

Game review samples

By Damien King (damienking.com) | Originally written for GameCynic

SteamWorld Quest Review (2019)

SteamWorld developers Image & Form have never been known to hold steadfastly to a single genre, with previous SteamWorld entries including turn-based space shooter (and hat collector) SteamWorld Heist, and two platformer adventures in the Dig series, the latter of which we gave an astounding 9.3. In their latest title, we're transported to a fantasy setting, following the adventures of a few plucky steambots as they face down an invading army of evil.

SteamWorld Quest plays things straight when it comes to gameplay, keeping things simple and foregoing much of the chaff that even casual RPGs tend to offer. The game plays linearly in chapters rather than any kind of explorable map, with each chapter being a self-contained area to explore in a room to room, branching corridor fashion with the occasional hidden room to discover and loot. It's simple but effective, keeping non-combat downtime down to a minimum and reducing the need to backtrack beyond a desire to make sure each chapter is fully explored and looted.

At first glance, it's easy to make comparisons with Slay the Spire — and while Quest uses a similar turn-based, cards as attacks system, it manages to carve its own identity with how it approaches combat and keeps each encounter fresh and exciting.

You'll be capped at playing a maximum of three cards per turn, which encourages more tactical approaches to which cards are played and, thanks to a lack of hand discarding at the end of each turn, which to save for later. Each hero in your party has their own customisable pool of exactly eight cards shuffled into your deck, and playing three cards from the same hero in one turn invokes and plays a special fourth card unique to that character, such as party-wide armor or health buffs. Certain cards also have a combo function, triggering an additional effect if they're played directly after a card from a different hero.

On top of these strategic decisions, cards either generate or consume a resource called steam. Playing simple attacks or buffs builds up your steam, with strong skills requiring various amounts of steam to play; reliably playing a single hero's three card chain becomes more difficult as you'll often lack enough steam to play all of their cards in your hand, particularly if you're fond of running expensive cards.

In fact, juggling steam and having enough cards to cover most situations becomes a fun art in itself. While deckbuilding feels simple early on, you'll soon begin gathering a steady stream of new cards from treasure chests and travelling merchants, and the hard limit of eight cards per character makes building a strong deck tricky enough to stay interesting. Where most card games are content with letting you ultimately build a deck with all the best cards, Quest forces you to balance between utilising your favorite powerhouse abilities and having enough basic cards on hand to generate the steam for them.

Poor deckbuilding is quickly punished, too — while you're able to discard and redraw up to two cards per turn, badly constructed decks will still mean that you'll have turns where you simply can't play anything. Furthermore, if a hero's health reaches zero, their cards cannot be played but are still drawn as normal, cluttering your hand with unplayable skills unless you have and are willing to consume a revive item.

While this all may sound punishing and overly tricky, don't let me discourage you: SteamWorld Quest's combat has a great feel and flow to it. The hard limitations imposed on your deck force you to be creative, and every new card acquisition makes you think whether it'd be worth changing out your (hopefully) solid deck and how to best play around the newfound ability; not to mention when options to rotate party members out for new characters arise, each replete with their own cards and playstyles to explore and combo with.

Those party members are more than just walking decks, of course. SteamWorld games have always embraced witty writing and Quest is no exception, with each character having plenty of bizarre personality — such as wannabe knight Armilly's penchant for narrating the adventure, or the affable but unenthused Galleo, who just wants to go home and hang out in bed. We've all been there, buddy.

Image & Form manage to keep playing the characters off of each other throughout their journey, developing in-jokes and occasional groaners that always manage to raise a smile and help carry the game along in slower moments where progress gets a little tougher.

Fans of the ever evolving SteamWorld universe are in luck, as Quest embraces the lighthearted, quirky humor and lovable characters that the games thrive on.

Though the game may be a little short, with the main story taking about fifteen to twenty hours, the journey is full of finely tuned combat and daft party banter, making it worth every penny.

Battle Princess Madelyn Review (2018)

I wanted to like this game, I really did. The graphics are wonderful, the overall aesthetic of each area is interesting and the premise behind the game — that the lead developer's young daughter inspired and helped design much, if not all of the experience — is both unusual and attention piquing. Battle Princess Madelyn's pixel art and tough, oldschool gameplay aim to hit nostalgic notes for those of us old enough to remember games on cassette tapes or pouring endless coins into arcade machines.

Regrettably, the game itself plays out as a lackluster experience, neglecting the wealth of level design wisdom that has developed since those days of yore, resulting in a hugely frustrating cycle of repeatedly getting lost and dying, with no sense of progress.

Madelyn boasts two modes — a story mode with a world to explore, NPCs to quest for and the usual adventuring, and a more straightforward arcade mode which plays more like the vintage classics that so readily inspire it, in particular the Ghosts 'n Goblins/Ghouls 'n Ghosts series. Story mode is the main adventure, offering a supposedly easier time, while the tougher arcade mode throws a lot more enemies at you, playing the oldschool "hold on to your pants" feel a lot closer to its chest.

Firing up the game for the first time, I half-expected Battle Princess Madelyn to be very easy; after all, it'd make perfect sense that a game "co-developed" by a child would, in turn, be suitable for players of that age, who are typically bouncing around the fun, colorful environments of the likes of Mario and Shantae. However,

whether by design or just developer inexperience, the game cannot remotely be accused of being easy.

The first 30-40 minutes of the game eases you in nicely, and it's clear that a lot of time went into polishing the initial experience. While elements like quest breadcrumbs and NPC dialogue are a little clunky, and the first section of the game is perhaps a tad too hand-holding, Madelyn quickly gets you up to speed with what to expect from your journey around the world. Mistakes lead to quick deaths, with Madelyn losing her armor when she's down to a sliver of health (a nice nod to Ghouls' Sir Arthur), but the early game is reasonably forgiving.

Unfortunately, once the first dungeon is cleared and the debut boss downed, things take a major turn for the worse. From the second area onwards exploring the maps becomes a tiresome chore, with little sense of direction and confusing layouts exacerbated by awful screen-by-screen level design. For instance, there are countless spots where as you progress you'll end up on platform with no view of what's below, and the leap of faith to whatever lays below often ends up a fifty-fifty chance of landing on an instakill obstacle.

[image/video example]

You'll naturally end up on this platform as you try to figure out a way to continue through the second area, and whichever way you decide to jump, drop or fall off, you'll end up dying in the water below. Oh, and you'll respawn back on this platform. Excellent.

The game is, unfortunately, chock full of inane level design decisions like this. Enemies spawn almost directly on your character at times, while others are placed in positions where it's almost impossible to continue without taking damage — and in the early game when you can only take two hits before death, these feel more akin to stabbing your thumbs into a hedgehog rather than enjoying a tricky platformer. Add to this the regularity in which you'll run out of magic, a resource partially spent to revive yourself whenever you die, and you'll be sent back to the start of your current zone all the time.

Other elements of gameplay also feel like they've missed the mark; simple things that modern gamers take for granted are missing from Madelyn, and the wound left behind aches constantly. Sometimes it's little things, like being unable to throw

weapons diagonally or, more frustratingly, upwards if you're currently climbing something. Not a problem for most games, but Madelyn likes to add enemies right at the top of climbable things — not even slightly off to the side, just enough for you to quickly whisk yourself up onto the ledge and duck beneath any incoming projectiles, but right in the way to make sure you lose some of that sparse health you're desperately clinging to.

Just to be clear, my problem with Battle Princess Madelyn isn't that "it's too hard", but that the core design of the game is extremely frustrating. I've been playing and completing punishing titles for decades — including the Ghosts games on the ZX Spectrum — so I have no problem with tricky games as long as they're fun and designed well. Madelyn simply isn't.

Common staples of platformers have been ignored or forgotten, too. Being struck by (or landing on) an enemy results in a hefty knockback but the game doesn't offer any true invincibility frames during the loss of control, so expect plenty of unavoidable deaths from knockback into spikes, water and other hazards. And while the game does offer a rudimentary fast travel mechanic, the stones that you can warp to and from are few and far between, sometimes with multiple areas spanning between them. I would've liked to have seen some form of item that could warp you back to the last fast travel stone you visited as traversing the maps to head back to a town is not only monotonous but, with the hefty amount of cheap deaths, frustrating to the point of simply preferring to quit the game instead.

Simple additions would make the current nightmare of exploring the areas much easier; an example would be the countless arrow signs all over the place that tell you nothing except "something is this way... somewhere"; giving the player the ability to interact with the sign to see what the hell is actually in that direction would be a godsend. I spent far too long putting up with instant deaths, pixel perfect jumps and invulnerable monsters following these signs before reaching the fabled exits they pointed to... which whisked me back to the previous area.

All in all, there's a pervasive feeling that Madelyn simply wasn't tested by regular players outside of perhaps friends and family. So many glaring issues — aimless level design, failure to explain mechanics and so forth — would easily be spotted by fresh eyes, and this feedback would've truly been invaluable, possibly turning a

mediocre exercise in frustration into a fun, replayable experience. I do hope for a sequel, as I'd love to see this game done right, living up to its full potential.

Soul Calibur VI Review (2018)

While the franchise mostly fell away from me as it grew into the Soul Calibur series — the Dreamcast was very unpopular in my British homeland, and I've happily stuck with Sony over Microsoft every generation — the most recent entries have felt somewhat lackluster, with Soul Calibur V feeling decidedly uninspired and stale.

Thankfully, Soul Calibur VI returns to its roots, embracing the original ideologies in a semi-reboot which manages to bring the Calibur series back to its glory days.

Moving back in time in both historical context and design philosophy, Soul Calibur VI returns to the era of the first Calibur title, following a new timeline in a reboot designed to get the series back on track as one of the best fighting series available.

The timeline shift allows Namco to bring back some fan favorites of the series who had been retired in previous games, such as original Greek warrior Sophitia and the ever popular ninja Taki, while characters who are either too young or haven't gone through important lore events aren't present, such as Hilde and Viola. This cuts some of the chaff brought in from recent entries to the series, including funny but overly niche Dampierre and the horribly redundant Patroklos/Pyrrrha combination.

New to the roster are enhanced dual-sword wielder Grøh who can switch between fighting in a staff style or splitting the swords apart to dual wield in a style reminiscent of Darth Maul, as well as antagonist Azwel who essentially replaces Algol as a superhuman character able to summon various weapons at will. Both characters feel strong, with Grøh acting as a great "first play" character able to help new players ease into the game while Azwel offers a high number of technical complexity with his multiple stances and weapon combinations.

The Calibur series is known for bringing unexpected guest stars with previous visitors including Ezio Auditore (*Assassin's Creed*) and Kratos (*God of War*), becoming infamous for including Darth Vader and Yoda in SC4. Soul Calibur VI is

no exception, this time drawing Geralt of Rivia from the Witcher series into the action, whose fans will be happy to know that the White Wolf feels authentic and lovingly implemented; every hack and slash feels natural to his fighting style including having each of his swords be useful in different situations, and he can spend portions of his power meter on casting trademark signs like Igni or Yrden at his foes.

Beyond witcher signs, the power meter is used by all characters to execute their most powerful attacks. Critical Edges — the super moves of Soul Calibur — return to VI, being a devastating combo of moves which drains more health the weaker your enemy currently is, while new to the series are Reversal Edges, which operate as an improved guard able to block most attacks, triggering an Injustice-esque clash with each attack button able to beat a button pressed by the opponent in a rock-paper-scissors style format.

While on the surface reversal edges may sound like a guessing game with hitting a random button and hoping for a good outcome, it's actually fairly nuanced as each character responds to the various inputs in predictable, learnable ways. For instance, if you're facing ring-out monster Astaroth, you can reasonably expect him to go for a B attack during a reversal edge, as that attack ends with a colossal throw that's more than capable of ringing out your character from a long distance and immediately winning the round, so hitting A will generally win. Learning each character's various attacks and combos out of reversal edge clashes becomes one of the most important parts of competitive play.

Soul Charges are another new mechanic; instead of gambling a meter charge on one big hit with a critical edge, soul charge powers up your character for a short time, increasing damage done as well as unlocking additional moves for certain characters. Guard Impacts, which cost a portion of meter in earlier installments, are now free of cost as part of making the game more accessible to newcomers, as are lethal hits — a powerful strike that shatters an opponent's armor, increasing the damage they receive for the remainder of the match.

For single player modes, the big draws are two different but intersecting story modes. Soul Chronicle acts as the standard story mode but departs from the usual "pick a character and win the story from their perspective" deal that drives fighting games. Instead, there's one established canon storyline featuring Kilik, and as you progress through you'll unlock the timelines for each other character

so that you're able to experience what each was doing and when. It's an interesting format that feels cohesive and well thought-out, with characters overlapping in their various quests.

Libra of Souls, meanwhile, is a more fleshed-out mode akin to past Edge Master modes — you'll start by creating a character who'll proceed to journey the world participating in quests, helping locals, and bumping into the main cast at regular intervals. While lacking the voice acting of the Soul Chronicle mode and thus relying on large amounts of text and static screens, the storyline continues at a decent pace. Interestingly, as you meet the main characters along your journey, details from those encounters are added to the Soul Chronicle timeline, further fleshing out what each individual was up to at any given moment.

Online play wasn't available much — we've been playing the game pre-release after all, so only other reviewers and those sneaking early copies home from retailers are online — but the matches I found were surprisingly smooth. While Soul Calibur VI's online beta had occasional lag and stuttering, the netcode for final release seems to be vastly improved, and certainly feels more reliable than that of some of its predecessors. Vitally, combat never drops below the base 60fps, though loading times felt a little long at times.

Character creation, a strong feature for the Calibur series, returns with the usual array of equippable items, color combinations and tons of patterns to overlay and customise, although the general selection available did feel a little flat, perhaps due to the time limitations imposed on the small team allocated to developing VI.

Certain items are initially locked and need to be purchased using currency earned during Libra of Souls, which can also be spent on museum unlocks to browse articles such as FMV and concept art for each game in the twenty year history of Soul Calibur.

All in all, Soul Calibur VI feels like a familiar friend returning home after a long absence. Smooth gameplay, visceral clashes and easy to jump into whether you're new to fighting games or a technical veteran, VI is the fresh start that Calibur fans have been waiting for.

Overcooked 2 Review (2018)

In principle, Overcooked 2 sounds deceptively simple: work together to chop, mix and cook various ingredients to build and serve the requested dishes. In reality though, this soon gets completely out of control, in a delightfully fun way.

Overcooked 2 plays in a single screen top-down perspective, with up to four players dashing around kitchens to fetch, prepare and serve meals, and just like its predecessor the game is misleadingly simple looking. Every level has its own options for what dishes will be asked of you, and the game will very quickly test how well you and your fellow chefs can work together.

The hallmark of Overcooked is giggle-inducing insanity, and this sequel dials it up even further, challenging new chefs and veterans alike. You'll only have a few minutes per level, and each order that comes in won't hang around for long, so you'll need to work together intelligently to prepare each dish in time; perhaps delegating one chef to grabbing and chopping raw ingredients, a second to cooking and frying, and a third to assemble the final orders, serve them, and wash up dirty dishes.

While this sounds very simple on paper, in game things break down very quickly. Communication between players soon deteriorates from task delegation to yelling at people to get out of the way, panic setting in as unattended cooking pots threaten to catch fire and orders signalling their imminent failure. The best laid plans soon fall apart as the levels take control, with parts of your kitchen being swept out of reach or being completely rearranged.

You'll watch helplessly as your finest effort of planning ahead of time where everyone needs to be goes horribly wrong, and you can't help but laugh.

The game is a master at gently overloading your senses, ensuring each level becomes a chaotic mess as you wrestle with juggling every task required — you'll need to chop and prepare ingredients while keeping an eye on anything currently cooking, making sure dishes are assembled correctly, glancing at the current orders, wondering where the cheese is, why aren't there any clean plates for serving, and so forth.

Levels have their own themes and hazards which complicate the cooking process and require some deft thinking on who goes where. Kitchens on rivers or hot air balloons often have parts of their kitchens moving around at all times, while magical schools have disappearing stairs and portals to teleport around with.

Sometimes parts of the map will move around from time to time, and occasionally you'll be stranded apart from each other, looking on helplessly as you wait for a chance to pass a completed dish to your partner to serve; a few levels even completely transition during gameplay, such as a kitchen suspended by crane which ends up swept along a rushing river thanks to a flood.

To combat the wild dynamics, *Overcooked 2* introduces a throw mechanic, where players can now toss raw and chopped ingredients around. Good use of throwing ingredients to one another soon becomes an essential skill to pick up, as the levels make full use of your new enhanced ability by walling off players from each other or encouraging you to fling ingredients around before conveyor belts carry them off to a nearby trashcan.

Recipes in *Overcooked 2* are a little more complex than the first game, and a couple of these stumped us as the instructions aren't always conveyed clearly. We butted heads against one particular level several times as we couldn't tell why our breaded meat wasn't working, until I figured out that we needed to add meat to the breadcrumbs and then add additional breadcrumbs before it could be cooked. Seems logical in hindsight, but no other recipe has worked like that — it's always been one of each item — and the game doesn't give any kind of indication that it's the way to go. Luckily, issues like this are few and far between.

Hand of Fate 2 Review (2017)

If you've played the first *Hand of Fate*, you'll know what to expect — the interesting subtleties of planning encounters in a deck and how to best approach various tasks remain, but the sequel helps bring everything together much more smoothly, with combat in particular feeling much more enjoyable: enemy attacks are better telegraphed, while animation and general flow of combat has had a serious polish.

Hand of Fate 2 revolves around a series of quests, which are standard roleplay fare, whether it's seeking out and killing a powerful enemy or tracking down a

magical artifact or blessing. Quests are played out by way of cards laid face down on the table in front of you to journey across as you see fit, each card representing an encounter such as a hostile ambush, a chance at loot, or a new location of interest for later. A deck's cards are chosen by you before you begin (with a few extra thrown in by the dealer), which lets you pick and choose which encounters you want to run into along your journey.

Certain cards have tokens attached, which can be claimed if you successfully beat such encounter; once a quest is completed, all tokens won grant new cards for later selection, including new side missions, items and equipment, or foes to tackle.

Planning each quest thus becomes one of the more tactical parts of Hand of Fate 2 as you plan which encounters you'd like on the table, given that there is a hard limit on how many you can include; do you take that card that always grants useful supplies to help you keep going through a tough quest, or risk running a new card to discover what it offers and potentially unlock additional new cards?

Much of the gameplay remains at the tabletop, where you'll be guiding yourself across the board from card to card, making decisions as you discover new people and situations, though occasionally you'll be pulled into a fight whether by choice or fate. Here the game changes, dropping you into realtime third-person combat where you'll need to take down your opponents or die trying.

Combat is fairly straightforward, with the options of standard slicing strikes as well as heavier attacks to stagger opponents who may be adept at blocking or evading your regular attacks. Enemies on the attack will telegraph their next move, signalling whether or not it's blockable; blockable attacks can be countered, leading to a slightly Arkham-esque style of fighting as you pummel crowds of enemies, deftly counterattacking and dodging as needed. Once you're used to the controls, combat flow feels good, and becomes a lot of fun.

Combat, while not groundbreaking in any way, remains short enough to avoid monotony, and challenging enough to force you to pay attention, especially with the tricks that bosses can bring to the fight. You won't be alone in combat, however — across your adventures you'll run into a roster of unlikely characters who'll become companions, and you'll be able to choose one to bring along for aid in any quest.

Beyond a small help in combat, companions also serve a bigger purpose of having their own questlines; bringing a particular companion and their current quest cards into a quest reduces the other options you could bring along, but you'll learn more about their backgrounds and motives, as well as scoring some rather interesting new encounter and loot cards.

Back at the tabletop, the ominous dealer introduces new tricks in Hand of Fate 2 to keep you on your toes. Attempts at heroics, such as saving villagers from a burning house or swiftly dodging a sprung trap can trigger different types of luck or skill checks. A common one you'll face is a simple dice roll, where you'll need to roll three dice and hope to match a particular target; another is the wheel, where spinning cards will require you to stop them on a safe pick — or face punishment. Each quest also tends to favor a particular gimmick or quirk to mix things up; an early quest has you traversing a dangerous, snowy mountain, so the dealer will add a number of freezing blizzard cards to the deck, each rapidly draining your health as you become trapped in them and forcing you to consume more of your ever-dwindling food supplies.

These different challenges help bring a little variety to otherwise straightforward gameplay, forcing you to rush through a quest, seek and collect particular objects, or beat the odds to successfully perform enough heroic deeds for fame. Paired with the steady depletion of food as you move from card to card, and the inevitable loss of health from tough combat and failed challenges, and the difficulty can catch you unawares if you're not paying attention to all the details in front of you.

The game never feels overly punishing, however; while difficulty naturally rises over time with the inclusion of tougher opponents and trickier challenges, so too does the availability of powerful gear to trade or loot. Progression throughout Hand of Fate 2 feels fair, and moves along at a decent pace, perhaps slightly faster than the original.

A Hat In Time Review (2017)

Published by Humble Bundle, A Hat In Time is a surprisingly fun title that has gone under the radar of many; fans of games such as Super Mario 64 or Banjo-Kazooie should dive in.

Murder mystery sleuthing. Leading a marching band. Becoming a mud monster. A Hat In Time isn't like your typical 3D platform adventure — while it does follow the genre's typical "multiple themed worlds to explore" staple, Hat has a hugely diverse array of odd missions and adventures to enjoy, each one surprisingly different from past ones even within the same world areas.

On the surface, A Hat In Time seems like a short game, with five worlds with a few levels in each, but as you progress you'll notice that entirely new levels start to open up, and new secrets come into reach. One of the main collectibles throughout Hat is yarn, which can be spent crafting a number of different hats each with a useful ability associated with it, such as blowing up obstacles or making things vanish.

Each time you put together a new hat and start discovering uses for its power, you'll recall places earlier in the game where the ability could progress you beyond previously impassable terrain, helping to give each zone plenty of replayability as you revisit and discover new areas and goodies.

Each world is colorful, dynamic and full of personality — as are the huge number of fully voiced, quirky characters you'll meet. A Hat In Time has a seemingly limitless amount of silly humor oozing out of every scene, from some of the unusual level set-ups to daft NPC one-liners that always manage to make you smile. Whether it's seagull-punching mafia, groovy disco directors, or soul-stealing monsters, every character you bump into is unforgettable and you can't help but like them.

The levels deserve credit for their creativity. Not content with running with the usual design of "here's an open world, go find stuff", levels will instead push you into an incredibly diverse assortment of tasks. One moment you may be sneaking around levels to avoid detection, the next fighting a gaggle of baddies. The diversity is astounding, and the feel and tone vary appropriately, whether you're hurriedly running around leading a parade or evading a monstrous evil in a survival horror-esque mansion.

A Hat In Time is, at it's core, mostly kid friendly — the whimsical graphics and fun characters lend to a very charming game. It's unusual then that the game can feature some surprisingly tough difficulty spikes as you progress. While most

levels are relatively straightforward for an average gamer, there were numerous times where I wanted to snap my controller. Hat doesn't really follow a typical, slowly rising difficult curve as the game advances, but rather is mostly fair punctuated by the occasional punishingly tough task or level.

Most of these spikes are for optional tasks, such as going for collectibles, though there are a number of regular levels that fall prey to these outliers in difficulty, some of which are fairly early on. While not terribly brutal, be aware that these could be a source of frustration, especially for younger players.

A Hat In Time features a wonderful number of fun collectibles to grab and discover. Beyond collecting and crafting hats, you'll be able to buy badges to stick on said hats to enhance your abilities — improving mobility, gaining map or projectile abilities, or even just fun little things such as riding around on a cute little scooter instead of sprinting.

Successfully unlocking and completing hidden bonus levels called time rifts also offers the chance to unlock random cosmetic choices, such as dyes for your character's outfit, new skins for the hats (transforming your winged sprinting cap into a shark/monster, for instance), and soundtrack remixes. While nothing too fancy, they're just part of the beautiful charm and whimsical fun that Hat offers from moment to moment.

Longevity for A Hat In Time also looks promising. Beyond the array of collectibles and secrets to find, two more worlds are planned as free DLC, as well as Steam Workshop integration, allowing PC players to develop, share and enjoy new outfits and levels. Co-operative play is also planned as an update granting two player splitscreen play on all platforms, with PC players gaining the additional ability to play co-op online.