

Eldritch Review Eldritch Review: Terrible Knowledge

H.P. Lovecraft once wrote, "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far." The quest for knowledge and understanding is a recurring theme in Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. It is also a quest full of darkness, danger, and madness. Eldritch, from *Minor Key Games*, nails this concept square on its octopus-shaped head.

In Eldritch, you play an unnamed customizable character who wakes up in a massive, abandoned library. Three books are displayed more prominently than the others, and each of these three radiates magic. Technically, you don't have to interact with these books in any way. You could just enjoy the library and live a happy life. You know this, but at the same time, don't you want to know why these three books are special? Surely one little peek couldn't hurt. Open a book, and you'll be transported into its world. There, you'll sneak, sprint and scramble through randomly-generated dungeons full of abominable horrors as you search for an exit. You will be hunted. You will die. All because you just had to know.

Despite Eldritch's decidedly retro look, it feels less like *Minecraft* and, in terms of player movement, almost exactly like *Dishonored*. You can sprint, crouch, lean, vault and slide your way around the level, and if you're so inclined, you can treat the entire experience as a first-person stealth game with excellent player mobility.

Is there a cultist around that corner? Take in your surroundings, study them, and use them to your advantage. Crouch behind a nearby pillar, then lean around it so you can see where he is. Once he's in range, take him out with a weapon or stay silent and sneak around until you can clamber onto a ledge and be out of harm's way. I often found myself sprinting away from danger, then power-sliding around a corner to lose my pursuers. Eldritch's buttery smooth movement makes that possible.

Worlds are rendered with low-resolution blocks, and there are often many floors between the start of a dungeon and its exit. Luckily, while floors are often inhabited with various monsters, there are also plenty of items and weapons to find. Rocks, daggers, revolvers, tripwires and dynamite can be used against your foes, but you can only carry two weapons at a time, so choose wisely. Personally, I often went with a revolver for ranged damage and a dagger in case my enemies got too close for comfort.

There are also magical powers to dabble with, which you acquire by finding ancient shrines. These shrines are much more rare than the scattered weapons, but seeking them out is well worth the effort. Maybe you'll get a cloaking power that lets you sneak past enemies unseen. Or you might get the power that lets you turn foes into friends. Or maybe you'll learn to revive yourself, effectively cheating death.

There's a wide variety of abilities to discover and experiment with, and each time you play,

odds are you'll find a new one you haven't tried before. It's incredibly satisfying to start a game of Eldritch, roll the proverbial dice, see what powers you get, and then challenge yourself to see if you can take on the dungeon. Just be mindful of your inventory, because using your powers costs ancient stones called "artifacts."

Like weapons and healing items, artifacts are littered randomly about dungeons. Each power requires a different amount of artifacts to use, with more powerful abilities costing more. Artifacts can also be used as currency, which will come in handy should you discover a secret shop run by a dapper lizardman in a bowler hat. You'll have to decide for yourself which use of the ornate stones is best.

The use of low-resolution blocks makes many areas look more or less the same, and when you've got monsters breathing down your neck, it adds a sense of directionless panic. More than once I darted from room to room with several lizardmen in pursuit, their hungry hisses always sounding like they were right behind me, and more than once did I run in circles like a wild animal desperately looking for something, anything that would let me get away. another day another cube

I panicked because Eldritch, like the world of the Cthulhu Mythos, is incredibly deadly, and it often takes just a swing or two from enemies to end your adventure. Even if you manage to take an enemy down, looting their corpse will cause them to respawn somewhere else in the level.

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This creates an interesting risk vs. reward system. You may be low on supplies, but you have to decide if the gamble of possible treasure is worth the risk of the monster you just killed

coming back. This is also in keeping with the Lovecraftian theme of knowledge bringing more harm than good, as you won't know what an enemy has on them until you try to take it. If you're feeling particularly masochistic, there's also a New Game+ mode that makes the game even harder by giving you fewer weapons and making enemies more aggressive and deadly.

Either way, when you die, you lose your progress - mostly. Items you've collected, such as bullets, weapons and health upgrades, will be lost, but books you've unlocked will stay that way. You'll have to unlock the books in a certain order on your first playthrough, but once they've opened, you can tackle them in any order you like. Artifacts can also be banked for use in later plays, provided you reach a chest before your demise.

No matter what powers, weapons or gear you end up with, Eldritch challenges you to learn its systems. You can't memorize the level layout, so you'll have to take into careful consideration your surroundings, what you're capable of, and how you can put your abilities to proper use. You have to be clever. You have to understand. You have to seek knowledge in a playground of sorcery and revolver pistols, filled with cultists and star-spawn.

This review is based on a Steam download of Eldritch, provided by Minor Key Games.

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