Over the years, I have become a fan of indie games. A few years back, telling my AAA-games-lover self that I would one day chase these low-budget and overly simple games would have generated a burst of laughter. But let us face it: Indie games have some perks over the traditional big-budget games. Most of the time, they are cheap, innovative and still manage to be as fun as their big brothers. This is what I expected when I decided to venture in the world of They Bleed Pixel, but little did I know that I was walking into a mirage.

The character that you incarnate in the game is a young girl. However, if not for her little hair bowtie and her feminine shouts when she dies, not much is said about the character. It is a shame that no dialog or interaction was implanted in the game as it would have been a great opportunity to enhance the game’s story, giving it, and the heroine a personality. It should be said that even though the character is not developed at all, it is exciting to see that the gender choice for such a plain actor was female, since the male hero has long been the norm, and it should have been such if the developed still worked in an outdated paradigm.

However, being a young problematic girl, your character is sent to “Lafcadio’s academy for troubled young ladies”, an institute that would plunge you into a worse nightmare that what is ought to be in your mind already. The mysterious book you find possesses you, sort-of, and forces you through a journey that will permeated by great numbers of life thirsty monsters. Every morning you wake up from your nightmare, hands soaked of blood, and try to bury the book from which seems to come all the evil that haunts your dreams.

This is what motivates your roaming through the dangerous worlds, and that may be the only thing. They Bleed Pixel is a pixelated action platformer which integrates combat mechanics, such as hit combos, with intense platforming challenges. While this sounds like an interesting mix, it does not blend as homogeneously as we could have hoped.

With no bosses, levels consist of moving from point A to point B by jumping over deadly pits and murdering hideous creatures. However, it sometimes seems like both of these challenges too often interact one with another: creatures will randomly interrupt the final jump of a long series, knocking you back so powerfully that recovery is no longer a possibility. This is also true for saw and spikes, which will not kill you instantly, removing, one by one, your three life points. On some occasions, it is possible to use the second jump to get out of such situations, but this only happens a handful of times, just enough to make you maintain a faint light of hope.

Fortunately, the game has a mechanic to balance for its infernal difficulty. Amassing enough of your foes’ blood will give you the ability to set up a checkpoint anywhere that is safe enough to let you automatically lay a demonic rune. This might sound like an enormous advantage in a platformer but there are only a limited number of areas where no saws will bloc the incantation. Moreover, this perk has many downsides, suffocating any cheers that its announcement might have provoked. Not knowing what is to come next, it often happens that the checkpoint is set at a non-optimal position, forcing you through a repetition of tiring challenges as, when you die, you respawn in the world as it was when you had set the checkpoint.

When on flat land, combat can be somewhat interesting, permitting you to unleash your character’s fury on your enemies, their pixels everywhere. This activity only comes once in a while and is rudimentary. A few moves emerge from the unique attack button and the combinations with movement. On the designing side, the use of a single attack button leaves the controls to be a bit unintuitive. With one button, it is possible to kick and hit your enemies, two distinct actions, one that pushes and does not hurt and the other one that simply hurts. This comes to be confusing and could have been avoided by making use of a single additional button.

This leads to the consequence of all the aforementioned points: you die a lot. This is indeed thought to be common in a video game, and some games successfully made a trademark their punishing difficulty. Although, They Bleed Pixels does not feel like deaths are fair. On several occasions it seems the randomness of encounters is the reason you perish: saw blades will knock you so far away it is impossible to act consequently to survive. On other scenarios, it simply seems like the game constantly tries to cheaply trap you. As a result it is frustrating to achieve what could have been rewarding challenges, and turns out to mostly exasperating.

They Bleed Pixels is an action platformer that aims at blending the combat and platforming genres. Its universe is indeed an interesting one but not much can be said from its gameplay. The game throws a lot of challenges at the player, challenges which's presence does not seem to be masterfully designed. The organisation the obstacles that are but on your way gives an impression of randomness to the levels you venture through. Although the game has some major flaws, it could be attractive to platforming fans as this iteration of the genre is peculiar on its own.