



Bring A Shovel: Darkest Dungeon is Brutally Beautiful

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When I reached out to [Red Hook Studios](#), the fine folk behind *Darkest Dungeon*, co-founder Chris Bourassa signed off his email with the words, “Bring a shovel.” I could not imagine a more fitting slug line for a game that is as brutally hard and unapologetic in its willingness to kill player characters as *FTL* or the original *X-Com*.

Though *Darkest Dungeon* is still a work in progress, having secured funding through Kickstarter, the current build is incredibly playable and very well polished. Though there’s still placeholder art, and several sections of the game are not yet complete, the overall aesthetic is so refined as to leap off the screen and rattle around in my sub-conscious.

Our player is set up as the distant relation of a pre-modern eccentric, who has squandered the family fortune on his pursuit of the occult. Forget about power, wealth, and other banal things, this man is in search of the untold pleasures awaiting a soul brave enough to wander antediluvian halls.

It’s *that* kinda party.

Horror devotees will recognize the spirit of cosmic horror in the mythos, but I see a strong root in the works of Clive Barker. Though the horrors of *Darkest Dungeon* often make the Cenobites look like a bunch of creampuffs.

Since the game is still in development, I don’t want to spend too much time writing about gameplay features and various nuts and bolts. It’s enough to say it is a turn-based CRPG with some very rogue-like elements and some truly amazing dialogue and voice-over work.

When a character dies in game, they stay dead. To name a character is to give them an internal story and to lament their loss in a practical and emotional way when they die. Rest assured, if you venture into the *Darkest Dungeon*, people are going to die.

Most remarkable, to this reviewer at least, is the way *Darkest Dungeon* makes addressing the mental health of the party a key part of the game. It’s not uncommon in the tabletop gaming world to see Lovecraft-inspired games engaging with a character’s psychological well-being.



Arkham Horror, for example, requires players to make a sanity check before confronting a monster. *Darkest Dungeon* takes this a step further in that a character's mental state isn't a secondary health point system.

Exposure to the horrors of the world causes characters to gain stress. Untreated stress can manifest in a number of ways. Where one character could become overly selfish and refuse to cast healing spells, another could become emotionally abusive.

In the case of the latter, I had an abusive character who would constantly hurl invectives at another character, causing their stress to go up as well. After finishing a quest, either in glory or defeat, stress can result in characters acquiring personality quirks that affect their capabilities. I have one character who isn't allowed to blow off steam in the brothel because of her "deviant tastes." I have another who believes he is possessed by demons, causing him to hesitate during battle with the supernatural.

While tending to a character's needs isn't an entirely new concept in a game, *Darkest Dungeon* strikes me as unique because of the amount of time and effort it wants me to spend on treating the mental health of my adventurers. I probably spend at least half of my resources tending to the party's emotional wellness. In some cases, it would be easier to cast aside mentally damaged low-level characters and start again with somebody new – there's no shortage of would-be adventurers – but I find myself unwilling to be so crass. These characters bled for me. Do I want to be the guy who tosses them with the trash because they've developed a fear of blood?

What's particularly interesting is I think I could play the game that way, as a cold hearted bastard. *Darkest Dungeon's* introduction tells me it is a game about making the best of a bad situation. Perhaps as my characters level-up and harden themselves against the horrors of a cold and indifferent world, I'm expected to do the same. Perhaps that level-zero character isn't worth the 1/6 of my gold that it will cost to send them to the chapel for a week of prayer and reflection. Do I want to be that guy?

Overall, it's quite amazing to see a video game approaching mental health in such a way that "toughening up" is a long-term consequence of mental stress, rather than a short-term solution to an unending problem. One should also find it a chilling example of art imitating life in that mental health care is both vital and often painfully expensive. At the same time, the game isn't preaching.

Darkest Dungeon is, first and foremost, an RPG, not a sermon. It's motifs, however, are razor sharp and resonate quite well with this critic. I look forward to revisiting this game as it progresses toward a release build.