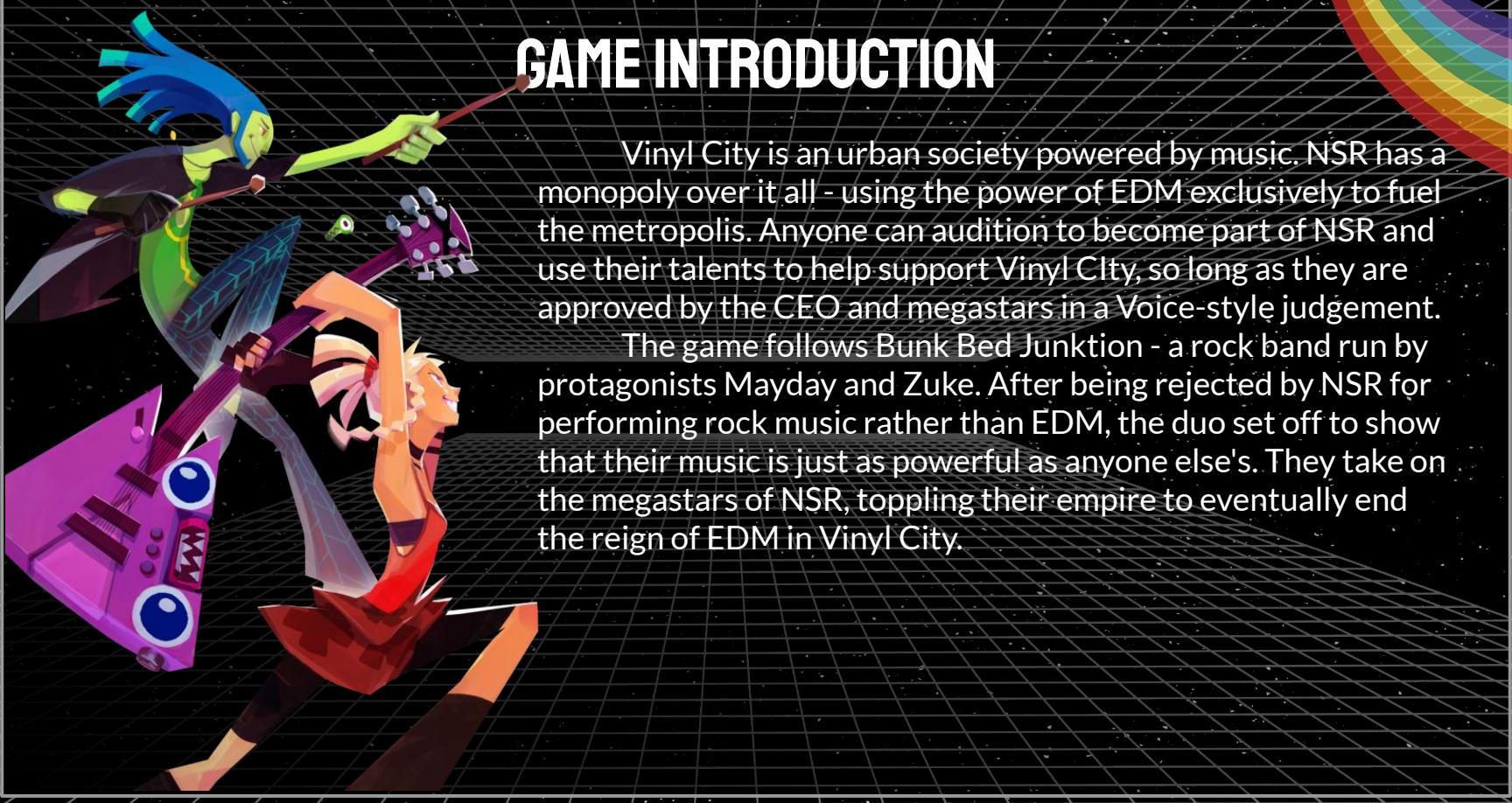




HEURISTIC ANALYSIS

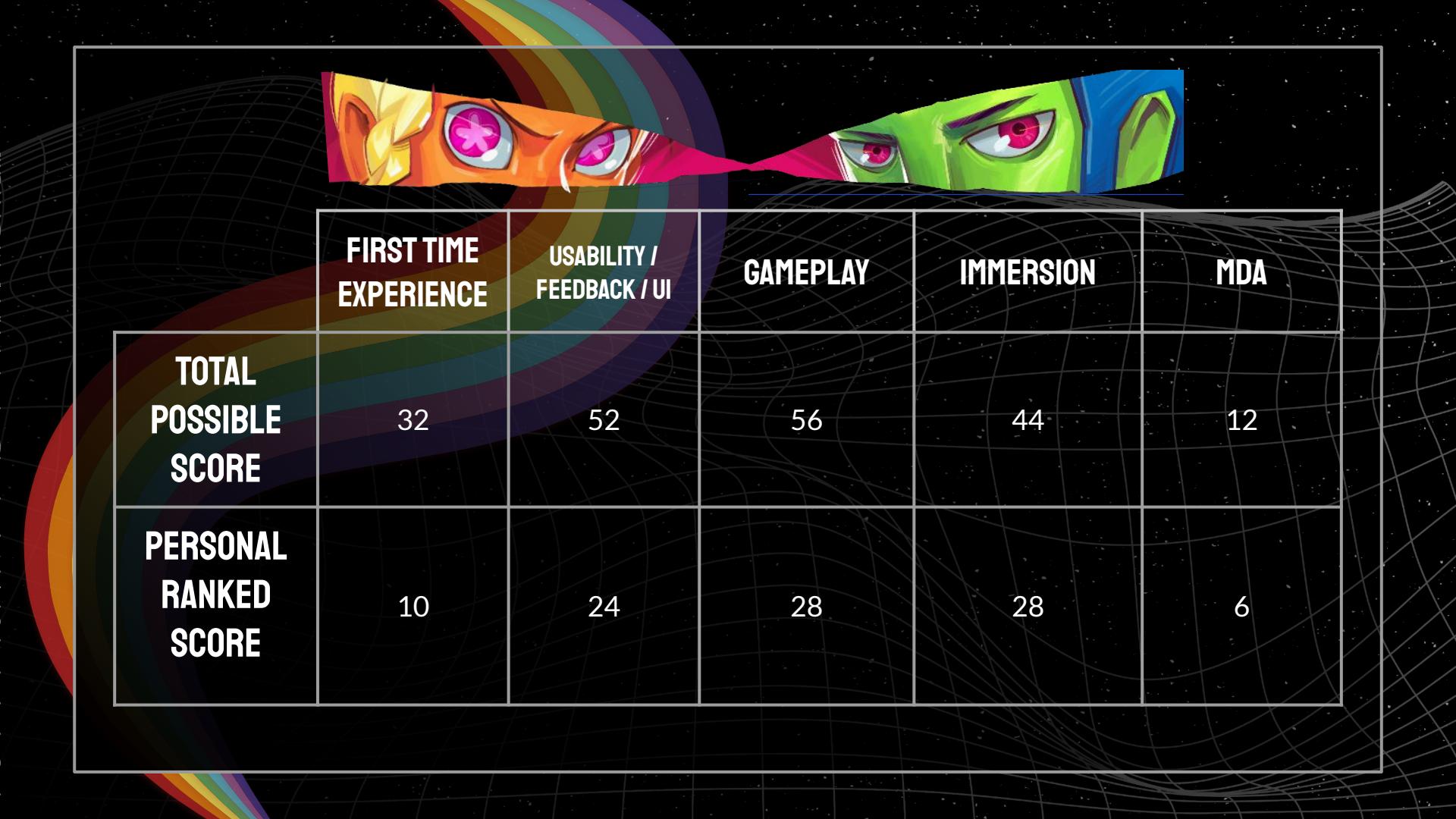
Cas Hancock - ITGM 351

GAME INTRODUCTION



Vinyl City is an urban society powered by music. NSR has a monopoly over it all - using the power of EDM exclusively to fuel the metropolis. Anyone can audition to become part of NSR and use their talents to help support Vinyl City, so long as they are approved by the CEO and megastars in a Voice-style judgement.

The game follows Bunk Bed Junction - a rock band run by protagonists Mayday and Zuke. After being rejected by NSR for performing rock music rather than EDM, the duo set off to show that their music is just as powerful as anyone else's. They take on the megastars of NSR, toppling their empire to eventually end the reign of EDM in Vinyl City.



	FIRST TIME EXPERIENCE	USABILITY / FEEDBACK / UI	GAMEPLAY	IMMERSION	MDA
TOTAL POSSIBLE SCORE	32	52	56	44	12
PERSONAL RANKED SCORE	10	24	28	28	6

FIRST TIME EXPERIENCE

I had high hopes going into NSR - It had been a game on my radar for years, and I adore the artistic direction. However, while the characters and aesthetic shine just as much as I knew they would, the gameplay itself fell flat.

Perhaps it was my computer, but I encountered sluggish gameplay, off-beat rhythm mechanics, and soft-lock worthy bugs that made my experience frustrating. For a game advertised as a rhythm based beat-em-up, there lack of rhythm involved made the experience jarring and hard to play. I understand there are cross-platform differences between games, and I hope that my issues are not consistent throughout systems - however, these were my own experiences.



FIRST TIME EXPERIENCE

Information -- Upon turning on the game, the player has enough information to get started to play whatever state the game was left

3 -- Start screen and tutorial level provide everything the player needs to see to begin gameplay

Accessibility -- All levels of players are able to play and get into the game quickly with tutorials or adjustable difficulty levels

1 -- No tutorials past the initial level and quick difficulty increases. *Ease the player into the systems more and slow down the pacing of the game*

Immediate feedback -- Player actions are obvious, and result in immediate and early positive feedback

1 -- Delayed control inputs and odd UI choices make intent of player input hard to understand or visualize in the moment. *Clarify visual UI and emphasize certain points to better communicate information*

FIRST TIME EXPERIENCE

Settings/Difficulty -- Players can choose from different levels of difficulty at the outset

1 -- There is an apparent difficulty setting, but in my four hours of gameplay I could not find it. I assume the only issue would be to increase the difficulty once a certain point was reached. *Clarify this in the game menus or options*

Learn/play balance -- Game play and learning are seamlessly integrated. Development of tool mastery is seamlessly offered

1 -- Game did not explain many mechanics it expected the player to understand. Learning was not easily allowed. *Give the player more time to understand mechanics and gameplay before throwing them into hard situations that they die endlessly on*

Learn/apply balance -- Learning (rather than lecturing or expecting players to know) occurs in a paced, leveled way of demonstrating the new player skills needed to play.

0 -- Pacing is incredibly varied with very few tutorials and hard to understand mechanics. Learning the skills is not translated well past text on the screen. *Let the players have time to learn new mechanics and practice the skills the game is trying to get them to learn*

FIRST TIME EXPERIENCE

Learn/practice safely -- Players are able to learn and practice in a safe place without penalty
1 -- Penalties are minimal to story progression, but there is no way to practice skills outside of levels. *Allow a section to practice skills before jumping into boss levels*

Learning/Knowledge transfer -- Game behaves in similar ways to other games

2 -- Many facets of the game are consistent with other games, but certain platforming mechanics and enemy encounters broke the mold in negative ways. *Make the mechanics act similarly to preexisting games - they are not core mechanics that are defining the game in any specific way*

USABILITY / FEEDBACK / UI

Visually, NSR is a delight to look at. The colorful world and perfect aesthetics are captured wonderfully and translated well into the UI design. However, that doesn't mean the functionality of said UI matches the cleanliness of the aesthetic.

NSR struggles to clearly define its gameplay and allow the player to ease into it. You are thrown straight in and given little to no breathing room to learn mechanics before never been told of them again. No help is given to the player in a digestible way, leading to confusion on mechanics and goals.



USABILITY / FEEDBACK / UI

Situational Awareness Feedback -- Visibility/Audiability of System Status - Prompts and indicators are visible when necessary

1 -- Prompts are not given and expected based on color prompts. Some are hard to see or understand function of. If you forget a control, the game does not have a section to reteach you. *Add some sort of feature to go back and see control schemes and relearn how to use them*

Situational Awareness Status -- Player can track progress throughout experience

3 -- Décor is given to player after each boss fight, which is the main gameplay loop. Menu has percentage of completion. *Include a consistent way to see game progress*

Accessible Language --Player understands terminology

2 -- Overall clear, but certain terminologies are the same as others which makes distinguishing them difficult at times. *Change some of the terminology or make clearer in game*

USABILITY / FEEDBACK / UI

Easy exits/help -- User can exit and start game and easily access help

3 -- Start button allows access to menu, and then exit game. Game runs on an autosave system

Error prevention -- Free of bugs and errors

1 -- Unsure if my own system, but some bugs were gamebreaking for gameplay - lack of movability, unable to recognize enemy hitboxes, input delay, etc. *Run bug checks and fix input issues for lower resolutions or systems*

Interruption support -- Player interruption is supported so players can easily turn on and off the game, having the ability to stop at different states with the game saved

3 -- Player can pause game at any time, but game autosaves so there is not a way to guarantee returning to your position after exiting game. *Allow for manual saves*

USABILITY / FEEDBACK / UI

Consistency and standards -- Navigation is consistent, following standard design patterns

1 -- Item boxes that usually have health sometimes do not; some areas that once were open will get closed off with no reason other than forcing the player to go to certain areas. *Allow for a more free-play system in the hub world rather than locking players into a streamlined path in a world that looks to be open*

Aesthetic and minimal design -- Screen layout uses space efficiently, maximizing area for gameplay. Colors, font choices and treatment serve aesthetics.

4 -- Game's strongest aspect. Visually stunning and unique with a style that stays consistently fun throughout

Recognition rather than recall -- Interface supports cognitive offloading. player does not need to memorize information to play.

2 -- Interface could have more button descriptions; it is easy to forget what buttons activate what abilities. Unsure how to use a specific skill until finding out through trial and error. *Add some sort of feature to go back and see control schemes and relearn how to use them*

USABILITY / FEEDBACK / UI

Help documentation -- Accessible help documentation

1 -- Once instructions are given, there is no way to recheck how to do controls.

Add some sort of feature to go back and see control schemes and relearn how to use them

Context sensitive help -- Players are given context sensitive help while playing so they do not get stuck or have to rely on a manual/text for help

0 -- Often got stuck in battles because the "gimmick" was unclear and not explained. Rather than being a fun challenge, it was frustrating, especially when going against pre existing rules set. *Give minor tutorials in battles to help understand what is going on*

Camera -- Camera interaction is smooth and behaves as anticipated

0 -- Camera is fixed in a single angle with no player input. Makes some areas hard to visualize or navigate. *Allow for minor camera movement to help player visualize environment*

Skipping repeated events -- Players can skip events they have already experienced

3 -- Single button hold input when prompted by player

GAMEPLAY

Gameplay is where NSR falls flat. I wouldn't be surprised if it my own system's issue, but I've played much heavier running games on it with little issues compared to NSR.

The game was riddled with frustrating battle mechanics and a complete lack of learning curve. There is no segments to practice your newly obtained skills, and before you get a grip on old ideas new ones are thrown at you. The difficulty increase was incredibly quick, making boss fights that took ten minutes jump to half an hour with little time in between.



GAMEPLAY

Goals -- The main game goal is explicit and clear and presented early

3 -- Pacing was odd, but story is clear and makes sense in universe

Short/long term goals -- The game presents overarching and longterm goals early as well as short term goals throughout play

3 -- Short term goals are defeating each area boss, long term is allowing rock music to have a place in the city

New Skills Taught -- Players are provided meaningful situations to learn new skills.

2 -- New skills are obtained as more fans are gained, but game does not make them feel as required as they are. *Emphasize skill tree and abilities with a cutscene rather than single speech bubble*

Scaffolded Teaching -- Skills needed to attain goals are taught before new skills are needed

2 -- Game is near impossible without skills you obtain, but players are not given a chance to try out skills until level already begins. *Include area to practice newly obtained skills*

GAMEPLAY

FLOW 1 - Overly challenging -- Player is challenged without becoming anxious

2 -- Game does not explain or elaborate on boss-specific mechanics. There is no difficulty setting available. The challenge feels artificial rather than earned. *Follow more standard game practices and include segments prior to boss fight that explain the boss' mechanics*

FLOW 2 - overly repetitive -- The player has an opportunity to practice skill without being bored

0 --No opportunity to try skills or practice after initial gameplay tutorial is given
allow a practice area in hub world to experiment with builds and skills

Rewards -- Game rewards players, by increasing their capabilities, or capacity

3 -- Rewards are given dependent on player skill within levels

Unfair penalties -- Unfair penalties - Player is not penalized repetitively for same failure

2 -- If player chooses to restart in place, they automatically get the lowest score for the level, but can restart as many times as they wish

GAMEPLAY

Learning support -- Methods are provided to help player succeed after repeated failure

0 -- Game has no system in place to reduce difficulty if player repeatedly fails a segment nor a tutorial provided to explain what to do. *Inforce some sort of tutorial-like segment or reduced difficulty for repeated failures*

Variety -- Varying pacing and activities retain player engagement

3 -- Each boss has a different mechanic that builds on skills earned

Balance Challenge/pacing -- Challenge and pacing are in balance

2 --Game increases in difficulty as it progresses; Difficulty ramps up very fast suddenly.
Have a slower increase in difficulty

Challenges -- Challenges are positive experience, player wants to keep playing

1 -- Challenge feels incredibly artificial; player skill is hardly taken into account, but is just manageable enough to encourage playing. Restarts are common. *Follow more standard game practices with certain aspects instead of trying to reinvent the wheel with platforming, fighting, and so on*

GAMEPLAY

AI -- balanced with player skill

2 -- AI is at a set difficulty with set patterns with little influence from player.

Supposedly supposed to be timed with the music of the game but it is not consistent. *Fix musical sync issues to allow players less confusion with attack patterns*

AI -- tough enough that players have to try different tactics against it

1 -- Enemies have different attack patterns, but they differ between levels despite looking the same which causes confusion. *Either make new versions of these enemies or keep them consistent*

Playstyles -- The game supports a range of play styles

2 -- Two playable characters; one is more heavy hitting while other is more skill based. *Make their attacks more distinct. Skill-based character is hard to use properly due to buggy controls*

IMMERSION

The world of Vinyl City draws you in quickly due to the character designs and overall environment of the world. While a bit brash, the main protagonists are fun to follow and fit into the world they inhabit perfectly. Overall, it's easy to get into and understand NSR as a world.

However, once again, translating that to gameplay left a lot to be desired - specifically in the rhythm elements of the game. During my playthrough I fought five bosses, and of those only one had attacks that synced with the music in a clear enough way that allowed me to use it to my advantage. It was jarring when the game seemed to be so music focused, and feels more lazy than anything.



IMMERSION

Agency - timely control -- Player feels like he/she has control at appropriate moments

3 -- Players can move when not in cutscenes and are locked in place when they are
- overall consistent with what is expected

Agency - Appropriate interaction -- Player can interact with anticipated elements in game

2 -- Some objects seem to be intractable but are not. Otherwise fairly consistent
with what is expected. *Clarify interactable objects by changing colors on objects*

Agency - Self expression -- Players can express themselves

3 -- Player can customize their build of the characters to their preferred playstyle

Urgency - tactics -- Employs tactics that encourage player to accomplish goal

2 -- Other than plot progression, there isn't a strong drive to complete new bosses

Urgency - character connection -- Emotional connection with characters

3 -- Characters are one of the strongest aspects and are easy to enjoy and want to
learn more about

IMMERSION

Urgency - narrative progression -- Emotional connection with story

2 -- Pacing issues and confusion about plot beats are present, but overall understandable. *Do another passthrough of story to work on explaining things better as well as slow the pace down a bit*

Realism - consistent graphics All visual elements behave consistently

3 -- Visuals are consistent and easy to immerse yourself in

Realism - contextualized audio -- Audio creates a sense of experience in the world

1 -- For a game based around rhythm mechanics, the game has a lack of rhythmic consistency. You expect a lot more involvement with the rhythm in the gameplay, and that in turn makes a disconnect for players. *Work on syncing the music to the gameplay more*

Realism - appropriate affect on world -- Players can affect or change the world

3 -- Some objects have interactable elements and players can interact with NPCs; progressing story has a direct impact on world as well

IMMERSION

Realism - Moving through world Players can see their passage through the world 1
Camera is locked in a fixed angle which makes it hard to see the scenery and area for navigation allow camera movement to better allow for movement and environment exploration

Narrative - outside gameplay support Cinematics and/or loading scenes move story forward 3 All cutscenes move plot forward and are primary driving force of plot

Juicy Feedback Interface components/effects/audio provide meaningful/appropriate/stellar feedback 2 Audio is unique and clean, but not synced properly to characters and environments

MDA

At its core, NSR does fairly average in the Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics department. There is a clear attempt to fulfill all three of these aspects, but like with a lot of this game it falls flat in a few areas, especially Dynamics.



MDA

Mechanics -- Mechanics are easy to learn, work appropriately, and generate anticipated dynamic

2 -- Overall understandable mechanics, but after initial tutorials there is no emphasis on mechanics and buttons. *Incorporate a way to refresh memory on mechanics of re-view tutorials*

Dynamics -- Run time behavior/experience matches developer expectations

1 -- Game is advertised as a rhythm-based fighting game, but very little rhythm is required or visible in gameplay. *Work on syncing the music to the gameplay more and incorporate more rhythm-based mechanics outside of attack patterns*

Aesthetics -- Core experience/Vantage point, experience promised by developer is served by all aspects of game.

3 -- The aesthetic and experience intended is clear in the design and core gameplay loop

CONCLUSION

Bunk Bed JUNCTION.



No Straight Roads is a game I desperately wanted to play better than it did. The characters, art direction, and plot are all incredibly solid and fun to immerse yourself into the world of, but the gameplay falls flat to a point of frustration. With my four hours of gameplay, I am presumably about 75% through the plot - but I struggle to want to pick it back up after the slog it was to get through that initial percentage.

I think another pass through for pacing issues, as well as a slew of bug fixes for the Steam edition, could boost this game from possible to great. I feel like the 70% Metacritic Score is a worthy grade for this game - the great characters but mediocre gameplay even it out to something worth picking up if you feel the drive to, but it's nothing that will change your life in my personal opinion.