

**A STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE CINEMATIC  
PLATFORMER SUBGENRE**

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**ABSTRACT:** Cinematic Platformer is a game subgenre. The objective of this study is to analyze the mechanics of the subgenre to observe the historical evolution of games. The 56 analyzed games belong to a list created by the community. They were evaluated based on objective criteria to determine whether or not they included certain mechanics. Finally, it was observed that there are two phases of the subgenre: a classic phase that lasts until the year 2000, and a renaissance phase that emerges in 2010 with a new perspective on the subgenre.

**KEYWORDS:** Game genre. Cinematic platformer. Digital games.

**UM ESTUDO DA EVOLUÇÃO HISTÓRICA DO SUB GÊNERO DE JOGO  
CINEMATIC PLATFORMER**

**RESUMO:** Cinematic Platformer é um subgênero de jogo. O objetivo deste estudo é analisar mecânicas do subgênero para observar a evolução histórica dos jogos, os 56 jogos analisados pertencem a uma lista de jogos criada pela comunidade. Foram analisados através de critérios objetivos se possuíam ou não determinadas mecânicas, por fim se observou que existe duas fases do subgênero, uma de clássicos que vai até o ano 2000 e o renascimento que aparece nos anos 2010 com uma nova visão para o subgênero.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Subgênero de jogo. Cinematic platformer. Jogos digitais.

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## **Introduction**

The concept of game genre is used to define different types of games, in the same way that films and books are defined. However, unlike these, game genres are not defined by their story but rather by how the player interacts with the game (Rogers, 2012).

In other words, a first-person shooter game can take place in a science fiction, western, fantasy, military, or any other setting. As long as the game is a first-person shooter, regardless of the setting, it will be considered a first-person shooter.

The topic of this research is a subgenre of digital games known as Cinematic Platformers. This subgenre is derived from the Platform genre. One way to define a platform video game would be: they are games in which you control a character to jump between platforms, avoiding obstacles (Melcer, 2020).

Cinematic Platformer emerged with the great success of *Prince of Persia* (1989), which sold over 2 million copies, was translated into 12 languages and developed for 20 video game and computer formats worldwide (Saltzman, 2000). Although *Prince of Persia* is a very successful franchise and has had a series of games, the subgenre it originated from didn't have as much impact when compared to other subgenres.

This article studies the evolution and development of games within the “Cinematic Platformer” subgenre of digital games from their inception to the present day.

For this purpose, 58 games were analyzed individually, based on the list from the MobyGames website, categorized as “Cinematic Platformer”. The aim of this analysis was to examine how the elements of “Cinematic Platformer” games have changed over time and to discuss what is relevant to the subgenre.

## **Cinematic Platformer**

The platforming genre is one of the oldest and has a lot of variety within the theme itself. However, over the years some mechanics end up being repeated quite a bit, and can be used to help classify the genre. These are, according to Perry (2009):

- Collectibles: Items that the main character collects during a level.
- Simple enemy: They do not possess advanced Artificial Intelligence.
- The character is very acrobatic. It can jump multiple times without getting tired, as well as climb walls and perform similar actions.
- Mobile platforms: Locations where the character must jump to proceed towards their objective.
- Levels: The games have many phases.
- Chiefs: Stronger enemies appear at the end of some stages.
- Score: Indicator of points the player has scored.
- Minimalist History: The story is not the focus of the game.
- Special powers: Unique skills that the player can utilize.

It's important to mention that a platform game doesn't need to have all of these mechanics, but by observing the items on this list, it's possible to visualize what a platform game is like. Based on this information, we can see how the Cinematic Platformer subgenre differs from this formula, how it is presented, and what its main elements are.

The main features of Cinematic Platformer are as follows:

- Fluidity in animation
- Unique animations
- Character vulnerability

- Minimalist interface
- Side view

Cinematic platformers had their golden age in the 90s, when many great titles were released. One of the characteristics of the genre was that the trailers were made with images from the game, something that is done nowadays with games that have a high production cost. This is because the fluidity of the animations was something very striking for the time (Bexander, 2014).

The fluidity in the animation was achieved using a technique known as rotoscoping, which uses real footage to create the animation. In other words, it uses two different cinematographic processes: filming and animation to achieve the desired result (Quaresma, 2017).

In the case of *Prince of Persia* (1989), creator Jordan Mechner used footage of his own brother taken in a parking lot to create the game's animations. It turns out that the digitizer Mechner had available could only distinguish between black and white images; the method he found to achieve the desired result can be seen in Figure 2 (Mechner, 2011).

**Figure 1:** Image used for rotoscoping the game *Prince of Persia*.



**Source:** Mechner (2011 p. 17)

Currently, rotoscoping is no longer necessary to achieve the fluidity characteristic of the animation subgenre; this technique has been replaced by motion capture, which uses a camera with depth sensors, facial recognition, and real-time skeleton tracking to achieve fluid animation (Bleiweiss et al., 2010). Pre-made animation packages, such as those offered by Unreal Engine, are produced using motion capture.

In addition to the fluidity of the animation, the subgenre has other characteristics such as: human characters with realistic proportions, with the agility of a person without special powers, that is, they cannot jump very high or change the direction of the jump in the middle of the jump. The character tends to be weak like a human being, that is, if he falls from a great height or is shot, he dies, demonstrating his vulnerability (Bexander, 2014).

Other characteristics of the subgenre include having little information on the interface and also having unique animations for specific in-game events; for example, picking up an item from the ground, the character bends down to collect it. Therefore, due to the difficulty of creating unique animations, the games tend to be linear (Bexander, 2014).

Based on the review above, it can be concluded that the cinematic platformer subgenre, at this moment, represents a conglomeration of possibilities and mechanics that can be further explored in future studies.

## **Materials and Methods**

This research is a documentary analysis using the observation technique as described by Marconi and Lakatos (2003, p. 190), which defines observation as “a data

collection technique to obtain information and use the senses to obtain certain aspects of reality. It consists not only of seeing and hearing, but also of examining facts or phenomena that one wishes to study”.

The material used for this research comes from the Mobygames portal, which is a large online catalog of digital games, has existed since 1999 and contains information on more than 299,000 digital games.

This portal features various game categories, one of which is a group created by the site's curation team for Cinematic Platformer games. Currently, this group contains 56 games classified as Cinematic Platformers, including games from their origin in 1988 to the present day, 2022. For this purpose, a table with objective criteria was created to analyze each of the 56 games individually.

An objective analysis was conducted with the intention of identifying the main elements present in the games. The search criteria that were analyzed to determine whether or not a certain element is present are as follows:

- Fixed camera in the scene: The term “camera” refers to the camera's position within the scene. It can be fixed, remaining in a predetermined location and switching to a new camera position as soon as the player leaves the screen, or it can be a camera that constantly follows the character.
- Depth movement: Does the player only move laterally, or does the player have depth movement, going to the background of the scene and coming closer to the camera?
- Side view: Whether the game uses a side view or other view types.
- Realistic Movement: Realistic movement refers to movement that respects human movement, such as jumps that are expected and plausible for someone

without special powers; that is, they cannot jump very high or change the direction of the jump mid-jump.

- He dies in one blow: Dying in one hit means the character has no hit points and all damage is lethal. The main point of this category is whether the way the character receives damage corresponds to reality; for example, a bat bite is not enough to kill a human being, while a gunshot is. However, in the context of games, this is represented by life points.
- Cutscene: If a game has cutscenes, a cutscene is understood to be a part of the game's story told in a non-interactive way, which may or may not be rendered outside of the game, usually at the beginning or end of the game.
- Dialogues: Whether the game features in-game dialogue with other characters. Dialogues can be interactive or non-interactive, where the player has options to speak, or simply receives story information from another character.
- Three-Dimensional Graphics: Does the game's graphical representation use only two-dimensional representations, or does it use a third dimension?

The selection of criteria was done dynamically, initially based on academic studies on the subject, adapted to a format that allows for objective and targeted responses, where it is possible to obtain a positive or negative result for each criterion.

Regarding the analysis procedure, complete gameplay videos from the beginning to the end of the game were used. As well as extra materials such as information obtained from the Mobygames website itself.

In addition to analyzing the results for each item, the study sought to determine which was the first game to be released that contained the feature described in the item. This made it possible to analyze the historical process of incorporating the resource into

the genre. In cases where the frequency of the analyzed feature was very low, a more in-depth analysis was conducted on the special cases that presented the feature, in order to understand why such games stand out from the rest of the genre.

## **Results and Discussion**

The period analyzed for the games corresponds to the period from 1988 to date, 2022. The sample was divided into two periods: (i) the initial period, and (ii) the second period, in which a kind of renewal occurred.

The initial phase, which spans from 1988 to 2009, includes classics of the subgenre such as *Prince of Persia* (1989), *Out of This World* (1991), *Flashback* (1992), and *Oddworld* (1999).

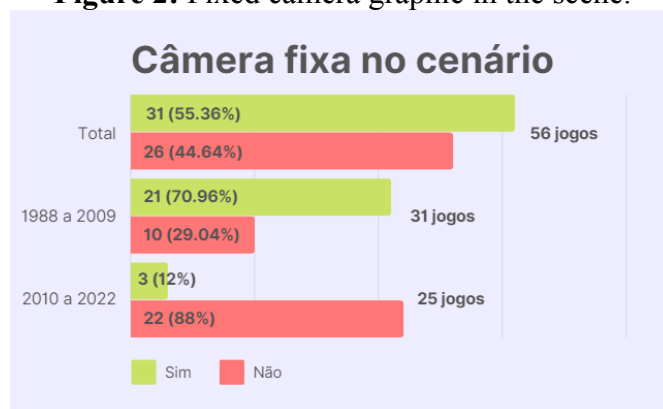
The second major phase of the revival, from 2010 to the present day, features the release of *Limbo* (2010), which greatly influenced future games.

### **Fixed Camera in the Scene**

The number of games with or without a fixed camera, divided into the two time periods, can be seen in Figure 2:



**Figure 2:** Fixed camera graphic in the scene.



**Source:** The author himself.

The fixed camera in the scene was predominantly present in games from the 90s until the release of *Limbo* in 2010. From this date onwards, virtually all other games feature a camera that dynamically follows the character, with the exception of the remakes and remasters of *Another World: 20th Anniversary Edition* (2011), *Flashback* (2013) and *Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty* (2014) is precisely about the classics of the subgenre.

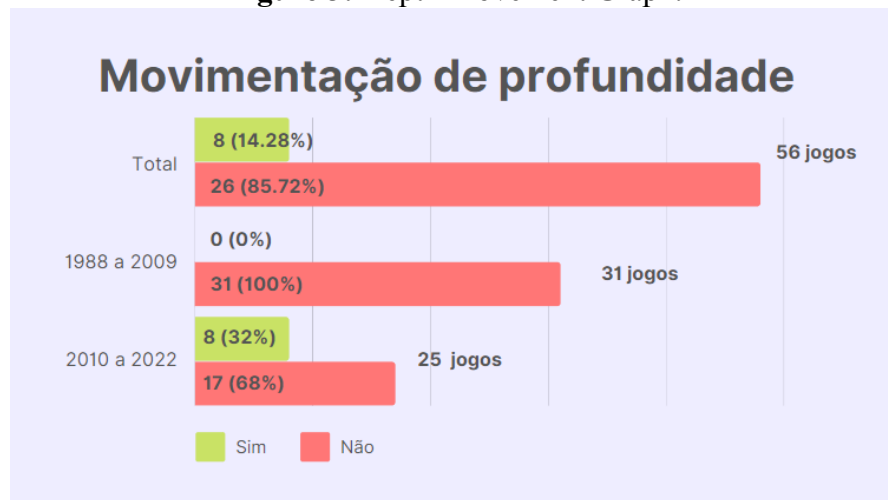
Initially, one might believe that this is a technical limitation, however, there are games from 1991, 1993, and 1994 that do not use a fixed camera in the scene, ruling out this hypothesis. Therefore, it is believed that the game *Limbo* (2010) served as inspiration for the camera in later games in the genre.

The decision to stop using a fixed camera in the scene may be due to the great success of *Limbo* (2010), which received 7 awards and 15 nominations, demonstrating its influence on the subgenre in games that preceded it.

## Depth Movement

The number of games with or without depth movement divided into the two time periods can be seen in Figure 3:

**Figure 3:** Depth Movement Graph.



**Source:** The author himself.

Unlike the previous case, as soon as the mechanic first appeared in 2015, it was quickly accepted and implemented in future games.

The game that truly incorporated this mechanic, showcasing its true potential and possibly inspiring new games, was *Inside* (2016), from the same developer as *Limbo* (2010), and just like its previous game, it won several awards, most notably Best Art Direction and Best Independent Game at The Game Awards 2016.

### Side view

In this category, 56 out of 56 (100%) of the total games have a side view. And 55 out of 56 (98.21%) of the total games exclusively feature a side view during gameplay.

The only exception to this category is *Woolfe: The Red Hood Diaries* (2015), which during gameplay switches from a side view to a third-person view.

The side view case seems to be the main element of the subgenre; we might even question whether Woolfe: The Red Hood Diaries (2015) could be disqualified from being considered a Cinematic Platformer due to not fulfilling that criterion.

### **Realistic Movement**

Regarding realistic movement, 53 out of 56 (94.64%) of the total games have realistic movement.

Only three games do not fit into this category, the first of which is The Lost World: In Jurassic Park (1997), despite being a human character with animations befitting a person, he has the ability to jump several times his height and fall from incredible heights.

One possible explanation for this is that in the late 90s many games were released for Game Boy, and the Cinematic Platformer subgenre was the closest thing to a realistic game. For this reason, it's possible that the developers chose to use various attributes of the genre, but opted for a more casual movement.

The second game in which this occurs is Feist (2015), where the character is not a human being, but that alone is not enough to disqualify him, since a non-human character could move realistically according to the rules of physics. It turns out that he also has the ability to jump several times his height and fall from incredible heights.

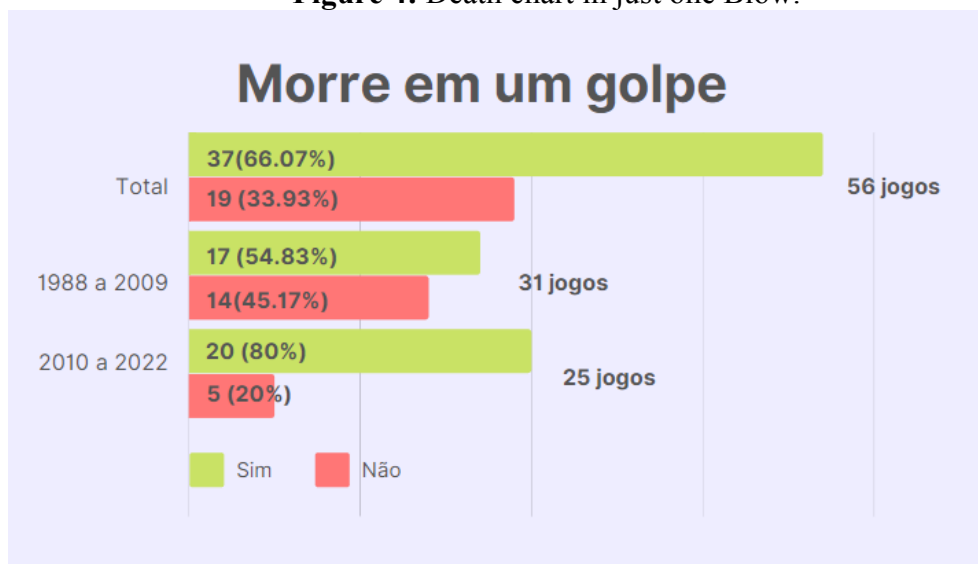
Feist (2015) is a game inspired by Limbo (2010), and in this case, the fact that the character does not have realistic movement was an attempt by the developers to modify the subgenre, bringing a mechanic that was not common for the game.

Finally, *Woolfe: The Red Hood Diaries* (2015) incorporates the double jump mechanic, something not present in cinematic platformer games, just as Bexander (2014) addresses the issue of characters not possessing special powers.

### **Dies in one Blow**

The number of games in which the protagonist dies from a single blow, divided into three time periods, can be seen in Figure 4:

**Figure 4:** Death chart in just one Blow.



**Source:** The author himself.

This category has been observed in two distinct periods. The first period is the beginning of the subgenre, where the mechanic of dying in just one hit was present in most games, but many of them experimented with using other ways to show the character's fragility.

The second period, however, corresponds to a new vision for the subgenre in which the character's fragility and dying in just one hit, although more frequent, does not necessarily make the game more punishing. For example, by creating more save files for the game.

### **It has a Cutscene**

Regarding cutscenes, 51 out of 56 (91.07%) of the total games have cutscenes.

Only four games on the list do not have cutscenes: *Limbo* (2010), *Monochroma* (2014), *Inside* (2016), and *Black. The Fall* (2017). These four games share the same behavior, focusing on delivering a seamless experience.

In the games mentioned above, there is no clear distinction between when the player is interacting with the game and when they are not, as everything happens dynamically, with the story being told through the player's actions.

Unlike a game that uses cutscenes through a pre-rendered scene that gives the feeling of watching a movie.

Therefore, the fact that these four games do not have a cutscene implies a more immersive experience, which is a positive factor for these titles, without losing the narrative element that is common in the genre.

### **It has Dialogues**

In this category, 16 out of 56 (28.57%) of the total games have dialogue.

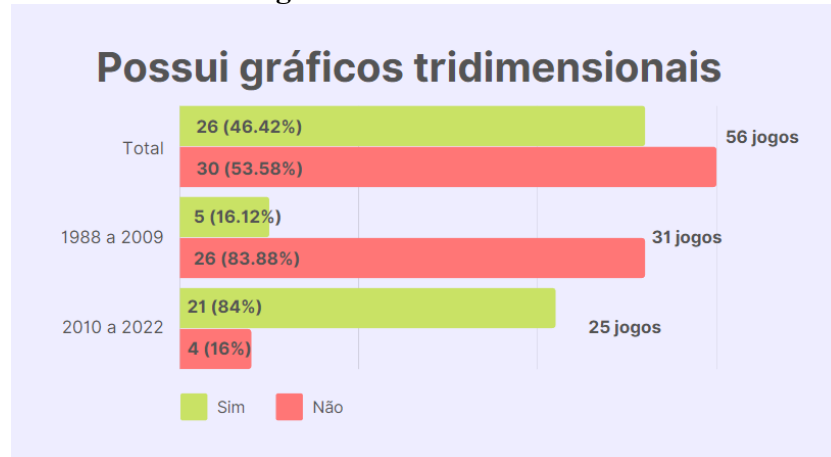
Having first appeared in *Flashback: Despite* being one of the major titles and franchises of the subgenre, *The Quest for Identity* (1992) didn't have a very extensive adaptation of dialogue in Cinematic Platformer games.

Despite the high percentage of cutscenes, it's clear that there's a preference for telling a visual narrative using cutscenes rather than a textual narrative using dialogue.

## It Features Three-Dimensional Graphics

The number of games that feature three-dimensional graphics divided into two time periods can be seen in Figure 5:

**Figure 5:** Three-dimensional chart.



**Source:** The author himself.

In this category, the technical limitation is present in older games, where the computational cost of three-dimensional graphics becomes prohibitive.

One thing that becomes apparent when observing the data is that it's not just a technical limitation, as newer games like *The Way* (2016) opted not to use this type of graphics, but the vast majority prefer and use three-dimensional graphics, even in games that utilize a side view. In this sense, it seems that the genre followed a broader trend of adaptation to three-dimensional aesthetics, which occurred throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

## Final Considerations

Cinematic platformers aren't a large subgenre and there aren't many studies about them, but they do have famous titles ranging from classics like *Prince of Persia*

(1989), *Out of This World* (1991), and *Flashback: The Quest for Identity* (1992), as well as well-known modern games and award winners like *Limbo* (2010) and *Inside* (2016).

Regarding the research results in summary:

**Table 1:** Summary of results

Criterion	Frequency	Historical distribution
Camera fixed on the scene.	44%	It stopped being used in 2014.
Depth movement	14%	It began to be implemented more frequently after its first appearance in 2016.
Side view	100%	Criterion of greatest relevance to the subgenre.
Realistic Movement	94%	A very important criterion for the subgenre, with few exceptions.
Dies in one blow.	66%	This criterion was widely used by the subgenre, but from the second phase of the subgenre onwards it ceased to be punitive.
It has a cutscene.	91%	An important aspect for the development of the story, but not mandatory.
It has dialogues.	28%	It is not the primary narrative tool option for the subgenre.
It features three-dimensional graphics.	46%	Although not the majority among all the games analyzed, new games are favoring three-dimensional graphics.

**Source:** The author himself.

Being able to observe these games through objective criteria and find patterns that define them is quite relevant for game developers. Lesser-known genres, such as this one, require careful analysis to understand their main pillars and more or less typical mechanics, as well as their historical development.

One of the limitations of this knowledge is that the list is not absolute, since the sample, despite including 56 games, is neither systematic nor exhaustive. Analyzing

other games within the subgenre could yield different results and lead to further discussions.

Another example is games that perhaps shouldn't be listed as cinematic platformers, such as *Woolfe: The Red Hood Diaries* (2015), which, in addition to being the only game that doesn't use a side-scrolling view throughout the gameplay, features a double jump mechanic, something that goes against the definitions of the subgenre.

The main contribution of this paper, and for future studies, is to give relevance to the study of the subgenre itself, which currently lacks attention and deeper analysis.

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