

Slippers Playtest – 10/4 Build:

NOTE: All testers' identifying information has been removed.

Test Goals: Gauging the overall usability, engagement, and atmosphere of our game.

Object(s) of Test: A build of *Green Reaper* made 10/4/2022.

Method of Test:

The playtester was given a copy of the prototype and asked to open it and play through as much as they desired, while being observed by a designer. After the test, the player was asked questions about their experience by the designer.

Key Issues:

Focus Area – Difficulty: While there are certainly areas of difficulty, at this point this seems to engage players more than dissuade them, bringing them back as they better understand the mechanics and improve their skills. That said, there are areas of the game where difficulty is found where not intended. Platforming, while not a problem for everyone, can stymie new or inexperienced players, keeping them from the main action of combat. Additionally, while the large enemies are difficult to battle, they aren't interesting, players expressing frustration with their lack of variety – they're boring meat walls, not engaging threats.

Focus Area – Engagement: As mentioned previously, where players are running up against significant difficulty, their engagement is increased rather than dampened, being presented challenges which must be considered, learned, and overcome. Players show investment in improving and learning.

End-of-encounter cinematics: While testers seem to appreciate the visual storytelling, these are still somewhat unclear to some, and to others they are too long and keep them from the action

Focus Area – Spawn Bugs: While I didn't see any occur directly, a dearth of enemies in certain encounters leads me to suspect that they indeed aren't spawning in properly.

Controls: Admittedly, the difficulty the first player had with controlling the character is largely down to their unfamiliarity with PC controls – our other player didn't have much trouble. Once controller support is finalized, I may return to this first tester to confirm these suspicions. That being said, the control difficulties encountered by this player (difficulty lining up angles when moving around, jumps being too long or not long enough, problems moving the character around in small spaces as they don't turn with the camera until directed to move) match up with those of previous testers, which may be worth investigating further.

Pot Stairs: The pot stairs area consistently causes players problems due to a lack of direction, little space to maneuver, and needing tight turns. A fix is already in the works for this issue, and I look forward to seeing if players' experiences improve.

Camera: The camera continues to be occluded by set dressing, both in combat and out of it, which not only makes gameplay difficult but blocks the view of the wonderful environments players enjoy. It is also difficult to navigate tight spaces with the camera with how close it must come to the character, limiting the view.

Teaching: Players less familiar with these sorts of games have difficulty picking up on the particulars of combat, likely due to the rapidity with which controls are introduced at a time when players are focused on oncoming enemies. Players seem to quickly forget about sprinting and dodging, possibly due to a lack of immediate relevance or gameplay reinforcement making them use and understand it. In addition, popups in their current position block the view of the player's destination, making proceeding difficult (if they pop, that is – in the first test, the sprint tutorial seemed not to trigger).

Checkpoints: There have been a few issues and suggested changes to checkpoints. As it stands, dying tends to really break the flow of action, as players must find their way back from a checkpoint to wherever they were. The game either needs more checkpoints, or relocated checkpoints, ones that will put them right back into the challenge and let them try again, encouraging them with action instead of discouraging them with waiting and wandering. Speaking of wandering, the lack of landmarks or direction near checkpoints leaves players confused, many of them wandering around the nearby area until they figure out where they are and how to get back to where they were (if they don't just backtrack out of confusion). It may also be worthwhile to consider whether checkpoints should heal players.

Health pickups: Tests seem to go back and forth on how clear these are to people – perhaps an examination is in order

Mineshrooms: These enemies seem to confuse people, not being read as dangerous even when triggered, though to a certain extent that is desirable as they are meant to be a "sneak attack." Something to keep an eye on.

Music: While the music and SFX have been praised, the former is at times inappropriate to the situation, its lighthearted feel clashing with darker moments. We may want to consider adding more dynamic sounds.

Test #1

Test took place at 6:33pm, 10/4/2022.

Notes:

This tester reports at least passing familiarity with 3D platformers ("I did a lot of those in the past") and with combat/hack & slash games. Their primary platforms are VR, mobile/tablet, and console, and during the test they reported some difficulty in using the PC controls.

There were some difficulties setting up the test – as this was getting set up, they praised the visuals of the game. Once everything was set up, they had no problem entering the game, and found the opening cinematic and environment "really pretty."

Starting gameplay, they took some time to move around the camera, getting used to its movements and looking at the character and environment. Moving around the environment and learning the controls, they seemed to want to explore, maneuvering into corners and edges. When the jump prompt appeared, the camera was not at an angle to see the intended path, but they seemed to take this as a hint and found their destination on the ramp quickly. They also seemed to have little issue using the jump flower.

While on the first shelf, they noticed the icon and tried the special attack. They also paused to watch the checkpoint animation, seemingly confused about its purpose at first. Moving on, it took them some time to enter the first arena, with them pausing as they approached the edge of the plank and looking down as they considered whether to drop down.

Entering the arena, it took some time for the enemies to reach them (or even be visible), offering no distractions as the combat tutorial played out. However, when the enemies did reach them, their initial response was to jump, seemingly confused – either about the controls or how to respond to the creatures' approach (who do, notably, jump when they attack). However, the real difficulty arose when they tried to turn and face the enemies – the camera clipped into the set decoration and was blocked by grass and leaves mid-encounter, rendering the player effectively blind at a point that should have been an engaging confrontation. Despite this, it only took a few frenzied swings to kill all enemies and trigger the confrontation end animation (which was also partially blocked by leaves). I suspect the delayed start of the encounter and low volume of enemies to be due to current bugs with enemy behavior and spawn points, greatly decreasing the difficulty and impact of play.

Throughout the game, the player took quite some time moving around the environment. The hopeful part of me wants to take their camera movements during this time as a sign that they were enjoying taking in the environment. However, it must also be considered that they were having difficulty with the controls, both due to unfamiliarity with PC controls (which they found “weird”) and the in-game settings, which they described as “twitchy” and oscillating between too fast and too slow. They wished that the character would turn along with the camera movement, as they wouldn't face the way the player intended until they started moving, making gauging and executing more exact, specific movements difficult.

Nowhere was this clearer than with the extended time at the pot stairs, which took them several minutes to surpass the first time. Figuring out what they had to do in the first place was a challenge for them – it was difficult to direct the camera in an enclosed space, and whether they saw the ramp they needed to reach or was attempting to jump on the pots for a better vantage point was unclear. They seemed to get the message at first that they needed to use the pots as stairs at first, but after a few attempts failed, they moved on to trying to find other methods – searching between pots, looking out from the edges and the ramp in for other paths, using attacks on the environment – before I confirmed that their initial impression was correct. The core of their difficulties seemed to be the length of jumps – jumping and then pressing forward made the jumps fall short, but jumping and moving simultaneously would send them flying past their goal, the pots being “too easy to miss.” One attempt sent them off the shelf, killing them and sending them back to the checkpoint, where to their credit, after some confusion about their location, they found the stairs again and went right back to trying. Even when they did reach the ramp, they flew past and didn’t seem to notice the health pickup, and misjudged the angle and ran off the edge, having to return and complete the pot stairs once again (they later remarked on the distance between checkpoints in this section).

Making it up to the ramp, they took some time to carefully line up the angle before walking up. The jump flower up to the hanging pot gave them difficulties, which they avoided by frankly miraculous means – after misjudging the jump into the pot, they landed on the very edge of the shelf, and when while attempting to return and try again the flower launched them in the opposite direction, they were caught on the edge of the decorative metal shelf post and managed to stay on the shelf. However, they did fall off the edge while going in for another try, dying and respawning.

At this point, with the player having such difficulties and losing so much progress (and having to return to the pot stairs), I was ready to call the test, but the tester surprised me by wanting to continue. Though the navigational challenges were largely unintended, they were engaged by the difficulty of overcoming the challenges and learning from each attempt – indeed, they made it up the pot stairs much quicker, and carefully lined up their launch into the hanging pot, which they celebrated. They compared the project to the game *Moss*, both in aesthetic and experience – you might die, or spend forever beating your head against a challenge, but you learn from it and improve.

While they made it up to the hanging pots, they didn't seem to be alarmed by the minesrooms' activation animation, and ended up dying by standing between them when they detonated (admittedly they were somewhat distracted by our discussion of the previous points). It was at this point, spawning back again before the pot stairs, that they commented on having to reach another checkpoint and the distance between them – and that I noticed that I hadn't seen them use a single health pickup. By this point they had very little difficulty passing the pot stairs, and managed to get back up to the hanging pots. They ran through the minesrooms, but missed the jump to the other pot – at which point I realized that I hadn't seen the sprint tutorial pop up when it should have. After one last jump flower mislaunch and death, they called the test.

They found the most difficult aspect of the game to be the controls, their unfamiliarity not being helped by their "twitchiness." They noted that with a game controller they would likely have had a much easier time, and mused about how good the game would look in VR. They also wished that there had been more tutorialization on the front end, more guidance on controls and navigation. They found the visuals the most engaging aspect of their playthrough, and commented on the music and SFX being "nice... appropriate" and "not distracting." They commented that it looked like the game was headed for some fun action, and that they would like to see the rest of it in the future.

Test concluded at 6:57pm.

Test #2

Test took place at 10:00am, 10/7/2022.

Notes:

Tester rated their experience with both 3D platformers and hack & slash games at a 7/10. They also noted that they had tested the game some months prior.

Opening up the game, they complimented the art before going to the settings menu to turn down the music. While turning down the sound effects, they noted that they didn't have any example of how loud it was and would be after alteration, and would like an indicator sound of some form. Instead, they hovered over the menu buttons to test volume.

Starting the game, they read along with the loading screen flavor text and complimented the loading bar. They found the opening cinematic "pretty," commenting on the sad, "blindfolded" state of the statue and wondering about what a bounce flower was doing in the environment.

They seemed excited upon starting the game, enthusiastically greeting the player character with "oh, this must be me!" They took some time to move around, and tried the special attack at the direction of the "shiny F thing". Before moving on, they took a moment to turn up the mouse sensitivity, praising the UI and finding its accessibility from gameplay "awesome." They overall seemed to pick up controls quickly, and had little trouble navigating the environment and using the jump flower.

Beginning the first encounter, they noted being unable to attack from the air, and while they initially seemed a bit surprised about “actually [having] to dodge”, they picked it up in combat fairly quickly. However, they just as quickly encountered the “ambient occlusion” issue with set dressing, which confused and frustrated them. They seemed surprised at the end of the encounter when the purification animation triggered (“oh, there’s things going on”), only realizing at the path clearing that this marked the end of the encounter. They also found the animation to be overly long, wishing there was some way to skip. As the encounter ended, they noted how “when I kill people I can use [the special attack] more frequently” and, again, the inability to attack while jumping.

They continued to have no issue navigating, even taking the pot stairs quite easily (while also experimenting to see if they could double jump, noting they could not). They figured that the hearts coming off of the health pickup signified healing, and was quite satisfied to be proven right.

At the hanging pots, at the sprint tutorial, they commented on how frustrating it was that the tutorial popups blocked their field of view, particularly as the area being blocked was their destination, wondering about moving them to the bottom of the screen or a corner. They were quite surprised upon first encountering a minesroom, exclaiming “oh jeez that’s a mine” when it began to smoke, and commenting on being thankful for time to escape as they “did not read as dangerous.”

Entering the next enemy encounter, they showed strategic engagement, musing on which enemies were present as they entered and how to engage with them. They commented again on issues of ambient occlusion, and how the special attack felt “funky” with the first two swipes doing no damage.

Walking down to the next encounter on the leaves, they were distressed to miss the health pickup, and “[wished] the leaves are bouncy” before happily realizing that they were, in fact, bouncy. They commented on the difficulty of the ranged enemies, their accuracy at range, the need to dodge roll, and how it was “good” to be able to stun them. They were confused by the small enemies, who seemed to spend a large portion of the encounter just “sitting” and idling – it was confusing, but they stated that as it made their work easier they wouldn’t complain. Post-encounter, when moving between platforms, they wished that there was less set dressing blocking the greater view, as what they could see of the ground and the greenhouse was “beautiful” and offered a good sense of scale.

They again approached the next encounter strategically, noting which enemies to prioritize and the lack of space in which to dodge around. As the encounter ramped up and they took more damage, they commented “oh, I’m terrible at this game,” though whether this was in jest or serious, it didn’t seem to impact their play or engagement. They had some interesting observations regarding the enemies in this section, finding that ranged enemies felt “unfair” in the distance they could reach, and that big enemies, who were “just a big meat sack of health” didn’t require much new strategy, which at this point felt “kind of nice.” Late in the encounter, they noted that they were almost out of health, but even so elected to finish off the remaining ranged enemy first before retrieving the nearby health pickup. They continued to express annoyance at the length of end-of-encounter cinematics.

Moving on, they commented on the floral similarities between health pickups and checkpoints, and posited that it would be “cool” if checkpoints also provided healing. They were surprised by the ambush of smaller enemies, stating “that was good.” Moving through the field of minesrooms, they wondered what the point was to sprinting besides faster locomotion, as the normal speed was sufficient to make it through, postulating that it may help with jumping later.

At the encounter between the several small pots, they figured out the presence of ranged enemies by the presence and trajectory of their shots, later commenting that “ranged are the only ones I’m scared of.” Moving through the encounter, while noting that the volume of grass made it difficult to see, they did find dodging between enemies and mid-attacks effective, and sprinting was “nice”. Overall, they felt that they had “learned the game” which seemed to engender pride, and found the remaining large enemies “trivial” in their simplicity – and disappointing in their energy recharge yield. However, they did die to a large enemy, commenting “I’m so bad at this game” (but not seeming disheartened) and respawning. As they made their return, they described how they “felt like [they] died because of impatience” – while they certainly had opportunities to dodge, their frustration with the long process of wearing down the large enemy (which they now considered less of a relief and more a “beefed up annoying version of the smaller guys”) and wanting to get it over with superseded sense. Returning to the encounter, they continued to experiment with and observe the combat. They found the attack rate felt inconsistent, with “funky, random” delays between attacks. They also got creative with their use of attacks, getting into the middle of the ranged enemies and using the special attack to take them out practically in one fell swoop.

Moving on from that encounter, they commented on the “pretty” environment, but was confused for a good moment as to where they needed to go, the moving between pots having confused their sense of direction, until they saw the statue and figured that was their ultimate destination. Moving on toward it, they seemed surprised and excited by the dropping pot.

As the encounter began, they seemed dismayed at the appearance of multiple large enemies, expressing an expectation of tedious combat (“I just gotta deal with these people for like five minutes”), referring to the prospect of a majority-big-enemy fight as a “bummer.” Indeed, their strategy was repetitive – go in and wail on them, dodge when they wind up to attack, repeat – and successful. As the encounter finished, they noted an appreciation for the storytelling – even if these end-of-encounter events were long, they did effectively convey the player’s effect of clearing the garden of invaders. They did, however, wish the fog had been cleared as well, as it hid the jump flower they needed to proceed.

Hopping up the jump flowers toward the climax was “fun” and “elegant”, though the climax itself was critiqued – the player character disappearing from the final cinematic confused them, the “E” prompt hanging in the air was distracting, and they were expecting similar particle effects and fanfare as previous clearings. Still, they rated the experience “very cool... awesome”, though was “curious about why I would restart this game” from the credits.

To their mind, the most difficult aspect of the game was the ranged enemies, which required the use of the dodge roll to complete – while the big enemies did as well, they didn’t take off nearly as much health. That said, they also rated them as the most fun aspect of the game, requiring them to prioritize and strategize, adding agency and engagement into the game. Where versions of the game they had tested before “felt like the same thing over and over again,” the combat of this version had been much improved by variety. They found the platforming “easy,” never falling and generally knowing where to go. The art was “amazing” and “so cute,” and the environmental storytelling was “good” – while they didn’t understand every aspect (e.g. the player character’s origins), the basics were clear. Closing out, they took a moment to critique the music – while the music itself was fine, its lighthearted presence through the entire game didn’t fit the player character’s changing circumstances and tone, and made the experience feel more one-note than it should. They recommended having changes in music, such as a tense battle theme and/or “goopy mushroom music”.

Test concluded at 10:22am.