Slay the Spire Review – A Roguelike Deck-Building Masterpiece

Slay the Spire stands tall as the trailblazer of the roguelike deck-building genre, and pardner, it’s earned its legendary reputation. Released in 2017 by the two-person team Mega Crit, this game **fused card strategy with dungeon-crawling** in a way no one had seen before. The premise is simple: choose a hero and ascend a mysterious spire floor by floor, **building your deck of attack, skill, and power cards** as you go. But don’t be fooled by that simplicity, partner – the strategic depth here runs deeper than a well in snakebite country.

In each run, you’ll **face monsters, elite foes, and powerful bosses** while picking new cards and relics to enhance your build. Slay the Spire features four distinct characters (The Ironclad, The Silent, The Defect, and The Watcher), each with their own card pools and playstyles, giving the game immense replay value. One run you might be a defense-stacking juggernaut Silent, whittling enemies down with poison; the next run, a Watcher dealing explosive damage but risking it all in **“calm” and “wrath” stances**. With **hundreds of cards and relics** to discover, no two climbs feel the same. *The granddaddy of roguelike deckbuilders* earned its spurs by making every decision matter – from the path you take up the spire to the cards you draft and even when to press your luck or play it safe at healing campfires.

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Gameplay and Strategy

At its heart, Slay the Spire is a turn-based combat game where **cards represent your actions**. You start with a basic deck and along the journey you’ll add new cards, remove weaker ones, and upgrade cards at campfires. The brilliance is in how elegantly it forces you to **make tough choices**. Do you add an OK card now to strengthen your deck short-term, or skip and keep your deck lean for better draws later? Do you spend gold at merchants on a strong relic that gives passive bonuses, or on card removal to get rid of that pesky Strike? These decisions create a dynamic strategy puzzle every run.

The **map layout** on each act lets you choose your route – maybe you risk an elite fight for a great relic reward, or detour to a merchant or mystery event. This adds a layer of planning reminiscent of a dungeon crawl, with each node a step in your journey. A successful run requires carefully balancing offense and defense: you might draw a handful of attack cards when an enemy is about to wallop you for 20 damage, so you’d better have some block cards or defensive relics handy! And watch those status effects and curses that can clog your deck – part of the strategy is adapting when your deck gets bloated with those no-good wounds or dazed cards.

What really keeps Slay the Spire more addictive than a moonshine on a cold night is the **synergy between cards and relics**. When you discover a combo – like playing **“Infinite Blades”** to gain shivs every turn, then having **“Accuracy”** to boost shiv damage and **“Kunai”** relic to gain Dexterity on multiple attacks – you feel like a genius outlaw who just cracked the safe. These moments of *“aha!”* are endlessly satisfying. The game actively rewards creativity and adaptability; rigid decks often fail, but flexible ones that come together by capitalizing on the random offerings each run are the key to victory.

Community Praise and Lasting Impact

Slay the Spire didn’t just impress players – it **blew the genre wide open**, inspiring a whole posse of deck-building games to follow its lead[1]. It’s no exaggeration to say it defined the standards for roguelike deckbuilders. Gamers keep coming back for more because the game hits that perfect sweet spot of being **easy to pick up, yet possessing enormous depth**. As one critic noted, *“on the surface it’s much easier to grasp,”* yet it has its own hidden depths to uncover with repeated play[2][3]. It’s the kind of game where you think you’ll play just 30 minutes before bed, and next thing you know the sun is rising – *“just one more run”* syndrome in full effect.

The popularity and player goodwill are reflected in its **Steam reviews being “Overwhelmingly Positive.”** In fact, an astounding 97% of over 130,000 user reviews sing its praises[4]. Talk about a unanimous posse! In terms of sales, Slay the Spire rode off into the sunset with **nearly 3 million copies sold on Steam alone**[5] – a feat few indie games achieve. Those numbers aren’t just big; they’re **genre-defining**. This success has been so impressive that Mega Crit recently announced a sequel is on the horizon, proving the Spire’s influence is here to stay.

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Critics and players alike love how **balanced and tightly designed** the gameplay is. Losses rarely feel unfair – you can usually trace defeat back to a decision or a risk that didn’t pan out. That post-run analysis becomes part of the fun. And when you do manage to “slay” that heart at the end of the third act (or even beyond, in the uber-challenging fourth act), you feel like the toughest gunslinger in the West. Plus, for those truly looking to test their mettle, the game’s **Ascension mode** offers 20 progressively harder difficulty levels, adding new wrinkles like tougher enemies or limited healing. Reaching Ascension 20 is a badge of honor in the community. It gives practically endless challenge for the hardcore crowd.

Why It’s a Must-Play

Even years after release, Slay the Spire hasn’t lost an ounce of its shine. It’s a permanent fixture on many players’ playlists (with an **average playtime around 72 hours**[6] – now that’s some longevity). Mods and daily challenges extend it even further for PC players looking for new thrills. Frankly, **if you have any interest in card strategy or roguelikes, this game is the gold standard**. It’s approachable for greenhorns, thanks to clear visuals and tooltips, yet offers intricate strategy that veterans can optimize endlessly. That balance of accessibility and depth is rarer than a unicorn in these parts.

Slay the Spire also nails the **aesthetic and atmosphere** in a subtle way. The art is charming and clear (every card icon quickly readable), the UI snappy, and the music shifts from quietly tense in hallways to dramatic in boss fights. It creates an ambiance where you can totally lose yourself in planning your next turn like a chess match. There isn’t a complex story – in fact, the minimal lore about an ancient spire and a corrupt heart is really just backdrop – but it doesn’t need narrative frills. The **emergent story is the one you create** through your deck and relic choices. Few games make you as proud of your personal strategic journey as this one.

In the tavern of deck-building games, Slay the Spire is the grizzled veteran holding court, dispensing wisdom (and perhaps the occasional beatdown to challengers). It **earned its reputation by doing nothing less than revolutionizing a genre**. Easy to learn, lifetime to master – and utterly engrossing throughout. If you haven’t climbed the Spire yet, lace up your boots and give it a go. Just be warned: once this game sinks its claws into you, you’ll be *hooked* like a desperado at high noon, itching for “one more hand” to play. **Slay the Spire remains one of the finest video game experiences around** – a true ace-high masterpiece in the deck-building frontier.

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Inscryption Review – A Twisted Deck-Building Journey

If Slay the Spire is the old sheriff of deck-builders, Inscryption is the mysterious stranger who saunters into town with a sinister smile and a deck of cards that bite. This genre-bending indie hit from 2021 (developed by Daniel Mullins) is **part card game, part escape-room puzzle, and part psychological horror** – and it pulls off that trifecta with aplomb. Inscryption doesn’t just challenge your strategy; it **messes with your mind and expectations** in ways that will have you saying, *“What in tarnation is happening?!”* (in the best possible way).

From the moment you start a run of Inscryption, you can tell you’re in for something *different*. The game initially presents itself as a dark, atmospheric roguelike deck-builder where you’re trapped in a cabin, forced to play a life-or-death card game against a shadowy opponent. By candlelight, you place down creature cards – squirrels, wolves, stoats – each with attack and health values, attempting to tip a scale with damage in your favor. But soon you realize the **cards are talking to you**, whispering hints, and the cabin holds secrets far beyond the card table. Without spoiling too much (half the fun is discovery), know that Inscryption constantly **breaks the fourth wall and shifts gameplay**. It will switch genres, rewrite the rules, and even make you question the game’s reality. It’s a wild ride.

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Gameplay: Cards, Sacrifices, and Secrets

At its core, Inscryption’s card game is about **sacrifice and survival**. You draw creatures from your deck, but to play most of them you must **sacrifice lesser creatures** (like squirrels) to gain blood or bones as resources. It’s a clever twist on typical card mana systems – you’re literally feeding some cards to play others. Each battle is on a 4-lane board where your creatures and the opponent’s creatures face off. Rather than reducing a life total, damage is tracked on a scale: deal enough excess damage and you win; let the opponent tip it against you, and you’re done for. This creates a tense push-pull where every point of damage absorbed or dealt matters.

As you progress, you make roguelike choices on a map, akin to Slay the Spire’s node map. You might stop by a campfire to power up a card (at the risk the starving survivors there might eat it!), visit a trapper to trade pelts for items, or meet the ominous Trader who lets you swap those pelts for powerful cards. These decisions and events are dripping with theme – everything is dark, creepy, and intriguing. Inscryption keeps you on your toes: one moment you’re making a straightforward deck upgrade, the next you’re solving a cryptic puzzle using clues hidden in the cabin’s environment to unlock a new card. It **seamlessly blends a physical escape room adventure with the card battles**, something I’ve never seen done before.

And oh, the **boss fights** – talk about memorable. Each boss in the first act, like the Prospector or the Angler, has not only unique mechanics but also a theatrical flair. They’ll speak in character (sometimes directly to you as the player), and even **alter the rules mid-game**. For instance, the Angler can steal your cards with his hook – unless you figure out how to trick him. These encounters often require you to sacrifice a card or make a hard choice, perfectly in line with Inscryption’s dark tone. Win or lose, the game’s narrative marches forward, and you’re left both satisfied by the strategic challenge and unsettled by the narrative implications.

A Narrative That Keeps You Guessing

Without giving away the farm, let’s just say Inscryption’s **story is one of its strongest cards in the deck**. What starts as a spooky cabin card game evolves into something much larger. The game is divided into distinct acts, each with its own ruleset and surprises. Just when you think you’ve got Inscryption figured out, it deals a whole new hand that changes everything – from 8-bit retro RPG style segments to found-footage videos that blur the line between game and reality. By the end, your jaw will be on the floor, and you’ll appreciate why *not knowing* is the best way to experience it. As one gaming outlet put it, “I can’t spoil any more; it’s best to dive headfirst into this game without any prior knowledge. Just know it’s critically-acclaimed for a reason!”[7]. They ain’t just whistlin’ Dixie – the less you know going in, the more Inscryption will blow your mind.

What’s mighty impressive is how Inscryption balances this narrative mind-bending with solid card game mechanics. Even if you stripped away the story, the underlying gameplay would still be a fun (if simple) deck-builder. But with the narrative, it elevates to something truly special. The game creates an oppressive, mysterious mood – you’ll hear creaking floorboards, see eerie eyes staring from the dark, and feel truly captive to this deranged Game Master running the show. Few games manage to marry gameplay and storytelling this well. It kind of reminds me of playing poker with the Devil: the rules might change if Old Scratch feels like it, but you’re compelled to keep playing to see where it all leads.

The community quickly embraced Inscryption’s uniqueness. By mid-2024, **over 2 million copies** had been sold on Steam[8], and it boasts an **Overwhelmingly Positive user rating with 96% positive reviews**[9]. That’s a rare feat for such an experimental game, but it shows how many players were enthralled by its charms (and horrors). It also scooped up a lot of awards; if memory serves, Inscryption snagged the Game Awards 2021 prize for Best Indie, among other accolades. Critics lauded its creativity – it’s not often a game can genuinely surprise veteran players, but this one does, time and again.

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What Players Love (and Fear)

Players commonly praise **the atmosphere and presentation**. The hand-drawn card art of Act I has a rough, sketchy quality that fits the creepy cabin vibe. The sound design is stellar too – the distant cackle of the mysterious Game Master, the thunk of cards on wood, the strain of violin in the soundtrack – it all keeps you delightfully uneasy. This game can make a lack of color and light into an aesthetic; it’s grim in all the right ways for a horror-themed tale.

Another beloved aspect is **the constant sense of discovery**. Inscryption is packed tighter than a snake in a boot with secrets. Secret codes, hidden achievements, alternate endings – it practically begs the community to work together to find every little clue. There were whole Reddit threads and Discord groups piecing together the lore, decoding ciphers from the in-game footage, and sharing theories. If you enjoy games that have ARG (Alternate Reality Game) elements, Inscryption delivers that experience in spades, all within the game itself. It’s the kind of design that treats curious players to extra layers of content that others might completely miss.

As for criticisms, they’re relatively mild in comparison to the praise. Some folks mention that **once you’ve seen the story, the surprise factor is gone**, which is natural – Inscryption is arguably at its peak on the first playthrough. However, to address that, the developers later added a mini-expansion/standalone mode called “Kaycee’s Mod,” which essentially extends the Act I style gameplay into an endless roguelike mode with added cards and challenges. So if it’s the pure card battling you crave, you can play that mode indefinitely, climbing floors and refining decks just like a traditional deck-builder. It’s a welcome free update that increases replayability for those who want more after the story’s done.

Some players might also find the later acts’ gameplay less robust or more linear than the opening cabin segment. The game intentionally shifts formats, which means you get a bit less deck-building in certain portions and more puzzle or narrative. But in my view, it was a bold gamble that paid off; it ensured things never got stale. Just don’t expect a Slay-the-Spire-length infinite experience – Inscryption is more of a one-and-done narrative journey, about 12-15 hours long, albeit with some branching bits.

The Verdict

Inscryption is like a haunted deck of cards dealt by a trickster spirit – sometimes it plays fair, often it doesn’t, but darned if it isn’t captivating. It’s an **innovative mashup of genres** that succeeds both as a compelling card game and as a meta-narrative adventure. For those who enjoy creepy atmospheres, escape-room style puzzles, and a hearty dose of the unexpected with their card games, Inscryption is a must-play. It’s the kind of game you’ll be thinking about long after the credits roll, piecing together story revelations or just admiring how it pulled the rug out from under you.

The game’s success and acclaim show that players are thirsty for originality – and Inscryption serves that up in a chalice made of mystery and dread. It’s proven that even in a crowded field of deck-builders, you can still shuffle the deck and deal something completely fresh. This one’s a modern classic in my book, partner. Just be prepared: **Inscryption will pull you in with its dark charm and won’t let go until it’s had its fun with you**. And you’ll love every twisted minute of it.

Magic: The Gathering Arena Review – Spellslinging Showdown Online

When it comes to card games, Magic: The Gathering is the venerable old ranger – the one who started it all back in 1993 with complex mechanics and epic fantasy battles. **Magic: The Gathering Arena** (often just called MTG Arena) is the digital adaptation that slings those same spells on your PC (and Mac) with a slick presentation and a focus on fast, fun online matches. It’s essentially the *saloon* where Planeswalkers (Magic’s wizarding warriors) from around the world come to duel at the drop of a hat. But does MTG Arena capture the magic of the original, and what’s the cost of entry? Grab your spellbook and let’s take a look.

First off, MTG Arena is a **free-to-play online card game** – you can download it for free on Steam or from Wizards of the Coast directly, and start playing right away. It features **the full core gameplay of Magic: The Gathering**, which means if you’re a veteran, you’ll slip into it like a well-worn boot. For newcomers, Arena offers one of the best onboarding experiences Magic has ever had: a thorough tutorial and a set of starter decks to teach you the ropes. Magic is famously complex – with terms like trample, flying, instants, sorceries, the stack – but Arena’s tutorials and helpful prompts ease you in gently. Before long, you’ll be summoning creatures, casting spells, and yelling “*Gotcha!*” as you counter an opponent’s big move, with the best of ‘em.

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Core Gameplay and Features

MTG Arena’s gameplay is identical to the tabletop Magic game (specifically, it uses the modern **Standard format** and other popular formats). You build a deck of cards – lands to produce mana, and everything from elves and dragons to lightning bolts and mind-control spells to duel your opponent. Each player starts at 20 life; reduce your foe to 0 and you win. What sets Magic apart from simpler card games is the **ability to play cards on each other’s turns** (instants and flash cards), and the concept of the stack (an order of resolving spells that can respond to each other). Arena handles all these rules for you, which is fantastic – no need to manually track complex interactions; the game will highlight what you can do at any given time. It even has stops at each phase of a turn if you want full control to react.

Arena currently offers a variety of modes: - **Casual matches** (unranked) if you just want to play for fun. - **Ranked ladder** play in both Best-of-One and Best-of-Three, where you climb tiers from Bronze up to Mythic, earning some rewards along the way. - **Draft and Sealed events**, where you open virtual booster packs and build decks on the fly (this is a *huge* draw for many, since Limited format is beloved in Magic). - Specialty events like historic or explorer (using older cards), or fun festivals with unusual rules. - There’s even a **Commander-like format** called Brawl with singleton decks and a chosen commander card.

In short, MTG Arena offers **almost everything a Magic fan could want in terms of play modes**[10]. The gameplay itself is superbly polished: **cards have flashy animations**, battlefields are vivid and change with the Magic plane they represent (you might duel in the fiery mountains of Shiv or the tranquil forests of Zendikar), and the sound effects give impact to big plays. Casting a massive spell like “Ugin, the Spirit Dragon” will shake the screen and emit a deep thrum. It’s satisfying as a hog in mud.

Cross-platform support means you can play on PC or mobile and use the same account – handy for when you want to sneak in a game on the go. And perhaps best of all, **MTG Arena constantly updates with new card sets** simultaneously with the physical game releases. So every few months, a new expansion comes out (bringing ~250 new cards), keeping the meta fresh and the deck-building possibilities ever-expanding.

The Good, the Bad, and the Costly

Now, let’s address the ornery oliphaunt in the room: **MTG Arena’s economy and monetization**. This is where even the fiercest Magic gunslingers sometimes spit and mutter. While the game is free-to-play and indeed you can earn cards by playing, it’s built on a model of selling booster packs and cosmetics for real money. You earn gold and limited free card packs through daily quests and wins, and there’s a “Mastery Pass” (battle pass) each set. But if you want to build top competitive decks quickly, you might feel the pinch of needing wildcards (which are how Arena lets you craft specific cards).

Some players have found the grind to collect cards **frustratingly slow without spending**. In fact, the community has been vocal that Arena’s economy can feel “very greedy” and **like a “funless grind” if you’re trying to progress purely F2P**[11]. You’ll see folks on Reddit characterize the reward system as requiring daily wins and constant play, which can turn the game into a bit of a chore if you let it. The daily quests often incentivize you to play certain colors or do specific actions, pushing you into playing even when you might not feel like it, just to maximize gold income.

That said, it’s not all doom and gloom. **Compared to physical Magic, Arena is way cheaper** to experience a broad range of cards. Draft modes especially give you a chance to play with a lot of new cards and keep some for your collection without outright buying packs. And developers have, over time, introduced things like a “Golden Pack” system and occasional freebies to slightly improve generosity. As one review noted, Arena is generous in giving you starter decks and initial rewards, but to keep up with every new meta deck, you’ll likely need to invest either **time or money** (or both) – it may be “free to play, but you won’t get very far without putting some money into it”[12].

From a gameplay perspective, **MTG Arena is top-notch**. The matches are as deep and engaging as the paper game. There’s immense satisfaction in pulling off a combo or perfectly timing a counterspell just when the opponent taps out. The variety of viable decks at any time is pretty decent (the meta shifts with each expansion). One month you might be facing a lot of mono-red goblin aggro, the next it’s all about blue-white control locking the game down, or a crazy 5-color combo deck. Magic’s richness is all here.

However, Magic by nature can also be **frustrating at times** – mana screw (drawing too few lands) or mana flood (too many lands) are age-old problems, and Arena is no stranger to those moments where you draw blanks and lose with no recourse. Unlike some newer digital card games designed to avoid that feel-bad randomness, Magic embraces it as part of the texture of play. As a result, matches can swing wildly, and a portion of games are lost to pure bad luck. On the flip side, the best players consistently find ways to mitigate luck via smart deckbuilding and mulligan decisions, which is part of Magic’s skill.

The **community** around Arena is active. The game has regular events, official esports tournaments, and a bustling Twitch scene. It’s fun to watch streamers draft or showcase wacky decks. But you will also hear the community airing grievances – particularly whenever a new expansion drops some overpowered card that warps the meta until it’s banned. That’s Magic for ya: sometimes an Oko, Thief of Crowns sneaks through R&D and then everyone is up in arms until action is taken. Arena tends to mirror the tabletop bans/restrictions, though sometimes slower than players would like.

One notable recent addition: **Arena finally arrived on Steam in mid-2023**, after originally only being on Epic and standalone launcher[13][14]. This made it even more accessible. However, the Steam reviews currently sit at “Mixed” – largely due to the aforementioned economy issues. Over 20,000 reviews with a roughly 65% positive ratio show a divide: many love the gameplay (Magic itself is a proven design), but many ding the app for how expensive or grindy it can be to collect cards[15].

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Verdict: A Duel of Extremes

Magic: The Gathering Arena is **the best way to play Magic without a physical collection**, hands down. It captures all the strategy, the excitement, and the massive card pool of the original game, with the convenience of online matchmaking and a polished interface. For long-time Magic fans, it’s a dream to draft at 2 AM or test a new deck idea without shuffling real cards. For new players, it’s the most accessible Magic has ever been – a true blessing if you’ve always been curious about this legendary game.

Yet, it comes with the **caveat** that you must accept either a grind or spending some coin. Think of it like entering a high-stakes tournament in the Wild West: you can win big, but you might have to pay the entry fee or spend time honing your skills in the qualifiers. If you go in knowing that and set personal limits, Arena can absolutely be enjoyed for free over the long term – many players do just that, reveling in janky homebrew decks or focusing on one or two competitive decks that they gradually build up with earned wildcards.

In terms of gameplay experience, MTG Arena is **thrilling and endlessly replayable**. Each match is a story – sometimes a quick shootout, other times an epic standoff with moves and countermoves. The satisfaction of seeing your carefully constructed deck come together in a winning play is immense. And because Magic’s card interactions are so deep, the game has a higher learning curve but also a higher skill ceiling than most digital card games. There’s always a new strategy to explore or a new meta to adapt to, keeping things fresh.

So, is MTG Arena worth your time? If you love strategy card games, **absolutely** – but keep your eyes open about the monetization. In my own experience, I’ve had a blast playing limited formats and occasional constructed without breaking the bank, treating it more like an *occasional hobby* rather than a must-grind-daily obligation. It’s all about how you approach it.

Ultimately, Magic: The Gathering Arena offers **the quintessential card duel experience on a digital platter**. It’s a showdown of wits, luck, and deckbuilding prowess that can be as rewarding as it is challenging. Just remember: in this town, the cards can be as cold as ice or as hot as a dragon’s breath, and sometimes the house (or in this case, the publisher) has the edge. But if you can navigate that, you’re in for one heck of a card-slinging good time.

Monster Train Review – Hell’s Hottest Deck-Builder Ride

All aboard, folks! Monster Train takes the deck-building formula and throws it onto a runaway locomotive bound for the depths of Hell – literally. If that doesn’t sound wild enough, toss in the fact that on this train you’re **fighting off heavenly angels across multiple floors**, and you’ve got one heck of a premise. This 2020 release by Shiny Shoe quickly became a darling among roguelike deck-builder fans, often spoken of in the same breath as Slay the Spire. In fact, Monster Train has been so successful that it sold **over 1.5 million copies** and spawned a full sequel by 2025[16]. So what makes this infernal train ride so special? Let’s stoke the engine and find out.

Gameplay Overview: Three Floors of Fury

Monster Train’s signature twist is its **three-floor combat system**. Picture a vertical cross-section of a train with a pyre (your life source) on the top floor. Enemies board from the bottom and each turn, any that survive move up one floor. If they reach the top where your pyre is, they’ll start smashing it, and if the pyre’s health hits zero, your run’s done. Your job is to **summon monster units on these floors and cast spells** to wipe out the intruders before they wreck your pyre. It’s a brilliant spin on the typical single-lane combat; you essentially manage three battlefields at once. It adds a tower-defense vibe to the deck-building: which floor should I fortify? Where do I place my champion? Do I let the weak enemies reach floor 2 so I can focus fire big threats on floor 1?

At the start of a run, you pick two demon clans (out of six in the game, as of the latest updates). The primary clan gives you your champion unit – an especially powerful monster that can upgrade throughout the run – and a starter deck themed to that clan. The allied clan contributes some cards too. Each clan has a distinct flavor, from the **Hellhorned** (big demons who rage and get stronger when damaged) to the **Awoken** (plant creatures focused on healing and spikes damage to attackers) to the **Stygian Guard** (sneaky spellcasters and frosty manipulation), and more. The mix-and-match of clans leads to a ton of strategic variety. Maybe you combine Hellhorned and Awoken for a beefy demons plus healing strategy, or Stygian and Umbra (shadow eaters) to buff up one super unit to monstrous proportions. Every run feels unique.

Battles themselves play out in rounds. You have a hand of cards – some are units (monsters) you summon to a floor by paying their Ember cost (think of Ember like energy/mana), and others are spells that do anything from direct damage, to apply buffs/debuffs, to altering capacity, etc. Each floor has limited **capacity**, so you can’t just stack infinite units in one floor; big units take more space than small ones. This forces you to make interesting choices about where to deploy your troops. When you end your turn, your units and the enemies on each floor do combat automatically. Generally your monsters smack the invaders, then if any invaders survive, they hit back. If they survive that and the combat phase ends, those enemies move up a floor for the next round. You have to clear all waves of enemies and then a boss who doesn’t move but has huge health.

That might sound like a lot, but Monster Train’s interface is extremely clear and user-friendly. You can see exactly the damage totals that will happen on each floor in a given round (accounting for all your planned moves) – a feature I wish more games had. It’s a godsend for planning and helps newcomers learn the ropes quickly. In fact, one might argue Monster Train is **easier to get into initially** than some other deck-builders, because of these helpful previews and the more concrete wave-based structure of battles. But don’t get me wrong, it gets devilishly challenging at higher difficulties (called Covenant ranks).

Strategic Depth and Deck-Building

Between battles, the train stops at various points that let you **upgrade your cards, recruit new ones, duplicate cards, remove junk from your deck,** and so on. The map of each “ring” (level) gives you a left or right choice, adding a bit of route planning like Slay the Spire. One side might have a hellhorned banner (letting you choose a new unit from that clan) and a Merchant of Steel (where you can upgrade units with bonuses like “+10 attack” or “multistrike” which lets them hit twice). The other side might have coins to collect and a Merchant of Magic (upgrade spells to cost less or deal more damage, etc.). These choices are deliciously tough at times – do I power up my current units or fish for a new unit that might shore up a weakness in my deck?

The upgrades system in Monster Train deserves special mention because it **really lets you break the game in satisfying ways**. You can stack upgrades on a single unit that turn it into an absolute beast. For example, take a little draff unit (a weak, dying-after-combat kind of unit) and give it +25 health and the ability to burn out slower, suddenly it becomes a durable frontliner. Or slap “Holdover” on a spell, and it returns to your hand every turn after you cast it – extremely powerful on key spells. This leads to some **crazy combos** and synergies. Fans often gush about how Monster Train allows even more outrageous deck builds than Slay the Spire, and I’d agree – it feels like the game encourages you to “break” it (which is part of the fun).

The design also cleverly splits cards into units and spells, and you often need a good balance. Lean too heavy on units and you might get overwhelmed if you can’t clear enemy back-liners; lean too heavy on spells and maybe you lack staying power for the boss. This balancing act, combined with the multi-clan system, yields deep strategy. And because you effectively have to defend multiple points (the floors), there are various viable approaches: - **Choke point strategy:** Stack one floor with your best units (often the middle or bottom floor) and let nothing get past. - **Delayed kill strategy:** Use top floor as final defense, set up units that get stronger over time (like via slay triggers that give them buffs when they kill an enemy) so by the time enemies climb up, your guys are juiced up to finish them. - **Sacrifice strategy:** Let some cannon fodder units or spells (like Molting Imp or Purifying Cleanse) soften enemies early, knowing you’ll finish them later, even if it means losing a unit or two in the process.

Few deck-builders give this feeling of spatial/positional strategy combined with card combos. It’s like a fast-paced chess match on three boards at once, with trading-card game rules – and it works *beautifully*.

*If you like deck builders, then make sure to check out* *Gunslinger’s Revenge. Click here to add it to your Steam wishlist!*

Presentation and Polish

For a game about Hell and monsters, Monster Train is surprisingly bright and colorful. The art is comic-book-like, with bold lines and a bit of whimsy (seriously, the demons can be more goofy than scary). There’s a definite **Metal album cover meets Saturday morning cartoon** vibe, which keeps the tone light. The UI, as mentioned, is top-notch for clarity. And the soundtrack – oh man, it *slaps*. It’s an intense, guitar-heavy score that really sells the idea you’re on this epic infernal train ride. When a boss shows up and the music kicks into high gear, you feel your pulse quicken.

One minor nitpick: the story/lore is pretty minimal. There’s some introductory text – basically Hell has frozen over because the forces of Heaven broke the Pyre, and you’re trying to reignite it by transporting the last flame. But beyond that, it’s just flavor on cards and some boss dialogue. This game is all about the gameplay. And that’s fine by me – you don’t really need a complex story when you have a **gameplay loop as addictive as a bag of chips**. Still, if you require narrative motivation, know that it’s fairly thin. You’re essentially playing for high scores and personal challenge rather than to see a plot unfold.

Speaking of challenge, Monster Train has an **Ascension-like system called Covenant**. There are 25 Covenant levels that ramp up difficulty (e.g. enemies get stronger, your Pyre is weaker, you get fewer upgrade options, etc.). The progression is well-tuned, such that by the time you beat Covenant 25, you’ll have mastered the game’s systems (and likely spent dozens of hours). For even more replay, there are daily challenges and custom challenges, plus the new Monster Train 2 sequel if you want to board a whole new ride.

The community love for Monster Train is evident. On Steam it held an “Overwhelmingly Positive” rating; the sequel even got praise like being “roguelike deckbuilder heaven, and a worthy challenger to Slay the Spire and Balatro”[17]. That’s high praise, comparing it to the best in the genre. Personally, I find Monster Train shines in how **fast and satisfying** each run is. A full run (win or lose) might be 30-40 minutes, a bit shorter than a Slay the Spire run. And it always leaves you wanting to try a new combo of clans or a new upgrade path for your champion. The “just one more run” factor is through the roof.

Final Thoughts

Monster Train is a **first-class deck-building roguelike** that every fan of the genre should consider riding. It took the best parts of those that came before – drafting cards, synergizing relics (called artifacts here), and tough tactical battles – and layered on innovative mechanics like multi-floor defense and dynamic card upgrades. The result is a game that feels familiar yet fresh, approachable yet capable of devious complexity in its hardest challenges.

If you’re someone who enjoyed Slay the Spire’s strategy but maybe wished for a bit more flash or a different twist, Monster Train will likely steal your heart (and then set it on fire to power the Pyre!). It’s **constantly engaging**: there’s no dead time in a run, you’re either planning your next battle, tweaking your deck, or reacting to new threats on the fly. And when a plan comes together – say, your uber demon with multistrike, lifesteal, and endless (returns to hand on death) just soloes the final boss – you’ll feel like an absolute mastermind.

On the flip side, even if you’re new to deck-builders, Monster Train is a forgiving entry point. The early Covenants are gentle, and the feedback the game gives helps you learn. It’s a great teacher and a great adversary all in one package.

In the end, whether you’re a hardened strategy veteran or a curious newcomer, Monster Train is **one hell of a ride**. It’s earned a spot among the top deck-builders out there with its creativity and solid execution. So grab your ticket, pick your demon crew, and get ready to send those do-gooder angels crying back to heaven. This train’s not stopping until Hell is restored – or until your deck falls apart in glorious chaos. Either way, you’ll have a devilishly good time.

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