

Student Name

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Game Analysis #5: *Death Road to Canada*

*Death Road to Canada* is an action-RPG game created and produced by two indie developers: RocketCat Games, and Madgarden. Although this game is classified as an action-RPG, that descriptor is not quite that accurate. The game that I would best equate this to is *Oregon Trail*, an educational game where the player must guide a party across the Oregon Trail, simulating all the trials and dangers that people had to go through to cross the Oregon Trail in the early 1800s. However, again, it is not quite that accurate. The game plays like *Oregon Trail*, where the player must guide a party and survive. However, it is not an educational game, and it has segments that play like a retro beat-em-up, with RPG elements in the mix, as well as zombies. So, the game does not have a complex story. The story is that there was a zombie outbreak, and civilization is destroyed. However, Canada is a haven, free from the zombie threat. And so, the player, who starts their journey in Florida, must brave the Death Road in hopes of making it to Canada. That is about it. The game ends when everyone in the player's party dies, or the player's party makes it to Canada alive. How the player does so is the main bulk of the game. The game itself is short; a successful run can be done in about an hour and a half to two hours. However, like *Oregon Trail*, *Death Road to Canada* prides itself on its replayability, and it succeeds in doing so. Currently, there is a PC version of this game, a version for Xbox, Switch, and PS4, as well as a mobile version for iOS and Android. I will be looking at the iOS version of the game because that is the version I played the most. I will also look quickly at the Xbox One

version of the game. The console versions have different control schemes and up to 4-player co-op, so I will briefly describe what the differences are with co-op.

After the player presses the big “Start” button, the player is prompted with “New Game” or “Custom Characters”. One way that *Death Road to Canada* increases replayability right off the bat is allowing the player to create their own characters to play with. Not only can the player edit the appearance of a custom character, but the player can also give them their own perks and traits from a wide variety of options. These traits and perks give each character their own strengths and weaknesses and provide neat little advantages in certain situations. For example, the Explorer perk gives the player another choice of a location to go to during a looting event, whereas the Fighter perk gives the character a hatchet as a starting weapon as well as a strength and shooting bonus. There are some perks and character traits that need to be unlocked before they could be used, too. The player can choose to start with two (or one, if they prefer) of these custom characters, and if the player has more than two custom characters, then the rest of the characters can show up at random times on the Death Road to be recruited. The custom character creation is a great way to get players engaged in the game before they even start the game, because they can be whoever they want to be. The vast amounts of customization allow for every single character to play different from one another, like a Big Bruiser who uses heavy weapons, or a Mechanic that can fix the car and build things then the group needs it. The customization is great as it is, but it could be expanded a little more in the future. For example, the player can sometimes run into animals, such as cats or dogs, on the Death Road that could be recruited to the party. Why not allow the player to have these animals be customizable, with their own passive traits and appearances? It would not be much, but it would add just a little more to the customization elements of the game.

Every character has their own strengths and weaknesses, and that is represented by specific attributes in the game. There are twelve tracked stats in the game: Strength, Fitness, Shooting, Wits, Attitude, Composure, Loyalty, Morale, Medical, Mechanical, Vitality, and Dexterity. The first ten are represented by face icons (red mad face being the worst, green happy face being the best). Vitality is the character's health, which typically starts at three (unless certain perks say otherwise), but of course, can go down if the player gets bitten by a zombie or gets hurt in a text event, and can be increased back up to three if someone in the party uses medical supplies. Dexterity is not shown on screen, but it is represented by a character's running speed. Strength is how well the character can use heavy weapons and what objects that character can pick up, fitness is how easily the character gets tired from swinging melee weapons/carrying a throwing object (the more tired a character gets, the slower they will swing their weapon), shooting is how accurate the character is when using a gun. Wits, attitude, composure, and loyalty are all personality stats that do not affect combat. Instead, when the party is in a situation where one of these traits is needed. For example, if the building the characters are in is on fire, then there would need to be someone with high composure and wits to lead the escape so that the team can escape unhurt. Loyalty can be great when the team needs to send someone that can be trusted. Mechanical is how well the character can fix the car if it breaks and is used in certain events as well. Medical is how well the character can heal other people (The higher medical stat, the less medical supplies needed to heal someone). At the beginning of the game, some of these stats are not shown to the player (they are instead represented by question marks) and can be revealed when a character does something in a text event. However, Morale is one stat that is always tracked. This stat is how happy the character is, and it is a very important to keep an eye on. If this stat gets too low, then that character will start fights with the group, may demand someone to get kicked out of the group, may straight up leave the group, or may just cause a lot

of bad things to happen to the whole team. All these stats add a layer of complexity to a game that seems so simple on the surface. While a casual player may not care about most of these stats (say for vitality and morale), these stats are important to keep in mind when making a tough decision. The stats are also important to be able to increase, because the player needs to find ways to grow the team to make them better when the game gets harder.

There are some things in this game that require unlocks. For example, there are many different game modes in the game. The player starts off with three game modes: Normal Mode, Familiar Characters Mode (where most of the people that the player can recruit to the party are custom characters), and Rare Characters Mode (most of the characters the player can recruit are “rare” characters that have very special perks, traits and appearances.), but other modes can be unlocked by completing the various game modes, such as Deadlier Road Mode, Extreme Mode, or Marathon Mode. Some custom perks and traits can also be unlocked. Throughout playing the game, the player earns this currency called “Zombo Points” by completing certain events. While collecting the Zombo Points does not affect the current playthrough, the player can spend the Zombo points by clicking the “Unlocks” button on the title screen. When that is clicked, instead of a traditional unlock screen, the player is taken to this place called “Zombo Town”, where they can walk around and talk to NPCs that sell perks and perk upgrades for Zombo Points (ZPs). The player can only collect up to ten ZPs at the start, but with completing certain game modes and talking to one of the NPCs in Zombo Town, that number can increase to fifty. The player can also see statistics, view the credits, delete their save data, or replay the tutorial in Zombo Town. Once again, unlocking the different game modes and perks allows for a lot more replayability. Players want to unlock the ability to challenge themselves or make their characters stronger, and the incorporation of unlockables will satisfy the player when they successfully unlock them. Now, when Zombo Points were introduced into the game, it came with the assumption that the

developers were implementing microtransactions into the game. Thankfully, the developers have not done that, but who is to say they may change that in the future?

While on the Death Road, the player's party will make stops for supplies in what are known as "Always Be Looting" (ABL) events. There are seven types of supplies in the game: Food, Medical, Gas, Weapons, Pistol Bullets, Rifle Bullets, and Shotgun Shells. Every party member can hold three weapons at a time (unless their perk says otherwise), and much more weapons can be stored in the car. The ABL locations are random every time, and the names can inform the player in what they could find at the location. For instance, a Grocery Store may have a lot of food, whereas a Bullet-Ridden House will hold guns and ammo. Also, the name of the location could have prefixes/suffixes that help guide the player. For instance, if a location has the suffix "With Car", then the location will have a new car that the player can take, but they must find the keys to the car first. The text color can also indicate what type of location it is. Locations in white text are the most common and easiest ABL locations, locations in red text are typically harder, with more zombies roaming around (Locations with the suffix "Rescue" are typically in red text), and locations in flashing text are rare locations, and are usually the most difficult but reward the player with something rare. The player will typically be presented with two locations (three if one of the characters has the Explorer perk) and will sometimes have the option to reroll the random locations at the cost of some of the party's gas. The ABL events provide the player with some choice as to where they go and what they collect, and they keep each playthrough of the game fresh. There are so many random events that it is impossible to see all of them in one playthrough of the game.

There are also two other main types of events: Trader Camps and Sieges. Trader Camps are places the player can stop at. At the Trader Camps, the group will find a few traders that sell supplies, weapons, and stat increases. In *Death Road to Canada*, food doubles as the way to keep

the team alive as well as the main currency at trader camps. What each trader sells at their shop is dependent on how much food the player has at the time; more food means rarer items up for grabs. Also, there are the stat increases. Some NPCs will offer the group some training in a stat, such as shooting, mechanical, or medical, in exchange for food, where a small amount trains only one member of the group (of the player's choice), whereas a larger amount of food trains the whole group. Also, if any character in the party has the "Charming" perk, then they can sometimes get free things from traders. However, if any character has the "Bandit" perk, they have the option to rob traders, which can produce many outcomes, from successful robberies to everyone in the group getting hurt. Along with the traders, the player can find characters that can be recruited to the team (if the character in question is not a custom character, then it typically costs some food to recruit them), as well as a campfire that gets everyone in the party rested and increases their morale a little. Then there are the Sieges. These are the hardest parts of the game, and what would typically end any player's run. These typically involve the player forcing to fight off a massive horde of zombies in an area, and they cannot escape until a certain time is reached. Alternatively, the party will be forced into a maze-like sewer/factory level where they must find the exit. If the player succeeds, then the group is rewarded with an increase in one of their stats. The Trader Camps provide the player with the chance to make some interesting choices in how they play the game, as they can buy a lot of different things, and the Sieges provide a lot of challenge to the game, and each siege gets even more difficult than the last one. The game gets progressively more difficult as the group gets closer to Canada, but the Sieges are the pinnacle of difficulty. The game knows this as well, as all trips on the *Death Road to Canada* end with three sieges: One that lasts one and a half minutes, one that lasts four minutes, and one that takes place on the border to Canada. The last of the three is the easiest of the three final sieges, so the fourminute siege, referred to as the "City of Crushed Hopes", is the hardest part of the game.

Strangely enough, putting the hardest part of the game as the second to last battle in the game works better than if the final battle was harder, because it works like a story structure, where the Rising action is everything prior to the City of Crushed Hopes, with little spikes of difficulty (the other sieges), then the City of Crushed Hopes is the climax, and then the border to Canada is the Falling Action and Resolution. The structure of how the events are placed reflects that of an interest curve in game design. It is done so well, even in the other game modes.

There are many different random events that could happen to the party throughout the game. Occasionally, bandits may show up and demand things from the group, or the group may discover something along the way that they must deal with. Every in-game day ends with a night sequence. In every night sequence, every character in the party consumes two food (if the group has it), and sometimes other things can happen. For example, they may find a moose in the morning, or they may have to barricade the house so that zombies do not attack them while they are asleep. Also, if someone in the group does not get enough sleep because the group was forced to do something during the night, then that character/characters get tired the next day, and as a result, some of their attributes decrease for that day unless the group rests. These events are shown through text, and this is where most of the choices are going to be made. Some choices are better than others, and some choices can only be made if someone in the group has specific perks. These choices are crucial to the survival of the group, and sometimes the player does not know the best choice to make. These choices are great, because the player can not only learn from them if they make a mistake, but they can try different choices next time if they have different characters in the party. These random events that happen, once again, increase replayability, because the player does not know what wacky situations the group will find themselves in. For example, one random event is that the group comes across a government ration box that has not been opened. However, they find out that there is dog poop on the handle

of the box, and the player must decide what to do. If the player decides to ignore it, then nothing happens. If the player has someone in the group open it, then that character loses a lot of morale, but the group gets the food that is inside. If the character that is chosen to open it has the Friend of Dog perk, then their morale will increase, and the group gets the food. However, if the group happens to have a stick on them, then the player can decide to use that, and the game says that you unlocked the true ending to *Death Road to Canada*.

During ABL events, Trader Camps, and Sieges, the player's party will get out of their car, and the player controls them against zombies to find supplies. This is where most of the combat takes place. The player can use whatever weapon they have equipped, or they can switch between weapons. Also, when the player is out of their car, the pause menu has a "Swap Meet" tab, where the player can switch weapons with other characters in their party. The player can exit the area in many ways. If the entire looting event is inside a building, then they just must reach the door with the exit sign, and the party will be taken back to the car automatically. Otherwise, there are two options for leaving the area. The party can make it back to their car, where they must rev it up and drive away (if the car's engine is damaged, it may take longer for it to be revved, and if the car's chassis gets too damaged, the car may explode.) If the party cannot make it back to the car, they can reach the end of the map and leave. However, they will abandon the car and be forced to walk (There is no supply penalty for leaving the car; the group will keep all their supplies). Walking events are when a bunch of bad events tend to happen until the group can come across a new car. The combat feels very natural and satisfying, and the AI for the group members the player is not controlling is very smart. The group members will follow the player and attack accordingly, and the player can change the way the other group members attack in the pause menu. The only downside is that killing zombies does not actually increase a character's stats or anything; killing zombies is only a means to get them out of the way. There is



nothing wrong with this, as running from zombies will mostly beat fighting the zombies, unless there is no place to run to, but it would have been nice if using a heavier weapon will increase the strength of the character if it used enough or kill a certain number of zombies with a gun and the character's shooting increases by one or something. It would not be much, but it would further embrace the concept that the team is growing.

Co-operative gameplay is a feature exclusive to the console and PC versions of this game. When the game first launched, there was only two-player local co-op and the second player trying to switch characters was a little frustrating since it could only be done within an actual scavenging event. However, after an update in October of 2018, the game has introduced 4-player local co-op for even more mayhem. There is no online co-op for the game yet, which is understandable considering that the game is an indie game and could not afford to keep servers running for the game. The co-op gameplay is much easier to manage in-game since all four players can choose their characters all at once and all four players can also choose which decision to go with in text events. As a result, the game develops new strategies or new chaos when more players join the party. Now, there will be times that one or more players are not playing during the scavenging events because of the permadeath in the game. As a result, if a player dies, they would have to wait for the group to recruit a new member to the party, However, they can still participate in all the text events. This makes *Death Road to Canada* an enjoyable experience as both a party game and a solo adventure. This increases the replayability of the game as well and would create experiences for a group to forge their own stories that they will remember as they tried to survive the Death Road together.

Controls are very simple across all platforms: dragging the player's finger on the bottom left side of the screen is used to move the character, pressing on the right side of the screen is used for attack, the red button is to interact with doors, pick up objects, and talk to NPCs, and the

blue button is to switch between weapons. On the Xbox version, the player would use the A button to interact with items and NPCs, hold the A button to drop the weapon they are currently holding, the X button to attack, and the B button to switch weapons. The top right corner accesses the pause menu (On the Xbox version, use the start button), where the team's supplies can be seen on the first tab, as well as where the player can change the team's combat style (using only melee weapons, using guns, or either one depending on the situation) and tactics (running, fighting zombies, or defending themselves). In the car, there is a status screen, where the player can view each character's stats and perks, as well as the equip screen, where the player can equip each character with different weapons. In the screen leading up to a combat event, there is the equip screen, status screen, and a screen in the middle that lets the player decide who the leader of the group is, who follows the leader, and who stays in the car to rest. In the combat events, there is the team menu, swap meet, and status menu. In the menu, the yellow crown next to one of the characters represents who the leader is, and the green thumbs up represents who is currently following the leader. If one of the characters is darkened, that means that they are not with the group. They may be in another room or may be separated from the group by zombies or something. The red "X" in the top left of the pause menu lets the player quit the current game session. While the player is driving or making a choice in a text event, they can leave, and the session will be saved right where they were. However, if this is done during a combat event, then the player will be informed that doing so during a mission will delete the current game session. This is done to prevent the player from restarting a mission if things go wrong. The menu provides a lot of information that the player will need to survive at the current time, and the permadeath trope this game is going for is clearly shown by the game through the constant autosaving and inability to quit the game during a mission without deleting the save game.

*Death Road to Canada* is an extremely fun game for people who like RPGs, action games, retro-style games, or just want to have a good laugh. The game has a lot of small humor and is filled with references to other pop culture. For example, some rare characters include a parody of *Mega Man*, a parody of the horror character Jason from *Friday the 13th*, a Valkyrie Character that wields a hammer that resembles Thor's Hammer *Mjolnir*, a Rick Grimes from *The Walking Dead* character, and many other rare characters. The player can also come across a UFO landing site that references *Men in Black*, where the player can obtain an Unidentified Fast Object, and many other silly references like that. The ability to customize your own characters, with many game modes, unlockables, and random events greatly increases replayability of the game. Also, the game is challenging; it is next to impossible to get a successful run on your first try. However, the game is never a super frustrating difficulty, and once you know what every stat does and can make informed decisions on what to do next, you and your group will make it to Canada in no time. The 16-bit retro graphics are a perfect fit for the game, and the music is an absolute joy to listen to. Every single mission I went on was fantastic, and the game has so much creativity with its gameplay that the game is well worth the nine dollars on the app store or fifteen dollars on Steam. Because this game is just about a year old, this game is getting more updates, and I am excited to see what else I can find on the *Death Road to Canada*.