

Orcs Must Die! Game Review

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Orcs Must Die! Game **Review**

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Introduction



Fig. 1: The cover art for 'Orcs Must Die!', taken from [1].

'Orcs Must Die!' is a game developed and published by Robot Entertainment [2]. Releasing on Xbox 360 and PC in 2011 [3], this game falls under the tower defence genre, where you are tasked with defending 'Rifts' from oncoming swarms of enemies, using a plethora of spells and structures at your disposal. It seems simple on the surface, however its presentation, execution, and the way it presents its challenges and mechanics to the player make this game stand on its own. In this review I will be discussing how it accomplishes this, looking at certain aspects of the game, including presentation, gameplay, challenge and replay value.

Premise

The premise is incredibly simple. Set within a medieval fantasy world, there is an organization known as 'The Order', which protect magical portals called 'Rifts'. One day, a group of monsters known as 'The Mob' launch a large-scale attack, wiping out all but one member of the Order, the main character known as the 'Hero'. Being the only living member of the Order left, it is the Hero's duty to protect both the human world and the Rifts inside the fortresses from the invasion of monsters by using his magic.



Fig. 2: A screenshot of one of the opening cutscene, explaining the context and situation to the player. Screenshot taken in game.

A very simple premise, however, in this game's case, it works in its favour. Scott Rogers says in 'Level Up! The Guide to Great Video Game Design' that "If gameplay is the meat of the game, then story should be the salt: just enough will add flavour but too much can ruin everything and kill you", stating that whilst not all games have stories, all games "still generate a narrative, which literally means "an order of events"." [4]. 'Orcs Must Die!' uses this the premise to provide the backdrop for the 'narrative', your motivation for completing your objectives, which is defending Rifts from the Mob. This narrative fits the game perfectly, setting the stage for the player. For a game like this, you don't need an overtly complicated story, and for what it is, it does its job well.

Gameplay

'Orcs Must Die!' comes under the tower-defence genre. Your goal is to defend Rifts from oncoming enemies, coming in waves that follow predetermined paths. You must clear all waves in each stage whilst ensuring that the Rift still has enough 'Rift Points', its health, to progress onto the next one. You lose Rift Points either by dying and respawning, or if an enemy reaches the Rift. If it reaches zero, you lose and must retry the stage. These are all very common tropes within the genre, defending the 'tower' from enemy waves. This is seen in games like 'Bloons TD 6' [5], where you must stop oncoming waves of 'Bloons' by

placing down different 'Monkeys' to eliminate enemies before they can reach the end of the predetermined path.



Fig. 3: A screenshot of Bloons TD 6 [5]. Screenshot taken in game.

'Orcs Must Die!' is no different, as you have a variety of different 'traps' that you can use to defeat the oncoming waves, from spikes that come out from the floor to grinders which sucks in nearby enemies, all par for the course. However, there is something that makes 'Orcs Must Die' stand out amongst other tower-defence games. For games like Bloons, you view the stage from a top-down perspective, the only control you have is placing down monkeys whilst you watch them fend off waves of Bloons (except for the helicopter which follows your cursor). You can keep placing and upgrading monkeys during waves, but you don't have much control in the stage, merely watching and managing your defences whilst waves play out. 'Orcs Must Die!', however, allows you to control the Hero in a 3D environment with a 3rd person perspective.



Fig. 4: A screenshot showing the 3rd person perspective in 'Orcs Must Die!'. Screenshot taken in game.

This isn't just for show either, the player actively gets to engage in combat. The Hero has access to a variety of weapons in game, such as a ring that shoots lightning and acid bombs. This completely changes how the player would normally approach a tower-defence game. As opposed to just placing and managing your defences, the player gets to assist in defending the tower itself by using both the structures they have placed and their own arsenal of weapons, allowing themselves to help influence the outcome of battle.

Combining the management and strategy of tower-defence with action and shooter genres helps give a fresh spin on the usual tower-defence affair. Having elements of action and shooting allows the game to have a much wider appeal to more than just fans of the tower-defence genre, opening itself up to a broader demographic. Other games as well have meshed these concepts together, such as Double Fine's 'Iron Brigade', where you control a mech whilst you defend your base from 'Monovisions', whilst building up your defences [6].



Fig. 5: A screenshot showing 'Iron Brigade' [6]. Screenshot taken from [7].

Whilst it may not be the only game of its kind, what makes 'Orcs Must Die!' stand out is the approach the game allows you to take to defend the tower. For example, many levels in game have large acid pools in certain parts of the level. The player has access to traps and weapons such as the 'Spring Trap' and 'Wind Belt', which allow you to fling enemies into these pools. 'Orcs Must Die!' makes you take the level's design into consideration when building traps or when you're in combat. You can use certain parts of the level to your advantage, whether that be acid pools, or blocking off branching paths with barricades to slow down enemies. It encourages you to use traps, weapons and the environment in tandem and to consider the stage's layout.



Fig. 6: A screenshot of the Hero using the 'Wind Belt' in game to blow enemies into an acid pool in the level. Screenshot taken in game.

The game gives you ample opportunity to experiment using certain traps together as well, as many have good synergy, like using the 'Arrow Launcher' with floor traps like the 'Tar Trap', which slows down enemies that walk on it. As the Arrow Launcher must reload every time it fires, you can use Tar Traps to slow enemies and allow it to reload, finishing off enemies not caught in the crossfire. The player can do this too with their weapons, such as blowing the enemies into a trap which can shoot them. Chris Crawford, in his book 'Chris Crawford on game design', talks about pattern recognition, how 'A pattern need not be strictly visual; it can take a more abstruse form.' [8]. In the case of 'Orcs Must Die!', the game allows the player to experiment and find out how to combine certain level mechanics, weapons and traps together to efficiently defend the tower to achieve your goal. However, even though the game gives you a nice selection of traps and weapons, you only play as one character throughout. Having multiple characters with differing stats, abilities and weapons would further add to the depth and experimentation that this game offers.

You want to do this, as for every kill you and your traps get, you rack up a kill streak combo, which allows you to receive more currency in return. Traps in the game cost money, and certain traps are very costly. So, the game encourages you to find the most optimal and brutal strategies to fight back against the horde of enemies so that you can further build more traps and further your streak combos, providing a good balance of challenge.

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Fig. 7: 2 screenshots showing the kill streak combo and the reward the player gets after achieving it. Screenshot taken in game.

Beating a stage rewards you with 'Skulls', up to 5 in normal difficulties, which is based on your performance. They are used to upgrade your traps, such as making the tar pits slow enemies down further. Along with the leaderboard scoring system that the game offers, it gives players incentives to optimize their runs throughout each stage and to find the best strategies to find in each to achieve a high-ranking score and Skulls that they can use to further their gameplan.



Fig. 8: A screenshot showing the results screen after being 'Overpass', a level in the game. Screenshot taken in game.

The base game has 24 stages in total. Whilst not seeming like much, thanks to the leaderboards and a new difficulty mode unlocked after beating the game, it gives the game a good amount of replay value. However, this game lacks multiplayer or co-op modes, being a strictly single player experience. A very polished and well-rounded experience, but a game of this genre would benefit from having multiplayer, where you can work together to build your defences and fight together against an onslaught of enemies. This would increase replay value, as it would give people a game that they could play with friends repeatedly, not just strictly a single player romp. The sequel, 'Orcs Must Die! 2' [9], addresses this, by giving players access to co-op, as well as adding new playable characters.

Presentation

In terms of presentation, 'Orcs Must Die!' has a cartoony art style, with the textures being hand-drawn. This look and feel fits the medieval/fantasy setting the game is set in. Visually, for a game released in 2011, it holds up significantly well. There isn't much in the way of visual effects, but the art style and cel-shaded lighting are very polished and allow the game to still look nice today. Still, the lack of visual effects like particle effects, whilst not necessary, would have been nice to have and would add to the world's immersion.

The main colour palette is mostly a mix of greys, blues, oranges and browns. Whilst seeming drab on paper, it fits the setting of a castle fortress in a dreary world and the colours chosen are pleasant on the eyes. This also allows the Hero, dressed in bright white and yellow, to stick out in the game. Contrasting his heroic character in a dreary land of monsters is a very nice touch. This also applies to the monsters, with the most common, the orc, standing out in the game environment with its bright green skin colour, putting focus on the enemy.



Fig. 9: A screenshot of the environment in 'Orcs Must Die!'. Screenshot taken in game.

Not only that, but the slapstick humour and the tongue in cheek tone that the game constantly has throughout is complemented by the visual style. You can see this in the hero's design, having a smug and prideful look on the cover whilst he's slaying orcs, making him out to be a man who, whilst capable, isn't very sharp or dignified, being more of a beefcake, always fumbling and getting into mischief, which the cutscenes in game show. It takes on a comical tone, and it works well.



Fig. 10: A screenshot of one of the cutscenes in game showing the Hero being trained as an apprentice. Screenshot taken in game.

The visual style and comedic tone also effects player feedback. For example, the 'Spring Trap' flings enemies in a comical manner, making them ragdoll whilst they're being flung back. It's comedic and unrealistic, but it provides the player with feedback and satisfaction that their trap has successfully worked, especially when they see a cluster of enemies flying towards their demise. The sound direction also complements this, with the kill combo counter making sounds, as well as weapons and traps providing feedback sounds that show they are actively working, such as sounds of arrows shooting and fire being blasted, with the Hero making quips when monsters die. This tells the player that their gameplan is going well, making them feel accomplishment for successfully building their defences strategically.



Fig. 11: A screenshot showing enemies being flung into an acid pool with ragdoll physics. Screenshot taken in game.

In 'The Art of Game Design : A book of lenses', Jesse Schell talks about how important the ability to see is, using a saltshaker as an example, how it's important not just to see it but "to really see it — see its shapes, colors, proportions, shadows, reflections, and textures — to see its relationship to its environment and to the people who use it, and to see its function", saying how you have to fully immerse the person seeing it. [10]. 'Orcs Must Die!' succeeds in this, immersing you in its cartoonish fantasy world with its characters, visual style and slapstick humour.

In addition, the HUD is clean and easy to understand, providing essential info that the player would need, such as health and magic power, a map of the stage and the current wave round. Having a well-designed user interface is important for allowing players to ease into any game, and in this game, it doesn't get intrusive, rather only assisting the player by allowing them to glance at info that they might need at any given time, which is good as the player needs to be more focused on the game, not being distracted by the HUD.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst the game lacks elements such as co-op and multiple characters, the game still makes up for it with a refreshing take of the tower-defence genre by combining elements of action and third-person shooters. It's a simple game to understand but allows the player to experiment with its many traps and weapons, and to use the level's design to assist their gameplan and strategy, allowing it to become so much more. It's a game that fans of the tower-defence genre can easily pick up and play and even people who aren't even big fans of the genre can get into it too. Along with its massive replayability and its presentation values being very high quality, make this game a very well-rounded package that's worth trying out.

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

77/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. Engagement With Literature Skills

Research has been evidenced and in-text citations have been used, with sources such as Scott Rogers used to help with points of discussion, which is always good to see as not only does it re-enforce the statements being made but shows the application of independently-sourced research.

A very good range of research has been used for the assignment, providing an interesting and well balanced piece of work. Well done.

2. Knowledge & Understanding Skills

An excellent grasp of the assignment's purpose has been evidenced in the submitted work. The content is not only informed and observant but well-written and objective, relying on comparisons and analysis rather than opinion when discussing the game.

Appreciation of tone, feedback and visual style is evident in the work presented for assessment. The use of comedy to lighten the mood of a game of this nature has been noted in the written work.

3. Cognitive & Intellectual Skills

A good analysis of Orcs Must Die!'s unique elements in the Tower Defence genre has been made in the review, with comparisons drawn against more traditional Tower Defence games.

Additionally, the observations for level design playing a factor in gameplay choices and tactics is good to see, as this is definitely something this game does well.

Suggestions have been made that may increase replay value and variety in the gameplay which are again based in theory and research. The addition of different playable characters would definitely add another level of tactical play and choice to the game.

4. Practical Application Skills

(not assessed in this assignment)

5. Transferrable Skills for Life and Professional Practice

The report is very well presented and written, with a good sense of flow within the content. Inclusion of relevant images adds context to the review, and relevant captions have been used – good work.

The review is objective and descriptive and reads well, with structured subheadings tackling different elements. Overall this is an excellent example of a game review that celebrates a game's achievements and suggests ways in which improvements can be made based on theory and research.

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