

Critique – Diablo and Jazzpunk

1 DIABLO

Diablo is an isometric “hack and slash” roleplaying game released by Blizzard Entertainment in 1996. The player takes control of one of three character classes, and ventures into the procedurally generated dungeons below the town of Tristram. The player moves around by clicking the location they want to move to, and attacks and spells are performed in a similar way. Using the weapons, equipment and spells the player finds along the way, they must descend the dungeons and defeat Diablo. During the course of the game, they player will be given quests by the characters in town. The dungeons offer checkpoints that connect back to the main town, encouraging the player to regularly head back to trade and repair equipment.

As is a trait of Blizzard games, the types of fun the player experiences changes as they progress in the game. At first, the player is treated to a dark *fantasy*, with the looming threat of doom shadowing the environment. The aesthetics the player begins to experience come out of the dynamics of the gameplay. For instance, the player starts the game behind a set of houses, with a path leading into town. As they learn to move around, they will notice that the player walks at a slow pace. This pace is part of what creates the *sensation* of dread in the player as they walk through the dungeons. With enemies able to move much faster, the player feels like they are on the defensive – like something could creep out from the dark at any moment and strike them. These dynamics are created by the simple mechanics of the player’s movement speed, and the enemies’ movement speeds and patterns. As the player progresses, the game shifts to a more *challenge* based fun type with the increase in difficulty. The player has no chance against later enemies in the game without strategically equipping and building their character. The player is given experience points when they kill enemies, and these experience points level up the player. At level up, the player chooses what attributes to put their points into – Strength, Dexterity, Magic, or Vitality. These mechanics create choice in the player’s progression, as these attributes determine what kind of equipment they can wear, as well as affecting combat calculations. The dynamics created by these relationships give the player a feeling of investment in their character and the choices they made. A balancing act is created as the player continues deeper into the dungeons, eventually being unable to compete with the monsters they find and *submitting* to farming experience. Diablo is a game with immense replayability because of the large set of dynamic content within the game. Part of this comes with the player’s ability to choose and build their character in many ways, but there are also other mechanics that create this effect. The player is given three character classes to choose from upon starting the game, each with their own unique voice acting and appearances. The dungeons are also randomly generated on each new game, so players can never memorize the dungeon layout. Finally, the quests given to the player are given in different order, and sometimes not at all. The player feels like each time they play the game they are embarking on a new adventure, creating the *discovery* element of fun. The game also has networked multiplayer, in which players can band together in *fellowship* to overcome the dungeons, or fight amongst themselves and test their skills. The players are not allowed to fight in town, which enforces the safety of the town and the danger of the dungeons.

2 JAZZPUNK

Jazzpunk is a first person adventure game. Because there is a wide variety of gameplay in Jazzpunk, it can be difficult to categorize it in terms of genre. The player takes control of Polyblank, a member of an espionage agency. The game is set some time in the late 1950's within an absurdist cartoon reality reminiscent of Hanna-Barbera cartoons. The player is given missions by "The Director", and is then sent to a small open-world level in which they must complete a set of tasks to continue. These levels are populated with a variety of NPCs which have humorous dialog and gags. The tasks in the levels consist of wildly varying gameplay, with some involving elements of first person shooters, and others involving puzzles and minigames. The story progresses linearly as the player completes these tasks, taking them to exotic locations around the world. The game is filled with pop culture references to older movie and video games. One minigame is a parody of Quake called Wedding Qake, in which the player participates in a wedding-themed deathmatch. Another parodies Virtual Boy Tennis, where the player is transported to a red and black virtual tennis court. The gameplay of Jazzpunk is treated as a vehicle for the story and humour on offer.

Jazzpunk has many transient mechanics with almost no overlap or interplay. In one moment they may be searching for a collectible in the level, but later they may be competing against AI in a deathmatch. This creates a wide variety of moment-to-moment gameplay depending on where the player is in the story. Because of this, the player experiences a sense of *discovery* for their first time playing through, however subsequent playthroughs suffer from a lack of depth. Jazzpunk makes use of its mechanics in order to tell a comedic *narrative*. The mechanics are in place to compliment this narrative. However, the game does offer some *challenge*, as some mechanics are built upon later in the the game. For example, in one scene the player is given a fly swatter and tasked with swatting flies in a room full of expensive vases. The player inevitably smashes the vases, giving them a fun *sensation* of schadenfreude as the NPC character proclaims "I am in your debt... I am in overwhelming debt." The player keeps this fly swatter for the final sequence of the level, in which they must use the fly swatter against the agents that impede progress. Later in the game, the player is given a tennis racket for a game of virtual tennis. Because of the earlier fly swatting sequence, the player has learned they can simply hit their opponent with the racket rather than playing by the rules of the tennis game. These dynamics are fleeting, though, as the game mostly relies on its quirky narrative to keep the player entertained. Players who enjoy hard-fun or achievement styles of play won't be satisfied by Jazzpunk's sparse mechanics. Players may enjoy the experience of playing Jazzpunk for the first time, but with its lack of dynamic gameplay content there isn't much motivation for playing it again.