

Is This Peak?

Your name: Zac Millman

Your school: Drexel University

Your email: zm352@drexel.edu

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Game Title: Peak

Platform: Steam

Genre: Co-op Climbing Game

Release Date: June 16, 2025

Developer: Team Peak

Publisher: Landfall Publishing & AGGRO CRAB

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Caelan Rashby-Pollock

Overview

PEAK is not a game most would describe as having a strong narrative core. It is a silly climbing adventure to be enjoyed with friends, working together to escape a cursed mountain. After getting set up in the airport lobby, players crash land on the island and must escape to the titular peak. Working together to avoid dangers across 5 areas, players must escape the island by collecting food and gear to keep their stamina filled. Dangers range from poisoned food to raging lava flows, all while the fog rises and threatens to freeze you after too long.

Peak plays very fast and loose with its narrative, the importance being having a good time with friends instead of deep emotional choices. Most of the built-in narrative comes from small lore items found during an adventure. Yet within its design it builds stories told between players, and works to make choices in each game feel important. Each run feels like a new

adventure, and the stories change drastically depending on the group playing and the way the island has generated each day.

Characters

- **The Scouts** – the players take the role of a group of scouts going on a trip, who's plane unfortunately crashes on the island of the game. The characters are very simple at the base, just a flat color model with simple hands and a round head. Almost everything about them can be customized: the outfit they wear, the color of the model, the eyes, the mouth, the hair/face additions. This is one of the big draws of the game, players making a character they find entertaining to watch climb and be visually different so their friends know who they are at a glance. The only addition to the model that isn't customizable is the badge sash, which is intrinsically linked to a player's meta-progress in the game.
- **Scoutmaster Meyers** – the long-stranded scoutmaster of a previous expeditionary troop. He got lost on the island, his group escaping without him, forcing him to survive off the strange food of the island. Over time the magic of the island has warped him into a creature of vengeance, set on making sure no one is left behind ever again. Using his elongated arms and legs, he will chase down and grab scouts who abandon their friends.
- **The Island** - in many ways the island the game takes place on is a character in and of itself, the procedural generation in the backend giving it a kind of personality each day. Not only is it the environment the game takes place in, it is also the strongest driver of the narrative outside of the players.
- **Bing Bong** - Bing Bong is a plush, an entirely useless item in the context of the game. but in the community, players have built him up as one of the central parts of the game. He is a silent companion, a moral support when things look down, and a crucial part of the team that must be saved. Additionally, he is the mascot of Bing Bong Airlines, the company in charge of the crashed flight the players take.

Breakdown

The Friends(lop) we made along the way

PEAK is part of a genre coined "Friendslop" in March 2025 by X (formerly Twitter) user @woosaaaahhhh to describe games such as PEAK, Lethal Company, and REPO that have grown in popularity since 2024. The genre is very loosely defined, but as discussion has continued there are a few constants we can look at. The main purpose of most friendslop games is, as the name implies, to be played with friends. Unlike most co-op games however, the mechanics of a game in this supposed genre are typically underdeveloped, simply serving as a background to the act of playing with your friends. This is where the slop part of the name came from, and it grew in popularity as more and more developers started releasing games that followed this mold.

INSERT IMAGE OF TWEET

While PEAK mostly fits the tropes of this genre, with it's use of proximity voice chat and simple art style, I would argue that it if not transcends the genre absolutely stands at its peak. One of the biggest problems people have noted with the friendslop genre is that, despite their stated desire being to have fun with friends, most of the time the most efficient way to play is to split up almost immediately. Games like Lethal Company reward players for extracting more items, and so it is better to split up to cover more ground and find more items. The first big change PEAK brings is the overall goal of the game, instead of being to get the most items it is simply to get to the peak of the island. This intrinsically changes the way players feel about their friends and the items they carry. If players stick together they can make use of each other's inventories to help complete the climb. The items themselves also incentivize working together, as almost all have a use for more than one person. Food and healing items can be used on your friends to refill stamina; and climbing gear like ropes can be used by a full group to pass an obstacle. All of this builds to instill the idea of "working together is easier than going alone" in a group of players.

But for those players who always feel like they have to go it alone, Team PEAK has included a mechanic that punishes getting too far ahead. If any player gets more than 160 meters above the second highest climber, Scoutmaster Meyers begins to chase them down. He will grab the offending player, dealing an initial 25 damage before tossing the player as far off the climb as possible. This can be a devastating loss, sometimes even leading to the player's death if they fall far enough, and definitely setting them far behind their friends. While this may seem random at first, a closer look at the Scoutmaster reveals that this is a perfect use of the stranded man. Once

a proponent of the buddy system, he is now only focused on "don't leave people behind." While his actions are inherently violent and aggressive to the leading player, there is a spark of mercy in the choice to throw back towards the rest of the team. Despite his transformation into a spirit of vengeance, there is still a hint of his pride as a scoutmaster left in the skeletal form.

Stamina to Climb

A perfect example of PEAK taking simple mechanics to the next level is with the stamina system. A plain green bar that drains when you run or climb is nothing new to the games industry, but in PEAK it is so much more. Not just energy like in most games the stamina bar in PEAK represent a player's total ability to climb, and there are many ways across the island for it to diminish. These all take the form of a colored bar replacing some portion of player's stamina bar, the base green bar getting smaller the more impaired a player is.

INSERT IMAGE OF NORMAL STAMINA BAR

Simply moving will cause players to get hungry, a yellow notch appearing in their stamina. And if a player were to then fall a chunk of their stamina bar would be replaced with a bright red injury section. These can be easily dealt with by carrying some food or healing around - which then brings on the problem of weight. Every item a player carries with them has a weight, cutting into their maximum stamina just like hunger or damage. Then there are biome-specific hazards, the cold wind of the taiga and burning heat of the caldera dealing damage of their own.

INSERT IMAGE OF EFFECTED STAMINA BAR

The stamina bar is the core of PEAK's story engine; it's the mechanic that everything else is built off. With the simple mechanic of "everything you do impacts your ability to climb", the PEAK developers created an experience filled with opportunity for player-driven narratives.

Remember Rule 0

The buddy system is not just something players learn to use through playing the game, it is baked in to the narrative behind the scout's adventures. In the guidebook, known to be written by Scoutmaster Meyers before his transformation, there is a massive emphasis placed on Rule 0: Neve Abandon a Friend in Need.

INSERT IMAGE OF GUIDEBOOK PAGES REFERENCING RULE 0

As players explore and experience more runs through the island, they find 8 new notes written by the scoutmaster. These contain some "bonus rules", which are revealed to the player in order. The notes as a whole serve two purposes in PEAK's narrative. Firstly, they give a clear timeline to Meyers' abandonment and downfall. The notes begin simply with new rules based on the island, like checking the mushrooms for poison or embracing the strange magic of the island. But starting at bonus rule 5, they begin to tell a more sinister story. After falling asleep from strange berry, Meyers wakes up to find himself alone on the island. The final note is the most striking in the series, and barely makes sense. The words Rule 0 and "Never abandon a friend in need!" are repeated across the page, and scrawled over the top in messy red handwriting is "THEY LEFT ME BEHIND." The notes are some of the clearest pieces of lore in the game, emphasizing the in-universe importance of Rule 0 and sticking together..

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For the players story, the notes serve as a reminder to stick together. The guidebook on it's own describes Rule 0 twice, both times in bold red text that stands out from the black text around it. Even notes not specifically describing the rule 0 imply that it's better together, providing diegetic explanations of teamwork mechanics. This includes possibly the most potent tool in a player's basic arsenal: the grab. Holding right mouse button with an empty hand will let a player pull a climbing friend up to safe ground in a set range. This alone makes sticking together worth it, as there are often scenarios where a player just barely can't make a climb with their current stamina level. Alone they would have to either use an item they were perhaps saving, or go a different direction and waste valuable time. But if a friend is there, one with a bit more stamina, they can cross the gap first and wait to pull a player up.

Scout's Alliance

A major piece of why PEAK's narrative feels more well thought out than other similar games comes from another simple shift in context. While games like Lethal Company and REPO put players in the role of coworkers, PEAK makes them a group of scouts. This small change, combined with the goal of scaling the island over simply earning money, give a much more compelling reason for players to stick together. One of the most fun parts of "friendslop" games is watching stupid things happen to your friends, hearing them yell out over proximity chat when

they need help or find something cool. Yet these games also have no narrative way to encourage the players to stick together. Outside the game you want to stick together because you are playing as friends, but in the game there is none of that familiarity. This is where the genius of PEAK's scout theming comes in, giving the players a prior connection in the game. A troop is made of people who know each other, spent time together, and have a reason in-universe to want to see each other succeed. The players don't just control faceless minions of a capitalist machine, they are individuals in a group of friends.

INSERT IMAGE OF GROUP IN AIRPORT

Mechanically this can be seen in the plethora of group-focused mechanics, one of those being the ability to carry a dead friend. If a player passes out from stamina loss, especially from status effects that can change on their own like Cold or Heat they don't die immediately. Instead they will pass out and a timer will begin for that player. If the timer runs out before they regain any stamina they are full dead, but if they can survive they'll come back with even just a sliver of energy. In this passed out state any of the other players can come and pick up their dead friend, shouldering the weight to put a stop on the time and hopefully get them to safety. There is a very real feeling of camaraderie behind the choice to save a dead friend, especially due to the large weight cost is bring to the lifter.

Strongest Element

PEAK's Ancient Statue, located by the campfire at the top of every biome, is a powerful tool for building player narratives. On the surface it is simply a way for groups to keep playing together, to keep everyone invested until the end. By activating the statue all dead players are revived instantly at the statue's location. This on its own is a powerful element of the narrative flow in Peak, de-incentivizing people checking out of the game if they happen to die early on. It's a very clever way to avoid one of the pitfalls of Peak's gameplay differences from other "friendslop", where players are simply revived between extractions. This isn't to say death has no consequences, as being revived by the statue leaves players hungry and a bit cursed, cutting into their maximum stamina over the course of a run.

INSERT IMAGE OF ANCIENT STATUE

But there is a second use of the Ancient Statue that pushes it from a clever workaround to an important interaction during a climb. If all players reach the top of a biome alive, instead of reviving any dead players the statue will reveal a mystical item. This further builds the sense of risk-reward inherent to PEAK. Not only does reviving a dead player leave them weaker for the rest of the journey, but it impacts the rest of the group by missing a chance at a mystical item. These can be game-changing items if used at the right time, often saving otherwise lost runs. The only other way players can get mystical items is through the rarely spawning ancient luggage, which deal damage when opened. As the most consistent way to get these impressive items, as well as a tool to keep players engaged even through death, the ancient statue uplifts the narrative and forces players to make a difficult choice.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite the many ways PEAK excels at player investment, there is one part where it falls short. The first biome of any game is always the Shore, which is in many ways the weakest part of each run. As with many roguelikes and games that employ procedural generation across runs, the beginning of a game of PEAK almost feels like a necessary annoyance. There isn't the same level of interest and excitement as there is further on in a run, and with this there is very little fear of failure. If the Shore gives bad items, or someone takes a burst of random damage, or the climb takes too long it is easy for players to just restart and try again. In a game like PEAK, where player investment is what drives the story, an area of almost no investment is certainly a weak point. However it isn't all lost, as the roguelike mechanics in the background of the island's generation can make some runs easier to get invested in. While luggage placement is only changed when the entire island resets, items in the luggage will change every time the players load up a run. Getting a rare or powerful item early on can instantly skyrocket player investment, hoping to get a chance to try something they may not find again soon. Additionally PEAK mitigates this lack of early investment with its achievements, which it calls badges. Many of these badges require players to interact with game systems more aggressively than they normally would, such as the Bouldering Badge requiring the player to place 10 pitons in a single run. Thus if a player is hoping to earn this badge and the shore gives them 3 pitons out of the gate, that player is much more invested in getting through to the next section and continuing to find pitons.

But this doesn't necessarily bring investment to the shore itself, instead it is a push to keep the players invested enough in everything past the shore.

Highlight

Perhaps surprisingly, the highlight of PEAK for me is not reaching the peak and calling the helicopter. It comes just a bit earlier, at the final campfire between the Caldera and the Kiln. It's the last chance for players to cook food, to gather their gear, and to revive any dead allies. This is a turning point in the player's story, the goal urging them forward as the peak is so close. The players are no longer just trying to survive the island, they are preparing to actually escape, to get to safety. The island itself knows this is an important point, the campfire placed at the top of a temple the players scale to reach salvation. It even provides more resources than at any campfire before, with multiple luggage crates surrounding the magical statue. These luggage are typically filled with rare and powerful items, from filling foods like Thick Mints to powerful climbing aids like the Chain Launcher.

INSERT IMAGE OF FINAL CAMPFIRE

This is the highlight moment of PEAK to me because it is when the game's atmosphere really shifts. There is a sense of "now the real game begins", with the abundance of items to prepare and sift through. The next area, known as the Kiln, is the final and hardest climb of the game. It's basically straight vertical up the inside of a volcano. There are lava flows, burning rocks, and steep inclines to deal with. But this difficulty is also what lends to the campfire's importance. There is no turning back once you leave a camp, and that is even more true here. In a given game players will be at wildly varying levels of stamina at this point, sometime making the final ascent feel impossible. Yet there is also a sense of hope and camaraderie here, groups working to get as many people ready for the final climb as possible. Items are distributed evenly, food is passed to whoever needs it most, and the final fire is lit.

The final campfire atop the caldera also emphasizes something PEAK excels at: the investment in the game. A full journey up the island, especially if you aren't playing the most optimally, can take upwards of an hour. Even just reaching the Kiln takes a lot of time, planning, and strategic item use. Combine this with the fact that PEAK's map resets daily, so groups have at maximum 24 hours to complete a climb, and you get a recipe for powerful player engagement. Sure, there

may not be real consequences to failing at the Kiln, but it does mean you've spent almost an hour just to have to restart. This pushes groups to be more careful, taking their time with at the final campfire to regroup and get ready. PEAK is a game about climbing *together*, and nowhere is that felt more powerfully than at the camp between the Caldera and the Kiln.

Critical Reception

PCGamer by Elie Gould - 86/100

Gould's review of PEAK echoes a lot of the sentiment of this analysis. They discuss how the game uses its core mechanics to build the experience into a fun co-op friendship story. Gould specifically points to the importance of sticking together and how PEAK's use of collaboration makes the multiplayer experience feel fuller. Their critique mostly focuses on the game's solo experience, which they describe as more of a "solo puzzler" than the chaotic experience of a group game.

GameInformer by Alex Van Aken - 9/10

In his review Aken lauds PEAK for its simplicity and cohesion. He discusses how the easy-to-grasp core lets the experience speak for itself, with the most enjoyment coming from funny things happening to your friends. In particular, Aken describes how the simple toon-shader based art style keeps the game readable, fueling the silliness intrinsic to the game. MacNamara closes his review saying that PEAK's strength is that it is always interesting, no matter if a group takes it seriously or not.

TLDRMovieReivews by Brian MacNamara

This review opens discussing the production pipeline of the game, MacNamara noting that PEAK's release cycle was immensely impressive. He notes the interesting interactions between the need to carry items to clear hunger, but balancing the items weight. This plus the proximity chat feature made the game engaging when playing with a group of friends, and MacNamara feels PEAK excels at being a fun experience. He also expresses that the single player mode, while fun, feels almost like a separate game from playing with a group.

Lessons

- **Simple isn't Stupid** - PEAK is a simple game, and that is one of its greatest strengths. It doesn't try to present itself as a powerfully moving story or hardcore competitive game, it's a fun climbing game to play with your friends. This is where the genius of PEAK's mechanics, and their impacts on the narrative flow of a game, really shine. There isn't a huge barrier to entry, there aren't vast webs of characters to keep track of, and the core mechanics can be explained in under 3 minutes. The rest of the information is all learned organically, often by a friend immediately after a player has fallen victim to a danger they didn't know about. The simplicity of the game is necessary for these incredible moments of "Oh yeah watch out" to come through. PEAK fully leans into and masters the friendslop genre's biggest criticism, showing that just because a game is simple at its core doesn't mean it's stupid.
- **Cohesion builds Investment** - PEAK's narrative feels engaging and works to keep players invested due to how cohesive the experience is. In games with similarly simple mechanics and worlds it is easy for players to lose interest over their play session, especially as the novelty wears off. PEAK deals with this problem by keeping its mechanics and narrative extremely internally consistent. There aren't random moments of incredibly intense lore, players aren't forced to take specific paths, items are never technically required. The game does an incredible job of letting the players breathe and develop their own story. Consistencies across runs, such as the climb up the kiln and to the final peak, serve to fuel the cohesion of the world and give a goal for players to strive for.
- **Don't lose your Whimsy** - Not every story needs to be dark and brooding, full of moral questions and anti-heroes fighting for their ideals. Sometimes a story is simply something fun to enjoy with friends, to relax after a long day with people you care about. PEAK excels in this space of easy pleasures, it doesn't ask much emotional investment outside of the enjoyment of company. Its narrative serves as a guide more than a harsh rule, the people playing together driving the story in whichever direction they want. PEAK doesn't take itself too seriously, its mechanics and narrative guides encouraging players to do the same.

Summation

PEAK climbs its way out of simply being a "slop" game as it is so often labeled, the core of its story so much more tuned to creating an experience that thrives on being together. While the island can be ventured alone there is a feeling of something missing, a fundamental core of the story disappearing without a group of friends to laugh together. The small notes of lore, the mechanics fueling collaboration, the items that only come into play with a group; all of this fuels the player's investment in the narrative they build with their friends. The setting of a mountain to climb gives a goal for the group then lets them run wild, bringing collaboration to the forefront from the beginning. The path to the peak is paved by the group of players, and the narrative is fueled by their imagination.