

The allure of difficult games



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Games are a form of art, but first and foremost they are a source of entertainment. This is why the primary goal of any game should be to provide joy to the user, right? Of course, this point of view crumbles the minute you come across a *difficult game*. Even though these games take pride in torturing the gamer, they are incredibly popular and loved. Let's take a plunge into the rabbit-hole and figure out what makes these games appealing.

Firstly, difficult games have progression systems pretty different from the mainstream. In most games, there is a steady incline in difficulty. The games hold your hand until you're reasonably proficient in most of the gameplay elements and strategies. Conversely, difficult games chokeslam you into the deep end. With little to no assistance from the game, you have to figure out how to survive.

A perennial classic is the Dark Souls franchise, as well as the recently popularised Cuphead. For these, the time you spend playing the game isn't proportional to the amount of progress you make. Regardless of how long you spend trying to overcome a particular level or boss, the game will put up a brick wall until you learn to play by its rules. You'll have to learn the movesets of the enemies, master the blocks, dodges and parries, and sell your soul to Kojima. Because of the number of hurdles you pass on the way to success, you learn to appreciate every little victory.

The little victories don't come easy, however. When playing difficult games, you will die. Repeatedly. Sometimes that is all you'll do. To some, the repeated deaths are enraging, which is why these

games aren't for everyone. Some people, however, don't know when to stop. For these people, every death, every defeat adds fuel to the fire. They may fling away their controller in disgust. They may call the game *unfair*. At the end of the day, however, they will push on to completion.

When you finally complete a difficult game, you'll look back to realise you're standing on a mountain of corpses. Corpses for all the times you've died, of course, but also your past selves. You look back and realise that you've left behind your past and grown into a more competent self. Even though you're sitting alone in your room, you feel like you've done something you can be proud of.

These sensations are somehow amplified in roguelikes — games which feature permadeath. Any and all progress you make in a single playthrough is wiped out the moment you die. No saves, no checkpoints. Two of my favourites are Risk of Rain and Nuclear Throne, which are like your favourite teacher- tough but fair. Each time you die, you realise the game isn't angry with you, just disappointed. In each playthrough you learn from your mistakes and eventually, you cross the first level.

Long story short, difficult games are like your parents. They'll have unreasonable goals for you to reach, and when you finally manage to reach one, they'll throw another, and another. You'll still love them at the end of the day, however. Just don't call others filthy casuals if you end up playing these games.

"With a heart of ash and a PC of potato, Wasique Hasan could use some help. Send some memes and cheer him up at facebook.com/hasique.wasan"

GAME REVIEW

TOTAL CARNAGE

TAMIM BIN ZAKIR

There is a famous story behind the making of Robotron 2084, the infamous arcade game which provides the clear inspiration for Nex Machina. Designer Eugene Jarvis, the genius behind hit coin-op Defender, broke his wrist in a car accident and found himself unable to use a fire button. Determined to keep working on a new game project, he and his colleague Larry DeMar hacked together their own controller using two joysticks; one to move the onscreen character, one to fire a weapon. Thus, the twin-stick shooter was born.

Years later, we have the latest title from Housemarque Games, the Finnish studio that spent two decades rediscovering and perfecting classic arcade game dynamics. It's Super Stardust and Resogun titles are exemplary old school scrolling shooters, catching the speed and style of arcade blasters but enriching them with modern era visual exuberance. Nex Machina continues that legacy — and then adds some more.

The game opens up in a jungle world, and you are instantly pit against neon bug-like machines. These baddies only need one shot before they're obliterated, which is good because there's a lot of them. Once you clear the first portion, you're instantly transported to another section of this jungle scene. It may be on the same plane or it may be on a different plane, but however it's positioned in relation to the last one, it'll have even more daunting challenges to overcome with even tougher bad guys.

Controls are very simple, as with most twin stick shooters, although Nex Machina is definitely best played on a controller as there's no mouse aim cursor yet. Using a controller, right stick moves your character while the left stick aims and shoots your weapon. There are upgrades and special moves that you collect throughout the game, but utilising those add-ons won't distract from all the other controls. Nothing sticks and everything is seamless — which is all-too important in this genre.

The graphics are definitely aesthetically pleasing. That neon is like eye candy and there's plenty of it. The music is very well done, as it leaves you with plenty of energy to breeze through battles but isn't annoying or repetitive. Both of these come together for a glorious product that is pleasing to all senses, delighting even those not versed with twin stick shooters with its awesomeness.

Perhaps the best part about Nex Machina is that there are so many layers to the game. You could just play it to get from point A to point B — start to finish, enter, beat baddies, kill the boss, etc. but there's more to it than just that. Humans are at every level, waiting to be saved, and saving all available humans before being transported to the next stage earns a multiplier bonus. Going deeper still, there are hidden humans in various stages that aren't that easy to find, but doing so will yield even more points for those willing to explore a bit. Additionally, there are specific types of bad guys that pop up in special places throughout each world, and killing all of them before they quickly disappear will result in even more points for those who emerge victorious.

Another really solid factor in Nex Machina has to be the boss levels — they're intense without being impossible. You'll still die plenty of times trying to defeat them, but you're not likely to get at the "break your controller" rage level. Each boss is pretty unique with different bullets, backgrounds, and fighting styles, so you'll have to learn and adapt each time.

Nex Machina offers a soothing but exhilarating experience that is good for decompressing after a stressful day at work or playing together with a bunch of friends. It's a tribute to the classics with a twist, and it definitely needs to be in game libraries everywhere.

Tamim Bin Zakir aka Shwag_Lord (PSN ID) is an enraged individual who seldom thinks of being generous to others. Feel free to devour his tranquility at niloy.tbz@gmail.com

