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My PAX 2009 Torchlight Game Play Experience

by Jerich, 07 Sep 2009, 06:25

I just got back home from PAX tonight and wanted to write a quick review of my experience with Torchlight. My expectations for PAX were high. This is such a good year for Fantasy RPG enthusiasts to view upcoming titles. Some of the major titles I was looking forward to seeing were Torchlight, Diablo III, Divinity 2, Dragon Age Origins, Elemental: War of Magic, Guildwars 2, and Majesty 2 (unfortunately it was not at PAX). All of them were amazing, but Torchlight stole the show. If I only had enough money and time to buy one of these games, I think it would be a hard choice between Diablo III, Dragon Age and Torchlight but that I would (gasp) eventually choose Torchlight. It was that good. Here are some of the reasons...

Graphics and Animations:

The first thing I noticed about Torchlight was the quality of the graphics and animations. The YouTube videos and screenshots I had seen had not done them justice. I had a hard time believing this game had only been in production for 11 months and secretly wondered if Travis had sold his soul to the Devil to get this far. The Torchlight graphic polish rivaled or exceeded that of games that had been in production for years (even Diablo III if I may be so bold) and were among the best in show. The two things that stood out most to me was the crispness of the graphics and the responsiveness of the animations.

I have not seen a such crisp graphics in a long time. Although there was a ton of detail on the screen, the graphics were never muddy. Some of the skills had impressive particle effects, and sometimes the dungeons were dark, but my character, the monsters, and the loot stood out clearly all the time. In some sense, I think the clarity rivals the good PC games from the last decade, like heroes of might and magic 2. Most of the other games at PAX looked cluttered and barren in comparison. As far as graphic quality, the characters were superbly rendered in a cartoony style that played well. The characters and monsters were visually interesting down to the armor variations and the environments were immersive.

The character animations were natural and responsive. Many of the games at PAX had characters that felt plasticly, almost as if a spirit had inhabited a body it did not completely know how to use. Not so with Torchlight. The characters breathed with life and the characters responded to my every mouse click with movement that was believable and immediate. The skills exude power. With every move I could tell that the character I was playing was a complete badass.

Overall, I would give this game a 9 out of 10 or even 10 out of 10 on graphics. I don't think I am being biased here, because the friends I was with who were relatively new to torchlight also thought the graphics were among the best in show.

Sound:

Unfortunately, I did not get to sample much of the sound of torchlight. PAX was noisy, I was talking to game designers and my friend while trying to play and the volume was set low. When I paid attention, though, the sounds seemed to fit the graphics quite well. The skills were all duly impressive and powerful sounding. The ambient noise and music also seemed to be very good from what I heard. That is about all I can comment on them, however. The sound was set too low and people were singing Karaoke Beetle Rock band a few booths down and were distracting.

Characters:

I was to play all three characters and was able to try several skills for each. While I did not have time to exhaustively look at the skill set for each, I did see that they each had three fully fleshed out trees, with about 15-20 skills in each tree. Of these skills, I believe roughly half were active skills that I could bind to an action bar or my right mouse button and half were passive skills that buffed the character all the time. When characters leveled up, they could assign stat points to Strength (for melee damage and armor), Dexterity (for range damage and armor), Magic (for mana points and magic power), and Defense (adds a percentage to the characters base armor class). They could also assign a skill point. Interestingly, some bosses gave fame points that could also be used as skill points. Thus, it presumably may be possible to completely max out a character by getting fame.

Each character (and the pet) had three inventory tabs. One was devoted to items, one was devoted to spells and one was devoted to fish. Spells are items that apparently drop and give the characters new skills that they would not normally be able to acquire through their skill tree. An example the developer gave was a fireball spell. If you found this, it would go in your spell tab and you could assign it like an active skill on your hot bar. The pet also had a spell tab and the same developer hinted that certain types of pets may be able to periodically cast certain spells. I am sure this is still being tweaked.

Alchemist:

The alchemist was a lot of fun to play. He felt like a glass cannon and even though I was playing on easy mode, he would take significant damage if I let the enemy surround him (although I was never in danger of dying, I did have to pop a couple healing potions). Luckily, I was able to kite effectively and later even summon creatures to tank for me. As far as damage went, he was able to kill most minor minions with one or ranged attacks. In all, the alchemist was a lot of fun to play. It reminded me of a cross between the sorcerer from Diablo I and the necromancer from Diablo II but definitely had his own flair.

Here are some of his skills (the names may be wrong):

- Ember Bolt - This is the skill I started with. With it I fired multiple bolts that traveled fast and seemed to slightly auto seek. I was able to gun down most of the monsters with it before they could come to me with it and was fast enough to kite with it if they did close.
- A Summon Imp Spell - I am not sure of this spells name since my friend put most of the points into this tree. With one point I was able to summon 2-3 imps from enemy corpses. They seemed to do decent damage and I even sat back as one imp tore his way through several monsters in a row. I only had to run back re-summon them twice, both times during boss fights that yielded fame points (these bosses seem particularly hard). More points spent in this skill increased the number of imps I could summon. At one time I had 4 or 5 out I

think. The AI for these imps was great. They were aggressive and fast. The pathing was good enough that they kept up with me much better than the skeletons from current Diablo 2 builds without having to resort to teleporting. When I got further away from them, they just ran faster to me.

- A Summon Golem Spell - There seemed to be multiple golem summons in the middle tree. This was the first one. It was hardy and did enough damage to kill monsters on its own. I don't think I had to re-summon it at all.
- A Minions Thorns Spell - This spell was kind of a reflective shield that I could cast on my minions. It reflected a large percentage of monster damage back on the attacking monster. I am not sure how effective it was, but I casted it on my minions during one boss fight where the boss was almost completely immune to my magic. He seemed to go down a lot faster than before.
- A Chain lightning type spell - This was probably my favorite spell I tried. It hit one monster and then would bounce to others with a satisfying electrical animation and sound. It seems to be very effective for clearing out trash fast, but did not seem to do much damage to the magic resistant boss I fought.
- An Exploding Coldball- This cold spell flew out to the enemy I clicked on then exploded and annihilated all the enemies around it. It was great for clearing groups of clustered mobs.

Vanquisher:

I didn't get to play the vanquisher much, but watched my friends play her for a while. She seemed extremely cute, yet carries herself with an aura that commands respect. We didn't put any points into defense, but even so she seemed a tad less fragile than the alchemist. She also had three trees and I believe we sampled one skill from each one. We played her primarily as a range and trap character, but it looks like you could play her as a melee build. I noticed one passive that was devoted to dual wielding. One interesting thing about the vanquisher, is that I believe the quest dialog changed when we played her. Unfortunately, my friends clicked past it faster than I could read it because they wanted to get to the dungeon ASAP.

Overall, she was a ton of fun to play. One of the spells we tried, a kind of lightning bomb, was one of my friends favorites of all the characters he tried. Here are the three skills we tried...

- Ricochet shot - Most of the times this shot behaved like a normal arrow shot, however when multiple enemies were around, it grew in badassery. A few times, it blew through a monster my friend was aiming, then bounced off a wall and then tore through about 5 monsters at once as it pierced through them and kept bouncing off walls. One of my friends that normally plays ranged characters thought it was awesome and it seemed to have a lot of potential. The developer we were with said it was more of a finesse skill than her others that could be incredibly powerful if you aimed it right.
- A Lightning Bomb - This skill was amazing. The vanquisher chucked a lightning orb into the air and it exploded as it hit the ground fragmenting into several smaller lightning bombs that bounced away from the first blast then exploded themselves. Several times my friend over aimed past the middle of a group and only hit the back with the first blast. I assumed he would be surrounded and hosed, but the secondary blast caught up with the monsters as they charged him and took them out from behind. What was incredibly satisfying about this skill is that it created a wake of flying enemy death followed by a secondary greater ripple that seemed to invariably seek out the survivors. Often they were hit so hard that the corpses flew over the vanquishers shoulders and hit the wall behind her.
- A Spread of knives (darts?) that seemed kind of like multishot - I didn't see this skill much, because the friend that was playing at the time was enamored with the lightning bomb and kept wanting to use it because he thought it was awesome even though I asked him to test this one. He did use it a few times and it seemed like a multi shot, but then immediately went back to the

lightning bomb.

Destroyer:

At first I was skeptical of playing this guy after seeing how fun the other two classes were. I normally, don't like melee characters in games like this. One of my friends, is even more of a ranged character snob than me. Both of us were completely caught off guard, however, by how awesome this guy was to play. He is a juggernaut, running into the middle of enemies while shrugging off damage and deflecting enemy missiles with his shadow armor. Instead of picking off enemies one at a time like tanks in most games I have played, he annihilated them all at once with powerful AOE attacks. The game play with him was visceral and satisfying. He may even be my favorite class. We didn't get to play him for too long (because I wanted to ask Travis to show me the PrEditor), but we did get to try three skills.

- Shadow Armor (I am pretty sure that is what it was called)- This is the cool ancestral armor ability that we have seen in the demos. It is even cooler in reality. Besides doing damage, it also deflects a percentage of ranged attacks (I think 70 percentish?). As such, it is useful to don it when trying to blow past a group of melee mobs that are guarding range ones.
- A Cleave like ability- The Destroyer swings his weapon demolishing the monsters in a cone in front of him. It seemed to go about 2 rows deep and killed most monsters in one hit. It did drain mana fast however.
- A Warstomp - This did AOE damage to every monster around the Destroyer and was his most fun ability. Several times I ran around and gathered a big group of enemies around me, ignoring the hits, just because it was so satisfying to destroy them all at once. All of us liked this Destroyer Ability the best.

Overall the characters are well designed and the skills are fleshed out. None of them is boring to play. All the skills made me feel overpowered, but even in easy mode I had to watch my life and mana, so they are scaled well to difficulty. I have not liked skills this much since DII. I may even like them more. 10 out of 10.

Game Play:

As soon as I started a new character I was met with a quest exclamation point. In addition to this, several townspeople had a smaller exclamation point showing that they had lore information. I read some, but was bullied on to the dungeon by my friends who wanted to see more action. As I went to the dungeon, I was introduced to the main NPCs with some scripted events. I don't want to give away spoilers, so I won't get into the quest line, but it seemed well done. At one time, I was even able to add one of the NPCs to my group for a while.

The action of torchlight is fast and furious. The character skills are overpowered but the game is challenging at the same time. Loot falls freely and is colored to match the rarity of the item. Here are some tidbits that I particularly liked (some I have said before... so I apologize).

- Secret passages are scattered throughout each level. In the mines there are plungers that you can depress that clear a rockfall. Monsters pour out of the rockfall, and when you kill them, you can go into the room and loot a special chest. These chests seem to be much better quality than chests in Diablo II. I believe I found two uniques, a set item and a rare from the multiple chests I found.
- Some special monsters create a portal when killed. This portal leads to a special treasure room with incredibly tough monsters. It is best to be fully healed when entering since there is not much room for kiting. Once the monsters are dead, there are several high quality chests for the taking as well as mountains of gold.
- Some bosses gave me a fame point. These bosses seemed much worse than normal bosses to me and would often take 30 seconds to a minute to kill. After killing a few, the game informed me that I was now known as so and so the

noteworthy. I believe this changes your character title, but since a developer used a console cheat code to level us right after this and that destroys your current title.

- There will be console cheats in the game. However, they change your current title to "The Cheater." And you can't get better titles after this point. Whenever the console is used, a pre-cheat autosave is created so that the character can go back pre-cheat. I love this feature since I have a hard time keeping myself from cheating and always ruin the single player experience for myself.
- Fame seems to have changed its use. One developer told me that it now acts as another skill point. If this is true, it might be possible to max out a character by grinding in the infinite dungeon. It would take a huge amount of time to do legitimately though.
- After you beat the game you will be about level 30-40 and it will take 10-30 hours depending on your desire for completeness. You then have two choices, keep leveling in the infinite dungeon, or inherit some of your prowess to a new character that can then presumably start at a higher difficulty level.
- Fishing is in the game. You throw in your line and then wait for the bobber to turn red and click on it. If you do it successfully, you get a fish that you can use to turn your pet into a different animal. On level two we got a fish that turned our pet into a slime. This kind of sucked because the slime was slow, but the Dev said it did have an awesome AOE attack. Perhaps it would be in a room where adds were being summoned.
- Spells are being added to the game. They are loot that you can use as skills. One Dev hinted your pet may be able to use them also (which is awesome).
- Magic items say "An unidentified XXX" when they drop (i.e. "An Unidentified Short Sword"). Unique items, however say "A Mysterious item..." I loved this small attention to flavor.

[*]I talked to Travis about the MMO and asked him if the classes would have skills like the paladin's auras from D2 that encourage group play. He said that every class would have party support skills that made the group better together than they would be alone if people took them. That being said, all classes will still be AOE killing machines.

Some Small Quibbles:

- I wasn't able to change my hotkeys in the PAX build. That is the first thing I do to any game I play, however, I think this will be implemented in the release build.
- There were only 10 hotkeys. It would be nice to be able to have more since there are more than 10 skills per character.
- The Alchemist's teleport doesn't teleport his minions (I didn't test this, but a Dev explained how it works). I have played minion masters in Guildwars and Diablo II. I think they are always more fun and playable when the summoner has some kind of minion teleport.

Overall:

The gameplay was amazing. Torchlight has the special something that Diablo and Diablo II had that Titan Quest and Sacred did not have. Not sure if I can completely describe it, but it is there. This feels like the real thing. For an unbiased opinion, one of my friends was slightly skeptical about torchlight going into PAX. After playing the demos, he said that he is definitely going to buy it. My other friend said that he is more excited now about Torchlight than any other game he saw at PAX. 10 out of 10.

The Runic Games Staff:

I got a chance to talk to multiple developers from different games during PAX. The crew from Runic Games was hands down the most competent, friendly, and most passionate about their game of any group I talked to. I talked for a while with

Wonder, Matt, Jeff (I believe), and Travis. All of them were incredibly helpful and seemed to be excited to share their game with my friends and me. Wonder was hilarious, Matt and Jeff answered a ton of questions and showed off some of their unique work and listened intently to suggestions people had.. Travis showed me the PrEditor and his enthusiasm was infectious. I could definitely tell all of them were proud of their work. They have a right to be. What they have done in 11 months is almost unbelievable.

Overall, this is the most friendly, competent and least pretentious design team I have ever met. They seem to be as close with each other as the best of small guilds that I have seen.

Overall Game Review 10 out of 10

Sorry for the length of this post. I could probably go back and edit it some to shorten it, but it is 3:22 am and I have been writing it for 4 hours. I don't have the energy left to do an edit. So I am just going to post it without rereading it.=)

Thanks,
Jerich

P.S. PrEditor:

Travis showed me the PrEditor and I was floored. I have made mods for other games and this is by far the best editor I have ever seen. Here are some of the amazing things you can do...

- Most of you have seen the triggers you can use in the PrEditor tutorials that have already been posted. They are powerful and easy to use... slightly reminiscent of LabView if any of you have ever used that language. This makes scripting easy for even someone who is not a huge coder.
- There is a separate quest tree where you can set up quest dependencies, rewards, dialog, etc. This can also be done visually. I can see using it to make a complete new campaign super fast.
- Spell and Item Effects can be added visually, inherited from other effects and triggered etc. Custom particle effects and lighting sources can be added with ease. It would not be difficult, I think, for someone who is somewhat versed in the system to make several new skills in a few hours.
- Base items and Monsters can be added to the game and inherited with an object oriented system.
- Difficulty and Leveling Curves (which are currently parabolic), can be easily modified
- I predict there will be several top notch mods within a month of release that add about as much gameplay as the original game. Within 6 months there will be complete overhauls. It is that easy to use.

Thanks again for showing off your game in PAX, Torchlight crew. I was astounded.
Cheers,
Jerich

P.P.S. If I misunderstood anything, feel free to correct any of my conclusions devs.=P

Edit: Go ahead and ask any questions if you want if I left something out. I didn't spend a huge amount of time picking it apart, but will try to answer.