Phasmophobia

Developed by Kinetic Games

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For freshman indie video game developers, there is a great amount of pressure to make an impression with your first release. A successful debut can incite interest in future releases, foster a base audience and fund larger and more ambitious projects in the future. However, the best-case-scenario is difficult to achieve. Without a large studio to fund your first product or an established fan base eager to purchase it, the chances of your new game going unnoticed by the masses are more than just likely; it can feel like an inevitable brick wall. Developers are pressed to find ways to climb over these obstacles and catch the attention of the world from the moment their first game is published. Horror game developers are faced with unique obstacles in this respect. As a genre, Horror often includes niche themes that are not easily marketable to general audiences: death, violence, the supernatural, and the uncanny. Putting death on the screens of thousands of computer monitors and making a profit from it is a difficult task, even for the veterans in the business.

Freshman developer Kinetic Games made their debut in September of 2020 – an early access release – with the hilariously creepy game *Phasmophobia*, a co-op ghost hunting simulator. So, how did Kinetic Games fair? As of 2 November 2020, Steam (a digital video game distributor) reports that "97% of the 66,505 [*Phasmophobia*] reviews are positive," awarding the game the "overwhelmingly positive" title on its Steam page. With the instant success of *Phasmophobia*, it should be asked: how did Kinetic Games, a new developer without a pre-existing audience, create a project that would climb to the 8th ranked game on Steam for player count?

Playing *Phasmophobia* is simple: gather your friends online to form a ghost hunting party, search for evidence of the supernatural, use teamwork and deduction skills to investigate ghosts and stay alive. The game can be played online, using a standard keyboard and mouse or game controller, but also has VR support for the Valve Index, HTC Vive, Oculus Rift/S, and Windows Mixed Reality. When launched, the game will place you with – or allow you to create or join – a group of paranormal investigators. The ghost hunting parties are comprised of 2-4 players, meaning a key element of *Phasmophobia* is online cooperation and player interaction. You can form a party of close friends or let fate match you with random players. Either way,

having other players beside you is imperative to establishing *Phasmophobia*'s unique atmosphere. Many games in the horror genre are single-player – and for a valid reason. Horror games often rely on the player's isolation to instil feelings of dread and fear, reflecting the dynamic of predator vs. prey with the mechanic "Player vs. Monster." Games like *Silent Hill* and the appropriately named *Alien: Isolation* are classic examples of the single-player dominated horror genre separating players from the comfort of teamwork. *Phasmophobia* subverts this technique by placing you in a team, rarely alone in a dangerous situation. Quickly, players begin to rely on each other – both to complete missions and for a sense of safety in numbers. The true horror of *Phasmophobia*'s mechanics is how delicately it isolates party members. Certain ghosts only leave evidence when investigated by players who are alone, meaning the party must separate to complete their tasks. Other methods of isolation are the game's death mechanics. When a player is hunted and subsequently killed by a ghost, their radio communication is disabled for the remainder of the match. When this happens, the remaining player(s) must finish their investigation alone.

Three other elements encompass the gameplay of *Phasmophobia*: the ghosts, the equipment and the maps. The main objective of investigating haunted locations is to discover the ghost's classification. Each location will have one ghost that will fit within one of twelve categories. Types of ghosts include: Spirit, Wraith, Phantom, Poltergeist, Banshee, Jinn, Mare, Revenant, Shade, Demon, Yurei, and Oni; so ghosts from different cultures and societies are incorporated. *Phasmophobia*'s ghosts have an uncanny design and a wide range of appearances. Ghosts can be children or adults, varying genders, and have drastically different physical models.

Through investigation, evidence is found to correctly identify the ghost, and the players complete the mission. To collect this evidence, players must utilize equipment. Starting equipment, such as Flashlights, UV Lights, Spirit Boxes, Ghost Writing Books, EMF Readers, Video and Photo Cameras are given to the party automatically. As you successfully investigate ghosts, you earn money that can be spent on more niche equipment including Head-Mounted Cameras, Thermometers, Tripods, Motion Sensors, Crucifixes and more. If killed, players may lose their gear, encouraging them to complete more jobs to replace what had been lost. The monetary system not only implements an incentive to continue playing *Phasmophobia* but allows players to experiment with how different pieces of gear can reveal different pieces of paranormal evidence. For example, a UV Flashlight is used to find Fingerprints while a Thermometer is used to detect Freezing Temperatures. Other pieces of evidence – such as Ghost Orbs, an active Spirit Box, EMF level 5, and Ghost Writing – when found are used to identify a ghost.

Phasmophobia has seven playable maps as of its 2020 release – and there are speculations that future maps will be added into the game after it leaves early access status. The maps range in size and location and include Tanglewood Street House, Edgefield Street House, Ridgeview Road House, Grafton Farmhouse, Bleadsdale Farmhouse, Brownstone High School, and the Asylum. *Phasmophobia*'s maps are imperative to its unnerving atmosphere. Each location is modeled with a familiar sense of every-day Americana. The residential houses look as if they could sit on any street in America. The High School is filled with books, desks and posters that students, past and present, would find commonplace. The familiar atmosphere is

juxtaposed by the dangerous specters that plague the buildings, creating a nightmarish environment for players to investigate.

Will *Phasmophobia* maintain its abrupt success? It seems that – even with its early access title – players are eager for new content and an official, full release from Kinetic Games. The game has certainly faced its fair share of hindrances – server crashes, lobby bugs, voice chat complications, and struggles with VR compatibility to name a few – but *Phasmophobia*'s players have overlooked these issues in favour of sharing their experiences as positively as a debut game could hope for. With post-launch updates already making their way into the game, and fixing some of the more prevalent drawbacks, players have much to look forward to regarding *Phasmophobia*'s future. In addition to new updates, *Phasmophobia* has already seen new content since its initial Early Access release, including a temporary Halloween themed headquarters and a new Prison map.

Phasmophobia is the perfect choice of game if you are in search of a co-op game where you can live out your paranormal investigative fantasies while laughing at your friends' screams. It offers players a fun experience similar to the *Left for Dead* franchise but with modern pleasantries like VR and its unique character design. If you are searching for a new release that already fits in with the classics of the genre, *Phasmophobia* has a lot to offer you. Kinetic Games has proven that indie studios can start with a bang; the bang just may be a ghost trying to grab your attention.

Bibliography

Phasmophobia. Early Access. Kinetic Games, 2020. Web. 28 October 2020. <https://store.steampowered.com/app/739630/Phasmophobia/>