THE TREE

FROM

A LEVEL DESIGN
CASE STUDY OF
THE FIRST 15 MINUTES
OF "THE TREE"

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NARRATIVE

Game Context:

The two playable characters, Cody and May, are a bickering couple under a spell that has turned them into miniature dolls. Desperate to break the spell, May and Cody have to traverse through areas of their home that are now grand and dangerous considering their miniscule state. After having successfully exited their shed, the couple needs to find a way to get to their daughter's bedroom, where they believe she can help them unbreak the spell. To do this they climb into her window through a tree but realize upon getting to the top that the path instead leads to a door with a society of squirrels living behind it. Kidnapped and taken to the inside of the tree by the squirrels, Cody and May are given a sap gun and a match gun to help the squirrels defeat the wasps that also reside inside the tree.

The sap carries weight properties and the match sets fire to where there is sap: this is the basic game mechanic premise the level is designed around.

Narrative Beats:

1. Introducing new environment
- After being separated by a falling panel during a heated argument, May and Cody are left to explore how to use their new devices separately and then together when they have figured out how to leave their "rooms"
- Some of the most satisfying aha moments

2. Hazelnut Labs
- Entered into a lab environment said to be where the scientist squirrels run their tests and invent their technologies
- we get to see an acorn suspended in a formaldehyde jar and experience a torture machine as a collectable and learn that they have torture chambers

3. Killer Wasps
- Encounter the wasps that fly at you to kill you and learn that you can blow them up with the sap and the match
- After taking a break from combat and gliding on the rails…
- More combat —but now with a miniboss
- Cutscene in the end shows the queen being told that there are two intruders and she orders that they shall be killed
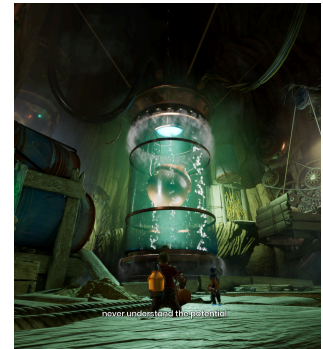
LEVEL MAP

Gameplay Beats:

Entrance
- Teach
  - Shoot sap at yellow and it weighs the object down/shoot match at target and it moves
  - Shoot match at sap and it explodes
- Test
  - Shooting range target practice
    - make moving object explode without the danger yet

Bridges
- Test
  - Use sap to lower bridge
- Teach
  - Use match to get rid of sap —raising the bridge

Lab
- Test
  - Using sap physics to lower one end of a wheel to turn it
- Teach
  - Sap is adjacently flammable so explosion could be transferred somewhere the match didn't land
    - Make all the clasps on the lip explode simultaneously

Killer Wasps
- Test
  - Shooting and damaging moving enemy —now with stakes
  - Sap's adjacent flammability
    - when match can't reach the area they want to burn
- Challenge
  - Shoot moving enemy
    - now with a shield protection the front of its body
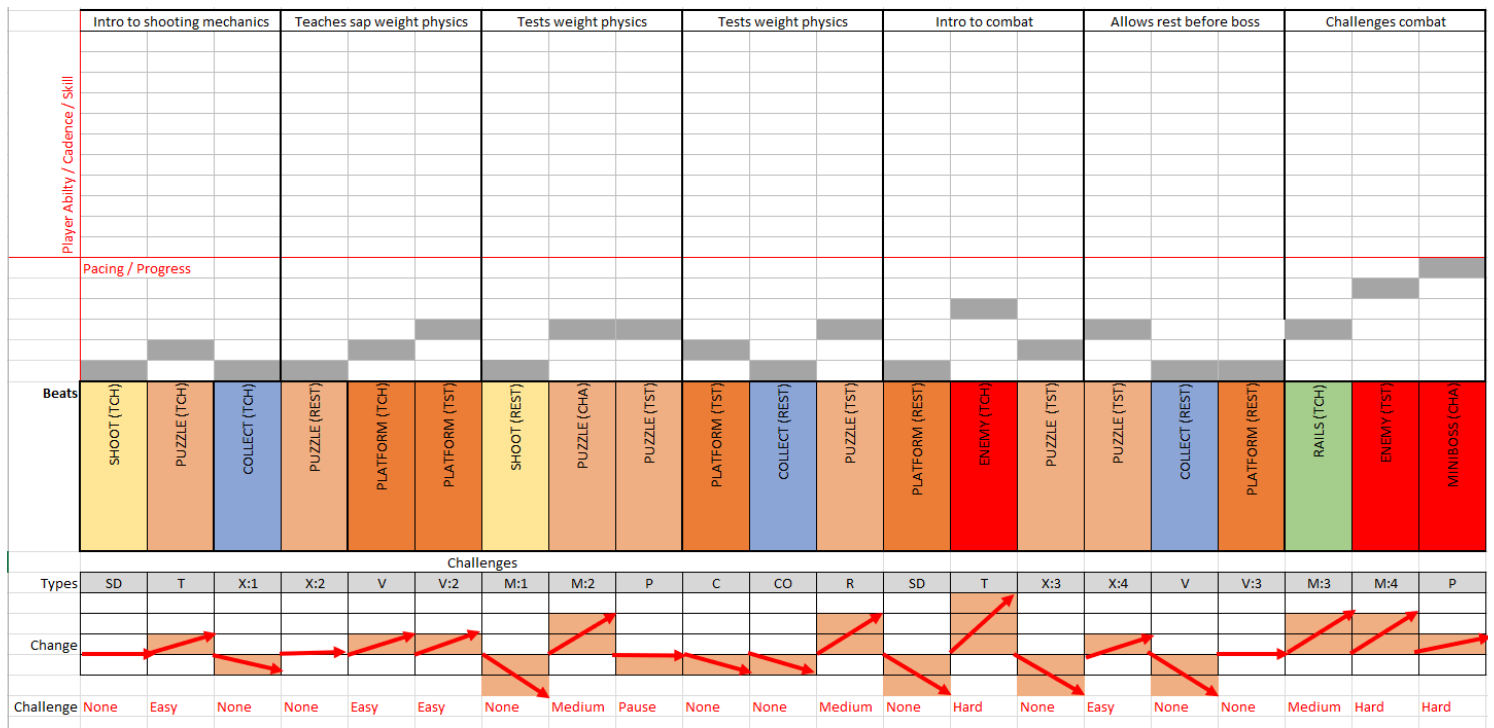
Gameplay Beat Diagram showing the attention to lower difficulty and slow progression for the sake of inexperienced or new gamers.

ANALYSIS

The Teaching:

The game teaches the player at the beginning of the level by first separating the two players —letting them interact with their new mechanics without the interference of wondering how they interact.

Once they've figured it out and left their rooms, they are reunited in a similar room where they are forced to figure out what they saw earlier demonstrated by the squirrels —they can use their tools to cause explosions.

Then, they find themselves in a room that is free to mess with.
In it includes:
* Twigs just like the door they just realized they can explode (go crazy!)
* A target practice area they are free to try out with a moving target and where the game suggests that they might have to use their tools against a moving enemy

In summary, the players are shown all the properties of these mechanics and how they can use them in this seamlessly integrated tutorial section:
1. Sap has **weight properties** an example of where it will be used is in a **weight based pulley system**
2. Matches are used as a **projectile** and an example of where it will be used is in a **spin based pulley system**
3. Sap is used as a **flammable** and matches are used as **ignition** when interacting together and example of where it will be used is to **clear twigs** that are in the way
4. Somewhere they will encounter a **moving target** they will have to use their mechanics on together.
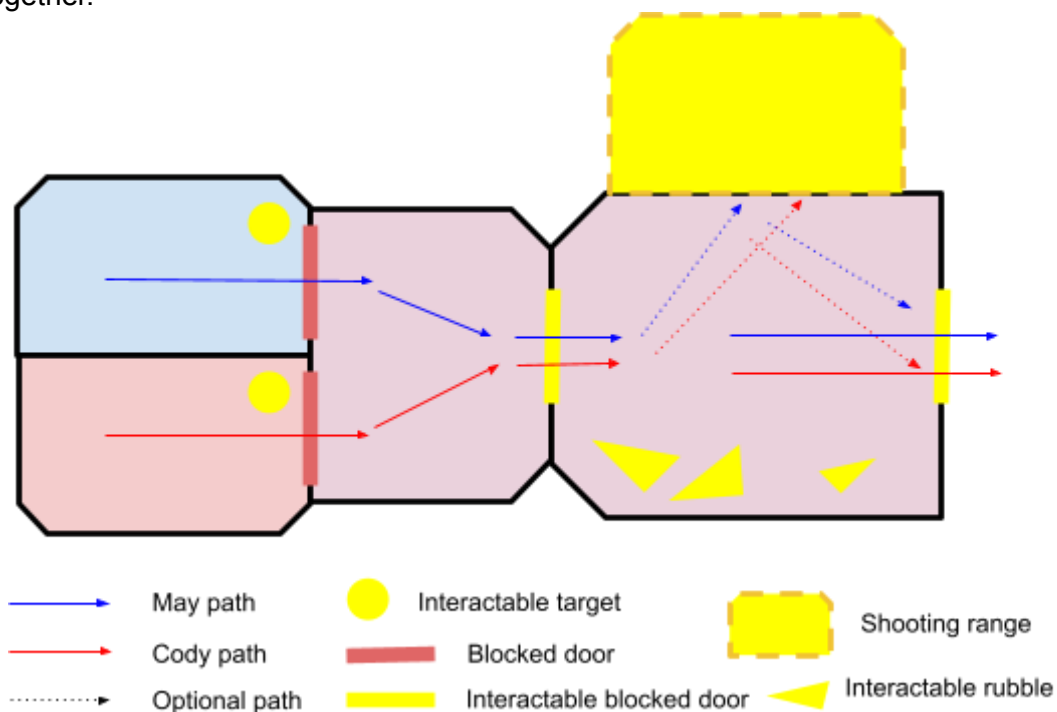
Mechanic tutorial level diagram —3 rooms

The Memorable:
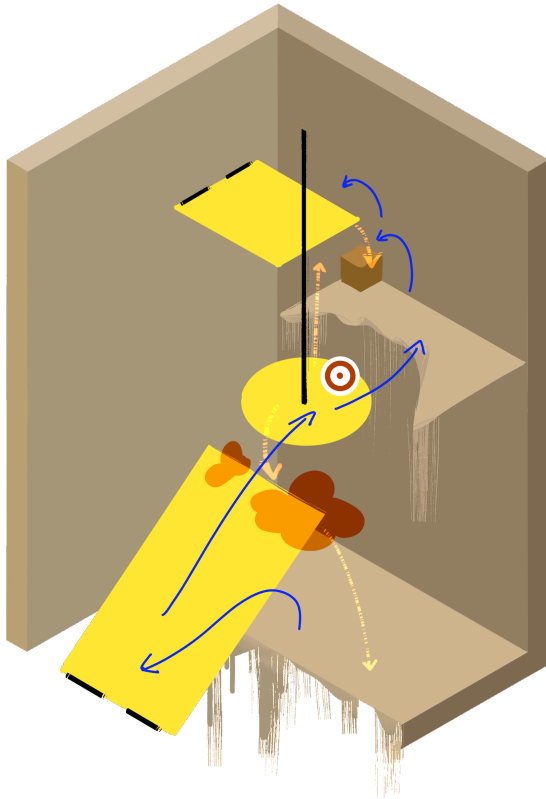
The memorable moments in this level include how satisfying the aha moments are while also teaching new mechanics —for instance in this section of the game when the players are taught that you will also need to shoot sap in order to reverse the weight and lift bridges

—Isometric diagram of the path of the players and the bridges

While there are some iconic puzzles in this level, what's most memorable about The Tree is its visually stunning moments of rest. The rest points are treated as just simpler, straightforward platforming challenges and respects the player's intelligence as well as their "tutorials" do.

The takeaway from this is that resting moments are just as important to a level as a clever puzzle and should be more frequent.

SUMMARY

It Takes Two is a game that is designed thoughtfully for players of all ages and skill levels to be able to enjoy. You can gather this from how seamlessly the mechanics are taught and how moments of rest between major challenges are frequent and engaging —they are treated as easier puzzles that just get you from one point to another.

The reason why the Tree level is often named as players' favourite level is because of its primary game mechanic and its ability to appeal to two types of players simultaneously. The main game mechanic of shooting sap/matches provides the same *feeling* a shooting/combat gamer enjoys about gaming but the twist is that these mechanics are used to solve puzzles as well.

Those who dislike this level are explorer type players who rank their enjoyment of a level based on how unique and fantastical they believe the mechanic is. Because most people who are playing It Takes Two are people who are looking for a whimsical puzzle platformer experience, some have found this level dull in comparison to the variety of puzzles they get to experience in Rose's room. Rose's room is a level about the toys in her room and the premise is that there is no one mechanic that is constant throughout the level. Instead, every area introduces a whole new mechanic. It is clear that this level appeals to exploration —mechanics leave as quickly as they are introduced and then the player gets to move on to the next mechanic to play with.

However, in my experience from playing It Takes Two with shooter players, they found the puzzles in Rose's room —what they consider an excessive use of their brain— draining and long. The tree level, however, is stimulating and satisfying for them to play. While we should not be designing puzzle platformers to cater for an audience that prefers shooters, I believe The Tree level presents an ingenious balance of the two. You can tell when you are solving puzzles in The Tree that the level designers had fun playing with the variety of situations this simple mechanic could be used in interesting new ways.