

Is This Peak?

Your name: Zac Millman

Your school: Drexel University

Your email: zm352@drexel.edu

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Game Title: Peak

Platform: Steam

Genre: Co-op Climbing Game

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Developer: Team Peak

Publisher: Landfall Publishing & AGGRO CRAB

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Caelan Rashby-Pollock

Overview

PEAK is a silly climbing adventure to be enjoyed with friends as you try to escape a cursed island. Its gameplay is built on a foundation of roguelite mechanics that encourage trial and error as a group. After getting set up in the airport lobby, players crash land on the island and climb to the titular peak. The island is broken up into five biomes of procedurally generated terrain, with biomes two and three also rotating between two environments. The climb always starts on the shore, then proceeds into either the roots or the tropics, which then lead to the mesa or the alpine, then the caldera, and finally the kiln. Each biome is filled with unique obstacles for players to navigate, all while managing their individual stamina bar. In the tropics pouring rain will make climbing impossible and poisonous thorns block certain paths; while in the roots gale force winds push spore clouds around and shroom-filled zombies will relentlessly chase players down. A freezing fog chases the players from shore to caldera, keeping them from relaxing for

too long. The only safe zones are the campfires at the top of each biome, a chance to recover before continuing the climb. The players are also fighting against time outside of the island, as each procedurally generated map only lasts 24 hours. Scattered throughout the island are luggage full of useful items, from items that refill stamina to gear that makes safe pathways. The items in each luggage change every run, but their locations are on the same 24-hour clock as the rest of the terrain. Planning under pressure is key, and it isn't uncommon for groups to fail a climb only to come back having learned what routes to take and where key luggage can be found.

This procedural foundation to the design is what makes *PEAK*'s narrative so interesting. It is not a grand sweeping epic, full of deep lore and long branching dialogue trees. It is a simple game designed to be played with your friends. But this framework naturally encourages players to build stories as they play, to create their own narrative on the island. The impermanence of each map combined with the simple goal of "get to the top" bring real tension to the climb; the tension then makes player choices feel like they have real impact. Successes are full of stories where a player makes a seemingly impossible jump to continue upwards or finds a clutch item to save a friend. A failure is a fun memory, and a reminder of what to avoid in the next climb; "remember we are going right at the roots this time" or "I can't believe your backpack just rolled down the mountain" are common anecdotes between runs.

Characters

- **The Scouts** – The players take the role of a group of scouts going on a trip, whose plane unfortunately crashes on the island of the game. The characters are very simple at the base, just a flat color model with simple hands and a round head. Almost everything about them can be customized: the outfits they wear, the color of the model, the eyes, the mouth, the hair/face additions. The simplistic character design combined with the large amount of customization allows players to create visually distinct avatars in game. In turn, this fuels the entertainment built in to watching friends try the climb, as you can almost always tell who a scout is even if you can't hear them. The only addition to the model that isn't customizable is the badge sash, which is intrinsically linked to a player's meta-progress in the game.
- **Scoutmaster Meyers** – The long-abandoned scoutmaster of a previous expeditionary troop, he got separated from his group, who left him behind when they escaped the

island. Meyers was forced to survive alone off the strange food of the island. Over time, the magic of the island has warped him into a creature of vengeance, set on making sure no one is left behind ever again. Using his elongated arms and legs, he will chase down and grab scouts who abandon their friends.

- **The Island** - In many ways the island the game takes place on is a character in and of itself, the procedural generation in the backend giving it a kind of personality each day. Not only is it the environment the game takes place in, it is also the strongest driver of the narrative outside of the players.
- **Bing Bong** - Bing Bong is a plush toy, an entirely useless item in the context of the game. But in the community, players have built him up as one of the central characters of the narrative. He is a silent companion, moral support when things look down, and a crucial part of the team that must be saved. Additionally, he is the mascot of Bing Bong Airlines, the company in charge of the crashed flight the players take.

Breakdown

The Friends(lop) We Made Along the Way

PEAK is part of a genre coined "Friendslop" in March 2025 by X (formerly Twitter) user @woosaaaahhhhh to describe games such as *PEAK*, *Lethal Company*, and *REPO* that have grown in popularity since 2024. The genre is very loosely defined, but as discussion has continued there are a few constants we can look at. The main purpose of most friendslop games is, as the name implies, to be played with friends. Unlike most co-op games however, the mechanics of a game in this supposed genre are typically underdeveloped, simply serving as a background to the act of playing with your friends. The surface level mechanics and emphasis on creating funny moments made the genre perfect for content creators, with groups of streamers clamoring to find the next big multiplayer success. Once developers realized there was real money in creating games in the mold of *Lethal Company*, it triggered a gold rush of rapid releases. The genre became oversaturated quickly, with quality dropping as everyone tried to get a game out immediately and make a quick buck. This scenario gave rise to the "slop" part of friendslop, the games feeling like cheap cash grabs or content farms rather than fun experiences. The genre differs from other multiplayer games in the framing of its mechanics. In classic

multiplayer games, such as *World of Warcraft (WoW)* or *Marvel Rivals*, other players are used as a vessel to push individual goals forward. Yes, raids in *WoW* are large group activities, but they are done in service of making the individuals participating stronger in game. In most friendslop games there is very little in-game reason to succeed, or even participate in, the activities the game provides. Their goal is not to make players feel a sense of narrative or mechanical mastery, but to facilitate fun moments with friends.



Image 1: Tweet originating the term "friendslop"

While *PEAK* mostly fits the tropes of this genre, with its use of proximity voice chat and simple art style, I would argue that it, while it may not transcend the genre, it absolutely stands at its peak. One of the biggest problems people have noted with the friendslop genre is the clashing of the most efficient gameplay with marketing that pushes sticking together. Games like *Lethal Company* reward players for extracting more items, and so it is better to split up to cover more ground and find more items. But, when players split up, they lose the funny moments that the game's marketing highlights. The first big change *PEAK* brings is to the overall goal of the game. Instead of getting the most items, the goal is simply to get to the peak of the island. This intrinsically changes the way players feel about their friends and the items they carry. If players

stick together, they can make use of each other's inventories to help complete the climb. The items themselves also incentivize working together, as almost all have a use for more than one person. Food and healing items can be used on your friends to refill stamina; and climbing gear like ropes can be used by a full group to pass an obstacle. All of this instills the idea of "working together is easier than going alone" in a group of players.

But for those players who always feel like they have to go it alone, Team PEAK has included a mechanic that punishes getting too far ahead. If any player gets more than 160 meters above the second highest climber, Scoutmaster Meyers begins to chase them down. He will grab the offending player, dealing an initial 25 damage before tossing the player as far off the climb as possible. This can be a devastating loss, sometimes even leading to the player's death if they fall far enough, and definitely setting them far behind their friends. While this may seem random at first, a closer look at the Scoutmaster reveals that this is a perfect use of the stranded man. The fact he throws a leading player back down, towards their friends, show he isn't a mindless killer. Fueled by betrayal and transformed by island's strange magic, he has become solely focused on ensuring no one is left behind. He is willing to cause harm to players, possibly even death, in pursuit of his warped beliefs.

Stamina to Climb

A perfect example of *PEAK* taking simple mechanics to the next level is with the stamina system. The stamina bar is the core of *PEAK*'s story engine; it's the mechanic that everything else is built off. With the simple mechanic of "everything you do impacts your ability to climb", the *PEAK* developers created an experience filled with opportunity for player-driven narratives.

A plain green bar that drains when you run or climb is nothing new to the games industry, but in *PEAK* it is so much more. Not just energy like in most games, the stamina bar in *PEAK* represents a player's total ability to climb, and there are many ways across the island for it to diminish. These all take the form of a colored bar replacing some portion of player's stamina bar, the base green bar getting smaller the more impaired a player is.

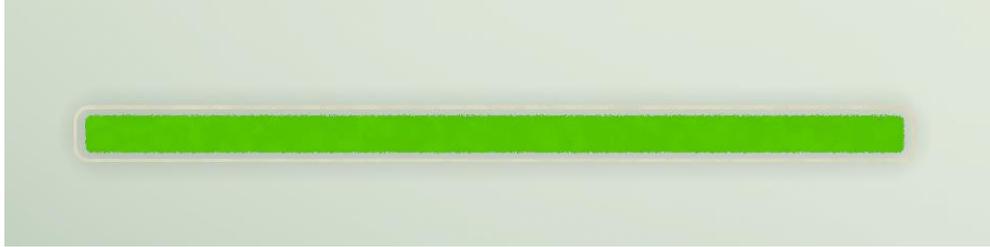


Image 2: Full stamina bar

Simply moving will cause players to get hungry, a yellow notch appearing in their stamina. And if a player were to then fall, a chunk of their stamina bar would be replaced with a bright red injury section. These can be easily dealt with by carrying some food or healing around - which then brings on the problem of weight. Every item a player carries with them has a weight, cutting into their maximum stamina just like hunger or damage. Then there are biome-specific hazards, the cold wind of the taiga and burning heat of the caldera dealing damage of their own.



Image 3: Affected stamina bar

Remember Rule 0

The buddy system is not just something players learn to use through playing the game, it is baked in to the narrative behind the scout's adventures. In the guidebook, known to be written by Scoutmaster Meyers before his transformation, there is a massive emphasis placed on Rule 0: Never Abandon a Friend in Need.

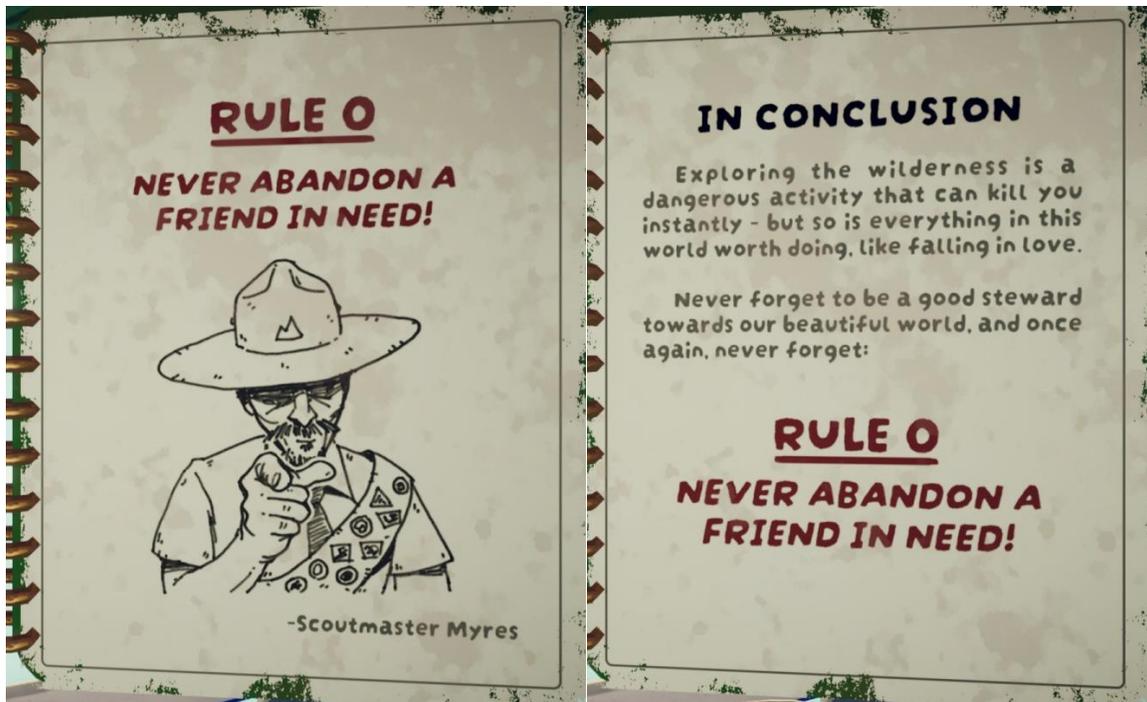


Image 4: Guidebook pages referencing Rule 0

As players explore and experience more runs through the island, they find eight new notes written by the scoutmaster. These contain some "bonus rules", which are revealed to the player in order. The notes as a whole serve two purposes in *PEAK's* narrative. Firstly, they give a clear timeline to Meyers' abandonment and downfall. The notes begin simply with new rules based on the island, like checking the mushrooms for poison or embracing the strange magic of the island. But starting at bonus rule 5, they begin to tell a more sinister story. After falling asleep from a strange berry, Meyers wakes up to find himself alone on the island. The final note is the most striking in the series, and barely makes sense. The words Rule 0 and "Never abandon a friend in need!" are repeated across the page. Scrawled over the top in messy red handwriting is "THEY LEFT ME BEHIND." The notes are some of the clearest pieces of lore in the game, emphasizing the in-universe importance of Rule 0 and sticking together. Even after his transformation Meyers still upholds the buddy system, as players can easily avoid his wrath by sticking with a friend. The trigger for his appearance only checks the two leading players at any given point; as long as players are in a pair they can get as far ahead of their troop as they want.



Image 5: Final torn page

For the players' story, the notes serve as a reminder to stick together. The guidebook on its own describes Rule 0 twice, both times in bold red text that stands out from the black text around it. Even notes not specifically describing the Rule 0 imply that it's better together, providing diegetic explanations of teamwork mechanics. This includes possibly the most potent tool in a player's basic arsenal: the grab. Holding right mouse button with an empty hand will let a player pull a climbing friend up to safe ground in a set range. This alone makes sticking together worth it, as there are often scenarios where a player can just barely make a climb with their current stamina level. Alone they would have to either use an item they were perhaps saving, or go a different direction and waste valuable time. But if a friend is there, one with a bit more stamina, they can cross the gap first and wait to pull a player up.

Scout's Alliance

PEAK's narrative feels more developed than other friendslop games because the story depends on the relationships between the players more than achieving an extrinsic goal, like earning money. Players are given many mechanics that serve as incentives to stay together and work towards the common goal of escaping the island. One of the most fun parts of friendslop games is watching stupid things happen to your friends, hearing them yell out over proximity chat when they need help or find something cool. Yet, these games also have no narrative way to

encourage players to stick together. Outside the game you want to stick together because you are playing with friends, but the game's world and mechanics almost directly contradict this. *Lethal Company* puts players into the role of a low-level employee with a group of co-workers, brought together simply to meet a quota. This role encourages players to delve into more dangerous situations for the sake of success but provides no reason for the characters to care about each other. This is where the genius of *PEAK's* scout theming comes in, giving the players a prior connection in the game. A troop is made up of people who know each other, have spent time together, and have a reason in-universe to want to see each other succeed. The players don't just control faceless minions of a capitalist machine; they are individuals in a group of friends.



Image 6: Group of players at the start

Mechanically this can be seen in the plethora of group-focused mechanics, one of those being the ability to carry a friend who has “passed out.” If a player passes out from stamina loss, especially from status effects that can change on their own like Cold or Heat, they don't die immediately. Instead, they will pass out and a timer will begin for that player. If the timer runs out before they regain any stamina, they are fully dead. But, if they can survive, they'll come back with even just a sliver of energy. In this passed out state any of the other players can come and pick up their friend, shouldering the weight to put a stop on the time and hopefully get them to safety. There is a very real feeling of camaraderie behind the choice to save a friend, especially because of the large weight cost it brings to the lifter's stamina bar.

Strongest Element

PEAK's Ancient Statue, located by the campfire at the top of every biome, is a powerful tool for building player narratives. The statues are placed at the end of each biome just before the campfire. By activating the statue all dead players are revived instantly at the statue's location. This on its own is a powerful element of the narrative flow in *PEAK*, incentivizing people to stay in the game if they happen to die early on. This isn't to say death has no consequences, as being revived by the statue leaves players hungry and a bit cursed, cutting into their maximum stamina over the course of a run. One or two deaths can be manageable; the curse only takes a small chunk of stamina each time. But dying consistently can mean having nearly a quarter of the stamina bar gone, as curse is one of the hardest statuses to remove. This use of the statue is a very clever way to avoid one of the pitfalls of *PEAK's* gameplay differences from other friendslop, where players are simply revived between extractions. *PEAK* forces players to think about the entire climb as one unit, as opposed to extractions being somewhat self-contained in other friendslop games.

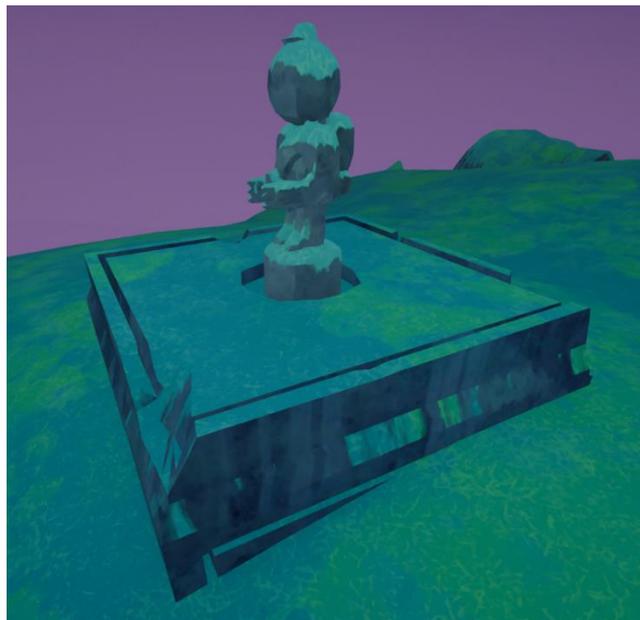


Image 7: Ancient Statue

But there is a second use of the Ancient Statue that pushes it from a clever workaround to an important interaction during a climb. If all players reach the top of a biome alive, instead of reviving dead players, the statue will reveal a mystical item. Anti-Rope Cannon, Cure-All, Bugle of Friendship; these are game-changing items when used at the right time, often saving otherwise

lost runs. The only other way players can get mystical items is through the rarely spawning ancient luggage, which also deal damage when opened. This builds on the sense of risk-reward inherent to *PEAK*, simultaneously putting pressure on individuals and the entire group. Players are incentivized to stay alive to not get cursed, but also to keep their friends alive. The consequences of death are now multiplied. A revived player becomes cursed, a cursed player may need more help later in the climb, and a mystical item could have been exactly what they needed.

What makes the Ancient Statue such a powerful narrative tool is that both outcomes are high peaks on the interest curve. The excitement and cheers from a sole player reviving the rest of their friends is palpable, the group now invested in getting to the top because “we can’t let that performance go to waste.” This is matched by the feeling of anticipation when it comes to using a mystical item, asking “is now a good time to use it” at every opportunity just to see what happens. These are stories that stick with groups past each run, and the Ancient Statue facilitates them all.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite the many ways *PEAK* excels at player investment and storytelling, there is one part where it falls short. The game always begins in the Shore, with the players waking up from the plane crash to find themselves at the base of the island. This first moment is exciting, particularly to new players, but the rest of the biome lacks the strong interest curve the rest of the game has. There is little danger to be found, paths up to the campfire are easy to spot, and luggage is abundant. The most powerful moments of *PEAK*’s narrative come when players need to overcome unexpected challenges, pushing to get to the top of a biome. These moments are generally absent from the Shore due to its consistent spot at the very beginning. Additionally, when these moments occur in the Shore they don’t carry the same weight as a similar moment farther into the climb. There is no time investment in the Shore, no story that would be told if a run ended as it hadn’t even really begun. The intense desire to complete a climb, to make your time and effort mean something that is felt throughout the later biomes, is lost because no time or effort has been spent. Instead of being a powerful narrative spike in the interest curve, moments of sudden stress or panic are met with valleys. “We can always just restart” is a thought that goes through my head whenever the Shore gives my group bad items or someone takes a random burst

of damage. One way *PEAK*'s developers aim to mitigate this lack of early investment is with achievements, which are called badges. Many of these badges require players to interact with game systems more aggressively than they normally would, such as the Bouldering Bade requiring the player to place 10 pitons in a single run. Thus, if a player is hoping to earn this badge and the Shore gives them 3 pitons out of the gate, that player is much more invested in getting through to the next section and continuing to find pitons. But this doesn't necessarily bring investment to the shore itself, instead it is a push to keep the players invested enough in everything past the shore.

Highlight

Perhaps surprisingly, the highlight of *PEAK* for me is not reaching the peak, calling the helicopter, and getting rescued. It comes just a bit earlier, at the final campfire between the Caldera and the Kiln. It's the last chance for players to cook food, to gather their gear, and to revive any dead allies. This is a turning point in the player's story, the goal urging them forward as the peak is so close. The players are no longer just trying to survive the island, they are preparing to actually escape, to get to safety. Both mechanically and narratively this final rest stop is the denouement of a group's climb. The island itself knows this is an important point, the campfire placed at the top of a temple the players scale to reach salvation. It even provides more resources than at any campfire before, with multiple luggage crates surrounding the magical statue. These luggage crates are typically filled with rare and powerful items, from filling foods like Thick Mints to powerful climbing aids like the Chain Launcher.

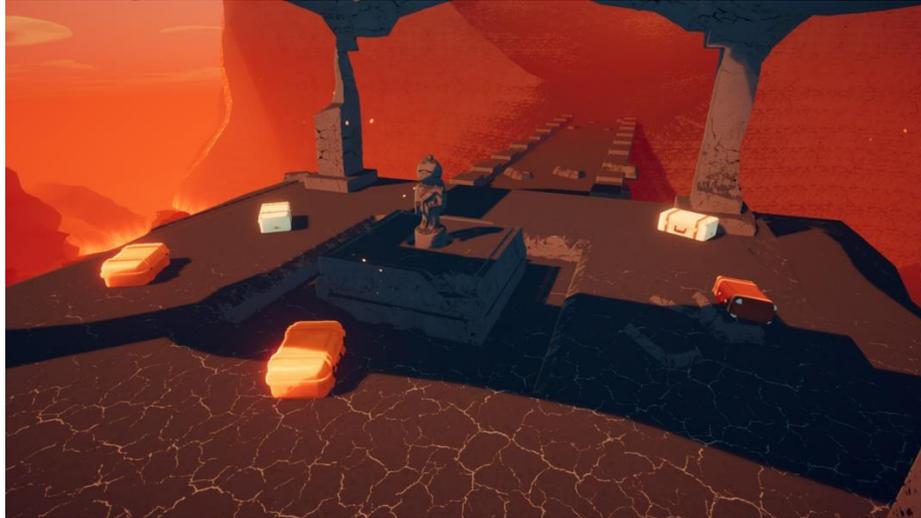


Image 8: Final campsite

This is the highlight moment of *PEAK* to me because it is when the game's atmosphere really shifts. There is a sense of "now the real game begins", with the abundance of items to prepare and sift through. The next area, known as the Kiln, is the final and hardest climb of the game. It's basically straight vertical up the inside of a volcano. There are lava flows, burning rocks and steep inclines to deal with. But this difficulty is also what lends to the campfire's importance. There is no turning back once you leave a camp, and that is even more true here. In a given game players will be at wildly varying levels of stamina at this point, sometime making the final ascent feel impossible. Yet there is also a sense of hope and camaraderie here, groups working to get as many people ready for the final climb as possible. Items are distributed evenly, food is passed to whoever needs it most, and the final fire is lit.

The final campfire atop the caldera also emphasizes something *PEAK* excels at: player investment throughout a run. A full journey up the island, especially if you aren't playing the most optimally, can take upwards of an hour. Even just reaching the Kiln takes a lot of time, planning, and strategic item use. The game's 24-hour clock on each map feels much more pressing once you've spent almost a quarter of it getting to the Kiln; time becomes a vehicle for tension the longer a group climbs. This point is where players reflect on rng they've had to endure getting here, and what could happen if they fail. Roguelikes often have a feeling of disappointment when a run with powerful items doesn't pan out, a feeling that can occur in *PEAK* as well. But due to the map changing daily instead of every run, the different item rng has farther-reaching narrative effects. The story is not just, "Oh I can't believe we failed with such

good items” and then try again. It becomes, “Well last time we got across using the anti-gravity rope, we need a different path up.” *PEAK* is a game about climbing together, and nowhere is that felt more powerfully than at the camp between the Caldera and the Kiln.

Critical Reception

PCGamer by Elie Gould - 86/100

Gould's review of *PEAK* echoes a lot of the sentiment of this analysis. They discuss how the game uses its core mechanics to build the experience into a fun co-op friendship story. Gould specifically points to the importance of sticking together and how *PEAK's* use of collaboration makes the multiplayer experience feel fuller. Their critique mostly focuses on the game's solo experience, which they describe as more of a "solo puzzler" than the chaotic experience of a group game.

GameInformer by Alex Van Aken - 9/10

In his review Aken lauds *PEAK* for its simplicity and cohesion. He discusses how the easy-to-grasp core lets the experience speak for itself, with the most enjoyment coming from funny things happening to your friends. In particular, Aken describes how the simple toon-shader based art style keeps the game readable, fueling the silliness intrinsic to the game. Aken closes his review saying that *PEAK's* strength is that it is always interesting, no matter if a group takes it seriously or not.

TLDRMovieReivews by Brian MacNamara

This review opens by discussing the production pipeline of the game, with MacNamara noting that *PEAK's* release cycle was immensely impressive. He highlights the interesting interactions between the need to carry items to clear hunger, but balancing the items weight. This plus the proximity chat feature made the game engaging when playing with a group of friends, and MacNamara feels *PEAK* excels at being a fun experience. He also expresses that the single player mode, while fun, feels almost like a separate game from playing with a group.

Lessons

- **Simple isn't Stupid** - *PEAK* is a simple game, and that is one of its greatest strengths. It doesn't try to present itself as a powerfully moving story or hardcore competitive game, it's a fun climbing game to play with your friends. This is where the genius of *PEAK*'s mechanics, and their impacts on the narrative flow of a game, really shine. There isn't a huge barrier to entry, there aren't vast webs of characters to keep track of, and the core mechanics can be explained in under 3 minutes. The rest of the information is all learned organically, often by a friend immediately after a player has fallen victim to a danger they didn't know about. The simplicity of the game is necessary for these incredible moments of, "Oh yeah watch out" to come through. *PEAK* fully leans into and masters the friendslop genre's biggest criticism, showing that just because a game is simple at its core doesn't mean it's stupid.
- **Design for your Intended Experience** – A massive reason as to why *PEAK* succeeds where other friendslop games fail is the clear experience the developers had in mind. The interest of the game, and the entire genre, comes from being together and having shared experiences. Yet so many of these games, like *Phasmophobia* and *Lethal Company*, center their experience on waiting for the next person to die and hoping you can escape. It isn't about actually being together and having fun social interactions, it's about watching the game happen to a friend and then hoping you aren't next. *PEAK* is a game about being together, it is all centered around the social interactions the friendslop genre pushes. Players aren't waiting for their friend to get to the next area; they are actively helping each other during a climb. Sharing food, pulling friends up, carrying passed out players; all these mechanics are built for social interaction in a way many other friendslop games miss.
- **Consistent Interest Curves** – *PEAK*'s interest curve, like the rest of the game, is designed around player story and social interaction. It strives to keep players interested throughout the entire experience and to grow that interest over the course of the run. The roguelite mechanics that are the foundation of the game are key to this, as failure is never impossible, even in the very early levels. Players must constantly be aware of each biome's many dangers, the items they have on them, their stamina, the next path forward.

When playing with friends it can be easy to forget about one or multiple of these things; these relaxed moments are where some of *PEAK*'s highest interest points are. By making the latter biomes of the Caldera and Kiln the most difficult, the base interest curve rises to match the difficulty. Players must be more engaged and aware of their group to succeed, and in these last two levels failure means a much longer climb back up. But because a map stays for a full day instead of changing every run, the interest curve doesn't crash to zero even after a failure near the top. "We can make it this time" you think, because now you and your friends know where to go, what paths to avoid, what risky jumps you can make. The interest curve of a game is as intrinsic to the narrative as dialog or lore, and *PEAK* has created a curve that keeps stories growing.

Summation

PEAK climbs its way out of simply being a "slop" game as it is so often labeled. The core of its story so much more tuned to creating an experience that thrives on being together. While the island can be ventured alone there is a feeling of something missing, a fundamental core of the story disappearing without a group of friends to laugh together. The small notes of lore, the mechanics fueling collaboration, the items that only come into play with a group; all of this fuels the player's investment in the narrative they build with their friends. The setting of a mountain to climb gives a goal for the group then lets them run wild, bringing collaboration to the forefront from the beginning. The path to the peak is paved by the group of players, and the narrative is fueled by their imagination.



Image 9: BingBong

Citations

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