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Assignment 3: Level Design MDA Analysis Essay

Game: Ori and the Blind Forest

Word Count: 1616

Due: 12 April 2021 at 08:00

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Ori and the Blind Forest: Definitive Edition (2016) by Moon Studios is a masterpiece of a video game with enthralling gameplay wrapped in breath-taking visuals and rooted in a beautifully emotional narrative. This essay aims to analyse this video game, henceforth referred to as *Ori and the Blind Forest* or *Ori*, using Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek's (2004) MDA framework. Particular focus will be paid to Level Design and how the playing space of the game is designed to encourage and facilitate the various core mechanics of *Ori and the Blind Forest*.

Ori and the Blind Forest (2016) developed by Moon Studios is an action-adventure platformer in which players control Ori, an orphaned Spirit Guardian, who must restore light to the forest of Nibel, and return it to its former glory.

On top of basic movement and the single jump, Ori has 11 skills which can be obtained through progressing in the game, and may either serve him in combat, or movement, or both (see Appendix 1). The core mechanics of movement and combat aside, Ori can interact with various objects, such as levers and boulders. He can also collect spirit essence (used in learning skill upgrades) and energy (used to perform certain skills). A final important mechanic is the ability to create Soul Links – a means of saving the game at any time and in any space when out of combat.

For the purpose of this essay, the level design analysis mainly references gameplay from the period between the opening cutscene, to Ori's first arrival at the Spirit Tree. The gameplay of *Ori and the Blind Forest* takes place on a vast world map, consisting of 11 major world areas (see Appendix 2). The very first cutscenes and moments of gameplay take place in Swallow's Nest, where players are introduced to basic movement controls while playing as Naru and Ori respectively, in this very narrative-focused start to the game.

The game properly begins in Sunken Glades, after Ori leaves to seek out the Spirit Tree. Equipped with only basic movement, players are required to traverse the hazardous terrain. This area, like the rest of the world map, is made up of many tunnels and areas of open space, both horizontal and vertical, with many platforms and puzzles that make use of the various movement skills available in this game.

Along the way, the player is taught minor mechanics like pushing boulders and falling through platforms – mechanics that are immediately required for progression in the game (see Appendix 3). It is in this area of the Sunken Glades, that the player is introduced to several important level/game elements, such as indestructible thorns (that hurt the player), hidden areas/items, and the collection of spirit essence. The map of the game is designed to corral players into certain areas to encounter and learn about important game elements, such as energy/life cells (see Fig. 1). The main function of Sunken Glades, aside from introducing basic mechanics, is encountering Sein – the light of the spirit tree, who also gives Ori his first attack skill – Spirit Flame. Immediately after obtaining this skill, Ori is chased by jumping enemies which he needs to defeat using his new combat ability.

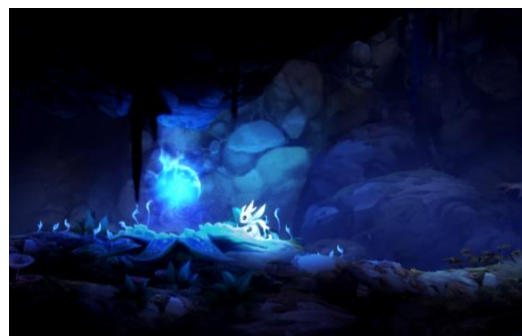


Figure 1: Screenshot showing a blue energy cell in Ori's path.

While the map of *Ori and the Blind Forest* is technically open, player movement through the world is meticulously controlled by various level elements that require the use of certain skills/abilities and/or items to deal with. An example of such are destructible, spiky thorns

(see Fig. 2) that are purposefully placed to not only make movement dangerous/difficult, but to also block access to certain parts of the map. These can only be destroyed using damaging abilities such as Spirit Flame. Hence without these, players cannot access these blocked areas, and are forced to find another path or acquire the necessary skills. Similarly, the game features cracked rock formations that can only be destroyed with heavy attacks such as Charge Flame, and very tall walls that require the use of Wall Jump, Double Jump or Climb. As such, in the player's journey, they end up passing many offshoots from the main path, that they can only return to later when they have the necessary skills.



Figure 2: Screenshot depicting spiky thorns blocking the path and covering level elements.

Another level element that serves the same function are Spirit Gates (see Appendix 4). These gates, along with Energy Gates, are introduced very early in the game as they control access between major world areas and require certain items to unlock. Spirit Gates require the collection of a certain number of Spirit shards to open. These can be found scattered in the area around the Spirit Gate and obtaining them requires the solving of a puzzle, or more often, application of certain mechanics and special skills. As such, these Spirit Gates effectively section out the world map, and control the movement of the player, making sure that certain skills are acquired and mastered before the player can progress to the next major world area.

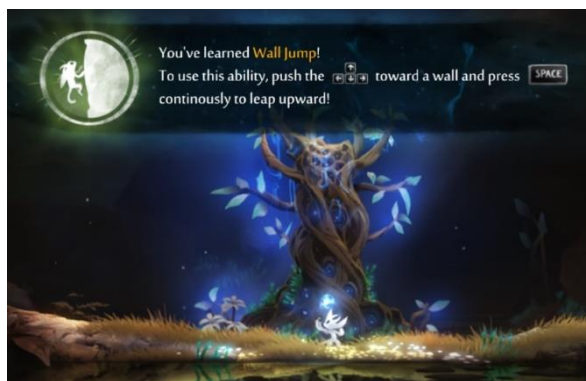


Figure 3: Screenshot of the Ancestral Tree of Fil, which gives the player the ability to Wall Jump.

A final major level element is the Ancestral Trees (see Fig. 3). These ethereal trees, graves of passed Spirit Guardians, are where Ori and the player can obtain new skills. These skills are presented with clear instructions on their usage. Each Ancestral Tree is situated in its own special grove. These groves are designed so that a player has no means of leaving the grove without making use of their newly obtained skill. For example, the Ancestral Tree of Fil gives the player the Wall Jump ability. To exit to the grove, players must navigate a vertical tunnel that requires the use of the Wall

Jump. As such, every time a player obtains a new skill, they are immediately required to use it. In this way, the game ensures that players properly learn each new ability through immediate practice and application.

A major dynamic of *Ori in the Blind Forest* is Strategy. While there are not many instances of incredibly long-term strategy in this game, players are able to plan their abilities and skill upgrades ahead of time due to the linear skill trees featured in this game (see Appendix 5). Upgrades on one branch can only be unlocked if every upgrade before it has been bought. Hence players can plan for the specific playstyle they prefer (be it combat heavy or more utility focused) and save/spend ability points accordingly. However, focusing one branch will not change the later outcomes of the game, as all upgrades can be obtained if the player obtains enough ability points.

On a more micro-level, players are required to strategize constantly as all areas of the game require careful usage of specific skills to navigate and may contain puzzles for the player to solve. For example, the area Black Root Burrows is shrouded in darkness and requires careful usage of a light globe to find hidden platforms. Even more fast paced levels, such as the three sequences (challenging timed levels that require Ori to escape the area) require very careful and thought-out usage of his skills. One missed opportunity could easily result in failure.

The main Aesthetic of *Ori in the Blind Forest* is Challenge. Challenge is facilitated by the ever-expanding list of mechanics the player juggles as they progress through the game. Despite the large number of skills, each skill can be used seamlessly with other skills, resulting in very fluid gameplay. The playing space too presents a world of ever evolving challenge for the player. Each new mechanic adds a new layer of complexity to the gameplay, that is reflected in the level design itself. Areas later in the game feature a variety of level elements and significantly more dangerous enemies, that not only rigorously test newly obtained skills, but also push players to use these skills in conjunction with other previously learned mechanics. For example, in the Ginso Tree area, players learn the movement skill Bash (which allows them to bounce off certain objects/enemies). In the following Water Escape Sequence, players are required to use Bash a countless number of times, both by itself and alongside other abilities, to complete the sequence successful. By the end of the game, the player has an ensemble of 11 skills, and has reached areas in the game that require them to juggle most if not all these abilities, using them back-to-back to pass each sub-area/level.

Secondary Aesthetics of *Ori and the Blind Forest* are Fantasy and Narrative. Aside from its challenging game play, this video game presents to players a heart-wrenching and emotional story about mother's love, set in the magical fantasy world that is the Forest of Nibel. The lore of this mystical world, and its main story focusing on Ori, is supported by the game's breathtaking visuals and masterful music score. At any moment, a player can lose themselves in the game, even when they are not currently partaking in its challenging gameplay.

In conclusion, this essay has analysed the masterpiece that is *Ori and the Blind Forest: Definitive Edition* by Moon Studios, using the MDA Framework. The analysis focuses on the level design of the video game and how the various mechanics are introduced, reinforced, and tested by the design of the map of the game. These highly demanding game levels require careful juggling of skills, and hence support the main dynamic of Strategy and main aesthetic of challenge. Secondary aesthetics of Fantasy and Narrative are facilitated by the unforgettable story, visuals and world that is central to the video game *Ori and the Blind Forest*.

Bibliography

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research.

Moon Studios. (2016). Ori and the Blind Forest: Definitive Edition (PC Version) [Video game]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Studios.

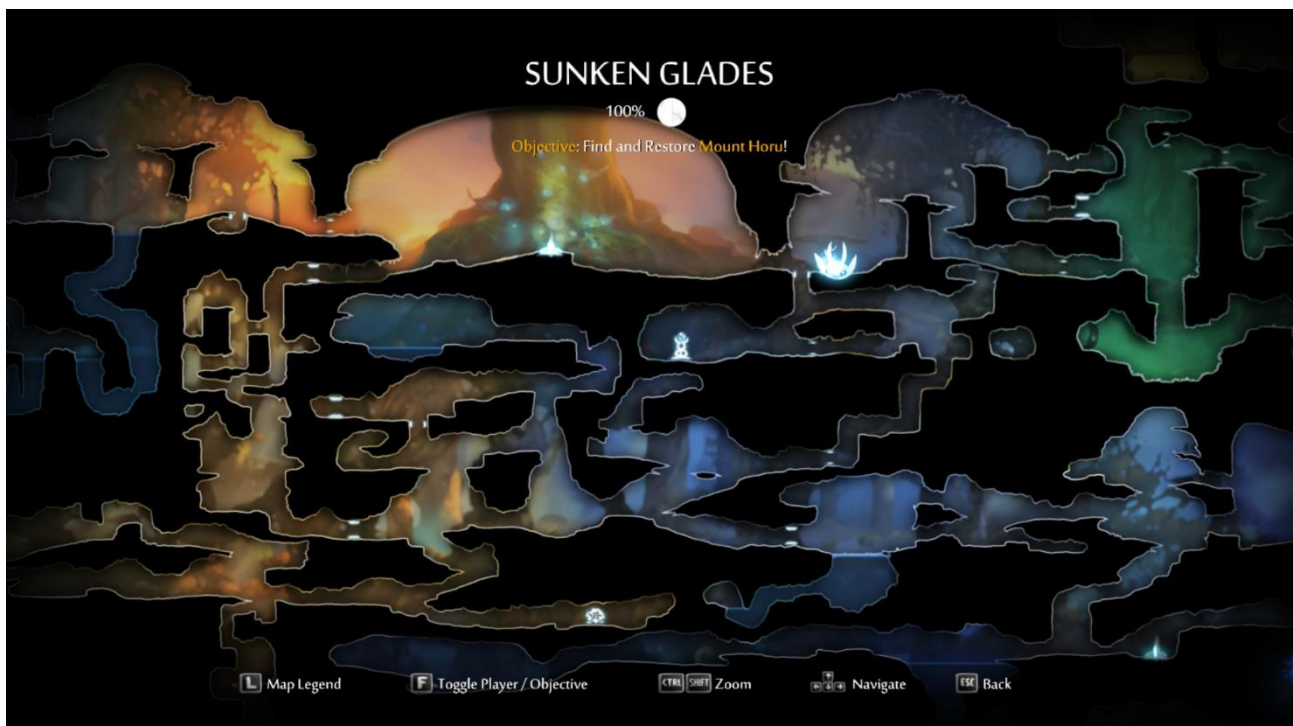
Appendix 1



Appendix 1: Screenshot of graphic displaying all skills available in *Ori and the Blind Forest*.

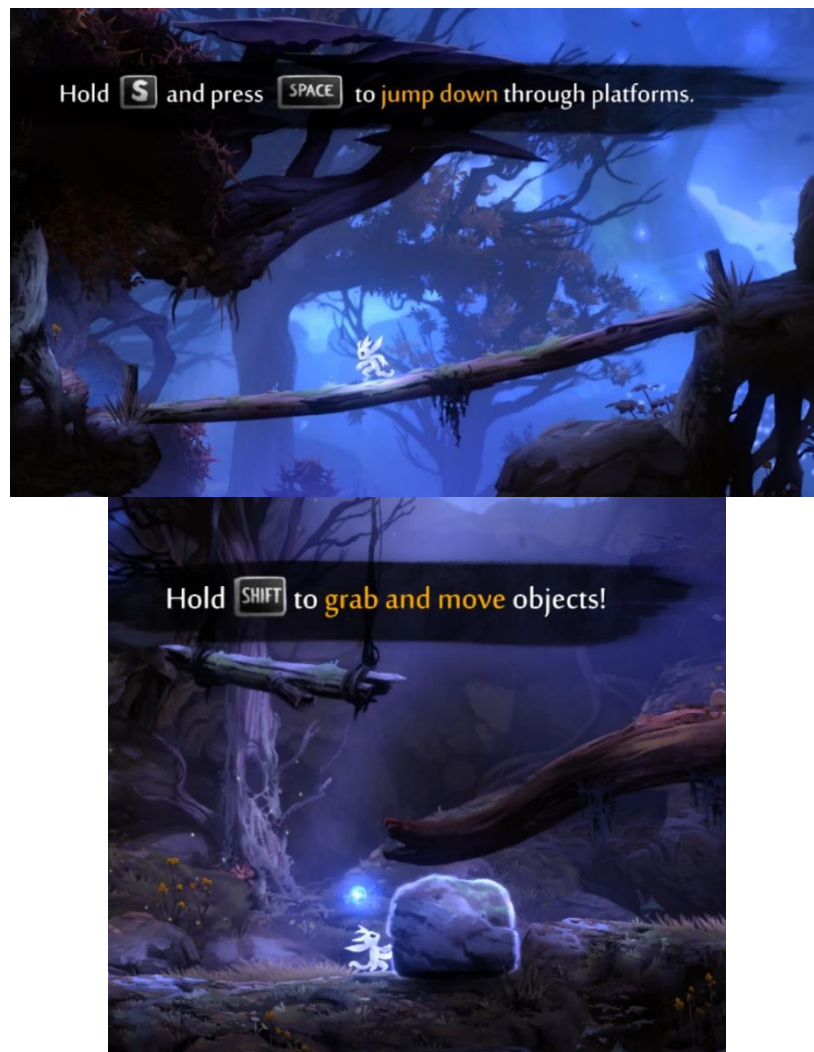
Starting from the top, going clockwise: Spirit flame, Wall jump, Charge flame, Double jump, Bash, Stomp, Kuro's feather, Climb, Charge jump, Lightburst and Dash.

Appendix 2



Appendix 2: Screenshot of a part of the world map of Ori and the Blind Forest – displaying the basic structure of every area.

Appendix 3



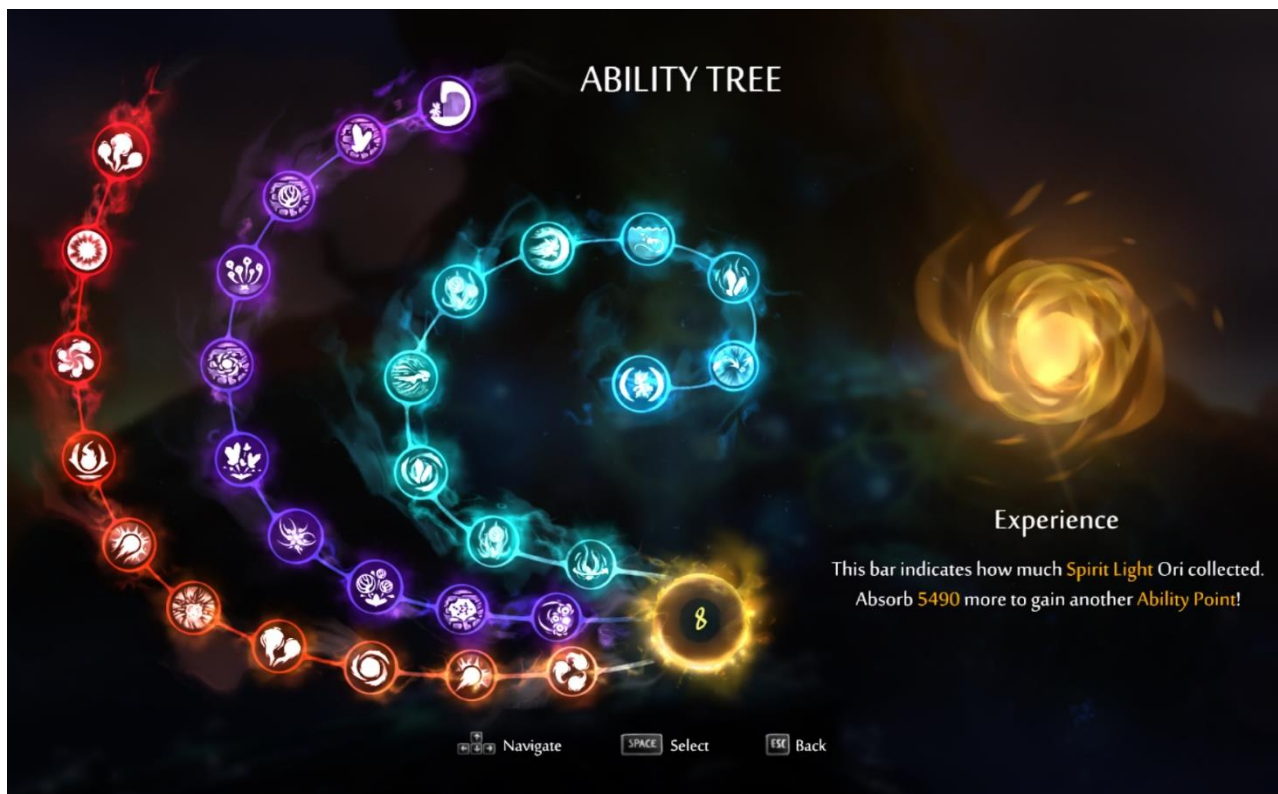
Appendix 3: Screenshots of moments in game play where players are instructed about new mechanics and are required to put them into practice immediately for progression in the game.

Appendix 4



Appendix 4: Screenshot featuring a spirit gate that requires two Spirit Shards.

Appendix 5



Appendix 5: Fully upgraded ability tree.