

REVIEW | Hollow Knight

Written by Michael Richardson

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Beautifully Hollow

There are many things I am thankful for in my life; my family who inspire me, my friends who motivate me, my education which enlightens me, my house which comforts me - and so much more. I am also thankful for Saguaro cacti.

For the initiated, the Saguaro cactus are indigenous to an extremely specific section of Arizona's Sonoran Desert, and can mature to several dozen feet over many decades. While these cacti hold upwards of one-thousand-five-hundred gallons of water, they are hollow on the inside. Therefore, numerous species, namely birds, find their homes inside the spikey plant. Despite a challenging arid climate year round, the cacti maintain a symbiotic relationship with neighboring species through its hollow insides that allow life to cultivate. The Saguaro cactus exemplifies how beauty flourishes in sorrow landscapes; for its inspiration to humanity, I am thankful.

Over my course of my forty hours with the game, I grew to become very thankful for *Hollow Knight*. Because deep inside its world, a palpable life cultivates beneath that words can hardly describe. Despite cryptic navigation and storytelling that frustrate at the beginning, Team Cherry enveloped me in their bug-infested world with satisfying gameplay, sublime atmosphere, and an insightful narrative.

Midnight Firefly

Hollow Knight begins with the protagonist, The Knight, being summoned to Hollownest to stop an unknown threat. In traversing the numerous pathways and civilizations that lay beneath the surface, The Knight learns of the ancient secrets that lie deep within the kingdom. The biggest detriment to *Hollow Knight* is the vagueness of its plot. While environmental world building and character interactions weave a lot of implications that benefit the narrative, I grew increasingly frustrated with the game as I had literally no clue what I was doing. Some sort of exposition is necessary to involve the player in a universe, and *Hollow Knight* takes several hours to establish a feasible threat. While I enjoy implicit storytelling, with one of my favorite games being the wordless *Journey*, *Hollow Knight* borders on criminally vague during its initial hours. The navigation is similarly cryptic, leaving me wandering for minutes on end wondering where to go next. I believe Team Cherry could have adopted a system akin to *The Messenger*, a contemporary metroidvania, which subtly guided through text. If the player was especially confused, in-game currency could be spent to directly navigate the player through the plot. A comparable progression structure would have alleviated navigation blemishes, and if characters provided exposition as to why the player was traveling there, storytelling would have significantly improved.

Despite the vagueness that permeates the experience, I still enjoyed *Hollow Knight*'s plot. The narrative excels at environmental storytelling, to the point where every single frame has a story to tell of the kingdom's history. Every area exhibits a rich atmosphere that caused me to stand still for minutes on end, soaking in my surroundings and interacting with every citizen I could find, which rewarded me with humorous dialogue and company in the sparsely populated world. Learning the backstories of the characters and world was similarly a joy, to the point where the ending cinematic sent shivers down my spine through its implications. Also, *Hollow*

Knight delves into unexplored themes that had me surprised with how well its diverse messages translate to reality. Like a Saguaro cactus, *Hollow Knight* inspires with a narrative that breathes life into a world overcome with despair, and despite its cryptic nature, I grew to adore its world for that.

Nailed It

Hollow Knight's roots in the metroidvania genre shine through every facet of its design. Whether it be the frequent backtracking, rewarding supply of upgrades, health increases, or interesting side-quests, all of the usual aspects of a *Super Metroid* successor are present and executed well. However, *Hollow Knight* sets itself apart with its incredibly satisfying combat. Wielding only a nail, The Knight controls with an agile elegance the likes of which I have never seen in a game of the genre. Attacks resonate beautifully with every hit, and nail upgrades over the course of the game truly made me feel a sense of progression. In particular, nail arts always entertained with new abilities, such as hitting enemies in a relentless cyclone. Most importantly, every time the Knight attacks an enemy, he gains soul - a type of magic meter that can be used to unleash spells or heal. Subsequently, combat became a balancing act of making constant decisions of whether to deplete soul to heal The Knight and leave myself vulnerable, attack the enemy and risk taking damage, or use soul to unleash a powerful spell but lose out on the ability to bandage wounds. While I wish there was more combat variety to alleviate some repetition, such as a more reliable parry maneuver or a larger amount of soul spells or nail arts, Hollow Knight's combat still shines above all others in the metroidvania genre and most games in general, and I hope the soul system gets iterated on to make combat even deeper.

Hollow Knight's charm system adds another incentive to explore its sprawling world. To elaborate, charms are like the badges found in rpg staples such as the Paper Mario series (before it careened off the edge with Sticker Star) that augment the player. Some charms such as

nailmaster increase physical attack strength while others such as gathering swarm collect any nearby geo - the currency of Hollownest. I consistently enjoyed experimenting with different charms to see which one benefitted my tastes, and exploring to find new ones was always gratifying. None of the charms feels overpowered as well, given the limit on how many can be equipped at a time, making the game feel balanced and accessible.

Hollow Knight's economy feels expertly balanced as well. Geo, which is rewarded from defeating enemies or whacking plants in the world (Yes, you can strike down plants. Enough said.), can be used to purchase new charms and upgrades from vendors. There is almost always something new to buy, and my favorite vendor happens to be a reoccurring one, the cartographer Conifer, whose murmurs sent happiness through my skull whenever I discovered him and bought a new area map. With the penalty for death being similar to From Software's titles - being teleported back to the last save point and losing all currency unless you reclaim it before dying again - I always felt cautious of my surroundings but inclined to explore because I knew geo was plentiful enough that if I did lose some it could be quickly regained.

After all, *Hollow Knight* can be supremely difficult. During one boss fight, I died over fifty times, but conquering that tough section made me squeal in happiness. While the game challenged me, it never felt unfair because all of the bosses and over one-hundred enemies have a recognizable pattern that rewards patience and mastery. I also grew to appreciate how *Hollow Knight* forces the player to retrace steps to the boss, which allowed me rethink my boss approach on the quick trip back to the encounter instead of flailing haphazardly. Additionally, I love how The Knight only takes damage in intervals of one, which allows for more strategy through simplicity unlike the Zelda series which can frustrate by taking a measly one-half or one-fourth a heart of damage. Just take the whole container, dang it!

As I wandered through *Hollow Knight*, I could not help but be impressed by the strength of its world. Every area, whether it be the somber City of Tears or the foligate-filled Greenpath are brimming with details and secrets, bolstered by their unique atmospheres and ecosystems that

I still enjoyed visiting after the dozenth time. I absolutely adored how believably constructed the world is as well. Once I found out the namesake for the City of Tears, my mind filled with glee; I'll leave that experience for you to discover. A terrifically convenient and lore-filled fast travel system cohesively ties the world together, representing the approachable yet complex gameplay of *Hollow Knight* that had me grinning at every frame.

Shades of Grey

Hollow Knight truly clicked with me once I grew to revere its presentation. Character models and environments may be simplistic, but vibrant enemies and characters stand out against the mostly black and grey catacombs of Hollownest. Animations and character designs are top notch as well, coupled with a masterful audio design and a transcending atmosphere. The well laid out user interface and ability to place map markers is especially helpful, even if I wish there was an option to display the map in the corner of the screen to make exploration more convenient.

Venturing through Hollownest awoke in me a feeling of curiosity I have not felt in a long time, which is likely due to the excellent soundtrack by Christopher Larkin. Every area emotes a vibrant tone that expertly fits with the compositions, and crescendo during challenging platforming segments or bosses; one particular battle theme weaves the themes of the journey into a magnitude I have seldom heard before, and has quickly become one of my favorite music tracks. I frequently listen to *Hollow Knight*'s orchestral score, not only for its superb melodies that benefit from auditory bliss, but from the nostalgia they awaken in me from my experience with the game. Additionally, performance remains consistent across all modes of play on Nintendo Switch at a silky smooth sixty frames per second, alongside a crisp resolution that make environments pop. Moreover, *Hollow Knight* sets an industry standard for demonstrating how a purposeful atmosphere and a vibrant presentation create an enthralling experience.

Verdict

For its inspiration to developers and to myself, I am thankful for *Hollow Knight*. Team Cherry's passion shines through every aspect of their metroidvania while also innovating the genre with a balanced combat system, insightful story, and presentation that had me spend hours on end exploring the depths of Hollownest. While the cryptic navigation and storytelling frustrated me during the initial hours, discovering the life beneath the surface motivated me all to the end and taught me that, just like a Saguaro cactus, light can permeate even the most challenging landscapes. Moreover, *Hollow Knight* is a must buy for any metroidvania fan and is an experience that I will not soon forget. I thoroughly look forward to Team Cherry's future projects, including Hollow Knight's upcoming sequel, Silksong, because if they are anything like the studio's debut experience, more dormant feelings will awaken in me. Afterall, sometimes the brightest places lie deep beneath the surface.



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