



INDEPENDENT GAMES  
SUMMIT

# Balancing Accessibility Against Depth in **Assault Android Cactus**

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# Who we are and what we made



- three person indie team in Brisbane, Australia
- previous industry experience
- self funded / self published first game



- intense, arcade influenced twin stick shooter
- combined influences to make something fresh
- all kinds of people seem to like it

“It's an addictive and elegant score-chaser that has the power to bring newcomers into the shmup genre, as well as the legs and tail to truly satisfy shmup veterans”

- *Digitally Downloaded*



85

Metascore

Generally favorable reviews  
based on 11 Critics

[What's this?](#)

Summary: Assault Android Cactus is an intense arcade style twin stick shooter - pick from one of nine unique synthetic heroines and blast your way through overwhelming robots hordes to save the ship from its own work force. Supports single player and local co-op game modes.

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“AAC is immediately accessible and thoroughly conquerable for an average player, but with extended play it also reveals a challenging end-game for high score chasers.”

- *IGN*

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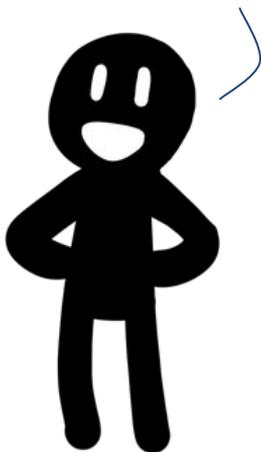
“Assault Android Cactus is a delicious dish best served with everybody.”

- *Impulse Gamer*

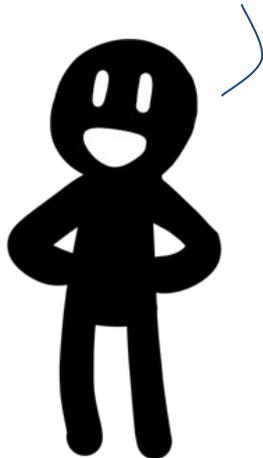


# Dilemma : many types of player

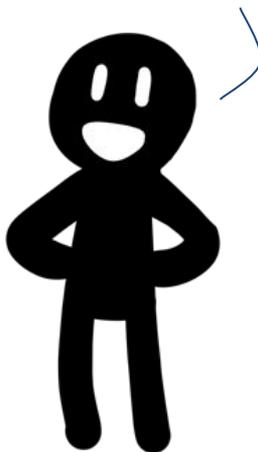
this gameplay  
makes me feel  
nostalgic!



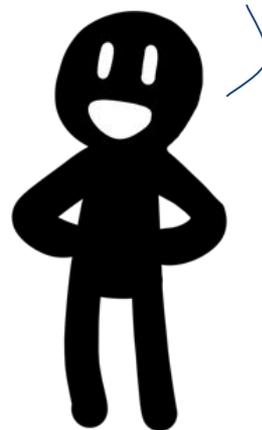
I love indie games, and  
I love a good challenge!



I normally don't play  
this kind of game, but  
I like the characters!

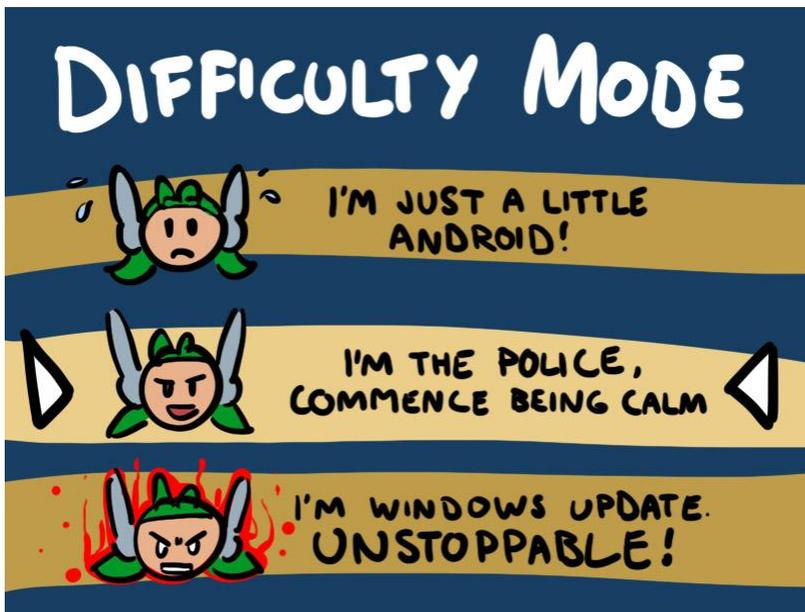


I have my Geometry  
Wars 3 high score  
tattooed on my face!





# Approach 1 : Selectable Difficulty



## pros

- gives player control over their experience
- allows content to cater to different play styles
- playing again on the next difficulty can work as a defacto **new game + mode**

## cons

- can be like building the game multiple times
- will obfuscate what the 'true' experience is
- can cause confusion and doubt in the player



# Approach 2 : Adaptive Difficulty



## pros

- doesn't require the player to self assess
- can maintain game flow at crucial points
- makes you feel clever while implementing it

## cons

- has similar content authoring issues
- can feel patronising and will undermine strict and/or competitive game systems
- easy to go too far down the rabbit hole



# Approach 3 : Negative Feedback



## pros

- condenses the typical range of player experiences
- keeps players in the same sandbox
- "easy to play, hard to master"

## cons

- requires strong understanding of how the game's mechanics can interact
- can feel like rubber-banding
- "easy to say, hard to implement"

# Why Negative Feedback in Cactus

- Didn't want to compromise the core experience
- Knew from the start content would be a precious commodity
- Scaled well with other design decisions (local co-op)
- Increased tension in game systems highlighted other dynamics



# Dominant vs Optimal Strategies

- Assume players will find the path of least resistance in any system
- Designing fun strategies is irrelevant unless they are viable at all skill levels
- Battery system aligns dominant and optimal strategies, corrals players towards the intended play space
- Allows a boost to beginners without benefiting veteran players



# Creating a Skill Highway



- Multiple success criteria - finishing the level, beating your friends score, getting an S+, getting worlds highest score
- Game leads players from one goal to another by making the path visible, letting the player follow it when comfortable
- All progress is forwards progress - low resistance, and avoid teaching 'bad habits' earlier in the game



# Hiding a game within a game



- Depleting battery is a good motivation for not playing slow, but chaining every enemy together is the reward for playing fast
- Achieving S+ ranks is a 'hard mode' layered on top of the game and formalised the first time the player achieves it
- Playing this way is superior to the regular way of playing, but is best discovered and worked up to

# Leveraging Characters

- Unique characters appeal to and suit different players but they must be balanced to add meaningful value
- Tier list discussions encourage investigation and invention, character choice becomes a point of pride
- Good design makes everyone feel like a bit of a cheater!





# Using the aesthetic



- Visuals designed for clarity and function
- Game has a sense of humour but is not a joke
- Characters are meant to be likable but also action heroes



# Lessons Learned

- feedback from game conventions and Early Access helped us tune against first time players and hardcore veterans simultaneously
- Justice's phase structure made him appear as a road block due to a potential for a lack of tangible progress
- Different types of player reacted very differently to the use of complex bullet patterns (bullet hell)
- Sometimes it just takes a nudge - context sensitive features like "collect" above pickups and showing "death tips" in specific circumstances





# Conclusions

- don't sacrifice one type of player to appease another
- if something is important but doesn't click with players, find ways to lead them to an understanding
- empathise with your players, particularly your stragglers and think about what they really need (not just what they ask for)
- have an endgame worth reaching, and keep it in sight



