HOW TO NOT SUCK AT GAME DESIGN

GAME DESIGN, ART, RESOURCES, RESEARCH, CRITICISM, TUTORIALS & STUFF BY ANJIN ANHUT.

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With this post I'm participating in polyneux.de's top 10 games of 2011 special, where many german blogs collectively decide what was most awesome last year.

Normally stuff like this is hard to decide, but this year… man… I only can come up with 8 games worthy of being listed. The rest is a homogeneous blob of nice but unremarkable games, some boring and many plain bad titles. Not to say 2011 was a bad year. For 2010 I also got 6 worth mentioning and for 2009 only 4 titles.

One factor might be, that I only own an XBOX360, when it comes to current generation systems (also a MAC , which doesn't count for shit and a neglected DS and iPhone). There aren't enough PS3 exclusive titles to make me buy one, Uncharted series maybe, but nah. If I would own a PS3, I'd probably include Uncharted 3 on my list. It looks spectacular.

I also never was tempted to get me a wii. Motion controls still are just a gimmick to me. A gimmick which makes playing tiersome and unresponsive. Also you can't hook me with Mario and Zelda games anymore. No matter how brilliant the games are made, they are always an equal mix of fresh new ideas and warmed up leftovers. And when I get nostalgic, I prefer to actually plug in my SNES again. Blowing cartridges and all.

That doesn't mean, I just played a few games last year. I played tons of games, mostly 360 rentals, but also indie games, browser games, XBLA titles and even more tons of pre 2011 games, since I had a lot of catching up to do.

Anyway, since 8 is a weird number, this list will be a top5 plus a few honorable mentions. Here we go:

5: Gears Of War 3

It's just a beast. Playing Gears3 is what I imagine driving a tank must feel like. EPIC games unleashes an onslaught of creatures, soldiers, war machines, giants, dinosaurs and dragons on you. But you just steamroll over the hordes and are the last man standing. Always outnumbered, never outgunned.

The gameplay is just tight. Controls are perfect, everything feels right, AI is kick ass, art direction spot on and the story actually offers some genuine great moments. Yeah, the ending spoiled a lot of the fun for me, but that I'm going to

ignore here. Also the extra content, modes, multiplayer and unlockables make it the total package.

4: Mortal Kombat

The game is already on the index here in germany, but man was I happy to have bought it before it landed there.

The game feels, looks and sound just spectacular. Detailed character models getting damaged, an insane amount of super-expressive animations, epic backdrops, fluid combat, fun moves… Massive content, unlockables, many modes, a groundbreaking story mode and the oozing love for details in every aspect of the game, never fail to impress.

3: L.A. Noire

The facial animation technology not only makes for one fascinating tech demo, the great writing and campaign pacing, along with the stellar performance of the actors make L.A.Noire a playing experience like non other.

And, damn, is this game beautiful… in color and in the optional black-and-white mode.

2: Dragon Age 2

This games has countless problems. Real problems. Awkward location recycling being the most annoying to me. But what puts the game on spot to is how successful Bioware makes me feel involved in the campaign. The world is believable, the characters are relatable and your decisions have a strong effect on what's happening during the well

written story.

I'm currently playing it for the third time, in a row (!), and still find myself surprised about new twists and developments. Oh and there is Aveline… for decades I was reluctant to decide who my favorite video game character would be, but no more. Its her.

1: Batman Arkham City

It's Arkham City dammit! A perfect blend of game mechanics, impossibly grandiose art direction, polish polish polish and entertaining story. Still the most sophisticated melee combat system out there, period. What most impressed me, how the game managed to present me with the freedom of and open world and still kept me tightly engaged in a well paced campaign. Insert Citizen Kane clapping gif here.

Runners Up

Fight Night Champion – The champion mode, where you basically play a Rocky movie, with a black protagonist, including corrupt promoters, prison fights, an Ivan Drago stand-in and a Mickey-like trainer to push you during the fights… great stuff.

Deus Ex Human Revolution – That look, that music, the kick-ass stealth gameplay… wasn't it for the screwed up and badly balanced boss fights, this game would be top5.

Alice – Madness Returns – The game design is uninspired and repetitive. But what the game lacks in gameplay ideas it makes up for with stunning visuals and an intense fairytale world for mature audiences. Quite an experience.

And What About…

…Dark Souls? – Really? If you get satisfaction out of overcoming the embarrassing usability, lazy game design and the obvious complete lack of play testing, be my guest. I like my games with some fucking effort put in, thank you very much.

…Skyrim? – Sorry, not my type of game. There are just way too many and way too long stretches of aimless roaming and unworthy fetch quests to keep me entertained between the rare nuggets of epicness.

…Portal 2? – Played the first one, liked the concept. But just making it bigger and more complicated, does not warrant a second play through. I need some stakes, someone to save, someone to defeat, and being a lab-rat got old the first game already. The overall product is undeserving of the clever gameplay.

…Uncharted 3? – like I said, don't own a PS3, so I haven't played it.

…Battlefield 3? – Oh, come on. What a piece of crap. A game needs more than a high budget to be worth something. Realistic military shooters a conceptually bankrupt. Played the rental and, like MW3, I played the game on autopilot. Ugh.

And You?

Anything I missed this year? Must plays? What's your top5 and why? Any games, that pissed you off? (Except the obvious, "I was so disappointed by Dragon Age 2, it is not like origins at all.")

Cheers

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Alex
on **February 19, 2012 at 11:59 am** said:

Huh. DA2 is in your top 5 and yet you claim Dark Souls is poorly designed and untested.

Mind you, I respect subjectivity in all artful experience, but don't you think you might have lacked some necessary objectivity in that statement? By all accounts, Dark Souls has some of the best visual design of the year and a very fine-tuned combat system. It's not a game where you're meant to plough through enemies, but one where you're meant to strategise, use the environment to your advantage and use your character build efficiently. Both Demon's Souls and Dark Souls certainly lack any indication of how to build a character or upgrade items, mind, and they should be criticised for that. But once you know how to build a character (and it's easy once you get past the game's opaque refusal to tell you how), strategies and efficient gear choices begin to suggest themselves.

What sort of annoys me — and I say this as a lover of history, medieval martial arts and folklore, mind you — is that fantasy games mostly follow the patterns set down by D&D, Dragon Age included. Dark Souls (and its predecessor) is a breath of fresh air, breaking the chain of revealing breastplate and overpowered magic. Even the weapons that are stupidly big are either exaggerations of real designs or, for the really silly examples, look completely arcane to begin with. While not everything is realistic (obviously), the designers of Dark Souls really seem to understand what weapons combat is, and they based their game design around it. The result is something that requires a lot of minute player input to succeed at, testing its audience's grasp of timing, distance and angle.

Furthermore, unlike DA or DA2, it lacks what's called a "dominant strategy". This is when a game has a particular way of doing things that solves situations easily. Sometimes intentional, sometimes not. In the case of the DA games, however, dominant strategies are too easy to find (make someone really good at offensive magic and you'll no doubt stumble upon at least a couple), whereas Dark Souls throws the whole concept of a dominant strategy away. One has to be survive and then react. And that's sort of what Dark Souls is — a survival horror with excellent combat and RPG progression mechanics.

> **Anjin Anhut**
> on **February 19, 2012 at 5:28 pm** said:
>
> @Alex…
>
> Dark Souls…. hm… Since I already dedicated a full article and countless comment responses on setting people straight, who try to sell Dark Souls as a solid game, I wont take that bait again here. Let's say we both greatly differ on what fine-tuned means and what constitutes best visual design. You can read me and others elaborate here more if you like:
> http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=3538
>
> Don't get me wrong. I appreciate you chiming in here. Your Gears 3 comment was quite an interesting angle on the possible backgrounds of the mythology. But people trying to explain to me that all the stuff I found to be horribly broken in Dark Souls is actually good game design just annoy me now. Like Jehova's witnesses trying to convince me about their god thing. It's not there. People just think it is.

Kaucukovnik
on **February 15, 2012 at 3:26 pm** said:

So…Deus Ex: Human Revolution didn't make the list because of fucked up 10-20 minutes out of the whole game? While Dragon Age 2 with its recycled areas and waves of filler enemies for the whole duration of the game are fine. The fabulous writing, I guess. "I want to be a dragon!"

Nikita

on **February 14, 2012 at 1:22 pm** said:

You only played 8 games this year? :P

Jessica

on **January 28, 2012 at 9:47 pm** said:

really? DA2? No, really not!
There were so much greater games last year! much, much greater!
I Love Dragon Age, but the whole Kirkwall, Characters, lame Deep Roads, disgusting leveldesign, no innovation…
Dragon Age 2 had so much more potential if Bioware would had take the time they needed to get the game complete!
I absolutely disagree.
Whats with Alice, madness returns for example? What a wonderfull game! Funny, Crazy, Pretty!
L.A.Noire, yeah. inspiring!
greetings.

Phobosis

on **January 20, 2012 at 8:43 am** said:

I didn't really like singleplayer part of Portal 2.
You see, Portal wasn't about portals. It was about innovation, experimentation, about thinking different, about feeling your horizons expanding. Portal 2 doesn't make you think different, it doesn't teach you anything new, you just use the tricks you learned long time ago. It's plays more like a huge addon/DLC with lots of additional content (we used to call stuff like that Brood War and Yuri's Revenge), not like true sequel.

What I did like though, is Portal 2's coop mode. It really deserves "2″, because it multiplies your possibilities exponentially. It is actually a new game, and a good one.
I think you should play it cooperatively, really.

Orcs Must Die wasn't bad too. Don't know if it qualifies for top5, but it surely qualifies as one of the best games of the genre.

Oleg

on **January 17, 2012 at 10:18 am** said:

Battlefield 3 is good for it's competetive and cool multiplayer that much better that MW3. Single – yes, it's piece of crap and it is big mistake that EA made it. Battlefield brings online experience in FPS on a whole new level.

VoEC

on **January 16, 2012 at 2:27 am** said:

Hey, i've been reading your blog for a while. Really great stuff you post here.

I'm not really agreeing with your Top 5, but I'm not gonna comment on that. Everyone has their own tastes and opinion, right?

But I would like to comment on one thing. From your "And What About‚Äö√Ñ¬∂" segment I get the impression that you did not bother to play Portal 2, since you think it is just a reheat of the old concept? I have to beg you: At least try it!
Before the release I thought like you. I thought that they would just add a few more test chambers with the same plot,

the same repetitive environment, throw in some cake references and like I said, reheat the concept.

And I have to admit, perhaps the first 1/3 of the game is really just that. The old tests in a slightly new optic with a few added gameplay elements. Up until this point I didn't really enjoy the game all that much.

But then there is a kind of… story shift. In my opinion Valve did amazing things with the characters and their personalities in the game which sadly only shows after about 2/3.

The new environment (2nd part) and the characters really made up for the lame beginning. Stephen Merchant, J.K. Simmons and of course Ellen McLain did an incredible job at voice acting (of course only, if you play it in English) and their characters are so well written. In my opinion Valve raised the bar here in terms of character portrayal and presentation in games.

So please, play it at least about half-way through until the major turning point. If you do and still don't like it you can beat me with a banana and never even look at a Portal game again!

Of course, if you did already play it and didn't like it, well… just forget about all this. But I can not imagine this.

Secondly I would like to ask if you played Rayman:Origins? Sadly I do not play on consoles and only had the chance to try the first levels at a friends house. But I still really enjoyed it. The gameplay is very smooth and the art and sound design is brilliant. Overall it seems like a great expierience. I hope they will release a pc port.

So, those are my favorite games of 2011. Hope this was not to much of a wall of text.

Anjin Anhut
on **January 16, 2012 at 11:14 pm** said:

@VoEc

I'M pretty sure, I will eventually play Portal2. I just didn't get around to play it so far (and I didn't finish the first game, for lack of sustained interest), and when it was time to do a top list for 2011, Portal2 was just not played yet. Rayman is on my must play list as well.