Hidden Through Time is a relaxing yet challenging puzzle game

It can be difficult to find time to finish a video game, especially if you only have a few hours a week to play. In our biweekly column Short Play, we suggest video games that can be started and finished in a weekend.

Often, when I'm not sure what I want to play, I go browsing the new releases on Steam, Itch.io, and the Nintendo eShop until something grabs my attention. Usually, it's a game that fits my mood, which, like a lot of other people's moods lately, is a bit more anxious than usual. While in such a state, I'm almost more interested in playing something familiar and relaxing instead of something new. That's probably why I've put so many hours into *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and also why *Hidden Through Time* got my attention.

[embedded content]

Hidden Through Time is a game where you locate hidden objects in a scene, similar to 2017's *Hidden Folks*, the *Where's Waldo?* books, and the puzzles inside the *Highlights* magazine at your childhood doctor's office. It's about as simple as a game could be: it presents you with some objects, animals, and / or people at the bottom of your screen, which you have to locate. Once you've found enough of them, you then move onto the next level.

This is how things progress in the game's story mode, which doesn't really have a story. Rather, it is a progression of 26 levels that take place across four fantastical interpretations of specific periods in human history: Stone Age with dinosaurs, ancient Egypt with giant gods walking around, medieval Europe with goblins, and the American Wild West. Each

period provides a unique aesthetic, along with new sets of buildings, objects, and people. Aside from being visually pleasing, this also helps the gameplay from growing stagnant.

By the time you're near the end of a time period, you will have adapted to become more efficient at parsing the levels for where things are, so it can start to feel repetitive. In this way, the change in appearance isn't just visual, but a new challenge to adapt to the new visual language of the level. For instance, the Stone Age period is full of rounded and curved things; a lot of green between the trees, bushes, and dinosaurs; and trees and bushes are often overlapping or hiding other objects. In the ancient Egypt stages that follow it, it is more yellow, things are more straight line and square, while people and buildings are more densely packed together, yet not overlapping in the same way.

There are a lot of similar choices that might go unnoticed while you're playing, but they show that a lot of consideration is made about how things are hidden in a scene. Generally, objects are near where you might expect them to be; a sword will likely be near a knight, and bread will usually be in a kitchen or at a meal. But the game also uses small scenes within the level to not only look amusing, but also as a way to draw your attention to an area where an object might be. For example, in one stage, you are tasked with finding a sword stuck in a stone that happens to be hidden near a wizard and a boy, aping Merlin and a young King Arthur.

When the game breaks from your expectation or if you find yourself confounded as to where something is, there is a hint system. These are some of the best hints I've seen in a game, as they are like their own little puzzle that tells you *just* enough to point you in the right direction. A hint in one level for a small stone statue was something to the effect of,

“I made this so I’d be less lonely,” which tells you that you need to be looking for someone or something by itself and that they perhaps resemble the statue.

Perhaps the game’s best feature is that it has a level creation tool, which lets you quickly make your own levels and upload them for other people to play. The editor is all drag and drop, first letting you pick which of the time periods you want to use, and then giving you access to all of the buildings, people, and objects from it that you can use to populate your level. Or if you aren’t interested in making levels, you can just download other people’s, effectively giving you access to far more levels than you could possibly play.

Hidden Through Time is also available on pretty much everything — PC, Mac, iOS, Android, PS4, Xbox One, and the Nintendo Switch — so you can play it however you want anywhere inside (and, eventually, outside) your home. The game isn’t exactly revolutionary, but what it does it does very well.

Hidden Through Time *was created by Crazy Monkey Studios. You can get it for $7.99 on the Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and Steam (Windows and macOS) for $1.99 on iOS and $2.99 on Android. It takes about three to four hours to finish.*

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