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Case Study 4: Levelhead

Levelhead does a great job to introduce experiences and concepts to the player while leaving the player to discern from these experiences how to navigate through the game. Starting with an underwhelming approach to teach the player how to navigate through the level with tutorials and an intuitive experience, Levelhead aims to keep its players intrigued on what lies ahead while adapting to the concepts they're learning. Vital concepts and tools are introduced to the player early on so that they become familiar with its use by the time they need it for the more challenging tasks.

The player learns early on in the game that they need the basic item block to enter the finishing platform in order to complete a level. It quite common that the player needs a certain item or tool in order to progress through a certain area. This gets the player accustomed to keeping the new items nearby, which is a great level design tactic used by the game to prime the player for later. In later levels, a lot of these non-essential items can be ignored but come in full fruition for hardcore gamers that want to achieve top scores.

This game aims to keep the player focused on beating the puzzles in front of them by using good level design techniques to help the player discern what they can and must do. One design technique in particular is the game's aesthetics. Enemies can be killed when the player hops on top of them, and their model design generally hints at this, having a flat-topped body or a bald head. Another visual technique the designers used is to keep moving items animating even while the game is paused, even though everything else seems to stop moving. Since moving objects attract the eye, it's a good way to redirect the user's attention into overcoming the obstacle they face.

As the player progresses through the game, the game introduces more difficult and less intuitive concepts for the player to solve. It starts introducing to the player logical puzzles such as jumping while landing on an enemy kill spot to collect out-of-reach coins. The game also gives the player hypothetical obstacles which stop the player if they don't have a specific tool (bounce pad, block, key, etc). Tasks such as these aren't instructed or guided by the tutorials for a reason; it is the player's intuition and experience which will determine their progress in the game. One level in particular starts with the camera zoomed out to simplify some of these non-intuitive concepts. This is a great technique for the player to visualize all the complicated components of the area they're in to better piece together their strategy and progress through the level.

Levelhead implements level design techniques aiming to increase the game's replayability. It does this by incorporating prize item and areas such as coins, puzzle pieces, and hidden robots for the player to wake up. The levels also have prize coins which are not necessary to collect but more challenging to collect for the more daring players. This is a common concept in well-designed platformers so that players are encouraged to retry levels so they can make 100% progress. Levelhead also does a great job incorporating hidden or out of focus areas at a very selective pace for the more hardcore gamers. It utilizes great level design technique by implementing these hidden features for the player to discover. These features are hinted by odd details such as:

- A crevas with an unplaced block in an otherwise solid surface
- A coin path which trails off the main path which is to be navigated
- A wall which is abnormally large or unnecessarily covers a large portion of the level

By using the bounce pad in this area, I got to the following area, hidden by the bushes:
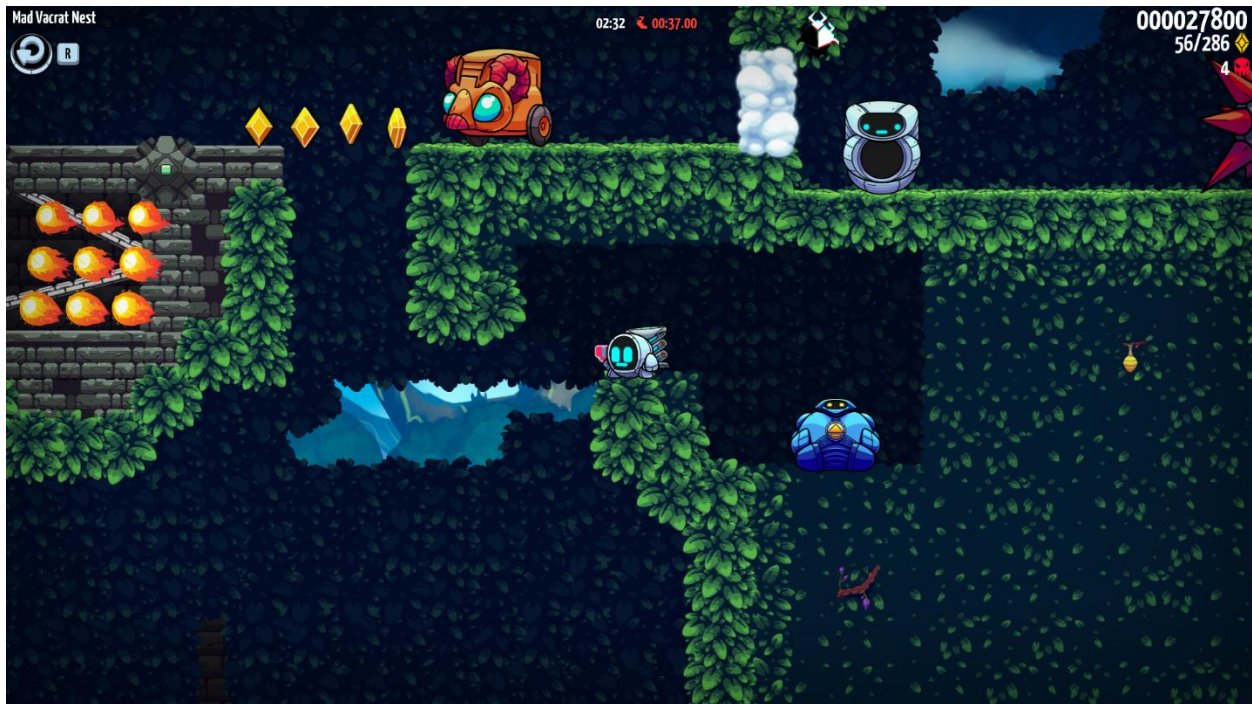
In terms of my own opinion, being someone who's not a fan of platformers with repetitive and simple action, I think the gameplay experience would be vastly improved with more complicated interaction. One example I'd like to see implemented is distinct weapons that are more or less effective on certain enemies. For example, if they were to add in a bow and arrow in certain levels, I'd figure the bow wouldn't be so effective on the "bucket rats" whereas a bow would

clearly be fatal on the bald, small-headed enemies. Weapons would add in more complicated ways of defeating enemies rather than simply jumping on top of them. It would keep the enemies from being over-intuitive as they are from my experience of the game. The enemies would at least be interesting enough that you'd think twice before hopping on top any enemy.