

REVIEW | Axiom Verge

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Influential Passion

The indie scene recently flourished. With games such as *Cave Story* being designed by only one individual, many were propelled to create breathtaking experiences that have taken the video game industry by storm. One such developer is Thomas Happ, who released his game *Axiom Verge* in 2015. A lover of the Metroidvania genre, Happ solely designed, programmed, and composed his passion project over the course of five years. After fully completing the game, *Axiom Verge*'s reverence for the Metroidvania shines through in its new approaches to genre staples, but incorporates poor design choices that impact the experience from exceeding its predecessors.

Different Familiarity

The game starts off with a literal bang. You play as Trace, a scientist who is left unconscious and put into a coma upon a frozen pressure valve destroying his lab. Trace wakes up in a mysterious alien world named Sudra and seeks to find a peaceful way back home. Throughout the roughly ten hour story, Trace will come to realize the irony of his hopes and uncover the enigmas of Sudra, along the way picking up upgrades to enhance an extensive

arsenal. To start, I thought the setting of the game was good overall. The eerie, foreign scenery created a world that brimmed with fear and beauty, and consistently had me invested in the experience. While no areas particularly stand out from their often forgettable names and peculiar layouts, the atmosphere certainly does.

Axiom Verge greatly succeeds in its reverence for the Metroidvania genre. To elaborate, Axiom takes massive influence from the genre's best: *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* to form an identity of its own. Metroidvania staples are nearly absent from Happ's passion project. For instance, Trace will never receive a double jump, instead he will get a propelled drone that acts similar to a double jump, but with added abilities later on such as increased range and teleportation. Trace's weapons are differently utilized as well. Instead of weapons that gain strength throughout the course of the adventure, such as *Super Metroid*'s combined wave and plasma Beam, Trace will instead gain over a dozen different, individual types of firearms. I felt the addition of a regulated arsenal was a great change of pace from the genre norm, and consistently propelled me to investigate and backtrack to old areas to get just one more new gun, especially since the guns are well balanced. I found myself always changing my arsenal to go along with different combat scenarios and filled with glee at the addition of a new weapon.

Short range, powerful enemy? Use the nova to inflict shotgun-like damage onto your opponent. A mobile enemy giving you trouble? Use the lightning gun or flamethrower to inflict fast, wide-range damage. Heck, why not use the turbine pulse to weaken those dang crawlers with multiple fast attacks. Furthermore, the weapon variety feels endless, without ever coming off as overbearing or cumbersome. With all that being said, it's a shame that the numerous firearms have barely any impact on the game's monotonous bosses. Barring a few encounters, most of the bosses felt like bullet sponges that repeated the same attacks at nauseam, and consequently were tedious to defeat. Most felt one-sided towards a single weapon, which limited the use of Axiom's excellent arsenal.

The addition of the glitch gun was a particular highlight of the game. Around three hours into the adventure, Trace will receive a gun that allows him to alter enemies and make them look like a faulty pixel out of a 1980's Nintendo Entertainment System cartridge. I adored the variety

this one item added to the game, and truly speaks to the game as a whole in that it constantly impresses. I felt myself wanting to glitch each type of enemy to see what new forms they would take and their altered mobility. Some enemies even completely change their attacks, such as one that goes from range based onslaughts to producing health pickups. To go along with the glitch motif, there are randomly generated secret rooms that change location every playthrough. These challenges are often hard to find and upon completion reward a secret weapon. While I only encountered one throughout the course of the adventure, their idea remains novel and another reason for repeat playthroughs. Additionally, Axiom's replayability shines from the incredibly appreciated speedrun mode, which skips the randomly generated elements, cutscenes, and dialogue, and leaves an on-screen timer that will especially be helpful for streamers. Furthermore, Axiom Verge's embrace for the genre's hallmarks and shortcomings culminate to create a package that constantly had me on the edge of my seat.

The game contains most of the modern options gamers have come to expect. Be it the music, volume, sound effects settings, the aforementioned speedrun mode, and more, the game succeeds in creating an experience tailored to the player. However, the lack of control options and user interface regularly frustrated. Switching between menus quickly became tedious since the game offers no dedicated map button. Additionally, the decision to have only two map markers completely baffles me. The landscapes quickly become similar after a time, so navigating through them without any sense of direction was infuriating and tiresome.

Also, Axiom Verge's complete absence of any item indication annoys. Whereas games such as *Super Metroid* have map markers indicating where items were, giving players an idea where they should explore, Axiom has none of that, and instead employs a single yellow mark to indicate that all items have been collected in an area. Given that these areas are sprawling, cryptic to navigate, often barred with environmental hazards that cannot be bypassed until the latter half of the game, and have no option of fast travel except for a ridiculous area that takes far too long to use, the lack of any navigation tools greatly hampers the experience to the point where I found myself constantly using guides so that I could remember the items I picked up. It certainly doesn't help that the game employs a challenge and drops the player in to explore for themselves. While titles such as *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Super Metroid* have

triumphed in this form of game design, Axiom's confusing map system and insanely well hidden secrets left me perplexed for minutes on end wondering where to go next. The inclusion of more navigation markers and a dedicated map button would have helped, or custom control mapping that allowed for the latter. As a result, Axiom would have become a much more user friendly experience that mimicked the success of its predecessors and seldom frustrated.

In contrast, I found myself enjoying the storyline of *Axiom Verge*. Axiom's science fiction romp of a tale succeeds in creating an enthralling narrative that can be taken at face value, but leaves a lot of room for implication without ever coming off as poorly thought. Also, the optional notes help to flesh out the story and create a world that felt lived in. I found myself curious about the past inhabitants of Sudra, who were inexorably tethered to their religious and technological beliefs that they locked themselves from the outside universe and eventually got wiped out by a pathogen. The ending of the story particularly insights and leaves a lot of room for analysis, creating an overall narrative that builds upon itself and enlightens.

The presentation consistently impressed with its polish. The game ran incredibly smoothly on a regular Playstation 4 and I never encountered a crash or frame rate dip. The environments have a fantastic art direction that feel original, not quite 16-bit or 32-bit graphics. The backgrounds are incredibly detailed, and spell of an otherworldly tone that impresses. In addition, the music remains great throughout the game. Happ provides some chilling, haunting melodies that reminiscence of the Super Nintendo era and fit each area's mood. While no track stood out and I see myself seldom listening to the soundtrack, it certainly suits the game well and my musical preference is entirely subjective, whereas others might find a lot of enjoyment from the compositions.

Verdict

First and foremost, I believe that it's important to factor into the overall score the commendable creative power of one individual that *Axiom Verge* displays. With that being said,

Axiom provides a breath of fresh air for the Metroidvania that breathes new light on genre staples, while embracing the formula's shortcomings to create compelling, addictive gameplay and a great, implicit narrative that consistently thrills. While the game frustrates in its user interface, cryptic navigation, and forgettable landscapes, the work and dedication seen in Axiom is palpable and should not be undermined. I believe *Axiom Verge* represents among the world's best aspects - the passion behind one individual can create a work of art, even if that art has a few scratches. If you want a Metroidvania that reveres its predecessors and employs a great narrative, give *Axiom Verge* a try. It might not be the best of the genre, but it certainly stands on its own as a fun, albeit slightly flawed gameplay experience that will teleport you to an otherworldly place.

