

Bastion

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The year of 2011 has been nick-named “The Year of Video Games” and November has quickly become the successful month in industry history. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 grossed \$400 million and sold 6.5 million copies within 24 hours its November 8th release, making this the most successful launch of anything in the entertainment industry (MacDonald, 2011). The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim was released on November 11 and sold 3.4 million copies in 48 hours (AFP, 2011). Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary, released November 15th, has already shipped 2 million copies (Keogh, 2011). The video game industry is clearly doing well for itself, constantly outselling and continually expanding their customer base. However, there has been slight push back from the gaming community about the constant re-hashing of old ideas into new games. MW3 might be the most successful game ever, but it is the third installment of the CoD:MW series and the ninth installment for the CoD series. Skyrim is the 5th installment for Elder Scrolls and Halo Anniversary is literally the original Halo game from 2001 with an option for updated graphical display. Looking at the games released this year, the biggest sellers (Portal 2, Battlefield 3, Deus Ex 3, Assassin’s Creed 4, etc.) have all been released as an installment in an existing series. Though the game industry has become bigger than ever, many of the biggest games follow the same formula; they are 3D, first-person shooters, with little to no plot and set in worn-out universes. Though many gamers like the familiarity of this formula, there has been a serious desire for something fresh to be introduced to the game scene.

The Indie game community has a few successful games that have broken free of this mold, but, for the large part, have gone unnoticed outside their small community. Bastion, released by Supergiant Games on July 20, 2011, is one of the games that has broken free of its Indie roots and is becoming widely known in the game community as one of the best Indie games of this year. Bastion, though a role-playing game (RPG), is more than another fighting game; it

incorporates entirely hand-painted scenery, a unique soundtrack, and a constant voice-over narrating the plot-driven game. This game only had a team of 7 people working on it for 20 months before it was released. It has risen in popularity because of fantastic game-play mechanics and stunning artistic elements. As an isometric 2D game, it can be considered a throwback to the 1980s RPG games such as Zelda; but at the same time, it reintroduces the artistic elements that have become lost in more current large-production games.



First off, this game is gorgeous. It doesn't matter what kind of art background a gamer might have, anyone can identify the distinctive style this game has. All of the art for the game was hand-made by Jen Zee, the only artist in the group. By using only one artist, they were able to keep a cohesive feel throughout the game and keep the home-grown quality of it. Visually when playing the game, anyone can tell that the tiles, sprites, and models are not graphically created with a random generator, but were individually made images and placed within a scene.

The attention to the level of detail and planning that went into this game may not be directly obvious when playing, but is clear in the overall mood of the game.

The main conflict of Bastion comes from a devastating event called the Calamity that devastated and destroyed the entire world. This juxtaposition of the story to the art was something the creators aimed for from the beginning of the game, they want the players “to feel a pretty stark contrast, where on one hand there’s this rich and vibrant almost-storybook world, but on the other hand [they] can tell something has gone terribly wrong in that world” (Kasavin, 2011). Just having this simple contrast in the game makes it unique from most other games in the market now. It adds a layer of complexity to the game without it being completely artificial. The Bastion team has said in multiple interviews and on their website that they want to create games that are reminiscent of the games we played in our childhood. The bright, cartooned colors make the game look visually stimulating while the story remains darker and more mature.

The music, much like the art, is another contrast in the game. There are brighter, upbeat tunes mixed in with drums and deeper chords to constantly change tempo of the game. The soundtrack for the entire game was also composed by only one team member, Darren Korb. This was another area the game thrived in because they one team member produced all of the content. All the music was able to have the constant feel and each level’s theme integrated with the others seamlessly. The small development team also made it possible for the music production to follow the game and art production closely. On a larger game, this work would be separated into departments that would have little to no communication with each other during development. Because of the small, nimble size of the team, everyone was able to keep in contact, follow new developments, and have input in areas they were not assigned to.

The soundtrack for the game has songs that blend together through a mix of different instruments. The sound itself is unique, using non-traditional sounds and instruments that are not found in most games. The soundtrack is entirely online with a sample song here:



<http://supergiantgames.bandcamp.com/track/a-proper-story>.

The music is incredibly different from the usual game soundtracks and is timed to fit the game perfectly. The small team also enabled Darren to advance music along with the gameplay. The music cues that start and fade a song are impeccably timed and obviously tied in with the player's actions. It has become common in some larger, industry games, to just use the top billboard singles to create the soundtrack for the game and just fade from one song to another. This loses any momentum music creates in a game and the minimal amount of effort put in by the developers is obvious.

One of the most unique things the development team did with Bastion was plot development through actively storytelling. When starting Bastion, the game immediately starts without any backstory; there is, however, a voice over describing the world, narrating the player's actions, and guiding the player on what to do. With the active narrator the team was able to remove the walls of text that come in a game and inform the player in an interesting way that will actually engage them. It also eliminates a majority of the popup text that instructs a player how to play the game. This is something that is new to the gaming world and is nearly exclusive to the Bastion game. They have meshed gameplay and story narration together and presented a gamer with a completely new way to follow a game.

When these two game elements are added together, the player's actions become a part of the story itself. The gameplay is entrenched into the storyline; one is not artificially supplementing the other. There is a purpose to the game and a player is able to see how their actions affect the plot. There isn't a disconnect that comes from games with poorly implemented story. The cut scenes are minimal in the game and limited to 1-2 minutes each. All the scenes are static images layered on top of each other with no animation and minimal movement, and are largely the narrator's voice dictating developments in the game. The Bastion team wanted to reintroduce storytelling, something that has largely become lost in large production games, and their efforts exceeded well past expectations (Supergiant Games, 2011). The active narrator draws the player in and delivers the story in a unique way that isn't tiring to listen to. A sample of this exceptional narration can be heard here: <http://supergiantgames.bandcamp.com/track/get-used-to-it>.

For an Indy game with a seven-member team, Bastion has broken out of the game mold that is seen with many video games today. The creators wanted to take the gamer back to an era where it was fun to play a game and looking at the success of the game, they have accomplished it. Since its release this summer, Bastion has sold 350,000 copies on Xbox Live and Steam (Winchester, 2011). Though these numbers are no where near the million-dollar games coming from high production teams, they have proven that a small, Indy game can compete in today's market and if every aspect of the game is well thought out and beautifully designed, the game will thrive.

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