



Unmasking the mechanics of Skyshine's Bedlam

More than the sum of its influences?

By **Chan Khee Hoon** - Sep 11, 2015

Much of *Skyshine's Bedlam's* rapid ascent to acclaim is that it is often heralded as a mish-mash of some of the most popular games and films today, such as *Mad Max*, *FTL: Faster Than Light*, *Oregon Trail*, *XCOM*, *Borderlands*, *Fallout*, and even good ol' chess. While comparisons to these greats can be flattering, they make *Bedlam* sound like an overpowering bowl of casserole—the result of too many components and ideas. As delicious as a steaming bowl of casserole is, throwing in all your favourite ingredients can ruin the dish.

Thankfully, this isn't what *Bedlam* is about. At the heart is a focused vision of a killer roguelike; a *FTL*-esque, turn-based strategy game, coated with a thick layer of *Mad Max*-y goodness. Blossoming from a long-held childhood dream, it is a game that the developers from Skyshine Games themselves would have loved to play as a 14 year old—complete with gigantic missile-laden tanks called Dozers, steampunk-inspired infantries, and venomous bile-spewing monsters.

"This is the game that they wanted to make," Steve Escalante of Versus Evil told us at Pax Prime. "And they kind of geeked out about it. It's not some corporate overlord basically telling them what they should do, what features they should have—this is their game."

A chance at life via Kickstarter

Like many indie games today, *Bedlam* was conceived from a Kickstarter campaign. The brainwave of three industry veterans—Art Director John Mueller, Designer and Programmer Jeff Johnson, and Visual Effects Lead Sam Gage—*Bedlam's* gritty '80s comic books-style

and irreverent sense of humour resonated with many gamers, which probably helped the studio raise \$166,540 out of their initial goal of \$130,000. And this success is not surprising; it is hard to resist a game that features an adorable toxin-peeing pug, outfitted with cybernetic upgrades. Sprinkle in some irradiated mutants, corrupted AIs, twisted cyborgs and bloodthirsty marauders, and the game is set to become an instant fan favourite.



These colourful characters aren't created on a whim though; *Bedlam* was the trio's labour of love, and they had always known the direction the game will be taking, ever since their *Dungeons and Dragons* days as kids. Led by Mueller's artistic vision and driven by their mutual love for roguelikes (Mueller alone has a staggering 288 hours logged on *FTL* in Steam), these factors helped to steer the game's development in the direction the studio envisioned. This single-minded and fervent focus on *Bedlam* was most evident in Escalante's belief that the game would still be made, one way or another, even without the backing of the Kickstarter crowd. "They wanted to get this game done no matter what. Kickstarter basically afforded them the opportunity to do so [earlier]. But the wackiness and the writing and the character design and all that stuff were all an initial thing."

Keep your sand goggles on

As the mysterious masked protagonist The Mechanic, your job is to transport your crew of merry men (and women) across the unforgiving wasteland of Bedlam. First, pick a badass Dozer, from the iconic Boneshaker to the grotesque Mutant Dozer. Then, choose from a colourful assortment of infantries, such as the dual-wielding Gunslingers and the rifle-toting

Deadeyes—both of which, incidentally, were Escalante's crew of choice. Whatever your choice though, your crew will be packed into the heavily-armoured Dozer on an expedition to the fabled utopia, Aztec City, where salvation supposedly lies.

Although ending up at Aztec City is your objective, how your crew gets there is completely up to you. Players can embrace their inner completionist to explore every nook and cranny of Bedlam, go through the side quests to transform the crew from a ragtag army to an invincible battalion, or forgo all these by taking the shortest route possible to Aztec City. After all, as Escalante explained, *Bedlam* is “not necessarily just about getting down to Aztec City”, but more about giving players the freedom and choice to do what they want.



Another example is that players can not only decide who to bring along for the expedition, but how many as well. “You can mix and match who you want to bring. If you bring less people in, you have a higher chance of getting better modifiers from what you are picking up in the battlefield,” said Escalante. The flipside, of course, is having fewer people to defend your Dozer and its passengers with. But before you get too complacent, here is a fair warning: any half-baked plans to loiter around the wasteland with experienced crew members can result in permanent death—a constant reminder of the journey's perilous nature.

And it is precisely because of this feature that every decision needs to be a highly calculated one. For instance, on top of keeping an eye on the amount of meat to keep your crew well-fed and happy (there are no vegetarians in *Bedlam*, it seems), you also need to conserve enough fuel to keep your Dozer's engine running. Choosing the right crew for your journey is also necessary—would you rather work on growing your close-combat team of Trenchers,

or hire a good mix of combat specialists to take on the mixed bag of degenerates wandering the wasteland?



No “one way” to surviving the expedition

If the game’s artistic style is what attracts most gamers, then its sense of unpredictability and “wait-did-that-just-happen” might keep them hooked, albeit on the edge of their seats. Maps are randomised every round, ensuring that replays require you to adapt a new strategy each time. Feeling lucky for finally making it to Aztec City? Take a gamble by heading back to where you came from—with all your upgrades and weapons intact for subsequent journeys. Remember though: what you earned in spades can also be lost just as quickly, if not even more so. Like many roguelikes before it, *Bedlam* thrives on replayability, a trait that Skyshine also seeks to constantly refine.

What sets *Bedlam* apart from other roguelikes though is the game’s proprietary blitz battle system—which makes combat increasingly difficult and intense if they do not end quickly enough. Firstly, this battle system assigns two action points to both the crew and the enemy’s team. Every single action, from moving your unit to attacking the enemy, uses one action point. You can even use the point to collect additional resources, strewn across the battlefield, to give your crew an additional edge. However, take too long to eliminate the enemy, and the enemy can unleash a “blitz” move, which can range from doubling their action points, to using resources to cause your crew even more pain.

Other features of this battle system include Dozer upgrades, which can affect your crew’s abilities and enhance their chances of survival in combat, and powerful Dozer weaponry that

can turn the tide of battles—especially if your crew is barely hanging on. With so many options and only two action points to exhaust, strategic planning is a must, since a poor decision can easily cripple your team.



You are awaited in Aztec

Although *Bedlam*'s release is soon, Escalante mentioned that Skyshine has already created tons of additional content that will be updated after the game's launch. "They aren't DLCs," Escalante promised, "[It's just that] they will only come out a little later." Skyshine will also be including a bunch of new features that were "never promised" initially, but will be in the game when it launches. Perhaps it is one of the unmet stretch goals in Kickstarter, such as a Cyber Dozer or a bigger *Bedlam* universe? Escalante was keen to keep mum about this update. Nonetheless, do keep an eye out—cybernetic or not—for the game on September 17.

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