

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS REVIEW

(or ARMCHAIR SURVIVOR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND EMBRACE
THE REAPER'S COLD HANDS)

As written by Justin Allen McKenzie circa 2022-2024

Edited by Roger Williams ,2024

2022//

Rainy night, South Florida, USA, the parking lot of a lonely Travelodge lights up the perimeter of the adjacent farmland nestled behind a bustling Waffle House and an abandoned fire station. Facing the parking lot of the Travelodge, a plywood nook is shaped behind the fire station — guarding from the rain both the unused electrical systems and a large, scruffy green blanket turtle-shelled in flattened cardboard boxes oscillating, breathing — pulsing almost to the rhythm of the rain. “Ouch,” whispers a separate homeless man, studying the nook dweller from inside of his red 2015 Chevrolet Sonic LT parked outside the Travelodge. He blows the last of his spliff’s smoke into the industrial-grade THC sauna he’s created inside of it’s cabin then takes a slow breath. He watches two grounded pigeons squabble over a half-alive frog. He takes another breath , this one incredibly long and deep and important. He drops the roach into a half empty large black coffee from Wawa and places the lid back on it. He gathers his bags and enters his room, abandoing them on the bed until the next morning. He begins playing Vampire Survivors via his 13” MacBook Pro for several hours. He takes a cold shower. He takes a hot shower. He checks the hotel bed for bugs and/or blood and/or hair. He drinks a Koia Vanilla Bean protein shake and falls asleep.

2023 // This is VAMPIRE SURVIVORS.

I’ve always found a kind of magic to games that can be played with just one hand — age of empires, dicey dungeons, civilization, slay the spire, darkest dungeon, chess, Balatro, go fish with grandma at the kitchen table — all endlessly engaging despite their lack of physical, bio-mechanical depth. There are plenty of games that demand mechanical and physical nuance with your fingers in ways that God did not (likely) intend — anything from taking Katamari for a spin to beating Ninja Gaiden 2 to obeying traffic laws in GTA IV. Some games just cost too much, physically. As games grow out their graphics hairdos and build bigger maps with more stuff to never stop doing added every week, how can you raise a family when the game never ends? What we need are great games we can play while we take care of our children. When a game can purely divorce you from reality, requiring only your eyes, ears and right (or left, freak) arm, it can become part of your routine very easily. For five human years, I played the World of Warcraft digital card-battling game Hearthstone every single morning on my iPhone 5s for one hour while drinking coffee and having breakfast. It was able to occupy the lizard parts of my brain that demanded numbers go up and shiny objects bend to my will , while allowing me the physical freedom to go about my business . That was to eat breakfast and drink black coffee. Breakfast quickly became my longest meal of the day as I shouted “THE GATES ARE OPEN!” to myself and flicked virtual cards at my best friend who lived only a few miles from my house, presumably in the middle of the same ritual I was in the middle of trying to wrap up.

If you played through and beat Ninja Gaiden 2 every morning for five years while trying to eat your breakfast not only would your hands literally fall off of your body in agony (they would give up), but your coffee would get cold. You cannot drink coffee when it is cold, that’s the rule. You must throw it away. Do not put it in the microwave either that is just shameful. If a game can nail a sense of progression and visual readability while retaining these control accessibilities beware: You can easily lose dozens of hours of your life over the course of days and weeks and months and years as you “dabble” for a few minutes/hours ever so frequently to activate your brain cells.

There's something wrong with us, this is obvious, but the hooks are impossible to deny.

In Vampire Survivors you play as one of a myriad of characters that seemingly have no connection to each other outside of their position on the character select screen. There is literally no explicit plot or narrative found within the games 10 or so (and growing) levels. Each is a sprawling tundra of repeated tile sets and randomized turkey dinner locations. And on each landscape, enemies pile into swarms from all corners of the screen and walk towards you and your never ending barrage of automated projectiles. When they inevitably perish they drop gems that you pick up and when you collect enough gems to fill up the blue bar on the top of the screen you get a choice between three (sometimes four) upgrades to your existing items or new items if you haven't already filled out your 6 weapon slots and 6 artifact slots.

There are dozens of weapons and dozens of artifacts and all the weapons have combination-based evolutions with artifacts that you have to discover. Unlocking the weapon evolutions leads to unlocking new parts of the stages which leads to unlocking new characters which leads to unlocking new stages which leads to unlocking new ways to play those stages — the only thing “surviving” around here is your endorphin addiction. You will become the master of unlocking — as long as you can survive the vampires.

The game is called Vampire Survivors but some of the characters you can choose seem to literally be vampires. Therefore, i'm not sure who's surviving who — especially given that when you achieve a thirty minute run the literal Death appears and rips you from this screaming world and its Game Over. No matter which map you are on, what powers you unlock- the dude just comes up and says “you've been doing this for thirty minutes: it is time to go, seriously.” This is how the game elevates itself among the lineage of one-handed games — it only lets you play it until even the game knows that there is simply no way you are still actively engaged, cutting your line from the drip feed — Euthanasia style. The game is never wrong, either — after a few complete thirty minute runs I realized that at about the 20 minute mark my character would become exorbitantly powerful and I was simply moving in one direction (or standing completely still), barely leveling up past level 80 and stomping any version of an enemy swarm that the game could generate. It has all the god-tier power leveling of a strong MMO but sped up by one million percent and there's no dialogue and there's no one else but you and it's also somewhat randomized. Yes, it's absurd and yes the music is awesome and yes power is meaningless and ultimately corrupts those with and without it but like I said by the time it gets to the limit, you get Euthanasia'd.

At first, I thought besting the projection of death itself would be the best option — trying to 360 no scope the four inputs I had into some combination that would get me to succeed the horror (the game of life). I tried using the terrain of the dairy plant map to hide, firing projectiles in hopes that he (it?) would not surpass my superior intellect — he (it?) would inevitably slip through the building and devour me, time and time again. I grew numb to it, and then I realized how the reaper's placement within your run is essential to keeping the “why am I doing this?” thoughts from intruding on the number/firework explosion you should be enjoying — so the game kicks you to back to the menu to reap the rewards of your successful run. After 25 minutes, Vampire Survivors literally surrounds your character with enemies (the only way it can truly keep you cursed in any way at this point in your vampire surviving career) — an impenetrable fortress of swarming bats and ghouls and terra cotta warriors and vampires and clay monsters and demonic trees and birds and worms and guys with guns and giant eyeballs and little eyeballs and literally Smurfs — a colorful digital dance for your brain as different colored numbers and pixel art models pop and flash, turning the screen into some kind of demonic, 16-bit pachinko machine that is using an IV to monitor your heart rate and pulse to the beat of your inner demon. The first few seconds of this are dazzling — your vicarious god-hood via avatar 20 minutes into vampire survivors almost turns vampire surviving into an anti-game, a treat for your future self and not a soul more. It seems to lay seeds in your mind, seeds that will grow minutes or hours or days or years later into...something? But will you please think of your children — and when you finally do, will you do so from the house on top of the hill or beneath the cardboard box behind the abandoned fire station on a rain-soaked night? Your choice.

Your children will see your Vampire Survivors achievement score on Steam and dedicate their lives to being half as dedicated as you to anything that brings them joy (bone raiser minions, probably). You kept going and going and going and you unlocked all the power ups and all the weapons and all the evolutions and you fought every boss on every stage and you thought you were opening a doorway for your children to learn to love but instead you start to feel the weight of how the game told you to stop playing after thirty minutes. You get it don't you, you worry about what this might mean — spending seven hours playing a game that you control with only one hand and half of your mind? It's partly the beauty, the allure of its design — how you can escape both into the game and somewhere deep in your thought palace. How it invites you to wander off, subtly challenging your eyes and their memory receptors to distinguish the things on the screen — and then slapping you awake after thirty minutes with a cold rag rattail to the keister right before you start to glaze over and forget what desert you're fighting in.

The “Vampire Survivors” art style can be described simply in one word that is: Castlevania. The series' trademark pixelated vampires with long cloaks and long hairs and long weapons keeps up but everything is turned to 11. And some enemy sprites are quite big and with subtle points of motion making them take up more space and turn and twist closer towards your projectiles.

The game looks nice enough — and it's readable at a distance while not seeming garish up close. But I would hesitate to call it pretty. Some of the weapon effects do verge on pure psychedelia with wild color combinations and persistent, screen-altering pulses of particles and beams which sort of creates another, more meta and personal level of customization wherein you get to decide how Vampire Survivors looks to you and the people who can see your screens radiation glow on any given run. Poncle invites you into the design process of whatever perceived version of vampire survivors you are currently playing, creating a sense of ownership over your thirty minutes on their earth. There are certain weapons I can simply not use while playing the game via my 50” television set — the cats that also live in my house would turn my television into actual dust if they see the Peachone bird dancing around the screen. I've remarked multiple times while playing Vampire Survivors “Wow, this would be a great PS vita game.” Truth is, I have literally never held a PS vita in my life — I just think it would be nice. Maybe a Game Boy game. Even better, and more in line with the one handed games as part of a routine narrative I was spinning earlier, would be to get the 1.0 version release to phones/tablets. (Editor's note: leaving this in just to be clear I called it a year before it happened.)

The game's toxic combination of Diablo, bullet-hell, rogue-likes and open-world games creates within it a vast network of possibilities that is hard to explain to someone who hasn't just played the game themselves. Vampire Survivors is a game that communicates itself to you the player immediately upon moving the joystick and seeing a little guy turn glowing red and then into glowing red numbers from the effect of your avatar's starting weapon. None of the games genius is communicated in the deep lore of the characters, the level design, the weapons — it all comes down to the simplicity of the inputs and the confidence of the game's timer. I've always loathed a game that features a time limit in any capacity — any activity really, I long for pushing things out to their absolute limit — as I vividly remember the game Tornado Outbreak developed by Loose Cannon Studios and released in 2009 by Konami for the Playstation 3 when I was 13 years old, before I had time to worry about what my future children might think of me and the time I was spending playing it. Tornado Outbreak is actually somewhat similar to Vampire Survivors now that I think about it — the game has small open-world style levels with multiple objectives given to you to complete, a character with a large area of effect style damage hit-box and an unavoidable, strict time limit to go along with each stage. Main difference being that the timer in Tornado Outbreak felt arbitrary and unbalanced (picture: teenage boy yelling at television he is sitting directly in front of, DualShock 3 in one hand, other hand pointing at the tv, “there's no way you can do all that in 12 minutes!”) While the time limit in Vampire Survivors feels reassuring, a statement of the games desire for you to try again — instead of a desire for the game to not let you see too much of its ugly parts, an attempt to make you just hurry up and get it over with. Really did not like Tornado Outbreak, I'm sorry to all the devs on that one — thing really is terrible in a lot of ways and I don't like remembering it all the time but I absolutely do every time I see a tornado, I think about those horrible timers.

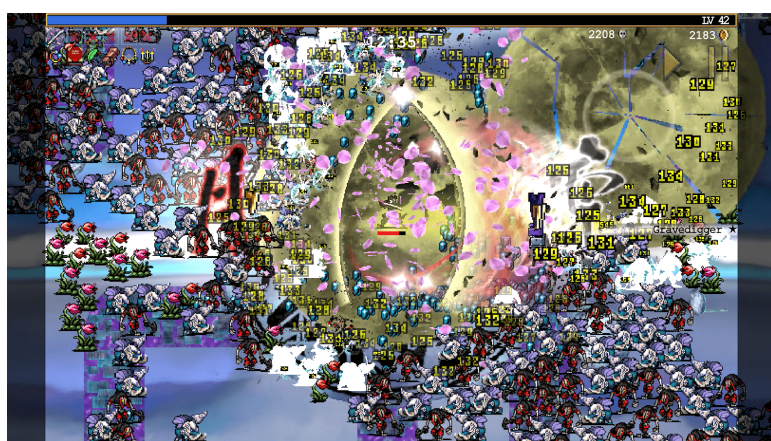
- /can you really go thirty minutes, mate?\ the computer whispers. /your life has been a series of events and relationships wherein you couldn't see when enough was enough\ there's no achievement for playing the game for 7 hours in one sitting / there's no achievement for having the most endorphins out of everyone in this Travelodge combined / there's no achievement for sticking around after someone's hurt you.\ For some there is simply no other way to learn.

A moment's pause after a particularly potent run in VS allows me to look out of the Travelodge window, partly to check on the weather and decide if I can go outside to smoke again or risk the 50 dollar cleaning fee of a weed-sauna via the unlimited supply of boiling hot water from the hotel's shower. And partly to check on the cardboard lump, wondering if they've built up the courage to break into my car and hot-wire it, allowing me freedom from the predatory loan it was purchased through and the trash occupying it's passenger seat. Alas, it was still raining cats and dogs, filling up the parking lot like a kiddie pool — the lump and my car were exactly where I left them seven hours ago.

Our minds are so fragile and easily manipulated. Sometimes, even games that are wholly original and well designed can't help me from escaping the thought that it seems so damn easy to get and keep our brain's attention. So many of the things we use to keep us going are just very complicated versions of making our brain happy via chemicals. Vampire Survivors is no different. And just like in real life — there's always that damn grim reaper, coming back to his god-created maps to roost on your pile of bones. If the reapers hands came after I hit the level cap or killed a certain number of enemies or some other player-controlled goal, I would feel cheated almost. I would feel like the game was robbing me of doing more than I did within my run — but placing the embrace of death so confidently, so astutely at the thirty minute mark I feel grateful, respected, in control. I wish there had been some kind of reaper to visit me during my 15th solo Destiny strike in a row — learning nothing, going in circles watching the same digital heads pop off the same digital action figures with no remorse from the game — no forceful hand to close our eyelids and tell us that we cant run from the nightmare anymore. I wish there had been some kind of reaper to tell me that I didn't have to forgive them for what they did right away — that I could have put the controller down and moved on with my life —

// your time is up, go outside

// take care of yourself. // and someday, your children//



2024 // I am a survivor.

Playing Vampire Survivors today in 2024 is like playing 4 different versions of Vampire Survivors all at once. Simultaneously working to unlock upwards of five to six challenges or characters or weapon evolutions or power ups or new maps for four different substantial DLC add-on packs all at once creates a dizzying mind chemical concoction. Juggling many slow-moving plates and anticipating their arrival strategically becomes the “name of the game” — just about as much as herding and movement are the “name of the game”. That’s right: calling all you cow farmers out there — if you’re good at rounding up the cattle then you can survive some vampires. To all the wide receivers out there: If you can juke and shuffle from the away twenty yard line into the home end zone at top speed — then you can survive some vampires, I guarantee it. Vampire Survivors becomes one of those games that never seems to move fast enough the more you play it — waiting for these plates to finish spinning can become somewhat tedious — even in Hyper mode where the game moves at literally double the speed. As an exhaustive VS player, this is easily my preferred way to play if I’m just trying to jump in for a little hit of that flashing number nectar. Hyper mode does slightly enhance the only real issue I often have with the game which is that it can sometimes be hard to near impossible to tell which tiles on the screen you can traverse and which ones are just for show — and often the boundaries for an asset or tile are simply just incorrect and are too big or too small for their size. Again, it’s a minor issue and the game is all about replaying it so ideally you would be able to retain the knowledge of which tiles are which but the initial process can be frustrating (bone raiser minions does not have this issue, for those keeping score at home).

In it’s later stages of living inside of you, the game becomes just as pleasant and enchanting to your eyeballs as it does to your actual brain meat. Your trickle of rewards is so vast and easily laid out for you — because you have only two currencies to keep track of and helpful, clickable UI design ensures you always know what to do next to see fireworks explode across the screen. New gameplay variants are added via the new characters/weapons/powerups included in the add-on packs. Many of them doing some variation or combination of pushing the game engine to its absolute limits and presenting strict starting weapons that require specific strategies to get deeper into a run.

As the DLC packs go on (as of writing; Operation Guns is the latest as some branded Contra tie-in that is actually really nice and a great tip of the hat to the Konami series) they increase in scale and detail creating specific events, items, enemies, and secrets for each new pack released (4 total over the last two years). These help to deepen the investigative, discovery-centric core of the game as it always feels like there’s something to chase some challenge to try or weapon to evolve or map to master.

For someone to start playing the game in 2024 they have plenty of feed to drip into their horribly dry and starving coffers — and all for about the price of a chickfila chicken sandwich. That’s right: the game is cheap as dirt. We can talk about the value of art and how its defined in a capitalist world all we want but at the end of the day, broke ass people are the majority so if you want your art to reach the most people you’re going to have to make it affordable, I’m sorry — I know you worked really hard on it.

Poncle has seemingly made this his mission statement as the game released out of early access for five doll hairs and each subsequent add-on pack for half that. I’ve spent the last two years playing and writing about a product that only ever cost me 15 dollars? Perhaps the cost was much more than that...



The depth of Vampire Survivors, like any great game you keep with you, lies in your memories of it and the ways they change or stay the same as the game changes and as you change as a person. Those of us who still remember how to read books will understand what I mean right away. The Vampire Survivors I play today in this same Travelodge in the same exact room number as when I started playing the game two years ago is only different from the vanilla version of the game superficially. There's so much MORE Vampire Survivors now than there ever was — more versions, more characters, more weapons, more stages, more unlocks, more challenges, more graphics and more vampires (still unclear as to who the vamps are and who they are not). And perhaps I, too have only grown superficially — more ideas, more goals, more plans, more money, more cars, more drugs, more food, more music and more cats (2).

Maybe I'm saying that people and the art they create are often exactly what they seem to be on the surface and it's only through your eyes through my eyes through your memories through my memories that something of value begins to take shape. Perhaps its all perception after all and perhaps there's not much we can hope to do to effect change in out own lives but continue to pile memories on top until we can't see the forest for the trees and we start to feel like "someone new." What I'm trying to say is that Vampire Survivors is, at its core, a very good video game that is simultaneously innovative, singular and totally timeless and you should know that what it does to your mind is not evil magic in any way — it is just simply whatever you want it to be. Unless of course you struggle with epilepsy in which case it is absolutely evil magic and I suggest you do not even glance at the games' digital store page.

None of us have control over the pale light of our memories. The things we hold onto and the things we let go can seem so arbitrary — so many of the things I hold to be truths got pulled from casual conversations or signs on the side of the freeway. The ways and reasons you connect to art or the people behind it can also seem just as arbitrary or superficial — I don't necessarily believe that all of the art I love is unproblematic or even good but I can dig down into my memory palace and put together the fractured pieces of why I like it they way I do — the things that it reminds me of. The "worst" art that you can think of is absolutely someone's favorite thing simply because of the memories and perspective it reminds them that they have. Through our human struggle to grasp onto the pale light of memory and keep it alive, keep it in correlation to the master document, we turn to art that reminds us of those things in microcosm so that we might bear witness to these pale lights as tangible objects — if only for a brief moment. Vampire Survivors, for me, creates tangible a long-held feeling of peace, a memory of moving on, a prophetic vision of the places we long to go, and a mournful phosphene of the time we've spent together...for the sake of our children.

So long. / / take care of yourself.

written by: Justin McKenzie
2022-2024

frog forest records dot net forever.

