

Guiding Light

Level Design Document

How three levels teach and test a single mechanic through spatial composition.

1. The Four-Beat Structure

Every level in Guiding Light follows the same teaching pattern: Introduce, Develop, Twist, Test. The structure originated as a learning framework for the prototype's mechanics and proved durable enough to apply to each level individually.

Beat	Purpose	Player Experience
Introduce	Present the mechanic in isolation, in a safe context.	First encounter. Low or no stakes. Player observes.
Develop	Combine the mechanic with previously-learned elements.	Comfortable but more demanding. Player practices.
Twist	Subvert the player's expectation of the mechanic.	Surprise. Forces a rethink. Player adapts.
Test	Demand fluent use of everything taught.	Climax. High stakes. Player demonstrates mastery.

This is not a novel framework—platformer designers have used variants for decades. What is notable in Guiding Light is the discipline of applying it within each level rather than across the game's lifetime. Each level is a self-contained micro-arc, and the prototype is the sum of three such arcs.

Why this structure works for Guiding Light

The torch-and-oil mechanic is non-intuitive. Players have learned in dozens of other platformers that visibility is free. Guiding Light overturns that expectation in Level 1's first encounter and must teach a replacement mental model. The Four-Beat structure provides the scaffolding.

Each level's new mechanical layer (static hazards, proximity hazards, active threats) is taught fresh through this structure, building on what came before.

2. Level 1: Foundation

Design Intent

Level 1 teaches the core loop: light to see, dark to conserve, navigate through static hazards. By the end of the level, the player should have internalized that lighting is a tool with a cost, not a default state.

New Mechanic

Oil-rationed light combined with static hazards (spike rocks, pits).

Previously Learned

Movement and jump (from IntroLevel).

Beat-by-Beat

Introduce: The First Spike

The level opens with a wide, open section. A single spike rock sits in clear view directly along the player's path. The player will instinctively light the torch—they have a torch, they will use it. They see the spike rock. They jump it. The hazard is taught.

What is being taught here is not the spike rock itself (which any platformer player recognizes). What is being taught is the act of lighting. The player has now performed the core loop once: light → see hazard → act → continue.

Critically, this Introduce section is wide and forgiving. There is no pit nearby. If the player walks past a spike rock without lighting, they die in a clearly survivable way—the level is short enough to restart immediately. The lesson lands either way.

Develop: Pit and Spike Together

The second hazard zone combines a pit with a spike rock. The player must light to see the layout, then either jump the pit (avoiding the spike on the far side) or take an alternate path.

This beat is about combining mechanics. The player now needs to plan a route, not just react to a single hazard. The oil cost of looking at this section twice (to confirm the layout) is real but small.

Twist: The Committed Path

A narrow path with spike rocks on both sides. The player can light, memorize, then traverse blind. Or they can keep the torch on through the entire crossing.

The twist is the trade-off: paying more oil for safety, or paying less and trusting memory. This is the first time the player feels the oil economy actively shaping their choices, not just the moment-to-moment loop.

Test: The Beacon Climax

The beacon piece sits at the end of a precision-platforming section. Multiple pits, multiple spike rocks, and a path that demands jumps in specific sequences. The oil cost of lighting through this entire section is high.

Players who managed oil well in earlier sections have headroom here. Players who burned oil freely earlier are forced into riskier decisions—traverse some of this blind, hope the memory holds. This is where the oil economy first shows real teeth.

The EndLevel trigger sits just past the beacon piece. Picking up the beacon does not automatically end the level; the player still has to walk through the EndLevel area. This separates the moments of 'I earned the piece' and 'I'm done with this level,' giving the player a beat to register their progress.

Level 1 Length

Approximately 60-90 seconds of clean playthrough. First-time players take 2-4 minutes including some deaths.

3. Level 2: Vigilance

Design Intent

Level 2 introduces time as a hazard. Static threats are no longer enough—the world now changes while the player navigates it. The player must observe patterns and time their passage.

New Mechanic

Stalactites: ceiling hazards that activate when the player is in proximity below them. Each stalactite goes through a cycle (dormant → cracking sound → fall → ground hazard → respawn). The player must time their passage through the fall zones.

Previously Learned

Oil rationing, static hazards, beacon collection.

Beat-by-Beat

Introduce: Watch the Cycle

Early in Level 2, a stalactite hangs in a position the player must pass under—but with enough horizontal space that the player can stop and observe before committing. The crack sound plays. The stalactite falls. The player sees the cycle.

The lesson here is the rhythm. Crack, fall, ground, gone. Crack, fall, ground, gone. Repeat. Players are not expected to dodge perfectly the first time; they are expected to see the cycle and understand it.

Develop: Time the Passage

A section with two or three stalactites in sequence, with safe pauses between them. The player can navigate one at a time, finding the rhythm before moving to the next.

This beat establishes that stalactites are now part of the level's vocabulary. The player is not surprised by them anymore. They are an obstacle to time.

Twist: Beacon Under the Hazard

The Level 2 beacon piece sits directly under a stalactite, on a platform with a pit beneath. Three hazards stacked: pit (don't fall), platform (precision required), stalactite (time the fall).

The player must light to see the pit and the platform. The torch's light reveals the position of the stalactite above. But while the torch is on, oil drains. The player must commit to a fast traversal: light, jump, time the stalactite, grab the beacon, leave.

This is the climax of the timing-rhythm-pressure layered demand. Most playtest deaths happen here, and that is correct—the design intends this section to be the level's challenge crescendo.

Test: The Wave

On the return path (upper layer), three stalactites are arranged with offset cycle timings. They form a wave: when one is mid-fall, the next is cracking, the third is dormant. The player must find the wave pattern and move with it.

This is fluency testing. The player has timed individual stalactites. Now they must time a sequence under continuous motion. There is no safe place to stop in the wave section—stopping puts the player in a hazard zone.

The stalactite cycle offsets (0s, 0.7s, 1.4s) were tuned in playtest to produce a navigable wave with a single safe window per cycle. Earlier values (0s, 0.3s, 0.6s) collapsed the wave into a continuous deadly zone.

Level 2 Structure: The Loop

Level 2 is laid out as a horizontal loop. Player starts on the lower-left, traverses right along the lower path (encountering Introduce, Develop, Twist), climbs to the upper path on the right, then traverses left along the upper path (the wave Test) back to EndLevel on the upper-left.

The loop is intentional: the player sees the same physical territory twice with different threats. The lower path teaches stalactites individually; the upper path tests them as a sequence. The spatial repetition reinforces the mechanical progression.

4. Level 3: Calculation

Design Intent

Level 3 introduces active threats. Monsters that chase. The player can no longer simply navigate the level—they must manage the monsters' attention through torch control. And the level introduces a counterintuitive subversion: monsters are also platforms.

New Mechanic

Monsters: active threats that move faster than the player when lit, freeze when dark, and serve as solid platforms in dark mode. The player must learn 'lit = dangerous, dark = traversable.'

Previously Learned

Oil rationing, static hazards, stalactite timing, beacon collection.

Beat-by-Beat

Introduce: The First Chase

Level 3 opens with a single monster in clear line-of-sight. The player will light their torch on entering the level—reflex from two prior levels. The monster begins chasing. A roar sound plays once on activation, marking the moment.

The player has two reactions available: turn off the torch (monster freezes, player can navigate around it) or panic and run (monster catches up because it's faster). Both produce useful learning.

If the player extinguishes, they learn 'dark = safe.' If they fail to extinguish, they die quickly and restart. Either way, the next attempt will involve more careful torch management.

Develop: Route Planning

Two monsters in different sections of the level, none of them blocking the only path. The player can navigate around them with strategic torch use: light briefly to see what's ahead, extinguish to pass safely, light again at the next obstacle.

This beat is about establishing that monsters are part of the world's vocabulary. They are obstacles to be managed, not enemies to be killed. The game's combat verb is light management, not combat.

Twist: The Monster is the Path

The starting section of the level where the player cannot proceed without crossing over a monster. With the torch lit, the monster is solid only as a deadly trigger—touching it kills. With the torch off, the monster becomes a solid platform.

The player will try lighting first (reflex). The monster chases, the player dies. They try again, more cautiously. Eventually—through frustration or experimentation—they extinguish the torch and try to jump over the monster with a guess in the dark, expecting to jump over the monster without touching it. Instead, a light jump miss or any miniscule touch and not die teaches the players that in dark the monsters work as a platform. The locator shows them stopped against a surface. They jump. They are standing on the monster.

This moment is the design's risky bet. It depends on the player attempting the dark traversal at all. Playtest validated this works—every playtester eventually discovered it within 3-5 attempts—but the moment of discovery varies significantly by player. Some find it in 2 tries. One playtester took 8.

The geometry is deliberate: the monster is wide enough that any forward jump in the dark lands on it. The platforms on either side are placed so the gap is uncrossable by jumping alone. The mechanic is force-discovered, not optional.

Test: Everything Together

The final section combines monsters, stalactites, and oil pressure. The player must navigate past one monster (using the platform mechanic), under a stalactite (timing), past a final monster (managing torch), to reach the beacon piece.

Oil pressure is real here. By Level 3, players who managed oil well have ~40-50% capacity. Players who burned freely earlier are scraping bottom. This section is winnable in either condition but feels distinctly different. Profligate players are forced to memorize and traverse blind. Disciplined players have headroom to light, see, and time.

The Difficulty Curve

Level 3 is the hardest level in the prototype. This is intentional. The cognitive load is maximum:

- Manage oil (carried tension from L1).
- Watch for stalactite timing (carried from L2).
- Manage monster attention via torch state (new).
- Use monsters as platforms when appropriate (new and counterintuitive).

5. The IntroLevel

Before Level 1, the player passes through an IntroLevel: a title screen, a brief story card, control prompts, and a short walkable area culminating in picking up the torch and entering the first cave.

Design Purpose

The IntroLevel does three things:

- Establishes the visual and audio tone of the game without any mechanical pressure.
- Teaches movement and jumping in a no-stakes environment.
- Hands the player the torch through a diegetic moment—they walk to it and pick it up, rather than starting with it. This makes the torch feel earned, even in a 30-second sequence.

Why a Separate Scene

The IntroLevel could have been merged into Level 1's opening. An earlier iteration did exactly that. It was split out because the title flow and story card needed input gating that conflicted with the core gameplay loop. Separating the scenes made both cleaner.

6. The Win Scene

After Level 3's EndLevel, the player arrives at the Win Scene: a brief walkable area with a hollow beacon at the end.

The player has three beacon pieces by this point (enforced by Level 3's EndLevel gating). They walk to the hollow beacon and touch it. The sprite changes to a lit beacon. Text appears: 'The cave is lit. Move onto the next area.'

The framing is deliberate: this is not 'you won, game over.' This is 'you completed the first section of a larger world.' The prototype positions itself as the opening chapter of something bigger, giving the design space to expand.

7. Spatial Composition Principles

Three principles guided spatial composition across all three levels.

Forced Encounters

Each level's key learning moments are placed on the only path forward. Players cannot skip the first spike rock, the first stalactite, the first monster, or the platform-discovery moment. The level design ensures the player engages with each new mechanic.

Optional content (extra oil pouches, alternate routes) appears later, after the key learning has happened.

Safe Observation Spaces

Every new hazard is introduced with sightlines and a safe place to stand. The player can observe a stalactite cycle from a distance before committing to passage. The player can light briefly to see a monster's behavior without being in its range.

Safe observation spaces are critical for the mechanic to feel fair. Without them, players die on first encounter and feel cheated. With them, players die because they made a choice—and that distinction is the difference between frustration and challenge.

Visible Reward, Hidden Cost

Beacon pieces are placed in positions that are visible from a safe distance but require committing oil and movement to actually collect. The player can see the prize. They can plan the approach. Whether they have enough oil to execute the plan is the question.

This is the prototype's defining spatial principle: see the goal, calculate the cost, decide.

8. Playtest-Driven Iteration

Several spatial decisions were changed based on playtest:

Level 1's beacon was moved earlier.

Originally placed at the far end of Level 1, requiring a long oil-burning approach. Playtesters consistently ran out of oil before reaching it. Moving the beacon to the middle of the climax section preserved the challenge while making the level reliably completable.

Level 2's stalactite count was reduced from 5 to 3 on the upper wave.

Five stalactites with offsets created a wave too dense to navigate. Three created a wave with a clearly visible safe window. The mechanic became readable rather than punishing.

Level 3's monster placement was widened.

Initial monster placement put two monsters within ~5 tiles of each other. Playtesters could not extinguish their torch between encounters—the second monster was already aware before the first was managed. Spreading monsters out gave players the cognitive space to manage each one.

Level 3's platform monster was made wider.

The original platform monster was the same size as other monsters (~1 tile wide). Players in the dark would jump and miss, falling into the gap. Widening the monster to 2 tiles made the dark-jump-and-land discovery reliable—every dark-jump attempt landed on the monster, triggering the discovery moment.

9. What the Levels Don't Have

- No checkpoints within a level. Death restarts at the scene's beginning.
- No optional secret areas. The level layout is linear with one alternate path (Level 2's loop).
- No environmental storytelling beyond the cave aesthetic. The space is functional, not narrative.
- No NPCs or dialogue. The player is alone in the dark.

Each cut is intentional. The prototype is about the mechanic, not the world. Adding any of these would have diluted the design argument. They are reserved for an expanded version.

10. Level Design as Argument

Each level argues the same point in a different way: every act of seeing must cost something.

Level 1 argues it through resource scarcity. The player learns to ration oil.

Level 2 argues it through time pressure. The player learns to balance memorization (cheap, risky) against continuous light (expensive, safe).

Level 3 argues it through threat management. The player learns that light invites danger as well as revealing it.

Three levels, one argument. By the end of Level 3, the player has experienced the argument across three different contexts and absorbed it as a worldview rather than a single mechanic. That is the design goal.

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