

Valheim

EARLY ACCESS REVIEW 20/02/21

Chris Getliffe

I'm dropped hungry and ragged upon a grass plane by a giant Raven. Besides this slightly fantastical entrance I feel that I've been here before. As will anyone else who's ever played a survival game. I punch a tree, make an axe, cut some wood, build a bonfire, stare into it's flickering flames and wonder why this game is becoming such a hit. As besides the unusual Playstation 2 retro style graphics, the game feels almost redundant.

Then a storm hits, a streak of lighting illuminates the night sky making the low texture environment suddenly look beautiful. I can see eyes peering at me from the darkened tree line. The torrential rain has put out the fire, and I'm cold. I frantically build a tiny hut around the bonfire to shield both the bonfire and myself. Once completed I breathe a sigh of relief, shut the door and re-light the bonfire, only for the tiny room to quickly fill with smoke, and for me to begin to asphyxiate. Coughing, wet, and now outside my smoke filled rickety hut. I begin to understand what Valheim might do differently, and why chimneys are important. This experience was the first of many lessons in how Valheim sets out to fundamentally improve the survival genre.

You're a recently slain Viking warrior who's been banished to the 10th realm 'Valheim', a place where even the gods fear to tread. You must prove yourself to Odin to get your seat at the Valhalla table by slaying 5 Deities that he has deemed a threat to the Viking Gods. Arguably though the biggest threat to you is not to get side tracked. From building a lavish dwelling, tending to your garden, or just exploring the diverse and atmospheric environments. Upon starting a new game the world is randomly generated so you can never be sure what's out there. Vast oceans, stagnant swamps, and towering mountains are just few of the locations for you to brave. The Deities you hunt act as giant Boss battles, and a soft gate to your progress, as once one is defeated they will unlock new means of survival, new recipes, and abilities.

What Valheim does so well is to take a hard look at the traditional systems of survival games and remove anything that's not conducive to having fun. Anything crafted will always give you the full components used to build it back should you destroy it. So you're free to create and experiment however you want. There is a hunger system, but you can never starve to death, instead the amount and quality of what you eat increases your stamina and health. Combat, although basic still requires thought, as stamina management and parrying are key to surviving an encounter. This gives fights a good amount of weight and tension but the lack of a lock on option and a limited move set can make battles feel slightly listless. There are times, especially early game, when certain key resources such as leather are hard to come by in the amounts you need. This is something I'm sure the developers will tweak across the early access period. Yet at the time of writing Valheim hasn't fully got rid of what seems to be the mandatory survival game busy work.

Valheim uses low resolution textures and simple polygonal models, looking like a title from the early 2000's. It does however greatly benefit from some of the most well realised modern day lighting and physic techniques that contemporary gaming has given us. There are times when the orchestral score is swelling and the sun is rising through the treeline,

that the game truly is something beautiful. Or as you grip your tiny raft for dear life as a storm bellows in whilst lightning cracks, illuminates the huge wave about to crash into you .

The sailing in Valheim is well realised, and a challenging addition to your land based adventures. Wind is realistically modelled, so basic sailing techniques such as Tacking have to be used, (and possibly researched outside the game). Which adds to the tension of what possible beasts may be under, or in front of you.

One poorly planned sailing expedition resulted in me being out of food with no land in sight. With the sun beating down, I'm desperately hunting for anywhere to land. Then in the distance I see it, I'm in luck as there seems to be a tiny island out at Sea. Even better it appears to have a resource I've not yet discovered. I hurriedly swim ashore, I can't find any food but at least I can get some of this new material. I begin to mine it when I hear a distant roar. I nervously look around but there's nothing I can see that would be a threat, I shrug it off, my mind must be playing tricks. I bring my pickaxe back down, to be greeted with the whole island beginning to violently shake and moan. In a panic i jump off to get back to the safety of my ship. Only to see the land mass sink into the sea. It was no island – it was some kind of leviathan monstrosity that I'm now fleeing from. It makes me think how far I am away from the safety of my homestead, and the slightly dull beginnings of Valheim.

It's impressive what developers Iron Gate have achieved for such a small team. Whether playing by yourself, or with up to 10 players on a server, you'll not play a better survival game then Valheim. Even at the start of the early access process it is an engrossing and rewarding game. One that can only get better over time. Although there's infinite Viking worlds out there, I will not be forgetting mine any time soon.

Early access score as of 20th February 2021
8/10