

GUIDE 03 • LEVEL DESIGN

# THE FUN CHECK

41 checks that tell you if a level will be fun before you build it,  
plus a nine-line level plan.

# THE FUN CHECK

41 checks that tell you if a platformer level will be fun, before you spend a day building it. Read the rules, plan your level in nine lines, then score it right here.

15 minute read

Scorecard saves in your browser

Updated October 2026

PDF version. The interactive version (with the scorecard) is online:

<https://claude.ai/artifact/3r8VefcZfQPXTgNPbQgU9u>

## 🕒 IN 60 SECONDS

1. Give each level one idea, and play it out in four beats: meet it, develop it, twist it, test it.
2. Make the first meeting safe. The new thing appears alone, easy to see, where a mistake costs seconds.
3. Keep failure cheap. After a death the player is back in control within a second, near the spot they died.
4. Show every danger and every landing before the player has to jump.
5. Check three times: on paper, on a rough build, then with real players. Score the 15 must-pass checks first.

## 01

### WHY A CHECKLIST

When we built the canyon in our own game, The Exiled King, it took about 12 rounds over four days to get right. Every problem was found by someone playing it, never by looking at screenshots: first it was “ugly”, then safe drops and deadly drops looked the same, then the deadly water was hidden under the ground.

So we ran five research passes on how the best platformers teach, challenge and pace their levels. We read talks from GDC (the big yearly game-maker conference), developer blogs and interviews, the published Celeste source code, Steam review data, Game

Maker's Toolkit (a game design video series) and The Level Design Book (a free online book). Then we turned it into one checklist. It took 21 minutes to write, and every level since has been planned with it.

The fun check has 41 checks: 39 from that research, plus two we added after it missed things in our own levels. You run it three times per level. It works for any 2D platformer or metroidvania (an explore-and-unlock game, like Hollow Knight). Most of it works for any game built from levels.

02

## THE FIVE RULES UNDERNEATH

Every check comes back to one of these.



### One idea per level, in four beats

Meet it safely, develop it, twist it, give it a final test, then drop it. Nintendo, Ubisoft's Rayman team, Celeste, Yacht Club and Ori all work this way under different names.<sup>1 2 3</sup>



### The first meeting is safe

Anything new is first met alone, easy to see, and somewhere a mistake costs seconds. Use on-screen text only for a button the player could never discover.



### Cheap failure keeps it fun

The best games keep the challenge and cut the cost of failing: back to life in under a second, a checkpoint (a restart spot) at every hard part, nothing permanent lost.<sup>4</sup>

`felt difficulty = chance of dying × cost of dying`



### Seen before it can hurt

Every hazard and landing is on screen before you commit. What looks solid is solid. Most “unfair” complaints are really about something hard to see, or about collision (the invisible shapes the game treats as solid).<sup>5</sup>



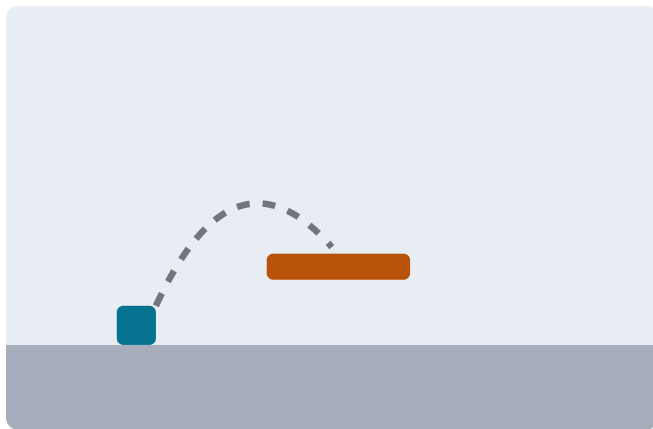
### Boredom comes from sameness

Empty walks, repeated challenges, filler pickups. Retire an idea after about five minutes, and put one surprise in every level.

## The four beats, drawn

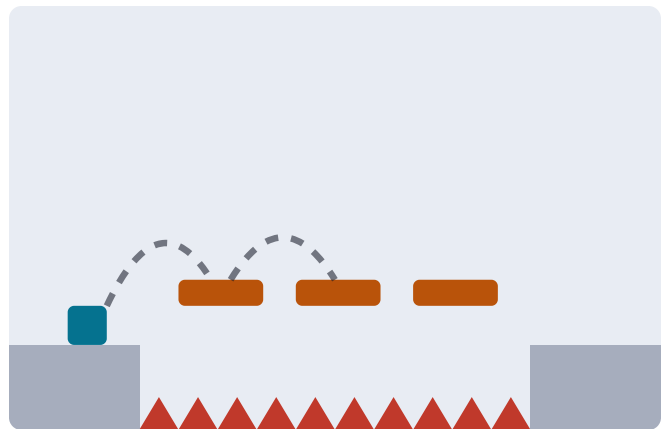
Here is one idea, crumbling ledges, played out across one level.

## 1 • MEET



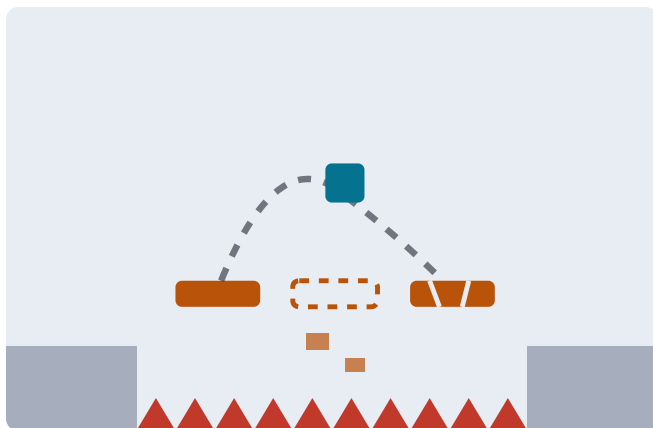
One crumbling ledge over solid floor. A slip costs nothing.

## 2 • DEVELOP



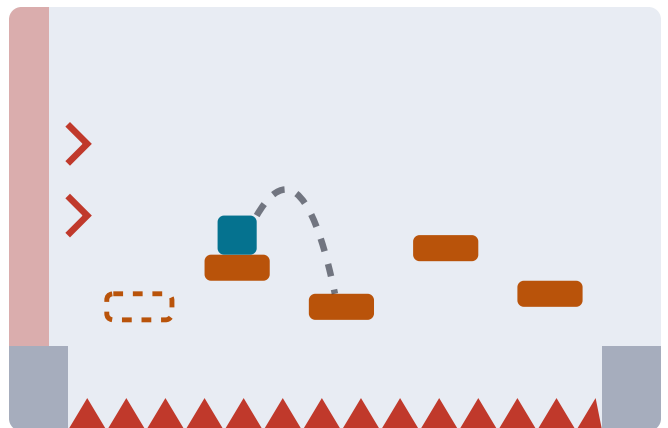
A row of them over a pit. Same rule, real stakes.

## 3 • TWIST



Now they crumble the moment you land. The idea itself changes.

## 4 • TEST



Everything at its biggest, with a chase. Then retire the idea.

■ The level's one idea ■ The player ■ Danger

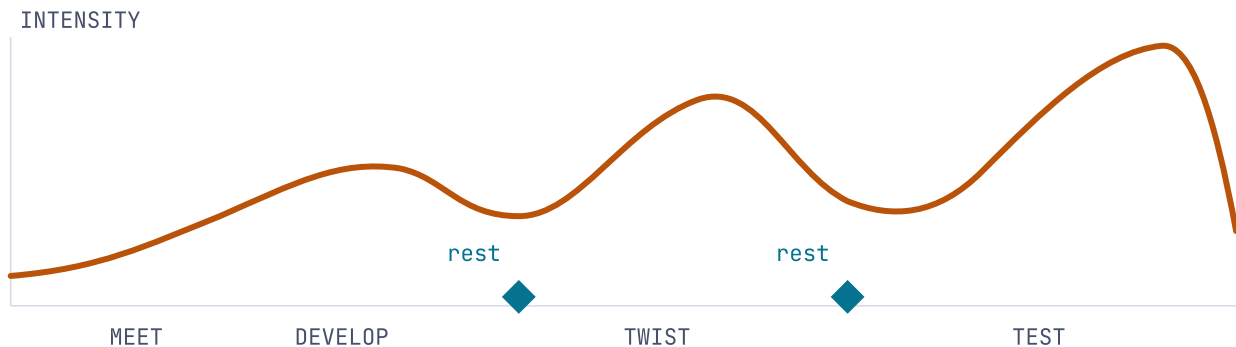
## Why cheap failure matters

How hard a game *feels* depends on two things: how often you die, and what each death costs you. Dying a lot is fine when you're back in a second.

|            | DEATH IS CHEAP                                                          | DEATH IS COSTLY                                                    |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| RARELY DIE | <b>Relaxed</b><br>Easy going. Good for a breather.                      | <b>Tense</b><br>Every mistake hurts. Fine in small doses.          |
| OFTEN DIE  | <b>Hard and fun</b><br>You die, you're back in a second, you try again. | <b>Frustrating</b><br>Each death costs minutes. Players quit here. |

Felt difficulty = chance of dying × cost of dying. Keep the challenge high and push the cost down. <sup>4</sup>

## The shape of a level



The intensity curve shows how tense the level feels, moment by moment. Shape it like this, not as a straight ramp. Rests come after peaks, a checkpoint (diamond) sits at the door of each harder beat, and the hardest moment is the test at the end. Based on Yacht Club's note that difficulty rising in a straight line feels robotic.<sup>3</sup>

03

## HOW TO RUN IT

Run it three times. Each pass catches what the others miss.



PASS 1 • BEFORE BUILDING

### PAPER

Read your level plan and beat chart (a one-page plan of how intense each part of a level feels) against every check. Fill in the scorecard.

Catches: no clear idea, no twist, no rest, no big finish, nothing optional.



PASS 2 • AFTER THE GREYBOX

### PLAY

Build a greybox (a rough version built from plain grey blocks). Play it yourself five times, once with the game drawing its collision shapes on screen. Then watch one person who has never seen it, without helping.

Catches: jumps you can't see the end of, art that doesn't match what's solid, unclear routes, dull stretches.



PASS 3 • AFTER EACH PLAYTEST

### PLAYER

After each playtest (watching someone else play your game), read where people died and where they quit, plus their notes. Score the last group of checks, "The player's evidence".

Catches: unfair spots, walls that make players quit, boredom, "what was that?"

#### ▼ For the curious: seeing collision shapes

Most engines can draw the invisible solid shapes over your art while the game runs. In Godot, open the **Debug** menu at the top of the editor, tick **Visible Collision Shapes**, then run the game. Each shape shows as a coloured outline.

Walk every ledge and wall. Anywhere the outline and the art disagree, the player will feel cheated.

## Scoring

MUST

SHOULD

BONUS

- **Must** checks all pass before a level counts as done.
- **Should** checks mostly pass. More than three misses means the level needs another pass.
- **Bonus** checks are nice to have.

The numbers in the checks (seconds, counts) are starting points from the research. Tune them with your own playtests.

04

## PLAN THE LEVEL IN NINE LINES

Fill this in before you build anything. It's the level template from our breakdown of every level in Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze and Super Mario Bros. Wonder, 134 in all.<sup>6</sup> Your answers save in this browser, and you can copy them out.

### 1 The one thing this level owns

One platform, creature or object. Name the level after it: "The Snapping Boughs".

Crumbling ledges

### 2 What's under the player

A pit, spikes, water. If the floor is safe, name where the pressure comes from instead.

A bottomless pit for most of the level

### 3 The four beats

Meet (safe), develop (over danger), twist (the same thing changes), test (at its biggest).

Meet: one ledge over floor. Develop: a row over a pit. Twist: they crumble faster each landing. Test: a chase over the longest bridge.

#### 4 Gap sizes, per move

Size every gap to a move. Makeable gaps read clearly makeable, impossible ones clearly impossible. Change one thing at a time.

#### 5 Sections and checkpoints

3 or 4 sections, each calm then tight. A checkpoint at the door of the twist and of the finale, with health a few steps after.

#### 6 Every enemy and its job

On a landing, in a jump's arc, as the only bridge, or as a tool. Never at random.

#### 7 One secret

One step off the path, marked by the odd one out, costing a little risk.

#### 8 The background

What threat waits there before it arrives? What story plays there?

#### 9 The clutter pass

List every object in the path and its job. No job: move it to the background or delete it.

Expert run: 1.5 to 2.5 minutes

First play: 5 to 10 minutes

# THE SCORECARD

Score each check Pass, Partial or Miss. The summary tells you whether the level is ready and what to fix first. Everything saves in this browser only.

The list opens on the must-pass checks, so you start with what matters most. Press “All checks” to see all 41.



## BY HAND VS WITH THE COACH

Scoring a level by hand works, and it's worth doing. **The Dream Game Coach does it for you:** it drafts your beat chart, places every platform in a blueprint, checks every jump can be made, and scores the level before you build anything. [See Premium](#)

LEVEL

Level 1: The Snapping Boughs

Must 0/15

Should misses 0

Scored 0/40

## Start scoring

Begin with the must-pass checks.

## A. The idea and the feeling

Score on paper, before you build.

MUST

FC-01

### One idea, one feeling

The level's idea fits in five words, and its target feeling in one.

PASS LOOKS LIKE “Cross the lake on sinking lilies / calm, then nerve”

Pass

Partial

Miss

MUST

FC-02

### A planned twist

The twist changes what the idea means, not just how hard it is.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The lilies that carried you now sink faster each time you land

Pass

Partial

Miss

SHOULD

FC-03

### Something new every few minutes

At any point, a player can name what was new in the last three minutes or so: a new element, a twist, a set piece (a big, memorable moment), a view, a story beat.

PASS LOOKS LIKE A minute-by-minute list of what's new

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-04

**The idea serves your game**

It fits your game's hook (the one idea that makes it stand out). If it could sit in any other game, it's weak.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Says why this hero, in this world, does it

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-41

**Length is stated, with its source**

Each section says how long a first-time player takes and how many ideas it holds, and where those numbers came from.

PASS LOOKS LIKE "About 4 minutes, 2 ideas"

Pass

Partial

Miss

**B. Teaching**

How the player learns each new thing.

**MUST**

FC-05

**The first meeting is safe, alone and easy to see**

Every new element is first met where a mistake costs seconds, with nothing else competing for attention.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The first crumbling ledge sits over floor, not a pit

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-06

**A spot that checks you learned it**

Before any real danger, one safe place blocks progress until the player has done the new thing once.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The only way out of the first crack is the wall jump

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-40

**New abilities are used at once**

The space right after getting an ability can't be left without it, and a mistake there costs seconds, not a life.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The double jump sits at the foot of a ledge too high for one jump

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-07

**No text for ideas**

Text only for a button the player could never find by experimenting.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Zero tutorial text, or one prompt for one button

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-08

**One new thing at a time**

At most one or two new elements per level, layered on things the player has mastered.

PASS LOOKS LIKE New: crumbling ledges. Known: run, jump, checkpoints

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-09

**Rehearse before the test**

Anything a set piece demands appears just before it, in a low-stakes form.

PASS LOOKS LIKE A short climb right before the chase that needs it

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-10

**Harder spots read more clearly**

Hard spots get cleaner backgrounds, stronger light on the route and wider safe spaces.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The hardest jump has the plainest background

Pass

Partial

Miss

## C. The challenge

What the player is asked to do.

**SHOULD**

FC-11

**Every element does two jobs**

Each element (a platform, enemy or object) tests a move, and does something else too.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Crumbling ledges test timing and hide a secret ledge below

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-12

**A shaped intensity curve**

Meet, develop, twist, test. How tense it feels rises and falls, with a rest, and an easier beat right after the hardest one.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The intensity graph has peaks, dips and a rest spot

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-13

**One set piece as the final exam**

The level's big closing moment uses only moves the player has mastered.

PASS LOOKS LIKE A chase that ends in the climb the level taught

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-14

**Retire it before it goes stale**

Each element appears at least twice, and none outstays its welcome (about five minutes per idea).

PASS LOOKS LIKE Crumbling ledges: introduced, used twice, retired

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-15

**One surprise inside trusted rules**

At least one moment of delight that doesn't break a rule the player relies on.

PASS LOOKS LIKE A bird lifts off the ledge you're about to land on

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-16

**Real decisions**

A choice about every 30 seconds: a route, a risk, a timing, a way past a threat.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Fast high line or safe low line

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-17

**No element soup**

The hardest moment combines at most three elements.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Jump, a crumbling ledge, a moving saw, nothing more

Pass

Partial

Miss

**D. Fair, not frustrating**

Most "unfair" complaints live here.

**MUST**

FC-18

**Seen before it can hurt**

Every deadly thing and every landing is on screen before the player commits. Before a drop, the camera looks down ahead of the player.

PASS LOOKS LIKE No leap of faith; the camera looks down into the drop

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-19

### What looks solid is solid

The art matches the collision (the invisible shapes the game treats as solid) wherever the player stands, grabs, lands or walks under. Turn on your engine's view of those shapes to check.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Every ledge top and grab wall matches its solid shape

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-20

### Jumps read honestly

Intended jumps look comfortably makeable; impossible ones look clearly impossible. Avoid gaps just short of the longest possible jump.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Easy “go” gaps and obvious “no” gaps, nothing in between

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-21

### Cheap failure

Control is back within 1 second of a death. After a death, you replay less than 30 seconds. A checkpoint at the door of every set piece (a big, memorable moment).

PASS LOOKS LIKE Death to control in under half a second

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-22

### No cheap kills

Getting hit never knocks you back into instant death. No enemy waits on a landing you can't see. Each hazard's hitbox (the shape that decides what touches what) is a little smaller than its art.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Nothing near an edge can knock the hero off unseen

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-23

### Wrong ways fail obviously

Routes you don't want taken look impossible. False solutions don't almost work.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The tempting shortcut is visibly too far

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD** FC-24

### Interactive things look interactive

One visual language for climb, break, grab and hide, never broken.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Every grippable wall has the same look

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST** FC-25

### Nothing permanent is lost

No lost progress on death. Any scene before a hard part is skippable or behind the checkpoint.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The checkpoint is after the cutscene

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST** Not needed: no stealth FC-26

### Stealth: you can always say why you were seen

Enemies show what they can see (a sight cone) and clearly show when they've noticed you. No getting caught just for walking in at the wrong moment.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Every time you're spotted, you can point to the cone or the noise

## E. Never boring

Sameness is the enemy.

**SHOULD** FC-27

### No empty stretch

No more than about 20 to 30 seconds without a decision, a challenge, a view or a story beat.

PASS LOOKS LIKE A beat every 15 metres or so

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD** FC-28

### No repeat without a change

The same challenge never appears twice in a row unchanged.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Each hop is lower, wider, or has a new threat

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD** FC-29

### Pickups test skill or change play

And never block progress.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Food that heals, on the hard line

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-30

**The best idea isn't saved for last**

Score for the whole game: a strong twist in the final third, and the game's main move given early.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The main move in level 1; its biggest use in the finale

Pass

Partial

Miss

**F. Memorable and worth replaying**

What players talk about after.

**SHOULD**

FC-31

**A moment of awe and a landmark**

One "whoa" per level; the destination or a future place in view early.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The tower on the far hill from the first lookout

Pass

Partial

Miss

**MUST**

FC-32

**An optional harder line**

With its reward in view.

PASS LOOKS LIKE A hidden gem up a side shaft

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-33

**A reason to come back**

Time, deaths and rank at the end, a no-death goal, a hidden route, a secret.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Finish screen: time, deaths, secrets 1 of 3

Pass

Partial

Miss

**SHOULD**

FC-34

**The place tells the story**

Without words.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Dropped lanterns and a tipped cart on the road people fled down

Pass

Partial

Miss

**BONUS**

FC-35

**Sound marks the beats**

A change at the set piece, a cue before each hazard, silence on purpose.

PASS LOOKS LIKE The music drops out as the chase starts

Pass

Partial

Miss

## G. The player’s evidence

Score after a playtest.

**MUST** FC-36

### Deaths happen where you planned the hard parts

Never piled up on one spot you didn’t plan.

PASS LOOKS LIKE Deaths at the chase and the hops, none on the walk

Pass Partial Miss

**MUST** FC-37

### Deaths feel fair

Four of five deaths read as “my fault” when testers explain them.

PASS LOOKS LIKE “I jumped too early”, not “what hit me”

Pass Partial Miss

**SHOULD** FC-38

### Testers can name the idea and the best moment

Without prompting.

PASS LOOKS LIKE “The bit where the flood chases you up the tower”

Pass Partial Miss

**BONUS** FC-39

### Somebody replays something unasked

PASS LOOKS LIKE “Let me try that climb again”

Pass Partial Miss

06

## RED FLAGS: STOP AND FIX

The level’s idea needs a sentence with “and” in it twice.

A new thing can kill you the first time you meet it.

You make a jump every time, but a new player can’t see where it lands.

You catch yourself holding right on the controller and thinking about something else.

Testers die at one spot and say “what?”

A collectible sits on the main path, or the path needs it.

The finale is just the level made longer.

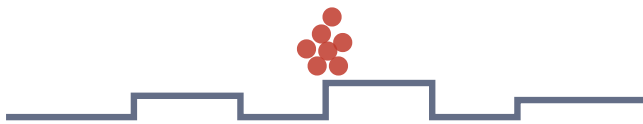
The big moment uses a move the level never taught.

07

## READING A PLAYTEST

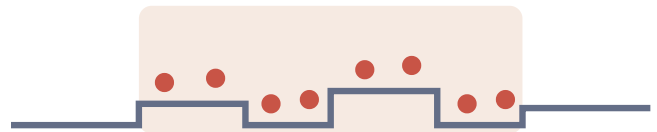
Watch silently and trust what players do over what they say. Log five things: deaths per room, time per room, how often they switch on easy-mode settings, how often they open the map, and where they quit. <sup>7</sup>

### Deaths in one exact spot



Something there is broken. Look at what the player can see, the solid shapes and the camera.

### Deaths spread across a challenge



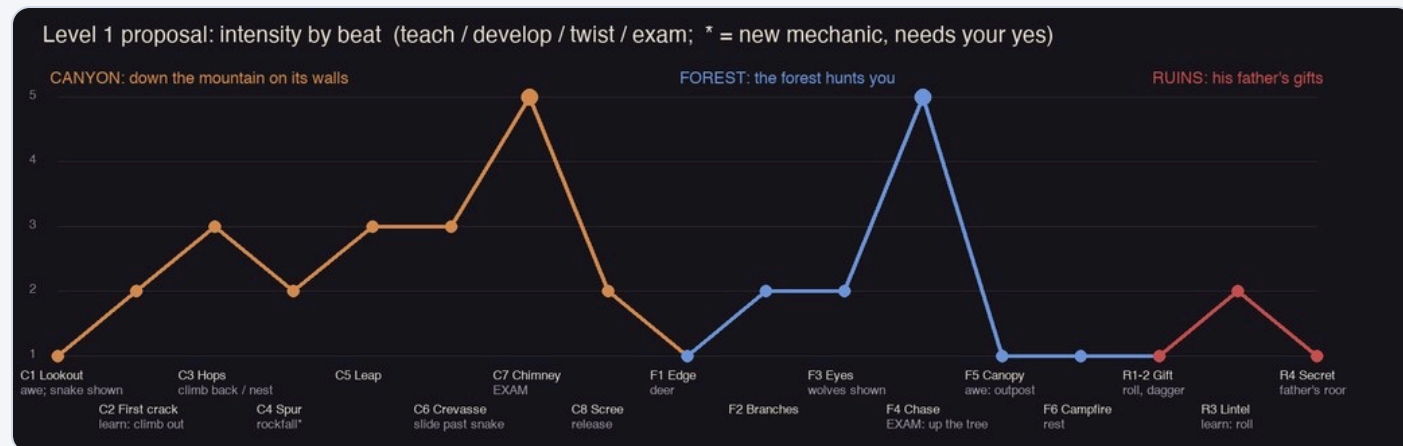
Usually a fair skill test. The shaded part is the challenge you planned.

Each red dot is one tester's death, marked on a side view of the level.

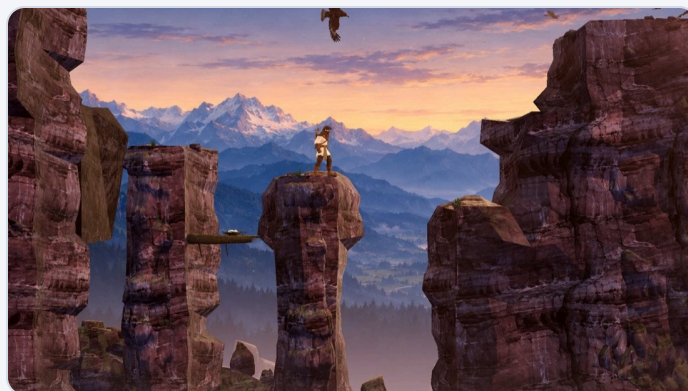
| WHAT YOU SEE                                                     | LIKELY PROBLEM                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Deaths clustered on one exact spot                               | Something is hard to see, the solid shapes don't match the art, or the camera hides the danger. One study found broken levels using death data from just five players. <sup>8</sup> |
| Deaths spread across a challenge                                 | Usually a fair skill test                                                                                                                                                           |
| Repeated tries at a route you didn't mean                        | It doesn't look impossible enough                                                                                                                                                   |
| "I didn't touch it", "what hit me", "I pressed jump"             | Collision, something hard to see, or input lag (a delay between pressing and acting)                                                                                                |
| Sighs when they come back after a death, fewer tries per sitting | Coming back, or the walk back to the hard part, takes too long                                                                                                                      |
| Looping back and forth, "where now?"                             | Lost                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Running past things, skipping pickups                            | Boredom, or filler that adds time but no fun                                                                                                                                        |
| Nobody can name what was new in the last five minutes            | Too few ideas                                                                                                                                                                       |
| A new ability goes unused                                        | It only opens doors, like a key, or it was never taught                                                                                                                             |

## HOW WE USED IT

On The Exiled King, the check changed how levels were made. Each section got a beat chart first: the idea, the twist, meet, test, a rest, one moment of awe, and a checkpoint before each test. The level was built beat by beat from that plan. Small test scripts walked the route and tried every jump to prove it could be made. Then a person played each section before the next one was built.



The real Level 1 beat chart. Peaks at the chimney climb and the wolf chase, rests after each. Its labels say “teach” and “exam” where this guide says meet and test.



The same jumps a week apart. The plan underneath stayed; the art came last. Real captures.

## GO FROM GUIDE TO FINISHED GAME

This guide gives you the checklist. Premium gives you a coach that plans and checks every level with you.

 **The Dream Game Sprint video masterclass** COMING SOON

Step-by-step video lessons from first idea to launch day.

 **The full Dream Game Coach for Claude Code**

It guides your game every day: research, design, levels, art, sound, playtests and launch, with automatic checks.

 **A personal gameplay review from John**

Honest notes on your game from someone who ships them.

Join Premium

09

## WORDS YOU'LL SEE

### Playtest

Watching someone else play your game.

### Greybox

A rough version built from plain grey blocks.

### Collision

The invisible shapes the game treats as solid.

### Hitbox

The invisible shape that decides what touches what.

### Set piece

A big, memorable moment, often the finale.

### Metroidvania

An explore-and-unlock game, like Hollow Knight.

### Beat chart

A one-page plan of how intense each part of a level feels.

### Beat

One step of a level's idea: meet, develop, twist or test.

### Twist

A change that makes a known idea feel new.

### Checkpoint

The spot you restart from after a death.

### Intensity curve

How tense a level feels, moment by moment.

### Hook

The one idea that makes your game stand out.

10

## SOURCES

The fun check comes from our platforming research (October 2026) and our level-by-level audit of Tropical Freeze and Wonder. These are the main outside sources behind it.

1. Kotaku, "What made Super Mario 3D World so great", on Nintendo's four-step level design. [kotaku.com](https://kotaku.com)

2. Game Developer, "Rational Design: the core of Rayman Origins". [gamedeveloper.com](https://gamedeveloper.com)
3. Yacht Club Games, Specter of Torment level design deep dive, part 2. [yachtclubgames.com](https://yachtclubgames.com)
4. Game Developer, Edmund McMillen on why Super Meat Boy is so hard. [gamedeveloper.com](https://gamedeveloper.com)
5. Game Developer, Itay Keren, "Scroll back: the theory and practice of cameras in side-scrollers". [gamedeveloper.com](https://gamedeveloper.com)
6. Our own audit of all 57 Tropical Freeze levels and 77 Wonder main courses, from their full walkthroughs, Super Mario Wiki and developer interviews (October 2026).
7. The Level Design Book, playtesting. [book.leveldesignbook.com](https://book.leveldesignbook.com)
8. Trier University of Applied Sciences, report on level analysis from player death data (2015). [hochschule-trier.de](https://hochschule-trier.de)
9. Dan Taylor, "Ten principles of good level design", GDC 2013. [gamedeveloper.com](https://gamedeveloper.com)
10. The Level Design Book, blackout. [book.leveldesignbook.com](https://book.leveldesignbook.com)