

The Good, The Ugly and The Bad in Desperados III: A Retrospective

I am the good and the bad, you're only the ugly.

– Duke Nukem

Introduction

Desperados III is the third installment of the Desperados saga, developed this time by a different studio than the previous ones: Mimimi Games GmbH.

This is an isometric-view, real-time-tactics game (or RTT), meaning players take control of a group of heroes, each with their own distinct abilities, to advance through the levels. More often than not this must be done as stealthily as possible, because one of the staples of the RTT genre is that movement and actions from the players are relatively restricted and slow, as well as characters having short health bars. This tends to lead to a quick death if spotted by the enemy.

The Desperados saga is set within the 19th Century American Wild West and this installment is no exception. Desperados III is narratively set before the first game, functioning as a prequel, and features how some of the characters of the first and second game met. Players are able to control old characters like John Cooper, Doc McCoy and Kate O'Hara as well as some new additions like Hector Mendoza, a mexican tramper, and Isabelle Moreau, a voodoo witch.

This retrospective includes spoilers for the gameplay, narrative and atmosphere aspects of the game. If you like RTT games, haven't recently played Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun, and haven't tried this one yet, go play it now (you won't regret it). Real-Time-Strategy (RTS) fans may also find joy here, as RTT and RTS have many similarities in their intended player experiences. In the latter I would recommend to check out some videos and trailers of the game and try it out if it scratches that strategy itch you might have.

The reason why I don't recommend playing this game if you have recently played Shadow Tactics is because both games play very, very similar (both being developed by the same company, one after the other) with the key difference being the change in setting along with the special abilities provided by one of the new characters. This character only becomes playable in the second half of the game and is not even present in all the missions. Therefore there is a risk players may eventually get burnt out as most special skills and passives from Shadow Tactics make a comeback in Desperados III, working the exact same way.

I find it a real pity because both games are incredibly polished, engaging single-player experiences, but from the three-four years of development between the publications of Shadow Tactics and Desperados III (from 2016 to 2020) Mimimi Games chose a path of delivering more content from the get-go than providing a relatively different experience. This can be clearly seen in the amount of extra side missions included (which Shadow Tactics had none), as well as in the personalization capabilities of many aspects of the game (e.g. a complete new difficulty mode was added and players can also edit many different variables to achieve an almost-unique difficulty setting for themselves). Desperados III also includes a few more story levels in comparison to Shadow Tactics and an option to replay levels including other characters that weren't involved the first time around for story reasons (e.g. a mission where only Cooper and Hector were present can be played with all or some of the other characters after being beaten for the first time).

Whether this should shine a negative light on the game or not I leave it to the personal judgement of each player. I will only say that similarities are to be expected as Shadow Tactics was heavily influenced by the earlier Desperados games in the first place.

Gameplay

The gameplay of Desperados III intends for players to feel careful, methodic, and strategic about their choices. Because getting discovered usually leads to a quick death, going guns blazing is discouraged and meticulous planning of your next movements are then fostered.

Explanation of the basics

The core gameplay loop of the game involves moving the camera around, investigating enemy placements, patrols and their vision cones. With this information players can then carefully plan whether it's better to take down enemies or simply try to avoid stepping into the vision cones to progress through the level.

Hovering the cursor over an enemy shows their vision cone in green, which type they are and also their gender. Vision cones originate from the enemy position in an angle between 30°-40° and usually feature a solid part (players will be seen even if ducked on the ground) and a striped part at the furthest point from the enemy (player's won't be seen if crouching). The length of the cone can be quite large and is the same for all enemies throughout the game (except civilians, which have a much smaller cone).

Obstacles and verticality influence the vision cones of the enemies, automatically creating a striped surface on it regardless of how close this obstacle is to them. Surfaces above the enemy will always be striped, while surfaces underneath the enemy will be solid. In this last case, if the enemy is at the border of a gorge or balcony, the area right underneath won't have a cone at all, representing for restricted vertical vision range.

To achieve stealth, levels have a variety of hiding spots players can use to hide themselves and the bodies of enemies they take down. These can be environmental (e.g. bushes, cliffs and bodies of water), but also locations behind a door players can open (like buildings or shacks) can be used. For the latter caution must be practised, as enemies entering these places (either because their patrol pattern leads them there or they are alerted and actively searching) will find any bodies or characters hidden in them at that moment.

Players can choose to kill enemies or knock them out. Knocked out enemies will remain unconscious for a short time, waking up and starting a search for the player for a brief amount of time by themselves without sounding an alarm. While the enemy is unconscious players have also the option of tying them up to prevent them from waking up at all. Players can also eliminate enemies with environmental elements, like pushing huge rocks from the border of a cliff. These kills will be seen by others as an accident and won't set off an alarm.

If a character is discovered, or an enemy sees a dead or tied-up body, the alarm will be set. Enemies in the surrounding¹ area will be alerted and will run to assist whoever rang the alarm². Reinforcements from the nearest barracks will also arrive. For a brief period all these enemies will look around for any character and shoot them on sight. After a while this search will finish and all enemies will return to their assigned spots and patrols. Any reinforcements will also permanently patrol around the area and won't return to the barracks, thus increasing the difficulty of the level with each alarm state.

Enemy types

Before diving into the abilities that characters are capable of, it's worth mentioning enemy types and how they are affected by those abilities and how they limit them. Desperados III features seven different types of enemies/non-playable characters: Thugs, Gunslingers, Ponchos, Long Coats, Dogs, Civilians, and Farm Animals.

- Thugs: only possess physical weapons. They are affected the longest by all kinds of diversions among all enemy types and will leave their assigned spots and patrols to investigate or if they are victim of a diversion skill like Hector's whistle. They have one hitpoint.
- Gunslingers: are the same as thugs but have a revolver with them, which makes them capable of attacking characters from afar.
- Ponchos: are one step above the hierarchy. They are overall affected by diversions a shorter amount of time than thugs and gunslingers and will never abandon their patrols or assigned spots unless the alarm is set off. If they are talking to a gunslinger or a thug, they will also share the poncho's reduced distraction times. Last but not least, they wear ponchos and possess rifles and that is how you distinguish them. Like thugs and gunslingers, they feature only one hitpoint.
- Long Coats: wear long, brown trenchcoats and a face-covering red bandana. They share all the traits from Ponchos, except that they will abandon their spots to investigate footprints left by characters on mud or sand (if the level has any area featuring mud or sand). Their bandanas protect them from some distracting skills like Kate's perfume. They are also the strongest enemies, they have three hitpoints and can only be killed directly by Hector. Other characters can only kill a Long Coat if he is weakened first with a bullet shot or they will get themselves killed instead by the Long Coat.
- Dogs: have a very limited vision cone. However it is always solid and it also represents their smelling range. They are able to detect characters hidden in bushes or behind walls/obstacles. If they discover a character, they will start to bark and attract nearby enemies who will then set off the alarm if they see the character.
- Civilians: have a much shorter vision cone than regular enemies and can be unfriendly, neutral or friendly. They are affected by diversions/distractions as much as thugs and gunslingers.
 - unfriendly civilians will run to the nearest enemy and set off the alarm if they spot a character or a dead/tied-up enemy.
 - neutral civilians won't mind seeing the characters but will still run to the nearest enemy and set off the alarm if they spot a dead/tied-up body or see the characters killing someone.
 - friendly civilians support the characters and will never set off an alarm.
- Farm Animals: like horses, oxens and cows are neutral towards the characters. If they are affected by some abilities, like Cooper's diversion coin, they will get annoyed and perform a strong kick or head butt that will kill anybody standing behind/in front of them. A special case are chickens. If a character runs around them, they will start clucking and moving in circles, attracting enemies nearby that fall within the blue noise circle of their clucking.

General character movement and abilities

Characters are able to move around, perform scripted interactions and use special skills. At the same time characters possess different passive characteristics.

- Movement: this includes direct movement which the player has direct control of, like

running, crouching, carrying a dead/KO'd enemy, swimming (for the characters that are able to) and triggering Showdown Mode (explained later at the end of this section).

- Scripted interactions: can be performed when a character is near an element that offers some kind of interaction and a UI prompt pops up near the element with the necessary button to press to perform said action. Among others, this include killing an enemy, grabbing a body, hiding a body behind a door/under water/throwing it off a cliff, climbing ladders/vines, jumping down to a lower accesible area, kill/knock out with a jump attack an enemy in a lower area, entering a body of water to swim, entering/exiting a building and triggering an enviromental kill. If many elements are together, players can scroll through the different options with the press of a button. However, the algorithm that decides the one that shows up first isn't entirely accurate and it is a very normal situation that trying to grab the body of an enemy near the edge of a roof ends up with the character jumping down the roof instead. This becomes a real problem in the last three levels of the game where lots of enemies are on roofs and balconies. This did frustrate me quite a bit.
- Special skills: the bread and butter of the game. Each character has access to either three or four special abilities. These abilities either involve a diversion/distraction, killing/KO an enemy or healing a teammate or self. For killing abilities, characters can have a stealth option and/or a non-stealth option (usually shooting their weapons).
- Passive skills: all characters share the same type of passive skills that are used to limit their movement or range of actions. These passives dictate how many bodies the character can carry, at what speed and if they can do so standing up or crouched; if they can only climb ladders or also vines and ropes; if they are able to swim or not, and if they are able to tie up knocked out enemies. Some characters also have a passive ability unique to them.

Moving and using skills cause noise and players need to be careful. Most of the time the range of noise is shown with a blue circle drawn with a solid line with the character (or receiver of the skill, like the victim of a throwing knife) in the center. Everything inside the circle will hear the ability taking place and will go and investigate. Special skills also feature a maximum range, which is shown with a white circle drawn with a dashed line.

Specific character abilities

All characters except Isabelle posses a gun they can shoot with. Ammunition is limited but chests with ammo can always be found in the levels.

- John Cooper:
 - Passives: John can carry one body while walking at a reduced speed. He can climb vines and ropes apart from ladders and can swim.
 - Diversion Coin: Cooper can throw a coin away from him in an arc. Any enemy within the blue noise circle will briefly turn around and look for a while to the origin of the noise.
 - Throwing knife: Cooper can stealthily kill enemies from a distance by throwing his knife. The knife remains in the body and Cooper needs to get close to retrieve it, until then he cannot use this ability and can only knock out enemies in close-quarters. The affected enemy will show a fairly small noise circle, making it the ideal choice in great majority of situations with this character.
 - Double Colts: Cooper owns two revolvers and can choose to shoot one or both at the same time. The noise radius is among the biggest in the game, making them useful only in very specific situations.
- Doc McCoy:

- Passives: Doc can only carry one body and can do so only by crouching. This means he carries very slow but won't be noticed if doing so in the striped area of an enemy's vision cone. Doc can only climb ladders and he also can't swim.
 - As a special passive, Doc is the only member of the team that can pick locks. This only works for regular doors and he can't open barrack doors where enemy reinforcements are stationed.
 - Sniper Rifle: the weapon with the longest range in the game. It also features a rather small noise circle, making it a relatively stealthy weapon. This ability makes Doc the perfect choice to remain behind in a high spot as support for the rest of the characters.
 - Decoy Bag: Doc can throw his "medical" bag near him. This bag will attract thugs and gunslingers who will come and open it. After being opened some gas is released which blinds the enemy for a short amount of time.
 - Swamp Gas Vial: a small bottle that breaks into an area-of-effect attack. All enemies within the area will be automatically knocked-out for a while. Long coats will only be temporarily stunned thanks to their bandanas. This ability has only a limited number of uses and, unlike weapons with ammo, can't be replenished again during the level.
 - Bandages: Doc can heal an ally or himself up to two hitpoints per use. This ability has unlimited uses and is only subject to its cooldown for further usage.
- Hector Mendoza:
 - Passives: Hector is the strongest character and can carry up to two bodies and run at normal speed. If he is carrying one body, he is able to carry a second, knocked-out enemy that isn't tied up. He can only climb ladders and can't swim.
 - As a special passive, Hector can throw a body he is carrying in a short arc at any time. He is also the only one that can directly kill a Long Coat.
 - Bianca: is a huge bear trap that Hector carries around. It is able to kill any enemies that come in contact with it. However, patrolling Ponchos or Long Coats will see it and disarm it. Once placed, Hector needs to move near it to retrieve it.
 - Whistle: is a distracting ability with a fairly good range that will attract any thug or gunslinger to its source. The perfect ability to lure someone into Bianca. Ponchos and Long Coats will only look to the source of the whistle for a brief period of time before looking back to their regular direction.
 - Alcohol Flask: heals Hector's wounds. It has unlimited uses but it's too strong for other characters to use.
 - Sawed-Off Shotgun: has a relative short range and a noise circle as big as Cooper's colts. However, it has a triangle area-of-effect starting at Hector's position and finishing at the shotgun's max range that kills everything within it, making it the most powerful weapon of the game.
 - Kate O'Hara:
 - Passives: Kate, like McCoy, can only carry one body while crouching. However, she is able to carry knocked-out enemies that aren't tied up. She can't perform lethal takedowns nor can she tie up enemies. She can only climb ladders and can't swim.
 - As a special passive, Kate can pickpocket enemies in certain missions.
 - Perfume: an ability very similar to Doc's Swamp Vial. Kate can throw strong perfume bottles that will temporarily blind enemies within the area of effect. Long

Coats will remain mostly unaffected, though.

- Derringer: is a small pistol with limited range but also a very small noise radius. Perfect for taking down enemies that patrol away from still crowded areas.
- Disguise: in most levels, Kate can acquire a disguise from a hooker and use it to distract exclusively male enemies, including Ponchos. They will turn around and look at Kate, so some planning is required to make the most optimal usage of this ability. Distracted enemies can still spot characters moving within their cone. Long Coats will recognise Kate on the spot and are unaffected by this ability.
 - As an extra to this ability, Kate can temporarily lure thugs, gunslingers and civilians away from their spot and make them follow her for a short amount of time (this wasn't present in Shadow Tactics). A perfect skill to drive enemies to an ambush.
- Isabelle Moreau:
 - Passives: Isabelle's passives are exactly the same as those from Cooper. They are the only characters able to swim and climb vines and ropes.
 - Pet Cat: is a sweet cat that Isabelle can send out up to quite a long range to distract an enemy for a short time. Ponchos and Long Coats are unaffected.
 - Jimson Weed: is an ability pretty much similar to McCoy's bandages and has the same effects and limitations.
 - Blood Sacrifice: Isabelle can choose to voluntarily lose one hitpoint and gain control of the mind of an enemy or animal within a short range. Players can move the controlled enemy freely within the now very long movement range and perform a different ability depending on who they are.

Like McCoy's Swamp Gas, this ability can only be performed a limited amount of time and can't be replenished within the level.

 - Thugs/Gunslingers/Ponchos/Long Coats: can shoot other enemies with their weapons. However, it takes some time for the enemy to raise the weapon and shoot. During this time other enemies can see this and kill the controlled person. This won't raise an alarm as they will think of this person as a traitor.
 - Civilians: can yell to attract the attention of all nearby enemies to their position, even Ponchos and Long Coats.
 - Dogs: they can bite to kill enemies (the same slow build-up restriction applies) or bark to attract others to its position.
 - Farm Animals: can perform the attack that they would do when hit with Cooper's coin or Kate's perfume.
 - Connection: Isabelle can shoot her blowpipe gun to two different characters and connect them, the shooting range is limited but the connection range is virtually unlimited. Everything that happens to one character will also occur to the other. There is no limitation to who can be affected by this ability and Isabelle can shoot enemies, player characters and animals alike. It is the most versatile skill in the game and the one that really feels that brings something different to the table. Players are encouraged to experiment and it really can cause a great number of emerging different scenarios. Some are:
 - An enemy affected by a distraction will also cause the linked enemy to suffer the same effect regardless of position.
 - Killing someone will also kill the linked person.
 - Long Coats never die when a linked person dies, they will get stunned as if normally shot by a gun.
 - Linking a player character and an enemy and shooting the player character

will kill the enemy and be seen as an accident while only taking one hitpoint from the player.

- However, if you link a character and an enemy and kill the enemy first... the character also dies!

Showdown mode

At any point players have access to this mode. If activated, the game pauses and players may scroll through the characters and tell them to perform one action. This action won't yet be done, though. At the press of the appropriate button, all characters will perform their assigned action at the same time, allowing for complex situations to be resolved easily, where there needs to be high levels of coordination that can't be achieved with the regular control scheme. This mode also allows for the triggering of the actions at different times, allowing for flexibility in the characters' positioning.

Further considerations

The different skills of the character together with the various different enemy placings and the level design (that feature multiple different connections between the different areas of a level) give Desperados III one of its strongest aspects: player agency and self-expression. For most levels players will be handling at least two characters at the same time, but most of the time three. This means that, especially during the first half of the game, players have a wide range of possibilities to "solve" the puzzles that the enemies present depending on which characters they like more or feel more comfortable using.

In some situations it's pretty obvious that you will need a specific skill from a specific character, but most of the time you are free to experiment and come up with a custom solution made up on the spot. This is further encouraged in some levels where you are presented with a goal that can be achieved in more than one part of the level (e.g. you need to find some dynamite to blow up a door and there are two different places in the level that you can get it).

On the one hand, this is one of the game's strongest aspects, on the other it partially becomes its bane with further progression. There are very few situations where the usage of specific skills from specific characters is enforced or encouraged through the level design, so unless players go out of their way to explicitly try all characters in different situations, they will master one or two and try to use them most of the time even in situations where it would be more efficient using somebody else. This will inevitably bring a feeling of repetition to many players.

This player agency is the main avenue used to handle the game's difficulty, too. As players advance through the game, this agency is diminished and more and more situations arise where there are less than a handful of "solutions" to every problem, specially in the last third of the game.

I felt that Desperados III had two ways of designing really challenging situations from mid-game forward:

- "Find the crack": by this I mean that players would encounter a highly populated, tight area where many enemies would be looking at each other and there would be even some patrolling here and there. The puzzle mainly consisted in "finding the crack". Find that one enemy that at some point isn't on any other's vision cone for long enough and take it down. and then widen the crack doing the same for the next one, and the next one... until there are no enemies left and you can progress.
- "Find the way": it's an evolution of "Find the crack" where now there is only one linear path to progress forward, so the number of total solutions to the puzzle narrow down even more (e.g. a gorge with one entrance and one exit with various enemies patrolling the upper levels while players have to go through the lower one).

This pattern becomes very clear in the last two levels of the game, where the difficulty spike is noticeable in respect to the rest of the game.

In general the gameplay is pretty solid and it will carry most of the game, especially for players that like to experiment. I would have personally liked more variation in skills and enemy types. Even though dogs are introduced in the third level, they aren't used again until mid-game, and even then, they are terribly underused in my opinion. When they appear, it's maybe one or two per level and they are only used in three-four levels at best. What is baffling to me is that there isn't a single dog in the last two levels of the game in the normal difficulty.

While adding gender to enemies also brings a bit of variation, and forces players to not overuse Kate to just distract everybody (which was something that was quite unbalanced in Shadow Tactics with Aiko, the character who has the same disguise/distracting skill), it can probably be somewhat immersion-breaking to some players when they arrive at some game areas that are full of female bandits to prevent Kate's skill.

Narrative

The narrative of the game is relatively simple and, from my point of view, the weakest part of the game. This doesn't mean that it is bad, only that compared to the gameplay and atmosphere, the story and characters sometimes fall flat and fail to drive the interest of players to progress in the game. I felt that most of the time I wanted to come into the next level because I wanted to see what new environment I would experience and the "thirst" of solving more puzzles, and not what new story piece would I get to discover in the end-level cutscene. As a player of Shadow Tactics, this came as doubly disappointing as the narrative in that game was very well handled and had some really powerful moments, which upped my expectations for Desperados III.

Story

The plot of Desperados III is a very simple revenge story. Where John Cooper seeks a bandit leader called Frank, to whom Cooper makes responsible for the death of his father. However, this premise doesn't become clear until the third-fourth level, which in my opinion is a bad idea because until then, players have little knowledge of why they are where they are and why they are doing what they are doing.

The plot begins in the tutorial, where we follow a teenage John Cooper accompanying his father, a bounty hunter, in a mission where he tries to capture notorious bandit leader Frank. Halfway through the mission danger ramps up and Cooper's father decides to go forward by himself, leaving behind his son. Cooper is annoyed by this decision as his father always seems to stall the moment where he will be faced with real action. The levels fades out with John Cooper practicing knife throwing against a tree at the command of his father.

Fast forward to an adult John Cooper, we find ourselves on a train ride to the town of Flagstone. The train is attacked by bandits and comes to a stop. This train is transporting gold belonging to the DeVitt company (owned by Vincent DeVitt, probably a character inspired by Andrew Carnegie). On his way to find out what happened, Cooper meets Doc McCoy, a gun for hire that has been entrusted the protection against robbers of DeVitt's assets in the train. Together they make a quick end of the bandits and the train continues its way to Flagstone. This mission in hindsight felt a lot like filler. As mentioned before, as players we have yet no idea of the premise at this stage and I think that is something that should be fully known to the player as soon as possible to avoid

confusion and lack of motivation to go forward during the game's first steps.

In Flagstone, Cooper meets with his old friend Hector, from whom he learns that Frank finds himself right now in the Flagstone's Mayor mansion up in the mountains. Before marching there Hector asks the help of Cooper to get rid of some head honchos from the DeVitt company that are terrorizing the local population into selling their homes so the railway can be built through it. After that is taken care of they both head for the Mayor's mansion.

In the mansion the characters learn that the Mayor is soon to be married to a young Kate O'Hara. Kate wants to retrieve the lost deeds of her family's ranch that were taken away by the mayor. When Kate finds the scriptures in the Mayor's private office, she briefly reads the papers and finds out the Mayor has sold out her family ranch to the DeVitt company. Shortly after discovering the fact, she is forced to hide in a wardrobe as Frank and the Mayor suddenly enter the room. Both men immediately start an argument regarding money and Vincent DeVitt (for whom Frank is currently working for) and afterwards Frank leaves for New Orleans to meet DeVitt there. With the Mayor alone in the room, Kate leaves her hiding spot and confronts him. In a fit of rage Kate steals a shotgun hanging from the wall and kills the Mayor. Hector and Cooper arrive and help Kate to flee the mansion.

Cooper asks Kate if she knows where Frank was headed to. However she will only tell if Hector and him help her fend off DeVitt's men from claiming her family's ranch. As they speak, bandits are heading that way. They accept and furthermore also fetch McCoy from Flagstone to help them.

They manage to arrive to the ranch before DeVitt's man and help Kate's uncle to barricade the facilities for the probable night assault. They manage to successfully drive away the bandits, but the last bullet of one of the last man kills her uncle as they are all going inside the house again. This last bit felt unnecessary and anti-climatic. In my opinion it would have made much more sense to have the father die during the assault and not afterwards. It just felt a cheap way of cutting any ties that would prevent Kate from following the gang for the rest of the game.

After burying her uncle, Kate still won't help Cooper find Frank. She wants to make sure that no more DeVitt man will be able to arrive to claim the ranch in a long time, so she asks the rest to help her destroy a railroad bridge a few hours north. They accept and proceed to destroy the bridge. While this mission in itself was interesting and had beautiful scenery, it pretty much felt like filler to pad out the game.

We go back to young Cooper throwing the knife to the tree. He hears a yell from his father and decides to go to him. Once he arrives he sees Frank captured his father and is about to kill him. Cooper goes out of cover and prompts Frank to free him. However, Frank tells one of his men to kill the boy, and when the underling complains, Frank himself kills this underling for disobeying him. Then he makes a proposition to Cooper, he throws one of his colts to the ground and tells Cooper they both may walk free if he can shoot him from fifteen feet away while he is holding his father as human shield and pointing at his head with his other colt. Under the count of ten the image suddenly fades to black with the sound of a gunshot. It is heavily implied that Cooper missed and killed his own father.

Finally Kate confesses Frank is heading to New Orleans and so the group heads there. They stop on their way to rest in a little town near a swamp and seem to have a big party. They all wake up hangover with no memories of the prior night. There have seem to be an attempted robbery for the banks safe and the sheriff and his men seem to lay the guilt on Cooper and the others and are actively looking for them. Everybody doesn't know what really happened and also seem to mention that the witches of the swamp may have practised some sorcery there as there are a few unexplained

situations here and there, like cattle being in some balconies they couldn't have reached by themselves. They regroup and finally make their way to a boat they had hired the day before to lead them through the last stage to New Orleans. This is 100% a filler mission. Even though it has a spooky feeling to it, probably so the introduction of Isabelle in the next level doesn't feel too shoehorned, it really doesn't add up anything to the plot whatsoever.

Down the river they are assaulted by DeVitt's men, who patrol the river to capture vagrants to force them to work into DeVitt's gold mines. Isabelle is one of their prisoners, but she manages to break out and helps the group escape down the river, finally arriving at New Orleans.

In New Orleans we get to know that a Marshall called Wayne is investigating Frank and DeVitt. During the course of his investigation he gets captured by them before the group arrives in the city. It turns out Isabelle is a friend of Wayne and wanted to come to the city to actually look for him to tell him tidings of the happenings in the swamp with Frank's gang. They still don't know Wayne was captured, but he doesn't show up to the rendezvous so the group decides to investigate in the city. After doing some findings they discover Wayne has been captured and sent to the Louisiana Wetlands with more prisoners to be sent promptly to the mines.

In the Wetlands, the group manages to rescue Wayne and set fire to DeVitt's facilities to render them useless. They go back to New Orleans to finally look for Frank.

For the last time we go back to young Cooper. With his father dead, he is devastated. With Frank and him there is a Long Coat as well. Frank orders him to kill the boy and dispose of both bodies and then leaves the place. The Long Coat takes Cooper's knife from the ground and gives it back to the boy while placing his hand near it. Cooper makes a slight cut into the Long Coat's hand, who then finally speaks. It is the voice of Hector Mendoza, and he tells young Cooper there is nothing to worry about. Fade to black signaling the end of the scene. This scene alone is maybe the most powerful narrative moment in the whole game. A very heavy connection is implied between Hector and John, however it isn't explored barely any further in the rest of the game.

After the investigation of the prior mission and the havoc in the wetlands, New Orleans finds itself under lockdown from Frank's and DeVitt's men. This doesn't prevent the group from finally arriving at the pier where Frank is located. However, Hector can't see and won't allow Cooper to follow the fate of his father and tries to prevent Cooper from entering the pier. A very angry Cooper shoots Hector in the shoulder without a second thought and prompts everybody to hide, as he will face Frank by himself. Kate, present in the shot is freaked out and begrudgingly follows Cooper's advice while carrying Hector. The face-off proves unlucky for Cooper, as he isn't fast enough and Frank shoots him in the belly. Before Frank shoots again, Vincent DeVitt appears and tells Frank not to kill Cooper. He reveals that he has captured Cooper's companions and wants them all to work in his mines.

An emotionally split and angry group manages to escape from the mines and rescue Cooper and Kate that were put in cages. Doc decides to cut his losses and abandons the group with the only horse left in the camp. The rest of the group makes amends for the happenings in New Orleans and head on foot to the nearest town to take the train back to New Orleans. Quite the plot hole in this cutscene. It is explicitly said that Doc takes the only horse left, yet right at the level exit the player can very clearly see four horses saddled before the cutscene starts.

A still angry Kate helps Hector stop the train while Isabelle takes care of Cooper's wounds. Once cured, Isabelle falls into a deep sleep, forcing Cooper to carry her into the train. With Hector convincing Kate to forgive Cooper and seeing how Cooper brought Isabelle all the way from their hiding spot to the train, Kate finally forgives Cooper. The group heads again to New Orleans to

meet Wayne.

Wayne wants also to put an end to Frank and Devitt and asks for the help of the characters. They will first take care of DeVitt and then go after Frank. With this in mind, Wayne asks them to abduct DeVitt from his mansion while he is throwing a very big party. After the group manages to capture Devitt and get to the rendezvous point, DeVitt asks to be let to pee. Hector accompanies him, and to everybody's surprise, when they come back they learn DeVitt has stolen Hector's shotgun and is now threatening to kill everybody. However, a well aimed shot to DeVitt's hand frustrates this plan. Who shot? No one other than Doc McCoy! Who came back as he felt remorse for abandoning everybody earlier. Wayne finally appears, loads DeVitt onto the back of his horse and rides away. This cutscene honestly felt ridiculous and the first impression that I had was that Hector would eventually betray the group (but that never actually happens) because it comes across as a bit unbelievable that DeVitt could manage to rob him of his shotgun. In the end it seemed just an excuse to have McCoy come back with a big bang. Although in my opinion that also falls flat, after McCoy appears and everybody expresses gladness for his return, Doc just says one of his cynical signature catch phrases and the scene ends, making everything feel a bit forced.

With DeVitt out of the way, the group finally chases Frank for the last time. And Cooper knows where he is, in the very same place that he and his father followed him to many years ago. After getting rid of his entire gang, the group finally faces Frank. After Kate gives a goodbye kiss to Cooper, he goes to the final face-off. This time Cooper outdraws Frank and wounds him. After Frank musters his last words, Cooper finishes him off with a last shot. Credits roll.

Further Considerations

The pacing of the plot is a bit all over the place sometimes. I didn't feel that it detracted from the experience, but the game certainly suffers first from a too delayed acquaintancing with the premise and second from the few filler missions that I have already mentioned. Other than that, it is not too overcomplicated or hard to follow. Quite the contrary, it is pretty straightforward. Even too straightforward I would say, as there are some situations with potential that I felt weren't fully explored. Not only regarding the revelation of Hector being a member of Frank's gang, but also for example the relationship between Isabelle and McCoy. Isabelle also used to offer her Voodoo skills in the past to whom could afford them with no questions asked until Wayne convinced her to change her ways. What at first seemed like annoyance on her part with McCoy being so stubborn with accepting money with no questions asked, ended being sincere respect for him after he returns to the group. But not a lot of dialogue lines are said regarding this situation.

In fact, not a lot of dialogue deeply explores any character's relationship towards others in the group. While it is quite frequent that the different characters will speak and banter between them during all levels, I felt that the character progression is limited and most of this banter and conversations always deal with the same points and personality traits of each one (Yes, I know Hector is really strong, he loves Bianca and he is kind of a lazy, laid-back guy. I got that very clear the first time it was mentioned). This makes characters feel a bit flatter than they could have been. What I did like is that sometimes these conversations reveal further story bits in a seamless way with the gameplay, as you will hear them while you are planning your next moves and aren't really making any actions. However, sometimes they will indeed trigger while you are performing a plan and that is most unfortunate when it happens, as you will probably miss what they are saying or risk setting off an alarm.

Atmosphere

This is, with a big difference, the strongest aspect of the game. Just a quick look around in the first level reveals an obsessive attention to detail in the art direction. But this attention to detail not only becomes obvious in the backgrounds, 3D models and level design, they also eventually surfaces in the music, SFX and especially in the vast array of customized voice acting (VA from now on) lines for each character. Fans of western atmospheres will feel delighted with this game because it does a wonderful job of driving you directly to 1875.

Sound and music

The music score is flawless and many songs will remain in the players's heads even days after the last gaming session. Level music tends to be soft and chill to foster the necessary meticulous planning but ringing the alarm will quickly change this into a rhythmic, powerful sound that will really make you feel the heightening of stakes.

There has been an incredibly and punctilious focus on providing extensive and varied voice acting lines. All characters have assigned catch phrases related to all their skills and they will always say one of them whenever one of those skills is selected. And with time you will also be saying them in your mind. Cooper's "Who needs a good killing?" when selecting his Throwing Knife ability or Hector's "Time to use Bianca!" when selecting his bear trap are just two examples on how these VA lines are also subtly used to convey the personality of the character without dialogue to others. A very smart choice.

This is not all. There are customized VA lines for all levels. Sometimes when choosing an ability, the character will say something regarding the current goal of the level, and that line will never be used again in any other level. The best example of this is the stage where they all wake up hangover. The full VA of this level for all characters was customized to fit this situation and some lines are absolutely hilarious when they start mentioning how their head hurts. Even their character portraits are temporarily changed to fit their hangover looks.

And enemies become their own VA lines, too. Just like characters speak and banter at some points during the levels, it is also frequent that patrolling enemies stop to chat with colleagues. This conversations are cleverly used to reveal to players details of happenings between levels and they will often talk about past events and things the characters did. Some of these exchanges can also be quite funny and almost any conversation between two enemies in every level tends to have between two and three variations. The VA work that went on in this game can't really be overstated.

Background and models

The game is just gorgeous to look at and the models and backgrounds are filled with details. It makes a wonderful job of immersing players in the levels, who will find themselves from time to time just looking around in awe instead of investigating enemy patterns. The game offers a wide variety of surroundings. From villages, to a full blown city like New Orleans. From desert and canyons (where footprints can be left on the sand) to river and swamps (where footprints can be left on the mud). The game also features levels at night where light sources play a key part in deciding what parts of the enemy's vision cone is solid or striped. The levels are usually packed with buildings, towers, enemies and many other things to interact with. The only thing that I'd say I missed was a greater number of explorable interiors, as the amount of buildings in the game where you can really explore the inner hallways and rooms can be counted with one hand.

Level design

The level design has player freedom at its center and is something that quickly becomes obvious when you see how the different areas within the levels are interconnected in many different ways. Maybe you can access a certain place through the main door, or maybe you enter a side door that

first drives you to the rooftop and from there you work your way down, or maybe you decide to use Cooper/Isabelle to climb a vine that grows over a wall in a dark corner. This is just a very simple example. Almost all levels have been carefully crafted to allow a wide range of progress possibilities. Only the last levels are increasingly linear to craft the difficulty more easily. IT is really another superb aspect of this game.

However, what comes across as really varied first, with the ongoing of the game many repeating patterns start to arise and become noticeable, especially in the enemy placement department. I already mentioned the lack of interiors, because practically all areas of all levels are open areas. It comes a moment where as a developer you explore all kinds of possible puzzles that this limited amount of enemy types can be arranged playing with the verticality. This isn't to say that the game becomes boring, but some players may feel burnt out by the last third of the game when they enter yet another open area level where they are continuously putting in practice the same kind of plans they have already thought of multiple times because the combination of enemy layouts always hold similarities between one another.

The game tries to shake up this a bit by introducing different limiting factors like footprints in the sand/mud and night levels with light sources. These levels offer an interesting change of pace by adding more variables to the puzzles but are really a minority (especially night levels) and areas where footprints can be left are reduced to some small key parts within the more advanced levels. There is potential for a lot of improvement here.

There is also some lack of variety in terms of goals in levels. Most of the time the goal is that you need to reach the end of the level. Sometimes you need to perform some mid-term goal, like getting the key to the exit door, but most of the time in the game your goal is always to go from A to B and it gives you total freedom on how to get there. This seems to be a reduction to the absurd (don't we always have to go from A to B in all games?). However, in the case of Desperados III almost nothing interesting happens between A and B and the way is just a continuous domino take down of the enemies in your path.

An example to make this point clear: the first time you arrive to New Orleans and need to look for Wayne you need to conduct an investigation first. You have to stealthily move yourself around the city to inadvertently listen to thugs' conversations to see if you discover useful info. At the end you need to pickpocket a letter from one of DeVitt's liutenants (there are three in the level and you need to find out who has the letter) to progress. You need to be stealthy and non-lethal, so diversion and distracting abilities become even more important than usual. This is the only mission of this type in the whole game and is such a pity because it was my favourite one just because it was such a breeze of fresh air.

The Good, The Ugly And The Bad

Desperados III provides an incredibly polished and immersive single-player experience. If you are a fan of the RTT genre, this is a game you really shouldn't pass on. Albeit some lack of variety in the gameplay and a narrative that doesn't take advantage of its full potential, the game manages to capture your attention hard enough to at least drive you to the toughest levels of the game. There, the sudden increase in difficulty spike might frustrate even the more experienced players. This games provides plenty of difficult challenges and will really make you feel like part of a spaghetti western.

The Good:

- Incredible level of care in the details. Music and art direction are superb. The game is

gorgeous to look at and manages really high levels of immersion. Playing with headphones is 100% recommendable.

- Again, the VA work can't really be overstated. The variety in the characters and enemy lines is vast.
- The combination between the characters' skills and how the levels have been designed allows for high levels of player agency within the constraints of the game's rules, giving the game a very high replay value. This is increased even more with each level having up to three unique, difficult challenges that are known once you finish it for the first time.

The Ugly:

- The narrative is powerful at times, but falls flat in many others. It doesn't explore threads that are only superficially mentioned and that seemed to have really interesting implications.
- Towards the end of the game it starts to become obvious that most puzzle combinations have been explored and players find themselves continuously in repeated situations, doing the same plans they have already done dozens of times.
- Characters' skills could be better balanced. Hector and Isabelle feel too overpowered while Kate can feel nearly useless outside of her distracting ability.
- The algorithm that decides the order of nearby script-based actions like climbing a ladder, grabbing an enemy body or jumping down a roof is not that accurate. More than once, and twice and thrice I was facing away of a rooftop's/balcony's edge, on top of a body I wanted to carry and the character ended up jumping down. This becomes a noticeable problem in the last two levels of the game, with lots of enemys on rooftops and balconies.
 - Other typical annoying situations included entering a door instead of taking down the enemy that was in front of it or climbing a ladder down instead of doing a jump attack to an enemy below. This was the one single detail that frustrated me the most during the game, because it led many times to me getting discovered and killed.

The Bad:

- Even though nearly four years separate Desperados III from Shadow Tactics (developed by the same company), both games provide a virtually identical experience and play nearly the same. In my opinion, the addition of Isabelle's unique skills, Dogs, the Luring capability of Kate and the new setting are not enough to justify the purchase of this game if you have just finished, or recently finished, Shadow Tactics.
 - This point doesn't apply if you haven't played the aforementioned game; or you did, but are still really hungry for more tactical planning.