

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 workforce. Supports single player and local co-op game modes.

“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*

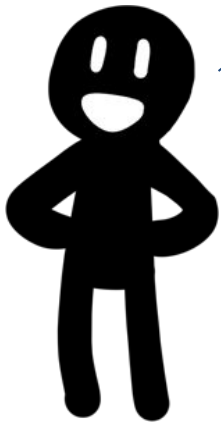
“Assault Android Cactus is a delicious dish best served with everybody.”

- *Impulse Gamer*

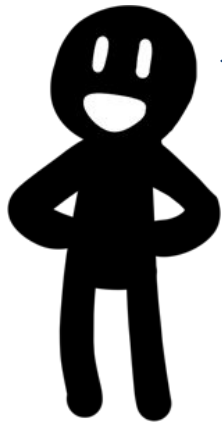


# Dilemma : many types of player

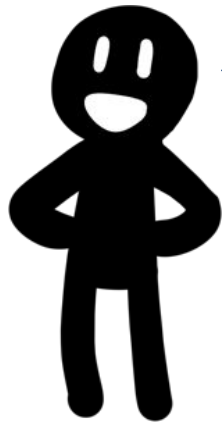
this gameplay  
makes me feel  
nostalgic!



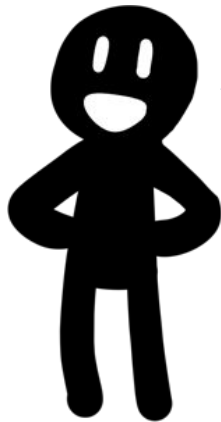
I love indie games, and  
I love a good challenge!



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



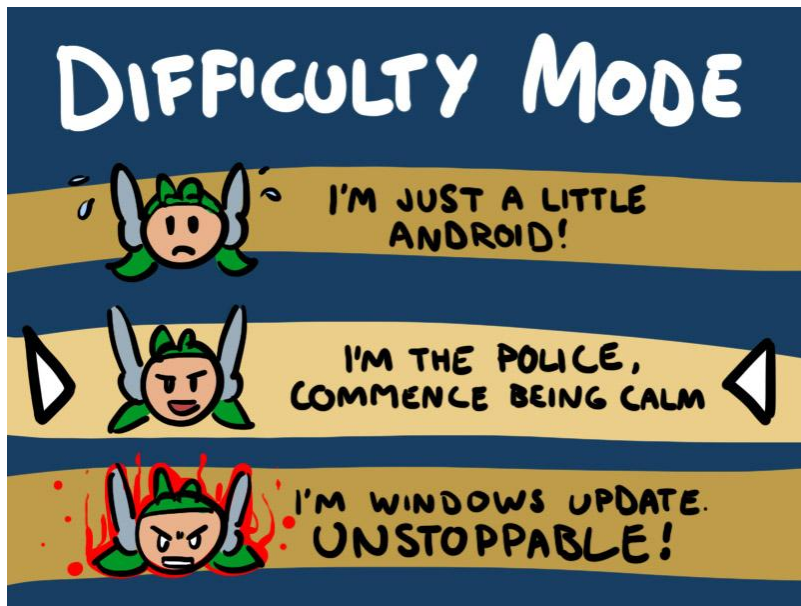
I have my Geometry  
Wars 3 high score  
tattooed on my face!







# 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

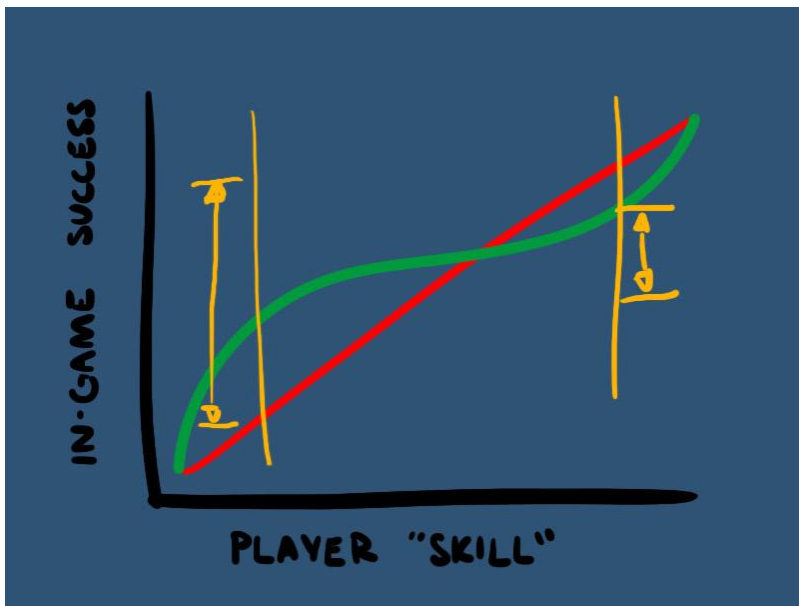
- doesn't require the player to self assess
- can maintain game flow at crucial points
- makes you feel clever while implementing it

## 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



