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Singularity's tale is rather one-dimensional even as it combines the tried-and-true elements of time manipulation, physics-bending and alternate histories.

The right ideas

Singularity plays well but could have been so much better

JUSTIN AMIRKHANI
Special to QMI Agency

Time manipulation, physics-bending and alternate histories have all been the components of great games in the past. Singularity rolls all three of these elements in to one, forming a first-person shooter that plays well but doesn't fully live up to its potential.

The game is set on a secret Russian island where, during the Cold War, the USSR discovered a mysterious new element called E-99 that would revolutionize everything we knew about science. Since then, the island has been overrun by E-99-infused mutants and military personnel still trying to harness the element's powers. The trouble begins when the player, in the role of an American Black Ops soldier, crashes his helicopter on the island and sets in motion a series of events that puts the entire world in jeopardy.

As players explore the island, they'll encounter audio logs and notes telling the stories of its once-living inhabitants, fleshing out the narrative and providing context to the world players explore. It's a storytelling device we've seen work well in games like 2007's BioShock, but while BioShock used the method to tell a complex story in multiple parts, Singularity's tale is rather one-dimensional.

Singularity

★★★

Rating: Mature

PLATFORM
Xbox 360, PS3, PC

Where the game deviates from the usual hall-to-room shooter is the introduction of a Time Manipulation Device (TMD) that gives players the ability to rapidly age or restore enemies and objects around them. In combat it has some practical uses, decomposing barriers enemies cower behind or returning ammo crates to their once-full state as needed. However, as a puzzle mechanic, the TMD is mostly used to fix momentary delays like repairing collapsed stairs or decaying an obstacle, which requires no real thought other than remembering which button to press.

As the game evolves, so do the player's powers. The problem is that the game doesn't properly pace these abilities, making the player far too powerful even before the halfway point. In particular, the ability to slow time at will is easily abused, letting the player freeze their enemies mid-combat before sauntering closer for a point blank *coup de grace*. Players who like feeling all-powerful will have fun, but those who play for a challenge will have to artificially handicap themselves.

Singularity tries to do a lot of different things through the course of the campaign but very few of the ideas are original. While that doesn't make the game any worse, it certainly doesn't carve space for itself in an overcrowded genre. At times it feels like the game is trying to be too many things at once, as no single element feels properly explored or balanced.

BottomLine

Singularity is a cocktail of many great ideas, but doesn't follow any to their fullest. Because of this, the experience is very enjoyable but somewhat unremarkable.

Giving it their best shot

It takes a really unique idea to make a great first-person shooter stand out from the crowd. Singularity pulls a lot of inspiration from some of gaming's greatest, incorporating a lot of different ideas from a lot of different games:

Half-Life 2

Valve's 2004 blockbuster wasn't the first to use physics for puzzles, but it was the first to give the player direct control with their very own gravity gun. It may not be as powerful as Singularity's TMD, but the gravity gun changed how we look at puzzles in first-person shooters.

BioShock

Telling a story through fragmented audio logs made BioShock's Rapture feel like it had a real history, creating an air of mystery as players explored the once-thriving underwater metropolis. Singularity attempts this, but without a world as deep it feels more like menial collection than exploration.

Fallout 3

Kitschy 1950's public service announcements and a distinct "glory of the past" motif colour both Fallout 3 and Singularity with a haunting light that questions the permanency of all civilization.

Dead Space

Spooky hallways, check. Terrifying mutant enemies, check. Easily severed limbs, double-check. Dead Space mastered the feeling of terror Singularity replicates as its waves of mutant freaks descend on the player.

Command & Conquer: Red Alert

It may have been a real-time strategy game, but Singularity's alternate Cold War history bears striking resemblance to Command & Conquer's rise of the Red Army. Both stories involve a dramatic escalation of the Soviet conflict and the consequences of playing with history.

— Justin Amirkhani