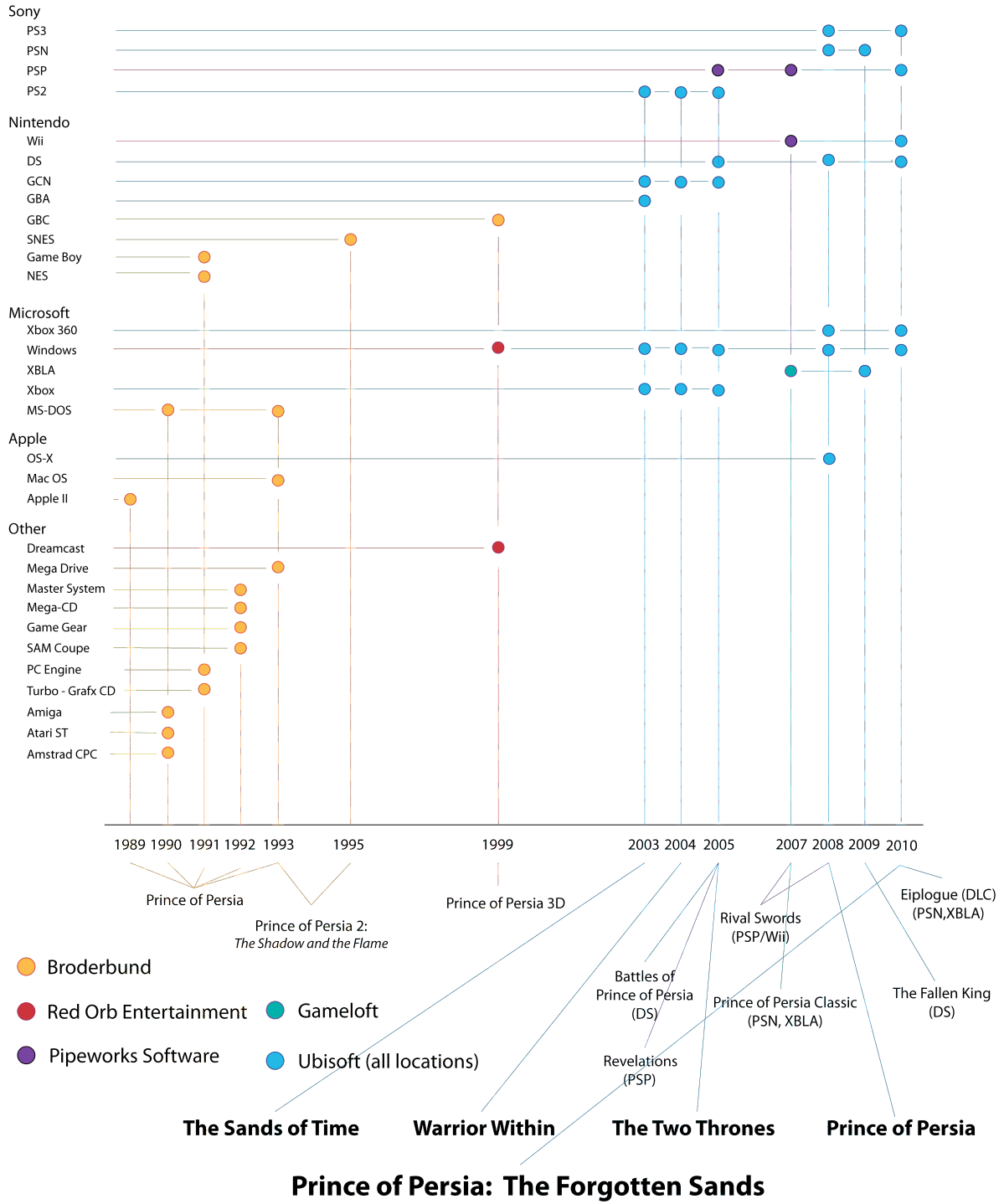


Game Review:
Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands

Over two decades ago, Jordan Mechner videotaped his younger brother running and jumping in white clothes around his back yard. Jordan then took that footage, got it onto his computer, and started tracing over each frame with pixel art. After this, he uses the pixel art as sprites of an animation for the protagonist of his video game for the Apple II. This was the first time rotoscoping was used in a video game, and that game was called *Prince of Persia*. The original *Prince of Persia* was ostensibly about a boy who fell in love with a princess. However, the game was really about the player running, climbing and jumping his/her way out of deadly traps and pits. The game was a success, and Jordan Mechner went to enjoy a great career in writing and game design. He even got to design the first sequel. Needless to say, there were many more sequels and spinoffs after that (see below).

The chart on the following page tracks the many iterations of the Prince of Persia franchise.

Prince of Persia Development History



The point here is that in order to review the most recent iteration of the *Prince of Persia* franchise, *Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands*, it is important to know the story of the Princes who came before. *The Forgotten Sands* is the latest heir to the dynasty of the *Prince of Persia* games. The gameplay surpasses its most immediate predecessor *Prince of Persia* for the PS3, but failed to live up to the overall experience of *The Two Thrones*. Ubisoft may have overcorrected against the failures of PS3's *Prince of Persia* by developing new combat mechanics at the expense of the overall player experience. But it's not all bad. Despite a lousy story-line and lackluster graphics, *The Forgotten Sands* gets back to basics with the classic, linear, trap-laden platform gameplay that made the series popular in the first place. Furthermore, much as in the 1989's *Prince of Persia*, the animation is very smooth. Unfortunately, the combat mechanics of *Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands* are unfocused and overloaded with redundant magical powers. If Ubisoft had directed the same resources to the visual design and story of this game as it did to the combat mechanics, *The Forgotten Sands* could have been a much more worthy successor to the *Prince of Persia* dynasty.

Fifteen years after the first *Prince of Persia* game, the second most significant event in the history of the *Prince of Persia* royal line occurred. This was the release of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* in 2003. Since then, every *Prince of Persia* game to come after has been compared this game as the best in the series. *The Sands of Time* didn't just have challenging and meaningful gameplay, it told a story and created a world of its own. This game delivered not only in terms of the mechanics of the gameplay but also in the quality of the overall player experience.

“Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time is an outstanding game – a dazzling, masterful achievement. It has, just as Mario 64 did with Nintendo's classic franchise, taken the 2D mechanics of the Persia universe and applied them into the 3D realm with no scarifices – only enhancements. That is, to put it bluntly, a hell of a thing. Thanks to wholly intuitive control, stunning atmosphere and satisfyingly clever environmental puzzles, the title easily ranks as one of my favority adventure offerings of all time (*Casamassina*).”

The only complaint reviewers had about *The Sands of Time* was to become a recurring theme in the modern *Prince of Persia* games. This was the clunky and simplistic combat. Despite this, the game is a classic and one of the few games ever made to do it all, and to do it all well. Perhaps it was a different time back then, with smaller teams and less expectations, but no other *Prince of Persia* game since *The Sands of Time* has been able to achieve such a balanced, quality player experience. Did I mention that you could reverse time?

In most all the *Prince of Persia* games, there are three main forms of gameplay at work. The first and most important is platforming (running, jumping, avoiding obstacles), the second is combat, and the last is puzzle gameplay. The player switches from platforming challenges to combat challenges and back, with more in-depth puzzles interspersed between. This is meant to keep the gameplay from getting too repetitive in any one way, and usually works out well. The platform gameplay can vary from high-intensity, twitch-based maneuvers to much slower gameplay where the player is trying to navigate the correct path to the next goal. The latter, pathfinding platforming makes up the bulk of the gameplay and is the bread and butter for the series. For the purpose of discussion, all three of the previously-mentioned gameplay types

(platforming, puzzle, and combat) will be very loosely lumped together to refer to the game's *mechanics*. On the other hand, a great gaming experience is about more than *mechanics* alone. There are also the ineffable qualities of game design; like establishing a compelling story with interesting characters, or creating a world that looks and feels like it's straight from a storybook. Again, for discussion purposes only, let's call the ineffable qualities of game design *atmosphere*. In the end, *mechanics* and *atmosphere* come together to create the overall player *experience*. All game developers struggle to balance *mechanics* and *atmosphere* together to create an overall *experience* that feels complete. The conflict between mechanics and atmosphere is also key to understanding the *Prince of Persia* sequels to come after *The Sands of Time*.

Mechanics vs. atmosphere is not the only conflict within the *Prince of Persia* franchise. Another exists within the mechanics themselves. Developers and designers seem to go back and forth in deciding whether *Prince of Persia* is mostly a thoughtful platforming game with a little combat or a hack-n-slash combat game with a little platforming. However, no matter what decisions the developers make, players never seem to like the combat gameplay at all. The first sequel to the *Sands of Time*, *The Warrior Within* ([dat here](#)), demonstrated this with a very lopsided game tilted toward action-combat at the expense of the overall player experience.

"I can appreciate the "we want to do more action" idea. But in the future, try to make that action worth playing. Like *Sands*, the highlight of *Warrior Within* is still the platforming. And, like *Sands*, the downside is still the combat. Unfortunately, the platforming is so adversely affected by the other "more is better" aspects of the game. The result is simply not spectacular, innovative, or polished. It's just there (*Goldstein*)."

The designers downplayed the thoughtful, pathfinding nature of *Sands* and focused on button-mashing combat instead. They also gave the Prince the ability to slow down time (in addition to time reversal). This backfired by making it too easy for players to pass through trap gauntlets and defeat slowed enemies, thus diminishing the value of the platform gameplay.

As if that wasn't enough, *Warrior Within*'s mechanics were not its biggest drawback. That would be the game's utter failure to create an atmosphere worthy of the game that preceded it. The designers intentionally took a different road in hopes of increasing the game's appeal. The art design was dark, violent, and very cliché. The voice of the *Prince* sounded just like a wolverine impersonator, and no sane player who enjoyed the rich culture of *Sands* would have thought of *Godsmack* as an appropriate artist for the soundtrack of the sequel.

So, *The Sands of Time* was awesome, and the *Warrior Within* just sucked. What about the third of the series, *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* ([date here](#))? This game was celebrated for stepping further into a more seamless blend of combat and platform gameplay. While *Sands* has a rich story-book aesthetic, and *Warrior* was much more dark and grim, *The Two Thrones* had a bit of both in its visual style. *Thrones* made clever use of the contrasting visual styles of the previous two games with a story of good and evil personalities competing to control one body (one with *Sands*'s visual style, the other with *Warrior*'s). The game's story was a stripped-down psychological journey into the duality of the mind, but was still no match for the storytelling in *Sands*. The gameplay did not suffer any egregious imbalances, but still had the clunky and awkward combat mechanics of the previous two games. The most important accomplishment of *The Two Thrones* was the introduction of quick-kill events as a way to transition from

platforming to combat gameplay. This was done with sneak-attack, quick-time events that allowed the Prince to quick-kill powerful enemies. The player carefully approached the enemy (from the ground, from the side, or from above), and waited until the Prince's knife glowed blue to press the attack button. This added a new dimension to the gameplay and worked to solve the franchise's never-ending struggle to balance combat and platform gameplay. The player would be platforming, then transition to a combat challenge with a quick-kill sequence. This fits thematically, as it makes sense for the first kill in a combat challenge to be a stealth kill from a hidden position. The quick-kill system was key to linking the two gameplay styles seamlessly, though it did not actually improve the combat itself. Overall, *The Two Thrones* represents the most recent high-water mark of quality in the *Prince of Persia* franchise since the *Sands of Time*. It achieved both solid gameplay mechanics and atmosphere to create a memorable player experience. It was good, but not great like the *The Sands of Time*.

Sadly, no *Prince of Persia* game has yet surpassed *The Two Thrones*. The first to try was *Prince of Persia* for the PS3. That game showed off next-generation graphics with striking cell-shaded design and seamless character animations. Unfortunately, Ubisoft made the same mistake as it did with *Warrior* once again by trying to tweak the game into appealing to a wider audience. Put simply, the platform and combat mechanics failed to ever truly kill the player. The character's love interest would simply swoop down and rescue the prince whenever he fell off a platform. In addition, the player no longer had the ability to rewind time, which eliminated risk/reward decisions the player had to make in previous iterations. With a limited amount of time ability to use, the player had to choose when and where to spend it, and thus the game became more interesting. This was eliminated in PS3's *Prince of Persia*. Instead, the player can merely make the hero hurl himself about with no regard for how often he will die. The designers also changed the world design from linear to open-world. This further devalued the platforming obstacles. In previous games, the obstacles formed a gauntlet with one beginning and one end. This leads to a sense of accomplishment in the player in having conquered a series of obstacles and traps. In *Prince of Persia* for PS3, passing a chain of obstacles is just a way to get around the world and offers no risk to the player. The platforming was boring in *Prince of Persia* for PS3, but the combat system was its biggest failing. There were four bosses in the game, each to be fought several times, and only one type of grunt enemy. The player had a number of combinations involving the love interest, Elika, that made quick work of both bosses and grunts. The animations for these combo moves were stunning, but all too easy to pull off. Every one of the game's battles was short and forgettable. The combat system and platforming in *Prince of Persia* was just too simple to provide a meaningful challenge to the player. All in all, *Prince of Persia* for PS3 became a victim of its own user-friendly gameplay. The mechanics were there, but too shallow to make for meaningful play.

From the ineffable perspective of atmosphere, however, the game did very well. The cell-shaded graphics and visual style were beautiful and worthy of a next generation console. The story was sparse, but the player was led to care about the character of Elika as the game progressed. *Prince of Persia* had a good story and great visuals, but fell down on gameplay. Two important failings define *Prince of Persia*'s missteps in gameplay. The first was replacing the trap-ridden platform challenges that made the series famous in the first place with an open world of connected but unchallenging paths. The second was its lackluster combat system,

which made it very difficult to lose or die. In order to correct these missteps, Ubisoft must have decided to focus on gameplay for their next installment rather than visual design or story. Unfortunately, it looks like they overcorrected and came up with a game with an overabundance of gameplay mechanics at the expense of atmosphere. While PS3's *Prince of Persia* was all atmosphere and no mechanics, *The Forgotten Sands* was all mechanics and no atmosphere.

Actually, the first problem to mention in *The Forgotten Sands* is that Ubisoft didn't make just one game, but at least four games, of this title. There was of course the PS3 version to be reviewed here, but also versions developed for the Wii, PSP, and Nintendo DS. All four games have completely different stories and game mechanics. It is not a great leap to assume that the PS3 version didn't get the attention it deserved simply because of pressing deadlines involving four different games on four different platforms; all wanting a single release date! Let's not forget that the game's release had to coincide with the release movie version of *The Sands of Time* the same summer. The work was divided between Ubisoft's Montreal and Quebec locations, but it is clear that the PS3 version of *The Forgotten Sands* suffered as the result of an overextended mandate by Ubisoft to develop games for such a large number of platforms at once in such a short amount of time.

Now for the game itself. The gameplay of *The Forgotten Sands* goes back to basics, returning the ability to control time to the player. However, this ability now costs one magic point, which forces the player to use it sparingly (like in *Sands* and *Warrior*). The challenges are linear, with a clear beginning and an end. Obstacles in the game include classic booby traps like spikes and swinging pendulums which are well known and loved by players. With its linear level design and limits to the player's abilities, *The Forgotten Sands* reintroduces the kind of risk/reward gameplay that increases the satisfaction of the player's accomplishments in the game. These are admirable achievements in terms of the game's mechanics. Unfortunately, *The Forgotten Sands* does not make similar achievements in terms of atmosphere. The level design in *The Forgotten Sands* is largely made up hallways full of death-traps leading to a series of large and similar-looking rooms. These rooms divide combat events on the floor from platform challenges on the walls and ceiling. The player kills everyone on the the floor, then has to platform up the sides to the next room. There are no sprawling vistas like in the previous games, but there are some mildly entertaining sequences where the Prince avoids attacks by the game's villain, a demon named Ratash.

The story for *The Forgotten Sands* takes place between the *Sands of Time* and *The Warrior Within*. The player follows the Prince as he seeks to save his brother Malik from the corrupting influences of the demon Ratash and his army of sand soldiers. The story exists, but when compared to the inner turmoil that made up the conflict of *The Two Thrones*, or the gestalt, the beginning-is-the-end aesthetics of *The Sands of Time*, *The Forgotten Sands* falls flat. The characters are forgettable, and even the final boss Ratash seems like a rip-off from the villain in the Ridley Scott's classic *Legend*. The developers at Ubisoft definitely did not focus their resources on the art, characters and story that make up a game's atmosphere for *The Forgotten Sands*.

Nor did the developers focus on other artistic aspects of game design like animation and visual style. Even though it is built on the powerful Anvil engine originally developed for *Assassin's Creed*, the graphics and visuals of *The Forgotten Sands* are nothing special. Most

rooms involve jumping around areas that look exactly the same. There is none of the cultural richness and color of the previous games like the pools, gardens, and palace interiors of *The Two Thrones* or the overgrown ruins of the previous *Prince of Persia*. Instead, we get a series of bare rooms and ruins. *The Forgotten Sands* is unable to match the visual impact of even its PS2 predecessors, which is a shame considering the potential of PS3 graphics. This shows some evidence that Ubisoft was rushing to complete their game mechanics and may have been unable to devote time and resources to polishing up the game's visuals.

It may have failed in terms of atmosphere, but there is no shortage of game mechanics in *The Forgotten Sands*. When it comes to those involved in platforming, I am big fan of all of them. As mentioned before, the designers went back to *Prince of Persia*'s roots and made linear levels with old-fashioned traps and obstacles. With the ability to rewind time to undo a mistake, the player doesn't have to respawn and retread the entire path every time he/she fails. However, rewinding time costs a magic point, and there are a limited number of magic points available to the player. This creates the risk/reward relationship that gives the player a real sense of accomplishment upon crossing a gauntlet of obstacles. In addition, the Prince is given other powers over time and space that are crucial to later platforming challenges. The player can stop time for water, "freezing" it so waterfalls and spouts can become platform elements. Another power is the ability to toggle ruins back and forth from their pristine state so they become available for the player to interact with. Often these powers must be invoked in mid-air and quickly toggled on and off as part of the platform challenges. For example: the Prince will have to pass through some waterfalls, then freeze them so he can wall-jump off of one, then unfreeze them in mid-air so he can pass through another waterfall, etc. These powers add a new dimension of challenge to the platform gameplay and can be quite difficult to master. However, they add depth and interest to the player's accomplishments upon successfully navigating a difficult set of obstacles. The platform mechanics in *The Forgotten Sands* were very successful and brought the franchise's platform gameplay to a new level.

It is in the combat mechanics, however, that I believe Ubisoft overcorrected against the failings of *Prince of Persia* for PS3. The Prince fights waves of identical enemies in a manner similar to just about any hack n' slash out there, only worse. The Prince has a handful of combos and can hold the attack button for a charged attack. It is possible to defeat all the enemies without taking a hit if the player repeatedly runs to the corner of the room to prepare a charge attack. Even though there are only four types of enemies to fight, these zombie-sand-warriors still manage to look generic and boring. They do not adequately ramp up in difficulty as the player progresses. Instead, the player just fights a more enemies at a time.

So with these problems, how did Ubisoft overcorrect? Magic powers. It might seem like a good idea to give the Prince magic combat powers involving mastery over the four elements, but they are just not that fun. Also, there are way to many games out there that do the same thing better. A huge skill tree is presented to the player with a variety of possible upgrades to health, magic, and all magic powers. Upgrade points can be spent on improving the Prince's platform abilities or unlocking new combat powers. Later challenges in the game are so difficult that a player is best suited spending these upgrades on things to make platforming easier; like increasing the amount of time the Prince can freeze water. However, most players will probably want to see what the magic combat powers are, and waste their upgrades. This means that the

devious platforming challenges near the end could be nearly impossible to beat. In addition, using combat magic costs a magic point. This means the player will have fewer chances to freeze time when the battle is over. One might argue that an especially good player might want to upgrade and use their combat magic skills more instead of focusing on platforming. Unfortunately, the sheer difficulty of the platforming challenges compared to the ease of the combat events means that a player who wants to focus on combat powers will probably not actually need them, but is simply upgrading to see how the powers change over time. This is bad design, as upgrades need to be important to progressing through a game, not a side-attraction. Although interesting, the skill tree with its four types of combat magic powers seems unnecessary. The time and effort that went into these powers would have been better spent polishing the game's visuals and adding more interest to the story. The developers should have been satisfied with their new platforming mechanics, and diverted the rest of their resources to the ineffable qualities that make up a game's atmosphere. This in term would have made for a much more complete player experience.

Prince of Persia has certainly come a long way from Jordan Mechners's Apple II, and this may not necessarily be a good thing. As Ubisoft and the *Prince of Persia* franchise gets bigger and bigger, I begin to doubt that they will ever be able to strike the type of balance of gameplay, story, and visual style found in its most successful predecessors, *The Sands of Time* or *The Two Thrones*. However, I am still hopeful for the future. The new platform mechanics provide a solid foundation for their next installment. Furthermore, the solutions to *Prince of Persia's* perennial combat problems can be found in previous games, like quick-kill system in *The Two Thrones*. The Prince is at his best when sneaking up on enemies using his stealth and agility, not magic powers. The Prince also deserves to look nice, and have an interesting story to tell. Here's hoping that the next installment of the series learns from not its immediate predecessor, but from all the Princes who came before.

Works Cited

Wikipedia Sources

Prince of Persia. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_of_persia)

Jordan Mechner. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan_Mechner)

Prince of Persia 1989.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_of_Persia_%281989_video_game%29)

Rotoscoping. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotoscoping>)

IGN Reviews

Casamassina, Matt. “**Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time:** This is how you make a sequel.” IGN. (<http://cube.ign.com/objects/535/535913.html>) November 10, 2003.

Goldstein, Hilary. “**Prince of Persia: Warrior Within:** The Prince is back and he sure looks pissed.” IGN. (<http://ps2.ign.com/articles/568/568834p1.html>) November 24, 2004.