

# The (Erratically) Weekly Game Review

<https://dlaurh.wordpress.com/>



Hello my loyal non-readers! Finally getting this blog started, thank you for your tremendous amount of patience considering you don't exist. Well, not yet anyway.

I am a huge fan of horror, particularly in games. From Dead Space, to Amnesia, to Silent Hill and Resident Evil, my love for this genre extends all around. Sure, many have cheesy storylines, flat characters, and often clunky controls that some may say restrict gameplay, but in the world of horror is something that most games tend to ignore; a gripping atmosphere and terrifying settings that suck you in and make your hands shake. Frankly, this entire blog could be just about horror titles, but I want to be able to splurge about all the games I love so I best not restrict myself.

Seeing as it's that time of year again, I figured it would be appropriate to talk about some games in this beloved category. However, for all the praise I would love to give to my favorite and prestige series, I thought it would be a lot more fun if I took advantage of this month to run through a couple of horror titles I HAVEN'T played yet, ones that are generally renown as mediocre and not worth most peoples time. I want to lift the rug these games have been swept under and give them another look, and see if there is anything they accomplish well that they have been under appreciated for. I HOPE to get through 4 games this month, a lofty goal but one I look upon with optimism and excitement. With the expectation for sub-par presentations, it's time to dig into as many of these titles as my free time allows me... Q-Q

## Rating System



Extremely recommended



Recommended



Recommended with flaws



Not recommended

# Showcases



Figured since I have a blog now, I'd try bring attention to certain things that are important to me in hopes SOMEBODY IS ACTUALLY READING THIS \*wink wink\* Couuulld be yoooo!! \*wink wink\*

Anyways, today I wanted to briefly talk about the website:

<http://www.thezeroreview.com/>

While I could pretend I was selflessly promoting a site I think could use more attention, that's not entirely the case.

This year at PAX Prime 2015 in Seattle, I had the pleasure of meeting the two founders of the Zero Review website, Justin and... Justin! Yep, both Just Scerbo and Justin Chou happened to be in line with my group of friends and I for the Divison. After some friendly banter, I discovered they happen to run a games journalism site. What a coincidence, it JUST so happens I am going to school to become a journalist for video games! Turns out they were willing to have a bit of extra content on the site and offered to have me write for them.

Well, I took them up on their offer and started writing articles (well, article singular as of right now) in my spare time. Unfortunately, spare time has been a sparse thing as of late. But I hope to populate their site with some more content in the coming future. However, ignoring my minuet contributions, they actually do write some pretty good stuff, so I'd recommend checking them out. They don't update super frequently, but what's there is definitely an entertaining read.

Below is my first (and currently only) article I wrote for them, so give it a read when you get the chance!

<http://www.thezeroreview.com/newsitorial/honor-impressions-medieval-multiplayer-madness/>



I wanted to talk about an event that is rather special to me. As a child growing up in the north, there are essentially no opportunities to attend conventions of any kind, let alone any focused on the medium I love. Leaving town is an expensive endeavor and not one to casually do in search for these gatherings of communities. But in 2014, my friend Brandon Cooke and I decided it was time that we bust out our wallets and make the commitment to journey down to Seattle, WA for Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) Prime and get a tangible insight closer into the video game industry and culture outside of reddit and NeoGAF. Accompanied by my girlfriend, Erika Thompson, the three of us drove all the way from Yellowknife, NT, to see what we were missing. I was nothing short of hooked.

Walking onto the show floor for the first time sent me into a daze of wonder as I seen the booths and displays for these upcoming big budget titles such as Alien: Isolation, The Order: 1886 and The Evil Within. The crowds of people brought the expo hall to life, with up to 70,000 fans both young and old filling the Washington State Convention Center to the brim. Cosplayers, gamers, parent and child, and even celebrities of the industry walk the halls. It makes a dramatic setting for what amounts to a bunch of video games and televisions, which I don't mean to undermine. Over the 4-day event, I found myself planning my weekend like a job, trying to determine what game I wanted to play and scheduling out my hours to make sure I had a chance to experience as much as it had to offer. Getting a chance to play these titles and get an early impression of them before they hit the market is simply ex-



citing for me, and especially over at the Indie Megabooth, where independent developers bring their games and talk about them directly to their audience. It's awesome to hear them talk about their passion projects they've been toiling away it for months, and I can only imagine how exciting it is for them to get exposure.

Oh, and collecting free swag became a competitive game between team Brandon and team Shane/Erika. From pins, to lanyards, to t-shirts and posters, there is plenty of merchandise to harvest. Brandon still won however.

We decided almost immediately that we would go again next year. For PAX Prime 2015, we ended up with six tickets, giving the other three to my good friend Ian Wolfe, my cousin Cody Weaver and his girlfriend Aidan Vair. We even did some cosplay this time, myself as Cole MacGrath (inFAMOUS), Erika as Heather Mason (Silent Hill 3), and Cody as the Ox King (Dragon Ball). Though my memories for the first year of PAX linger more fondly, we still had another fantastic year at the expo. (Brandon won the swag off again...)

To anybody thinking of going, do it. It is expensive as hell, but if you can expend the moulah and ACTUALLY manage to grab tickets within that first hour on sale before they are gone, then you will be in for an experience that, honestly, might have put me on the path of journalism I'm now taking.







Okay, so some might say I'm cheating a bit here, as Castlevania games are not horror titles. But the FOUNDATION of these games lay within classic movie monsters and the ghoulies of Halloween, so it's still very much in spirit of the holiday! Castlevania as a series has taken many different faces over it's last near 30 years on the market. I myself have come to love the franchise under many of it's different guises; from the vintage 2D side scrolling action roots in games like the original Castlevania and Super Castlevania IV to it's evolution as a full 2D exploration action title in Symphony of the Night that has since been aptly dubbed "Metroid-vania". However, like many successful 2D Platformers at the time; such as Sonic the Hedgehog or Mega Man, the transition from their dual planed pixels into 3D polygonal worlds was a rocky journey. Introducing an additional dimension while still trying to retain gameplay that was familiar and faithful to the original titles was not easily achieved. The mechanics that made the previous titles so popular unfortunately did not translate well outside of their "left to right" foundations. From the Nintendo64's attempted reboot to the PlayStation 2's title Lament of Innocence, Castlevania has always had a difficult time penetrating into the 3D landscape. That was until Konami rebooted the series in 2010 in the form of Castlevania: Lords of Shadow developed by MercuryStream. Borrowing elements from numerous action titles, namely God of War, it seemed as though Castlevania may have finally found a standing in the third dimension after all, as it scored well with the critics and became the most successful title in the series history. However, many fans would argue that the franchise just finally ran out of ideas and had succumb to ripping off other games in order to make a solid title that would sell for Konami. The Lords of Shadow franchise still

holds a negative stigma among fans of the retro titles, with claims that it completely lost it's own identity has little to do with Castlevania anymore. I mean, the first game doesn't even involve Dracula, CASTLEVANIA'S MAIN VILLIAN! That's like a Mario game without Bowser, right? (Oh wait...) While I certainly see the validity in these arguments, as a Castlevania fan myself I cannot say I agree. Though the first title doesn't carry familiar elements from the past games, it serves as an origin story for a "greater" plot to unravel in Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate | Revenge of the subtitle and the eventual sequel of Lords of Shadow 2. It slowly worked it's way into the universe we known and love in it's own unique way and I don't frown upon it for taking a different approach to the series lore, but rather embrace it as it's own interesting take on the Belmont lineage. As far as gameplay goes, I personally am just happy to see Castlevania still relevant in today's market. That's not to say I wouldn't like to see another 2D rendition, in fact I would ADORE for a new title in the classic formula. But for what we got, this new formula for the Castlevania franchise goes under appreciated in my own opinion. Now wait a second, this is supposed to be a review, RIGHT?! Well then it's time to cut to the chase and talk about how the second game holds up. WARNING: As expected, considering the nature of a sequel, this will contain spoilers to the first game \*gasp\*. You've been warned. Lords of Shadow picks up with our "hero" Dracula, formerly known as Gabriel Belmont, awakening decrepit and weak only to find himself as confused as the player to discover he is actually in modern day civilization. Having no memory of how he fell into such a long slumber, his ol' "buddy" Zobek from the first game is back to fill in the blanks and tells Drac that Satan plans

to return from hell again to cause anarchy and rule the planet. That troublemaker! Zobek requests Dracula's help to eliminate Satan once and for all in exchange for the Vampire Killer, Gabriel's original weapon and the only item capable of fulfilling his longing desire to put a permanent end to his eternal life. Though the game begins in this present day setting, it is luckily not solely constrained to it. In fact, after introductions to the story, the city quickly takes a back seat for nearly the first half of the game, as the player is introduced to the much more interesting setting of



what is only explained as The Castle. This fully interconnected area is never properly explained to be entirely real or just part of Gabriel's psychosis, but it is much more visually appealing and definitely the highlight of the game with it's Gothic atmosphere. Artistic direction was stellar for this portion and it's dark aesthetic makes it a true delight to wander it's halls. They had better be nice to look at though since you'll be revisiting many of these locals if you plan to collect the hidden items scattered around the

semi-open world, many of which are unattainable until certain abilities have been discovered by playing through the main story. Any completionists like myself will find themselves backtracking though these environments to hunt down these collectibles, which quickly becomes a chore do to non intuitive platforming and a poorly managed world map, with fast travel zones often feeling too spaced out. The player can also travel between the Castle or the City though Wolf Alters that are spread out just as sparsely. It is worth noting however that this game came out right at the brink of the

console generations end, and it shows for it. Like stated before, the game is gorgeous, both artistically and technically. Levels are generally set in darkness or with low lighting, well-suited habitat for our vampiric protagonist. The soundtrack is fitting and sets the appropriate mood, but not memorable or emotionally striking. An unfortunate trend for the Lords of Shadow series, as Castlevania is renown for their absolutely incredible soundtracks; classic melodies that only get so much as a nod to in these games.

Lords of Shadow had a very familiar combat system to anybody familiar with the hack and slash genre. Like stated before, this is where the games receive most of their's flack, as it's gameplay derives almost directly from God of War. Particularly in it's long range weapon and combos, with platforming elements also borrowed. Having said that, the combat DOES work great, and it's just as strong in the sequel. There are strong attacks and wide attacks, as well as dodging and blocking. This time around, the Holy and Magic powers from the first game have been replaced with entirely new weapons with their own combos. The Void Sword takes the place of Holy magic and heals you with each successful strike, and the Chaos Claws are for breaking through enemy shields and dealing massive damage (Nemean Cestus anybody?). Activating these weapons still requires magic for each however, which can be gained through combat orbs. These orbs are dropped after filling you focus metre by landing a certain amount of consecutive hits without being struck in return. A well timed block can also cause you to parry, which is a quick way of filling the Focus metre as well. Enemies can often prove to be difficult for the wrong reasons however, either too well shielded or giving the player too little time to determine what move is being telegraphed. On the flip side, most bosses are complete pushovers, with easy patterns to determine and life bars that drop like a courtesan's skirt in the presence of the Chaos Claws. Despite these issues, the combat remains fun and satisfying overall. There is also a great deal of platforming, though admittedly it feels monotonous to traverse, taking more appreciation for the creativity of the landscape you scale, rather than actually being entertained to do so. As you proceed you gain more abilities that help in both combat and can relieve some of the frustration from the platforming. There are also strange stealth segments where you must take the form of a rat to sneak around powerful en-

emies. These portions don't ruin the experience by any means but can certainly slow down the pace. In fact, overall pacing is poorly done, both in gameplay and in story. There never feels like an appropriate time to set down the controller. Not due to the game having it's hooks dug into you, but because no chapter feels like it has enough closure to recognize that you could have taken a break. The story tends to just keep trailing on until you find yourself in a whole new region of the map. Additionally, while the voice acting holds up, the game could have been better written, with a few lines in particular having been painfully forced into the script in an attempt to pay homage to past titles. Aside from the main campaign, there are also Kelidos Challenges to test your skills... and patience. I found these often an unfair challenge and added very little to the game, and ended up being the only part of the entire game I did not complete. There is also a DLC campaign called Revelations (How original!) where you get to play as Alucard for the first time in 3D. I won't go much in depth, but this additional chapter is enjoyable enough and adds new abilities with puzzles and combat focused around them. It's worth a play once finished with the main story. Overall, Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2 is a fine cap for this sub-series in the Castlevania franchise. While these games are flawed and heavily uninspired, it's is still satisfying and lengthy, providing plenty of value and an incredible presentation. I think Mercury Steam has crafted an interesting take on the series, one that knew to stop before overstaying it's welcome. As much as I've enjoyed these titles, I'd hate to see Lords of Shadow 3 ever pop up. This sequel was an imperfect end to an imperfect string of games, but not the stains upon the series that they are generally identified as. I'd recommend this game to anybody with a hack and slash fix to fill that's already been through the likes of God of War and Bayonetta, as long as they don't expect it to be in the same class as those titles.







I laid out my titles for Halloween in front of me thinking I made some pretty decent choices for the season, some critically mediocre games with horror elements I can focus on as strengths. I've realized now that I have done myself a great disservice, most prominently shown in this week's title, Clive Barker's Jericho.

I'll quickly get a story synopsis out of the way as it's generally underwhelming anyways. You play as Captain Devin Ross of Jericho team, a special forces unit from the U.S. Military's Department of Occult Warfare. Basically, you and your team of six other members fight the powers of the paranormal. There is a lost city that appears in the desert and Jericho is sent to investigate, only to discover it is actually the prison of an ancient evil known as the Firstborn. This was God's original creation before human beings that he locked up because it was flawed and he couldn't bring himself to kill it. Ever since it's been angrily trying to escape, and it's your job to jump through time and try keep it imprisoned, or take it out yourselves.

With that out of the way, level structure is as simplistic as you can imagine. Walk through linear environments which baddies spawn. Take them out, and the door will open so you can find more baddies and repeat the process. This may sound like the basic description to any sort of FPS of this era, but this isn't just an overall synopsis, it's the entirety of it's depth. Often I would question if I was doing something wrong or if the game was glitched because it just wouldn't progress. But nope, just keep eliminating the immense amount of walking targets until the game says you can keep going. Enemy variety is laughable. You get grunts, suicide bombers, bullet sponges, the flying enemy, the other flying enemy, and then creatures contextual to the environment you find yourself in. There are no puzzles in the game, as puzzles would imply thought being necessary. However, occasionally there are moments contextual to a squad members specific ability that must be used to progress. This would be great if it wasn't used ONCE per ability in most cases, but as it stands it just goes

to show that they could have had better level design then they ultimately put in the effort to actually craft. Speaking of these abilities, time to dig into the gameplay. This is no spoiler but early in the game, Ross kicks the bucket but his spirit is still alive and he is able to host the bodies of his remaining squad mates. This turns the game into a "squad based" First Person Shooter, in which jumping between the bodies of your other six team members will grant you access to their own unique weapons and set of abilities. Allow me to quickly round them out:

- Black: Sniper chick with grenade launcher, Telekinesis, and remote control bullet
- Rawlings: Priest with dual pistols, the ability to resuscitate injured comrades and drain health from enemies.
- Church: Lady with a sword and Uzi that uses blood magic to incapacitate enemies or light them on fire.
- Cole: Techy girl with assault rifle and grenades, plus the ability to slow time and boost team firepower at the cost of her own health.
- Jones: Generic dude with assault rifle and underbarrel shotgun that also can possess nearby enemies.
- Delgado: Tank like guy with Gatling gun, magnum, and a fire demon at his call to light up enemies.



Welcome to the team.

This is the ONE interesting gameplay mechanic that Jericho has to offer, but is unfortunately weighed down by the tremendous amount of flaws in the rest of the title.

Earlier I cynically labelled this as a squad based with titles, but considering the control you have over your squads actions are basic at best, it's hardly to be considered tactical in any fashion. Tell them to stop, move forward, or have half the team directed to go here or there. You will ultimately never use these controls, save for one "puzzle"

moment, as there is no cover to take anyways. The AI is also incompetent on their own, getting themselves killed to the suicide bombers over and over. Managing your team is more like managing your health, making sure enough people are still standing to switch over to when you get hit by a cheap bomber yourself.

Nothing else is really worth going over in detail. Characters are forgettable. Quick time events are some of the worst I've seen. Destructible objects fall to piece when you slowly walk into them. Dialog is generic and quickly becomes repetitious. Loading screens upon each death with lengthy text to watch slowly type out like a typewriter. Top it off with a broken tutorial and you've got one of the worst FPS games I've laid my hands on. In fact, APPARENTLY there is an extra gameplay mechanic called "tethering", where you can combine the effects of two team members magical powers for a more powerful ability. Sounds cool, right? Extra layer of depth to the gameplay perhaps. Too bad the game NEVER taught me how to do this or involved it in level design in any way whatsoever. I only heard about it afterwards doing more research on the game before writing my review.

After fighting through the troves of demons and fighting a wave of bosses in the last hour of the game (which I'll admit was actually a highlight), you are treated to one of the most unsatisfying endings that lacked any closure at all. How fitting. The game never even built up expectation for a payoff though my 8 or so hours with it and it still managed to disappoint. Oh, and I forgot to mention, there are NO COLLECTIBLE ITEMS in this game, not even health or ammo. There is NO reason to replay this game and explore it's maps any farther. Unless you like completing challenges like "Get 50 Headshots" to unlock fucking character profiles. No thanks.

But perhaps the greatest crime, and my closing note, is that this game is never, ever, evererererer scary. For 2007, it was pretty enough in presentation, and the creature design can be quite neat and grotesque, but it fails to ever drape you in it's atmosphere, and thus never makes you feel threatened or frightened. It's world and characters are so disconnected that moments are never tense, but almost certainly frustrating. It's not even an action-horror game. It is an action game, which was the biggest disappointment for me to discover in my month of HORROR. Nothing to see here. Moving on.



The Saw video game comes as a bit of a surprise to me. Don't misinterpret, this game is not good, mediocre at the very most. However, as a fan of the Saw franchise, I went in knowing full well that this series isn't structured well to translate over to video games despite the whole stupid "Would you like to play a game?" tagline the films carry. However, this game SURPRISINGLY showcases some interesting ideas and has a decent premise for its story. Considering my expectations for this game were "total shit", I can't quite call it disappointing that the few strong elements the game has are muddled within its fundamental flaws.

Oh, and since this takes place farther in the Saw timeline, there are minor spoilers, but nothing worth covering your eyes over.

Speaking of no need to cover your eyes, the squeamish need not worry as the Saw video game lacks the graphical capability to recreate any of the disturbing torture gore that the series is known for. Yet it recycles a multitude of the traps from the films, how does that work? The game lacks any originality in the design of the traps. On the subject of lacking, the iconic theme of the series is sorely missing from this game, with sound design overall being poorly handled, especially with enemies shouting, "Where are you?!" to give away their position and ensure that the player is never startled or caught by surprise. Phew! What a relief, amirite?

The player assumes the role of Detective Tapp, obsessed cop from the first film hellbent on catching the Jigsaw murderer. After being shot in the films, Jigsaw decides Tapp's journey would not end here and spares his life by extracting the bullet inside of him. In it's place, however, Jigsaw has left a key implanted in our vengeful protagonist, and left him trapped in an asylum full of desperate subjects that can only be freed from their own game by the key hidden within the detective. The objective to Tapp's tests share striking similarities to that of the third movie, though in this case you are trying to save people you've hurt at the cost of your investigation. I actually like the set up they have in place, drumming

up characters from the films that had potential stories and bringing them to life. Unfortunately, due to a lazily written script and horribly represented characters, the idea of Tapp reflecting on the pain his obsession brings upon others and himself is ultimately ruined and diminishes the promise of any character growth.

Actual gameplay consists of repetitious minigames and broken combat, along with meaningless resource gathering. This was the games greatest missed opportunity, because all the pieces are here for a great horror game, but by adding too many mechanics and supplying the player to the teeth, tension is totally removed. Allow me to explain. Through the game, you can collect items such as tripwires and shotgun shells. With these, booby traps can be set up to lure enemies into in order to manage incoming threats. Sounds like an interesting mechanic that would add strategy and urgency to enemy encounters, but this idea is completely tarnished by two huge mistakes. First off, there is an OVERWHELMING amount of resources dispersed throughout the environment, so you will never run out of materials for traps and therefore never feel under equipped. The second and most glaring problem is that the broken combat system allows you to punch any threat to death with ease, removing the need for traps and rendering the abundant materials totally useless. Seriously, even the hand held weapons like pipes and bats that the game provides prove uselessly slow and are not as reliable as knuckle sandwiches. This removes any and all tension from the game, because you never feel vulnerable, which is inexcusable for a horror title. Think of a game like Outlast, where you're only means of defence is to hide. Imagine that with booby traps. That's what this COULD have been if they just dialed back on the resource handouts and completely removed the combat system. In fact, Tapp is currently recovering from a bullet wound, is he not? I hardly think he would be in the condition for MMA boxing matches and pummeling the life out of people.

Also, just as a side observation, there is the environmental hazard of broken glass on the ground that will inflict damage on Tapp as he has no shoes... Why doesn't he just steal a pair off of a corpse?? Oh well...

I was very impressed by one gameplay addition however. A few hours into the game, the player can find a camera and swap it out with the default lighter as their source of light (Why you

can't shove the lighter in your pocket is beyond me). By firing off the camera flash, any dark area becomes entirely illuminated, but only for a short couple seconds, during which time you will suffer distortion. Being able to uncover threats hidden in the dark instantaneously at the cost of being left vulnerable by the lingering after-image is a PERFECT mechanic for authentic horror, making you fear what you might see when you uncover the darkness. It is also a genius homage to the first film when the character Adam uses his camera flash to do exactly the same and results in probably the most well paced scare in the entire movie. Unfortunately, the game developers didn't recognize horrific abilities this enabled them to conjure great scares as the camera is hardly utilized. Nothing threatening or disturbing lies hidden in the dark awaiting you and it doesn't take long before you acquire the far more effective flashlight, leaving the camera to become another forgotten missed opportunity worth it's own paragraph.

Aside from needing a total reworking of combat to handle opposition and integrating more intelligent attempts to frighten it's audience, Saw could have greatly benefited from a more cinematic approach and overall better presentation. The character's needed to be more humanized with proper facial expression and better writing. None of the traps serve as actual tests or trials for any subjects to overcome and learn from, but instead are condensed to minigames and challenges for Tapp to accomplish while arrogant characters bicker at him to keep them alive. Upon reaching the end, the game presents the player with a moral decision to determine which ending they get, and while both are underwhelming, only one provides closure to the story the way you would expect from Saw (Hint: Saw NEVER gives proper closure).

In the end the Saw video game fails in it's most vital areas. There is no satisfaction to be had with its gameplay or its story. The atmosphere is lacking and while it implements plenty of references to the original source material, it subsequently disrespects it with bad writing and an obvious misunderstanding of the moral structure the series is led by. Yes. Saw has a moral structure. A skewered one for sure, but a firm one nonetheless that the game does not treat appropriately. I would not recommend this game to fans of the series or any players in general unless you are looking for an easy Platinum Trophy.

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