

Hyper Light Drifter – An Indie Game Review

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HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER – WHAT WE THINK:

Hyper Light Drifter is a top-down action RPG developed and published by Los Angeles indie darlings **Heart Machine** following a wildly successful Kickstarter campaign. It combines equal parts **Link to The Past** and **Super Meat Boy** to produce a beautifully surreal – if occasionally punishing – experience.



TO THOSE WHO WAIT

Following a Kickstarter campaign that raised \$645,158 from 24,150 backers after setting a goal of only \$27,000, development began in October of 2013. At the outset, Heart Machine set an intended release window of mid-2014. That window came and went, and an official delay announcement was issued via their Kickstarter page on August 25th, 2015. The game would be released in the spring of 2016.

In the update, Heart Machine had this to say about development: “We have set a high standard for ourselves throughout the entire process, and will not compromise those to release a title before it’s ready. We’ve seen how that choice turns out time and time again. The final game will be far better for it.”

The game was successfully released via Steam on March 31st, 2016. All other major platform releases are scheduled starting in summer of 2016.

WE'RE NOT IN HYRULE ANYMORE

Perhaps its greatest achievement is the game's genuinely unique visual style. Alex Preston, the game's creator and founder of Heart Machine, also served as lead designer and artist. In his Kickstarter campaign, Alex explains how he's been cooking this one up for a while: "Visions for this game have been fluttering in my skull for ages; something dark and fantastic, with giant forests to navigate, huge floating structures to explore, deep crumbling ruins to loot, massive throngs of enemies to rend, and behemoths both flesh and mechanical to overcome. I want it all to be as beautiful as possible..."



It's safe to say that Alex pulled it off and then some. The world of Hyper Light Drifter goes around corners. It so thoroughly mixes equal parts neon mecha-punk and enigmatic fantasy that a third, legitimately fresh flavor emerges. Influences from other successful neo-pixel art titles like **Sword & Sworcery** and **Samurai Gunn** are apparent.

The latter should come as no surprise, since **Beau Blyth**, creator of Samurai Gunn, is listed as the game's lead programmer. That said, make no mistake: Hyper Light Drifter is a towering achievement of originality.

The game is set in a pixel art universe of anthropomorphic animals, ancient technologies and sinister shadow monsters. This makes it hard to slot Hyper Light Drifter into any one popular mythology. Its narrative design, credited to **Teddy Diefenbach**, sets the ambitious goal of working almost exclusively through images.

The opening cinematic throws a lot at you: a thriving neon metropolis, an ominous structure floating in the sky, glow-eyed titans that clear the cloud line, and something involving a shadowy dog and his temple. The rest of the game is just as densely packed with tenacious environmental storytelling. Every inch

fosters an aesthetic distance that simultaneously alienates and fascinates the player, down to the final battle.

SLASH, DASH, REPEAT

Fans of button-mashing and spray-and-pray tactics be warned: Hyper Light Drifter punishes sloppiness. You'll need to collect yellow tokens while progressing through the game's four environments. These are spent on incremental upgrades to your base abilities of dashing, slashing and shooting.

Even with the available upgrades, your character is as fragile as they are deadly. The entire combat system has been designed to foster graceful, intentional dives through mobs of enemies, picking off one at a time while dodging the attacks of others. The absence of easy victories is a testament to how fully Heart Machine has fostered this style of play. The strategy dovetails beautifully with Preston's character design and animations. If you're not thinking at least two moves ahead and using every available resource, expect to go down quickly.



Learning to evolve your combat style is core to navigating the game's merciless difficulty curve. While every encounter is challenging, first-timers will need to spend at least ten to 15 tries studying patterns before winning a boss fight. Thankfully, you'll never respawn too far from where you went down; the game does a good job minimizing time spent between attempts, and the resulting loop feels like a well-made mobile arcade game. Players push the penny forward with every attempt, honing their strategy as they go.

With no shortage of secrets, completionists will get their money's worth. Most achievements are for collecting the various bits of gear hidden throughout the

massive game world. Secret hunting is mandatory for anyone playing for the first time, as the majority of currency is found off the beaten path. By the end, I was running up against every suspicious wall and walking to the edge of every navigable surface, looking for hidden caches.

Anyone who feels like they left a lot undiscovered will be happy to know that beating the game unlocks a new game mode, allowing you to replay with all the gear and outfits from previous runs.

WORTH THE WAIT

Hyper Light Drifter is a beautiful, cruel game. It's at once a love song to the best design choices of the past and a brave aesthetic push into the future. Like all great media, it offers abundance in layers without compromising vision. It's made no less impressive by the fact that it was authored by such a small and devoted team. It's the kind of development story that you want to hear more of, and the kind of game you want to revisit. I'd recommend it to anyone looking for a concise, challenging experience, and the opportunity to tour the minds of some of the most imaginative world-builders making games today.