Its difficulty lies in its secrets and tricks, its demands upon a playful compulsion to try this or that and go everywhere. It's a clear statement that challenge, fun, and engagement can all be had in a non-violent platformer.

TAKEAWAY: *Challenge need not come from danger, nor from brain teasers; mystery, impulse, and playful puzzles can be more than enough for the job.*

Heart of Darkness and Another World's pervasive uneasiness, and their outdated design philosophy

Heart of Darkness and its more famous older sibling *Another World* offer a more cinematic take on the genre.

They demand a lot of the player, with large numbers of foes and numerous tests of their reflexes and dexterity punctuated by a design that wishes death upon them and screen after screen of puzzles that sit uneasily with the action around them. And their trial-and-error philosophy runs against the grain of current design sensibilities, which favor intuitive rather than obtuse solutions and clear rather than unclear consequences for actions.



But there's much to learn here, and not just from their still-remarkable graphics. They convey intent in subtle touches of animation and sound and present worlds that are clearly alien and yet uncannily familiar. They surprise and awe with their sudden scripted scenes. They spark fear and wonder and vulnerability as often from the absence of agency as the presence of it, all while leaving the player very much in control of their fluid, elegant, poorly-equipped, totally-unremarkable avatar as he struggles to survive his treacherous surroundings.

TAKEAWAY: Deeply flawed games with many great elements can offer the best (though often hardest to grasp) lessons, and there's a surprising emotional resonance that comes with Another World's (and to a lesser extent Heart of Darkness') intentionally-unintuitive puzzles and unexpected events.

Conclusion - it's all in the execution

The unifying principle here is that you have to really own at least one core component of your game.

Innovation is as much about execution as it is about ideas, and so is game design and development. Each of these games was deemed innovative and unique at its release, yet all merely took existing ideas and refined them until they shone like new — until they became fresh and exciting because they now had their developer's fingerprint on them. Because they had become more than the sum of their parts.

And when considering how to replicate that process for your own work, it may be helpful to also explore exemplary titles at the periphery of the genre — games that sit uncomfortably with the puzzle-platformer label but nonetheless share many of its hallmarks, like *Lemmings*, which showed a more strategy-focused path the genre could take, or *Journey*, which keeps both the puzzling and platforming light but shows how to use a game's level design and art to mirror its dramatic arc, or *Banjo-Kazooie*, which opts for a sandbox hub world and a design that's part *Mario* and part puzzle-platformer.

The best games tend to emerge from the amalgamation of tradition — of convention — and the exotic, offbeat, or outlandish — the idea that comes from somewhere else, outside the genre bubble. And as these games show, if you do that *and* nail the execution, you could unexpectedly land on a new classic.

Thanks to Geert Nellen, Martin Sahlin, Michael Chu, and Peter Wingard for their help putting this list together.

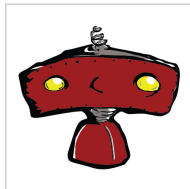
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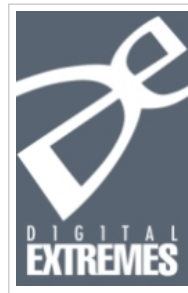
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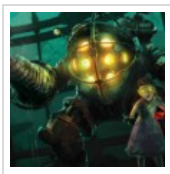
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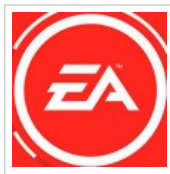
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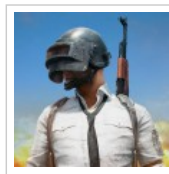
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Theresa Catalano

17 Jan 2018 at 8:15 am PST



Out of all these puzzles games, I think it's Another World that still resonates with me the most. Just something about that game's presentation and unfriendly yet intriguing world.

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TC Weidner

17 Jan 2018 at 8:50 am PST



I agree, that was a memorable game. That Art style is timeless

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Patrice Thorrez

18 Jan 2018 at 2:38 pm PST



Darn, I wish they'd release Heart of Darkness on online stores (such as gog), I have a "fond" memory of this one.

The Portals and Limb-side games are pretty neat in my book too. Portal 1's tutorial being the best I've ever played.

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