



INTRODUCTION

Platformers have been a staple of the video game industry ever since its inception. Mario, Sonic, Banjo Kazooie, Megaman, the list of video game mascots specifically from platformers goes on and on. Pretty much every major console in history has had a platform game that has either tried to create a new mascot or breathe new life into an existing one. For example, we have Mario (Nintendo consoles), Sonic (multiplatform), Crash Bandicoot (PlayStation), and then we have games like Pitfall and Rayman that began life on the Atari consoles.

If we look through history, most of these mascots originated in 2D and then eventually moved into 3D as time went on and popularity rose. However, many of these adaptations were unsuccessful, such as the 3D Rayman games, and of course the infamous Sonic 06. If we exclude the Nintendo 3D titles, such as Super Mario 64, Odyssey, Sunshine, and both Galaxy games, then the range of truly great 3D platformers is far shorter than that of 2D platformers.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD 3D PLATFORMER?

The Wikipedia definition of a platformer game is: “a type of videogame, and subgenre of action game. It involves guiding a player character or avatar to jump between suspended platforms and/or over obstacles to traverse their environment.” However, in my opinion, most 3D platformers lose their charm when they enter the third dimension, because, in many cases, the actual platforming becomes secondary to the action and combat present in the game, games like Ratchet & Clank, and the Jak and Daxter franchise. I would class these games as action games, but with platforming elements, not platforming games with action elements. It’s like claiming that the Uncharted series is a series of platforming games, it doesn’t really make sense when the action and gunplay takes precedence over the jumping and platforming?

I would argue that one of the best 3D platformer in recent history is Super Mario Odyssey; this game fits into the ‘Collect-a-thon’ category. In my opinion, this is the best type of full on 3D platformer, as it is a game centred on platforming, rather than killing enemies and then jumping across a few rocks to reach the next room full of copy and pasted foes (Knack). I truly believe that all 3D platformers should have an element of exploration, and should allow for at least a semi-open-world, with large areas for the player to explore. I say this, because when a linear 3D platformer is created, it is

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genuinely very difficult to enjoy when it has such restrictive movement, especially for a game in the genre all to do with moving and jumping. A prime example of this is Crash Bandicoot, due to its linearity it can hardly be considered as a three dimensional platformer, essentially, the only direction you are supposed to travel is forward, yet this completely defeats the point of being able to travel in any direction and explore the space around you. Yes, Crash does have hidden secret levels, where you can get extra lives and what not, but this provides no additional route for the player to travel and to reach the end of the level. Compare this to Super Mario 64, which came out in the same year, even where you start the game, you are dropped into a large area that you can run around in and then, as soon as you enter the castle, you are greeted with an extremely well designed level screen, which involves going through the doors to travel to the different worlds. Each world has a unique feeling and aesthetic, and utilizes the three dimensions to the fullest and allows for the player to explore, while Crash, as much as I love it, is essentially a series of corridors with holes in the floor.

One of the most overlooked design features that is hard to get right in 3D games is the camera. Where the camera is positioned has a huge impact on how the game is played, I will use Crash as an example, the Rolling Boulder levels, as cool as they are and as much as I love feeling like the animal version of Indiana Jones, I just can't defend the fact that poor camera placement and simplistic level design meant that I kept on falling down holes that I couldn't even see. Super Mario 64 on the other hand, provides a camera that the player can actually control to help suit them and help them see where they are going.

PACING

When it comes to pacing, I think it is important for a game to have a sense of urgency to really add that extra edge to keep a player engaged. This can be somewhat lost in 3D platformers. It is much easier to tell a story in a 2D platformer, there is one goal and the way to achieve that goal is by travelling in one direction, key examples being Mario trying to rescue Peach from Bowser's Castle, doesn't help when you reach the end of the level just to meet Toad and hear the infamous phrase: "Thank you Mario! But our Princess is in another castle!" or how Sonic awards extra points for completing the level as fast as possible, or even how you are given a rank in terms of performance, represented by either a bronze, silver or gold medal, or in the case of Super Meat Boy (2010) giving an 'A+' to the player if they complete the level faster than the target time. These time-oriented gameplay mechanics add a sense of urgency to the game that forces progression to be made very quickly, also the idea of getting a 'high score' will make the player want to replay the game to try to best their previous attempts, if anything this just reinforces their fond memories and positive thoughts towards the title.

On the other hand, in 3D games, with more open levels, the player may be more tempted to explore, this is a great way to design a "collect-a-thon" game, such as Super Mario Odyssey or Super Mario Galaxy, however in a game that is more story driven, this can kill the pacing of the game and can lead to players losing interest and even becoming confused or frustrated, especially if it isn't clear where to go due to poor level design. This can become a real issue, especially for games like Sonic, where there should always be a real sense of panic and excitement, where fast gameplay is encouraged, that is why Sonic suits 2D much more, as the player is more encouraged to go quickly through the levels, keeping this pacing of the story alive.

DIFFICULTY

I think that difficulty is a real issue when talking about games; difficulty is, for the most part, subjective – when a game is designed fairly. But, this idea of fair design is key, especially when in 3D games, where levels are either designed poorly or are just ruined by some other omission in terms of graphical or mechanical design, this doesn't challenge the player, it merely frustrates them. For example, Crash Bandicoot – yes I know I'm picking on him a lot – a game that is near and dear to

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many people, however it certainly wasn't perfect, the main reasons for this being the camera, the Rolling Boulder levels, but most importantly the poor design of the jumps and the fact that they weren't difficult, they were unfair. Naughty Dog is a fantastic game development company, giving the world Crash, Jak and Daxter and of course Uncharted, however they seemingly failed to give Crash Bandicoot a decent shadow. This may seem like a slight oversight when designing the game, but it is a key part of a platformer, especially a 3D one, as it allows the player to see where the character is going to land, and if they have no indication as to where they will land, then their depth perception is essentially hindered. This problem isn't really encountered in 2D games, especially since you can see the entire environment and it is easy to judge where you will land.

Difficulty can also be a factor when you need to add more mechanics to add depth to your game, this can make even the best 3D titles suffer. I was playing Super Mario Odyssey the other day, and I realized that for almost the entirety of the game, I never used the hat throws that were triggered by the Joy-Cons movement. When developers try to add things to 3D platformers, they should consider how useful the mechanic will be to a player, how often the player will use it and how easy is it to pull off. If it isn't effective, then the player probably won't use it, if it is too hard to pull off, then the player will become frustrated and just not use the mechanic. The control scheme certainly feels more simplistic in a 2D platformer and understandably, there are less options for when it comes to moving: up, down, left, right and then the occasional ability like a ground pound. When it comes to platformers, the control scheme is key and a game with poorly designed controls will just frustrate players and make them want to stop playing the game.

MOVEMENT

There is a lot more depth in the movement of 3D games than there is in 2D games – pun intended. You can move around in any direction that you want, and you are only limited in where you can move by how the level has been designed.

Much of the movement in games is fairly straightforward, based on the directions that you can move in, normal laws of physics apply, so you can't just float down through the floor, or up into the sky. But, the main difference in movement can be seen in three ways: firstly, how responsive the controls are, this is especially key in platformers, when timing is extremely important, the last thing you want is to attempt to take a run and jump, just to find out that you press the jump button right at the edge of the ledge, but instead of leaping across, you fall to your death. Secondly, the animations, the way that a character's movement is actually visualised by a developer is very important as it can have a huge impact on the visual side of the game, but also the mechanical side of the game, we see this in pretty much all games, ranging from fighting and action games, to racing games like Mario Kart. For example, in Mario Kart, when drifting the colour of the sparks created changes to signify how much of a boost the player will get when they release, it's not only visually appealing, but it also provides a visual aid to the player, and this is no different in platformers. Finally, the mechanics of the movement and how the level is designed, if a level is designed poorly, then it may be difficult to navigate it, again this may come down to unfair design with jumps or poor camera positioning; but also the abilities available to the player, as I mentioned earlier, if a certain ability is too difficult to pull off, then it can frustrate the player.

INDIE DEVELOPERS

Many indie developers began their gaming lives playing titles such as Mario, Sonic and Megaman, and they have a love and passion for these 2D platformers. This means that they know what they want from a platformer due to how much they played when they were younger. Indie dev's seem to have the formula for what makes a great 2D platformer locked down, games like Fez, Thomas Was Alone, Cuphead, Inside, Teslagrad, all great and unique in their own way, with fast-paced gameplay, a compelling narrative or clever puzzles. Indie developers are now beginning to pull ahead of most

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other developers (except Nintendo) when it comes to making 2D platformers. But, there hasn't been too many Indie 3D platformers that have been a huge success, recently Gears for Breakfast has given us A Hat in Time, however this type of indie success is quite rare and many indie 3D platformers have flopped, just look at Yooka Laylee, developed by ex-Rare employees, the same people behind Banjo Kazooie, yet this game was a failure and didn't live up to the hype.

I don't think that this is a huge problem, just as many indie developers grew up playing 3D platformers, soon we may have an influx of indie dev's, just like Gears for Breakfast, who are creating 3D platformers out of love for the genre, and love for games like Super Mario 64. Playtonic Games attempted to recreate the magic of Banjo Kazooie, with Yooka Laylee, unfortunately the spark just wasn't there and it didn't have the same charm and appeal that Banjo Kazooie possessed, but with time it is almost a certainty that an indie developer will create a 3D platformer that will one day be considered a classic.

SOUND DESIGN

In 2D platformers, there is always a distinct amount of things happening on screen at one time, and most of those things can be admired or examined individually by the player. Whether it be the movement path of the enemies, the overall aesthetic of the level, or the music that may be playing, all of these can add to an experience and change how a player feels about the game. However, in 3D platformers, players have less time to just stop and examine the overall design of the level as enemies can move in different directions, which can create a somewhat hectic atmosphere, as well as the fact that the world around the player may be moving, for example waves in water based levels. The amount going-on on-screen can influence how much a player can really appreciate each individual aspect, and the harsh truth is, in the most part, 3D platformers have more happening at any one point than 2D platformers do. The main issue with this is that it can really detract from the sound design of a game.

This may seem like a strange point to make, but I'll try my best to explain it, if the noise that plays when you collect a ring in Sonic is the same in a 2D game, and the same in a 3D game, let's say they are for arguments sake, then the sound in the 2D game will appear more distinctive and stand out more. In a 2D game, you are more likely to hear each sound as the main sources of sound would be that ring that you have just collected, and the music playing in the background. However, in a 3D game, that very same sound could be lost due to the fact that other things will be making noise, since more things are happening on-screen, there will be more things that should emit sound to create a realistic or effective environment that isn't just silent, and this can cause for the really impressive sound effects, such as the iconic ring collecting sound from Sonic, to be drowned out by all the other nonsense that have boring, generic sounds.

IN CONCLUSION

From a technical stand point, 3D platformers are better than 2D platformers. They literally have another dimension. However, from a gameplay and enjoyment standpoint, 2D platformers seem to be much more appealing, this can be due to a range of reasons, such as simplicity, overall polish and pacing. The indie scene is key when it comes to platformers, and just as there has been a range of 2D indie titles released in recent times, such as Shovel Knight, Limbo and Cuphead, but as time goes on, we will be delivered with a handful of high-quality indie 3D titles.