

Video Game Review: 'The Escapists' is So Obtuse

Submitted by [PMeekin](#) [1] on March 5, 2015 - 10:37pm

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CHICAGO – Years ago I took a game development class and pitched a game that was “Harvest Moon” meets “The Sims.” Instead of farming, your options included being a taxi driver, store clerk, handy man, stay at home parent, etc - all with accompanying mini-games and domestic troubles, a bit like the now-freeware “Cart Life.”



The professor was confused. “What’s the game part? Like, what’s your drive?”

“The same thing that’s fun about ‘Harvest Moon,’” I said.

“And what’s the fun part of ‘Harvest Moon?’” he asked. I didn’t know. Farming?

Sometimes you can’t pinpoint why a game draws you in and why something repels you, it’s the nature of subjectivity. As a game critic this isn’t particularly comforting information. As a result the gig is often about identifying that subjectivity and separating it from fundamental value. Whether or not the “Terraria” meets “Animal Crossing” meets “Escape from Alcatraz” indie action-RPG “The Escapists” is for you comes down to that subjectivity.



“The Escapists is available on Xbox One and PC.”

Image credit: Mouldy Toof Studios

The setup finds your customized convict incarcerated with several other inmates in one of several prisons with guards, and a warden, a doctor, and you take on “favors” to score money, gain favor, and steal items in order to craft the tools required to escape. On paper? Great idea. And it’s not bad for your eyeballs and earholes, either. On boot-up the game has a distinct charm and a catchy soundtrack. The 2D top-down

presentation is great, too - and outside of little details like you'll always see a fist when attacking as opposed to whatever weapon you have equipped, the game's visual presentation is confident, vibrant, and bright - and the animations that play while in the shower, gym, or at the cafeteria communicate the game's personality well.

But when it comes time to play it and progress, "The Escapists" is a hard sell. Turning prison into a cutesy, laid back, crafting-focused for-all-ages adventure could push away folks who enjoy the gritty nature of prison drama, while also boxing in and limiting fans of "Minecraft" and "Terraria"'s wide-open nature. It's a little obtuse, too - with only a short dream sequence to really explain the process of escape, and tons of items to pick up, craft, and eventually lose if busted by the guards (or if you escape). It's tricky for the typical gamer to fully invest, because while it's fun to occasionally smash a sand castle, knowing the sand castle is getting smashed ahead of time sort of moots the point of making it in the first place.



"The Escapists is available on Xbox One and PC."

Image credit: Mouldy Toof Studios

Which makes "The Escapists" an oddly specific game for an oddly specific kind of gamer - if you're a hardcore crafting game zealot, this is for you. But I'd have to imagine most gamers *don't* want to leave all their work behind to escape from a fictional prison. In "Minecraft," "Harvest Moon," "Terraria," "Starbound," and "Cart Life," you're building something with the goal of keeping it all together; creating a home or farm or life. You play for the satisfaction and challenge of evolving creation with the joy of discovery thrown in as a bonus. Seeing the fruits of your labor is really rewarding.

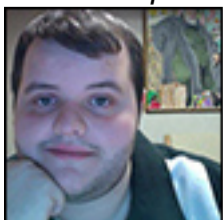
To me it seems "The Escapists" is all about flushing your fruit and hard work down the toilet. But, that's me. And like I said above, subjectivity is at play here. Prison is what you call a structured environment. You go where you'd told when you're told, and if you don't, expect consequences. "The Escapists" is anything but. It's an open-world game locked behind bars. It's assembling a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle on the carpet with a Hoover vac looming. How big of a problem that is depends on if you're one of these "hard work is its own reward" types. There's a lot of fun to be had simply by taking favors and completing the various "job" mini-games, but your true objectives remain murky at best.

Like the game I pitched eons ago, explaining why "The Escapists" is or isn't fun is complicated, and certainly more appealing than a farming or newspaper stand simulator, but somehow less cohesive. The parts are great, but they don't add up to what you'd expect.

The good news is that Mouldy Toof studios appears to have a great team. The game's failings are philosophical, not technical, and they have themselves a great little game engine that would benefit from a little more structure, and a bit less geographical constriction, if that makes sense. Something in an Earthbound-esque suburb could be a heck of a lot of fun.

I look forward to seeing where this team goes once they put the slight misdemeanors they committed in this game behind them.

"The Escapists" was played on Xbox One but is also available on Steam.



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