# **Paper Alchemist**

## UX & Level Design





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## **1.0 Concept Overview and Intentions**

Paper alchemist is an atmospheric puzzle adventure game inspired by Paper Mario. It wants the player to engage in a creative way with the environment it presents by learning about colours, their associated qualities and applying that knowledge in different contexts. The player takes control of a scientist, who has been robbed of one of his biggest accomplishments: *the supreme potion* and now must get it back. However, the thief has left puzzles and enemies to block the players advance...

This document is complementary to the presented level prototype and sheds light on its development process, as well as the ideas behind it.

#### **1.1 Success Definition**

Whether the created prototype is successful, is determined by reaching the hereafter mentioned external and internal goals. A final discussion about which goals have been reached, can be found at the end of this document.

#### 1.1.1 External Goals

As for external goals, I mainly had in mind to develop a fun and relaxed puzzle adventure experience. To create such an experience the following four sub-goals presented itself to me:

- 1. Work with tools that can create atmosphere (Camera, Art style, and Music)
- 2. Make the level easy to play and introduce mechanics in portions
- 3. Give the player action space to choose their own gameplay goals
- 4. Reward players for exploration and don't punish them for taking their time

In addition to that, I wanted the level to be of high enough quality as to be presented within a portfolio. That quality includes a bug-less experience and a coherent level without any loose ends, unexplained or useless mechanics, incomprehensible story, or open questions in the end. I also wanted the game to be a meaningful experience, having application of in game learned effects of colours in real-life.

#### 1.1.2 Internal Goals

The internal goals I set, mainly evolved around the player being driven to play the level. As for that, it was most important to me that the player always feels like their actions lead towards a goal and have meaning. The goal being to create freedom of choice in what objective to pursue next, but also guide towards a definable achievement. No matter what they choose to do, players should always feel rewarded as well as productive and have an impact on future gameplay. Furthermore, I wanted to have the players have as little cognitive dissonance as possible, to keep them relaxed and enjoy their time playing the game. In contrast, I also wanted to make the player feel smart for solving difficult puzzles and at the same time not take that feeling away by giving to many and obvious hints.

## 2.0 Concept Research

These are some concept research outcomes with explanation.

#### 2.1 Mood board, Tools, and Papers

A mood board showing some low poly art style inspiration from Paper Mario and other pixel-based assets. Also presented are some props and tools the fictional scientist might have or use in his laboratory.



One of the papers I read on effects and associations of colours in videogames in addition to plenty of YouTube videos.



https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239842533 Colors and Emotions in Video Games



A tool I used for experimenting with additive and subtractive colour mixing.

https://isle.hanover.edu/Ch06Color/Ch06ColorMixer.html

#### 2.2 Fake Screenshot

A fake screenshot showing how gameplay in a generic level might look like. In the top left is some UI including a colour wheel, which misses some colours (To be unlocked in the future). Furthermore, there are vials that have a red, green, and blue fluid in them. Towards the player charges a red and angry enemy, which the scientist wants to counter with the blue (calm colour association) vial he holds, negating its intention to hurt the player.



#### 2.3 Unique Selling Points

Paper alchemist convinces with its creative possibilities and stand apart concept. Only few games have a complex colour coded AI-behaviour system and even fewer a wide variety of options through which the player can influence and make use (passively and actively) of that system. Want to move a rock? Why don't you colour some enemies in the vicinity magenta and bind them to the rock while they are friendly and jolly. Once you are don't make them red and angry again! They will pull the rock out of the way in while pursuing you.

An open world supports those strengths, giving the player a lot of free action space to decide what goal to follow next. In connection to that, having visual and auditory guidance for the player towards the main objectives but never pushing them externally, helps create a relaxed and meaningful experience.

The first level gives the player an easy introduction into the main mechanics, before they are free to choose on how to let their creativity flow.

#### 2.4 Competitors

Mechanically, the main competitors are educational colour mixing games for kids. Yet, their mechanical complexity rarely exceeds "combine colours & draw with them".

Visually, the main competitor is Paper Mario. The paper like 2D visuals in a 3D world give off a feeling that barely any other game could come close to. However, there are other games that share Paper Marios style idea, most accomplished being Octopath Traveller. Mentionable are also Bug Fables and SkellBoy, whereas Bug Fables comes closest to capturing the Paper Mario feeling.

Gameplay wise the strongest competitor seems to be The Witness with its open world exploration and puzzle aspects.

From a camera work point of view are Paper Mario and SkellBoy strong competitors, with mainly cameras following the player in a predefined perspective but also short cinematic sequences or perspective changes.

The overall strongest competitor remains Paper Mario.

#### 2.5 Target Audience

As for the target audience, the game has a broad appeal. It can be played by kids and young adults, due to its low level of difficulty and simple game mechanics. The open world design allows for players who don't want to be challenged too hard to follow the more simple and main objective line. On the other hand, can adults and people who are searching for a challenge find them as well. In addition to that, the game has appeal for visual artists.

The prototype level itself is more suited for younger audiences, since there is no high puzzle or gameplay difficulty, and the focus lies on introduction exploration and atmosphere.

#### 2.6 Target System

Console and PC

## 3.0 Game Structure

In the following are presented artifacts of the development process, which led to the final level prototype. They all have an explanation regarding their use and creation.

## 3.1 Game Flow

#### 3.1.1 Overall Game

This is an older flow-chart for the overall game's linearity. My goal was to create an completely open world, but I saw the necessity to introduce players to new mechanics as well as their abbreviations in some kind of linear context. My solution was a semi-linear structure, where the player can choose between different level sequences, but final progress is bottlenecked by a main sequence. It starts off with linear levels but opens slowly over semi- to non-linearity, the further the player progresses.



Over time and with feedback, I realized that this gives players a strong dictation on how to interact with the game's mechanics and world. Testers suggested that the game should have a strong focus on story in case I planned to go with this type of linearity.

To develop the flow further, I created the following flowchart. It shows a linear game start to introduce the main mechanics and then instantly opens into a nonlinear open world. Within that world players can choose at any time what objective (main/ side) they want to engage with. Depending on where they explore, they might find an abbreviation of a mechanic (for example finding a vial with green fluid in it). There is a main objective line, however it defines itself as "main" only by the story that they tell. I oriented myself a lot at *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, where a player can virtually beat the game on many different metrics without ever engaging with the main story line after the first level.



Before I created the flow charts, I set up a beat-sheet. It contains three hypothetical levels of which the first one was chosen as base for the level prototype. Again, I planned on easing the player into mechanics, as to not overwhelm them. However, I recognized that one new mechanic per level might be to slow of a development for the size of levels I had imagined. When participants play tested the level in its early stage with two different mechanics (movement & throwing vials), they found the level to not have enough interactivity. Only partially because the objectives to use the mechanics on were too few but also of the lack of interactivity overall. In the final level there are more ways to interact (movement, vial throwing, restocking on vials, filling them, collectables & tutorial white boards).

Level	The Laboratory	What is left	The Goal
Gameplay	Familiarize with game	Exploration & basic fighting	Exploration, basic fighting & information gathering
Game Structure	Very linear	Linear	linear
Main Mechanics	Movement	Movement, "Picking up colours", filling vials, throwing vials	Movement,"Picking up colours", filling vials, throwing vials Killing red enemies by throwing blue liquid vials at them
New Mechanic	Picking up items, filling vials, throwing vials Red enemies can die through potion liquids	Killing red enemies by throwing blue liquid vials at them	Talking interaction with NPC's Picking up colors from items (Flowers or river etc.)
Mechanic Adaptation	x	X	X
Puzzles	Simple sequence of actions puzzle	Simple sequence of actions puzzle	X
Main Enemy	x	Red enemy	Orange enemy
New Enemies	Red enemy	x	The thief
Estimated Time	x	x	x
Gameplay Intensity	Very low	Very low	Low
Gameplay Complexity	Very low	Low	Low
Playtest Feedback	x	x	x

#### 3.1.2 Level

This is an older flow-chart for the level prototype. It focusses on overall functionality of the level, ranging from player interaction to user interface updates. It shows a linear level, where the player must follow an order of actions to reach the end. This didn't really catch the feeling I wanted to go with and left out the introduction to the mechanics. After the feedback that the game testers left about stale game flow and boring interaction, I created another flow-chart with stronger focus on interactivity of the level. It includes two player choices and multiple mechanics within a semi-linear level (Bottleneck being the enemies at the end of the level).





During the development process, I created this pyramid analysis on different dimensions of interaction players could have in an imaginary finished level.

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#### 3.2 Annotated Maps

My first annotated map included the two parts of the level present in the final prototype (Laboratory & Outside). By positioning points of interest, enemies, and walls in this way, I hoped to engage the player with different mechanics. The first enemy for example introduces the player to the mechanic "Blue vial neutralizes red enemy". Only in later levels they would have been able to make the distinction between the vial neutralizing the enemy or the colour of the liquid. In the final level, the tutorials help make that distinction. By placing one tutorial right after the camera sequence an immediate connection between the colour of the enemy and its behaviour can be made.

![](_page_15_Figure_0.jpeg)

With these two maps I focused more on the introduction of the player movement mechanic. Although it is easy to understand, I wanted the player to gain experience (even if it is a little) within a safe context before facing enemies head up. In comparison: The final level follows the movement layout of the second picture, where the player must walk in each direction and turn the joystick in both directions as well.

![](_page_15_Figure_2.jpeg)

The following picture shows a map, which originated during the planning of player attention flow and bread crumb trails. Within the final level, cues are placed in multiple locations, spreading out player attention. However, the thieves trail worked as a bottom-up attention cue first and after the player identified to follow it, it held a place as a top-down attention cue. Play testers liked the trail and I therefore kept it in as guidance. One of the testers mentioned that after the trail went up the hill (where he couldn't follow), he lost his next point of interest for some seconds before understanding where to go. To counteract that, I took another play testers suggestion of adding a trail to further lead the player through the level. Furthermore, to guide the player subliminally through the level, I added red flowers to every point of interest (Except where the last special vial is hidden). The first hidden special vial is hinted at first by the flowers, then by the tree stumps that act like walls to a path.

ne Player Attention & Player Goals stacle 3 Obstacle Bread cramb frail : Attention grabbe Obstacle ? Osstado 4 Player 2 kinds of atkention guabless 1 Goal

Following the attention analysis, I looked at where players have the highest cognitive load. I determined this by multiple factors:

1. How many goals do they currently have (How much do they hold up in working memory)

- 2. How many points of interest do they currently see
- 3. How many things are they forced to engage with to reach a goal

The following map looks at an early stage of the final prototype, where the green circles show low cognitive load and the more red they get, the higher it becomes. The blue dotted line shows the quickest way to the end and the light blue dotted lines its alternative paths. I liked the layout and it felt fitting for a Freytag pyramid with a slow start with tutorials in the laboratory, a climax around 2/5 of the map and some smaller bumps later. In the final level this shifted further to the start of the players overall path, due to the introduction sequences and higher number of tutorials in the laboratory.

![](_page_17_Picture_4.jpeg)

## 4.0 Gameplay

## 4.1 Game Play Loops and Feedback Types

4.1.1 Positive Game Play Loops

Within the level, as it was planned, I wanted three different positive feedback loops. First of which is the players exploration of the level, rewarded by three special potions. These would have later been used to unlock new colours and broadened the range of possibilities to explore the world. Secondly, changing certain enemies would drop some of their old colour, ready to be picked up by the player and used for changing other enemies. And lastly, I planned on adding vial belt extensions, increasing the overall carrying capacity for the player. More vials would make for more possible colour combinations and easier to solve levels.

The reward types used for that are investment (Invest time and effort for the vial belt extension and get a lasting reward) and escapism & wish fulfilment (Getting creative to solve puzzles your own way and receive rewards for it).

#### 4.1.2 Negative Game Play Loop

For now, a negative feedback loop can be found between vial fill ups. Once you are stocked on vials, their amount only decreases during gameplay until you restock again. During that time possibilities on how the player can interact with the environment decrease leaving the player with more inefficient options and an even quicker depleting vial count. The limitation of vials and its consequences can either be seen as a positive or negative challenge, but the player certainly must take more conscious control over their actions with low vial counts.

#### 4.1.3 Emotional Game Play Loop

In addition to the positive and negative feedback loops the level tries to immerse the player by showing short cinematic sequences. Playing the game and engaging with it, will play these sequences more often, raising immersion even more.

The reward type associated with that is escapism.

#### 4.2 Mechanics and Game Rules

#### 4.2.1 Additive and Subtractive Colour Mixing

At the heart of the game's mechanics are the ability to mix colours yourself and then apply them to animated objects in game. Since this is supposed to be a meaningful experience, I wanted to use real world colour mixing physics. Even though, the outcomes of colour mixing can be infinite, by controlling two aspects, namely "How does a player get a colour" and "How does a player mix a colour", constraints are put on which keep the mechanic interesting. In the beginning for example the player can only extract blue colour from fountains in the region. Later, they will learn to extract colour from flowers or other objects processable in a laboratory. To remove all limitations finally the professor's laptop enters the ring (more in **4.2.5 The Laptop**). It is important to keep some constraints in the beginning as not to overwhelm the players with possibilities and only lift them slowly. Whereas subtractive colour mixing will work with every object a coloured vial is thrown upon, additive colour mixing makes for a different kind of puzzle (more in **4.2.6 Puzzles**).

#### 4.2.2 Animated Object Behaviour

The second most important mechanic the AI's behaviour in differently coloured states. The player can alter an AI's colour by throwing vials with a different colour at them. As a result, three questions arise: "Will mixed colours be defined by distinction or by value?", "How will AI behaviour work with value-based colour mixing?", "What do the behavioural transitions look like during value mixing?".

If I have a red enemy and throw a blue vial at them, they change their colour to magenta. But what happens if I throw more blue vials on them? Do I mix magenta with blue? Does it increase the blue value of the material? Does it make the enemy calmer? Does the vivid purple emotionally represent a calmed down angry enemy?

I have two different systems for now, which could solve those problems. The first of which is the one used in the level prototype. It includes a predefined colour wheel with distinct primary secondary and tertiary colours. Players can only obtain primary colours and mix them to secondary and secondary to tertiary ones. Objects that already have a colour must be mixed with a colour of the same level. Mixing tertiary colours will result in a black object, showing no behaviour and must be reset by throwing white colour (Also no behaviour) on it to start anew. Every distinct colour has a predefined behaviour and players must remember them. Sadly, I expect this to get tedious and feel limiting as for the freedom the game promises. Furthermore, does the limitation on already coloured objects feel very unnatural.

Another solution might be to align the three dimensions of colour (Hue, Saturation and Brightness) with dimensions we know from research on emotions. I remember reading a paper some time ago where emotions were mapped out in three dimensions called "Positive/ Negative feeling", "Intensity" and "Directed inward/ outward". Although this feels like an intuitive solution, I have not yet tested it out and it might very well not fit. A very strong and negative outward directed disgust might align with a very dark and highly saturated green, but does that concept work for every colour? I have yet to try.

These questions all have the same problem root: How to combine the three dimensions of colours (RGB) with far more dimensions of emotion and their associations.

#### 4.2.3 Throwing Vials

Vials can be thrown if the player has some to throw. All vials will shatter, leaving their interior on the collision object. In case that object is animated, it will change colour as well as behaviour. In the current level the enemies sadly don't move or hunt the player yet. However, they change their state if hit by a vial with blue colour. Aiming and shooting are simple. With the help of play testers, I improved on the aim speed and size of vial objects.

#### 4.2.4 Restocking on Vials

Players can choose to restock on vials any time at dedicated locations. For every empty vial slot, the player will gain a vial without any filling. If the player desires to fill up their vials with any kind of colour they can choose what specific vial to fill with what colour. In the current prototype that is not implemented. Player feedback also suggested to implement an option to empty out vials if their filling can be replaced by something more useful.

#### 4.2.5 The Laptop

Some of the mechanics I felt are necessary to get rid of within later progress of the game are location based restock and location-based colour refills. Imagine a

player in the open world having explored an area and its secrets but suddenly be haltered, because there is no red colour in the vicinity, or they have run out of vials. That will feel unfair, tedious, and unrewarding for exploration effort. The difficulty of puzzles does not derive from whether the player can find the resources in the vicinity but rather if they use them correctly and to their best advantage. The laptop would have been a great addition to gameplay within later phases of the game because it introduces multiple new mechanics:

1. The player can simulate colour mixing on it (Additive and Subtractive) to get an overview on what possibilities they have

2. The player can open a map on it and determine points of interest

3. The player can have an overview on what colours associate with what behaviours

4. The player can produce colours artificially with it

Most importantly, the laptop can be limited to overall world progression, giving another incentive to explore and find collectables. Finding an extra hard drive for example could enable the additive colour mixing tool or, the amount of artificially craftable colours is connected to the laptop's battery status. Nevertheless, it provides a late-game positive gameplay loop as well as motivation to keep exploring. With a powerful tool like this, the vial limitation is needed (Especially if there are already extension belts to be collected).

#### 4.2.6 Puzzles

Puzzles can be divided into additive and subtractive colour mixing, or both at the same time. They might include shining differently coloured spotlights at places to mix their emission or repaint an enemy red to scare away NPC's that wont move. Or shine a green light on a red enemy to make them yellow and agitated. These are just some possibilities from the top of my head but there are countless options as to how colour mixing can be used in puzzles.

#### 4.2.7 Memorable Moments

In my vision of the level, I saw the introduction sequence and the one where a monster hit the shelf only to drop a vial of blue colour on their head very differently to how it turned out. However, the intention behind those camera sequences was to create atmosphere, immersion, and something funny to remember (Maybe it was just funny in a different way). Right after the player leaves the laboratory the camera pans out over a big part of the level. The players attention grabs multiple objects in a fast order:

#### 1. The tutorial board

- 2. The enemy down the road
- 3. The special vial on top of the hill with two enemies guarding it
- 4. the fountain on the hill and the enemies at the end of the level

(5. If the player pays attention well enough, the hidden special vial behind the tree line)

6. The second fountain next to the laboratory

During this, I wanted the player to see the first things they are supposed to interact with after the sequence as the first and last points of interest. This plays to the natural ability to remember items at the beginning and end of mental lists better than those in the middle (Primacy and recency effect).

There is one more camera position foreshadowing what the player can interact with in the future, during the walk under the bridge. In the distance the player can see an enemy and the first collectable special vial, which is hidden from clear sight once the camera switches back again. One intention with the camera movement was to reward observant players and have them think "HA! I saw that!", making them feel accomplished and smart to solve a puzzle others might have missed, and the game designer challenged them with. That would make a possible memorable moment.

## 5.0 Game Play Goals

As for the overall game experience game play goals include collectables and achievements as well as reaching the games end. Collectables include all special vials, which translates to all unlocked mechanics (Which would then translate into an achievement), as well as all vial belt extensions. Only after completing the main story line the player can finish the game which makes each part of, it an objective or goal.

In an older version of the prototype during analysis what could be done about interactivity in the level, I created this. It holds the level goal of finding the thief int the end and the scenarios, moments and actions that might be required to do so.

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Within the final level there are the following objectives two objectives: Follow the thief and collect all special potions. Intrinsically set objectives could include changing all enemies and explore the entire level.

### 6.0 Story

#### 6.1 Narration Type

I envisioned the games story to be mainly narrated through the player as a creator. However, since it has prewritten content that the player just uncovers or is presented with, I see the player as a discoverer and receiver as well. During play testing, participants didn't show a clear preference as to which kind of story telling they would prefer. However, testers mentioned that in combination with an open world design they would prefer small stories within the world to uncover. To conclude, the game would mainly see the player as a creator of the story, sometimes as the discoverer and rarely simply as the receiver. Within the prototype level the story is mainly presented, which correlates with the linearity of the level.

#### 6.2 Story Type

As mentioned above, was the intention to have small sub-plots all over the map and a main story line. This suggests strong player driven storytelling with traditional storytelling on the side.

#### 6.3 Theme, Mood and Setting

My plan was to mimic the Paper Mario art style. It is light-hearted, low on detail and nearly every single asset and prop has a round convex shape. This would have gone well in combination with my internal goal of creating a relaxing experience. However, when playing with colours lighting and saturation are some of the variables that cannot be constant as to keep the context for the main mechanics fresh and varied.

I chose the setting for the prototype level to be a laboratory on the mountainside to give the player a feeling of isolation. Outside in the nature everything moves slower, and humans can enjoy the simplicity of the things around them. Furthermore, the mountainside was to work well with lighting, when simulating a moving sun. Unfortunately, I had to give up on creating 2D assets for use in the scene and the only thing resembling Paper Mario's art style is the professor himself. As for the rest, I tried to keep it low poly and low detail. Right now, especially the textures for the fountains, the laboratories floor and the mountainside are sticking out and need to be more coherent with the rest.

## 7.0 Future Iterations and Goals Reached

#### 7.1 Future Iterations

Over the entire document I mentioned feedback and aspects to improve on. However, now I would like to focus specifically on what the level itself would need to be a coherent final experience.

First, the level needs to improve regarding the theme, mood, and setting. A coherent art style with a theme that supports the internal goals and different moods to get the player invested in the story itself would help already. However, the biggest miss is sound and the lack of pacing optimization

Secondly, does it need a resizing of props and assets. In addition, has playtest feedback shown that the players find the right half of the map to be taking to much space, as well as the area in front of the laboratory. Participants specific descriptions also suggested that it is not necessarily just the sizing that feels off but the positioning of certain interactive objects as well. The tutorial white board outside the laboratory is a little to far to the edge of the mountain and the refill station on the hill above the first special vial location just isn't well placed. Players either needed it more to the west, where there are four enemies, or further to the south if they run out of vials while fighting the enemy defending the potion.

As a third big aspect of improvement is the completely missing enemy AI. Currently they are just standing there, waiting to be painted but have no real impact on player decision, or, as a matter of fact, on anything.

Smaller issues regard player falling speed, level boundaries, an actual finish screen which shows the players impact (Right now there is no difficulty and therefore no feeling of accomplishment), more feedback on what objects will change behaviour when being coloured (Via pattern recognition), and a more refined value-based colour mixing system.

Finally, I will have to adjust my external and internal goals to create better levels in the future. Why, I will show you now:

## 7.2 Goals Reached

Regarding my external goals, I did better compared to the internal ones. I did indeed work a lot with camera movement and a little with art style. I succeeded in creating an easy level, which introduces mechanics in small portions that are understandable to the player. Furthermore, players had plenty of action space to choose their own goals, to such an extend even that they do not really have to interact with anything to reach the end of the level. I could go through all my external and internal goals in this manner, but that is not really of use. I found that my initial definition process for these goals has been lacking severely. Goals have been reached, yet their effect didn't reach the player. Sometimes intended effects showed to occur, but not for the reason I planned them to happen. In the future, I will have to be clearer and more precise about every goal, dividing them into sub goals and those into sub goals, to make sure that intentions are translated well into level design. To finalize this document, I found that two things worked well and as intended: Players found their way very well to the end of the level and felt guided but not pushed, and they felt rewarded for putting the small extra effort into exploring the level and finding hidden special potions.

## **8.0 References**

I used different textures from <a href="https://freestocktextures.com/">https://freestocktextures.com/</a>

Wood Texture:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZooJp7tmjxVGFakAMajk\_AN0BPmmDj v

Wall Texture:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yUV2E-OQFLCAjMJ2UXAvU2ADaL6VBdiP

Moreover, to create and texture the terrain itself I used unity's build in terrain package. As for all the tree, bush, gras and rose objects they are part of the simple nature asset package from the unity asset store.

All other code and objects like vials, tables, fountains, enemies, sprites, and animations I made with the unity editor, blender and in illustrator/ photoshop.