

Game Journal

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1 - 10/10/2024 - Risk of Rain 2

Platform: PC | Word Count: 717

Risk of Rain 2 is a third-person roguelike game that tasks the player with fighting against increasingly difficult waves of enemies. While I have not beaten the game (yet), the game has a fairly straightforward gameplay loop. The game is split over multiple levels (~5) in different settings. Each level has a teleporter that the player must find in order to progress to the next stage.

Stages seem to be somewhat procedurally generated, though each stage in terms of progression has a similar 'theme'. Once a player is in a world, monsters immediately start spawning randomly within a certain radius of the player. The core difficulty lies here: the player must balance killing monsters with finding the teleporter.

Around each level there are chests or other power-ups (e.g. shrines) that the player must spend money to open. The player gains this money by killing monsters, adding an additional incentive (besides safety) to killing the monsters. This mechanic also introduces the idea of not immediately taking the teleporter before you have enough power-ups to survive the next level.

Astute readers will notice that this seems similar to many RPGs, where it is possible to over-level oneself to easily defeat the next level / boss. Risk of Rain 2 discentivizes this by having a (very visible) difficulty scale that slowly increases the longer you are in a level. The longer you are in a level, the more gold you can obtain. Risk of Rain 2 discentivizes this by having a (very visible) difficulty scale that slowly increases the longer you are in a level.

1.1 Good

Multiple Characters Risk of Rain 2 starts you out with 3 basic characters, with at least 12 more to unlock. A major benefit to this is that it allows the player to experiment with different playstyles. Some players may prefer to have a gun where they can precisely point and click, whereas others may wish to have a bow and arrow that auto-targets enemies for them.

UI The UI is clean and unobtrusive, while still providing necessary information (difficulty, weapons, upgrades, etc.) Depending on the character used, the UI will change to reflect the character's abilities.

UX The performance and graphics of the game allow for smooth gameplay on reasonably powerful hardware. The game offers both a low skill floor, and a high skill ceiling. Players are able to learn the attack patterns of common enemies, and the teleporter has additional particle effects that attentive players can use to locate it.

Sound Nearly every action taken within the game has an associated and distinct sound to it. Different weapons sound different, enemies emit sounds occasionally, and dealing damage has a clear indication.

Multiplayer The game supports up to 4 player multiplayer, including support for 'pinging' locations (e.g. teleporters, items, upgrades, etc.)

1.2 Bad

Weapon Balancing Oftentimes characters have a 'primary' attack that players find themselves depending on for the majority of the game. One example is a character with a shotgun that shoots bulletes in a horizontal pattern. The character's secondary attack is a knife that they use to slash (for close range) attacks. I have found that I very rarely use the secondary attack, and the game does not seem to reward diversifying the attacks or weapons that are used.

Progression Despite playing the game for 8+ hours, I have ‘only’ unlocked one additional character. Without wanting to spoil the game, I am unsure of what potential unlockables, (permanent) upgrades, or other progression mechanics the game has. This makes the game feel slightly shallow at the moment, but this is partially a *skill issue*.

Difficulty With so many characters, it does seem that some are more catered to specific playstyles. In addition to ‘recommended’ controls, it would be nice to have an indication of how ‘easy’ a character is to play, including what controller would be recommended. However, allowing players to experiment with the characters and have them find out for themselves is also a valid design choice.

1.3 Summary

Overall, Risk of Rain 2 is a fun third-person shooter for those who have ~30 minutes to an hour to kill. With a low skill floor and high skill ceiling, the game is easy to pick up and play, but difficult to master. Replayability is high thanks to the vast characters, upgrades, and randomized level generation.

2 - 10/17/2024 - Oxygen Not Included

Platform: PC | Word Count: 609

Oxygen Not Included (ONI) is a 2D base-building survival game that allows the player to manage a group of colonists that crash landed on an asteroid. Management is heavily focused on resource management, including (unsurprisingly) oxygen. This game is similar to Factorio in terms of logistics; all resources have to be collected somehow, and the game leans heavily into automation and managing the colonists.

Progression is up to the player, but the end goal is to launch a rocket (similar to Factorio). Since the colonists are on an asteroid, there are natural incentives to properly managing your resources. From waste management, breathable oxygen, and even avoiding heat death, ONI is an in-depth game that has a lot of depth.

2.1 Good

Introduction Despite the name of the game, the very beginning of the game *does* include some oxygen. Some helpful hints and popups are admittedly a lazy way to introduce the player, but they are effective. The game manages a decent balance between letting players figure out what does what, while at the same time introducing and explaining key mechanics.

UX As the game requires good resource management, the game's UX allows the player to 'pin' certain resources to the UI to quickly glance at what resources are most important to them. Cyclic summaries and graphs are also reported, allowing the player to see how their colony is doing.

Difficulty The game has an extremely steep learning curve, but allows players to learn and understand machines within the game itself through an in-game 'encyclopedia'. The game also has a moderately configurable difficulty setting, determining how quickly colonists have to eat, how easily they get stressed, and many other factors.

Modability ONI supports the Steam Workshop, which allows programmers to write custom mods and addons for the game. This allows players that are looking for an extra challenge (or an easier time) to change how they want to play the game.

Controls ONI keeps the controls simple with a good UX. A 'priority' system allows the player to easily specify granular importance over what tasks should be done first. Clicking on a specific colonist also shows a window with all the information about that colonist, including what the current task is, and what they plan on doing next.

2.2 Bad

Learning Curve Though the game does its best to teach the player what is what, it is still very complex. It is not uncommon for players to rely on external resources (usually YouTube videos) as a guide for how to get started. Even intermediate players can find a specific task confusing or unclear how to accomplish.

Progression Similar to the above issue, the game does not have a clear progression path. While the end goal is to launch a rocket, the game does not provide a clear path to get there. This can be frustrating for players who are looking for a clear goal to work towards. I have found myself restarting the game multiple times because it was unclear what the next steps are for my colony.

Default Settings Thanks to the game's high replayability, players often will create a new game and immediately have preferences that they want to enforce. It is a bit of a chore to have to change global settings for the colony every time a new game is started (e.g. colony schedules).

2.3 Summary

ONI is a fun and challenging 2D base-building survival game that allows the player to go as quick or as slow as they are comfortable with. The game has many elements to its gameplay, and in conjunction with the game's randomization and varying biomes, the game has a high replayability factor.

3 - 10/27/2024 - Sea of Thieves

Platform: PC | Word Count: 722

Sea of Thieves is a first-person pirate game that tasks the player with running a ship, usually with a crew. The game is similar to a rouge-like in that the basic progression starts out at a common hub, with a few different ships depending on the number of players. Crews are able to choose a quest to go on, or simply sail around and explore the world.

Throughout the adventures, players can run into random events such as krakens, megalodons, or other players. The game has a heavy emphasis on teamwork, where one player could be steering the ship, another navigating and giving directions, another repairing the ship, etc. In contrast to the actual ocean, the islands in Sea of Thieves are relatively small and clustered together.

In combination with the game's great graphics and sound, Sea of Thieves is a great game for players who enjoy teamwork and exploration.

3.1 Good

Multiplayer A core element to Sea of Thieves is the multiplayer support. Cross-platform between the varying consoles and PC allows players to play with their friends, regardless of what platform they are on. Another great feature is the separation of 'High-Seas' and private servers, allowing players to choose how they want to play. High-Seas servers are public and allow for random encounters with other players, whereas private servers only have the players that are part of the crew. The game manages a balance in this regard by having some quests that are only available on High-Seas servers.

Communication The game has multiple ways of communicating with your crew and others, including a voice chat system, text chat, and emotes. Additional diageitic methods such as what pirate flag you are flying can also be used to communicate with other players what your preferred playstyle is (e.g. white flag for peace, black flag for war).

Quests A wide selection of quests allows crews to tailor which quests they go on. Whether a crew prefers a heavier combat focus, puzzle solving, or exploration, there are quests for everyone. A combination of these quests as well as the random encounters tasks everyone to do a little bit of everything.

Graphics Water is infamously difficult to render in games, but Sea of Thieves' comical approach allows for players to not be distracted, and is still very appreciable. This combined with the consistent art style and solid character designs makes the game visually appealing.

UX Where possible the game conveys information diageitically. The game's strong commitment to the pirate / sailing theme is evident in the game's UI. One example is the mast, which visually blocks whoever is steering the ship. The game forces players to consider what sailing was like, including how crews communicated, navigated, and repaired ships.

3.2 Bad

Progression Due to the game being a rogue-like, progression has for the most part been cosmetic. Quests offer gold which can be used to buy cosmetic additions to ships, such as fancy cannon designs or sails. Though I have not played the game for super long, I haven't found another usage for gold yet. As long as you have friends to play with I don't see this as a major issue, but for solo players, there does seem to be less incentive to play.

Combat Combat in Sea of Thieves is fairly straight forward. Players are given some cannonballs for their ships, a gun, and a sword. Combat on the ship is more involved, allowing players to use a harpoon or an array of cannonballs to attack other ships. However, once off the ship, combat is fairly simple.

Exploration Though an important aspect of the game, the exploration and new discoveries the game offers seems to be lacking. While a consistent art style is nice, the game's islands are fairly similar to each other. This combined with most of the islands being within a 10 minute sailing distance makes the game feel a bit shallow.

3.3 Summary

Sea of Thieves is a fun and engaging pirate game that is best played with a group of friends. The emphasis on teamwork and communication allows for involved roleplaying with a nice skill ceiling if playing on a High-Seas server. Quests that can be tailored to the crew's playstyle, and the game's great graphics and soundtrack make Sea of Thieves a great game for those who enjoy exploration and teamwork.

4 - 11/03/2024 - Peggle Deluxe

Platform: PC | Word Count: 571

Peggle (Deluxe) is a casual pachinko-like puzzle game that tasks the player with clearing a field of 'pegs' by shooting a ball from the top which will fall down to the bottom. Each peg has a varying color determining its function, with orange pegs being the level objective, blue pegs being obstacles (and worth small points), purple pegs being worth more points, and green pegs granting a power depending on which character you are using.

Peggle Deluxe has 10 characters, each with their own unique power. Alongside each character are 5 levels tailored to that character's power. Adding on 5 bonus levels where you can use any character, Peggle Deluxe offers a total of 55 levels. Character powers vary from an extended guide, a multi-ball, an auto-aim, and even lobster claws on the side!

4.1 Good

Simple Peggle Deluxe is a simple game that is easy to understand. A skill floor combined with a high skill ceiling allows new players to get through the game reasonably well, and experienced players to focus more on getting a high score, or speedrunning the game.

Randomization Though the physical location of all level's pegs are set, the color (and thus behavior) of each peg is randomized. This both allows for 'opening strategies' to be developed for the first shot, but also requires experienced players to adapt to the randomization.

Characters With 10 total characters, each power allows players to have preferred playstyle and strategy. Once a player completes all levels through the story mode with their pre-set characters, they can then go back and play through all levels with any character they pick.

Challenge Though the game itself can be beaten within a few hours, the replayability comes from trying to get a high score or imposing other limitations to yourself (eg: no powerups). The game also has a few other challenge modes that task the player with reaching a certain score, increasing the # of orange pegs, or reducing the number of balls you get.

Juice The game has some nice sounds, camera and particle effects to make the game feel more responsive. The peg hit sound as you hit consecutive pegs with a single shot goes up in pitch, and on the last orange peg the camera zooms in as your ball goes near it.

4.2 Bad

Luck Though the game certainly has a skill aspect to it, there are some times where the game simply generates a level that requires a lot of luck to beat. This can be frustrating when a level goes from extremely hard to extremely easy once it's restarted.

Controls A very small issue of the game is on the main menu screen. Though the game does allow for the shooter to be moved around both with the mouse and keyboard, the game's main menu can only be opened by clicking on the menu button, and not by pressing the escape key.

Replayability Though the game has a decent amount of replayability, I felt that the game could have had more levels. The game's 55 levels can be beaten in a few hours, and the game does not have a level editor or other user-generated content.

4.3 Summary

Peggle Deluxe is a fun casual game that has decent replayability and allows players to finetune their skill if they desire. The game's simple mechanics and high skill ceiling make it a great game for those who enjoy skill-based puzzle games. I was originally introduced to Peggle Deluxe through a speedrunner who showcased the game's high skill ceiling alongside fun and engaging gameplay.

5 - 11/17/2024 - Stardew Valley

Platform: PC | Word Count: 583

Stardew Valley is a casual 2D farming simulation game that introduces itself with a cutscene where the player becomes tired of their corporate life and comes to the realization that their grandfather left them a farm in their inheritance. The player moves to the farm, and the game begins.

Stardew Valley has an amazing amount of depth to it; the player can grow crops, raise animals and friendships, go mining, fishing, and foraging. Tool upgrades as well as a solid combat system with many weapons means that there is a lot for everyone. The game's day and night cycle grants a decent amount of leeway in terms of what they want to do per day, while at the same time requiring the player to plan out what they want to do.

Developed by ConcernedApe, Stardew Valley is one of the best games period, and the fact that a single person created this game makes it even more impressive.

5.1 Good

Save System A feature that can go completely unappreciated is the game's save system. The game saves at the end of every day, either when the player goes to bed or they pass out (at 02:00). This mechanic has a great balance in terms of both pros and cons and convenience. On one hand, the player can't do small tasks and then save the game, but on the other, if the player wants to redo a day entirely, they are easily able to do so. This type of system also sends a message to the player that you don't have to do everything possible in a day, as you will want to save eventually.

Depth Stardew Valley has a lot of depth to it. With five skills, four types of weapons, half a dozen locations, a plethora of crops and animals, dozens of characters with many being candidates for marriage, the game seems to truly never end.

Information Despite being a game with a lot of depth, the basic mechanics and controls of the game are fairly intuitive and easy to pickup. The game starts you off with a limited backpack size, and you can purchase more space as you progress. The game slowly introduces more mechanics as you progress; for example, initially the caves (where you go mining) are blocked off, you gain a fishing rod on the second day, you learn crafting recipes as you level up, etc. This slow introduction of mechanics allows the player to learn the ropes as they go, while also allowing experienced players to quickly access the mechanics they want.

Events The game has a lot of events that occur throughout the calendar, including fairs, art shows, heart events, holidays, etc. As the player progresses, they will also unlock additional events based on some criteria (e.g. friendship level, season, etc.)

5.2 Bad

Fishing Perhaps the only weak part of Stardew Valley is the fishing minigame. The fishing minigame is one of the most divisive parts of the game, which goes to show how well the game is made. Some players consider the fishing minigame to be too boring, too difficult, or too easy. It is admittedly a bit of a chore, but I personally think it has a good balance of difficulty and reward.

Stardew Valley is an absolute must play for any casual gamer or someone who is just getting into video games. The game has an insane amount of depth, replayability, progression, and is a testament to what a videogame can be.