



## SteamWorld Build Review

A Bustling Town Built on Shaky Ground  
 by *Kenneth Seward, Jr.* on Nov 27, 2023 at 08:00 AM

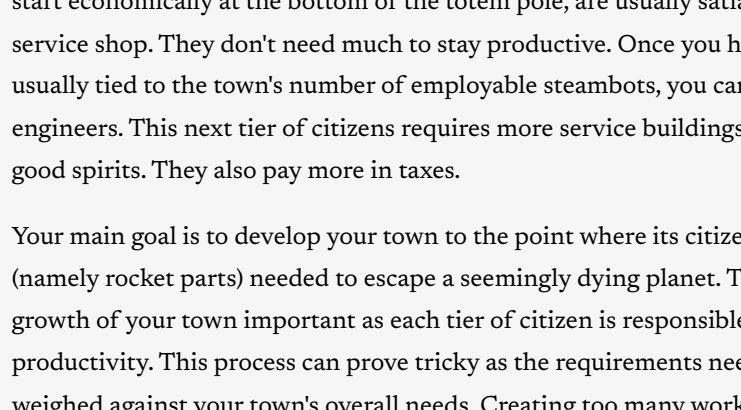
**REVIEWED ON** PC **ALSO ON** PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation X/S, Xbox One, Switch  
**PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing **DEVELOPER** Thunderful Development **RELEASE** December 1, 2023  
**RATING** Everyone 10+

The most endearing aspect of the SteamWorld series is how each of its games relates to one another despite their disparate genres. From tower defense to turn-based RPG, each title offers a unique spin on a specific gameplay experience while adhering to a shared mythos, resulting in a fun collection of games that coalesce thematically. SteamWorld Build, Thunderful's city-builder/RTS hybrid, serves as the latest iteration of this formula. Sporting streamlined genre mechanics, intuitive controls, and charming visuals, many essential parts are in place. Unfortunately, despite a solid foundation, SteamWorld Build struggles to maintain an engaging experience throughout its campaign.

Like most of the SteamWorld series, Build doesn't directly connect to any of the previous games. Instead, it tries to provide a unique perspective on critical events that feed into the series' overarching narrative. This familiar setup works in both. The plight of a group of travelers settling near an abandoned mine at the behest of a mysterious robot companion is initially attractive. Fans will especially enjoy the nods to past happenings and some extra lore surrounding an established planetary threat. That said, it won't take long for players to realize that SteamWorld Build's campaign is paper thin.

While the SteamWorld series isn't known for its character-driven stories, each new release offers more meaningful reasons to dive into its steampunk universe. SteamWorld Build's nearly nonexistent story is a step backward in this regard. There aren't any notable characters, worthwhile encounters, or imaginative events to speak of. Essentially, the why of it all doesn't matter, as the campaign's few cutscenes offer just enough exposition for it to be considered a means to an end.

Story woes aside, SteamWorld Build is entertaining. This is partially due to the streamlined approach to city-building and solid tutorial prompts. There are some genre staples, especially when it comes to building placement. You'll be told, for instance, to place Foresters (a giant tree-chopping machine) and lumber mills next to wooded areas to acquire logs. But most of the finer details involving the inner workings of a town's city – tax rates, zoning, population density in relation to the neighboring structures – are either handled automatically or simplified to a large degree.



There's no urban decay or adverse environmental issues to worry about. As long as your buildings are connected to their corresponding facilities and the central train station by road, they'll function as expected. And since the game's intuitive controls (whether using a gamepad or keyboard and mouse) do most of the heavy lifting, nearly every action can be carried out with just a few button presses. SteamWorld Build is more arcade than sim, offering a welcoming experience for newcomers.

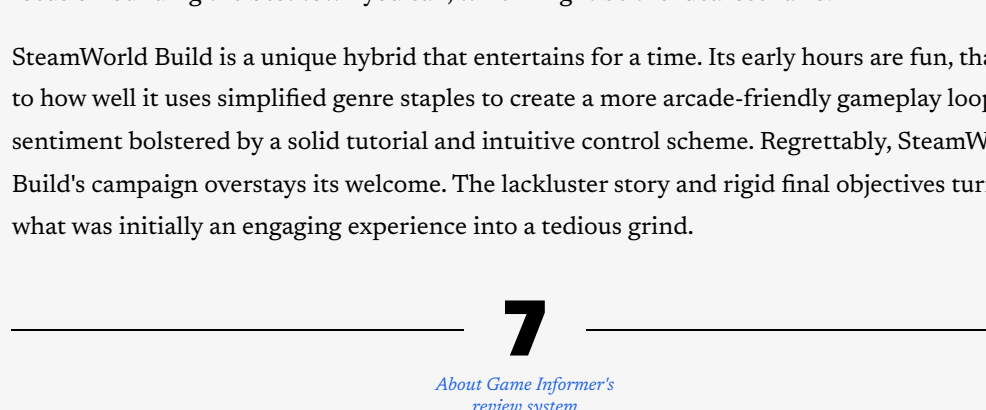
Despite its simplified mechanics, SteamWorld Build appeals to genre vets thanks to its puzzling play. Instead of fixating on every minor detail linked to actual urban planning, the game emphasizes keeping your steambots happy by placing key structures. Your workers, who start economically at the bottom of the totem pole, are usually satisfied by a general store and service shop. They don't need much to stay productive. Once you hit certain milestones, usually tied to the town's number of employable steambots, you can upgrade them into engineers. This next tier of citizens requires more service buildings and attractions to stay in good spirits. They also pay more in taxes.

Your main goal is to develop your town to the point where its citizens can mine specific relics (namely rocket parts) needed to escape a seemingly dying planet. This makes the continual growth of your town important as each tier of citizen is responsible for specific branches of productivity. This process can prove tricky as the requirements needed to satisfy them all are weighed against your town's overall needs. Creating too many workers means spending less money on new construction projects. Too few, and you won't have enough steambots to gather the basic materials (wood, coal, etc.) needed to keep the town functioning. The same goes for higher-tiered citizens; their larger financial contributions are offset by the cost of keeping them content.

Learning to juggle these different factors is vital when playing SteamWorld Build early on. Some of it comes down to properly positioning certain services and attractions. Plugging a general store at the corner of an intersection makes it accessible to more workers. You can also use stat-boosting items, tradable resources, improved roads, and more. Your management duties double once you gain access to the mines. These underground areas feature RTS mechanics requiring a more hands-on approach. Instead of buildings, you place miners, prospector, mechanic, and guard quarters needed to spawn the corresponding steambots around the map. Aside from the guards and mechanics – who are there to protect and heal bots/build machines, respectively – these bots aren't autonomous. They must be assigned jobs like mining gold deposits, knocking down walls, placing tunnels to repel pests, and building machines to harvest important materials.

Most of my time playing SteamWorld Build was spent hopping between my town's surface and subterranean areas. Watching the tiny steambots carry out their tasks as I slowly upgraded my residential areas was fun. I also enjoyed overseeing the developments underground; micromanaging these steambots offered a nice contrast to the above-ground activities.

All of that changed during the game's last few hours due to a combination of competing systems. To collect the final component needed to leave the planet, I had to turn a few of my bots into scientists and make sure they were content for a set duration of time. The problem is that this directive has no wiggle room. When the other steambots weren't at 100 percent, and their collective numbers started to dwindle, the few that remained still pitched in. That wasn't the case here, as it was an all-or-nothing situation.



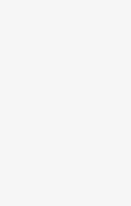
The other issue was that the scientist was the highest citizen level, meaning it takes a lot to keep them happy. Since my town had grown, it was easy for a given resource – water, food, etc. – to occasionally dip below a certain threshold. During those moments, my scientists became unhappy. I tried to mitigate some of this by improving all my roads, trading for the needed items, relocating attractions, buffing facilities, and so on. Nothing worked. The only thing I could do was wait for my steambots to produce enough of whatever was missing to meet my scientists' needs briefly.

Many sim-based games have this point where the player has seemingly optimized themselves into a corner. Their final objective is within reach, but because its strict parameters don't allow for alternative completion options, they can only wait as the game plays. That's what happens with SteamWorld Build. It's a shame, considering how enjoyable the core gameplay loop initially is. Things fare a little better once you've finished the campaign, though. Since each of the five maps offers rewards like free roads or faster miners upon completion, starting a new campaign with these unlocked bonuses is possible. You can also sidestep the story and focus on building the best town you can, which might be the ideal scenario.

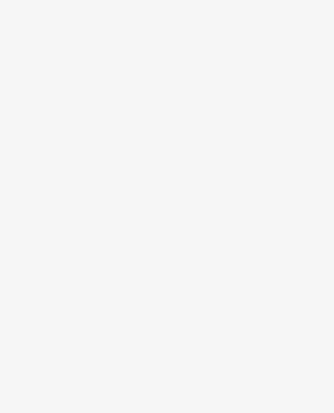
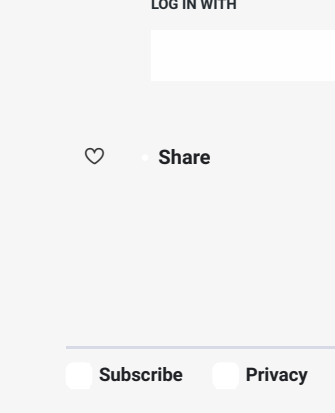
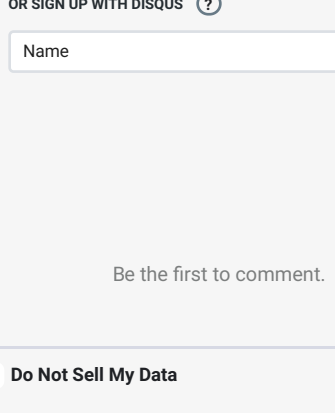
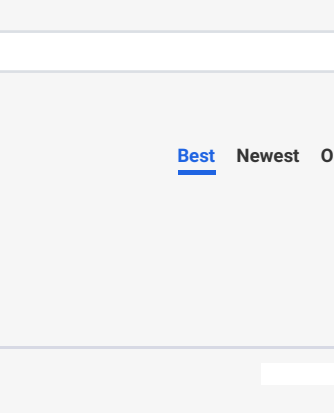
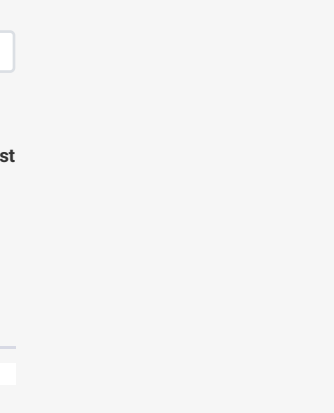
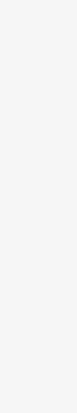
SteamWorld Build is a unique hybrid that entertains for a time. Its early hours are fun, thanks to how well it uses simplified genre staples to create a more arcade-friendly gameplay loop, a sentiment bolstered by a solid tutorial and intuitive control scheme. Regrettably, SteamWorld Build's campaign oversteers its welcome. The lackluster story and rigid final objectives turn what was initially an engaging experience into a tedious grind.

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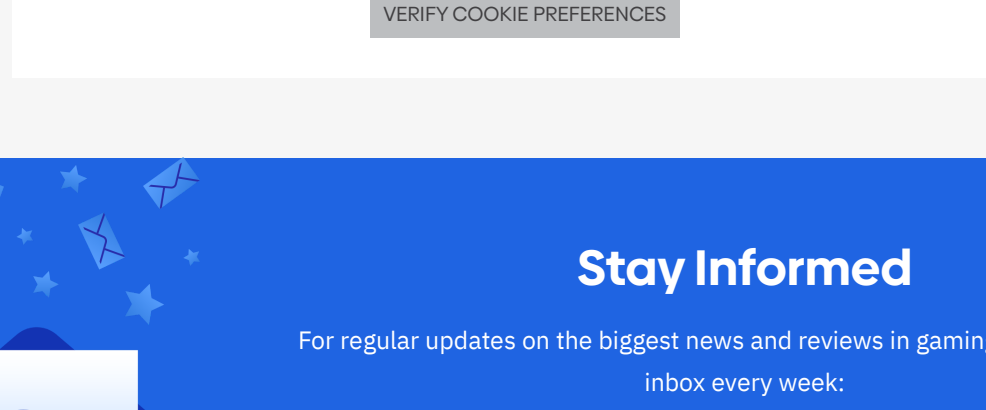
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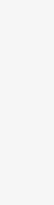
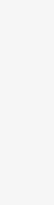
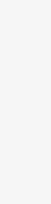
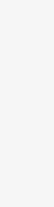
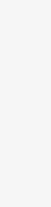
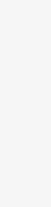
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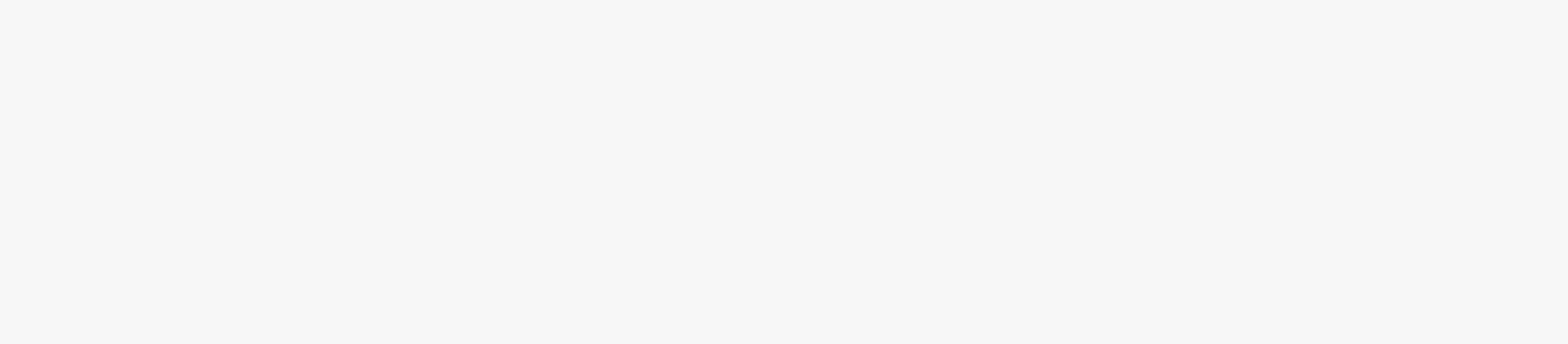
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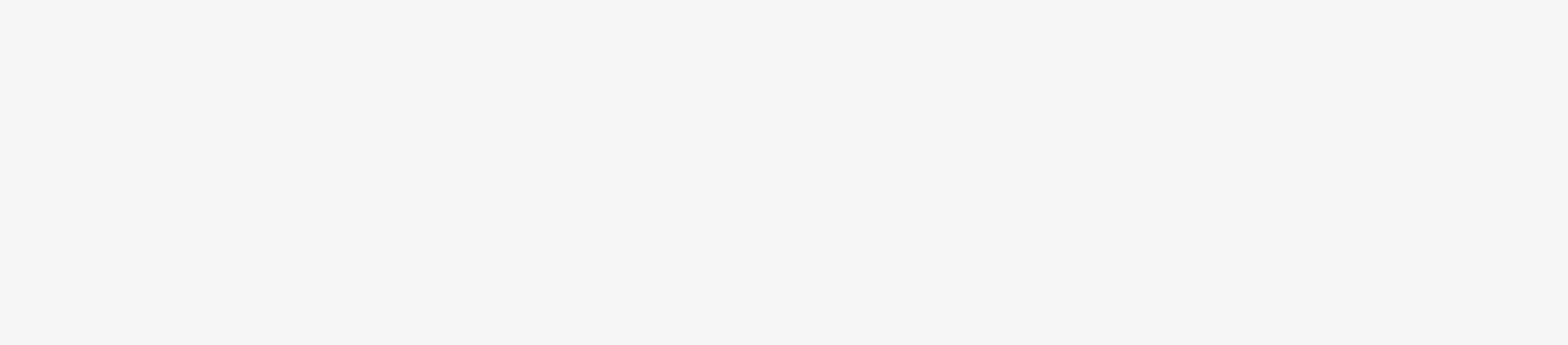
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