Plants Vs Zombies 2’s central theme is time travel, and PopCap’s flair for character creation is plain to see in the appropriately remixed zombie designs. But the change isn’t just for show, with profound gameplay differences between worlds, too.

PLANTS VS ZOMBIES 2: IT’S ABOUT TIME

PopCap repots the series in free-to-play soil

Publisher
EA
Developer
PopCap Games
Format
Android, iOS
Origin
US
Release
July
The subtitle says it all: it’s about time. Four years after the PC release of Plants Vs Zombies, PopCap is at last ready to show off the sequel. That’s a long time, especially given the game in question is an accessible spin on tower defence made by a tiny team. It seems even longer if you consider that the only new game the studio’s released in the nearly two years since EA bought it is Solitaire Blitz. ‘It’s about time’ is putting it mildly. What took so long?

In truth, lead producer Allan Murray tells us, PopCap hasn’t spent the past four years on Plants Vs Zombies 2: it’s been working on the original, too. Since its 2009 PC debut, that game has made its way to just about every platform around, and has been installed over 150 million times. “PopCap isn’t really a place that rushes to do sequels,” Murray tells us. “The first couple of years was just [spent] getting it out to DS, to console, to iOS, and eventually Android. A lot of care and attention went into those – they weren’t just quick ports. What you’re playing now has been made by a team that’s come together in the last year and a half to two years.”

A lot of care has gone into the sequel, too, with the team – currently 26 people, making this PopCap’s biggest project to date – keenly aware of the danger of making what could be seen as an expansion pack. But ‘it’s about time’ is more than a mea culpa for the four-year wait, it’s a concept that anchors the entire game. Partway through the first PVZ, players find a taco, for which Crazy Dave, their loose-screwed mentor, pays $1,000. With the first game’s undead invasion dealt with, Dave eats the taco, and loves it so much that he wants to eat it again. “Not just another taco,” Murray explains. “The same taco. So he brings out his time machine – because, of course, Dave has a time machine – and you go back in time to find the taco.” Naturally, Dave being Dave, his time machine (named Penny) doesn’t take him back.

You can hold only three doses of plant food at once, so when a zombie drops more, you might as well use some to make room for it. It doesn’t carry over between levels, either, so you can use the lot on the last wave.
five minutes, but thousands of years. Thus players will travel through time to different worlds in different eras, three of which will be available at launch. It’s a setup that allows PopCap to play with convention while staying true to what made the original so special. It also means world maps, with branches off the critical path leading to the minigames and challenges that the original buried in menu screens. Clear a world, and you’ll be invited to replay its levels in different ways in exchange for stars. One such objective has us clear a level with a limit on the number of plants we can have onscreen at a time.

Each world has a ‘blacklist’ that removes certain plants – we were thrown by having to start Pirate Seas without our go-to Potato Mine. Clear a world and you can chase Star Objectives with a full set of Plants Vs. Zombies 2.

A zombie modelled on Ra the sun god uses his staff to draw vital sun towards him

zombies try to pass themselves off as camels, holding up one-third of a crudely sketched tylopod each; another, modelled on Ra the sun god, uses his staff to draw PVZ’s most vital resource, sun, towards him. Tombstones now block your shots and must be destroyed, while sandstorms carry zombies across the map at speed. In the Pirate Seas, zombies shamble across planks from their ship to yours. With only three or four planks to go around, there will be gaps normal foes can’t pass, but you’ll need to watch out for the cannons that fire small zombies over large distances, as well as the canny zombie that rope swings over gaps. Wild West’s central conceit is a mine cart that can be dragged along vertical tracks as enemy wave patterns dictate, the trade-off being that you can only plant on the cart, not the track. There’s a spin on the original game’s Disco Zombie, with a piano-playing undead who causes those around him to dance and switch lanes. And then there’s the Chicken Farmer, whose flock rushes at you when you hit him.

Not all the original game’s plants have made it into the sequel — no night levels means no mushrooms, though the team hopes to reintroduce them at some point — but there are plenty of new ones to make up for it.
And yet it moves

In Plants Vs Zombies, a yetai appeared on your second
playthrough of the game’s fog levels, and he’ll be a similarly
sporadic presence in this sequel. He’ll appear on the world
map for a set period of time – a day or two, perhaps, or even
just a couple of hours – and Murray compares him to Diablo III’s
treasure goblin. Kill the yetai, and he will drop his loot-filled
lunchbox. It’s a simple enough concept, but given its host
platform, it’s a masterstroke: a push notification will let you
know where the yetai is and how long he’ll be there, pulling
players back into the game with the lure of a hefty loot drop.

The Bloomerang’s shots reach the far end of
the screen and hit enemies a second time on
their return. Bonk Choy punches enemies
that draw near, the Snapdragon emits a wall of
fire that hits zombies in three lanes at once,
and any zombie eating the Chili Bean leaves a
trail of paralysing gas behind him. Meanwhile,
Lightning Reeds fire bolts of electricity at
enemies anywhere onscreen, and turn the
farmer’s flock into little buckets of fried
chicken. The Coconut Cannon is a further
deviation: you tap on it to fire, and wait for a
cooldown before you can use it again.

That’s emblematic of a game that is much
more involved, and a good deal pacier, than its
predecessor. In PVZ, it was all too easy to
settle into a groove, relying on the same
plants and setting up in much the same way
each time, with only certain enemy types
requiring you to briefly change tack. Here,
there always seems to be something to do –
to the extent that the team is still debating
whether coins and gems dropped by fallen
zombies should be automatically collected.

The world map doesn’t just
show levels, but the plants
you’ve collected on the way
(as well as a glimpse of
those you haven’t yet
acquired). Branches off the
beaten track are behind
gates, which are unlocked
with randomly dropped keys.

The game has been built around
multitouch – little surprise given how at
home the first one feels on iPad – and the
two biggest mechanical shifts in PVZ2 have
both been designed with its new interface in
mind. Plant Food can be dragged and dropped.
system either. You can sit and play through App Store successes, and there’s no energy the game can be completed with the free tools food – and a handful of premium plants.

sunflower, for example, or your stock of plant increase the amount of sun yielded from each earned through play – permanent boosts that they’re being bilked all the time. “We want people to play and enjoy the game, and not feel like they’re being bilked”

“Balance will be key: in free–to–play games, difficulty spikes can be great revenue streams. Plants Vs Zombies 2 is pacier, and at times tougher than its predecessor, but we see nothing in our time with the game to suggest that PopCap is turning to the darker side of free–to–play design. Murray says EA, which presumably would like a return on its $750 million investment, has been surprisingly hands–off. “Honestly, it hasn’t affected our day–to–day development. The question we get asked is, ‘So, you’re part of EA now. They made you make it free–to–play?’ We were already leaning towards that; it’s something PopCap has been doing for quite a while. There wasn’t any sort of top–down mandate,” Murray is full of praise for the logistical support available within EA — in QA and networking, as well as a network of studios that openly shares knowledge and experience. It also means the studio has a presence at E3. But he is fully aware of the stigma that comes with being part of EA; that there will be a little bit more often. “God, yes,” laughs Murray. “There’s this 30–ton weight on our shoulders right now, we’re hyper–aware of it. Frankly, it’s been something that the team has really struggled with: how do we do it right? How do we do it in a way that we believe in? We’re just trying to find a really good balance. We want people to play and enjoy the game, and not feel like they’re being bilked all the time.” There are items for sale that can’t be earned through play — permanent boosts that increase the amount of sun yielded from each sunflower, for example, or your stock of plant food — and a handful of premium plants. Murray insists, however, that every level in the game can be completed with the free tools with which you’re provided. There are none of the content paywalls found in so many other App Store successes, and there’s no energy system either. You can sit and play through the entire game in one sitting, if you’ve got about 15 hours to spare.

The special moves are nice touches, if you’ll pardon the pun, but aren’t essential. We’ll admit to forgetting they were there till one final wave was dispatched almost entirely using Power Toss
Existing plants have been redrawn from scratch; their animations have twice the frames and are more full of character than ever. Bonk Choy is the most immediately likeable of the new plants, perhaps because in the demo’s absence of the first game’s Chomper we were hankering after something that could do big damage at short range. Mummies, pirates and cowboys are three rich sources of inspiration for the game, and the team has countless options of what to follow them with. Murray hints at months, if not years, of post-launch support. The world maps are one of many nods to games of yore. The mine carts are another, while Galaga is also mentioned during our demo. Time-travel means PopCap’s artists can have fun with the zombie designs, but whatever the era a traffic cone’s still a traffic cone.