

# Games and history report - Jack Peterson

*by* Jack Peterson

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This is an essay for my game FTL: Faster Than Light [1], in it I will be discussing aspects of the game such as it's genre, visual style, Intended demographic, audio-visual feedback, game structure, challenges, gameflow, replay value and how this has been received by players and other sources such as game critics.

FTL is a real-time strategy as actions performed are all on a timer but the player can pause everything to consider his or her options, this gives more focus to skills like strategy and thinking ahead than reflexes.

FTL is also classed as a 'rogue-lite' which is a derivative of rogue-like, a true rouge-like generally follows the eight tenets of the Berlin interpretation that being the game must have aspects of random environment generation, permadeath, turn-based, grid-based, non-modality, complexity, resource management and hack and slash elements [2], because of these stringent criteria games that don't follow all these tenets but are still regarded as similar are called rogue-lites.[3]

FTL also has role-playing elements, you aren't a player but a captain engaged with a race against time in a universe slowly being devoured by the rebel fleet, some in-game events also reward role-play by establishing rules about the setting such as the mantis being a selfish and violent race so if a potential encounter such as a mantis teleporting into your ship and asking for help to evade another ship happens the player can engage with the narrative and realize the situation is suspicious, thus avoiding a potential trap.

The visual style is a somewhat simplistic pixel art style, crewmembers and alerts are all small enough to be icons which helps in managing them as they don't distract with visual noise and unnecessary colour and lightning, this is important as managing crew and power supplies is a major part of combat and moving around many icons and characters with too much flair may be troubling for the player's attention. The player's display shows their entire ship and all its members to indicate the player's role as a controller of the ship itself and not of any individual members, this is a common motif in strategy games as the player needs a lot of visual information all at once to be able to make strategic decisions.

A survey conducted by Gametree Team [4] suggests strategy games are slightly male-leaning but predominantly unisex, the second chart shows a positive correlation to age and preferring strategy and role-playing games up to a point between 33-42 which implies as players age they become more interested in more complicated and intelligent gameplay and move away from skills reliant on reflexes and visual acuity which many people entering their 30's suffer a drop in, the games ability to pause and simplistic visual design probably alleviate these problems and result in a better experience for its target audience

Colour coding is also an important part of the ui, red in the player's interface an indicator of something they should worry about, the hull's health bar gets redder as it lowers and resources turn into a red zero when empty to indicate at a glance you can't use anymore of it.

The ambience music uses lots of hollow and echoing sounds such as synth bells to instill a feeling of isolation and represent a calm moment in the game, however each track also has a

battle variant which remixes the original with more climatic notes and allows a seamless transition from one track to the other [5].

Every sector has 20 beacons partially connected to each other with way points the player uses to jump from one beacon to another, common for rogue-likes is each level being procedurally generated by a partially random algorithm instead of designed so instead of designing more difficult levels the algorithm can be tweaked to give higher challenges [6].

At the end of every game the player is given a score which is added to a personal leaderboard, high-scores can then be compared and also feed into the aspect of replayability as you drive to reach an even higher score.

Enemy encounters are scaled to the player's current place in the game, early encounters with pirates have weak weapons and few shields and as the player reaches new sectors their enemies grow stronger and encounters become deadlier, this provides a constantly growing challenge to players to avoid them losing interest if the game plays too easy or becoming frustrated if the game is too difficult [7], since enemy difficulty affects loot positively this also feeds into the inverse of enemy scaling where the player is empowered by the enemy and can thus be quickly scaled to match opponents in the same sector, these two balancing techniques seek to keep the player and enemies on ideal footing to provide a more enjoyable challenge.

Resource management is a constant challenge for players, both in battle with crew and power being directed to different rooms as well as out of it with scrap (in-game currency) and missiles used to operate some weapons, the player gains more things to manage as they hire crew and equip weapons but the growth in complexity is slow to avoid overwhelming the player.

Whilst the player would want to explore every beacon in a sector they're constrained by the constant pressing threat of the rebel fleet which slowly consumes the game map and destroys whatever was underneath it, this acts as a warning timer to induce panic and tension with the ultimate goal of stopping players from wasting their time and potentially disengaging with the game [8], the timer only moves between in-game jumps and doesn't move with real-time which avoids rewarding taking actions without thinking as that would detract from the gameplay loop and may inversely punish players for engaging.

“experienced players will seek out the boundaries of a new game as quickly as possible, even if it involves dying over and over again. They understand that, not only is it a more fun way to play, but the knowledge they gain from it will help them succeed in the long run.”

- Derek Yu [9]

This quote from Derek Yu I feel accurately reflects how players approach challenges in the game, while the immediate goal is to reach the end players are pushed by the potential rewards offered by beacons to explore beyond and around that goal as much as possible before the imminent threat of rebels drives them to escape. Balancing this window of opportunity provides a growing tension as sectors (levels) progress and often finishes with a big race to the finish at the end of every sector, this gameflow of small rises and falls in a single sector surrounded by

an overarching rise and fall in the endgame adds room for players to strategize around the time they have as they must consider the future and sacrifice things in a hierarchy of urgency. Combat is fast-paced but the player can always pause to consider things, this makes time itself a resource as weapons and systems all run on their own timer than only ticks down when the player unpauses, combat also has a layer of room management both for yourself and the enemy as both of your weapons, shields and essential systems occupy rooms that can be targeted, as enemies damage those rooms of your ship the corresponding systems shut down and vice versa [10] which makes combat frenetic as a lucky shot can render a vital system non-functional.

The game is almost entirely random, each beacon can trigger a random event where you're boarded by pirates, find a cache of weapons, pass through a battle zone or some other random event. Random events aren't truly random and often have several defined outcomes and sometimes 'blue options' which indicate a specific condition has been met beforehand, this means the player can use information from previous games to make an informed decision in these encounters which rewards memorization.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman would say that information is a measure of uncertainty and that on the micro level uncertainty, information and probability all share a set of formal relations [11], in regards to FTL this means as the player gains information some uncertainty is cleared which rewards understanding and memorizing the outcomes to random events, whereas more uncertainty from encountering new scenarios and exploration rewards them information and in turn opens up new possibilities, this cycle of gaining information from encounters and gaining new opportunities from information means there are higher states of play that would've normally not been encountered by players early in the game and thus provide much more content in replays.

Restarting a game is also quite easy needing only a single button press and giving the player a single page of text before jumping back into the game, this can be considered a great design around a desire path as the player's are likely to use this 'path' many times so the designer made sure it was intuitive to do [12] which dramatically improves ease of restarts.

Fan consensus has suggested that the game has aged well and continues to be played as the moment-to-moment combat and replayability are both well-liked aspects of the gameplay [13]. The controls and hotkeys can be odd for new players, it has a 'catch and release' mouse control where things such as crew members are selected with right-click and sent to a room with a left-click, this is an uncommon break from the standard as most games use the right-click for both selecting and placing. Crew movement and combat also focuses on the use of hotkeys which aren't as common for cursor-focused games which often exclusively use icons on the screen which are selected by the cursor. These two factors both add barriers to entry for new players as they make the user interface a bit more complicated and add another level of learning before the player can actually engage with the game which may also deter potential players from even starting the game.

Also, as a randomly generated game the difficulty can become unbalanced, whilst the game does have many safeguards such as increasing loot to put players on the same level as the sector these aspects are also randomized leading some runs to hitting steep difficulty curves or

being spoiled by poor luck, a common complaint for roguelikes is "no matter what you do or how much you plan or how well you understand the game, you can lose it all on a coin-toss and have to start all the way from the beginning with nothing to show for all your effort" [14].

In conclusion FTL: Faster Than Light is a real-time strategy, rouge-lite with an engaging and easy to read design, the random generation incentivises replays whilst still rewarding calculated risk and continues to offer a climactic challenge throughout the playthrough

## Bibliography

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## GRADEMARK REPORT

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### FINAL GRADE

64/100

### GENERAL COMMENTS

#### 1. Engagement With Literature Skills

Independent research has been conducted in the submitted work with a good range of sources listed in the bibliography – this includes information that goes beyond other reviews of the game which is good to see. IEEE formatting has been used in the Bibliography and in-text citations as requested by the brief.

#### 2. Knowledge & Understanding Skills

A good understanding of the nature of the work is indicated in the content provided.

An explanation of the differences between Roguelike and Roguelite are featured in the report – this is evidence of information retrieved independently and applied to the assignment – good work.

Referencing the work of Derek Yu again shows understanding and application of knowledge gained through independent research. This is good.

#### 3. Cognitive & Intellectual Skills

Analysis of game genre, demographic and gameplay elements are present in the submitted work, which is good as this shows analytical thinking is being applied to the assessment.

Replay value has been identified in the form of high-scores, which is a good way to incentivise additional engagement with the game.

#### **4. Practical Application Skills**

*(not assessed in this assignment).*

#### **5. Transferrable Skills for Life and Professional Practice**

All elements of the assessment have been submitted successfully to the online Turnitin system before the specified deadline date.

Inclusion of some images would be good to see, as this could help provide some context to the text of the report and help illustrate certain features, factors or themes such as the shell menus and in-game map screens.

Including a title page and possibly contents and sub-headings may be a consideration for future work, as this helps raise the professionalism of the work overall.

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