

GT SPORT DEUS EX BATTLEFIELD 1



# WATCH DOGS 2

UBISOFT REBOOTS THE OPEN WORLD IN CO-OP

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HOW TO START A  
CAREER IN THE  
INDUSTRY

#295  
AUGUST 2016



# Job Simulator is nothing like a real job for a reason

A few years ago, a scene in the UK TV soap opera *EastEnders* presented a father talking to his children as they played videogames in their living room. To some viewers, it was nothing out of the ordinary. To those of us who've grown up around games, though, it felt something like a taunt. We could see the children holding what seemed to be PlayStation controllers, but what we heard were the primeval honks and bleeps from the 1982 Atari VCS version of *Pac-Man*. You can imagine the meeting in the *EastEnders* edit suite. "The kids are supposed to be playing with one of those computer things – why doesn't it sound like it?" "Uh, videogames sound more like movies these days, boss." "No, no, make it sound more like a videogame!" The amendments in the resulting broadcast satisfied precisely one person, while we at home reached for the knuckles of the person next to us on the sofa, having bitten entirely through our own.

Getting it all a bit wrong isn't the preserve of videogames. Military types sit through action movies grumbling, "Come on, do these people *really* not understand the physics of miniguns?" And take TV series *Mr Robot*, which is at its least convincing when it's portraying hackers as slick specimens performing outrageous manoeuvres that simply wouldn't stand up in the real world. The hitch in these cases, clearly, is that absolute authenticity wouldn't be as engaging in the context of fast-moving storytelling.

It's a problem for the *Watch Dogs* series, whose audience is highly sensitive to sanitised riffs on tech issues. Certainly there are elements of the new game that carry a whiff of the Hollywoodisation we're used to finding elsewhere. Unfortunately, hacking is very often a crushingly boring pursuit in reality, only rarely involving women that look like Carly Chaikin. So, taking control of drones skimming the skies of San Francisco, or sitting alone, in your underpants, brute-forcing password cracks? *Watch Dogs 2* goes for the exciting option – and with no trace of the grating sounds of a crappy 34-year-old arcade conversion. Our report begins on p66.



Exclusive subscriber edition



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# EDGE

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# Heads up

With the first wave of hardware now established in homes, where does **the VR industry** go next?

After years of growing expectation, and with a couple of problematic hardware launches now out of the way, the age of virtual reality is finally upon us. From this side of Rift and Vive's rocky emergence, the world feels little different, but few ever expected it to be: forecasters and industry pioneers have long warned that VR could take five, maybe even ten, years to permeate into mainstream consciousness. The big question for now, then, is: where do we go from here?

For many early adopters, HTC and Oculus's fumbled hardware releases sullied what should have been a triumphant couple of months – not least in the case of Rift Kickstarter backers, some seeing hardware reach retail outlets before their own preorders were honoured. HTC did little better, apparently prioritising orders by the



FROM TOP **Jason Kingsley**, CEO of Rebellion;  
**Starbreeze CTO Emmanuel Marquez**

date payment was received rather than when the order was actually placed – a misjudgment that meant customers who paid through PayPal, which transfers money instantly, were prioritised over card payments even if the order was placed at a later date.

**Any desire to** celebrate a headset's eventual arrival was further extinguished by a predominantly underwhelming launch lineup that failed to make a convincing case for the sizeable outlay required for either setup. The realities of room-scale VR in average-sized homes also quickly proved more frustrating than it did revelatory. But despite all of this, and the growing and inevitable wave of injuries sustained from falling over or walking into walls, the promise of VR remains as potent as it has ever been.

Bruises and disappointment will fade. The real challenge now facing VR is that of convincing everyone who isn't prepared to stump up £500 for unproven technology on faith alone.

"Releasing new hardware, especially if it's not just a new console but a whole new way of delivering entertainment, is always fraught with danger," **Jason Kingsley**, CEO of *Sniper Elite* and *Battlezone* studio Rebellion, notes. "People are also conservative: they naturally know what they like and like what they know, and they rarely vote for change. It's always an uphill battle to sell something like VR when nobody has VR yet – it's like when telly was first being introduced and they were marketing it on the radio. It misses the point entirely."

"There aren't any elegant words we can use to describe what we're talking ►



Starbreeze's StarVR headset (left) has been shown off in conjunction with a shotgun for Overkill Software's *The Walking Dead* VR demo



CENTRE Starbreeze's Cockatoo Spritz short is inspired by early French cinema pioneers, and is intended to kickstart VR cinema. ABOVE Rebellion's VR reimagining of arcade classic *Battlezone*. RIGHT Google's Daydream UI follows the familiar template



## DANGER CLOSE

What does players' primal response to VR mean for devs?



Kingsley suffers from a moderate case of vertigo, a problem that led him to consider ethical questions about VR. "I experimented with one of the early rollercoaster demos and within about five seconds I got all the symptoms that I would get if I was on a real ride, even though I was prepared for it," he says. "It means there are parts of our brains which are stimulated by VR that are out of our voluntary control entirely. What responsibilities do we have as game makers when it might actually disturb people for real? A lot of 2D games can be very frightening; a well-written book can be horrifying. A well-made horror VR experience, though? It will probably make you shit yourself."

about yet, which is both wonderful – because it means that we're at the cutting edge – but also slightly awkward when we try to communicate to players what a VR game is."

**One part of** the strategy for surmounting that marketing hump is simply getting HMDs onto people's heads, whether that means demo pods in videogame stores and shopping centres, or more exciting large-scale endeavours such as Starbreeze's IMAX VR collaboration – which stemmed from initial plans to build an LA-based VR arcade called Project Starcade – Alton Towers' VR rollercoaster Galactica, or The Void's 'hyper-reality' offering. In most cases, that first experience is enough to convince people of virtual reality's potential, and even if they don't rush out immediately to buy a setup, their initial impressions will percolate over time and they might just rave about it to friends with more disposable cash.

"When people – journalists, sceptics, enthusiasts, and even people who have no skin in the game – have come to try the headset [at our studio], almost every single one of them came away convinced that there was something very compelling and different about VR," Kingsley says. "Now, obviously that doesn't mean that the games themselves will meet those expectations, but it does show that it's not just about strapping a monitor to your head."

Developments such as AMD's \$199 VR-ready RX480 graphics card, and the competitors that will surely follow in its low-cost trail, will help to lower the barrier to entry and allow VR setups to make the daunting jump from expensive curios to must-have kit, but right now Kingsley's focused on even more affordable hardware: PlayStation VR.

"We're all waiting for the first massmarket units, which will presumably be manufactured in the millions rather than in the thousands," he says. "And as far as I'm concerned, PlayStation VR is the first commercial-scale massmarket virtual reality headset that's being released. The others are excellent pieces of specialist hobby kit, but they're in very

limited supply, they're very expensive, and you need a fast PC. None of that is the case with PSVR."

So where does that leave something such as StarVR? Starbreeze Studios' panoramic, no holds-barred headset is aimed squarely at the premium end of an already premium market, being shaped by a pair of established players that are themselves about to be undercut by PlayStation VR (though Sony's commercial advantage is lessened if you factor in the cost of revised PlayStation hardware). Up until now, the Swedish studio has been hand-building each prototype, but a recent deal with Acer means it now has the manufacturing clout to compete on numbers. Is there room for another high-priced headset at this early stage?

"Simply put, we're creating a premium experience," Starbreeze CTO **Emmanuel Marquez** tells us. "We definitely have room to differentiate ourselves, especially with the IMAX collaboration putting the StarVR headset in IMAX VR centres all across the world. And there are so many business applications for virtual reality that are more demanding on specs and not as price sensitive. We're very comfortable catering to the pro market as our focus."

Kingsley takes a similarly confident position, likening the VR market to that of TVs, where there's a continual churn of upgrading in which customers invest at their own pace rather than in step with console-style generational leaps. It's worth noting, too, that VR is being positioned as an additive experience rather than a replacement for HD monitors (Kingsley stresses that VR is only one of Rebellion's interests, and that he loves flatscreen games, too), and that removes some of the pressure that tech such as 3DTV placed on itself by trying, and failing, to replace the status quo. VR is trying to carve out a new space, rather than redefine an old one.

"I think there's a lot of room in this industry," Kingsley says. "It's probably

going to feel a bit crowded now because we really are at the beginning of a new form of medium, and games are only one very small piece of that."

**With so many** open goals, then, it's not surprising to see such a wide range of visions for what VR should be. Room scale or seated? Hobbyist or massmarket? Mobile or tethered? But the other rift in the industry concerns positional tracking, and whether experiences and games which lack it should be considered 'proper' VR. There are already a raft of mobile-phone-based headsets on the market of varying quality, and Samsung's GearVR (which is only compatible with certain Samsung phones) represents the best of them. But even that rather expensive setup – at least if you don't already have the required phone – can't achieve the kind of positional tracking that makes PSVR, Rift and Vive sessions feel so magical.

Google's recently announced Daydream project doesn't look to address that problem, either, but its open-source design leaves space for enterprising creators to rectify that.

Low-cost headsets represent an opportunity to spread the word, but the gulf between the kind of experience you can have using Google's Cardboard and that which you'd have on an all-singing Vive setup is vast enough that the two things hardly seem related at all. And this, Kingsley warns, could be a problem.

"I actually think it's really dangerous, and that there are a few red herrings in the VR space," he says. "The problem with [some of these devices] is that they don't show very complex things, and don't track head movement properly in the way that you need in order to get proper immersion, so it sort of gives people a falsely low-fi experience of what good VR could be. The danger is that they come away from that not convinced that VR is a good thing. I'm a little concerned that they might actually not be impressive enough for people, and then

**"The danger is that people come away from these devices not convinced that VR is a good thing"**



people think that they've tried VR and then they go, 'VR's a bit crap, really.'"

They're just as likely to be disappointed if they play *Final Approach* on Vive, however. The shift from videogames' proven rulebook to VR's uncharted waters has resulted in a kind of awkward shuffle in which developers have assembled new forms from a combination of salvaged old parts and jury-rigged new ones. Some of these creations are greater than the sum of their parts, while others come apart at the seams. Even an underwhelming game can still be a remarkable experience in VR, but with the first wave of releases reviewing quite poorly, do developers need to rethink their approach, or is this just a natural part of being at the beginning of a transitional period?

"I think lots of people are struggling with the language of VR, and trying to figure out what to do with it," Kingsley says. "And I think that's a natural consequence of very skilled teams finding themselves with a bunch of established rules that don't work anymore."

**It will take** time, then, for a new rulebook to be written, but it's also the perfect opportunity to experiment. "We, and I mean we as an industry, definitely need to keep in mind that we need to keep pushing for VR's 'killer app,'" Marquez says. "We need to show the user, consumer or otherwise, what the application is and why it's so awesome.

We all still have much to learn about VR, what works and what doesn't, and we need to keep evolving our different experiences to accommodate for this.

"We've always said we wanted to be a second-generation HMD in this second age of VR, but we feel that the current-gen HMDs are doing a great job of enthusing people and spreading the gospel of VR. Getting it in the hands of as many people as possible is crucial for VR to take off, and we have to remember that this isn't 3D glasses or 360 video – people need to have that first experience in Tilt Brush or be amazed by a full cinematic experience like [Starbreeze's immersive cinematic creation] Cockatoo Spritz to understand the power of the medium. HMD technology will certainly continuously evolve, and our implementation of experiences for them will evolve to match – we'll see new leaps of innovation happen every year for a while longer, I think."

We won't have to wait very long for the next wave of advancement. StarVR isn't the only headset gunning for the top end of the market, and AMD's wireless SULON Q, armed with inside-out positional tracking and powerful on-board processing, is set to join the fight this year. AMD promises "console-quality" graphics in a powerful VR package, but it also has some remarkable AR ambitions, as illustrated by its Magic Beans Demo ([www.bit.ly/25lw9Qf](http://www.bit.ly/25lw9Qf)), which brings Jack And The Beanstalk

to the SULON offices. Microsoft, too, has yet to unleash its AR-focused Hololens – and it has now revealed that it plans to share with other hardware manufacturers the Windows Holographic platform that powers it.

Rather than converge, the VR landscape looks set to become an increasingly convoluted space, then, as every new entrant introduces yet another quirk or angle. And that, for all the inevitable missteps that will occur along the way, is something to be celebrated.

"Seeing all the different creative and technical disciplines trying to figure everything out is hugely gratifying," says Marquez. "The most important factor to VR's development is creating new experiences and technical innovation."

Kingsley agrees: "I'm very impressed with what all of the manufacturers like HTC and Oculus have done in different ways. They've really pushed the high end of VR. I felt such an incredible sense of immersion when that Aperture robot came through the door – it was awesome, and a bit frightening that Pandora's box has been opened. We're at the beginning of properly simulating real experiences. We're obviously not there yet, because it's distinguishable from real life, but we're somewhat down that slope. I mean, we're now talking about synthetic environments that can convince the early human that's deep within our brain stem, the one that grew up on the savannas of Africa, that we're somewhere different." ■

FROM LEFT Google's Daydream – not ready for consumer testing just yet; AMD's wireless SULON Q, which has ambitions in both VR and AR; Sony's PSVR, due out in October

# Bossa's key

How the studio behind *Worlds Adrift* uses technology to **expand creative possibilities** rather than polygon counts

For a videogame developer, Bossa Studios has an unusual relationship with technology. While the studio behind *Surgeon Simulator*, *I Am Bread* and *Worlds Adrift* is as willing as any other company to take advantage of improved rendering techniques and faster processors, the team sees these kinds of innovations more as jumping-off points than a foundation. Bossa CTO **Sylvain Cornillon** and COO **Vince Farquharson** will explore this in their Design Track keynote at this year's Develop conference – taking place in Brighton from July 12–14 – and will talk about how disruptive technology can, and should, lead to disruptive design.

**What should Develop attendees expect from your keynote?**

**Vince Farquharson** It's about the convergence of technology with design and creativity, and the fact that we find technology empowering and exciting but maybe not in the same way that many other companies do. Generally, companies tend to use technology to do something faster or better. We do do that, but for us that's not really the point. For us, it's that it allows us to do things we couldn't do before. Stuff that was either impossible technically, or cool things we never would've had the time to try before.

**So your approach is about freeing yourselves up to focus on gameplay ideas as much as possible?**

**VF** Exactly. We can try out all these different things, and it's very evolutionary – the best ones survive. When you've taken a year and a half to make your

engine tech to try it out, you're committed. So the more technology that comes along that allows things to be easier, the more creative we can be and the more things we can throw at the wall to see what sticks. But also when features come along that allow us to do things that we couldn't do before, we really have the time and the space to think about how that new technology jump can allow us to do something cool, and not just for the feature's sake. You take that new technology, whatever it is, and throw it back into the mix, reevaluate everything, and all of sudden you've got a game idea that didn't make sense before today. That's what gets us excited.

**Sylvain Cornillon** Design paradigms were created due to the technological constraints of the past, but with new technology they needn't hold true any more. *World's Adrift* is almost entirely an example of that.

**"We try to think of threads that no one else is looking at – then it's about how we jump into that category"**

**In an industry that clings to existing models, how risky is your approach?**

**SC** A lot of what the industry does, especially in terms of content and content generation, is based on workflows that have been optimised to be as fast as possible and to generate as much as possible. But to do that you have very rigid workflows. And new technologies – for example, for us Unity was an important aspect of that, and Improbable's SpatialOS is another one – allow us to be flexible in our own workflow. Now, we're never as efficient as a big triple-A team with the number of people we have, but we keep them very flexible. We try to stay away from things that will lock us down too much.



FROM TOP Bossa CTO  
Sylvain Cornillon  
and COO Vince  
Farquharson

**What sort of problems does it create?**

**VF** A perennial problem we have when we do a new game is deciding which categories we're going to tick for the various stores, because everything we do doesn't really conform to the standard tickboxes. When we're asked what genre of game *Surgeon Simulator* is, we have to sit around for half an hour working out what we're going to say. And we have those same ridiculous conversations for every single thing that we do. For us, we try to think of threads that no one else is looking at, and then it's about how we jump into that category: we want to own the toast genre [laughs].

***Surgeon Simulator* used technology to deliberately obfuscate players' ability to interact with it. It seems to illustrate a full revolution of your design approach.**

**SC** The origin of *Surgeon Simulator* was from a game jam where you got bonus points for using ten keys on the keyboard. The team realised that it didn't work as they were developing it, so they limited it to five. And if you look at later versions on touchscreens and even VR, that aspect has gone away. We approach technology in the same way that we do game jam constraints. We look at what new possibilities a piece of technology give us, and then from there we come to a design that's different and original. But we might then realise that we can do what we want to do with old technology. It doesn't matter – the constraint or tech helped creatively. So that weird loop that you mention, it's like we really care about technology and constraints at the beginning, and then we make a design out of it, and after that, technology is just a means to an end – it seeds the creativity, but doesn't drive it further down the line. ■





Improbable's SpatialOS tech has allowed Bossa to host thousands of players at once in its persistent, physics-driven sandbox *Worlds Adrift*



ABOVE In *Worlds Adrift*, players form allegiances and sail the skies. RIGHT *Surgeon Simulator* was a surprise hit for Bossa, but the project has evolved significantly since its game-jam beginnings. BELOW *I Am Bread* also began life modestly, scaling up incrementally



**SILVER LINING**  
How Bossa finds the good in any situation



*Worlds Adrift* used to have simulated weather, but while it was a good idea on paper, it affected gameplay negatively. But in the remnants of that system, Bossa found new possibilities. "I think if most people had technology that enables awesome clouds, you'll look up in the sky and see awesome clouds," Cornillon says. "But that's not the important bit – because they're volumetric, we can now use them for gameplay, so you can have ships that can hide inside the clouds, and come out and surprise people. Yes, they look fabulous – but now we can design gameplay around the fact that they have volume."



# A long tail

How two filmmakers dug deep into gaming's past with *Man Vs Snake*

The melodrama of 2007's King Of Kong casts a long shadow over videogame documentaries, especially those focused on vintage games, but that didn't stop **Andy Seklir** and **Tim Kinzy** from completing their own contribution to the genre in the shape of *Man Vs Snake*. Drawing on eight years' worth of interviews and record attempts to tell a story of spirited triumph and tragedy with a real, humane warmth, the film centres on one man's quest to record a new high score on an ancient arcade cabinet. Crucially, the film displays an integrity and rigour that serves its subject admirably, which helps offset the fact that the game at the centre of it all, Rock-Ola's 1983 coin-op *Nibbler*, does not have the profile of the likes of *Donkey Kong* and *Pac-Man*. What it lacks in fame, though, the game makes up for by being the first example to allow players to record a score of a billion points before rolling over to zero. The grand challenge of clocking the score – a 40-hour mission – provides

fertile ground for gaming drama. Add Tim McVey – the first person to ever hit the billion mark, in 1984 – and document him attempting to do it again after a 25-year break, and you have the seeds of a true successor to King Of Kong.

*Man Vs Snake* started with a MAME cabinet built by Seklir. The hardware was moved into the studio where he worked alongside Kinzy in their day jobs editing for TV, and *Nibbler* came to attention as a random choice. As Seklir recounts, "We were trading high scores and Tim stumbled upon the 'Tim McVey Day' poster and the billion score." Kinzy

printed the poster and stuck it to the door of Seklir's office. "I thought, 'What the hell?' How could anyone possibly get over a billion points?" Seklir says. "We were struggling to get 100,000!" From that discovery came research into the story behind this rare feat of skill and endurance. As they discovered the history of Walter Day's Twin Galaxies arcade and the scene he cultivated, Seklir became inspired. "I had always been interested in doing a film set in the arcade culture of the '80s," he explains. "You have all these hotshots descending on this town and setting records. And there was Tim, the local kid, who did this thing that everybody thought was impossible". In 2008, Seklir and Kinzy visited McVey to research the backstory, but it wasn't until McVey announced that he wanted to break the world record again that *Man Vs Snake* became a full-fledged documentary.

Seklir and Kinzy's treatment is a more rounded and personal one than King Of Kong's, which helps to set it apart, but the earlier film had a deep influence on their approach, having premiered just after the pair had shot the first round of interviews. Seklir: "We saw King Of Kong and thought, 'Wow. It's so well done and so entertaining. How can a *Nibbler* documentary possibly compete with that?'" However, as professional editors with knowledge of how to edit for story, they were aware of how creative King Of Kong's makers had been with the truth. "They really said, 'Let's make one guy the black hat and the other guy the white hat,'" Seklir notes. *Man Vs Snake* took on a different dimension. "We

decided that we were going to treat the material differently," Seklir explains. "We weren't going to try and paint anybody black and white. We were going to go into the grey areas and see the ups and downs". This spirit of rigour meant including moments where McVey isn't at his best, at one point showing him simply giving up in the middle of a record attempt. "[That section is] completely unheroic and it's really downbeat," Seklir says. "The audience loses a bit of faith in him, but we wanted to keep all of that".

The duo's ethos extended to how it approached other key players among the vintage gaming scene for their input. "There was a backlash from King Of Kong, and people were reluctant to talk to us," Kinzy explains. "We had to assure them that we would treat the material fairly, so I felt an obligation to represent them in the best way possible."

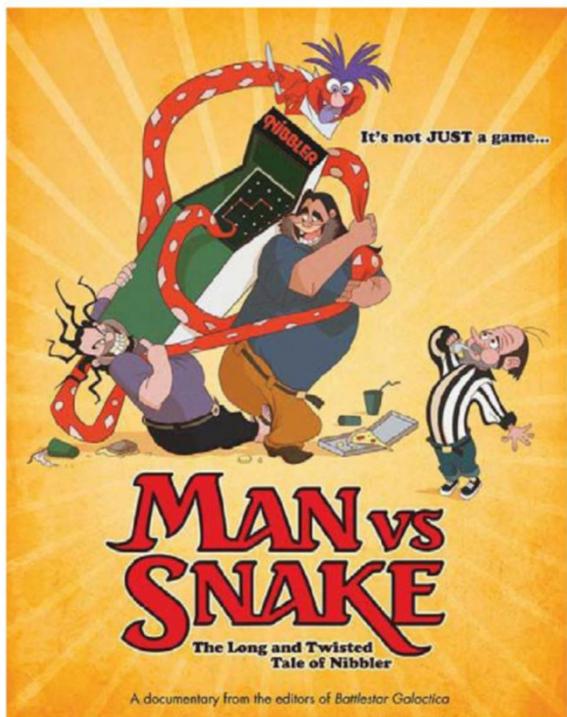
**Co-starring with McVey** are scene stalwarts Walter Day and Billy Mitchell, alongside *Nibbler* fans Enrico Zanetti and Dwayne Richard. Zanetti's unofficial 1984 score is a bone of contention, but also a target to beat; Richard arrives as a competitor with a wilder edge. A pivotal faceoff double attempt in 2009 was to serve as the film's climax, but typically for a documentary that grew beyond its original format, things didn't tie up neatly. "We really thought it would be the end of the film," Seklir explains. "We thought, 'Well, one of them's going to get it – one will pass out, something will happen, and we'll wrap this story up'. But it kept going on longer, because we kept getting strokes of luck. We stumbled on [Nibbler's] programmers by accident, so of course we had to interview them, and then we found Enrico, and things kept unfolding. I guess at any point you can

**"You have all these hotshots and then Tim, the local kid, who did this thing everybody thought was impossible"**



FROM TOP Andy Seklir and Tim Kinzy have production credits on shows such as *Battlestar Galactica*, and worked on *Man Vs Snake* in addition to their day jobs

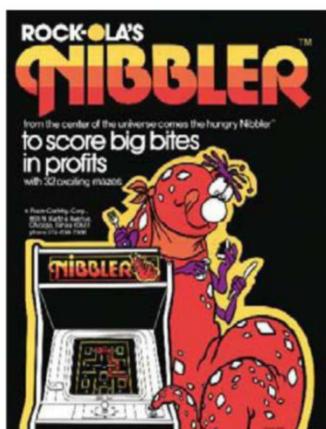




A big man with a big heart: Tim McVey was the perfect straight shooter for a straight story



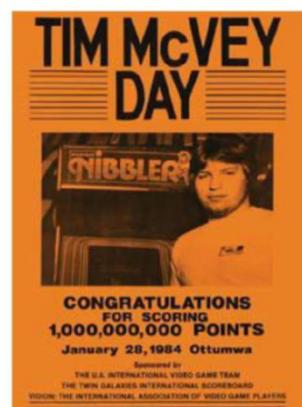
ABOVE A shared love of *Dragon's Lair* meant that Seklir and Kinzy were delighted when Don Bluth agreed to collaborate on posters and artwork. RIGHT Animated sequences do a terrific job of filling gaps where no archive footage exists



LEFT *Nibbler*: not the first game on many players' lists, but the first to offer the allure of reaching a billion points before rolling back to zero. ABOVE Walter Day's arcade was where McVey set his 1984 record, and the man behind Twin Galaxies urged him to try again. Seklir is in no doubt of Day's stature: "He should have a solid place in the historical record as being the father of eSports"



Dwayne Richard steps in to give McVey someone to compete against in the chase for a new high score. His chaotic energy injects plenty of drama and sparks the film's foray into vintage-gaming forensics.



## THE BILLY FACTOR

Gaming's most patriotic necktie is back on the screen



Man Vs Snake presents King Of Kong star Billy Mitchell as a benign expert, allowing us to see him in the role of enthusiast and supportive friend. "When we went to interview him, he had been burned by his experience in the 'other documentary,'" Kinzy explains. "There were trust issues: what were we after, really?"

"We wanted Billy because he was there for the first billion-point game and witnessed it," Seklir says. "He's been a friend of Tim McVey and remained his friend throughout the years. We didn't go after him for his celebrity status – it was because he had a unique insight into the story."

## KNOWLEDGE MAN VS SNAKE



**Kinzy and Seklir filming McVey during one of his stabs at setting a new *Nibbler* high score. The duo have been keeping a close eye on other record attempts. "Joel West wants to do 60 hours on [1982 Stern coin-op] *Frenzy*," Kinzy says. "If he sat down and did it in one game, and didn't take 12 attempts, that might be interesting"**

decide you've got enough story and stop, but we didn't feel we had enough story."

"Finding the narrative structure was a key struggle," Kinzy says. "It really came together when Andy and I took time off work and dedicated ourselves to getting this movie done." Other issues arose when the team considered using Kickstarter. Kinzy: "One of the challenges was Kickstarter itself. Is it worth it? Should we spend the time editing? How much should we ask for?" The Kickstarter turned out to be a success, exceeding its target funding while generating valuable publicity. With new funding on board, the team commissioned animation from Studio Joho in order to convey exposition and backstories. "For a long time, we had cards where the animation should be," Seklir explains. "Once the sequences were inserted, the whole feeling of the film changed". With the film now resembling a more rounded piece of modern docutainment, Seklir and Kinzy needed to navigate the tricky world of distribution. "We premiered at Fantastic Fest 2015, and won Best Documentary, so we had a bunch of interest," Seklir says. "We had to quickly educate ourselves on deal terms and what kinds of distribution there are, whether to get a sales agent, or just get a lawyer". It was

here that Seklir's day job came in handy: "I edited Atari: Game Over in the middle of all of this. I learned a little bit while working on that, which helped me understand what deal we should be looking for. Having industry contacts really helped." A deal was struck with Filmbuff, setting up Man Vs Snake for launch on June 24 via on-demand platforms in over 17 territories. Blu-ray and DVD releases with extra content are to follow.

**Tim McVey is an unusual choice as a subject for a documentary that took so much time to complete. A quiet man well on the way to middle age, he lacks any overt ego or traits ripe for caricature, so Man Vs Snake had little choice but to portray him simply as a human being. It's this lack of the sensational, and the relationships between him, his gaming pals and his ever-supportive wife Tina, that gives the film its warmth. Kinzy found McVey to be inspirational: 'He said, 'Think of all the things that we wouldn't have if someone tried once and quit'. There's something about his epiphanies that blew me away.**

It inspired me to finish this film, whatever it took." The loneliness of the long-distance high-score runner was another aspect the filmmakers sought to capture. "I think marathons are more dramatic," Seklir says. "I honestly thought someone might drop dead! You don't think about that when someone's just playing three hours of *Pac-Man*."

**"I think gaming marathons are more dramatic. I honestly thought someone might drop dead!"**

Seklir and Kinzy have a 'never say never' approach to making another gaming documentary. As long-time videogame fans, both see a need for more work in these areas. "I hope that there are more great videogame documentaries to be made," Siklir says. "People shouldn't say,

'Oh, well, it's been done'. There's room for different kinds of stories, and I think ours is a different story".

With its sprawling timeline and its desire to play everything truthfully, Man Vs Snake demonstrates what people with passion and skill can do in telling stories from gaming's rich cultural history. As games become more universal and their influence continues to grow, the audience for such carefully curated slices of players' lives is only growing. ■

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# PAWS GAME

Building a futuristic city from  
the perspective of a cat

Aside from outliers such as Bill Williams' 1984 title *Alley Cat* and, more recently, Chris Chung's *Collateral Damage*, feline videogame protagonists have been in short supply. Former Ubisoft Montpellier artists **Koola** and **Viv** – who prefer not to share their full names – are planning to add one more to the list, however, with a "cat adventure videogame" whose working title is simply 'HK project'. But while the game is fronted by a cat, it's the environments that dominate the screen. Inspired by cyberpunk themes and Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, the game's world is a densely packed, grimy metropolis populated by androids and decorated with neon signs, graffiti and fairy lights. Around the periphery of this world, a little black cat decked out with a futuristic backpack explores the pipes, cooling vents and stacks of boxes, unnoticed by the city's robotic residents. It's a striking shift of focus from the traditional ego-stroking starring bill that players are used to.

"We think the environment can communicate as much as a character, and we want the player to feel overwhelmed by the city," Koola says. "And we wanted an original main character who was small and harmless – it's very exciting to imagine controlling a cat in a that kind of topology."

The game is in a very early state, and with only two people working on it, it's not likely to emerge in finished form for a good while yet. As such, what you'll actually do in the game is currently fluid, but the pair have a few ideas. "We're still thinking about the gameplay," Viv says, "but it's going to have exploration, quests, infiltration, puzzles and dumb things that cats do." ■



The little cat you control pads along endearingly, the light from its backpack standing out from the shadows. The machinery and piping that lines the busy districts can all be climbed

# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"In a world of digital content and user-generated content, **we are providing self-actualisation** for many of our players."

Careful, Electronic Arts CEO **Andrew Wilson** – too much self-actualisation can make you go blind



"[Some people] don't believe it's really a game until you get to the end of the auction and you get your gun and you start shooting. **I'm OK if we lose some of those people.**"

Is **Neil Druckmann** talking about *Uncharted 4* or an eBay bid gone badly awry?



"They think, 'Since *Final Fantasy* is a special game, then we are also special because we are making it'. **I told them off, saying, 'We're not special. Wake up.'**"

*Final Fantasy XV* director **Hajime Tabata** shares one of his inspirational leadership techniques

"Typical Japanese companies are like armies. Media Molecule isn't like that... there's a feeling like **it's a family**. I want that for my company."

Next up for **Hideo Kojima**: a stealth actioner with a ukulele soundtrack



## ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



**Game** World's Largest Pac-Man & Friends  
**Manufacturer** Bandai Namco

Bandai Namco and Raw Thrills' gleefully over-the-top collaboration *World's Largest Pac-Man & Friends* is now available in western arcades. The machine comes in two parts: a control plinth with built-in speakers and a pair of Happ joysticks; and a faintly ridiculous 150" screen formed from an array of multicolour LEDs. The vast setup offers a surprisingly sharp display, which dwarfs the player to such an extent that you might just be transported back to those days of frequenting arcades as a kid and needing to stand on tiptoes in order to play.

But the release doesn't only rely on nostalgia: those two joysticks support the game's co-op multiplayer mode which, beside introducing a fresh spin on the ageing classic, must have played havoc with Blinky, Inky, Pinky and Clyde's dogged AI routines. While the machine is launching in its *Pac-Man* livery, at last year's IAAPA Bandai Namco also showed off a build of *Galaga* running on the setup, and more titles from the publisher's back catalogue will surely surface over time. The machine can also display moving adverts while it's in attract mode – it is, after all, a glorified display board – but the appeal of playing oversized Namco classics should ensure that the screen spends more time running games than promo slots.





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### The origins and inspiration for OlliOlli

As told by John Robbins

So, I've had a skateboard since I was about five. In my teens I actually got quite good and was sponsored for a while by Route One. Even now I still like to do the odd kickflip or whatnot (although breaking an arm is much more of a worry than when I was a kid).

**Skateboarding  
is hard**



I've played lots of games from the more serious games, but something really meant it was skateboarding.

While Hawk games, the idea that if you could land it except your trick on

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**poube**

# My Favourite Game

## Ashly Burch

The actor talks bonding with her brother over games, the creative process, and the therapeutic potential of playing

**A**shly Burch is an actor, voice artist and writer best known for playing Tiny Tina in *Borderlands* and a terrifying version of herself in web sketch series *Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin'*? More recently she took on the roles of Chloe in *Life Is Strange* and Orendi in *Battleborn*.

### How did *Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin'* come about?

Anthony [Burch, Ashly's brother] wanted to make a documentary about indie games around 2007/8. So he bought a camera and we started doing sketches so he could figure out how to use it. They became popular, got on GameTrailers, and he never made the documentary! Early on in the *Hey Ash* days I was too nervous to write, but it was such an organic development that over time I got more and more comfortable with the idea of being a contributor, and now we mostly write all of our scripts together.

### Did you and your brother bond over games from a young age?

Our mum saw Anthony at his first school play, in which he was supposed to skip, but he couldn't. So she literally thought, 'Well, he's never going to be coordinated so I'm going to have to get him a fallback.' And she bought him his first videogame system! He's two years older than me, so videogames were just in my life. It was also a big inspiration and motivator for my creativity. For example, I would bring the manuals for *Final Fantasy VII* through *X*, or whatever, to elementary school. They had character bios in the front, and I'd show them to my girlfriends and we'd act out *Final Fantasy*.

**BRANCHING OUT**  
Burch creates, writes and stars in comedy web series *Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin?* ([www.bit.ly/1s0VLWU](http://www.bit.ly/1s0VLWU)) alongside brother Anthony (former Gearbox writer now at digital film studio RocketJump). Directed by Justin Yngelmo, *Hey Ash* also regularly stars Burch's father, David, and Once Upon A Pixel creator Ashley Davis. Burch has also played various roles in the English versions of *Attack On Titan* and *Dragon Ball Z Kai*, as well as Breezy the bee in US animation series *Adventure Time*.

### People have always said games stifle the imagination, but presumably your parents were more progressive.

Yeah. Mum immigrated from Thailand, and didn't even speak English, but she was very aware of how important technology was going to be. We got the Internet and cellphones – I mean, really crappy ones – probably earlier than many of my peers because of that.

### Did having a brother in the videogame industry push you into wanting to be a part of it, too?

Well, my first character was Tiny Tina in *Borderlands*, which

Anthony wrote. He was writing the character and realised he wanted me to play her, but also felt like a jackass for getting hired and then being like, "Put my sister in the game!" So I submitted my audition without a name attached and they ended up picking mine. But apart from that, *Hey Ash* is a huge reason I've gotten a lot of the gigs I've gotten. I got my role in *Mortal Kombat* because of it; I'm Miss Pauling in *Team Fortress 2* because of it. People were more aware of my work on *Hey Ash* than anything else.

### Are you able to enjoy games in the same way you used to before *Hey Ash*? Presumably you're continually looking for sketch opportunities.

To be honest, it's usually that we go, "Oh, fuck, we need to write some *Hey Ash* episodes," and then start going

through our Rolodexes trying to remember what games we've played. We start thinking about what themes we want to hit, or what cultural things have happened in the industry that we want to talk about. I don't know what the experience for Anthony and Justin is so much, but for me I honestly just play the games and then later realise, "Oh, shit, we need to write an entire season of a web series now."

### What are you playing right now?

I'm really enjoying multiplayer and cooperative experiences. So I've been

playing a lot of *Destiny: The Taken King* and *Rocket League*. But I'm also so fascinated by the amount of female protagonists that are being featured in the games coming out. I think it's a really encouraging shift from the trend of mostly white male

protagonists. I think we still need to up our game in terms of representation of minority characters, but it feels like there's a shift happening in the triple-A scene and more women are being included.

### And how about your favourite game?

I have generalised anxiety disorder, and it was very acute when I was a child. It was hard for me to eat, I constantly felt nauseous, and I had anxiety attacks all the time. I was a ball of stress, and the only thing that would calm me down was playing *Harvest Moon 64*. And for that reason it is, and probably forever will be, my favourite game. I just adored it. ■





"*Life Is Strange* allowed me to tap into emotional parts of me we never do in Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin'?" Burch says. "But Hey Ash flexes different muscles in my brain and challenges me to think about what we're making"



## WEBSITE

**Lordran & Beyond**  
[www.bit.ly/darksoulscomic](http://www.bit.ly/darksoulscomic)

A collaborative webcomic series founded by writer Zach Sharpe, Lordran & Beyond is a building collection of fan-created *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* vignettes.

Sparingly told and beautifully illustrated, the charming strips explore the dusty corners of FromSoftware's potent lore with a mix of wide-eyed veneration and studied insight. The newest addition to a growing set is Storyteller, which sees Galvan stumbling through the Shaded Woods, flagon in hand, before meeting another familiar face. The site has also recently uploaded its first *Dark Souls III* story, called In Her Service, in which a thief takes possession of a Red Eye Orb from a fallen hero, all the while being watched by the wily Greirat. The first of a three-part series, In Her Service is also the site's best-looking effort to date.



## VIDEO

**Game Master: R-Type**  
[www.bit.ly/r-typefilm](http://www.bit.ly/r-typefilm)

While Paul Johnson's spectacular TIE Fighter short took notes from LucasArts' 1994 space combat game, his latest animation is based on a sci-fi videogame classic. Game Master: R-Type tells the story of a petulant arcade player who, on throwing a strop after failing to beat *R-Type*'s first boss, gets sucked into the game. The film looks every bit as good as Johnson's previous piece, but the move into dialogue doesn't hold up so well, meaning you can't help but root for the procession of classic *R-Type* enemies, hoping that the protagonist perishes horribly at their expertly rendered hands.

## WEB GAME

**I Have Brig Plans**  
[www.bit.ly/brigplans](http://www.bit.ly/brigplans)

Michael Pauley is an Australian engineering and mathematics researcher who uses Ludum Dare jams to hone his hobbyist game development chops. His latest entry, *I Have Brig Plans*, is a masterful block-based puzzle game that melds elements of *Minesweeper* and *Tetris*. In it you must construct cells for a variety of prisoners with varying accommodation requirements. Humans, for example, will only be happy in a rectangular or square cell, while cockroaches hate open spaces. Energy beasts, meanwhile, can't be housed adjacently to each other for reasons that should be obvious to anyone who's ever dealt with a pair of them. One final type of prisoner, the shapeshifter, will helpfully become whatever you need it to be to make everything fit on a grid in which no square can go unused.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

## GRAPHICS CARD

**Radeon RX 480**  
[www.bit.ly/rx480](http://www.bit.ly/rx480)

While AMD and Nvidia have traditionally gone head to head with each new generation of graphics cards, the advent of VR has seen the two PC behemoths' strategies diverge. Nvidia's first two VR-ready offerings, the GTX 1080 and 1070, dramatically undercut last year's £900 Titan X, but the flagship card still costs north of £500. The 4GB version of Radeon RX 480, meanwhile, costs just \$200 (around £140). Built on AMD's new Polaris architecture, the card puts out five teraflops of computational power compared to the respective six and nine of the 1070 and 1080, but with such a low price it should help to take the sting out of investing in a VR setup.



## continue

### Ad block

Nintendo could learn from Mojang's stance on corporate promotions

### All neon like

Björk ushers in the future with the world's first VR club night

### Next gender

You can switch sex in *The Sims 4* update

### Event horizon

Segueing between *Doom*'s classic secret areas and modern levels shows stirring progress

## quit

### Extinguished

*Project Spark*'s light goes out as Microsoft compensates players

### Force 10

A note to the Windows 10 upgrade team: 'no' really means 'no'

### Slipped disc drive

History will not judge backpack PCs leniently

### Videogame nasties

*The Division*, *Centipede*, *Missile Command*: wake us when Hollywood gets over its game obsession

## TWEETS

@Disney, now you're not making games, please sell me my *Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion* IP. I'll pay real actual money for them. **Ron Gilbert** @grumpygamer Creator, *Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion*

I have received loads of death threats this week, but don't worry, Hello Games now looks like the house from Home Alone. **Sean Murray** @NoMansSky Managing director, Hello Games

I deeply regret wasting my twelve-thousandth tweet. OH WELL – happy 12K to me. Next up: *Dreamfall Chapters* news. WOOOO! **Ragnar Törnquist** @rago Game designer, Red Thread Games

Just add "Fucked Up" after the "Super" in any SNES game title to make it amazing. **Steve Gaynor** @fullbright Game designer, The Fullbright Company



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# DISPATCHES

# AUGUST



Issue 294

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to [edge@futurenet.com](mailto:edge@futurenet.com). Our letter of the month wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store



### Idle thumbs

I've never been a completionist. As someone who only got back into games after skipping a generation, I've found the Achievements system both bemusing and intrusive.

But recently I've discovered an interesting use for Trophies on the PS4: you can see which percentage of players has achieved what. Since most Trophies are a mark of progress, you can use it to tell at what point said game has been destined for the CEX shelf. Much like Nathan Brown's column last month, I'm relating this to *Street Fighter V*.

For four months, I've been in a Sisyphean state between the Bronze and Super Bronze leagues. It's not just that points docked for losing become so unforgiving the moment you reach the latter, but also that improvement is becoming near impossible as I constantly find myself matched up against players literally leagues ahead. Is matchmaking broken? Not really. The playerbase has just bottomed out, if you look at the Trophy stats.

For the 'Fighting On The Internet' Trophy, you need to only play ten ranked matches. Last I checked, that's only been unlocked by 31.6 per cent of players, which already writes off most of the 1.4 million userbase. If, like me, you've been playing regularly since launch, you'll have easily played 300 ranked matches and got 'A Fiendish Trap', right? Only 6.4 per cent have. To top it off, the number of players to have reached Silver ('Muscles Bring Victory!') is just 5.8 per cent.

So, 5.8 out of 6.4? That basically gives me a nine-in-ten chance of being matched up with someone way above my abilities, and considering my daily sessions haven't even lasted ten matches... well, why bother? So I've officially retired from ranked matches before I lose my sanity. That said, casual matchups are just as bad, if not worse, so it really does seem the less-skilled majority

(over 90 per cent) have given up altogether. Because what else is there? No arcade mode; the prologues don't fill me with much confidence for the June story update; and when I finally managed to beat all ten combo challenges as Chun-Li, the pittance of Fight Money awarded was another slap in the face. So cheers to Capcom for delivering the most mechanically perfect *Street Fighter* to date but alienating most of its playerbase in the process. How's that for a Trophy?

On the flipside, it turns out I'm only one Trophy away from joining the 7.1 per cent of *Bloodborne* players to have got the Platinum. Even though my research indicates that it'll require fighting that bastard Logarius again,

my odds are surely better than in another game of SFV.

Alan Wen

**"After skipping a generation, I've found the Achievements system bemusing and intrusive"**

Such painstaking research deserves a New 3DS, but a warning: if you thought that the SFV playerbase was small, you're in for a shock when you play *Super SFIV: 3D Edition*.

### 99 per cent invisible

Do we no longer own games?

Are we merely the temporary custodians of the things we buy? I've been playing and buying games for over 25 years. Some of these games I still own and play, particularly a good few that I bought in the early '90s.

With constant online connectivity, are we actually still buying games, or just renting them until the companies shut down online services? *Disney Infinity*, which has been a family activity for me and the kids for the past three years, is disappearing, and *Project Spark* is at the end of its life. No more user content, all those hours of shareable levels gone. So what happens when I buy and play *No Man's Sky* and it somehow becomes unsuccessful? Eventually it will become a shiny coaster or a useless download.

It would be a great strategy to provide some untethering from online services so



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edgeonline](http://www.facebook.com/edgeonline)  
Discuss gaming topics with  
fellow Edge readers

that some time down the line I can show my grandkids the thrills of the first *Destiny*. Games are art, but shut down my servers and you've effectively closed the door on the virtual art gallery.

It would be great, but it's not possible, so we just have to wait for the game, and after ten minutes it discovers the server is gone, followed by a cheery, Hitchhiker's-style "Thanks for playing". How many current-gen games are dead in the water? But hey, let's just wait for version 2.0.

This grumpy old bum is off to see if *Timesplitters 2* still works in my PlayStation 2 so I can show it to my son, or plug a good old *Zelda* cartridge into my SNES. Now, where did I put that Scart lead?

**Keith Lawler**

The lack of fixed generational leaps on PC means it's less of a problem there, at least in theory. Hopefully Sony and Microsoft shifting to iterative hardware cycles will make such shutdowns less likely in future.

## Hardcore history

I'm late to the *Dark Souls* party. The series presents a substantial challenge, for sure, yet difficulty is not a new concept.

PS1 games were routinely punishing. Remember the first *Tomb Raider*? Even the child-friendly Sony mascot *Crash Bandicoot* demanded precision timing. *Resident Evil* could be very unforgiving, too.

Then there was *Deathtrap Dungeon*, arguably the spiritual ancestor of the *Dark Souls* series – a traditional dungeon crawler that employed sadistic traps and almost insurmountable enemies, made worse by a schizophrenic camera and blurred pixels, making it impossible to detect a trap or dodge a blow. Even *Ninja: Shadow Of Darkness* was routinely impossibly hard.

Arguably, the ancestors of the current hardcore are arcade games that, programmed for frequent coin input, enticed then destroyed the casual player, while still creating the feeling that 'just one more try'

would allow us to progress. And the real enticement (before the phrase 'endgame content' existed) was the promise of a glimpse of what the next level looked like. The only way to advance was through familiarity, paid for by coin (or the currency of sustained effort these days).

So when in Edge 291 Shuhei Yoshida observes that, "The game design of *Dark Souls* has been a good antithesis to the industry norm," he is failing to acknowledge what existed before: a challenging, thorny wasteland of difficulty.

**Andrew Hemsley**

*Yoshida's point was about Dark Souls in the context of today's gaming landscape. But now you've made us remember all those nightmarish Ghouls 'N' Ghosts sessions way back in the late '80s, and we're crying again.*

## Mind the gap

Are crossplatform features really a good thing? *Fallout 4* mods came to Xbox One recently, and while the idea of console players getting something that only PC owners previously had access to is great in theory, the reality's been a bit of a mess. Mods created for the PC version have been stolen, ported and reposted by randoms. Some have even asked for donations to support their future non-work.

*Street Fighter V*'s crossplatform online play means a bespoke user ID system with no voice chat and varying levels of input lag on PC and PS4. Elsewhere, if it's not souring the experience, it's simply killing the game, and sometimes even the studio that made it. Both *Project Spark* and *Fable Legends* went the way of the dodo for a number of reasons, but it's tempting to make the connection. Either way, what once seemed an impossible dream is increasingly becoming reality, but seems more likely to annoy than to enthral.

**Alex Stevens**

*In future, when people ask why the Edge website was closed, we'll show them this.*

## A life well wasted

This year I have spent more time gaming than in the past few years combined. I've dedicated hundreds of hours to puzzles, headshots, raids and incursions, all while raising a daughter, holding down a full-time job, and trying not to neglect a very patient and understanding wife.

I've had similar periods of 'intense' gaming in the past – during school holidays, when I should probably have been playing outside, and other times in my life where free time was plentiful and adult responsibilities were fortunately not. But there's something that sets my current gaming enthusiasm apart from the good old days. Though I have played games every single day this year, I have played only two of them.

Specifically, *Destiny: The Taken King* and *Tom Clancy's The Division*. Two games that are designed to keep a player hooked at the end of a sometimes fragile line. I've been guilty in the past of rushing games in order to move on to the new big thing, searching for the next hit. My perspective seems to have shifted. Now I see myself less as a 'gamer', and more as a member of some very specific communities that happen to be based around videogames.

I'm enjoying these games on a deeper level, engaging with forums, subreddits and extended lore. It feels nice to get off of the treadmill of new releases and focus on games I am truly passionate about, turning my life-long hobby into a smaller, more intimate experience. I hear similar stories from the passionate communities of *DOTA 2* and *League Of Legends*. As gaming becomes ever more mainstream, perhaps it will also become more and more niche, in order to cater to everyone's interests.

**Alan Jeffrey**

*This kind of devotion is no bad thing. Unless you have a professional duty to keep abreast of new releases, and colleagues who wish they could talk to you about something that isn't Destiny. Or so we imagine, anyway.* ■



STEVEN POOLE

## Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Videogame writing has come on a lot, hasn't it? Players love their epic sci-fi or fantasy stories, and the scope of the lore buried within their worlds. Everyone wants to celebrate the development of the medium into a sophisticated engine of ludic narrative. So when the American writer Michael Thomsen published a sceptical review of *Uncharted 4* in the Washington Post, the backlash was severe. Fans scrambled to sign an e-petition demanding that Metacritic remove this review, along with the arbitrary 40% score assigned to it. The voice of Nathan Drake himself, Troy Baker, tweeted a link to the petition, and then tweeted a sort of apology. In the emotionally brittle world of videogames, someone had once again done something simply unacceptable.

What really enraged the fans was a single line in Thomsen's thoughtful and interesting review. "The *Uncharted* games," he had written, "have never excelled at storytelling." Wait, what? But *Uncharted* has always been celebrated precisely for its storytelling. In the spirit of solidarity, I got in touch with Thomsen — who had stocially endured Twitter abuse and complaints from Sony to his editor ("In cultivating videogame communities around fandom rather than open critique," he remarks, "publishers and developers help feed into these kinds of reactionary outbursts of abuse") — to check whether he just hates story-driven games. Actually he doesn't, mentioning games such as *Twilight Princess* and *Cibele*. But I agree with him about the *Uncharted* games, and it points to something deeper going on in modern disagreements about game writing. Most games are far too long, for a start, and no one has the time in the average dev period to write an amount of narrative that could compare quality-wise with two seasons of a top cable-TV drama such as *The Americans*. But a more profound problem is that when we talk about a game's "writing," we are focusing exclusively on a small subset of what is really at stake aesthetically.



In the emotionally brittle world of videogames, someone had once again done something simply unacceptable

People tend, for example, not to think of structural elements — such as backtracking or enforced farming — as part of a game's writing. But if the whole game is supposed to be consumed as a "story," then these aspects of its experience are key parts of the story structure just as much as whatever happens in cutscenes. Thomsen agrees: "Many critics often isolate a very specific kind of storytelling, such as in the *Uncharted* series, which I would describe as theatrical more than cinematic, invested in the idea of oration and exposition, and as technology has advanced, facial animation/emoting."

In games as in film or television, however, the architecture of the story and the rhythm of its delivery is just as much part of the writing as single lines of witty dialogue. In *Uncharted 4*, the long-noticed disjunction between the person we are supposed to take Nathan Drake to be in the cutscenes (amiable, thoughtful) and the person we make him while playing (psychopathic mass killer) is a fault in the writing, even if one belatedly acknowledged by the designers (a 'Ludonarrative Dissonance' trophy awaits players who kill 1,000 enemies). But there's more: the fact that the pirates guarded their secrets with simple tile-rotation puzzles; the tedious crate-seeking; the late increase in bullet-sponge enemies; the fact that the game routinely forces you to try something even though you are scripted to fail — these are all faults in the writing, too. Perhaps the most forgivable faults are those that arise from impossible ambition. In a market, I listen to a long conversation in French between three men looking at their broken-down car. It's a lovely throwaway detail. But it makes the fact that I cannot interject or offer to help them all the stranger.

None of this is intended to discount the experience of people who have sincerely enjoyed the *Uncharted* games as a narrative experience. Nathan and Sam do exchange many funny lines. Nathan does have amazing hair. And seriously, as an exercise in sheer vista-making, *Uncharted 4* is an aesthetic landmark. (That's why I'm still playing it after 16 chapters, for the sheer thrill of seeing what is around the next corner.) But if we are going to praise the writing in high-profile games we ought to pay them the respect of holding them to the same high standards as other genres. *Uncharted 4* is many good things but it is not well-written. I suspect that the fans who become apoplectic and demand a newspaper unpublish a bad review secretly know this too.

Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at [www.stevenpoole.net](http://www.stevenpoole.net)

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NATHAN BROWN

## Big Picture Mode

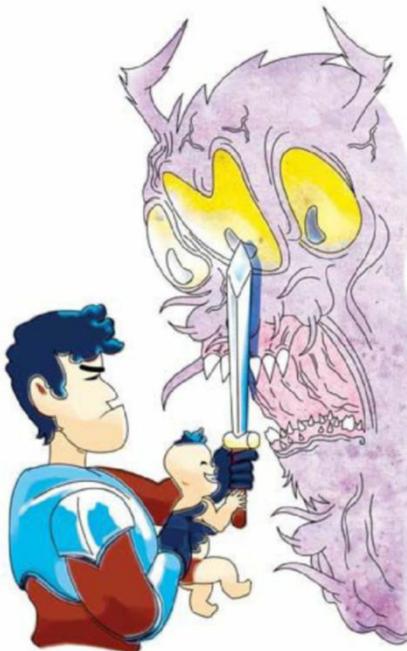
Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

A friend texted me at the weekend, worried that he'd made a huge mistake. His six-year-old was stuck on a boss battle in a Lego game, and was putting off returning to it. In an attempt to convince the kid of the benefits of persistence, my friend started to tell him about *Dark Souls*, and how victory is all the sweeter when it comes after so many defeats. The message got through, but did not exactly have the desired effect. Rather than go back to his Lego, the kid said he wanted to watch his dad play *Dark Souls*.

Hesitantly, my friend loaded up *DSIII*, started a new game, and played through the tutorial, explaining what he was doing at every turn. On the run-up to the tutorial boss, however, he paused. The boss has a second phase, during which he transforms into a huge, horrifying demon-thing. To a veteran of *Souls* and *Bloodborne*, it is a sharp intake of breath, a quickening of the pulse. To a six-year-old? Fuel for weeks' worth of nightmares, and to his parents, struggling for sleep as it is, a headache they just don't need.

So he stopped and turned it off, much to the chagrin of his offspring. We talked about it a bit and agreed that, were it not for the boss transformation, he would have been fine. And maybe the kid would have been all right with it anyway. My first 18-rated film was a dodgy VHS copy of *Robocop* that was passed round the school playground, and I loved it. Some months later, figuring I was ready for anything, I watched *Killer Klowns From Outer Space*. It invaded my dreams relentlessly over the next few months.

But what a child thinks they are ready for is very different from what an adult feels they aren't – and at least my friend's enforcement of the age rating came from an educated position, given the hundreds of hours he's put into the *Souls* games. I asked a few pals how they handle it. Responses varied: one plays *GTA* with his ten-year-old; another played through *Bloodborne* with a toddler on his knee; another would gladly let



I frown at the long line of resigned-looking parents with 12-year-olds at their sides and Black Ops in their hands

his teenagers play an 18-rated game, or anything, in fact, if it meant they'd shut up about *Minecraft* for five minutes. None admitted to paying much heed to age ratings. Considering themselves more informed about games than a ratings board, they're happy to make their own decisions.

Few would blame them for that. Yet every year, without fail, the weekend after a new *Call Of Duty* comes out I will frown at the queue at the games desk in the local supermarket, at the long line of resigned-looking parents with 12-year-olds at their sides and *Black Ops* in their hands. But who

am I to judge? Some of them neither know nor care about what's on the disc – it's just a way of spending £40 to not only avoid a tantrum but also keep a kid occupied for a wet weekend. But no doubt a few of them have done their research. They know exactly what it is. Maybe they've even played it; perhaps they'll play this one together. They know the game and their kid well enough to know that it's suitable, whatever the number on the box says. I feel bad for lumping them in with everyone else in the queue and silently judging them in order that I may feel a little better about my own miserable lot (pointlessly shushing a toddler who's screaming unintelligibly about blueberries).

My son's two-and-a-half, so this isn't a problem yet, but I'm increasingly careful about the things to which he's exposed. He doesn't watch *Street Fighter* tournaments with me, since he's a bit too rough-and-tumble as it is. (I don't know where he gets it from; certainly not me – some of his attacks are wildly unsafe, and he's not cancelling any of them into fireballs.) He's still largely uninterested in games. He'll spend 20 minutes doing doughnuts in *Forza Horizon 2*, and play with iPad jigsaw puzzles and the lightswitches in *Toca Life*, but that's about it.

For now, that's plenty. One friend warned me to keep the pad away from my son's paws for as long as possible, because once he gets hold of it, he won't want to do anything else. That's valuable advice for someone who's often gazed longingly at the DualShock 4 on the coffee table and wished he could while the afternoon away shooting space aliens with a magic shotgun, wondering if this could be the day the kid finally gets it. Not yet: I'll just have to read him *The Tiger Who Came To Tea* for the 15th time since lunch. I'll handle age ratings when the time comes, and make an informed decision then. I'm certain, though, that he won't be watching any horror films until he's left home.

Nathan Brown is Edge's deputy editor. He's much older now and is definitely not still scared of clowns, OK?

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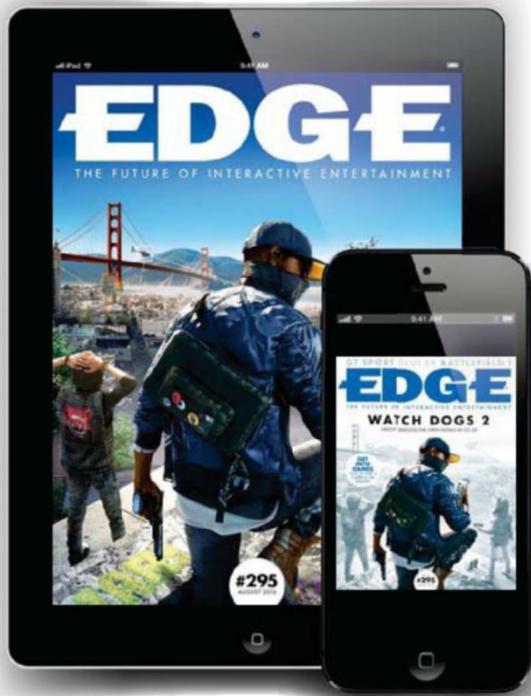
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## THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Hype content

# Stick or shift?

A change is as good as a rest, they say, but it's considerably better if you're a developer hawking the latest instalment of a long-running series and trying to keep players interested enough to pony up for yet another slow grind to the top. With *Gran Turismo Sport* (p36), Polyphony Digital is tackling the problem by shifting focus from its granular tutorials and daunting campaign – although, rest assured, both remain – to an FIA-endorsed online race series. It's a bold move that repositions the notoriously underhand world of online racing to be *GT Sport*'s main selling point, but Polyphony is taking steps to shore up what could be a precarious situation by minimising the riffraff through a levelling system that takes racing etiquette into account.

But while *Grand Turismo* is taking a side step, DICE's latest *Battlefield* (p46) represents something of a volte-face for the series as it leaves *Call Of Duty* to fend for itself in the far future and instead heads back to square one – and then a little farther again, to World War I. The switch from advanced weaponry to more brutish tools should make combat more focused and intimate, dialing down the relentless speed of *Battlefield 4*'s multiplayer to a

more considered pace, but how the absence of jet engines and laser sights will affect the series' characteristic vast scale is another matter.

The *Deus Ex* series leaves at least as much time between entries as *Gran Turismo*, but even this esteemed fiction is turning things on their head. Whereas previous games cast players as a superior, capable interloper, Adam Jensen finds himself ostracised by a society now fearful of augmented humans and kitted up to suppress any cyborgs who step out of line. The shift from invisible assassin to member of a scrutinised minority group is profound, robotic arms or otherwise.

Sequel-making can often seem a little processional, but this month's crop shows there's room for a little risk-taking in even the longest-running, most proven success stories.

## MOST WANTED

### Blackroom PC

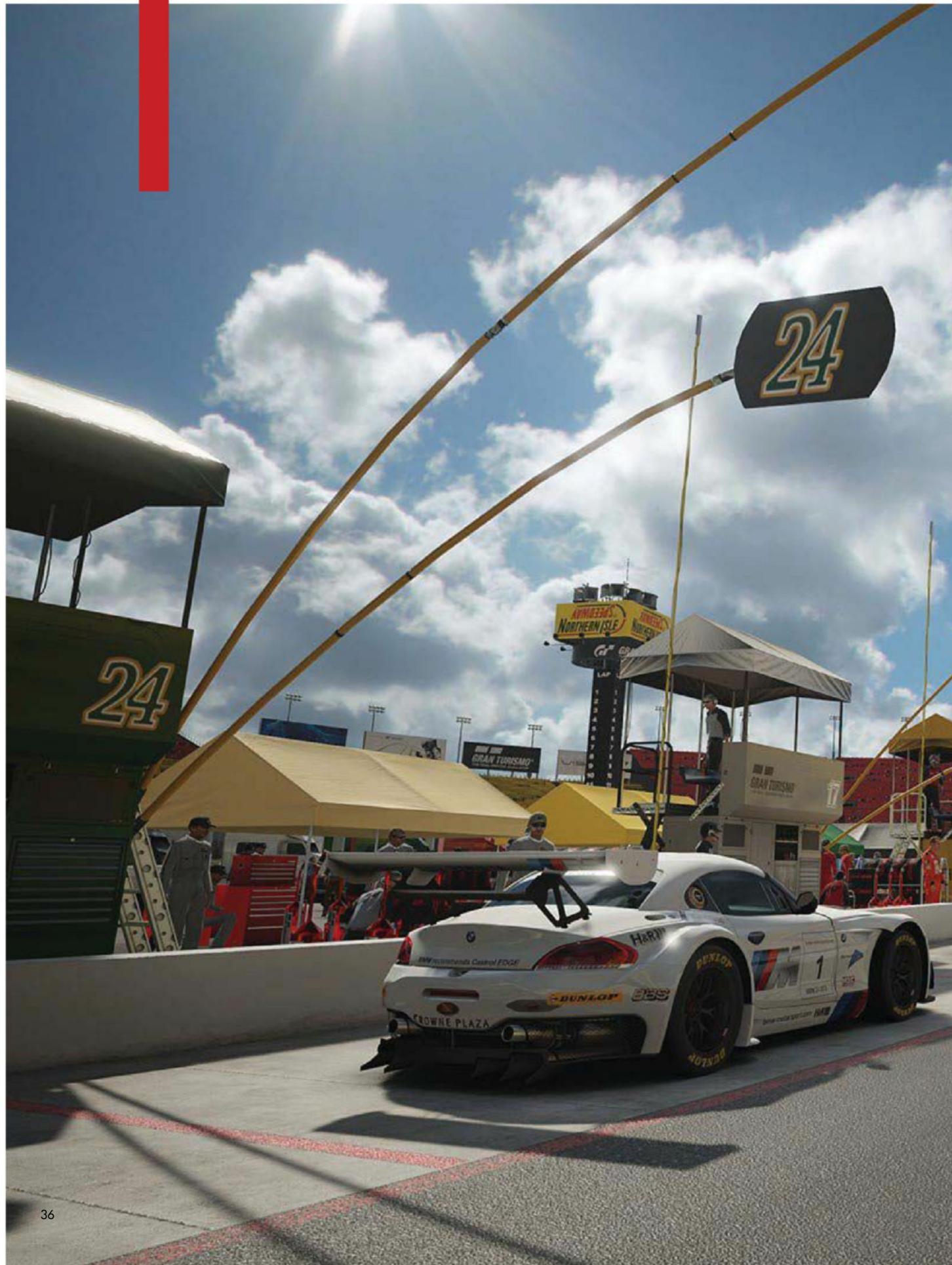
No, we haven't forgotten *Daikatana* – but everyone deserves another chance, right? And in the wake of Id Software's genre-shattering *Doom* refresh, we're more intrigued than ever to see what John Romero, one of the genre's founding fathers, can cook up with today's tools.

### Destiny: Rise Of Iron PS4

Rarely has the term 'most wanted' been so apt. We're not excited specifically about what *Destiny*'s second major expansion contains, though the prospect of a Fallen-focused raid is a thrill. We're simply looking for an excuse to return to the most intoxicating FPS in the universe.

### Horizon Zero Dawn PS4

Guerrilla has pushed its post-apocalyptic robot-dinosaur-hunting adventure back to next year in order to apply a few more layers of polish. We're happy to wait the extra few months if *Horizon* can live up to the promise suggested in its pre-E3 trailer, which had us needing a sit down.



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# GRAN TURISMO SPORT

Polyphony rolls out its most ambitious racer to date, but fails to raise the pulse

<b>Developer</b>	Polyphony Digital
<b>Publisher</b>	SIE
<b>Format</b>	PS4
<b>Origin</b>	Japan
<b>Release</b>	November 16



*Sport's focus on sportsmanship, and the fact it rewards careful drivers, should make playing online an unusually pleasant experience in a genre that often devolves into cheap tactics and aggressive shunting*



## GRAN TURISMO SPORT



*Gran Turismo Sport's* car models are the series' best yet, and look astonishing both on and off the track

Pressed on the existence of *Gran Turismo 7*, and how *Gran Turismo Sport* fits into Polyphony's plans for the next numbered entry in the series, studio CEO and series creator **Kazunori Yamauchi** mischievously avoids the question. "Thinking about it now," he laughs, "we could have called [this one] 7!" A frustratingly vague response, certainly, but given what *Sport* – a project originally touted as a *Prologue*-esque forerunner to 7's headlining act – has become, Yamauchi's change of heart feels entirely reasonable.

The finished game will include 137 "super premium" cars, rebuilt from scratch and all featuring interiors. These will be spread across four groups, which will mix real-world vehicles with *Gran Turismo's* ever-growing collection of fantasy Vision concept collaborations. The contents of this expansive garage can be raced on 27 track layouts – which include the return of dirt courses to the

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***"In this race series our objective is to create lots of winners throughout the world"***

---

series – spread across 19 locations. And there will be 117 events available in a suite of new modes, which includes a reworked campaign, as well as a profoundly expanded multiplayer offering. As appetisers go, it's excessive, which suggests that if *Gran Turismo 7* does emerge, it won't be any time soon.

But while the raw numbers make for enticing reading, it's *Sport's* online offering that proves to be its most striking component. Polyphony has spent the past three years in discussions with the FIA and autosport clubs around the world, and the result is two officially sanctioned online championships (one regional and the other split by manufacturers) in which the best drivers battle in weekend events to claim the top spot. But Yamauchi stresses that *Sport* won't just be trying to find the best *Gran Turismo* driver in the world. "In this race series our objective isn't to find the one single fastest driver, it's actually to create lots of winners throughout the world," he explains. "Divided by age and the areas of residence, we would

like to give out lots of trophies to different winners in different categories."

Every driver will have two ratings attached to their profile. Driver class is a traditional metric that's based on your placings and lap times, but you'll also accrue Sportsmanship points for not barging into other drivers. Both of these will feed into your overall level, meaning fast, skilful and – for the most part – polite drivers will climb the leaderboards. Those drivers, selected based on their performance in daily races, will be eligible to enter Weekend Finals events, which will be broadcast worldwide. In the Nations Cup, semi-finals will be broken down by region before the global final. In the Manufacturers Cup – where players align themselves with a favourite car brand – things are similarly subdivided, with semi-finals taking place as single-manufacturer events. "That broadcast final is going to consist of players matched together who have the highest rating throughout the world," Yamauchi explains. "Maybe like the top 20 or something players."



Polyphony CEO and *GT Sport* producer Kazunori Yamauchi

**Astonishingly, a good** online performance (along with the successful completion of ten racing etiquette lessons) makes you eligible for a FIA *Gran Turismo* Digital License from your local motorsport sanctioning authority. Although it's currently unclear what else you'll need to do to qualify – and it's likely that whatever that is will vary between clubs – once acquired, it will hold the same value as a real-life licence. So far, 22 countries are involved in the programme.

But securing this unprecedented relationship has not been easy. "Car clubs everywhere have [hundreds of years of] history, and those organisations don't move at the speed that we're used to [in the game industry]," Yamauchi says. "When you look at the history of the FIA and autosport clubs, it's almost a miracle that we were able to make this happen. The list of participating nations doesn't include countries such as Japan and Germany yet, but I believe that gradually we'll have more to add to the list."

Clearly, Polyphony is thinking big – Yamauchi describes it as the most innovative entry in the series since the first game – but the fastidious studio is predictably focused on





TOP Tokyo Expressway's tight tunnels make for precarious racing, but only slightly increase GT's sense of speed. RIGHT Brands Hatch exists in so many digital forms now, it's becoming difficult to tell them apart. GT's recreation is predictably faithful



TOP Willow Springs Raceway sits amid a vast desert landscape, its fast corners and wide track allowing for some aggressive driving. ABOVE Lighting is much improved, but it's harder to spot any progress in the case of textures and geometry. MAIN Set in Midwest US, Sport's dirt track winds through the Rockies and reaches the Mexican border



ABOVE The Nürburgring's long, winding raceway provides a thorough workout for both car and driver, and showcases *Sport*'s exemplary handling.

TOP RIGHT *Sport* will still feature an arcade mode alongside its campaign.

MAIN *Sport*'s drivers are the series' liveliest yet, though that's a low bar to clear.

BELOW LEFT Polyphony originally planned to run an open beta for *Sport*, but has now decided to focus its efforts on finishing the game in time for its scheduled November release slot.

BELOW RIGHT *Sport* will be compatible with PSVR from launch, and Yamauchi hopes to offer an experience on par with the game's performance on standard flatscreen displays





## GRAN TURISMO SPORT



the smaller details, too. While the jump to PS4 hasn't resulted in a *DriveClub*-esque visual revolution, it's handsome enough and the new car models are as gorgeous as you'd hope. That the game only looks slightly ahead of *Gran Turismo 6* is more indicative of that game's achievements on prior-gen hardware than any failings on *Sport*'s part. It's hard not to be a little disappointed by the minimal gains, but one area in which things have improved is the lighting. Where previous games in the series have felt a little clinical, here things are warmer and softer with less of the excessive contrast that made interiors impossible to see in certain conditions.

More importantly, the game's AI drivers have been instilled with a little more life too. While saying that they now have personality would be overstating it, *Sport* has dispensed with *Gran Turismo*'s infamously passive moving obstacles, and now cars visibly attack for positions and spin out. Unfortunately, despite Yamauchi's insistence that all of the game's audio has been reworked, we struggle to hear much improvement – cars drone rather than roar, and they feel less potent as a result. More worryingly, there's a distinctly underwhelming sense of speed in the game right now, and even whipping a Veyron around tight Tokyo streets leaves us unruffled. Placed against *Forza 6*, *Project Cars* and *DriveClub*, *Sport* feels underwhelming in this respect.

**Despite these issues,** *Sport* excels when it comes to handling. *Gran Turismo 6*'s mesmerising suspension physics is even more detailed here, and the nuanced way cars communicate and then break traction is a continual joy even when it feels like you're plodding along at 30mph.

We put in laps of familiar returning tracks such as the Nordschleife, Willow Springs and Brands Hatch's Indy and GP configurations, but also get to sample two new stretches of tarmac. The first, Northern Isle Speedway, is a 16-metre-wide, half-mile oval of the kind that only Americans can get excited about, but it does bring something new to the series. The second is a tight, winding urban course called Tokyo Expressway, which visually recalls Route 246, but feels like Special Stage Route 5

thanks to its changes in elevation and tough cornering descents into underpasses.

In an unusual example of the series reacting to its competitors, *Gran Turismo Sport* features a livery editor that looks to be just as powerful and flexible as *Forza*'s and should bolster the sense of ownership you have for your expanding garage. We wonder whether Yamauchi is feeling greater pressure to compete in the presence of the *Gran Turismo* alternatives his work inspired. "We're not aiming to fight for a share of a limited race game market," he tells us. "We're working to expand that market. Before *Gran Turismo 1* came out, the worldwide racing game market was about one million players, so it wasn't that big to begin with. I've always made *Gran Turismo* to try to expand that."

It has also always been about sharing his appreciation of cars, and in this respect *Sport* goes further than ever. There's a redesigned

### ***Yamauchi's passion is obvious, and clearly Sport is being designed from the heart***

Museum mode featuring an in-depth automotive timeline, which places landmarks in motoring history against those in the wider culture. Want to know what was happening in the evolution of cars and motorsport when Edvard Munch painted The Scream? Yamauchi has your back. The old car dealerships section has been replaced with the flatly named Brand Central, which is where you can browse and add cars to your collection, view a repository of detailed specs and facts, and flick through a channel of manufacturer-produced videos. "I redesigned this section because when I created the first *Gran Turismo*, I really meant the car dealerships to be a place where players would discover car brands and manufacturers," Yamauchi explains. "So Brand Central aims to provide a new way to discover cars."

Yamauchi's passion for this project is obvious, and clearly *Sport* is a game being designed from the heart. Its ambitious scope and moreish handling just need to be matched with a little more on-track drama if it's going to get players' blood pumping. ■

### **Snapped axles**

Photo mode has been greatly expanded and is now called Scapes. While you can still take photos mid race, Scapes offers up more than 1,000 photo spots from around the world in which you can place as many cars as you like, in any position you want, and then output the results in 4K. Lighting and spatial info is all calculated in realtime, meaning that real-world photography techniques can be used, while motion-blurring effects look exceptional. It's all so effective, in fact, that the in-game visuals feel a little bit more disappointing as a result.



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## INSIDE

Playdead has finally finished its second game. So have we

<b>Developer</b>	Playdead
<b>Publisher</b>	Microsoft Studios
<b>Format</b>	Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	Denmark
<b>Release</b>	June 29

You'll need some assistance to solve the trickiest tasks *Inside* has to offer – but not all hands are equally helpful



The controls aren't explained at any stage in the game, though you'll soon learn that A is used to jump and B to grab onto objects. Some need more effort before they'll start moving. The feeling of resistance is expertly communicated

**I**t would be a distinctly ungenerous assessment to say that Playdead has spent the past five years remaking *Limbo*. Nevertheless, as a gloomy side-scrolling adventure with a young male lead and a surfeit of puzzles that involve dragging boxes around and clambering on top of them, *Inside* does invite such comparisons.

What's clear from *Inside*'s opening moments is that we've once again been cast into a desolate, faintly dreamlike world. This murkily monochromatic, rain-sodden dystopia quickly establishes a mood of hopelessness, but it's a more expansive place than its predecessor, its barren environments stretching into the distance. You're fixed to a single plane, but you still need to be wary of the background, as darting torchlights swing your way, forcing you to cower behind a rock. Soon, you're no longer hiding but breaking into a sprint that, as in that familiar

### ***Its trick is to make death so horrible that you'll do anything you can to avoid it***

nightmare scenario, never feels quite fast enough. It is if your timing's good – just – but the windows are as narrow as in *Limbo*.

Playdead's debut had its share of close calls, but here they're part of a different tempo: this is a pacier, more energetic opening, with pursuits dovetailing with fidgety stealth, as you edge beneath overhead beams, their shadows keeping you hidden from the harsh glare of giant spotlights slowly shifting right to left and back again. Where before you took tentative steps, careful not to spring another trap, here you're engaged in a staccato rhythm: stop, then sprint. In *Limbo*, you jumped at shadows. Here, you come to fear bright lights and open ground.

And, to a much lesser extent, those damned boxes. *Inside* does find new twists on the kind of physics-powered conundrums we saw in *Limbo*, but there are times when you'll trudge across stretches of ground, dragging a crate to create a stairway to a higher platform. You'll pull levers and depress switches, climb chains and swing on ropes. *Inside*'s best

puzzles are so much smarter, more elaborate, more considered, that it's disappointing when it reverts to dull convention.

In fairness, as with the gentle platforming sequences, Playdead is less interested in challenging you than deepening your connection with the world. Perhaps only Naughty Dog and Nintendo EAD are capable of evoking such a strong sense of physicality. Your nameless avatar is no Nathan Drake – the odd grunt, gasp and pant aside, he's as wordless as the rest of the game – but the expressive animation and exemplary sound design combine to make his ordeal feel real.

**Playdead does peril** remarkably well. Its trick is not to punish you for dying – a restart rarely sets you back more than 30 seconds from where you fell – but to make death so horrible that you'll do anything you can to avoid it. Even in stylised form, the violence will make you wince: a mistimed sprint for cover sees a coiled wire lash out with a noisy snap, striking the boy as if fired from a giant Taser. The brutal suddenness of it is shocking, though there's worse to come: after years on top, *Resident Evil* might finally have a challenger for the medium's most vicious dogs, whose unsettlingly piercing bark has nothing on their bite. And they're not even the most frightening threat you'll face.

It's a world that bristles with menace even in its quieter moments. There may be no pressing danger, but distant rumbles and groans let you know there are much more powerful forces in play. For the most part, *Inside* is happy to let its environments do the talking. But at key moments, musical accompaniment will drift in almost imperceptibly, fading up from the white noise until it can't be ignored, and establishing a mood that's almost stiflingly potent.

Just as you're wondering whether any of the questions the narrative raises are going to be answered, *Inside* takes a hard left turn, concluding its four-hour story with an astonishing extended set-piece that left us gasping. For all its qualities, *Inside*'s first three hours don't quite have the shock of the new that *Limbo* did, but this? This is something thrillingly unexpected. Suddenly, the past half-decade looks like time very well spent. ■



### **Sphere of influence**

Your avatar is a capable enough swimmer, albeit with a very limited lung capacity, forcing you to the surface before you've had the chance to explore below water. Some of *Inside*'s more leisurely sequences, however, see you clamber inside a bathysphere, equipped with a torchlight to illuminate the gloom; what little natural light filters through to ground level rarely stretches beneath the surface. As you glide through the passageways of a hulking cadaver – either a sunken ship or a giant undersea craft – you can crank your vehicle's levers for a burst of speed that can smash through barricaded doors or widen cracks in the hull. Doing so means your light is dimmed for a brief period, but surely that can't cause any problems. Can it?



TOP The colder you enter *Inside*'s world, the better. We've tried to tread lightly here, but almost any information is too much.

RIGHT The story touches on themes of death, rebirth and transhumanism, though any deeper meaning will likely only be teased out through multiple playthroughs and fevered discussion with other players



TOP We assure you that *Inside* does get more colourful. At least a little. ABOVE CENTRE Optional puzzles are squirrelled away or require some delicate manoeuvring to reach. They're more elaborate or challenging – often both – than most of the challenges on the critical path, but you'll earn an Achievement if you go the distance.

ABOVE See that building in the distance? You probably won't want to go there.

MAIN Playdead rarely allows you to relax your guard. You'll welcome the embrace of water at first but by the time you've exited the bathysphere you'll be glad to be back on dry land

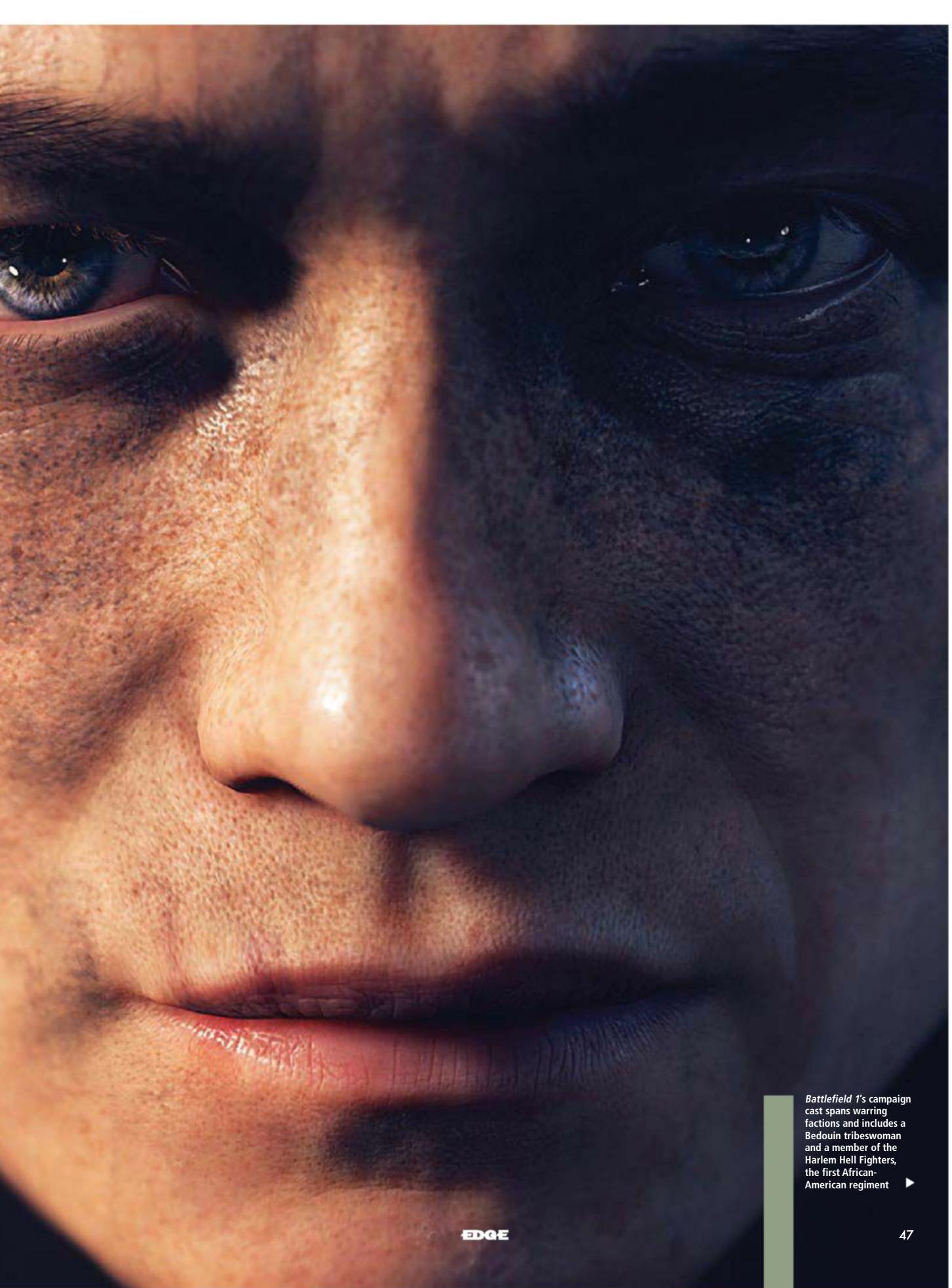


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## BATTLEFIELD 1

The past remains the future

<b>Developer</b>	DICE
<b>Publisher</b>	EA
<b>Format</b>	PC, PS4, Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	Sweden
<b>Release</b>	October 21



*Battlefield 1's* campaign cast spans warring factions and includes a Bedouin tribeswoman and a member of the Harlem Hell Fighters, the first African-American regiment ►



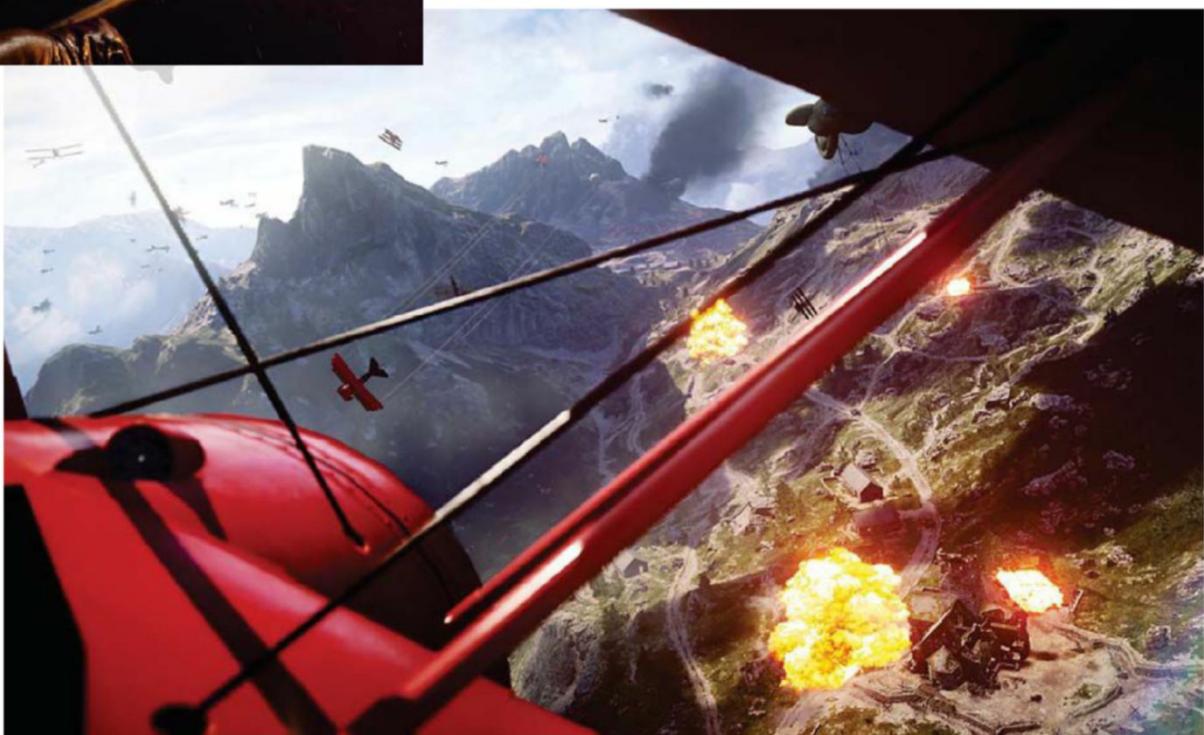
ABOVE The rapidly evolving technology of the Great War is captured in *Battlefield 1*'s mix of new-fangled devices such as flamethrowers and brutish, almost medieval melee and armour items.

TOP RIGHT The British Mark tanks have side-mounted cannons, rather than a single 360-degree-revolving turret. It's likely that close coordination between two or more players will be crucial to their use.

MAIN With heat-seeking missiles and auto-aiming cannons several decades away, you'll need a steady aim indeed to prevail as a fighter ace. There should be parachutes, at least.

BELOW LEFT Drawing on the technical innovations of *Star Wars Battlefront*, DICE's art department has brought a romantic sense of scale to a war often depicted as unrelentingly claustrophobic.

BELOW RIGHT The game's horses are likely to see plenty of service in YouTube Let's Play videos, even if they prove highly ineffective against tanks and artillery.



**C**an *Battlefield 1* do WWI justice? Going by DICE's previous efforts, probably not. Existing *Battlefield* campaigns are, after all, little more than giddy package tours of environments plucked from history books or news reels, and the new game's bizarrely brostep-driven reveal footage is cut from much the same cloth.

DICE claims that the game will explore aspects of the war beyond the butchered landscape of the Western Front, since the multiple-protagonist plot will take players to the Arabian desert and the Italian Alps. But the point of all this is simply to unlock eye-catching weapons and vehicles – including spiked maces, Bedouin cavalry sabres, and primitive flamethrowers alongside British Mark tanks with their rhomboid caterpillar tracks, and brightly painted Bristol biplanes – for the multiplayer core.

**T**here are, at least, signs that all this new hardware will change *Battlefield*'s multiplayer for the better. Of particular note is the aerial combat, which is necessarily driven more by dexterity than firepower. There are no lock-ons or heat-seeking missiles, and the propeller-powered planes of the day are considerably slower than the jets of *Battlefield 4*, which should make for longer dogfights and more involved air-to-ground combat. Aircraft classes will run the gamut from brittle interceptors to more adaptable vehicles with a gunner seat, to looming German zeppelins that conjure up memories of the flying fortresses in *Battlefield 2142*'s Titan mode. Whether the latter are pilotable remains to be seen, but they're an obvious staging ground for a climactic campaign chapter.

The British and German tanks are at the heavier end of the spectrum, able to overwhelm but not outrun smaller French vehicles equipped with swivelling top-mounted turrets. Needless to say, they won't be as unreliable or uncomfortable as the earliest Allied models in northern France – sluggish deathtraps that were deployed as much to bulldoze a path through No Man's Land as to take out opposing forces.

DICE's long love affair with terrain deformation is a good match for records of battle on the Western Front, but we won't,

it seems, be able to actually dig our own trench networks. The developer has, however, seized the chance to better distinguish the player's means of deforming said terrain. You'll need certain melee weapons to clear obstacles – a bayonet is the showier option, but you might prefer a trench shovel if you're looking to smash down a dugout door. At the other end of the spectrum, there's a battleship that can be commandeered to bombard coastal fortifications, rending soil and masonry apart till silenced by vengeful pilots.

The familiar and celebrated class structure returns, albeit with a few adjustments. As always, the Scout dominates at range, but snipers must do without FPS gizmos such as infrared scopes and motion detectors. In place of *Battlefield 4*'s fearsomely adaptable Engineer, the Assault carries high explosives to deal with mobile armour while the Support's light machine-gun packs a punch

### **DICE has an opportunity, perhaps even a duty, to set an intelligent example for peers**

against infantry. It's a sensible enough feature set, though hardly earth-shattering.

You might ask why *Battlefield 1* needs to justify its choice of setting, when so many other games based on real-life conflicts are granted a pass. There's definitely an element of hypocrisy to complaints that the developer is glamorising bloodshed, but as the first major studio to tackle the period in years, DICE has an opportunity, perhaps even a duty, to set an intelligent example for peers.

The Great War was unprecedented in terms of more than sheer bodycount or destruction. The emerging technologies of cinema and war photography exposed civilians to scenes of carnage hitherto cloaked in propaganda (which *Battlefield*'s 'Early Enlister' preorder DLC ironically evokes). The phenomenon of shellshock, meanwhile, forced an important re-examination of attitudes to psychological wellbeing. We'll find out in October if it's all being reduced to a matter of vehicle classes and capture points amid brain-liquifying dubstep remixes. ■



### **Called out**

The initial pitch for *Battlefield 1* was "absolutely rejected" by EA Studios' executive vice president Patrick Söderlund, who worried that players wouldn't take to the time period. In reality, *Battlefield 1*'s premise has earned it an early lead over Activision's futuristic *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, whose gameplay reveal trailer became the most disliked in YouTube history. *Infinite Warfare* will ship with a remaster of *Modern Warfare*, and perhaps both Activision and EA feel that the future-shooter bubble is about to burst, much as the arrival of *Titanfall* and *Advanced Warfare* previously signalled each publisher's disenchantment with present-day settings.





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## DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

Adam Jensen visits Prague, and is an outsider in more ways than one

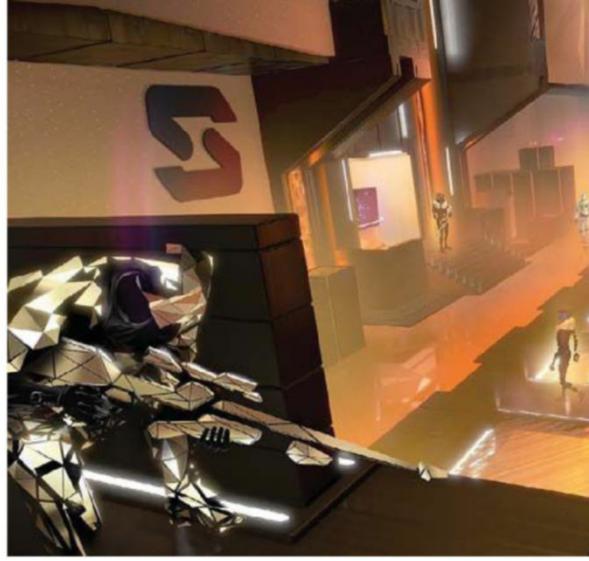
Developer  
Eidos Montreal  
Publisher  
Square Enix  
Format  
PC, PS4, Xbox One  
Origin  
Canada  
Release  
August 23

Eidos Montreal describes the segregation of augmented people in its world as a 'mechanical apartheid', which has generated some debate about whether using such a loaded term is in good taste





## DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED



The city hubs of *Human Revolution* were atmospheric, but limited spaces. A handful of narrow streets connected to a central area, sparsely populated with citizens. But *Mankind Divided*'s Prague, the new home of returning hero Adam Jensen, is much more convincing. The Czech Republic's capital is at the heart of an upswell of anti-augmentation sentiment in Eidos Montreal's dystopian vision of the future, yet it's an augmented city itself. The old, baroque architecture is retrofitted with stark, brutalist modern structures, holographic billboards, and monorails. And, for the first time in the series, we get to explore one of these futuristic cities during daylight hours.

An event in the previous game drove augmented people to violent insanity, resulting in the deaths of 50 million people. Unsurprisingly, in the wake of this so-called 'Aug Event', anyone with augmentations – whether it's a mechanical arm or an ocular implant – is now viewed with fear and mistrust. It seems a strange place for the heavily augmented Jensen to relocate to,

but Prague is home to the HQ of Task Force 29, the Interpol-funded counter-terrorism unit that now employs him. However, even with what a nosy police officer calls an "orange stamp" on his papers, allowing him to move more freely than other augmented people, the segregation in the city still affects Jensen, and by association you, directly.

**A military checkpoint** on a cobbled street littered with fallen autumn leaves is being watched carefully by armed soldiers. There are two queues: one reserved for 'naturals' and the other for augmented citizens. Were Jensen, even with his special status, to try to go through the naturals' entrance, the police would open fire. This feeling of being an outsider, of being scrutinised wherever you go, gives the game a different feel to its predecessor. There was a degree of fear around augmentations in *Human Revolution*'s world, bubbling away under the surface, but now the pot is boiling over. The officer who asks for Jensen's papers is brusque and impolite, sneering when they

You're now able to initiate takedowns from cover, grabbing an enemy and swiftly pulling them behind it to hide the body. Whether you kill or merely subdue them is, of course, your call





LEFT The heavy police presence in Prague makes moving around the city difficult. Fortunately, Jensen's cloak augmentation, which allows him to turn invisible briefly, returns from the previous game



TOP LEFT Breach is a standalone mode that sees you, a hacker, infiltrating computer networks and stealing data. Arenas are small and focused.

ABOVE Lockdowns will trigger in Breach, giving you a short amount of time to escape with the stolen data. If you're brave, you can try to grab a few more pieces as you dash to the exit

check out, almost as if she was eager for the chance to open fire. With 50 million dead, there's every chance someone she loved was killed by someone like you.

Another problem for augmented people is finding a source of neuropyzne, a drug that stops their body rejecting their prosthetics and implants. The wealthy could buy it from LIMB clinics before the Aug Event, but now those are few and far between – and there are none at all in Prague. Augmentations are also prone to breaking down because they are, at this point in *Deus Ex*'s timeline, still an emerging technology. Solving this problem is the basis of an early side mission. Jensen has a contact, an underground augmentation expert called Václav Koller, who can supply him with neuropyzne and perform repairs. But the eccentric Koller, whose lab coat is covered in punk patches and metal studs, owes some gangsters money and can't help you until you help him.

Modifiers such as extra weapon damage and easier hacking are unlocked as you play Breach, but only last for a single level. They're represented as cards, tapping into the current popularity of CCGs

Koller's lab is hidden beneath a bookshop, and when Jensen arrives he activates his smart-vision augmentation and sees the shimmering red silhouettes of two-dozen gangsters inside and out. This being a *Deus Ex* game, how you deal with this situation is up to you. Among Jensen's new tricks is the ability to launch nanoblades from his forearm and pin enemies to walls, and he has a gun-arm that can stun enemies from afar. The shop has multiple routes to the lab, a network of vents to skulls through, and locked doors that can be hacked or bypassed by locating the code. Jensen flits between cover, using gas grenades and silent takedowns to quietly deal with the gangsters. When the area is clear, he locates the secret entrance to Koller's lab, which is hidden behind a bookcase.

Building detailed, lived-in worlds has always been one of Eidos Montreal's greatest

## A degree of fear was bubbling away under the surface, but now the pot is boiling over

strengths, and a big part of *Human Revolution*'s visual identity was its clutter. The new game looks to take this even further: the lab is strewn with hundreds of old rusting augmentations, snaking cables, and buzzing computers. A benchmark tool is being released for the PC version, which will also give you the opportunity to step into this, and other environments, in virtual reality.

Koller greets Jensen, thanking him for his help, and our demo ends. So far, *Mankind Divided* feels like an iteration on *Human Revolution* rather than something entirely new, so it hits the target its creator set for itself when work began. Eidos Montreal promises livelier cities, more meaningful choices, better firstperson combat, and richer characters. From what we've seen of the Prague hub, it's on the right track. ■



## Breach and clear

A mode called Breach will sit alongside the story. It takes the combat, stealth, and hacking from the main game and gives it, in Eidos Montreal's words, "an arcade twist". You choose from a number of small challenges and the goal is to avoid or attack enemies and retrieve data. It all takes place in a virtual world and you can unlock modifiers that grant you buffs and special abilities, which open like *Hearthstone* card packs. It's a curious addition, seemingly designed to keep people playing after the credits roll. A progression system and leaderboards to compare scores with friends reinforce this. It's a nice idea, with a vivid art style of fractured polygons, but we're not sure yet what it'll add to the overall package.



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# MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS

The furriest cut is the deepest

Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Nintendo
Format	3DS
Origin	Japan
Release	July 15

**M**onster Hunter Generations producer **Shintaro Kojima** has a ritual every time a new game in the series is released. "I do this thing with a few buddies of mine," he tells us, "where we draw straws and we have to use a certain weapon until we've finished all of the solo content in the game." This time around he picked out the sword and shield. But while he's remained faithful to his choice, he's still been able to mix things up a bit, thanks to the selection of four different hunting styles. "I'm a little bit skittish," he admits. "I tend to get sick of one style and move onto another. I started with Aerial, then I tried Striker, and after that I gave Adept a go." When he fancied a return to a more traditional approach, he switched back to Guild style. "It felt comfortable," he says. "Like a favourite jacket." Perhaps not that comfortable, however. "After a while, I was pining for the special abilities of the Aerial [style] again, so I've come full circle."

It is, in some respects, the kind of diplomatic answer you'd expect of a man keen to sell all aspects of his game. Series producer **Ryozo Tsujimoto**, however, has no such qualms about declaring a personal favourite. "I'm completely monogamous to the hammer," he says. "And I use the Aerial style." His translator breaks off briefly to confirm the answer. "He showed us the data screen where

it tells you how many times you've used each weapon," he tells us. "It was just hammer all the way, for thousands of hours." Tsujimoto, aware his secret has been revealed, lets out a childlike giggle and nods enthusiastically.

**In other words**, if you have any hunting baggage coming into *Generations*, you'll be well catered for. And for some players, that's quite a lot of baggage: the series has just reached its 12th anniversary, after all. Once it had passed the ten-year milestone, Tsujimoto says that the focus of the development team was to mark it with some kind of celebration. "Our kickoff point for this title was a special event feeling, like a festival to celebrate *Monster Hunter* and its history thus far," he explains. "With that in mind, we looked back at the series and how players have always brought their own unique playstyles to the game, and we wanted to make that a concrete gameplay aspect by introducing these four selectable hunting styles."

These styles represent a significant adjustment to the game's fundamentals, not just offering a greater degree of flexibility for the lone hunter, but also allowing teams to combine skills in unusual ways. The Aerial style, for example, allows you to use monsters as a springboard, but you can also vault off your fellow hunter. For any long-running ▶



FROM TOP *Monster Hunter Generations* producer Shintaro Kojima; series producer Ryozo Tsujimoto





Producer Shintaro Kojima says that the four signature monsters aren't necessarily a perfect fit for individual hunting styles, though "each monster has a certain quality, so by extension these designs and behaviours may be easier to deal with using a certain style"

MONSTER HUNTER  
GENERATIONS

series, it's rare to see such a substantial change this far down the line – which may explain why there are so many familiar elements from past games. *Generations* has four new signature beasts, but there are plenty of old faces, too. Only one of its four village hubs is new, with the other three taken from earlier entries, dusted off and retouched. Similarly, many of the areas in which you'll battle will be instantly recognisable to old hands. Is Capcom concerned about changing too much at once?

"We didn't so much include the old stuff for that reason," Kojima says. "It's more about celebrating the series' history and having some fan service for people who've been with the series [a while], to give them warm nostalgic feelings when they recognise some of the returning elements. But as you mention, with so many gameplay changes, veteran hunters might be concerned that it's no longer the game they know and love, so for that reason the default Guild style is essentially the *Monster Hunter* they're already comfortable with."

**That said,** in the six months since the game's Japanese launch, it's not the Guild style that's dominating; rather, it's the Aerial style that has become the most popular among Japanese hunters. It seems the easiest to grasp of the four, allowing you to attack monsters from above or to mount them without having to climb to higher ground. Perhaps, we suggest, it may also have something to do with the popularity of the Insect Glaive in *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate*, which had been the only weapon to let you pull off leaping attacks from a standing start. "Yeah, it could be related to that," Tsujimoto says. "It's satisfying to use, and it's easy to understand how you might work it into your [battle] strategy, so it's very fun to work with."

Interestingly, however, as time has passed, the balance of power has begun to shift. Since launch, Capcom has been tracking its hunters' progress, and surveying players for their preferred approach. "Right after the game launched, Aerial style was way ahead of the pack," Tsujimoto adds. "But the Adept style has crept up in popularity. It's taken more time to grow because it's quite a tricky style

to use, and demands precise timing to pull off the instant attacks afterwards. Aerial style is still the most popular, but now there isn't so much of an absolute majority."

If there's one feature on which most Japanese players seem to agree, it's the return of Nargacuga, back for the first time since 2008's *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*. Given this was the point at which the series reached critical mass – it hit a million sales within its first week – is the beast's popularity, we wonder, down to its iconic status for a particular generation of hunters? "I think you've hit the nail on the head," Tsujimoto nods. "It has this speedy, streamlined, ninja-like quality to it, and it was featured at a point when the series was at a turning point in terms of popularity, and that meant lots of people are familiar with it. And we had a lot of fan feedback saying they'd love to see it return. It's one of those monsters that seems

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**"Aerial style is still the most popular, but now there isn't so much of an absolute majority"**

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to have everything! People like the way it moves, its behaviour, and I think it means a great deal to a lot of players."

Yet if it sounds like Capcom is only preaching to the converted, *Generations* has made its biggest tilt at a wider audience to date with the simplified Prowler mode, which lets you take control of a Felyne hunter. With no stamina gauge and the ability to heal and gather without tools, it offers a much gentler learning curve for beginners. "As with any *Monster Hunter* title, we really wanted to have new hunters join the pack," Kojima says. "*Monster Hunter* is all about observing monsters, reading their behaviour, finding tells, and then learning how to use those to your advantage. If you're getting targeted a lot and having to manage your items, your stamina and so forth, it can be overwhelming for someone who isn't used to the game yet. So they can take the Prowler out for a spin and it will give them a chance to really study the art of monster hunting." He smiles. "And, of course, everyone loves cute cats." ■



**The hunt begins**

Which comes first: the design of a monster, or the mechanics of the encounter? The answer, it turns out, depends on who proposed it. "We have both designers and planners," Tsujimoto tells us. "Planners work more on the behaviours and the systems, so if a planner proposes a monster design then it probably starts with what it'll do, and then the designers will work on how it looks, and vice versa. So we approach it from every angle." Game flow is also an important consideration: the game may benefit from a specific monster at a certain stage, and the team will find something to fit that slot. And sometimes the pitch is much simpler, as with signature beast Glavenus: "Let's do a dinosaur monster with a really big tail like a sword!" Tsujimoto grins.





TOP Depending on where they fit along the game's natural path of progression, older monsters such as Nargacuga will usually require some design tweaks, Kojima explains. "We have to bring it up to speed, so to speak, on what hunters can do nowadays."

RIGHT There are already lots of armour sets, but Capcom will be releasing more as DLC, with *Ghosts 'N' Goblins*, *Fire Emblem* and *Okami* tie-ins among the crossovers. BELOW Astalos can be found in Verdant Hills, a remake of the first and second generation setting known as Forest and Hills



TOP Not all creatures will be able to cope well with the new styles on offer. "You have to give players some monsters that are essentially punching bags for them to get to grips with the mechanics," Kojima says.

ABOVE CENTRE The development team initially had the impression that Adept would be considered the most "hardcore" of the hunting styles because it demands such precision.

ABOVE In practice, Adept has proven to be popular among users of the noisier weapons who tend to get targeted more frequently by monsters. "It's opened up the possibility for gunners to avoid dying quite so much during quests," Kojima says



Developer/  
publisher  
Facepunch Studios  
Format PC  
Origin UK  
Release 2017



## B E F O R E

Anything but a Stone Age simulation

**T**here's something of the caveman about Bill Lowe, the lead developer of *Before*. The long, unkempt hair and shaggy beard bear a striking resemblance to the digital cave people he's showing us on screen. But beneath the wild exterior lies a fiercely thoughtful individual determined to create something that challenges current gaming wisdom.

*Before*, as Lowe terms it, is a "strategy/survival simulator" set in an imagined Stone Age, the kind *Far Cry Primal* took advantage of earlier this year and *Wild* will use next. It follows a six-person tribe and the tribulations of life in a pseudo-neolithic setting. It's about guiding this group through the most basic of human needs – food and shelter – but it's also about the social dynamics that arise out of such a situation, and the big life-changing moments they go through: birth, death and, importantly, the discovery of expression.

Tribe members will congratulate each other if everything's going well, but things can quickly turn sour if the camp's fortunes suffer

If it all sounds a bit *The Sims*, it shouldn't be surprising. Lowe cites Maxis's seminal life sim as a key influence in *Before*'s design, but with an important caveat. "I love the mechanics in *The Sims*, and I love the social side, but I just got really sick of simulating capitalism," he tells us. "That's what I do every day – buy food and get a job." Lowe also references *Black & White*, the 2001 god simulator from recently defunct Lionhead Studios. "What I love about that game is that it's kind of obtuse and opaque. You're not really aware of the mechanics; you're not being fed numbers and stats." Lowe also cites modern Roguelikes as a key influence: here, too, death is permanent. It might come from a pack of wolves ravaging your camp, or a sudden turn of bad weather.

Drama, though, won't just be hewn from difficulty. Your tribe's subsequent rituals and



ABOVE CENTRE Lowe cites Timothy J Reynolds as a key influence in the aesthetic of *Before*. Don't let the low-poly visuals fool you, though – there's much beauty to be found in the world.

ABOVE *Before*'s day and night cycle is an integral part of gameplay. The cold poses a risk to the tribe's health, while nocturnal animals ensure the tribe must have someone keep watch





LEFT Mammoths behave realistically by moving in herds and sticking to grassy plains. Hunting them requires teamwork and coordination that only an experienced tribe will be able to manage. Lone wolves need not apply



TOP LEFT Confidence is key to activities such as hunting. Repeated failure to land a kill will make your tribe less likely to carry out an activity, with potentially catastrophic results.  
ABOVE Different biomes offer varying environmental challenges to your tribe but also affect their culture. Body markings, music and buildings are all specific to land type and climate

ceremonies, and emotional response to these highly charged moments, will drive home both their grief and yours. "Say you put 12 hours into a singleplayer game and your leader dies – that should be a big moment for you, and you should recognise that in the funeral ritual." Lowe wants to inject meaning back into game deaths, beyond the mere loss of progress.

**This connection with** your tribe is born, in part, from their own behavioural idiosyncrasies, specific to each player's game, and the selection of traits at the outset is a big part of this. Strength is a key attribute, vital to the manual labour of the time, but there are other more fuzzy traits on show, too: brave, moody, and night owl stand out for the potential psychological complexity they offer. These characteristics are hereditary, passed on through the generations. But personalities merely tilt characters towards certain types of behaviour; they don't provide concrete outcomes. In early parts of the game your tribe will still be reliant on player direction, a kind of "collective consciousness", as Lowe jokingly terms it. "We want you to feel you're

Bears provide a threat not only to your tribe but to other animals thanks to the game's carefully designed ecological system



teaching by osmosis," he says. "By just being in the world and interacting with things, you're kind of shaping how they behave."

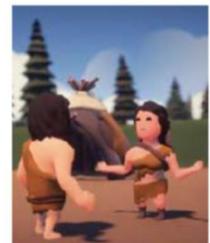
The chunky, cartoon look of *Before* belies a complexity that's working overtime under the hood. Beneath the rolling vistas and delicate morning light is a labyrinth of densely woven AI code giving life to the actions, motivations, wants and desires of the tribespeople. Indeed, the bulk of development since work began professionally in September 2014 has been spent on AI systems. Lowe admits to having been a novice in this field prior to production. "It's been a real journey," he says. "I think it's really changed me as a person. I think

**"It's that thing about people having a role in their society, which we probably lack now"**

differently. I compartmentalise; I'm more logical and kind of cold."

But if *Before*'s development has made Lowe more clinical in how he approaches his own life, it's all in aid of creating the most believable, and, yes, human characters possible. There's a warmth that permeates the game, be it the morning yawn and stretch of one tribe member, or the sight of children learning to play with one another. And it's discernible in Lowe's reasoning for choosing the game's prehistoric setting, if only after a little coaxing. "I guess it's that thing about people having a role in their society and their community, which we probably lack now," he says. "Also, I just think it looks nice."

As our time with *Before* draws to a close, the tribe are gathering around the campfire to cook. The red of the flames slowly dissipates into the dark of the wilderness and their survival, at least for now, seems assured. It's an intimate moment and quietly celebratory, pointing towards a togetherness few games try, let alone prove able, to muster. ■



## Tribal drums

Prior to *Before*'s concept being locked down, it started out as a music game. That idea was scrapped but it retains a strong musical identity. Composer Jenny Minton has worked with Lowe since the project's early days, before any of *Before*'s systems were in place. Now she's working with the team to design the audio elements that will constitute your tribe's ritualistic and ceremonial behaviour, drawing on the polyphonic singing of African pygmy tribes as well as Mongolian throat singing. Coupled with expressive dancing, these moments will punctuate the game's sometimes placid stretches with outbursts of emotion, giving the player more insight into the tribe's wellbeing.

Developer/publisher  
Hollow Pond  
Format PC, PS4  
Origin UK  
Release 2017



## LOOT RASCALS

Hohokum alumni set out on a Roguelike adventure

The most recent game from Hollow Ponds co-founder Ricky Haggatt – and, indeed, many of the people working with him at his new studio – was *Hohokum*, a borderless musing about freedom, self-expression and unhurried experimentation. So it's fair to say that the last thing we expected to see in his latest project was a hex grid. But on closer inspection, *Loot Rascals* isn't as rigidly defined as those hexagons suggest.

For starters, while this procedurally generated Roguelike is technically turn-based, you're still able to gad around freely, making time wind on and the world rapidly switch between day and night. Enemies, too, will only

### Some more powerful enemies switch between strong and weak forms with every move

move when you do, but some of them are gifted an unnerving turn of speed when you're dashing about the map. If you find yourself on the same hex as an enemy, then a fight to the death will automatically play out.

Whether or not you emerge victorious depends on your attack and defence rating, which is determined by the Loot Chips you have equipped in your spacesuit. You'll have a random selection to begin with, and most enemies will drop more on death. Tapping triangle switches from the top-down grid view to inside your helmet, and from here you can arrange collected chips on a 5x2 board. The chips come in blue and orange varieties (defence and attack, respectively), and while they have illustrations and evocative names – such as Hydra Putter and Ablative Armband – their only real function is to boost your stats.

An additional layer of strategy comes in the form of special conditions on certain cards. For example, a card might gain value if it's placed below another card of the same colour, in a particular row or if it's the only

card of its type equipped. Once you've got enough chips it becomes a mini-puzzle ensuring you have everything arranged in the most efficient and powerful way. Some chips can be flipped between orange and blue states; others are sticky and cannot be rearranged once placed; and still more can be laid on top of existing cards to bestow state changes, such as fire or filth, and unlock special attacks.

These abilities, which include a freeze ray and teleportation, are deployed by aiming with the right stick and then tapping R1. You get one shot and must charge the meter again by revealing more of the map or finding a one-shot-charge tile to stand on. Combat is deepened by enemies' strong ties to the time of day – some are nocturnal, others diurnal – and whether their first move in an encounter is to defend or attack will depend on whether it's the sun or the moon that's illuminating the battlefield. Some larger, more powerful enemies switch between strong and weak forms with every move, so you'll have to judge when to move onto the hex they occupy.

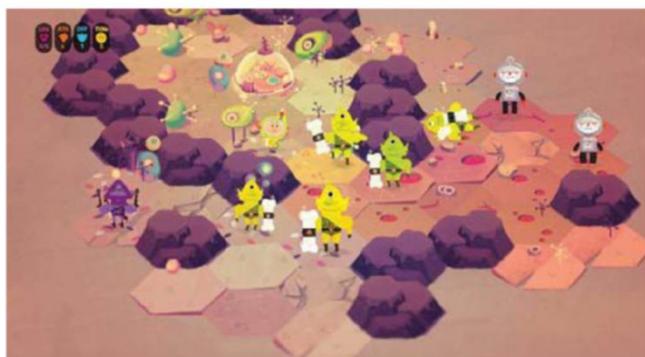
If you get it wrong and are slain, the wily victor will pick over your corpse and steal a Loot Chip, sending it to a random player's game online. When you defeat the stronger enemies in your own game, they'll drop a high-level chip looted from another player and you then have to decide whether to keep hold of it or send it back. Doing the latter means you could encounter that player's hologram which will tag along and help for a time. If you keep it, the same hologram may well be hostile when you run into it.

Whether you choose benevolence or greed, you'll also have to decide which chips to get rid of in return for gold coins – exchangeable at each level's home base for health, and the only way to recover from damage. Even at this early stage, the result of all these systems is a pacy, addictive spin on the Roguelike genre, and one that feels every bit as accommodating as *Hohokum*. ■



### Spout off

The game begins as you approach the site of a newly built outer-space holiday camp in order to make repairs. Woken from hypersleep by Genie – a Scottish holographic AI assistant who vehemently denies that his head looks anything like a teapot – you encounter a strange anomaly on approach and end up crash-landing on a hostile alien planet. The colourful world and its bizarre menagerie of aggressive creatures has been brought to life by a pair of artists whose résumés include Adventure Time and Spry Fox's *Road Not Taken* and *Alphabear*.



TOP It's surprisingly easy to get swarmed by large groups of enemies, limiting your options for a hasty retreat. RIGHT The procedurally generated maps are finite, and each contains an exit portal that will whisk you away to the next one



TOP Fire Bunnies, once killed, give you a flaming chip with which you can augment one of your existing Loot Chips. ABOVE Your collection of Loot Chips grows quickly, and careful management is essential in order to prevail against ever tougher foes. MAIN The game's combat system divides your defence rating by your opponent's power. If the result is more than one, you'll lose that much health. However, if it's less than one, then that figure is the percentage chance you'll take one hit



## ROUNDUP

### THE KING OF FIGHTERS XIV

Developer SNK Publisher Deep Silver Format PS4 Origin Japan Release August 26



Generally speaking, the one-on-one fighter has chiselled deeper into its niche of late. Impenetrable complexity isn't doing the numbers, however, so it's no surprise to see SNK follow its peers in casting its net wider, with a simple Rush Combo mechanic designed to accommodate newcomers. Existing fans will likely be pleased that *KOFXIII*'s Hyper Drive system has been replaced by a refined version of previous entries' Max Mode, though purists may balk at a shift to 3D rendering. Deep Silver is a surprising choice of publishing partner; hopefully, the game's European marketing campaign hits the appropriate notes for a storied series.

### SAURIAN

Developer/publisher Urvogel Games Format PC Origin US Release January



Not, alas, a narrative adventure about a fighting game expert, but a dinosaur survival sim made with admirable scientific rigour. With input from palaeontologists, this small team has recreated a chunk of the Hell Creek Formation, a kind of ground zero for fossils in South Dakota. You'll guide your chosen beast from birth to maturity, using each species' strengths to avoid predators, hunt, court and breed. Now, if only we could talk to these creatures...

### THIMBLEWEED PARK

Developer/publisher Terrible Toybox

Format Android, iOS, PC, Xbox One Origin US Release January



When Disney withdrew from game development, Ron Gilbert requested the rights to *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island*. Their spirit lives on in this throwback to Gilbert's LucasArts heyday: everything from its retro aesthetic to its many hidden gags suggests a classic adventure for contemporary times.

### ESCAPE FROM TARKOV

Developer/publisher Battlestate Games

Format PC Origin Russia Release 2016



Melding elements of FPS and survival sim with MMOG features, this game is perhaps more simply – albeit reductively – described as a *STALKER*-like. Playing as a mercenary in a conflict-ravaged city sandbox may be a familiar sensation, but the formidable level of customisation is enticingly new.

### SYBERIA III

Developer/publisher Microids

Format Mobile, PC, PS4, Xbox One Origin France Release Dec 1



A mere 12 years on from its predecessor, the third chapter of intrepid lawyer Kate Walker's wintry adventures will finally be with us before the year is out. An evidently bigger budget has resulted in significantly higher production values, with vastly improved animation and cinematic framing.



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# #295

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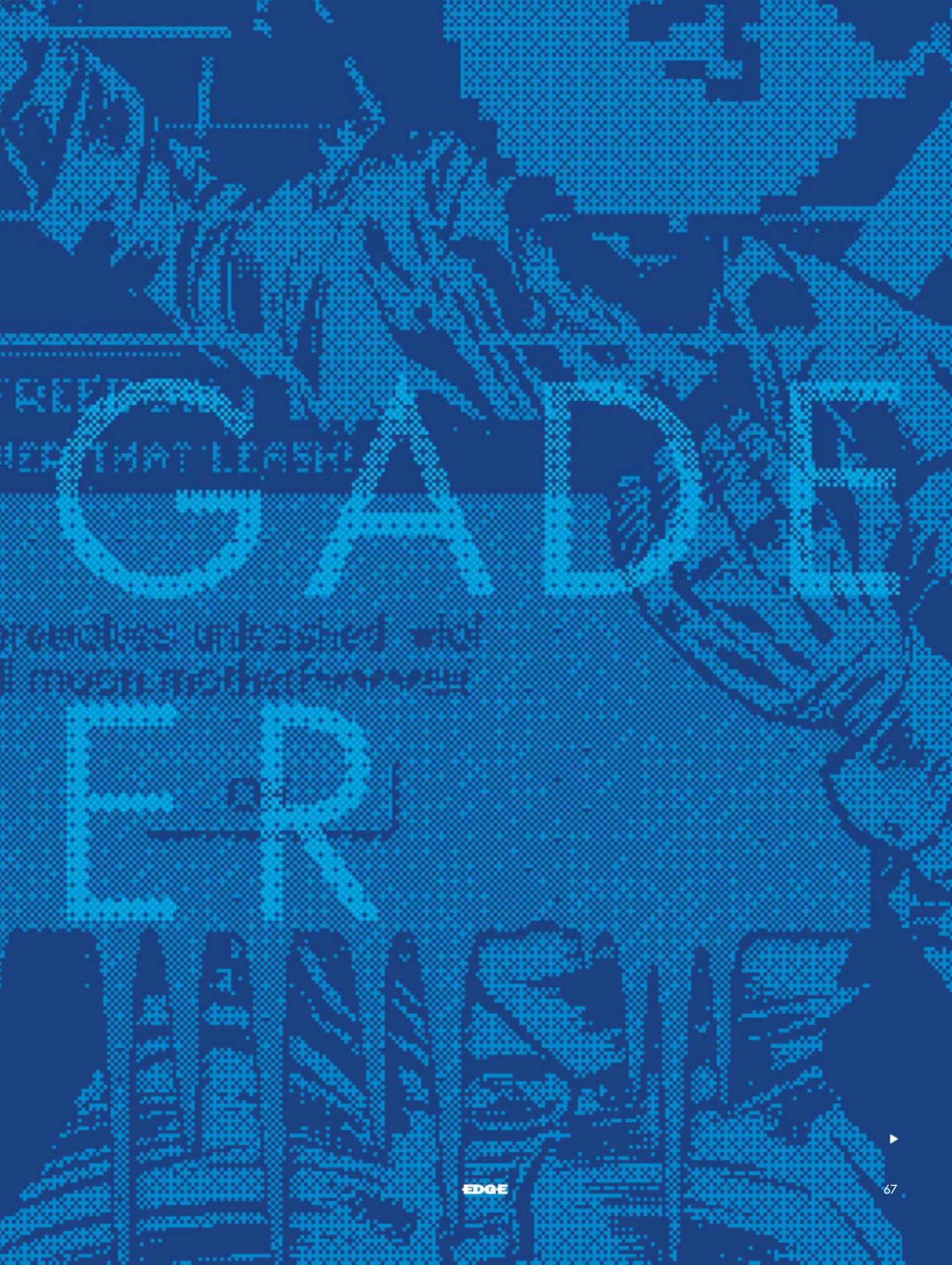


**Game** Watch Dogs 2  
**Developer** Ubisoft Montreal  
**Publisher** Ubisoft  
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One  
**Release** November 15



Ubisoft Montreal calls on the power of the crowd as Watch Dogs 2 heads out west to San Francisco

BY NATHAN BROWN



REVIEW  
REPORTER: LEE SWEET

you can't understand what  
I'm saying, then you're

# U

bisoft is rarely topical. This is a company that prefers to safeguard its future by borrowing from the past, be it the historical tourism of an *Assassin's Creed* or the prehistoric stylings of *Far Cry Primal*. Where it does dip a toe in more modern waters, it either does so by escaping the trappings of 21st-century civilisation, as in *Far Cry 3* and 4, or by simply destroying it, as in *The Division*. Yet in 2014's *Watch Dogs* the company was almost achingly current, its tale of surveillance paranoia launching mere months after Edward Snowden had laid bare the shocking extent to which modern governments spy on their citizens. The intervening two years have yielded the Panama Papers, the mass sharing of celebrity photos that were meant to remain private, and the rebirth of the Snooper's Charter. Drone warfare is ever more prevalent, while the rise of the Internet Of Things means that everything from smartcars to children's toys are susceptible to attack. As our relationship with technology becomes ever closer and more complex, so too grows the likelihood of it being exploited. The more connected we are, the more vulnerable.

"WE WANTED TO TAP A BIT INTO SOCIAL ENGINEERING, WHERE YOU HACK INTO INFORMATION THAT SYSTEMS GATHER ON PEOPLE"

That's terrible news, perhaps, for the luddite wondering how his new microwave has just given away his credit card details. But for the developer of a game about a white-hat hacker using their skills to defame the establishment and return power to the people, it's a dream come true. *Watch Dogs 2* is, as you'd expect, bigger and prettier, and boasts a suite of new features and improvements. But more importantly, it reflects the connected world's relentless, exponential expansion. Simply put, *Watch Dogs 2*'s hacking is, like its subject matter, broader, deeper, and more persistent.

"In *Watch Dogs*, many of the hacking actions were quite binary," returning creative director **Jonathan Morin** admits. "My favourite was hacking cameras; it was something I was talking about a lot towards the end of development. You were controlling something from a distance; it was more analogue. Now we have a lot more of those analogue inputs, so hacking becomes, really, a form of expression – a way to solve problems in a more creative way."

Surveillance cameras stood apart in *Watch Dogs*' hackable Chicago, able to be panned, zoomed and jumped between as you sought out threats, which could in turn be hacked so long as they were in the camera's field of view. By contrast, Chicago's other technological vulnerabilities were essentially lightswitches: the steam pipe that blew up, the traffic signal that turned from red to green, the bollard, bridge or platform that was raised or lowered. Those days are gone, consigned to history like a phone without a web browser.





Here Holloway shorts out the transformer panel on the ground to draw the guard over, then hacks into the car and makes it reverse, slamming the enemy guard into the scenery. You may be able to play the entire game without killing anyone yourself, but that doesn't mean no one will get hurt.

Now, when you aim at a hackable object and tap a shoulder button, you perform a quick, default hack, to ensure the pacy dynamism of the first game's hacking system is preserved. But hold the button down, and more options can be selected with the face buttons. Vehicles, for instance, will turn sharply to the right when quick-hacked, but a long press yields the option to have it turn left, speed up, or slow down. A quick hack of a pedestrian will, as in the first game, yield the contents of the target's bank account or valuable intel. But now you can distract someone – anyone – by messing with their phone, a game-wide expansion of a feature that, in the first game, could only be performed on certain targets. You can call the police on them, or alert an enemy faction to their presence. The aim, Morin says, is not just for more flexibility, but less predictable results, too.

"We wanted to tap a bit into social engineering, where you hack into information that systems gather on people," he says. "You can change what they are to the system, then call the police. The cops will show up and depending on who that ►



In addition to its uses as a remote hacking device, Holloway's drone can be flown in firstperson view



## A HERO COMES ALONG

New protagonist Marcus Holloway is moved to join up with Dedsec after he's wrongly racially profiled and accused of a crime he didn't commit. It's quite the departure from Aiden Pearce's fight to avenge the death of his niece and subsequent kidnapping of his sister. The idea, senior writer Lucien Soulban tells us, is to put players in control of a protagonist whose problems are believable, and that could happen to anyone. "We wanted sunny and vibrant as far as his personality was concerned, and we went for a hero who was fighting for the same things we hear and read about in our daily lives. And we made him charming, so he could convince others to join him."

He's different to Pearce on a physical level too. Younger and fitter, he has a greater emphasis on parkour skills than his forebear, whose mobility was always stymied by that bulky, 'iconic' raincoat. Ubisoft Montreal researched homemade weapons when deciding how Holloway should fight, eventually settling on a billiard ball attached to a parachute cord. Hard hitting and lightning fast, it's a compelling alternative to a non-lethal playthrough. All in, it's quite the change, but the greater battle will be tonal, something that's made clear by a character intro video showing our hero parkour-flipping over cascades of Windows 95 dialogue boxes. Naturally.



person is, they might flee, fight back, or just get arrested. If the cops arrive and there's an opposing faction, or other criminals around, it might go in a different direction. It might start a battle and even more police show up. It's pretty clear, when you press a button, what it does – I'm going to call the cops on this guy to create a diversion' – but you should be surprised by the outcome, forcing you to adjust and think about the possibilities. Everything we do is focused on that kind of control: either you control something completely from a distance or, when you start something, a chain of events might emerge from the systems."

Furthermore, now your hacking toolset will improve. Hacks are performed by consuming Botnet, a sort of mana bar that, at the beginning, will only let you hack two or three things at a time. As you progress, the bar expands, and hacks themselves will grow stronger – the cops showing up with a greater show of force, for instance. "I think that's an interesting improvement from the first game, where as soon as you gained a new tool, its power was pretty much what you were going to get until the end of the game," Morin says. "In Watch Dogs 2, that's not the case – you'll start seeing opportunities for how you can use them, and combine them with each other, too."

**Your hacking toolset's** growth over the course of the game is all thanks to Dedsec, the white-hat group – we're desperately trying to avoid the term 'hacktivist' – featured in the first game ►

"IT'S PRETTY CLEAR, WHEN YOU PRESS A BUTTON, WHAT IT DOES BUT YOU SHOULD BE SURPRISED BY THE OUTCOME, FORCING YOU TO ADJUST"



*Watch Dogs 2* creative director Jonathan Morin



Holloway's Dedsec clan are our biggest concern at the moment. How do you feel about spending 50 hours in the company of this lot?



Senior writer Lucien Soulban has writing credits on *Far Cry 3* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas*

that supported protagonist Aiden Pearce in his bid to free Chicago from the grip of the ctOS surveillance system. Here Dedsec is the focus of the game, with you as its leader. New protagonist Marcus Holloway is a young, brilliant, African-American hacker whose grudge against ctOS leads him to join Dedsec, where his charm and wit see him quickly rise up the ranks to become the group's leader. He sets about expanding its membership, amassing new techniques from recruits while conducting operations to expose Blume, the shadowy corporation behind ctOS, as the true public enemy.

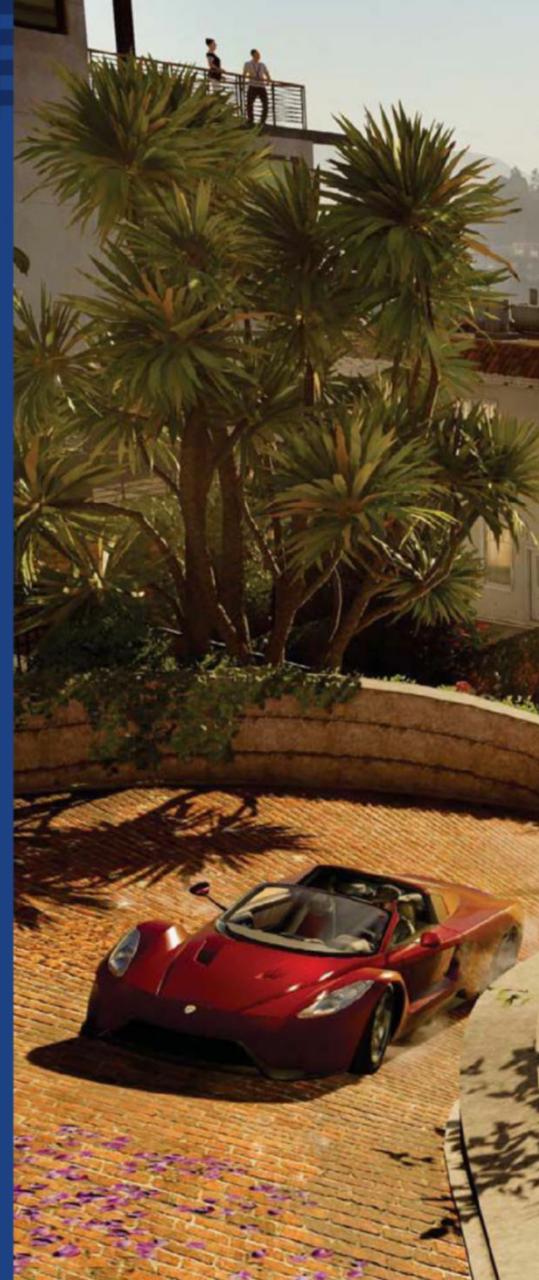
Hang on. Charisma and wit? No one who played the first *Watch Dogs* would associate either of those personality traits with the gruff, grizzled and thoroughly unsympathetic Pearce. Holloway alone would suggest quite the shift in tone, but Morin says the greater factor in *Watch Dogs 2*'s shift in atmosphere comes from its 2,000-mile, westward jump from the first game's setting of Chicago. Set in and around San Francisco – not just the city centre but Marin County, Oakland and, naturally, Silicon Valley – the area, Morin believes, naturally invites a lighter tone than that of its often dour predecessor.

"*Watch Dogs* was in Chicago and was about surveillance, which matters a lot there," he tells us, a reference to the fact that the Windy City has more surveillance cameras than any other conurbation in the US. "It's a more oppressive place, with lots of dark, narrow alleys. The tone of the first game was not only ►

"IT WAS QUITE OBVIOUS THAT THE STATE OF MIND IN THIS OPEN-MINDED PLACE REQUIRED A SHIFT IN TONE"

because of Aiden Pearce, but also the area. For *Watch Dogs 2*, we decided to jump into the Bay Area, and it was quite obvious that the state of mind in this open-minded place, with all the creativity that's happening there, required a shift in tone. It's slightly lighter, and more focused on the attitude you would expect from hacker culture: it's about people who see beyond pre-conceived rules, who think outside the box to solve problems. What's happening in San Francisco in terms of economy, in terms of development of technology, is pushed forward by this kind of attitude."

If Chicago was an appropriate setting for a game about a society in the grip of surveillance, San Francisco promises to be a wonderful home for a sequel about a group of counter-cultural, anti-establishment hackers. Where better to be technologically disruptive than in the most technologically disruptive city in the western world? But Dedsec is not just the narrative set dressing, there to tie together setting and story. In pushing the group to the fore, the development team has



## REALITY BYTES

Ubisoft's preference for the historical is well documented, and not without merit. There's an inherent peril in setting a game in the present day, as senior writer Lucien Soulban explains. "You understand the culture and the environment; you understand the language and the stakes," he tells us. "There's no disconnect or disbelief – but that's a trap, right? People are so familiar with the setting that you have to be careful about [re-]telling them their own experiences. They have an opinion on what's right and wrong, yet they need to understand and agree with the stakes as you've presented them."

There are legal concerns, too. Short of a defamation suit from a distant descendant of Rodrigo Borgia, this is not something most Ubisoft studios have to worry about. It's certainly never concerned Soulban, whose previous work includes the thematically bonkers *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*. "We need to fictionalise companies and brands, because how we use them in the game is rarely a true indication of their actual nature," Soulban continues. "The idea of corporate intrigue and espionage is hugely attractive, but the reality is rarely as engaging." That's not to say you can't hint at it, of course – one of the game's Valley companies has a bright, multicoloured logo, and is called Nudle.



Morin says the new driving model is an example of how the team has paid heed to fan feedback

completely redesigned *Watch Dogs'* structure, in order to move away from the classic shape of an open-world game, which Morin rather bluntly admits typically amounts to "just having a story and then some stuff on the side. We wanted to make sure the world would be more convincing – that the world is made up of, and shaped from, lots of different stories."

It means that every kind of mission and activity feeds into your overall progression. Holloway's aim is to grow Dedsec's numbers and so expand its influence, and once certain population milestones are reached, the story progresses. In keeping with the desire to give the player more control over how they interact with technology to solve problems, you'll have a far greater level of freedom in how you progress through the game. And, as a result, Ubisoft Montreal will have a far greater level of freedom in the stories it can tell.

"Each operation represents a different aspect of our relationship with technology," Morin says. "It gives us the opportunity to talk about the Internet Of Things on one

operation, advancements in AI on another, social media, data gathering, behavioural analysis... It gives a lot more perspective on the problems that exist in technology today."

Not everything will be so serious, of course. San Francisco is vibrant in more than just colour palette, after all, and no game set in a city containing, for instance, Haight-Ashbury's crinkled Deadheads and the Valley's techbro startups could keep a straight face all the time. "Just wandering around in San Francisco you can find colourful people," Morin says, "and if you dig into that you might find several different operations you can go into. Some are more important than others in terms of the impact their themes have on society, but it creates an interesting pool of operations and experiences that, I think, completes the world a lot better than just having you follow the main arc of the narrative."

Flexibility is key, then, in individual missions, the shape of the game they comprise and, thanks to the expanded toolset, the way you play, too. Morin says that players will be able to ►

play through the game non-lethally if they choose, whether by stealth, disabling enemies with Holloway's Taser, or by having police and criminal factions do the dirty work. "Well," he admits with a chuckle, "it might be difficult to avoid hitting anyone with a car." Regardless, the original game's divisively weighty vehicle handling has been overhauled and is now a good deal more responsive. Those intent on keeping blood off their hands, and front bumpers, will at least only have themselves to blame this time if they understeer into a bus stop.

Assuming they're behind the wheel, that is. Building on the first game's seamless, ambient multiplayer – one of few parts of *Watch Dogs* that didn't divide popular opinion – is co-op. Pitch up at a mission and you might encounter another player at the same point in the game, and then be able to either work together or head off your separate ways. Friends can be invited to co-op sessions through Holloway's smartphone, but you'll be able to play through a substantial chunk of *Watch Dogs 2* with company without needing to actively seek it out. Some missions are designed for lone wolves, but the less gregarious can play through all the dedicated co-op missions in singleplayer, while side operations can be played either solo or with company. And because of the new progression system, all of it has a bearing on your journey to the end of the game.

Since *Watch Dogs 2*'s protagonist is part of a collective, co-op makes narrative sense. So too do PVP invasions, where aggressors are presented as being part of an opposing faction (though in your opponent's game, roles are reversed – you're framed as the bad guy). As one of *Watch Dogs*' more successful components, PVP hasn't been changed too much, though Morin and team have streamlined things behind the scenes. "In *Watch Dogs*, you were proposed a multiplayer activity and, if you accepted it, it loaded in. Now, if we're proposing you something it's because the player is already here. No loading, no teleporting, nothing. Just go do it."

**Yet while the** focus on Dedsec solves a few potentially awkward ludonarrative conundrums, plenty more remain. Chief among them is the notion of a white-hat hacking group causing pileups at intersections so they can escape the gang battle they just kicked off down the street. And this lot are the good guys? *Watch Dogs 2* is a game about wresting control of technology back from the establishment, yes, but is all that power really better off in the hands of hackers?

"It's a contradiction that I like a lot," Morin says. "What's important is that the game will never judge how you play: you'll never feel like you've done something that the world says is wrong. It's the opposite. We want Dedsec to grow in power, and it's up to the player to decide what's meaningfully justifiable. We want to make sure you have the tools available to you, always, to do as you see fit. Sometimes emergence might change outcomes, but that's kind of the point: messing around with these things is dangerous."

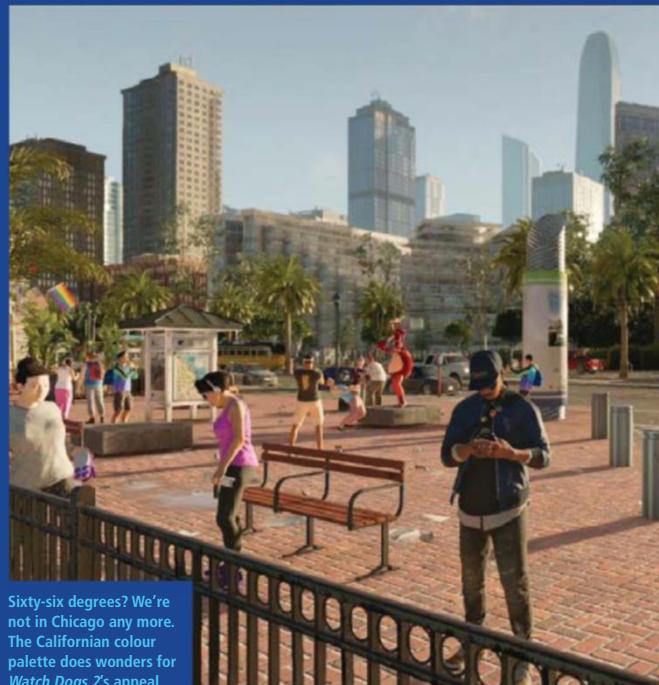
Indeed it is, but that hasn't stopped Ubisoft Montreal throwing in everything from drones to RC cars, EMP blasts and 3D-printed grenade launchers. Giving the player such destructive freedom is hardly new in open-world games, but absolving them of the consequences is rather more rare – and increasingly important in an era where open worlds just keep

getting bigger, more complex and more destructive. As technology improves, developers, just like the rest of us, must think carefully about how it should be used. Morin believes that the narrative must give the player the same level of freedom as the discrete systems the story is meant to tie together.

"It's a growing challenge," he admits. "I feel like *Watch Dogs 2* does a good job of trying to contain it and make it logical, but at the same time I think open worlds are all about giving players the right sets of simulations so they can make their own fun. As we try to tackle these things narratively, we can't slow down this ability to [let players] mess around with simulation more. Too many games right now are doing open worlds, but not giving players little toys that they can play around with in new ways."

"It's especially important for us, because that's how I see a hacker. A hacker sees something not for what it is, but what it might be, because he understands how it works. I would love for people to play *Watch Dogs 2* in the same way: not seeing what's been preconceived, but switching things around, turning things upside down, then wanting to share the results with the world to show how smart they were. Maybe the entire plan fucked up and they had to improvise and had a lot of fun doing that, too. It has to be surprising, has to offer some new kinds of inputs in the world. Otherwise, why bother? Why bother making open-world games where everybody is busting their ass at doing the same mechanics?"

It is easy – and, honestly, tempting – to be sceptical of all this. After all, *Watch Dogs* was an early pioneer of Ubisoft's recent history of over-promising and under-delivering. After stealing the show at E3 2013, it suffered a six-month delay, and



Sixty-six degrees? We're not in Chicago any more. The Californian colour palette does wonders for *Watch Dogs 2*'s appeal

The game showcases San Francisco's wealth, but it also plays out in areas of poverty



"A HACKER SEES SOMETHING FOR WHAT IT MIGHT BE, BECAUSE HE UNDERSTANDS HOW IT WORKS. I WOULD LOVE FOR PEOPLE TO PLAY WATCH DOGS 2 IN THE SAME WAY"



in its final form didn't exactly match up to the remarkable ambition on show at its unveiling. Ubisoft is a little more cautious these days, and so *Watch Dogs 2* has emerged, all but fully formed, just months ahead of its planned November release. This time it will make it, and just as well. This is supposed to be a commentary on the problems modern technology poses to the world at large, not just to Ubisoft.

Morin doesn't believe that the air of relative secrecy that has surrounded *Watch Dogs 2*'s development has made the process any easier this time. Experience has done that. *Watch Dogs* was a new IP that sought to do new things with its genre, running on new console hardware. Its development team faced a lot of problems, and not all of them were solved.

"During the making of *Watch Dogs*, we progressively understood, better and better, what our fantasy was for it," he says. "We had that understanding at the beginning of development on *Watch Dogs 2*. Now we can really focus on the fantasy of being a hacker." It's hard not to think of the jump from *Assassin's Creed* to *ACII*, when a flawed set of ideas blossomed into something that finally made good on all that promise. No doubt it was kicked around a branding meeting and dismissed as too trite, but on this evidence the sequel has earned the title *Watch Dogs 2.0*. Bugs have been squished, kinks ironed out, and new features woven in; there's a backdoor vulnerability or two, sure, but that's all part of the fun. This time, thankfully, everything seems to be working as intended. ■

# P R E P A R E T O D I C E

How a team of board game designers turned FromSoftware's Dark Souls series into a Kickstarter smash

BY WILL FREEMAN





The game's generous piece-count made the most affordable pledge level £75. It wasn't so pricey as to dissuade over 31,000 backers

utton mashing won't get you far in *Dark Souls*, where relying on a lucky strike is rarely a strategy that stacks up. FromSoftware's series is notorious for the exacting demands it makes on players, requiring them to learn the intricacies of attacks, positioning and counters, so why would it make a good candidate for a board game reimagining? Tabletop realms are places where rules and mathematical systems are the game, realised in cardboard and plastic, and played with an orderly, methodical approach. Aside from the dexterity sub-category of board games, where flicking and throwing pieces is the norm, typically tabletop experiences include little to no 'action', and capturing a sense of nuanced twitch combat in these contexts is simply unworkable in most cases. If you've been keeping an eye on Kickstarter recently, however, you probably noticed that an officially licensed *Dark Souls* board game confounded expectations and did rather well for itself. The team behind the campaign, Steamforged Games, sought £50,000 to make its spin on *Dark Souls* a commercial reality. That target was reached in some three minutes. Funding eventually cleared £3.7 million, with late pledges continuing to trickle over the line at the time of writing.

And it was possible, the Steamforged team believes, because *Dark Souls* is not a button masher's pursuit. To understand that logic, we need to look back to the beginning.

Seven or so months before *Dark Souls* – The Board Game emerged as the Steamforged team's day job, a handful of the team were already looking at tabletop gaming's own version of 'button mashing' – that is, an over-reliance on handfuls of dice as a luck mechanic that might just get players through if they persist for long enough.

At that time, Steamforged designer **Mat Hart**, a co-founder of the UK-based company,

# "WE'VE TRIED TO MAKE A BOARD GAME EQUIVALENT OF A THINKING MAN'S FIGHTING GAME"

had been toying with a prototype that he happily refers to today as a "generic dungeon crawler". It was an exercise in innovating within the genre, and although he might not have realised it at the time, he was working on something that would share many parallels with the *Dark Souls* videogames.

"I'd played a few of the other games of the dungeon-crawler type out on the market today, and I'd started to become a little frustrated by them," he explains. "I wasn't finding them as interesting as I felt they could be, or that I wanted them to be. They certainly weren't feeling as interesting as classic games of that type, like *HeroQuest* back in the day."

The tabletop games that so disappointed Hart were often repetitive, too reliant on luck, and commonly boiled down to the fall of the dice – 'dice mashing games', if you like. So the designer did all he could to reverse those shortcomings, never quite sure how the game might end up.

And then Hart met with an old friend from his many years working in production on videogame projects (his CV includes stints at Kuju Entertainment and Ninja Theory). That acquaintance happened to be employed at Namco Bandai, which itself was keen to find a board game designer to explore the world of *Dark Souls* in a new format.

"That could have been the end of the story," Hart reflects. "If I'd have just pitched the game idea I was working on then, as it was, I'm not sure it would have gone anywhere. So what we actually did for the pitch was stop and analyse what makes *Dark Souls* the game it is. We had to consider which elements from *Dark Souls* could make the transition from electronic media into physical media, before going back to Bandai Namco."

It didn't take Hart very long to realise that he might have a perfect match. Here was a videogame series that demanded its players do more than mash buttons, and a fledgling dungeon-crawler design exploring ways to escape the monotony of the dice roll.

"We realised our board game could ask players to think, to be clever, to learn, because that's what *Dark Souls* is, in a way," Hart says. "You can't just go rushing in to

*Dark Souls*. We've tried to make a board game equivalent of a thinking man's fighting game. We didn't want players 'button mashing' [our board game], I guess, because *Dark Souls* won't let you do that."

**With its starting** point set, the Steamforged designers could strip back Hart's prototype and rebuild it as a *Dark Souls* property, plundering FromSoftware's beloved series for suitable mechanics and all of the aesthetic elements they could possibly need. The designers had character types to replicate as miniatures, combat systems to rework, and a backstory to use as their foundation.

But they also had gameplay difficulty to consider. Steamforged knew it wanted to deliver a co-operative miniatures-based exploration board game, but how to translate *Dark Souls'* infamous degree of challenge? A tough board game that is still pleasant to play is a considerably different beast to a demanding virtual experience.

"That was probably the hardest thing here, if I'm honest," Hart says. "The game needs to be challenging, but it needs to be a challenging game you enjoy – that you can beat with skill and experience, and maybe a tiny bit of luck."

Hart and his colleagues also wanted to avoid what he calls the "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? syndrome", where something is "easy if you know it". Steamforged needed to shape an experience that didn't risk becoming a walkover because of a win-all strategy nestled at its heart.

"The difficulty [in our game] comes from decision-making," explains **Richard Loxam**, another Steamforged co-founder and designer, on zeroing in on how to make *Dark Souls* appropriately taxing when rendered in cardboard and plastic. "We looked at how learning behaviours – and understanding how to win – is essentially the core of why *Dark Souls* is hard, and we've tried to focus on translating that. We've introduced Boss Behaviour decks that replicate learning the move sets, alongside positioning via our node system on the board being crucial choices between life and inevitable death." ▶



## THE SOUL OF SUCCESS

While the Steamforged staffers had confidence in their concept for the *Dark Souls* tabletop release, some of the team can't yet get their heads around how their game reached over £3.7m on a Kickstarter target of £50,000.

"I still haven't quite got an answer to the question about the success," says Hart (above). "Maybe it's because, deep down at its core, *Dark Souls* deserves to be a board game. It feels like a board game you play as a videogame... Put in simple terms like that, it's a description of almost every classic tabletop dungeon crawler. There's a synergy between the core game in *Dark Souls* and what people want from a board game. That might be it."



**I**"THE BIGGEST ISSUE WAS THE SHEER AMOUNT OF DARK SOULS CONTENT WE HAD ACCESS TO"



01 While much of the gameplay exists via numerous cards, the miniatures bring *Dark Souls – The Board Game* to life. Pictured: 02 the playable characters; 03 the Gaping Dragon; 04–05 Dragon Slayer Ornstein and Executioner Smough; 06–07 a pair of Hollow enemies; 08 a Titanite Demon; and 09 a Gargoyle

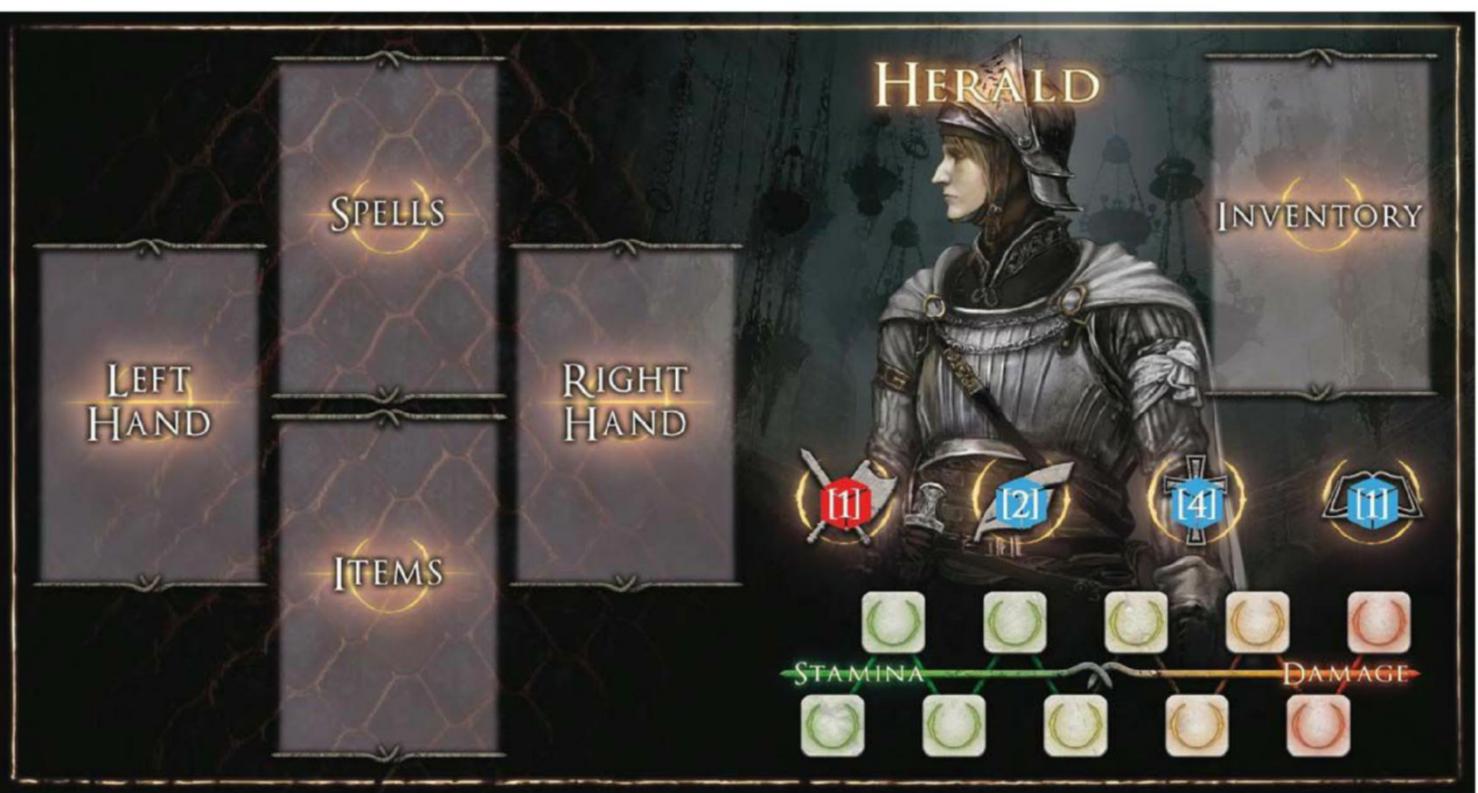
Capturing the essence of *Dark Souls* wasn't just about aping the original gameplay mechanics, though. To convince the videogame series' fan community, Hart, Loxam and their fellow designers needed to carefully replicate the lore, style and tone of the series. As a result, Steamforged was given full access to the resources behind the series. Yet while having the keys to FromSoftware's castle certainly helped, Hart believes that delivering the game world in another format came from an intimate understanding of the process of working with another company's properties.

"During my videogame career I worked with other people's IP often," he explains. "During that time I developed a very healthy respect for the care and custodianship you should have when working on somebody else's IP." It's a more complex issue than simply handling pre-existing assets, Hart asserts: game designers in his position must also keep in mind that they're working with an existing community that belongs to someone else.

"In everything we do, we're custodians for a community and we're custodians for IP. So with *Dark Souls*, we're not just serving FromSoftware or Bandai Namco – to an extent, they're just the names on the contract. We're really serving the millions of people who bought *Dark Souls*. We have to, for it to be a success. I guess that's a bit cheesy, but that's it. That's what guides us there."

Having access to the *Dark Souls* archives also presented Steamforged with the sort of problem most game designers would kill for. "The biggest issue was the sheer amount of content we had access to," Loxam explains. "It's very hard to choose the bosses we wanted to include from launch, and fit in all of the iconic parts of the universe. With *Dark Souls III* releasing [recently], we were conscious of not spoiling that experience for gamers too much, so we focused on bringing a lot of the iconic *Dark Souls I* and *II* bosses and grunts to life – with a splash of *Dark Souls III*."

**There were also** more practical considerations in capturing FromSoftware's universe. *Dark Souls – The Board Game* is centred on miniatures: its box will contain a



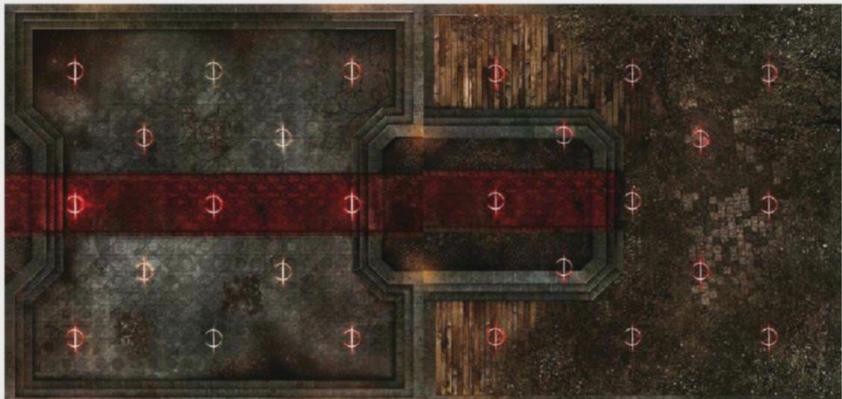
## TABLETOP TECH

Modern technology has undoubtedly fuelled today's board gaming boom. From rapid 3D-printed prototyping to crowdfunding platforms, new tools have helped pull board games from the back of cupboard and towards the spearhead of geek culture. For Mat Hart, it's only a good thing.

"I guess it depends if you're a glass-half-full or glass-half-empty kind of a person," he says of the influence being played by technology nowadays. "My glass is eternally half-full, so I think this technology can be a wonderful tool for sharing knowledge, ideas, experiences and excitement. It's a nice mechanism for people like myself to get a message out to people, as we've done with Dark Souls."



Steamforged co-founder Richard Loxam is one of the game's lead designers

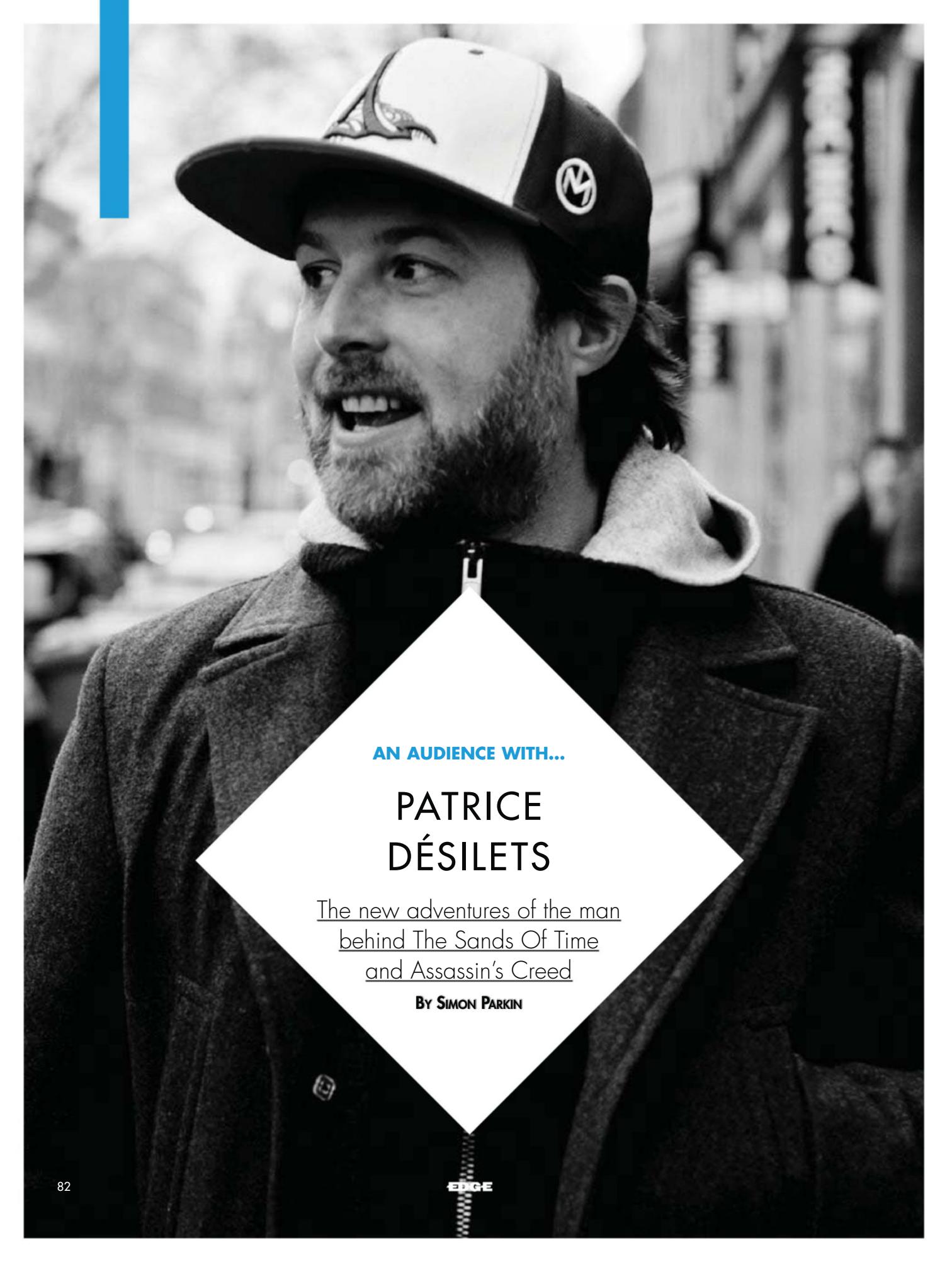


collection of models, each based on famed protagonists and enemies, albeit not always to scale (*Dark Souls'* Gaping Dragon may not have made it into the box otherwise). In 2016, it's easy to imagine Steamforged pulling character models out of FromSoftware's library and simply 3D-printing them in order to create an appropriate range of miniatures. It must be easy nowadays, right? "I wish," Hart laughs. "We had to think of really boring things, like how much of an underhang a miniature might have on an edge. If it's too deep, it might not come out of the mould. Also, too thin a piece might snap or bend, even if obviously it holds up in the videogame. So we needed to make the tweaks to the in-game geometry as subtle as we could, to know that it would match the look of the world, but also work as an actual, physical piece."

In spite of such challenges, it took only five months from that fortuitous meeting with Bandai Namco for the board game designers to have their vision ready for the battlegrounds of Kickstarter. The April 2017 release for the final boxed product is a long way off, but feedback from consumer playtesters who've sampled prototypes on the floors of tabletop gaming shows has been positive, partly thanks to the production quality of Steamforged's early models, which feel detailed and authentic.

The game will be finessed further in the months leading up to its production. Until we get it in our hands, we can't be certain quite how faithful it will be to its revered source material, but even with dice in the box, relying on brute force and luck alone seems unlikely to result in anyone besting Steamforged and FromSoftware's most imposing boss battles. ■

ABOVE The 'dynamic positioning system' addresses the challenge of bringing *Dark Souls'* fluidity of combat from screen to tabletop. LEFT Double-sided board tiles are the physical heart of Steamforged's creation, providing the terrain players explore



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

## PATRICE DÉSILETS

The new adventures of the man  
behind The Sands Of Time  
and Assassin's Creed

BY SIMON PARKIN

**A** child tennis star, film-school dropout and lover of improv theatre, **Patrice Désilets** followed a winding and unorthodox route into game development. When he received a tipoff that the French game publisher Ubisoft was planning to set up a studio in his hometown of Montreal, Désilets perceived an opportunity to combine his passions in a career that he otherwise knew little about. After two unremarkable games, the young designer was given the chance to reinvent *Prince Of Persia*. The resulting game, *The Sands Of Time*, and specifically his concept to do away with videogame ‘lives’ and instead allow players to rewind their mistakes, showed a design ingenuity that gave Désilets autonomy to begin work on a new kind of action blockbuster. Nevertheless, it took two years to convince his bosses that *Assassin’s Creed* should launch as a new IP rather than a *Prince Of Persia* spinoff. Again, his judgement proved correct, launching one of the best-selling contemporary blockbusters. It was success, however, that would go on to break the designer.

#### **Let’s go back to the beginning.**

To the Big Bang? Seven billion years ago?

#### **Not that far, perhaps.**

Well, that’s where we’re going with our new game.

#### **Let’s work our way forwards to that point. You grew up in Quebec in the 1970s, right?**

Yes, that’s right, on the south shore of Montreal. I’m 42 this week. I spent two years in Rwanda, Africa, when I was a baby, but other than that it was a fairly normal life in a French Canadian family, with a standard education. I liked to read and I had glasses, so I looked like the intellectual in the class. But at the same time I was good at sports. I wasn’t picked last for the team. I was a mixed breed of physical and intellectual, I’d say.

#### **Your father was a celebrated mathematician. Was there pressure to follow his example?**

Yes. Maths was not difficult for me, per se, but I was fortunate to have someone at home to explain things. He had a masters degree in maths in binary logic, the core of what we do in game development. I remember the book – his master’s thesis. It was a bunch of numbers. He was more of a teacher when I was growing up. He wasn’t theoretical; he finished his career as a college principal.

My father was also in charge of programming at this school, so we were one of the first families to have a computer at home. There was a bunch of friends around my father who also owned computers. I’d go to their homes for dinner and there would be computers all around me. This was in about 1985, so it would have been the Apple II.

#### **Did you play games on those machines?**

*Lode Runner* – that was the first. Then *Choplifter*. Those are the two that I remember.

#### **Were you interested in making games at that time?**

Not really. I loved creating worlds but I guess this is something that’s common to most children. I would create stories in the playground with other kids. I don’t feel like I was special or unique in that regard, but I did manage to keep that part of me, which is something that not everybody manages to do. Actually – wow, you are taking me back here – I do remember creating new levels for *Lode Runner*. The version we owned had a level editor. It was a bit like *Minecraft* or *Mario Maker*, I suppose. You could use blocks to create a level quite quickly. I feel like I grew up really fast but without losing touch with the kid inside me. I feel like that five-year-old boy is still inside me, present somehow.

#### **What do you mean that you grew up fast?**

I was a responsible kid. I played a lot of tennis when I was a teenager. I wanted to become a professional tennis player. I was playing between 15 and 20 hours a week, practising after school each day. I had to be disciplined. Then my parents divorced. My brother was just two at the time and I had to become the responsible big brother. Being in the middle of it all... I feel younger now in some ways than I did when I was 15. I’ve had to learn to get rid of the idea that everything is my responsibility. In my early 20s, when I was at the beginning with Ubisoft, I was not as creative as I am now. I was trying to fit in the box and be responsible.

#### **Did you think you were really going to make it as a professional tennis player?**

Ah, yes. When I was 15, certainly. I wanted to be best tennis player in the world and compete against the greats. Then I hit 16 and discovered sex and drugs and rock’n’roll, as it were. I also stopped growing. I was five foot nine. To be good at tennis when you’re not the ➤



Désilets' current focus is *Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey*, which will be delivered episodically, each instalment centred on a point in evolution ➤

## AN AUDIENCE WITH...



### CV

Shortly after Patrice Désilets dropped out of film school, he became one of the first employees at Ubisoft's newly founded satellite studio in Montreal in the late 1990s. After cutting his design teeth on *Donald Duck: Goin' Quackers* and *Hype: The Time Quest*, Désilets found his ideal project in a reboot of the classic platformer *Prince Of Persia*. His masterstroke was in suggesting to the team that they drop the Game Over screen and instead allow players to rewind their mistakes. The design made Désilets famous, and gave him enough political capital to create a new blockbuster IP, *Assassin's Creed*. After two games, Désilets had had enough. THQ hired him to repeat the *Assassin's Creed* trick; after the publisher went bust, Désilets founded Panache Digital Games in order to become master of his own destiny.

tallest player around demands incredible drive, like the kind that Michael Chang had. And I didn't have that. I discovered theatre at that age. I started getting into improvisation. It changed my life, this discipline where your mind and body mix on a stage, and you're in teams competing for the audience's vote. Tennis is a solitary sport. You feel all alone in the world. Discovering creativity in a team changed everything. I realised that what I wanted was related to performance and the creative arts. Sixteen was an important age for me. Then, when I was preparing to go to university to study film, I spent a year in Italy. I went on an exchange for a year. So when we came to pick a historical period for *Assassin's Creed II*, I was eager to revisit Italy. I knew the architecture and the history. I can speak the language.

#### While you were going through this shift in interest away from tennis into the arts, were you still playing games, or had they taken a back seat in your life?

They were always there, somehow. There was maybe a little gap at the end of high school. At that time it was really not cool to be at the peak of puberty and still playing games. It was really the little boys who played games. You were supposed to give them up as you grew up. But I was still playing as I had younger brothers. I took them up again in earnest in my early 20s at university. We had a Super Nintendo and I'd play *NHL* and other sports games. Then Ubisoft arrived.

#### How did you come to arrive at Ubisoft from a degree in film studies and an NHL habit?

I'm a lucky bastard. At the time my mum was the director of communications for the health minister at the government in Quebec City. She heard in the corridors of parliament that a French videogame company was coming to Quebec to set up a large studio, so I knew this before most people. I'd actually quit my university course after just two years – I realised that you cannot learn to make movies in school. I prepped my CV, wrote a letter saying that I was a scriptwriter, and sent it via email to Ubisoft. I think that it was the first email I sent in my life, and it was to Ubisoft.

They called me back. I didn't have a cellphone back then. Somebody left me a message on my fax. When I called back there was no answer – [the guy who'd called me had] moved to another hotel. So I started calling around the various hotels to try to find where the guy who had called me was now staying. I left a message and wrote him a letter. Eventually we got in contact and he offered me an interview. He asked me whether I wanted to interview for the role of scriptwriter or game designer.

The night before the interview I went through all my copies of Next Generation magazine, just to get the vocabulary of the industry. I used the word 'gameplay' for

the first time in my life in that interview. I was 23 years old and cocky. I told him: "Look, I could do scriptwriting for movies or TV, but game designers are what Ubisoft needs, so let's do the interview on game design." I had no clue what game design was. We talked for an hour about *Mario Kart*, trying to understand how it was made, and the pleasure and balance. I then had a second interview with one of the Guillemot brothers [the family of Ubisoft co-founders], and finally a third one in which I was offered the job. That's where they told me the game I was going to be working on was a medieval-themed Playmobil title. That was *Hype: The Time Quest*.

#### How long did you work on that game for?

We started in July 1997 and it shipped two years later.

#### Who were you learning from during this time?

Everything was about learning. It was a new studio. The day I started there were just ten of us. Today there are more than 2,000 employees at Ubisoft Montreal. So a lot of the learning was to do with how to build up a studio. Working in an office for me was uncomfortable. I'm still really bad at it. It's the worst part of creating videogames. I come from theatre and film where you're on stage or on set, where you don't have to be at a desk in front of a computer from nine till five. I still struggle with that. So, with my current studio, Panache Digital, I try to mess with all of those rules as much as possible, to keep the environment more like an art studio, something more creative rather than office-like.

#### How did you come to direct *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*?

I was working on *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*. At some point I was called into an office and told that Ubisoft wanted to make a *Rayman* game at the Montreal studio. They wanted to move me onto this project as I had experience working on platform games. While I was transferring all my knowledge to it, they decided to keep *Rayman* in France after all. So I was left without a project. For two months, I didn't do a lot. Then during this period Ubisoft bought a bunch of IPs: *Chessmaster*, *Myst* and *Prince Of Persia*. I went to a presentation on what a small team had been conceptualising for *Prince Of Persia* and I immediately knew that this was my next game. I joined the team as the first designer. They already had the prince running on walls, but only in movies. These were ideas of how he would move in 3D.

Quickly I realised that the problem with *Prince Of Persia* is dying. You die a lot. It was fine back in the original – the game was so fresh and new that players would forget that they died a lot. But in 2001, it didn't work any more. I was at home when I had a flash of inspiration: why not rewind instead of respawn? I pitched

# "WORKING IN AN OFFICE FOR ME WAS UNCOMFORTABLE. I'M STILL REALLY BAD AT IT. IT'S THE WORST PART OF CREATING GAMES"

the idea and someone in the team said he would implement it. Without that guy, we wouldn't be here talking. You can have the best idea in the world but if there isn't someone willing to implement it, you've nothing. But I'm a good salesman. You need that in this job. Good social skills. People hate game designers because whenever they have an idea it means more work for everyone else. You have to have social skills to sell your ideas.

Anyway, the rewind move was the beginning of a lot of things for Ubisoft and myself. Suddenly I'd had a good flash of inspiration. My earlier games had been fine, but this was something else: something new and interesting and fresh. For me personally I realised this was the kind of design I wanted to do. It all came together.

## Presumably the success of the game gave you power in terms of being able to pitch new ideas.

Yes and no. There's a French culture inside Ubisoft: they like a flat structure where nobody has more power than anybody else apart from the very top guys. I was asked to start work on a next-generation *Prince Of Persia*. I wasn't given a team of 25 people and told to come up with a great new idea. Rather, I was told a date and told the game I had to make. But, yes, it's true that we had a mandate to make a game. My official mandate was to redefine the action adventure game on the next generation of platform, under the *Prince Of Persia* umbrella.

## How did you convince them to let you step away from the umbrella?

It took two years. We were told that the new game needed to be historical, so I returned to my history books. I found a book about a secret society throughout history. The first chapter was about the assassins. The myth jumped out at me. I had to convince them that playing as an assassin was stronger than playing as a prince. It makes sense, though. A prince is a number two. He waits for number one to die. You know that: just look at Prince Charles – waiting and waiting. You see how boring that is? Nobody wants to play as Charles [laughs].



## So you managed to convince them to allow you to use a new theme?

My problem with *Prince Of Persia* is that everybody is as good as everybody else because the game is about solving puzzles. Everybody has to run on the same wall at the same time and make the same decisions. I was interested in games that allowed for creativity and improvisation. I wanted people to find their own paths, with a character that could go anywhere. So we had a historical situation, a city, crowds and a character that could go anywhere. That was the blueprint.

It took four years to build and only the final year of that was building a game because it took so long to develop the technology platform that we needed. That was four years of my life. And then we pretty much started *Assassin's Creed II* right away. And when that came out we started work immediately again on *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. It was midway through that project that I said: "No more."

## Did you just burn out?

I would say that I had a mental crisis. All of these years coming to the same building with the same people, day after day, had taken its toll. Keep in mind that I'm a guy who studied arts and literature. I wanted to be creative but suddenly I'm working in an office. All that joy of something that was fresh and new was gone.

My girlfriend confronted me. I had a family but I never saw them. Deep down I was just unhappy for multiple reasons. What I've learned from my parents' divorce is that eventually you have to follow your gut, whether or not it hurts people around you. When my mother decided to leave my dad, it was hard for us brothers. But in the end my mother was a better person for making that decision, as was my father. Even though at first it hurt, down the road it was something that needed to happen.

Suddenly I was 36 and I was becoming unhappy. So I needed to make that kind of drastic decision, to see if I could change things. I had a non-compete clause, which gave me a year off, essentially. After that, I joined THQ. ▶

The Montreal-based Panache team includes (from left) Philippe Debay, Nicolas Cantin, François Massé, Jean-François Boivin, Désilets, The Chinh Ngo and Jean-François Mailloux

*Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* stood out in 2003 not just for its gameplay twists but also for its characters and sense of place





However, even in the midst of the crisis I never asked: 'Would I do something other than videogames?' For me, no. I wouldn't do a movie now. I would miss the interactivity aspect of the work. I love working in a medium in which all of the pioneers are still alive.

**How do you feel nowadays, looking at how a good number of Ubisoft's recent games seem so deeply influenced by Assassin's Creed?**

I'm not a good person to ask about how I feel about Ubisoft games. I haven't played an Ubisoft game since 2012. I played the first two hours of *Assassin's Creed III*, and that was it. With all due respect, I love Ubisoft very much, but I cannot see their logo on my TV screen. It feels too personal. This is my flaw. I'm too personal. But yes, I can see the influence, even outside of their games. For example, I'm playing *Uncharted 4* at the moment, and the way that Nathan Drake moves through the crowd is something that we pioneered at Ubisoft in 2006. Even the climbing is in a bunch of games. These are things that we had to figure out in *Sands Of Time* in 2002. The truth is that there aren't too many of these games because thirdperson action adventures require so many different skills to come together. It's a multi-disciplinary genre, so a cross-pollination of ideas is inevitable. Everyone builds upon everybody else's work.

**You then went to THQ and started work on 1666. There's excitement about the game, but then the**

**publisher goes bankrupt. Did you feel like giving up at that point? Did it feel that your games were becoming too expensive and risky to make?**

It was a tough year at THQ. I loved some of it. When I joined, it was particularly exciting. There was lots of talk about "dreaming big" and so on. Suddenly, the company was going bankrupt. It was very tough. There were a lot of changes in the top management, and stress. Then that filters down to the working floor. It's a terrible environment to make a game.

I think people believed there was a button in the engine that reads 'Make An Assassin's Creed Game'. In truth, it takes time to find a character, to give them iconic moves, a good universe and story and so forth. I had to find all of those things. For example, one of the iconic moves in *Assassin's Creed* is the leap of faith. That came to me after we had designed the towers and all of the design for people getting up them. At that point I could see that getting up the towers was great, but getting down them was fucking boring. So I had the characters jump from the summit into a bale of hay. This illustrates quite how far you have to go in a development before you hit the block you need to face in order to force an interesting or iconic piece of design.

When people are stressed about money, and they want a 'leap of faith' move, they just demand to know where it is. But it doesn't work like that. I told them: "It's coming, but it takes time. This is normal." But the company was not going well, so there was this clash.

Then THQ went bankrupt. I didn't want to leave the videogame industry. I feel like I have 20 games in me. 1666 was going to be game number nine. Eventually I'll make that game. Two weeks ago, I got the IP back. Eventually I'll finish it.

**Do you have just the name for 1666, or do you have assets as well?**

We have everything. Everything we worked on with the team – two years' worth of work, including all of the images, code, trademarks and websites. We're in the process of getting it all back now.

**Before you get there you have Ancestors, the game you're working on now at Panache.**

Yes. That is my full focus today. When everything went down the drain, I had to reassess again. I felt like I was done with the major studios. That was 15 years of my life. Now I wanted my own place. I could pick the people I wanted. I could decide on the HR policies. I could pick the business partners. Then I could create an *Assassin's Creed* game that belongs to me.

Also, I had a dream for a major game to belong to a Quebec company. It would be good for everyone. What if I can come up with a major success that's also good for the community around me? I was unemployed, so this was my opportunity. We started Panache. I had a company, so now I needed a game. I had a dream to make a game based on the human evolution. A game is about evolving through time, so I figured we could do something along those lines, chunk by chunk through history. That's what we're now doing in Montreal with a team of 20 people.

**Large thirdperson games in the style of *Tomb Raider* and *Uncharted* clearly require huge amounts of staff and investment. How do you deal with those issues with a relatively small team?**

Our core team is made up of relatively senior people, with more than ten years' experience each. We only have one junior, who knocked on the door when we happened to need someone. Yes, games like *Uncharted* have a lot of people because they create a lot of content. We're trying something different. Don't expect us to ship 35 hours of gameplay the first time around because it's just not possible. But 20 people who know how to make a game can deliver an hour of a blockbuster. So we're focusing on one hour at a time, and that will allow us to deliver a game of comparable quality to, say, *Uncharted*. We're smaller, so we aren't making an entire season of a television series. We're making three episodes at a time. That's our business model: focusing on smaller, more manageable chunks.

**"I DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE THE INDUSTRY. I FEEL LIKE I HAVE 20 GAMES IN ME. 1666 WAS GOING TO BE GAME NUMBER NINE"**

**The first of *Uncharted 4*'s 20 hours obviously doesn't represent 1/20th of the labour, though. The work is frontloaded because you need to get so much of the engine and game design and animation up and working just to deliver that first hour.**

You're right, but that's the beauty of our subject matter. *Ancestors* is crucial for a small studio that's trying to make blockbuster-size games. By setting it in pre-history, I don't have to build a car or a gun. Right now, it's one character in a jungle. We're nailing all of the things that are relevant to this scenario. I don't have to do a crowd, or a city, or fire. Unreal 4 is an amazing engine, so let's use what we can out of the box in this relatively simple context. We're highly focused, building tools, designs, team spirit and so on. Eventually, we'll get there. It's a modular approach, then. This hour set five million years ago is something that nobody ever played before.

**Is your theme of evolution combined with an episodic structure a metaphor for the act of growing a new game studio, set by step?**

Yes! Actually, it's not even a metaphor. For example, the first thing we designed was a survival system. Once this was done, we now have a survival system for every game that we make further down the road. In the second chapter we then ask: what do we add next that will help us out down the road? We have enough material planned out for 25 chapters – not that this is decided yet. It could be 12 or 18 or more. I'm not sure yet, but we have a map, at least, and it's entwined with our plans and tools as a studio. Panache is built around *Ancestors*, and *Ancestors* is built around Panache.

Through this process we'll accrue all the tools we need to make 1666. This is my long-term goal. Right now, we have the backbone of it all. The format we're proposing is ingenious, I think, moving from five million years ago, then four, then three, then two and so on with each new chapter. We move forward and with evolution, so the game evolves as well. It's a new approach to making games. ■

As well as heading up the original *Assassin's Creed*, Désilets also worked on *II* and *Brotherhood*. Three games in one series proved to be enough



# THE MAKING OF . . .



## FIREWATCH

How a pioneering team broke all the rules to tell a new kind of adventure story

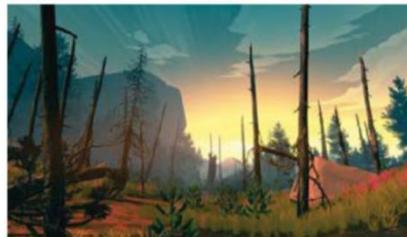
BY BEN MAXWELL

Developer Campo Santo  
Publisher Panic Inc  
Format PC, PS4  
Origin US  
Release 2016

**B**ack in 1999, **Cabel Sasser** and Steven Frank, founders of Portland-based Mac software developer Panic Inc, decided they could do a much better job of designing the Mac's interface than Apple had managed thus far. As part of their grand vision, the pair created Audion, a tool for playing CDs and MP3s that was originally intended to be just one component of a suite of focused apps, but which ended up being released in standalone form. The app took off and attracted developers keen to customise it, one going on to create skins that caught the attention of the Panic team. After reaching out, Sasser discovered that he and this accomplished designer shared other common interests – including an obsession with LucasArts adventure games – and through infrequent contact watched as his career developed. Fourteen years later, Sasser found himself listening to a videogame pitch from the guy whose Audion skins had triggered their friendship. The man was **Jake Rodkin**, and the game was *Firewatch*.

Rodkin made the pitch with writer and longtime friend Sean Vanaman, who he'd worked with on *The Walking Dead: Season One* during their time at Telltale Games. Now doing contract work to tide themselves over, the pair had founded indie studio Campo Santo and were looking for someone to fund their first project. "Sean and I worked on *Tales Of Monkey Island* and then on some smaller projects like the *Puzzle Agent* games and *Poker Night* team together, and all of that led into *The Walking Dead*," Rodkin tells us. "But some time prior to that, when Sean and I were living together, we kicked around a lot of ideas. One of the things we had talked about was the idea of a fire lookout tower, and we also really wanted to do something in firstperson."

It was a vision born as much from nostalgia (Vanaman grew up in Wyoming, where *Firewatch* is set) as a desire to innovate. "When we finished up *The Walking Dead: Season One*, I was a creative director and Sean was head of the writing department," Rodkin explains. "That was an amazing place to be – I was initially hired as a community manager, and I spent eight years slowly sneaking my way into game design meetings. During those years I had the opportunity to learn all these new things and I got to this point where the next logical step was probably *The Walking Dead: Season Two* and



*Firewatch* is "a very narrative game predominantly made by people who really like mechanical games," Remo says

potentially *Three*. I felt like I was hitting the end of the road for being able to learn a bunch of new stuff in that particular place, and I think Sean was feeling the same way, so we decided to try going out on our own. And once again, we found out we knew nothing."

Rodkin and Vanaman had had meetings with other publishers before presenting their ideas to

## "BASICALLY, THEY JUST PITCHED IT AS AN ADVENTURE GAME IN A FIREWATCH TOWER. BUT THAT WAS ALL I NEEDED"

Panic, but didn't yet have a clear picture of what the game would be. They had a handful of potential ideas, but decided to go for broke and present the most ambitious, and expensive, concept first. "Basically, they just pitched it as an adventure game in a firewatch tower," Sasser recalls. "But that was all I needed. I could immediately picture what that world would feel like, and I've always wanted to go to one of those towers. I'd known Jake for a really long time, of course, and I knew these guys could make games – it instantly added up."

While primarily an app developer, Panic had a history of experimenting in other areas (including, at one point, creating *Katamari Damacy* T-shirts) and had been interested in exploring the world of game development for some time. But Sasser and Frank didn't want to tackle the daunting task of building a game studio from scratch with no previous experience

in the industry, and so Campo Santo represented the perfect opportunity. And, conversely, this unusual partnership meant that Rodkin and Vanaman's nebulous idea was given the room it needed to breathe. "It was perhaps a one-of-a-kind relationship," Rodkin tells us. "When we were in the contract and negotiation stage – a term I use ridiculously loosely because it lasted approximately four hours – Cabel and Steve said, 'Well, if the spirit of this is that we have no creative control, we should write that into the deal.' Well, we said yes, obviously, and it meant we ended up sharing everything because there was no worry the guys funding it had some ulterior motive. It was very trusting, but it worked out well. For example, when we finished our first playable build, the first thing we did was fly out to Portland and have Cabel and Steve playtest the game. That's the sort of thing you would never do normally – you'd playtest the hell out of it before showing it to the people who are funding it. But instead we were like, 'Hey, guys, we've got a fully playable game – what do you think?' And that was actually one of the most helpful playtest sessions we had."

**But long before** Campo Santo reached that point, there were the small matters of creating a team and figuring out what the game would actually be. During online conversations and weekends spent together, Rodkin and Frank had talked about working on a project with people such as former Double Fine lead artist Jane Ng, *Mark Of The Ninja* lead designer **Nels Anderson**, and *BioShock 2* programmer Will Armstrong, but now they had the financial backing to make it a reality. And Rodkin had been "Internet friends" with artist and graphic designer Olly Moss since Moss posted a complimentary tweet about *Sam & Max: Season 3*, on which Rodkin had worked. "[Moss] half jokingly said, 'Do you know anything about making videogames?' to me, and just hours before, Sean and I were talking about who would be a good fit for an artist on the project. It was very fortuitous, I guess."

Skeleton crew assembled, Campo Santo moved into its San Francisco office in January 2014 and set about working out what a game about a lookout tower would actually look like. "The six of us had this thing that was a mirror inversion of Double Fine's *Amnesia* *Fortnight*," Anderson explains. "We called it Reality" ▶

## THE MAKING OF...

Fortnight, and we just scribbled shit on a whiteboard. We decided to stop worrying about the story part of it and figure out what it's actually like to be able to walk around and be able to push a radio button and have a conversation. We just decided to make the thing – we knew it would be bad, but we learned a lot. And then it was like, 'OK, well, we think based on this absolute hot trash that we can probably turn this into a real videogame with a lot of work.'

But even after the team, which was growing in numbers, created what Anderson reluctantly describes as a vertical slice of the game, things weren't much clearer. "We still didn't realise what the game was at all," admits designer and composer **Chris Remo**, whose other soundtracks include those of *Gone Home* and *Thirty Flights Of Loving*. "But I don't think we realised how much we didn't know what it was. We had to solve so many design problems – such as, what do you actually do when you're walking around? How do you talk to Delilah about anything that isn't a [primary] conversation? And how do we get the player to go to the place they're supposed to go? Just the fundamental, 'what's the game?'"

**As a result**, the team started at the beginning, literally. "We worked on day one first, and the end of the game last," Anderson laughs. "That's super-unusual in game development, and it means there's definitely some pretty rickety shit under the hood early on. We had some time to go back and revise stuff, but not an infinite amount, so there are still a few things that probably nobody who plays the game notices, but for me it's like, 'Oh, that's set up in the old way.'"

Campo Santo's leftfield approach to the unusual project, coupled with a lack of any real precedents to reference, resulted in a distinctive, grown-up-feeling game. *Firewatch* manages to rival the cinematic drama to which videogames so often aspire without ever compromising the interactivity that sets them apart from other mediums. "We forced ourselves to solve problems without falling back on the best-practice game design answer," Remo explains. "In a lot of cases we either intentionally or unintentionally just didn't pay attention to that, and I think the result was to solve all of these problems from an almost naive perspective. There are so few crunchy systemic underpinnings to this game, other than the conversation system, and I think that took us off the hook from a lot of videogamey design

## Q&A

**Jake Rodkin**  
Designer and creative director

**Do you think a more traditional publisher would have been as receptive to your *Firewatch* pitch?**

I'm sure the game would've been different, but it's really hard for me to predict how different it would be or in what ways. Maybe it would've needed to be episodic, or longer, or have some kind of connectivity feature?

**How did you find the process of designing a game with so few precedents?**

It was hard. Having that big contiguous open world that has to allow players to go anywhere and ostensibly do anything, but at the same time tell a reasonably linear story, turned out to be a lot more challenging and filled with insane one-off solutions than we thought.

**Were you surprised when you realised how much potential the radio mechanic had?**

We thought the game would be a little more systemically heavy than it ended up being, but once the strength of the radio started pushing itself to the fore, a lot of complicated climbing or item-based world gating fell out of the design. We got super-excited because it meant you could have the experience you can have in real life of talking with someone while you're doing something else. One of the things that's always a bummer in adventure games or even in BioWare-style RPGs is your ability to traverse space is killed once you get into a conversation – or your character just starts walking for you like in *The Walking Dead*.

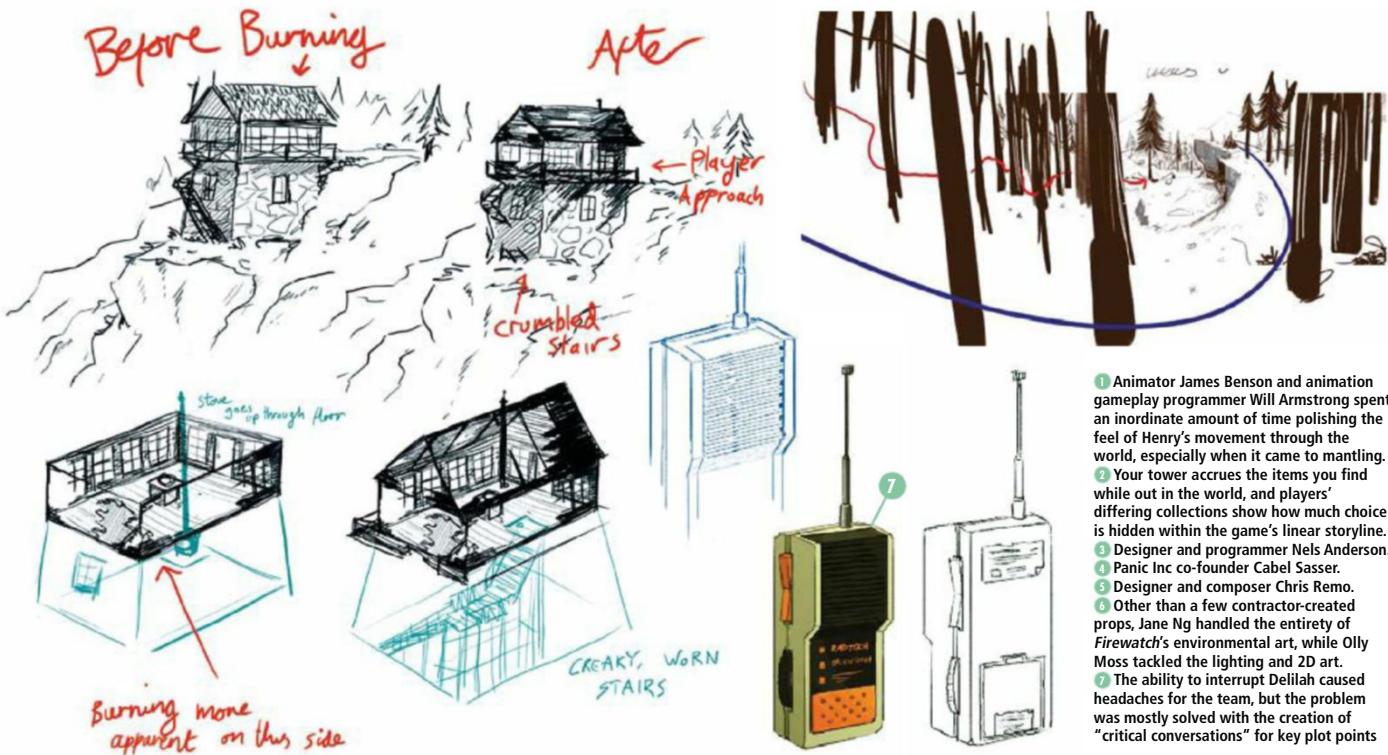
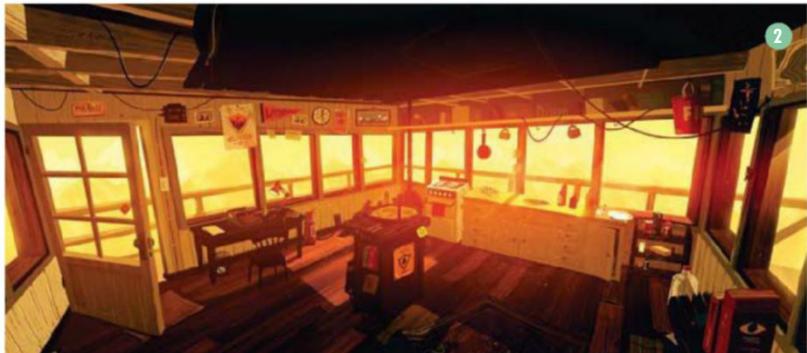
**Were you worried about pulling back from elements that players would easily recognise?**

Yes. It put the game in the same space as adventure games. You have to do your best to get people to buy into the story and the emotional state of the player protagonist as aggressively as possible, weaving in the player's wants and needs with Henry's while still keeping him a separate person.

decisions that might have prevented the game from feeling like it does."

That conversation system is *Firewatch*'s crowning achievement, a mechanic that allows for uncommonly naturalistic discussions. It's also responsive, adapting to a huge range of factors to ensure that everything flows convincingly. It can use trigger volumes to check where the player is in the world, it knows what you're holding in your hand and how many times you've picked up a ➤





## THE MAKING OF...

certain object, it keeps track of everything you've done and said, and it even knows where you're looking at any given time. It's a level of surveillance GLaDOS would kill for. "A lot of players didn't understand how much actual videogame is going on under the surface," Remo says. "In some ways it's a testament to Sean's writing that that's the case, because the interactive conversations feel so natural it doesn't necessarily occur to you how systemically complex they are underneath. But I would strongly suspect the complexity of our interactive dialogue would stack up favourably against any much more mechanical RPG in the past ten or 20 years. It's so interwoven and complex it just sort of washed over a lot of players. And that was also by design, because we intentionally didn't signpost these things."

**Before Firewatch found** its focus, the project was taking a more traditional shape, inspired by Metroidvania games and the open world of *Far Cry 2*, which had fans throughout the team. In building the world, Campo Santo took inspiration from the way *Metroid Prime's* maps were constructed ("Their design was a little cheesier than we thought," Rodkin admits), and environmental gating was more pronounced. The team even briefly considered a timing-based combo system for Henry's mantling, but a lack of resources and time derailed these early ambitions. But this focused efforts on the game's conversation system, environment and the relationship between Henry and Delilah instead, and what remains of those earlier ideas simply reinforces your sense of presence in the game world. "It was all built by hand and then just revved on a bunch between me, Olly and Jane over most of the production of the game," Rodkin says. "Then it was somehow magically set-dressed with only 20 trees and eight rocks – Jane is a machine. The Jane Ng building block reuse technique allows you to put together a convincing large space by basically pulling dupes of a few rocks then scaling and rotating them."

Artistic smoke and mirrors or otherwise, *Firewatch's* Wyoming environment feels like a natural space, reinforcing the convincing nature of the game's world – a facet bolstered by *Firewatch's* outright refusal to stray into whimsy or bombast. "The original intention was we never really collapse the possibility space of whether or not this was a crazy conspiracy," Remo reveals. "But I pushed hard for the ending to be really muted. I thought it was really important that the

## FINDING HENRY

While Frank and Rodkin knew that they wanted Delilah to be played by Cissy Jones, who they'd worked with on *The Walking Dead: Season One*, finding the right Henry proved very hard. "It took months," Remo recalls. "We heard so many auditions, and this is nothing against any of the actors because there were a lot of really talented people who read, but there was just something about the material that demanded a particular person. And until we found that person, it was really dispiriting. At times I thought, 'We're probably just not going to have a great male voice actor.' I reached a point where I'd accepted that Delilah would be good and Henry would just be fine, but that it would be OK as the player would do a lot of that work for us because they're choosing what to say and so emotionally invested automatically." After a gruelling few months, the team listened to an audition from Madmen actor Rich Sommer, and everything finally clicked into place. "It was just like, 'Oh! Thank god!'" says Remo. "When we heard his audition, literally everyone on the team was like, 'Oh, OK, we're done.' And it wasn't even that he was the best out of everyone we'd heard – it was that he was clearly the only even remotely plausible option." Unusually for such a relatively small project, Jones and Sommer recorded their lines together. "We had to do that because it was so intimate," Remo explains. "These people are basically the only other human that each speaks to for months. Without recording at the same time, I don't think that rapport could possibly have been developed to the same degree."

ambiguity of the ending, and therefore what you reflected on, shouldn't be about what happened, but about what it means to be human and deal with loss, responsibility and grief."

Anderson: "If the ending was, 'Oh, what if there was some crazy government programme?' then that ends up being what the game was all about. And if you look at all the things the characters dealt with, there are some deliberate themes. We didn't want to overpower that."

It may conclude in an understated way, but that makes it no less powerful. And now that *Firewatch* is out in the wild, the team can turn their attention to the next project and another burgeoning relationship. "It's a little bit different now," Sasser muses. "But it was a really special experience for us, and I think that even though [Campo Santo] probably don't need as much money as they did last time, there's still stuff that we can contribute. I really want to do it again."

"For sure," Rodkin says. "And if you guys ever make another MP3 player, let me know." ■





**1** "Originally we thought that the first time you get to a place you'd make an observation and Delilah'd go, 'Wait, where are you?' and say some line about that area," Anderson explains. "But we ended up finding more graceful ways to do that. So for the first day, that early structure is pretty obvious in all the major landmark areas you visit."

**2** "Firewatch is structured like a *Metroid* game," Rodkin says. "But it doesn't have alternative paths where you go and find things that you didn't think you needed. I mean, where would we hide an energy tank?"

**3** While you rarely encounter other people in the forest, you'll encounter poignant remnants of their presence.

**4** Only a handful of rock types exist in the game, but *Firewatch's* landscape feels organic and diverse.

**5** Such is the quietude of *Firewatch's* Wyoming wilderness, it's shocking when you discover you're not alone





STUDIO PROFILE

# FUTURE GAMES OF LONDON

How the minnows behind Hungry Shark became a global mobile success story

BY EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL





**Founded** 2009

**Employees** 55

**Key staff** Ian Harper (managing director), Chris Dawson (creative director), Will Marié (executive producer), Tobias Barendt (chief technical officer), Valentina Marchetti (marketing manager)

**URL** [www.futuregamesoflondon.com](http://www.futuregamesoflondon.com)

**Selected softography** *Hungry Shark Evolution, Little Raiders, Grabatron, Pool Bar*

**Current projects** *Hungry Shark World*



Once at Elixir, Ian Harper (left) and Chris Dawson also made mobile titles at Shadow Light Games before founding FGOL

A grinning predator barrels through a teeming ocean, chugging down anything and everything in its path, only ever a few seconds away from death by starvation. Future Games Of London's 230-million-download *Hungry Shark Evolution* could be a metaphor for the rapacious world of mobile publishing. According to a report by research firm Newzoo, global mobile game revenue will surpass that from PC games for the first time this year, but the market remains highly polarised and unforgiving, with a tiny percentage of studios and paying customers accounting for the largest share of earnings.

It's a far cry from the year of FGOL's birth. 2009 was a banner period for mobile game developers looking to build up their own intellectual properties, with the App Store still relatively uncontested and the iPad launch a few months away. "We were very fortunate," **Chris Dawson**, the studio's creative director, admits. "The iPhone had just come out; it had been on sale for a year or so. [The technology] had matured, but there wasn't the level of competition that there is now. We managed to time our arrival well, and we got into free-to-play at the right time as well. As we know, the industry goes through cycles, and the timing right now is really difficult for launching a new game."

If good luck has played a part in FGOL's rise, much is also down to foresight and the ability to capitalise swiftly on market shifts. Having cut their teeth on more restrictive proprietary 'feature phone' platforms, the studio's founders were quick to embrace the autonomy afforded by selling directly to players on iPhone. They were also among the first to seriously commit to Android gaming, releasing the original *Hungry Shark* on both Apple's and Google's platforms simultaneously in April 2010. A handsome, easy-to-control action game in which players scour a complex, colourful reef for prey, the game found a steady following, but the real breakthrough came with its standalone expansion, *Part 2*, released a few months later.

"We noticed everything in the free chart was pretty rubbish," managing director **Ian Harper** tells us. "So we made *Part 1* free with a link to *Part 2* [in August 2010], which was pretty unique at the time – everybody else was making 'lite' versions of their apps that were kind of crippled." The free version of *Hungry Shark* topped charts in 40 countries, producing a "tidal wave" – Harper's pun, not ours – of sales of *Part 2* and establishing the series firmly in the US.

FGOL also took the *Hungry Shark* name beyond videogames early on, after spotting references to the Discovery Channel's annual Shark Week event (now in its 28th year, with 49 million viewers) in reviews of the original games. It became the event's official app partner in 2012. "We've been able to benefit from Discovery's annual frenzy as the most prominent shark game on mobile, and they've benefited from our large reach on mobile to promote TV programmes on Shark Week," Harper explains. FGOL has

Newzoo to become the mobile game industry's largest single market this year, with \$10 billion in revenue. Harper claims around three per cent of China's population – 46 million people – has downloaded a *Hungry Shark* game.

The series' commanding presence in these territories might not have been possible without Ubisoft, which acquired FGOL in October 2013. "The Chinese market is huge and as an independent developer it was difficult for us to negotiate contracts," Harper says. "Being part of Ubisoft makes it an awful lot easier. We've got offices in Shanghai, and we're able to get good distribution pipelines set up." The publisher has

## AROUND THREE PER CENT OF CHINA'S POPULATION – 46 MILLION PEOPLE – HAS DOWNLOADED A HUNGRY SHARK GAME

since commissioned its own animated Pixar-style shorts featuring *Hungry Shark* characters to promote the release of this year's *Hungry Shark World*, following in the footsteps of *Clash Of Clans* and *Angry Birds*.

**Mindful of the** risks of relying too heavily on one brand, the studio has released a number of new IPs alongside fresh instalments of *Hungry Shark* – foremost among them *Pool Bar*, which featured at the New York iPad launch in April 2010, and *Grabatron*, a B-movie action game in which players control a kleptomaniac UFO. The pressure to maintain a broad portfolio has lessened, however, thanks to the smash success of the free-to-play *Hungry Shark Evolution*. Employing a mixture of advertising and optional payments for premium in-game currency, the game broke 25 million downloads in June 2013, and went onto capture millions of players in South Korea, Japan and China via local partners such as NEXON and KakaoTalk. FGOL's success in China is particularly striking: it's projected by

apparently resisted the urge to interfere with how FGOL is run, though it has invited the studio to work with some of its own brands – an *Assassin's Creed* joke features in one of the new animated shorts, for example. "Their interest was very much that we continue to do what we were doing," Harper says. "They've supported us in all the decisions we've made. For us, it's about being able to go out there with a great idea and take it to market, and Ubisoft helps in that respect."

A component of *Hungry Shark*'s appeal is that the image of a shark enjoys global recognition, but FGOL has run into some unexpected cultural differences while localising *Evolution* and *World*. "The big takeaway was with China – the Chinese audience we polled did particularly go for the more cutesy sharks, which was interesting next to the US, where people were more into violent-looking sharks. That then informed our marketing strategy, which breeds we put in the screenshots." Japanese players, meanwhile, "like lots of text over everything – lots of confusing things happening at the same time".



FGOL's HQ is in Islington, north London. Harper says the chances of breaking into the mobile market are "the same for everyone, really", regardless of budget. Dawson believes console devs could "learn a few tricks" from how mobile games are updated to retain player interest

Harper cautions against being too zealous about tailoring a product to each region, though: "[The markets] each have their individual art styles, and if you start getting too close to one, it doesn't work so well with another." Dawson agrees that making too many tweaks to suit a particular market can result in a "watered-down" experience. "I think the few western games that have done well in far eastern markets have stuck to their guns," he says. "Local companies will do a better job of appealing to local people."

**Since the launch** of the first *Hungry Shark* there's been an explosion in free-to-play monetisation models, many of which tread a thin line between being annoying and exploitative. FGOL has navigated these rough waters more gracefully than most, so what advice would Dawson and his team pass on to other studios? "I'd say each game should do what suits the context," he says, giving the example of the infamous energy mechanic, whereby players are asked to pay to continue playing when their stamina runs out or else return to the game later.

"I know why some developers use energy – to avoid player burnout. But it's one of those mechanics where, if you're going to recommend it to a friend, you might say, 'It's good, but it keeps kicking me out.' Because so much of our success with *Hungry Sharks* is due to word-of-mouth recommendations, we're quite sensitive to that kind of thing. So we think a simple approach to monetisation is sensible for these games. We want to spread the word far and wide."

Like most of the bigger mobile developers, FGOL also derives a considerable and growing proportion of its revenues from in-game advertising. In *Evolution*, you can watch a video to earn gems, the game's premium currency (you can also make a purchase in the game's store to disable adverts completely). Discussing the

advertising sector at large, Harper paints an intimidating picture of the scale required to earn a decent return. "To give you an idea of the maths, you might make a cent for every person playing on a particular day by showing them ads. So while 10,000 players might only make you a hundred dollars a day, once you get up into the hundreds of thousands it adds up."

However, for all that, Dawson feels that truly worthy new games will always rise to the top. "I wouldn't get too bogged down in monetisation, in what everybody else is doing," he suggests. "I would just be original, keep it simple, and I sincerely believe that if your game is good, people will notice. Quality, simplicity

fuelled by emerging regions and evergreen demand for more powerful handsets. "There's a big replacement market on mobile, and not everybody has upgraded to smartphones yet," he says. "You can see where the hardware is going – screens are gradually getting bigger, and we're approaching last-console-generation specs. By 2019, 2020 they reckon we'll be where the current console generation is. Plus, 4G networks are rolling out, so latency is coming down." FGOL is "fascinated" by the advent of virtual reality gaming on mobile, he adds, but feels it's too early to get involved for now.

The industry and Future Games Of London have evolved dramatically since 2009, but the

### "BE ORIGINAL, AND KEEP IT SIMPLE. I SINCERELY BELIEVE THAT IF YOUR GAME IS GOOD, PEOPLE WILL NOTICE"

and originality. There's still a chance. It's not as bad as people say."

FGOL's release rate has slowed over the past two years, despite growing from 35 staff in 2013 to 55. It's instead devoted resources to servicing the *Hungry Shark* games, with *Evolution* attracting millions of players every day despite its age. Harper has no plans to stop development of new IP, though. "Everyone can contribute ideas for an existing game or for a new one," he enthuses. "We like concepts that can be enjoyed by anyone, no matter their age, gender or culture. Sometimes we look to films to identify popular interests we could bring some new flavour to. It's thinking about what we see out there in the world and taking a distinctive stance on it."

Looking at the mobile business at large, Harper anticipates continued strong growth

basic rule of engagement is the same: keep moving. If FGOL is a bigger fish nowadays, the pond has also expanded, and with thousands of apps hitting Android and iOS every month, there's no telling what will steal the spotlight. Harper points to up-and-coming Chinese, Japanese and Korean developers as possible trend-setters. "Are we going to see PC online games becoming a thing on mobile in the west, the way they are in China? Car games in Japan are a big section of the market there – that doesn't seem to have spread worldwide as easily as some of the other concepts from China or Korea. MOBAs could potentially break out worldwide. They're very different markets, but you do wonder if something's going to come out of Korea or China and just completely blow our minds away." ■

- ① Evolution was a significant upgrade, adding more fantastical sharks alongside reworked 3D visuals.
- ② A party-based RPG with crafting elements, *Little Raiders* attracted warm but not rapturous responses.
- ③ Grabatron is a shallow but nevertheless entertaining one-off. You hurl objects around with your UFO's claw.
- ④ Humour has come to the fore in *Hungry Shark World*, as FGOL reaches out to overseas audiences



# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

### Hitman PS4

We've barely had time to fully explore Sapienza, and now a trip to Marrakesh is on the cards. Io-Interactive has somehow topped even episode two's daunting scale, but while there's plenty to see in this technically dazzling space, it doesn't feel quite so cohesive as the first two episodes. Its areas feel compartmentalised in a way that makes proceedings feel more staccato than silky, but that won't stop us making good on a bit of carefully planned violence.

### Battlefield 4 PS4

With *Battlefield 1*'s announcement, we fired up *Battlefield 4* for old time's sake. Clunky squad-creation tools may feel increasingly archaic, and its once-astonishing visuals are now starting to lose some of their sheen, but once you're up and running, there's still little to compare to a big old 64-player Conquest match. While the number of players still committed to the game continues to dwindle, there's life in the old dogtags yet.

### Drop 7 iOS

After several years of concerted effort, and lots of near misses, our *Drop 7* scoreboard is now finally crowned with a high score in excess of a million. All that time spent sneaking games into every spare crack of the day has resulted in grandmaster-like forward planning and speed, but fending off each game's inevitable collapse is tough for even the most committed players. Now, of course, we're considering retirement.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

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# Time after time

As a descriptor, 'retro' has always been unhelpfully vague. Sure, for a time it became synonymous with the kind of reimagined 8bit visuals that have risen to prominence in recent years, but as developers co-opt nostalgia in ever more diverse ways, the term is becoming increasingly nebulous.

That fact couldn't be illustrated more plainly than in this month's Play section. Take *Doom* (p100): here, Id Software has created the best instalment of the legendary FPS series yet, one that brilliantly captures the spirit of the first two games. But while aspects of it, such as its weapon wheel and a focus on brutal fun over narrative, might feel anachronistic among today's crop of shooters, the studio has taken *Doom*'s core ideas and applied several layers of polished innovation that make the finished article feel thoroughly modern.

*Overwatch* (p104) is less obviously tethered to the past in gameplay terms, but its diverse roster of idiosyncratic brawlers references the more profoundly

differentiated character classes of yore. Three Fields comes at things from another angle, hewing *Dangerous Golf* (p108) from *Burnout*'s crash junctions and presenting its destructive putting just as brashly. For PlatinumGames, the solution is to simply toss teenage turtles into its *Transformers* engine, and the results in *Mutants In Manhattan* (p110) disappoint.

*Shadow Of The Beast* (p118), meanwhile, takes a similar tack to Id, reworking the essence of a cherished classic into something that both references the original and overhauls it for modern tastes. But while Heavy Spectrum has a good go at it, and evidently reveres its subject matter, too much of the game feels dated and out of touch.

While 'retro' remains a difficult term to pin down, then, it's clear that the most successful attempts to reuse old ideas revise the past, rather than simply revisit it.



# Doom

**B**e careful what you wish for. The otherwise positive review of the original *Doom* in issue seven of *Edge* signed off with a longing to do more than repetitively plough bullets and plasma into enemies, and posited a game in which you communicate or even form alliances with the opposition. The musing was put forward in the context of another time – the review also explained the nature of shareware and applauded Id's bulletin-board-trading-driven marketing coup – but looking at it in 2016, it doesn't feel quite as contrary as it once appeared.

In the years since the original *Doom*'s release, developers set about answering the request enthusiastically, justifying the fodder you mow down by filling shooters with set-pieces, character and pathos. However, for better or worse, increasingly believable interactions, complex relationships and heavy-handed moralising have seen the genre gravitate away from the silly, undiluted entertainment of early story-driven shooters. Soaked in blood, grinning wildly and seeking to upend an entire genre, the new *Doom* emerges into a rather more po-faced landscape.

There is a plot of sorts, and even a couple of characters, but they'll rarely bother you. Doom Slayer, the latest variation on the series' perennial mute Marine protagonist, telegraphs his own disdain for any momentum-sapping storyline by smashing almost every mission-critical object he encounters, even when implored not to. Instead, the focus is placed on the most satisfying firstperson combat loop since *Halo*, built around a system designed to pull you into the thick of the action and keep you there. Inflict enough damage on an enemy and they'll flash blue to signal a staggered state. Move in closer and the flashing turns to orange, meaning that you're now in range to perform a Glory Kill – gratifying melee dismemberments that see your unfortunate target explode in a shower of gore, ammo and health items. This jocund setup facilitates a reversal of the cover-based caution we've grown used to and encourages you to barrel into the middle of the fight with all the unchecked surety of Francis Begbie. It's a game drenched in childish, exorbitant machismo, and is no less appealing for it.

There's nuance within all that aggression, however. Performing a Glory Kill closes the gap between you and the enemy instantly, and also makes you temporarily invulnerable for the two seconds each animation takes to play out. As a result, you'll quickly learn to use them as an additional safety net, staggering a weaker enemy without killing them in order to use the Glory Kill to avoid a swipe from larger, more dangerous Hellspawn. Enemies don't stay staggered for long, so you'll quickly make these calculations in the heat of the moment, adding to the tooth-and-nail brutality of each fight as you stay just a step or two ahead of death.

**Developer** Id Software  
**Publisher** Bethesda  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

**It encourages you to barrel into the middle of the fight with all the unchecked surety of Francis Begbie**



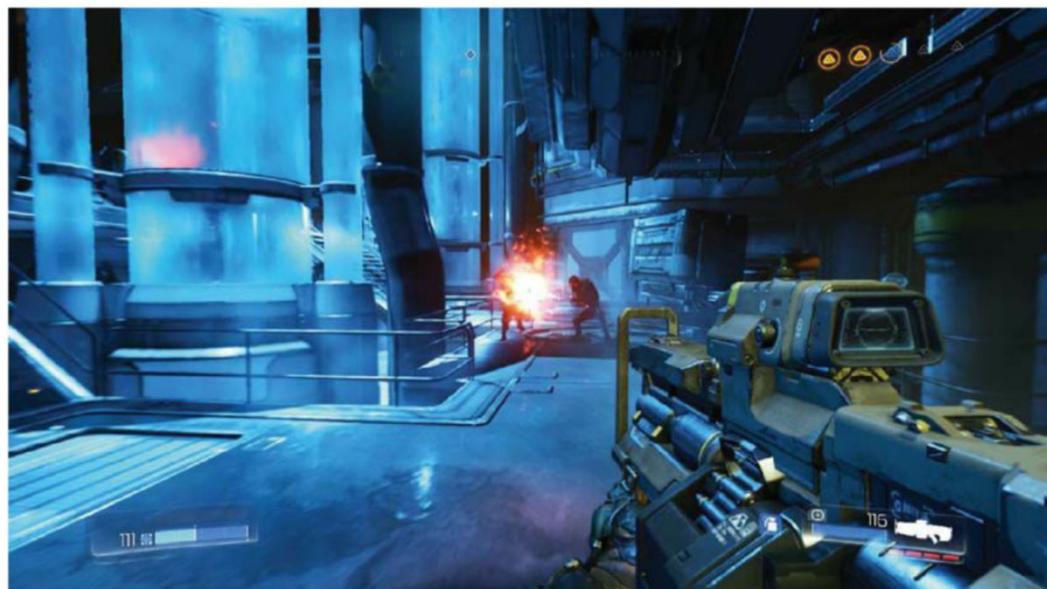
Id aligns *Doom*'s overall pacing with its combat, too, maintaining a taut and rapid gait for the most part. Even so, level design returns to the labyrinthian, non-linear concepts of the first two games, Id riddling every location with secrets and multiple routes, setting out a criss-crossing path in which you backtrack and open new areas with coloured keys. If you stay on the critical path, enemies are thrown at you regularly, locking down rooms until a computerised announcement confirms that an area's demonic presence is within an "acceptable" threshold. If you choose to explore more conceretedly, you'll find more breathing room. And it's worth taking the time to poke around, since you'll often find weapons earlier than you would otherwise, as well as the various items you'll need to make quicker progress through Doom Slayer's new upgrade system. Argent Cells permanently increase your health, armour and ammo caps, while Praetor tokens – collected from the bodies of fallen allies – let you improve your suit in five different areas: environmental resistance, area-scanning technology, grenade and equipment efficacy, power-up potency, and dexterity.

**Further to that**, you can augment your basic weapons (an armory that includes versions of every favourite from the series) with up to two modifications, each of which then have their own individual upgrade paths. And all of that's before you encounter the Rune Trials, which are partitioned challenges – kill a certain number of enemies only using vertical Glory Kills, for example, or collect items along a tough parkour route within an incredibly tight time limit – that bestow the titular stones upon you. You can equip up to three at once, and each one further modifies the game with perks such as keeping enemies in a staggered state for longer or increasing the range in which you'll absorb pickups. And, perhaps unsurprisingly given all of the above, you can make those effects even more potent by completing related challenges. It all proves a little confusing at first, but once you're into the swing of things, everything begins to make sense and somehow holds together.

Irrespective of whether you take the time to weed out every secret, and thereby maximise Doom Slayer's potential, during your first playthrough, or save it for a second one, the game quickly introduces its full cast of enemies. Updated classics are joined by a handful of new horrors, including the tough Hell Razer – which fires a glowing red energy beam across long distances – and the teleporting Summoner, which performs much the same function as the Arch-vile did in previous games. Now absent, the Arch-vile is a keenly felt loss given that it was one of the series' most terrifying presences – its replacement can occasionally be more of an irritation than a challenge – but overall the bestiary ►



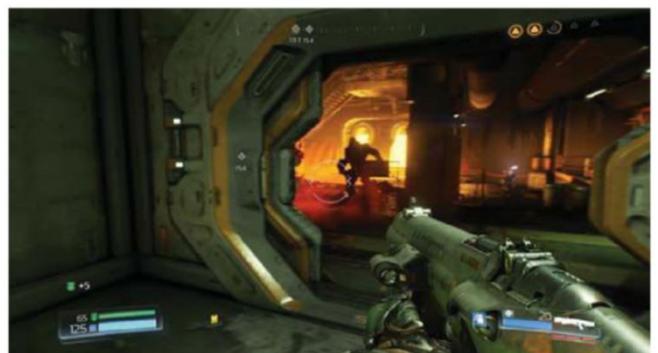
**ABOVE** When ammo's running low, *Doom* encourages you to charge forward and melee enemies rather than retreat, and switching weapons on the fly adds to the relentless sense of momentum.  
**LEFT** Occasionally, an enemy or two will prove elusive and you'll be forced to spend a few minutes searching for them in order to progress. Usually, though, nothing will escape the main bloodbath



**BETWEEN** Id's artists have created an aesthetic that's wholly *Doom* while still feeling modern. It never strays too far from sci-fi and fantasy clichés, but it looks so good in the process that you won't mind much



**ABOVE** While *Doom* is grotesquely gory, it retains its forebears' irreverent sense of humour. There's plenty of horror, but it's always delivered joyfully. Scenes like these flesh out the story, so it's worth hunting around for them





Doom offers is formidable and diverse. That diversity forces you to use the full spread of the weapons available to you, and playing efficiently requires you to continually swap tools using *Doom*'s anachronistic weapon selection wheel – hold down the relevant button or key and the battle slows to a treacly pace as you make your choice, or simply tap it and flick the analogue stick or mouse in the relevant direction once you've memorised their positions.

Enemy AI isn't particularly smart, but there are enough differing behaviours to make battles feel unpredictable. Imps will dash behind you or over to your flank while climbing up walls, Pink Demons will charge directly for you, and Revenants will leap into the air to unleash volleys of rockets. This mixture of patterns creates a complex tapestry from within which you're able to chain Glory Kills and weapon executions. If you find yourself kiting, you've missed the point of the game entirely.

**The exceptional, cleansing** nature of this thrilling rhythm makes it all the more disappointing when Id abandons the ad-hoc beauty of its free-flowing combat system for *Doom*'s boss encounters. Rather than improvise, here you simply memorise rigid attack patterns, jump over or duck beneath walls of fire and energy, and slowly chip away at colossal health bars in the provided windows of opportunity. In these encounters Id shifts focus to projectile avoidance over gunplay and, despite the undeniable spectacle, they feel drab as a result – a crashing misstep in the case of the returning classic bosses.

Similarly, multiplayer feels rather flat in comparison to the bulk of the campaign. There are, however, some



#### KIT WAD

*SnapMap*'s welcoming accessibility is remarkable, but it comes at a cost. You'll be up and running in under 15 minutes thanks to a series of quick tutorials and a user-friendly, icon-driven interface that makes building levels, complicated logic chains, and even mini-games a relative doddle. There are hundreds of pre-fabricated components to choose from, *Doom*'s full bestiary, and clever additions such as item-spawn and AI-conductor nodes, which populate your level for you based on some simple slider-controlled settings. But *SnapMap*'s smart streamlining undermines its potential power as you have to build within the restrictions set out by the pieces made available to you – a problem illustrated by the samey nature of the user-created levels available at the time of writing.

Some of the vistas you encounter are remarkable, and seeing the clouds and dust roll past this clifftop perch was enough to make us stop in order to soak it in. They're often views of areas you'll eventually visit, too

smart ideas here. In Soul Harvest, for instance, opposing teams must take and hold the souls of the enemies they slay, allowing players to steal them back again if they can kill the collector quickly enough. In Freeze Tag you'll spend as much time thawing out allies as you do putting opponents on ice. And in Warpath you're asked to defend a moving capture point, meaning that you must continually adjust your strategy in accordance with the ever-changing defensive opportunities and weak points.

In most multiplayer modes you can summon one of a selection of *Doom*'s larger demons, too, laying waste to opponents for a time in the most terrifying manner possible. Even so, weapons feel less powerful against human opponents, and the whole thing moves along at such a click that it's often difficult to read, much less appreciate, any given situation. And while it draws as much from *Quake* as it does the early *Dooms*, this section of the game lacks the standout personality of its singleplayer counterpart – a problem shared by the game's *SnapMap* editor, which is hobbled by its reliance on pre-fabricated parts (see 'Kit WAD').

But in the midst of a multiplayer mode that feels old-fashioned and outpaced by modern contemporaries, and a level-editing suite that panders a little too much to modern tastes, Id has created the most thrilling shooter campaign in more than a decade. The studio has managed to seamlessly marry hefty doses of nostalgia and innovation, and *Doom*'s shimmering, bombastic combat is as absorbing as it is revelatory. In short, the time for talk is over.

## Post Script

Interview: **Marty Stratton**, executive producer

**A**fter some quiet time to let the adrenaline settle, we get together with Id Software executive producer **Marty Stratton** to talk about the studio's pulse-raising rebuke to an industry that felt like it was leaving this sort of thing behind.

**The game took a long time to make – how do you feel now that it's finally out?**

Great! We spent that Friday, the entire weekend and a lot of Monday literally just watching people play the game on Twitch. It's a fascinating window into how people experience your game, and I haven't experienced that with a launch before, so it was really cool.

**Were you nervous about releasing a game with an old-school backbone into the modern FPS market?**

You're always a bit nervous with any game, just because you've only shown it to such a small sample of people. But I was more anxious about other things, like the way the upgrades work, the runes, and even the story to an extent. I'm really happy to see people enjoy the way that we approached storytelling in the game.

**Doom Slayer isn't particularly compliant throughout – is that a nod to players who would likely prize action over narrative?**

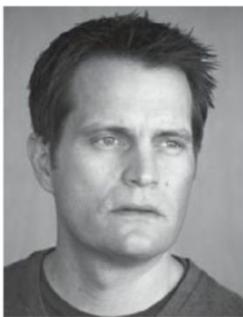
Absolutely. If there was a mission statement, it was that players aren't coming to a Doom game for the story, they're coming to blow things up and kill demons. That fed into how we approached the opening: you have a gun in your hand within the first few seconds. But subtler things, too – that scene where Dr Hayden starts talking to you and you grab the monitor and throw it to the side. We wanted to say, 'A Doom story is something you push to the side.' You can invest in it, but you're not just going to sit around and take orders.

**Was it tough to balance the game's downtime with such intense combat?**

I have to credit our design group, and everyone on the team, because we just played it a lot. We hit a couple of milestones through development where you're making a level where it's like, 'That's it, that's really good. More stuff like that.' We're lucky to have a couple of guys leading our design team, Jerry and Jason, who have both been Id designers for over ten years. They're both big *Doom* fans – they understand that balance.

**In multiplayer, the weapons feel less hefty, which is a shame given their strong presence in the campaign.**

I know what you're saying, and I think there are a couple of contributing factors. Another part of making players competitive right off the bat is that we wanted



**"If there was a mission statement, it was that players aren't coming to a Doom game for the story"**



them to have longer engagements – a kind of dance, not just run into a space and get hit by a rocket or a vortex and you're dead instantly. We wanted it to be that when players get shot, they have an opportunity at that point. I think that probably contributes to that feeling. Also, one of the things that we spent an immense amount of time on is enemy hit reactions, and that's part of what makes the game feel so visceral and connected. When you hit an enemy with a gun, you *really* feel it. But you can't blow a multiplayer guy's arm off or do the same level of hit reaction and force them to step back when they're hit by a Super Shotgun.

**Why remove the weapon wheel in multiplayer?**

There were several contributing factors there, but the biggest one was that we wanted to put people on a more level playing field out of the gate. Up until *Doom*, *Quake III* was my favourite game we've made, but there's an aspect of it in the way a skilled player can absolutely lock down a map by controlling weapons, and it's what a competitive player likes about it. We made a conscious decision to try to give players more of a head start right out of spawn. I still feel like it was a good decision. I know there's a lot of discussion about it, but we're considering changes and updates as we go forward to give people what they want to play.

**And how about the bosses? Despite the spectacle, the more prescribed nature of their design can jar against the game's freeform combat.**

Y'know, bosses are hard. I'm looking forward to doing more on them, because I think we got our feet on their ground and they're good, but there's a part of me that... honestly, I'd love to continue working on them. But we don't do anything where you're on rails – we never put you in a helicopter and force you to shoot from a mounted position. I think that the bosses are fun, and what works for me is that they're a nice pace-breaker in a game where you don't do a lot of set-piecey type stuff.

**While SnapMap is extremely user-friendly, the trade-off is that it constrains creativity to a degree.**

SnapMap is one of those things that we're going to feed like nothing else. I totally get the sentiment, and I understand exactly where people are coming from who've had more of a mod or level-building experience. And it's a mission of ours to really close that gap as best as possible. I feel bad because I can't go into a lot of specifics on future plans, but we want *Doom* to have legs for a very long time, and a big part of that is continuing to support SnapMap and the people who are making content with as many new assets, features and functionality as we can. ■

# Overwatch

We're about to pick Mercy, Overwatch's valkyrie-styled healer, when we spot the tooltip on the character-select screen warning that our team has no builders. We're on defence for this match, tasked with holding a series of capture points from our opponents, so fortifications are important. Nervously, we hover our cursor over Torbjörn, the Scandinavian dwarf who has caused us so much trouble in our first hours with *Overwatch*. Early on, he feels almost unbeatable: he can build a single, static turret, whack it with his hammer to power it up, then waddle off, gun in hand, to pick off the stragglers while his sentry covers a capture point, racking up kill after kill. Aim for him, and the turret will get you; focus on the turret, and Torbjörn can repair it with a couple of thwacks from his hammer. The match starts and we start to feel bad as we hit a 20-kill streak without even trying. Yes, truly, Torbjörn is unbeatable.

Suddenly, we're dead. The killcam shows a Tracer player using three Blink teleports to close space on us in a flash. She activates her Ultimate ability, throwing a sticky grenade at us and the turret. Then she uses her rewind skill to retreat. We die, but aren't chastened. We're elated. Now we know how to beat Torbjörn.

Though seemingly teaching little – its tutorial covers the fundamentals and is over in a flash – *Overwatch* is a masterful instructor. You learn through play, gathering ideas organically, even accidentally. There is helper text that for once is worthy of the name, post-death popups offering advice on coping with the character that killed you, or how better to survive with your own. The result is that players become experts not by poring over wiki entries and archive footage, but through their wins and losses, their kills and deaths.

Experience is king, then, but not in the contemporary sense. While you earn XP and level up, all that will ever change as you rise up the ranks is your stash of loot. There are no fancy attachments, no high-end guns, no skill points: unlockables are graffiti tags, dialogue snippets, emotes and character skins. Every single hero, weapon, ability, map and mode in the game is unlocked from the off, and all post-launch content will be free. While refreshing from a business perspective, it's of tremendous benefit for Blizzard's design teams too, since there's no need to balance the action around a set of haves and have-nots. And to the player it sends, loud and clear, the message that if they are failing, it isn't because they haven't ground out the highest-level gear. The answer to any given problem lies somewhere on the character-select screen.

It's an intimidating menu at first, admittedly. Twenty-one heroes are divided into four basic types – Attack, Defence, Tank and Support – but with tremendous variety even within their category, both in functionality and appearance. The Defence section has

**Developer/publisher** Blizzard  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

two snipers, one a classical Japanese assassin, the other a French mercenary who seems to have just walked off the set of *Mass Effect*. Two others use turrets – Bastion transforms into one, while our dwarven friend Torbjörn fashions his with a hammer. Then there's Junkrat, a Mad Max extra with a fine line in bouncing grenades, and Mei, a coy Asian girl who encases herself, her enemies and the scenery in large blocks of ice.

That diversity extends right across the cast, from a Wild West gunslinger to a robot ninja, a pro gamer in a mech suit to a gorilla from the moon, a shotgun-wielding grim reaper to a rollerblading DJ/healer. That the game hangs together visually is remarkable; that it should cohere so well in design terms, unfathomable. All of the launch characters are a delight in their own way and can be so powerful as to seem broken. But there are counters for everything and no match is unwinnable, whatever the circumstances, since you can switch heroes by returning to your home base at any point.

**Hero switching** is *Overwatch*'s beating heart, its implications pulsing out across the entire game's design. It's why every character is unlocked from the start. It's why the modes are built around the concept of shifting momentum. It's why seemingly lost causes can be spun back in your favour by a couple of canny changes and some smart teamwork. It's why there's no mid-match scoreboard, signalling to players that individual performances don't matter. It's about winning or not, and no one is going to care about your 30 kills if you end up on the losing side.

Crucially, it's why Blizzard can get away with what, by modern terms at least, is a relative lack of content. A dozen maps and just four game modes is, on paper, a paltry offering, but the heroes are so different in their locomotion and toolsets that each of them moves and fights on these multilayered, branching maps in a different way. And given there are two teams of six players, each switching heroes as the situation demands, no two matches are ever going to be exactly the same.

Designers speak of a game's possibility space, and *Overwatch*'s feels something very close to endless. That's not to say it wouldn't benefit from having a little more meat on its bones. Nor does it mean that Blizzard has nailed the game's balance on day one: certain Ultimate abilities could do with dialling down, while some characters could do with a leg up. A few little niggles on the console version – including one prompt for you to tap Y or N on your non-existent keyboard – have snuck through the porting process. But the flaws are minor and fixes will surely come given Blizzard's past form for post-launch support. The future, then, looks bright indeed. At launch, *Overwatch* will simply have to settle for being the finest multiplayer shooter for a generation.

That the game hangs together visually is remarkable; that it should cohere so well in design terms, unfathomable





**LEFT** Despite dialogue lines being locked behind the loot system, ad-hoc spoken exchanges inflect the cast with plenty of personality. One bravely mocks German tank Reinhardt about his love life. **BELLOW** Lucio offers allies in the vicinity a constant health top-up or speed boost, and he's a capable attacker too – his weapon's a little weedy, but a sonic knockback pushes foes away from objectives, and often to their dooms



**ABOVE** Map designs are as diverse as the cast, taking you from a snowy industrial facility to Japanese temple gardens, a Hollywood movie lot to futuristic Hong Kong. It has no right to work as effectively as it does



**Soldier: 76's** Ultimate racks up kills and is often a strong contender for the Play Of The Game video shown to players after a match. Ultimates are too frequent a sight at the moment, though ►

## Post Script

Interview: Jeff Kaplan, creative director

The final months of a game's development are a tiring period, but *Overwatch* creative director **Jeff Kaplan** isn't exactly resting up. In addition to monitoring the reams of player feedback Blizzard has amassed since launch, he, like us, has had a few too many late nights playing the thing. Here, he reflects on the relative merits of a passionate community, the key decisions that led to the creation of a very different online FPS, and where it might be headed in the future.

**You've made an online shooter with no deathmatch, no scoreboards and no gear game. Was it a conscious decision to make something that rejected genre standards, or did it just happen organically?**

It was very conscious. We wanted to, on one hand, embrace what we thought was special and magical about the FPS. It's not like it was an untapped genre: some of the greatest games of all time have been FPSes. But at the same time we wanted to bring something new to the genre. Otherwise, why make a game? If we didn't have something new to say, we shouldn't do it.

There were some things we really wanted to look at. In particular we wanted to make a game about heroes, not classes. We felt tantamount to it all was that you would work together. To get the right team vibe going, there were certain decisions that needed to be made, in terms of game modes and user interface, that led to where we're at now with *Overwatch*.

It's been amazing to see so much praise about things like the decision to not display a K:D ratio, or the fact that we excluded Team Deathmatch. Because when we first announced the game, very few people got to play it, and there was immediate demand for those things. There was this moment where we needed to prove it to players. Let us give you the game and play it, and hopefully you'll understand. I think there's a collective understanding now of why we made those decisions.

**Yet there are still calls for a deathmatch mode. Surely you've gone too far down the road to put one in now?**

Yes and no. We don't feel like deathmatch is about what *Overwatch* is about. I always cite characters like Mercy or Lucio: they don't really have a place if we create a game mode that's just about killing other players. But we're trying to create a lot of exploration space, and there are two elements we're open to providing players with — I don't know how to phrase this — almost their own creativity outlet. There's the Weekly Brawl, where we feel we can break all the rules and try a bunch of stuff. If we ever stumble across something that's amazing, it could become a core part of the game. The other place is our custom game feature — [perhaps] we could give players a deathmatch mode in custom games.



**"We wanted to make a game about heroes, not classes. We felt tantamount to it all was that you would work together"**



But when it comes to the core game, there's a vision that makes *Overwatch* tick. And while it might not seem like it on the surface, there are certain things that work very well for the heroes and the gameplay, and there are certain things that work directly against them. We see that most often when people bring up new game modes.

**What differences are you seeing between the way the game is played on console and PC?**

It's too early to tell. We had a much longer beta period on PC than on console, so it's hard to look at the stats right now. The thing we keep our eye on most on console is aim assist. That's very tricky to tune — there's a sweet spot to where the game feels good; it becomes more of an expression of what you were trying to do as a player, versus feeling too strong and like it's playing the game for you. We ran a thorough internal beta, and did a lot of consulting with our sister companies who have a lot of experience on console.

The other thing we keep an eye out for on console — and on PC as well, but we have a special caution for the console versions — is anything that's AI-driven that shoots at you. We expect them to be effective, but we don't want to see a drastic difference in effectiveness in Torbjörn's turret on console versus on PC. We're not seeing anything like that currently, but if we do we'll tune the game differently. We're not bull-headed about it; we'll make the right calls for the different platforms.

**You're bombarded with feedback from all angles. How do you make sense of it all?**

There's a feedback triangle for the health of a game. At the top is the loud player voice, which comes to us in various ways: emails, Reddit, forums, social media. But we can triangulate that with our own feelings — as players as well as devs — and actual data. It's wrong to assume any one of those things is absolutely correct; we like to use those three to balance against each other.

For example, right now players are saying they feel McCree is overpowered. Rather than immediately change him, we put it through its paces. How do we feel about him, as the *Overwatch* team? Then let's look at the statistics to see how he's doing in the game itself. It's not like all three of those things need to say the same thing, but it's good to have a system of checks and balances so we're not rashly making decisions based on the loudest voice. We're not going, like, "Oh my god, this Reddit thread got upvoted 2,000 times and it says 'Remove Genji from the game!'" We're not removing Genji from the game! But you would be doing yourself a disservice as a game developer if you weren't constantly listening to community feedback. It's the most valuable thing we have. ■

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# Dangerous Golf

**F**or better and worse, *Dangerous Golf* is exactly the game you expect it to be. Built by a team of ex-Criterion devs, it's a game that owes a large debt to the studio's most famous series. It is to the sport what *Burnout*'s Crash mode was to racing: tangentially related at best, with a similar unswerving focus on explosive carnage. The action may be on a smaller scale, but the sheer volume of onscreen objects makes it look every bit as spectacular, if not more so. Squeeze the right bumper and time will slow to a crawl, allowing you to witness champagne corks thudding into a tower of goblets, your ball's fiery glow lighting them up as they cascade gracefully past the camera. All that's missing is a trilling soprano to celebrate such operatic chaos.

This is a golf game without a swingometer — or even a visible club. Tellingly, the ball is fired from the tee: later you'll gain a laser sight to aim more precisely, but to begin with you rotate the camera with the right stick and flick the left forward to send your ball careening around the room. Curiously, the camera stays static during that first stroke; presumably as you've no way of influencing the shot once it's been hit. That changes once you've knocked down enough objects to trigger a Smashbreaker, whereupon the camera zooms in and you take aim once more, albeit this time with the ability to influence where it goes.

**And boy does** it go, blazing a literal trail through workshops and washrooms, kitchens and alleyways. Pots and pans clang and crash, while paint tins spew their contents across lushly carpeted floors and ornate china. Hit the pumps on a garage forecourt and they'll explode, though that's never quite as satisfying as toppling one statue into another and then another, a series of marble dominoes quickly reduced to rubble. It's in these moments that the austere realism of the settings begins to make sense: there's a certain mischievous frisson in admiring the messy aftermath. Sure, it might look more like the results of a wrecking ball than a golf ball, but in eschewing cartoonishness, Three Field Entertainment taps into something deliciously transgressive. Destroying a convenience store might not be as tense or carefully orchestrated as a *GTA* heist, but the thrill of the illicit remains.

You can halt the mayhem at any time; indeed, it's sometimes best not to let your Smashbreaker run dry, lest it leaves you with no direct line of sight to the flag for your subsequent putt. Fail to hole out, and half of the damage you've accumulated will be struck off your total. Again, the camera is unmoving, though it will cut to a close shot of the pin as the ball rolls toward it. You'll soon realise this is a conscious compromise, designed to allow for outrageously generous rebounds and ricochets. While your chances of success would be reduced without such assistance, the occasions where

**Developer/publisher**  
Three Fields Entertainment  
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)  
**Release** Out now

**One stage asks you to demolish boxes of oranges without disturbing a multi-tiered gâteau**



## FORE PLAY

There are 97 more medals to unlock in the co-op tour as two players take turns on a single stage to rack up the points. Should player one leave their partner with little to demolish, the objects that need toppling to earn a Smashdown bonus will be reset, making the higher medal targets easier to achieve, and alleviating some of the frustration of a poor first effort. Online options are limited to a simultaneous faceoff between up to eight players, with holes taken from a playlist selected by the host. To avoid delays, the slow-motion Danger Time feature is switched off, which is why it's unwise to rely upon it too much in the singleplayer game. Should anyone take too long to tee off, they'll automatically record a zero score for inactivity.

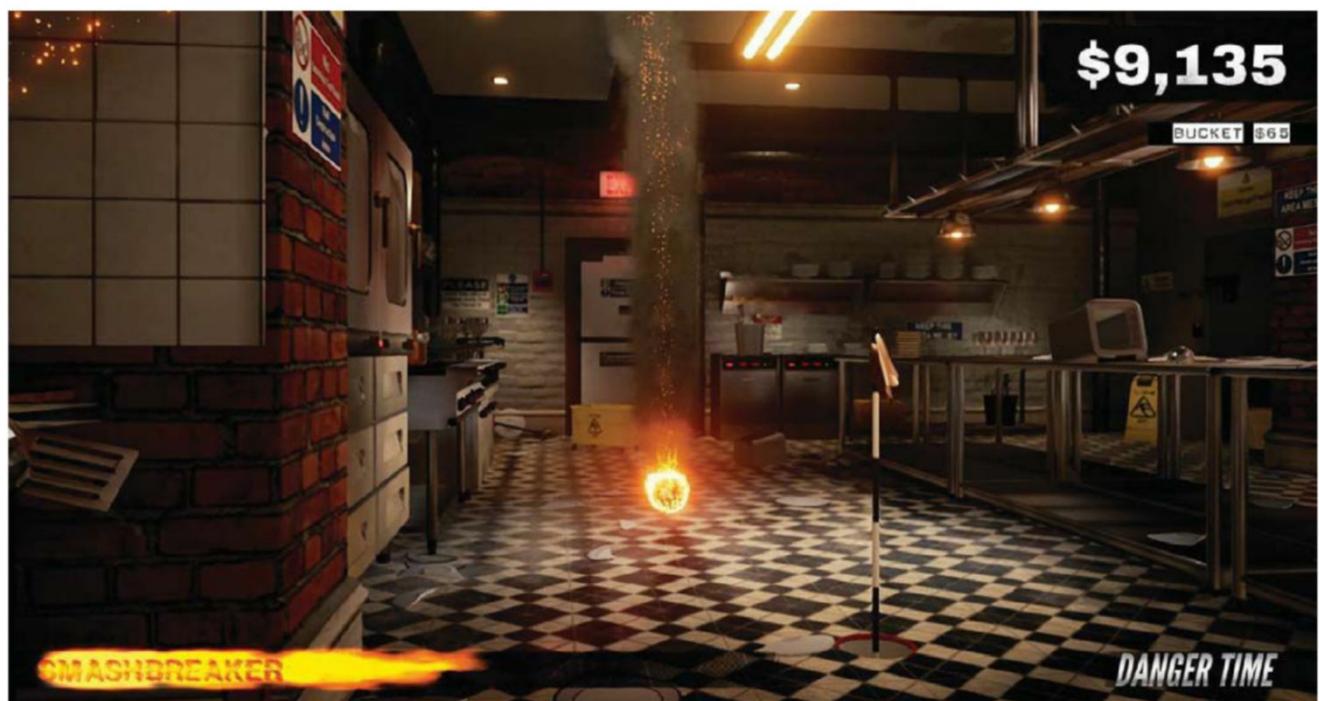
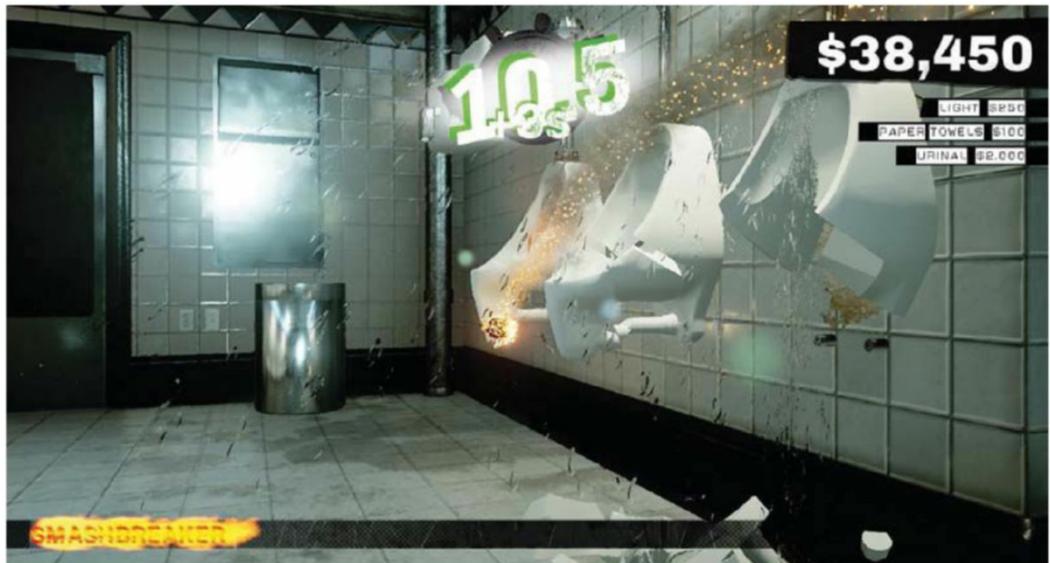
the ball comes to rest on the lip after a moderately overpowered putt are all the more frustrating; likewise when an unfortunate deflection off an object that normally yields to a power shot leaves the ball clattering around an alcove. And while there's a degree of tension as the ball bounces around and you wait to discover whether your tally is about to be boosted or halved, the process is much less exciting than the preceding stroke — the equivalent of *Burnout* asking you to reverse park your vehicle after causing a 20-car pileup.

Then again, after the first few tours (of a generous ten, each with ten holes), you may well appreciate the change of pace. To its credit, Three Fields finds plenty of inventive ways to shake things up. Warp points carry you to new rooms, while glue allows you to stick a succession of shots from one wall to the next, letting you target objects on all sides of a room, or to plot out a route to a distant target. You'll plant bombs and dodge hazardous floors, or even individual objects: one stage asks you to demolish several boxes of oranges without disturbing a multi-tiered chocolate gâteau. The same spaces are repurposed for fresh objectives, though that familiarity becomes a boon: the more you get to know a place, the better placed you are to uncover its secrets.

And *Dangerous Golf* certainly isn't shy of those. It deliberately gives you minimal information, presumably in the hope you'll be surprised at how many ways there are to increase your score. Loading-screen hints clue you in on some of these — such as the fourth-wall shot that sees you bounce the ball off the camera for a small bonus — though they don't give everything away. You might, for example, break a lock on a door to discover that the stage was far more expansive than you'd anticipated. Landing a ball on a trolley or in a wheeled bucket, meanwhile, gives you a Smashbreaker boost with the added bonus of a runaway vehicle to topple more tins or glasses. Stages never reach a Rube Goldberg level of intricacy, though a number encourage you to initiate amusingly sprawling chain reactions, for which you have a front-row seat.

There are trade-offs for all this pandemonium. A plummeting framerate afflicts action on the busiest stages, but less forgivable is the fact that the camera is actively unhelpful at times, swinging wildly as you vainly attempt to steer your ball away from danger, or zooming so close to the ball that you can't see anything else. And the game's appeal as a high-score challenge is diminished by excessively long loading times: few will have the stamina to earn every platinum medal when restarting can take twice as long as a failed attempt. Yet none of these obstacles is quite enough to permanently halt the momentum of this concertedly single-minded game. At heart, *Dangerous Golf* simply wants you to make a big, beautiful mess, and it's an invitation that proves surprisingly hard to resist.

**RIGHT** You can usually push back the clock on timed stages; here, each urinal smashed gives you a few more seconds to play with. Cutting it fine can reap dividends, however: there's a substantial bonus for 'on the buzzer' putts.  
**MAIN** The kitchen is the most frequently revisited setting, refilled each time with different arrangements of foodstuffs, pots and pans, cutlery and tableware.  
**BOTTOM** Although it looks like you could squeeze through the gaps, you'll need to strike a handle to raise the portcullis in the castle entranceway – especially if you want to gain both Smashdown bonuses



**ABOVE** Money flags rise up once you've passed certain score targets, from bronze to platinum. Sink your putts in ascending order of value and you'll earn a bonus, though you'll usually need to make at least one blind putt

# Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants In Manhattan

**W**ell, this is all a bit embarrassing. And not just the early-'90s surf-dude chatter of the protagonists. Upon its announcement, *Mutants In Manhattan* was a delicious prospect, a fourplayer, online-enabled, 3D-cartoon callback to the classic *Turtles In Time* coin-op, made by the best action-game studio on the planet. What it's turned out to be, though, is a shambles.

It is, by a distance, the worst game Platinum has ever made, which isn't especially surprising given how thinly the studio has been spreading itself of late.

*Mutants In Manhattan* arrives just eight months after the release of *Transformers Devastation*, Platinum's previous Activision gig; it's already made a *Star Fox* for Nintendo this year, has a *Nier* game due for Square Enix this winter, and Xbox One exclusive *Scalebound* is out in 2017. Something, somewhere had to give. This is it.

Where the studio has stumbled in the past, it hasn't done so in its mechanics. At the core of every Platinum action game lies a satisfying, tightly designed combat system – one that in some cases is so good players are prepared to overlook a game's more obvious failings. Consider that enviable winning streak broken. There might well be a decent fighting game underneath *Mutants In Manhattan*'s chaotic, frustrating action, but it's impossible to find it on a messy screen filled with enemies that seem designed not to empower a flexible combat system, but prevent you from using it.

Bomb-wielders explode on contact, so must be dispatched with a shuriken throw, as must no end of drones and laser emitters. Another foe throws a bola that wraps around your body, stunning you for a few seconds. It's impossible to stagger all but the weakest opponents, so your offence is constantly interrupted – if not by a punch swung by a foe that can somehow ignore the beating it's taking, then by a drone or projectile; and if not by a drone or projectile, then by an AI ally dashing in with the killing blow before you can mine the potential depths of the combo system.

Well, 'ally' is an odd description. While your three accomplices are quick to revive you when you're downed – a key mechanic here, since a timer countdown will boot a player out of the action for a spell if they're not picked up quickly – the rest of the time they're useless, running about randomly, attacking inefficiently, wasting cooldown-controlled skills on the rank and file, jumping straight off ledges, or running around in circles until you show them where to go. There's online co-op too, though we're yet to find a single partner, the week-of-release arrival of the review code doing nothing to stop word spreading of this being a bit of a stinker.

Still, there are flashes of potential here. The four cast members play slightly differently, and we were intrigued by Donatello's bo combos, including a pleasingly ridiculous launcher that propels foes

**Developer** PlatinumGames  
**Publisher** Activision  
**Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4 (tested),  
Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

**It's impossible to stagger all but the weakest opponents, so your offence is constantly interrupted**



## NO MORE HEROES

With four onscreen players meaning no single combatant is able to use the core combat system to the fullest, it's little surprise that Platinum has expanded the possibility space beyond traditional light/heavy air combos. Your cooldown-governed skills – damaging spin combos, sumo punch flurries, a disco-dance move leased from Insomniac – certainly provide spectacle, but it's a shame all your available moves, chosen in a loadout menu before the start of a mission, are shared among all characters, robbing the cast of individuality. Out in the field, green orb collectibles offer single use buffs (energy drinks) and burst damage (rocket launchers), with some predictable nods to the source material, such as pizzas serving as health pickups.

straight up off the screen for a second or two. It would be a fine crowd-control tool were we able to use it before a partner swoops in to land the killing blow. Skills – mapped to the face buttons and activated by first squeezing the left trigger – are powerful, can be upgraded, and often remind you of other, better games. Summon a giant baseball bat that knocks an enemy flying and shaves a hefty chunk off their health bar and you can't help but think of Clover's *God Hand* and wonder at which point it all went so horribly wrong. Meanwhile, charms afford passive buffs, an intriguing idea rendered pointless by the near-constant need to use your shuriken. With just one charm slot open on Normal difficulty, you'll take our Rapid Shuriken perk from our cold, dead hands.

**Other slots unlock** on higher difficulties, but we don't foresee ever experiencing them unless it's part of some cruel and unusual punishment. Mission design is a phoned-in succession of fetch, carry and kill quests marred by random enemy spawns and seemingly random objective placement, the latter asking that you criss-cross dreary environments, the former presumably meant to break the pace but instead slowing things down even further. Frequently you'll need to defuse a bomb, which involves holding a button down while your character is crouched down, immobile. Like clockwork, when the completion meter is half full, a group of enemies will spawn from the ether and start to fling bombs at you. Your AI allies will ignore them.

And if you thought *Transformers Devastation* reused its environments too liberally, try this for size. The third level takes you down to the sewers; the fourth to the city rooftops. Then you're in the sewers again, but they're flooded. Then you're back on top of skyscrapers, but this time it's dark and windy. During your second trip below ground, the Turtles' newscaster pal April pipes up over the comms: "Huh, it's like there's no end to this place." There is really no need to rub it in.

Boss battles, meanwhile, draw on TMNT's long history, though we must have missed the graphic novel where Bebop, Rocksteady et al were magically endowed with seven health bars and an enrage mode that kicks in when they're down to their last two. One even has two sets of seven health bars, with failure on the second form's enrage mode kicking you back to the start of the first fight. There are flashes of smart design – the fight with the shark-like Armaggon is a rare highlight – but attack cues are hard to pick out amid the chaos, and even while you're deftly avoiding Armaggon's toxic water attacks it's hard to escape the fear it's Platinum, not you, that's just jumped the shark. The result isn't the rebirth of a former giant, but a warning to a current one. Platinum needs to take a little more care when it comes to picking its battles.



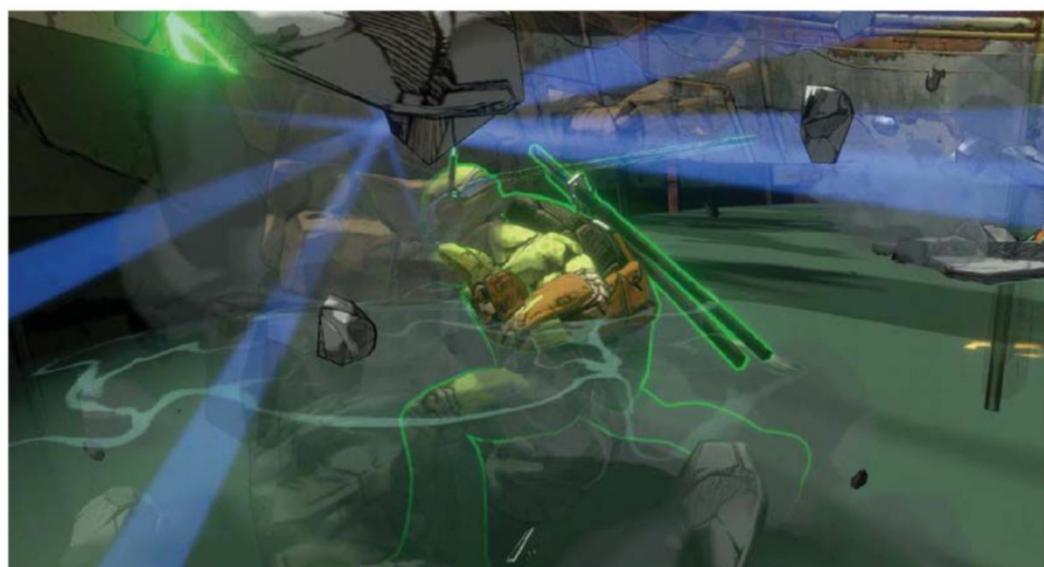
**ABOVE** An early level set in the subway network has you dodge moving trains, fighting foes on top of them, and boarding stationary ones in order to fast-travel to the next station, which looks just like the previous one



**MAIN** You'll return to these city rooftops later on, where the wind has picked up to movement-affecting strengths. Hold the button down and, somehow, your shell becomes a parachute, helping you cover longer distances.

**ABOVE** The Armaggon fight is a rare highlight, though that doesn't mean its reappearance during a late-game boss rush is especially welcome. Some fights change on subsequent playthroughs – Rocksteady turns up to assist Bebop, for instance.

**LEFT** Objective completion sees the HUD fade away and the screen flick between static poses of each of the four turtles. If you're in combat, great; if you were defusing a bomb, not so much



# Homefront: The Revolution

**P**erhaps we're not cut out to be a revolutionary figurehead. It did, after all, take us 17 attempts to escape that stash room, and nine to clamber up to that gangway. Whenever we invite our fellow guerrillas to accompany us on a mission, they either sprint away or block our exit route. Sure, we managed to liberate that enemy outpost at the second attempt, but you didn't see the first try when we reloaded our weapon instead of turning that gas valve. And let's not talk about the incident with the bike. Oh, and could we have some of those boots that supposedly make 25 per cent less noise before we head out? The Koreans can hear us a mile off in these tap shoes we seem to be wearing.

*Homefront: The Revolution* has endured a troubled gestation, and it shows. It's been a while since we played a game this technically wonky. On PS4, the framerate struggles to hit 30, and frequently falls well short. The action freezes for several seconds every time data is saved or a new area is loaded. Textures load in at their leisure, while mission markers suddenly vanish. On two occasions, the level geometry held us captive; after failing to extricate ourselves by twisting and jumping, we had to reload the previous checkpoint.

The odd failing is generally expected of open-world games – it is, naturally, the price of ambition. But the problems here are pervasive and ruinous. The framerate adversely impacts the responsiveness of weapons that already kick harder than feral mules; likewise the freakishly skittish bike handling. At times, you'll push down on the D-pad to give yourself a healing jab and nothing will happen. It's outrageously fussy about your positioning when climbing. And with the Square button used for everything from mounting ladders and using bolt cutters to performing the last crucial activity of a mission and, incredibly, reloading, you'd better believe that the context-sensitive command you trigger is not always going to be the one you wanted.

All of this is damaging enough, but none of it can compare with the catastrophically bad AI. Allies are regularly more hindrance than help, refusing to move when you're trying to pass by, or inexplicably forcing you to chase them if you want them to fight alongside you – though their pathfinding is so hopeless that they'll often abandon you en route anyway. Enemies are even worse, veering between omniscience and ineptitude in the space of a few seconds. During an alert they'll somehow know exactly where you are despite having never seen you before, and unerringly fire on your precise position the split-second they round the corner into your line of sight. Having found you, there's a strong chance they'll then walk directly towards you and into a hail of bullets, or turn their back, retreating to a position that leaves them almost entirely exposed.

At times, this is amusing; at others, it's infuriating. On one late-night ride, we saw a patrol of three Korean

**Developer** Dambuster Studios  
**Publisher** Deep Silver  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

troops in the middle of the road. Once they'd obligingly arranged themselves in a straight line, we ran them down. We dismounted to loot their corpses, only to discover all three were knelt bolt upright. Later, while attempting to destroy a fuel cache, we were told we couldn't complete the mission with enemies nearby – outside the base, an APC was firing on our position, having somehow spotted us through the walls. We waited for it to move on, only to discover that another truck was parked adjacent to it. Out of rockets, and with neither showing any sign of budging, we conceded defeat and looked for another territory to liberate.

**Outside, an APC was firing on our position, having somehow spotted us through the walls**



**There are glimmers** of promise, however wasted. The story behind the Korean occupation of Philadelphia may be absurd, but there's a convincing feeling of hopelessness among the subjugated residents in the early stages, which builds to a palpable atmosphere of belief in the growing rebellion. As you rescue citizens and engage in sabotage, you'll steadily win over support: in real terms, it's crudely represented as a 'hearts and minds' meter, but you'll notice things are changing out on the streets, too. Once a district is conquered, you'll still see the odd armoured vehicle, but the dwindling Korean forces are easily outnumbered by allies. If only it felt like a cause worth fighting for: the resistance seems primarily motivated by petty vengeance, with NPCs sneering insults at both you and the North Koreans (or 'Norks' – an unfortunate choice of colloquialism).

Despite intricate environment design that encourages thoughtful route-finding, and the occasional flash of inspiration in the objectives you're set, progress becomes a monotonous slog. Erratic enemy behaviour makes stealth a lottery, but their numbers are overwhelming enough to make a gung-ho approach impractical. Health packs are hard to come by outside of item stashes, and you'll often find yourself using several jabs on a mission. But since you're not paid for any activities that win over hearts and minds, buying the supplies to survive your next sortie will leave you short of vital weapon and gear upgrades. As such, you'll have to try to scavenge what you need between quests, or head for the nearest item stash and hope you don't get spotted on the way, dragging things out further.

Another six months in the oven may yet have cast *Homefront*'s few successes in a more favourable light. A smart modding mechanic lets you quickly take apart and reassemble weapons, leaving you with a stronger sense of ownership of your favoured hardware. And with stuffed bears transformed into proximity mines and RC cards retooled as mobile hacking devices, there's an appealingly homebrew feel to your arsenal. It's not nearly enough. Like the original's infamous mass grave, *The Revolution* is a messy jumble of broken parts, and every bit as grimly uninviting.



**LEFT** It's a fine-looking game when it's not moving. Naturally, it looks and performs better on PC, which makes direct combat more tolerable – though that hardly excuses the many other flaws. **BELLOW** Called to attack a sniper's nest, we found our targets unable to cope with our flanking approach: they each stood stock still by their designated window, meekly waiting for us to end their misery. **MAIN** *The Revolution* fares better in its six online co-op missions. These substantial multi-part quests are built upon similarly ramshackle foundations, but with NPC chatter limited to handlers barking objectives, the natural camaraderie fostered by smart teamwork with human allies ensures a greater feeling of achievement in victory



**ABOVE** From the unhinged sadist to the grizzled win-at-all-costs veteran and the morally conflicted doctor, *Homefront*'s mission givers run the gamut of clichés. Other characters are poorly acted, with shaky accents



# Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE

K, Japan, this is getting a bit weird. *Tokyo Mirage Sessions* is the third game to grace these pages in the past 12 months to wed itself to Japan's idol scene. Yet while it was merely a five-hour detour in *Yakuza 5*, and was a fine logical fit for *Persona 4: Dancing All Night*'s pacy rhythm action, here it's the setting for a party-based JRPG. And though the *Persona* series from which *Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE* is drawn typically has a youthful, modern-day cast, here Atlus must also incorporate the stars of the *Fire Emblem* series, which gives this already awkwardly named game its closing hashtag. Thematically, it's an absolute mess.

Yet, weirdly, it all hangs together quite well. The *Fire Emblem* characters take the role of the titular personas, here known as Mirages, the mystical beings who give these everyday teens their magical powers in battle. The likes of Chrom, Caeda, Virion et al lend their might to the main party; Gangrel and Aversa help out the antagonists. Tiki, once a being of such fulsome power she was locked away in a thousand-year slumber, is here a cutesy vocaloid who administers the upgrade system.

Tiki resides, along with your ever-expanding collection of Mirages, in the Bloom Palace, a beautiful Japanese garden behind an innocuous door in the offices of Tokyo's Fortune Entertainment. Run by the distractingly leggy, impossibly buxom former model Maiko Shimazaki, Fortune is officially in the business of talent management, helping the youthful likes of Tsukasa Oribe and Kiria Kurono make it big on the idol scene. Behind the scenes it's also working to prevent an evil Mirage force from destroying the world by harvesting Performa, a powerful energy source hidden in talented people, with which it intends to summon an ancient, world-devouring dragon. You know, as you do.

So, yes, you will battle. A lot. But in between times you'll help a young popstrel overcome her social anxiety before her first handshake event. You'll seek out ingredients for a mystical hangover cure for your still-drunk, party-girl boss. You'll prepare the team for TV debuts, magazine photoshoots and festivals. Every so often you'll be rewarded with a music video or live performance with a backing track produced by renowned J-Pop hitmaker Avex Group.

It's a curious blend of fantasy and reality that's lent a little more of the latter by its setting, though this is a *Persona*-style vision of Tokyo – of small chunks of Shibuya, Harajuku and so on linked by fast travel rather than *Yakuza*'s city districts. While there's none of the latter's atmospheric real-world branding, it's still a much-needed dose of reality for a game that is, in almost every other respect, absolutely off its rocker.

Deliciously so, in places. The battle system is always the highlight of a *Persona* game, and so it proves here, though there's a new dimension courtesy of the J-Pop set-dressing, which Atlus uses to fine, flamboyant

Developer Atlus  
Publisher Nintendo  
Format Wii U  
Release June 24

We doubt that, say, having a magic knight help you find a doughnut for a vocaloid was the first thing on the whiteboard



effect. In the series tradition, you must first identify and then target an enemy's elemental weakness (here expanded with the addition of *Fire Emblem*'s sword, axe, spear and arrow attacks). Doing so allows your onscreen teammates to join in with automated follow-up moves, known here as Sessions.

Early on, that means a three-hit combo. By the end you'll be hitting in double figures. First, characters earn upgrades that enable them to join Sessions from offscreen when not in the party itself. Then they gain the ability to launch partner combos mid-Session; these ignore an enemy's elemental resistances, kicking off another Session from the start. All the while you're filling the SP meter, which when full can be used to perform one of a character's super moves. Then there are ad-lib performances, which have a chance to occur when you use a regular skill. Combat hardly lacks spectacle, then, and the steadily increasing duration and power of your moves, combined with a generous flow of new abilities as you level up your party and their weaponry, mean battles are a consistent thrill.

**The dungeons in** which they're set, however, are a different matter. How we found ourselves longing for the unremarkable corridors of *Persona 4: Golden*, where the search was simply for the staircase to the next floor. Here, themed levels incorporate puzzle elements, a fine idea in theory but one that serves simply to irritate as you try to retrace your steps down identikit corridors, losing your bearings every 20 paces as a mirage rises up from the floor and rushes towards you.

A well-timed sword swing will knock the beast back, and it'll despawn after a few seconds. Tempting as it is to ignore the combat and focus on puzzling, doing so means starving yourself of much-needed experience. Text popups before boss fights consistently recommended that our party should be three or four levels higher than it is. And the elemental design of the combat system means you need to keep the entire cast, not just your favourite trio, levelled up. Churlish as it may seem to chide Atlus for trying to inject some flavour into the rather bland business of dungeon crawling, it frustrates more often than it enthrals.

And yet the whole thing is just so gleefully off its head that you can forgive its little missteps. *Tokyo Mirage Sessions* was announced just two months into development, under the even more awkward moniker *Shin Megami Tensei X Fire Emblem*. Few of its core concepts were in place and we doubt that, say, having a magic knight help you find a doughnut for a vocaloid was the first thing on the whiteboard. But it's all the better for it. Recognising that its core concept is absurd, Atlus has decided to simply go for it. You think a fantasy RPG set in the idol scene sounds a bit weird? You don't know the half of it.



**ABOVE** You play as Itsuki Aoi, a *Persona*-standard blank canvas who just wants everyone to get along. Dialogue options provide little scope to deviate from the script, though you can flirt a little, if that's your thing



**TOP** By default, the cast head into battle in fancy costumes inspired by their *Fire Emblem* Mirage.

Alternate outfits are available from a Harajuku haberdasher, the female cast's options priced in accordance with their perviness.

**MAIN** When a Session continues after an enemy's health bar is empty, it triggers an Overkill, which rewards you with extra cash and items. At first, it's damage wasted, though you soon get an upgrade that diverts the remainder of the combo to the next target.

**RIGHT** The upgrade system is called Unity, a ceremony performed by Tiki in the Bloom Palace that triggers a short celebratory cutscene. Fortunately, they can be skipped, otherwise you'd be seeing half a dozen of these at a time 30 hours into the game



## The Climb

**T**he greatest trick of *The Climb*, whether by accident or design, is that you'll feel like you've been on a real rock face after an extended session. In order to ascend the game's vertigo-inducing routes you simply look at the hold you want to grab, then squeeze either the left or right trigger depending on which hand you're using. Your free hand moves wherever you aim your gaze, but leaving only one hand on the rock will erode your stamina. You can recover by grasping with both hands, and you can slow the loss of stamina by using the appropriate shoulder button to chalk up. Brilliantly, you can also slightly release a trigger to loosen your grip, preserving your stamina but risking a fall. Despite the fact that neither arms nor legs are represented onscreen, this is a much more convincing interpretation of climbing than we're accustomed to seeing in games.

It's also terrifying. While most holds are within arm's reach, some will need to be leapt to by tapping A to jump. Other times you'll need to drop down to a ledge that can't be reached by stretching. And then there are the crumbling, thorny and technical holds that require quick movement and careful management of your stamina. The game includes three locations, each with three routes rated by difficulty, and there's an

One of *The Climb*'s chief pleasures is stopping to look around and take in the view. Environments are exquisite, and Crytek has made particularly good use of positional audio for passing helicopters and other daredevils

**Developer/publisher** Crytek  
**Format** Rift  
**Release** Out now



### HIGH WIRE

While the canyon and mountain settings are spectacular, you won't only be clinging to rock: you'll sometimes have to negotiate old wooden beams or cling to a wire strung across a valley. One particularly memorable moment has you jump over to a cable car, pull a lever to start it up, then clamber up on to the roof before leaping back to the cliff a little higher up. As you're doing this, a group of people marginally less stupid than you shoot past in wingsuits and it's hard not to crack a grin.

infinite climbing wall, which builds around you as you progress. You can tackle any of the main stages in Tourism mode if you just want to explore, or you can pick a time from the leaderboard and attempt to beat the ghostly hands of the player who posted the run.

But despite this smart, moreish setup, *The Climb*'s otherwise enjoyable mechanics are let down by finicky proximity detection, which makes lining up your hands with holds and ledges far harder than it should be. It's not a huge problem on the more relaxed easy climbs, but once you start attempting medium and hard courses, portions of which require split-second reactions, it can frustrate to the point of derailment. In most cases there are multiple routes that can mitigate this, but one bottlenecked difficulty spike on the Alps medium course briefly made us consider tossing our expensive Rift hardware out of the window. There's enough to think about already without worrying about whether your hand is hovering over the right pixel.

It feels like a degree of tweaking could have made this a standout VR title. The sense of achievement you feel on reaching the top of a climb, as your unseen avatar whoops in celebration, can be exceptional, while Crytek's visual accomplishments deliver some astonishing views on the way up. It all makes it an even greater shame that you'll sometimes feel compelled to jump off and end it all.

6



**“Which is the odd  
one out?  
Hero’s Duty, Sugar  
Rush, Fix-It Felix,  
Call Of Honour”**

#SMARTERMOVIEMAG

## Shadow Of The Beast

The original *Shadow Of The Beast* was, as with so many Amiga games of the era, a triumph of style over substance. The game may not have lived up to Roger Dean's evocative box artwork, but it set an aesthetic high-water mark that elevated its obtuse, frustrating gameplay. In its remake, Heavy Spectrum swings the needle a little in the other direction, but fails to serve up enough ideas to offset its – by modern standards, at least – underwhelming visuals.

That's not to say it doesn't look good at times. Indeed, some of the character designs are wonderful, the animation is luxurious throughout, and the later stages, when it feels like Heavy Spectrum is getting into the swing of things, offer up some spectacular sights. But it never quite achieves the contemporary polish of its forebear, and often feels a little amateurish.

Things improve when the developer strays farther from the original game's ancient template. The studio has introduced a deep and enjoyably nuanced combat system, which trades on timed counter-attacks, dodge-rolling, offensive and defensive special moves, and an all-powerful QTE super attack, which prevents enemies from countering or blocking for as long as you match the rudimentary onscreen prompts. Enemy encounters

**During most combat you'll be hemmed in by two giant forcefields while enemies approach from both directions. Not getting hit will raise your combo multiplier, and you'll be ranked with a medal after each fight**

**Developer** Heavy Spectrum  
**Publisher** SIE  
**Format** PS4  
**Release** Out now



### HEAVY BREEDING

Heavy Spectrum has spent a great deal of effort fleshing out the series' lore and storyline, and there's plenty of material to get stuck into for those who want to better understand Aarbron's burden. It's also possible to unlock the original game in its entirety, if you fancy reminding yourself how annoying those floating eyes were, or play the remake with David Whittaker's chilling soundtrack from the first game.

feel fluid and varied, throwing a diverse cast of enemies at you whose weaknesses and strengths force you to use the full range of your moveset. While the controls aren't always as responsive as you'd like, the dismemberment-filled brawls are moreish highlights once you've adjusted to the game's quirks.

Sadly, these lean, focused moments are surrounded by too much flab. Some simple environmental puzzles later on provide a little respite, but you'll spend a lot of time running through empty space and enduring rickety, old-fashioned platforming and some drawn-out exploration that highlights protagonist Aarbron's dull-feeling locomotion. None of this is helped by poor signposting and regularly misjudged checkpointing. The multiplayer components are misjudged, too, crowbarring in leaderboards and the ability to challenge other players' button-mashing abilities in an unsatisfying minigame in the Shadow Realm.

But despite numerous missteps, it's clear that this is a labour of love for its creators, whose fondness for the original is well known. The attention to detail, overt reverence and earnest fan service (see 'Heavy breeding') ensure that its big-hearted nature isn't drowned out. The remake's imperfections, while disappointing, reflect the clunky nature of its source material in a way that's likely to see them just as easily forgiven by fellow fans of the 1989 Psygnosis release.

5



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#SMARTERMOVIEMAG

## Lumo

Lumo's PEGI rating declares it suitable for all ages. Had we been on the classification committee, we might have suggested a rating of 35+. Not because Lumo contains any content even 18-year-olds would find objectionable – the presence of slippy-slidey ice levels notwithstanding – but because it's so deeply steeped in a particular era of British gaming history that former readers of Your Sinclair magazine will likely get much more from it than anybody else. We thought The Shaw Brothers' 1986 title *Mole On The Dole* might have been the most unlikely reference we'd encountered in a 2016 game, but a certain piece of elevator music effortlessly trumps it.

Otherwise, this isn't the kind of game to hold your hand very tightly. As a diminutive wizard trapped in a labyrinthine castle, you're given little direction and the sparsest of environmental clues as you explore its hundreds of rooms and attempt to make your escape. The likes of Spectrum games *Knight Lore* and *Head Over Heels* are the most obvious influences, though the level design here is more satisfyingly elaborate. There are several examples of that peculiar epiphanic joy when it dawns that a winding path is leading to a familiar place, while finding a new item or power

The homages come thick and fast, from *Donkey Kong* to *Marble Madness*, and they're not just restricted to games. A hat-tip to a cult TV favourite led to a Trophy notification that's immediately entered our top ten

**Developer** Triple Eh?  
**Publisher** Rising Star Games  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Vita, Xbox One  
**Release** Out now



### SPECCY FOUR LIVES

The default Adventure mode gives you infinite lives to complete the game, while furnishing you with a map and letting you save wherever and whenever you like. The Old School alternative, meanwhile, removes the map (no great loss, in truth) but you'll need to finish the game in a single sitting and have just four lives with which to do so. Though more can be accumulated on the way, this is a challenge few will have the patience to conquer.

and knowing exactly where you need to use it puts an extra spring in your step while backtracking.

Environmental puzzles find fresh recipes for conventional ingredients, and Lumo establishes such a cohesive vocabulary for the way levers, switches, fans and boxes are used that flashes of inspiration feel as common as sticking points are rare. The solutions aren't quite so straightforward to execute: in capturing the spirit of those early isometric games, designer Gareth Noyce has consciously appropriated some of their inflexibility. Though the controls are less rigid, it's still as difficult to gauge the position of certain objects in 3D space. Even the generous restart points can't compensate for moments of vein-popping frustration.

Noyce, you imagine, wouldn't want it any other way. To pay appropriate tribute to a bygone era requires a fidelity to the design idiosyncrasies of the time. Even the exquisitely enraging inertia of its icy surfaces is exactly as it should be. At a time when retro throwbacks almost exclusively pastiche classics from Japan and the US, it's delightful to play a game that embraces the UK's contribution to the industry. While we fully concede that Lumo's universe of screechy loading screens, floppy disks and *Manic Miner* nods might mean more to us than most, surely anyone with a taste for adventure will appreciate the ingenuity and character of such an intricate and secret-stuffed world.

7



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BARNES & NOBLE



# Puzzle --- & Dragons

How the most lucrative mobile game  
on the planet is fighting to sustain  
Japan's other whaling problem

By NATHAN BROWN

Developer/publisher GungHo Online Entertainment Format Android, iOS Release 2012

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**G**ungHo Online Entertainment was nothing before *Puzzle & Dragons*. The publisher owned a number of game companies, but the likes of Goichi Suda's Grasshopper Manufacture, *Tenchi* developer Acquire and *Grandia* maker Gravity were hardly the biggest or most lucrative industry names. In 2012, GungHo launched *Puzzle & Dragons*, a free-to-play mobile game blending elements of *Bejeweled*, *Pokémon* and *Puzzle Quest*. Within a year of its Japanese launch it was the top-grossing mobile game in the world and the first to make a billion dollars. Company financials for 2013 showed profits and revenue up by almost 600 per cent – and over 90 per cent of the company's \$1.5 billion income came from *Puzzle & Dragons*.

The game's success was born of an immaculate blend of accessibility, depth and savvy monetisation, but as the years have passed, the first of those qualities has diminished. Competitors have borrowed *Puzzle & Dragons'* structure and surpassed it in the sales charts. User numbers have fallen. The game has changed as a result: once it was an innovator, but now GungHo pilfers ideas from the very games it inspired. And instead of seeking to grow the game's userbase, the company's approach is to make more money out of the players it already has. It's still breaking new ground, in a way. Mobile gaming is still a young market, and a fickle one. Four years on from launch, *Puzzle & Dragons* is an intriguing case study in what happens when the most lucrative mobile game in the world suddenly finds itself fighting for survival.

Back in February 2012, however, *Puzzle & Dragons* (shortened to *Pazudora* in Japan, and *PAD* in the west) was a revelation in a nascent free-to-play mobile-game market where chart-toppers were mechanically slight and grubbily monetised. GungHo's game offered the depth of a full-priced game, but for free, and hid its lust for cash well, rewarding daily logins with the game's premium currency, Magic Stones, and making more available for completing dungeon sets for the first time. But it was the pleasure of simply playing the thing that

catapulted the game up the charts; it's easy to see a screenshot and dismiss it as a simple game of match three, but there's so much more to it than that.

The action is set over a 6x5 board, containing six kinds of orbs: fire, water and wood (each weak and strong against others), dark and light (strong against each other but with no weakness), and heart (used to restore the team's HP). You can move a single orb freely for four seconds, making as many matches of at least three orbs as you can until the timer runs out, at which point the team attacks. The higher the combo count, the greater the damage.

Teams are composed of five monsters, also referred to as cards, each with their own cooldown-governed active skill (change heart orbs to fire orbs; double the team's attack for two turns) and one with a leader skill (a passive x3 for damage output, perhaps, or x5 if you match four specific colours). You head into battle with a second leader from your friends list – take the same leader as yours, and that x3 bonus becomes a x9. Those are the fundamentals of team-building in *Puzzle & Dragons*, but the possibilities are mind-boggling, and the hunt for the perfect team almost endless. There's always a way to make a team stronger – a newly released card with a more powerful leader skill, an elusive team member with an active skill that offers perfect synergy with another monster's – and tougher dungeons require more than just the best team you have, with various status effects and gimmicks requiring that you tailor your approach.

**As fun as** the theory-crafting side of *Puzzle & Dragons* is, none of that would matter were the process of sweeping an orb around the board, making match after match, before watching everything disappear in a shower of sparks and rapidly rising damage values, not so tremendously satisfying. It is, whatever your team or skill level, a wonderful game to play.

Equally, however, it isn't simply by being fun that a free-to-play game makes a billion dollars in two years. Early on, *Puzzle & Dragons* is tremendously generous with its premium currency. After the tutorial, you're given a free go on the Rare Egg Machine (REM), which contains the game's most ►



## TIME EXTEND

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powerful monsters. It normally costs players five Magic Stones, which cost 69p individually and are available in bundles of up to £44.99.

A disciplined player can hoard their free stones for a special occasion, such as the fortnightly Godfests, when the Rare Egg Machine offers increased drop rates on powerful God-type cards, or when a licensing deal brings a time-limited REM with unique monsters (recent examples include *Final Fantasy*, *Batman Vs Superman* and *Taiko No Tatsujin*). But that really does take a strong will. As mobile-game best practice dictates, *PAD* has a stamina bar that you spend by entering dungeons; the higher the difficulty, the greater the cost. Spend a stone, and you refill your stamina. Die, and you can spend another to continue.

So those that want to progress through the game at their own pace will soon spend their stock of stones, whether on stamina refills, continues, or a chance to improve their teams at the Rare Egg Machine. The latter is an infamously cruel mistress – the rarest Godfest exclusive cards have a base drop rate of around 0.3 per cent, and YouTube has plenty of evidence of players



It's gods, not just dragons, that make up most of *PAD*'s bestiary. Zeus and Hera, shown here, have various forms

With the game ageing, supplanted at the top of the charts in Japan by other similar games – chief among them Mixi's *Monster Strike*, from which *PAD* has since pilfered an ill-suited multiplayer mode – GungHo has found itself having to focus on making more money from existing users, instead of seeking out new players. And so the past 12 months of the game have seen the company add a suite of new features aimed almost

## YOUTUBE HAS PLENTY OF EVIDENCE OF PLAYERS SPENDING HUNDREDS OF POUNDS HUNTING FRUITLESSLY



Guerrilla dungeons are the most efficient way of levelling up your monsters

spending hundreds of pounds in a few minutes hunting fruitlessly for some newly released beast.

**Yet the longer** you play *Puzzle & Dragons*, the less you rely on the REM, since over time you'll naturally amass a suite of strong cards. You'll continue less, because you've naturally improved at the game through practice. And you'll have less need to refill stamina, since its maximum increases as you rank up by playing the game, and because GungHo has progressively lowered the time it takes to refill – from ten minutes per unit at launch to just three minutes now.

exclusively at not just keeping the big spenders filling the coffers, but also bringing thrifter players up to their level.

The solutions are manifold, but are perhaps best summed up in a single phrase: power creep. *Puzzle & Dragons* is not really a game of hunting monsters, but numbers, of building teams that can put out damage in the tens of thousands, then the hundreds of thousands, and eventually the millions. First, GungHo began to give existing cards new, more powerful forms, improving their stats, tweaking their active and leader skills. New REM monsters offered dramatic leaps in damage potential compared to what was available before. But the most game-



## ARENA BRAWLERS

Power creep is meaningless without a commensurate increase in difficulty, and GungHo has certainly provided the latter. One solution is the Rogue dungeon, where your entire party starts at level one, ranking up as monsters are defeated. But PAD's true endgame is the Ultimate Arena, a 20-battle dungeon with a boss monster on every floor, the last of which will one-shot you unless you deal out 20 million damage points on the first turn. A highly engaged global community quickly devised strategies for the dungeon – too quickly for GungHo's liking, apparently. Arena 2 launched in January, and upped the difficulty even further, while version three recently arrived in Japan, as GungHo continues its attempt to stay one step ahead of its players.

changing addition was the Monster Shop, powered by a new currency, Monster Points, accrued by selling off unwanted cards. A normal dungeon drop would fetch just one MP; a boss up to ten. REM cards could be sold for at least 3,000 MP, rising to 50,000 for one of those 0.3-per-cent-chance Gods. At launch, the shop mainly offered up evolution materials, an escape route from the daily dungeon grind for the impatient. But right at the end of the list, stickered up at 300,000 MP, was a brand-new card. Shiva Dragon offered a x5 attack boost to any fire-type God card – rising to x25 when paired with another from your friend list.

This was unprecedented. Previously, the only route to a x25 fire team was a dungeon boss whose multiplier would only activate when the team had less than 20 per cent health. Shiva Dragon's was unconditional. The card was available for a month, then rotated out with another, and the multipliers grew still further. In April,

GungHo introduced the latest fire-type MP card. A team with dual Xiang Mei leaders can now reach a damage multiplier of x81.

The idea of the Monster Shop was, clearly, to give even players with a collection full of powerful cards a reason to return to the Rare Egg Machine, since now even duplicate cards had value. But the system didn't quite work as intended. Some players had been stockpiling duplicate cards for three years, and could easily afford each new flavour of the month.

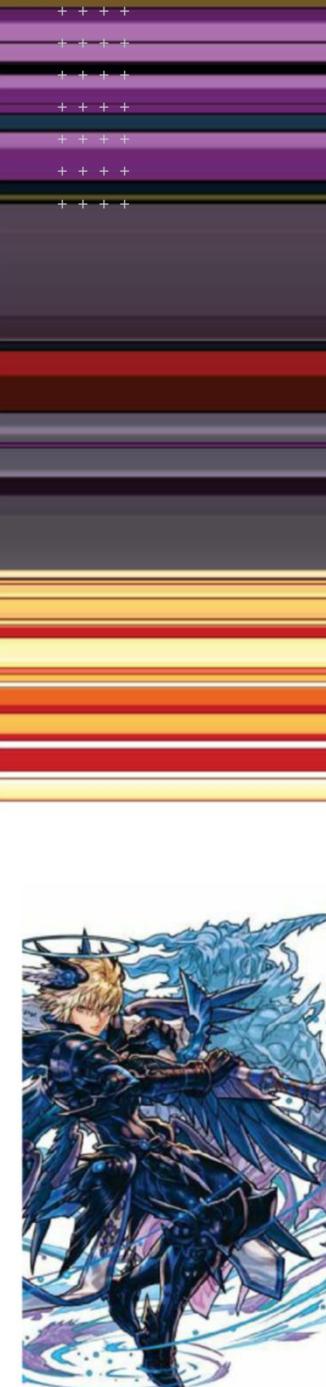
**Clearly Gungho needed** more flavours. Currently, there are six shop-exclusive cards available at a time – four permanently available, and the other two rotating every fortnight. And the company introduced a new mechanic designed to make players think twice before selling off duplicate cards. Skill inheritance lets you transfer one monster's active skill to another – though the donor cannot be used in any teams while the transfer is in place.

These changes, while clearly designed to keep the whales a-whaling, at least feed into the two vital components of *Puzzle & Dragons'* appeal: team building and damage output. But GungHo is swimming against the tide. The company's revenue and profit fell in 2015 for the first time since *Puzzle & Dragons'* launch, and while the game is still GungHo's most important asset – it brought in almost 90 per cent of sales last year – it's past its peak.

Unlike its App Store competitors, GungHo currently has no game to take *Puzzle & Dragons'* place. A sequel would simply risk upsetting the base game's userbase too much, since few would take kindly to their considerable investment in *Puzzle & Dragons'* being made redundant overnight. It means GungHo is a victim of its own success in a way that is extraordinarily rare, not just on mobile but in the industry as a whole. It has made one game that is so good, and so good at making money, that the company seemingly has no choice but to keep making it for ever, the monster count swelling indefinitely, the damage output rising into the tens of millions and beyond. ■



Awakenings are passive skills that unlock once a card is evolved. Liu Bei is defined by his three Two-Prong Attacks, which combine to give four-orb matches a x3.5 multiplier



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# GET INTO GAMES 2016

How can game jams help you create an all-important portfolio? Plus: we talk to the people heading up the best options for videogame-focused study in 2016



Abertay



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Brunel



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# Self preservation

How game jams can give you the edge when you're looking to get started in the industry

**S**tudios look for many things when interviewing prospective employees. Passion is tantamount, as is technical proficiency, and having a good degree behind you will go a long way to demonstrating your commitment to a development career path. But in all the years we've been creating Get Into Games features in **Edge**, the thing that every developer we've spoken to wants to see above all else is a strong portfolio of projects. Some of these could be finished games; others might be smaller endeavours focused on the individual's particular discipline – pieces of art or audio experiments, for example, or a proof of concept for a gameplay mechanic.

Building such a portfolio will take dedication, talent and – perhaps more than anything else – a great deal of your free time. It's a daunting prospect if you're already ploughing hours into a degree or a day job, but one way to accelerate the growth of a portfolio is to take part in game jams. These events, which take place under strict time constraints and often ask participants to work to a particular theme, have turned from unusual experiments into staple activities, offering both nascent and established game makers the opportunity to gain experience, try out new ideas, and work with people they may not have met otherwise.

Most jams will welcome a variety of skill levels, and participants will be either placed into teams or allowed to define their own groups before attempting to create something workable in a tight timeframe that might be as little as 24 hours. A huge number of events are now available to take part in, ranging from one-off local events to international jams such as Ludum Dare and Global



Haggett is working on *Loot Rascals* at new studio Hollow Pond. As one of the curators of club night and game showcase Wild Rumpus, Haggett often includes standout efforts created during game jams

Game Jam, which take place in all sorts of locations across the globe and attract hundreds of entries. In a few short years, the prominence of game jams has enjoyed a huge surge.

"When I started out making games independently around 2008, it felt like game jams were in their innocent heyday," *Hohokum* designer and Hollow Ponds co-founder **Ricky Haggett** tells us. "I held one at my house that a handful of folks came to, which was a fun toe in the water. Then I organised a much larger one at the Honeyslug offices to coincide with [developer and event promoter] David Hayward's inaugural World Of Love conference. Loads of amazing people came – like Terry Cavanagh, Ed Key, Stephen Lavelle and Tom Beets – and it really felt like something good and special."

Jams, Haggett explains, allow participants to practise creating a small project without being burdened by the pressure of it having to be your best work while still working within the constraints of an artificial deadline. They allow you to test and appraise your work practices and find creative ways

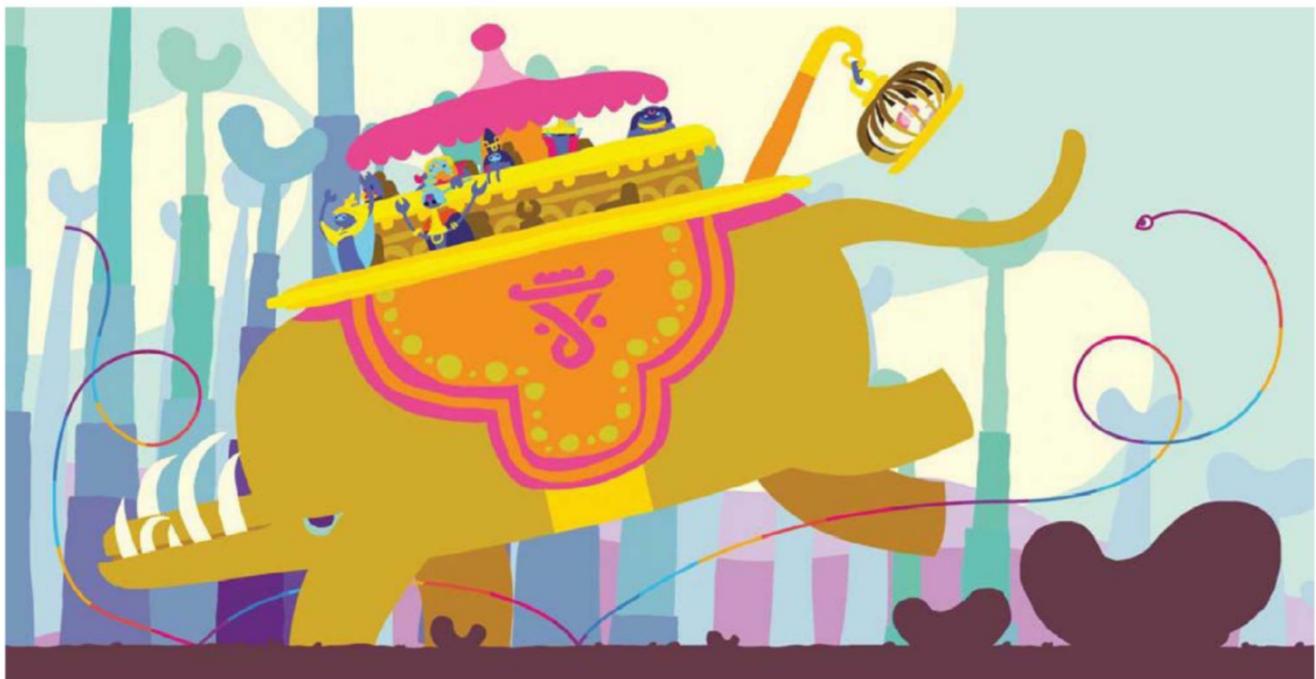
to tighten up your approach to development and become a more efficient creator. And they create a space in which you're supported by other developers – many with plenty of experience to share. "[There's] a huge sense of camaraderie," Haggett says. "The conversations around people sharing their jam work, and the released games themselves, feel hugely valuable. Jams are very much a part of the glue that binds the independent development community together."

**That sense of** camaraderie, and the teamwork that engenders it, is an important asset in an industry whose indie success stories represent appealing, if unrealistic, paragons to those hoping to become the next Notch.

"I think too many people start out trying to do everything themselves, often with underwhelming results," Haggett says. "Whereas if they concentrate on being great at one specific thing, and team up with people with complementary skills, they could probably make something incredible right off the bat. Perhaps a good



FROM TOP Hollow Pond co-founder Ricky Haggett; Acidinerve co-founder Mark Foster



*Fruitwolf* is Foster's latest Ludum Dare game, which he created with David Fenn and Angus Dick

approach is to join a large studio, where being good at a single thing is more likely to be enforced, but where you can meet lots of amazingly talented people you might one day team up with to make a smaller thing."

Increasingly, experience of this kind of teamwork is being fostered by university course leaders who are keen to capitalise on their students' wide-ranging skills as well as those who are learning other disciplines – the university profiles over the next few pages reveals an assortment of innovative approaches to student collaboration from institutions across the UK, and game jams form an important part of that.

"We run several game jams each year, from [taking part in] international competitions like Global Game Jam to our own Three Thing Game jam," says University of Hull senior lecturer **Warren Viant**. "And several of our most successful teams have gone on to found their own indie studios as a result, while those that go on to join triple-A studios have plenty to talk about in interviews and a solid portfolio of – often crazy – games to show off."



## "I think too many people start out trying to do everything themselves"

The National Film And Television School, meanwhile, uses jams to get its first and second-year MA students to team up, and Brunel University London uses them as a way to hone students' appreciation of 'finishing quality' in any project. "Portfolio pieces are the best way to show you are a designer – by actually making something, not just talking about it," explains Brunel's Game Design and Theory lecturer and director of digital games theory and design **Kelly Boudreau**. "Game jams are one opportunity to create games, or to get a great idea off the ground. And we're pleased to say our team won this year's UKIE student game jam in both the main category and the accessibility category. We're very proud of them."

It is Abertay University, however, whose reputation is most closely bound in with game jam culture. The Dundee institution hosts Dare To Be Digital, an international game development competition held annually, in which it invites 15 student teams from around the world to compete for a number of substantial prizes – including large cash investments and the BAFTA Ones To Watch award. But Dare doesn't follow the traditional jam model.

"Many of these games began their lives in traditional 48-hour game jams," **Dr William Huber**, head of Abertay's Centre For Excellence In Game Education, explains. "But we like to think of Dare as a model for a future-facing, more sustainable game jam:

ABOVE Haggett created *Hohokum* at former studio Honeyslug and was involved in the early game jam scene. LEFT With its clear focus, it's easy to see how *Titan Souls* began life at a game jam





FROM TOP Bossa Studios CTO Sylvain Cornillon and COO Vince Farquharson

residential, a little slower paced, with an eye toward balanced production schedules and the development of games that can actually be released. Game jams are wonderful for developing rapid-prototyping and concept-development skills, and we find that some of our students' most original projects emerge from jams. But a well-rounded portfolio should balance the experimental and daring work you get from a game jam with the well-crafted, polished and complete work from projects with longer timescales."

**This happens to** be a production model that Bossa Studios, the company behind *Surgeon Simulator*, *I Am Bread* and the forthcoming *Worlds Adrift*, has adopted. "[Game jams have] become part of the process pretty much since *Surgeon Simulator*'s success, which was when we understood what they allowed us to do," enthuses Bossa CTO **Sylvain Cornillon**. "We've tried other things like research days, or like Google's '20 per cent time', but they didn't give us what we wanted. However, spending that time doing game jams was great.

"It has multiple benefits for us. They allow us, on a tight schedule, to get a team of people who don't normally work together to get to

know each other, which helps with company cohesion. And it allows us to experiment with new tools quickly under high time pressures. Then there's the more key aspect of it all, which is it allows us to try a lot of designs, and get really quick feedback and iterations. We don't have a formal process on judging the outcome of these jams – the ideas that work just stick, and it's obvious because everybody talks about them. The stuff that's not good enough, nobody talks about!"

Cornillon goes on to concur with our other interviewees on jams' potential for

"That fast momentum and our ability to roll with ideas comes out of the game-jam attitude at our core, but it filters out into many many longer-term attitudes within the company," explains COO **Vince Farquharson**. "The whole company is now about trying to find the next fabulous idea, which can come from absolutely anybody – it could be me or Sylvain, or it could be a quality assurance guy on his second day in the office. But when we see it, the whole company gravitates around that person to make a great game. Only the other day I was joking to someone that our

## "Try a bunch of stuff, trust your gut, and try not to get bogged down"

portfolio bolstering to those looking to get into the industry, but also highlights the fact that getting people of various disciplines together to work on a project at the same time is extremely difficult if you're not already working in a studio – a problem jams cheerfully solve. And Bossa's adoption of jam culture has enabled it to turn around games such as *Surgeon Simulator* and *I Am Bread* in punishingly short timescales without ever resorting to crunch periods.

company's so creative that our finance manager is currently making a game!"

While Bossa is a small studio by industry standards, **Mark Foster** operates on an even more modest scale as one half of Manchester-based *Titan Souls* creator Acid Nerve. He offers a clear message to anyone currently sitting on the fence about taking part in their first game jam. "Do it!" he says. "If you want to practise stuff, there are many theme generators online that you can



Bossa Studio's ambitious MMO *Worlds Adrift* is a direct result of the studio's game jam culture in which experimental ideas can be seized upon and expanded

use to create a random theme, and you can jam on your own for a few hours or a day or two. And failing at a jam is succeeding, because it's really all just about being able to adapt. If you make the scope too big for the time or get stuck on some code or run into any problems, you'll know those problems exist and next time you'll be prepared for them. There's really no downside."

Foster owes his success to game jams, having clocked up several Ludum Dares with Acid Nerve partner David Fenn, one of which yielded *Titan Souls*. "Jams are useful for anyone wanting to practice their design skills in an applied way," he continues. "You could spend weeks, months or even years writing design documents and planning how a game will work, but I can guarantee that when you try it out it won't go exactly like it was in your head.

"And for people trying to make their own games in small indie teams, it's a fun and useful thing to do. You can take away a lot of things from a jam: knowledge of what design concepts work together or new mechanics you hadn't thought of before that you accidentally discover. You may find little game design gems you then want to expand on in the future, or squeeze into other projects. All this is extra on top of the experience of making something, trying out ideas and adapting them to constraints and themes."

**Jams, then, represent** an opportunity to hone your design chops, learning to identify the nub of a project and how best to spend your time when it comes to shaping it. The game jam version of *I Am Bread*, for instance, was entirely focused on what would become the finished game's control mechanism – just a slice of bread moving about in a simple environment. The team didn't spend any time on a splash screen, menus, or thinking up modes or levels since its members knew that doing so would eat into their limited time – all of those elements could be added in later, laid on the foundations of a core gameplay mechanic that had already proven itself to be entertaining.



"See game jam constraints as a positive – why you're in that jam rather than doing something at home on your own," advises Cornillon, who works at *I Am Bread* creator Bossa

It might sound obvious, but key to that kind of efficiency is a good understanding of the tools at hand. You needn't be a world-class programmer or artist, but having a reasonable understanding of the software you'll be using before taking part in a jam will help you master it more quickly rather than wasting time frantically looking up the intricacies of a particular function. "Take a piece of technology, learn about it and build something with it," Cornillon advises. "It's good to learn the tech, but then through a jam or personal project you need to do something with it. That's what matters, because you'll learn so many things in doing so. Pick a game engine like Unity or Unreal – depending on your proficiency in development and the type of thing you want to do – but focus on one."

Foster also recommends Unity, admitting that *Titan Souls* (which was written in Scratch and C++) would most likely have been finished in half the time if he had used the now-ubiquitous development platform in the first place. And even if you're not a proficient coder, he adds, it's well worth having a decent understanding of how Unity works so that you can edit things without the help of a programmer.

Haggett, however, offers broader advice. "For people starting out making games, I think the most important trait for any tool you use for making games is that it's appropriate – both for the thing you're trying to make, and for your level of aptitude," he says. "Try

a bunch of stuff, trust your gut, and try not to get bogged down."

There are plenty of high-end game engines available alongside Unreal Engine and Unity, many of them now available in open-source versions, including CryEngine and earlier iterations of Id Tech. And even tools aimed purely at amateur creators have surprising potential – take Clickteam Fusion, for example, which was used to create the Devolver-published *A Fistful Of Gun* and *Not A Hero*. YoYo Games' GameMaker: Studio, meanwhile, provides the platform on which modern hits such as *Nidhogg*, *Spelunky* and *Hotline Miami* were built. Not to be out-manoeuvred, many modelling, rendering and painting tools are also available for free or for modest subscriptions, including Maya, 3DS Max, Modo and Mari.

In short, the barriers to entry continue to collapse. And while there are many ways to learn your craft, game jams represent the most focused, collaborative and – as everyone involved seems to agree – fun ways to get into game development. A quick Google search will turn up dozens of jams in which you can take part, and in doing so you'll not only be gaining crucial experience with your chosen tools and a greater understanding of your own creative process, but you'll also build priceless relationships with other talented developers on the same trajectory, which could remain in place for your entire career. ■

## DRIVE CLUB

Whether it's lone indie development or working as part of a larger studio, there's no shortage of industry opportunities in 2016. Cornillon stresses that in all cases, though, you'll need to be particularly committed. "People shouldn't go into games if they're not passionate about it," he says. "If you're going to see it as a nine-to-five, it's probably one of the worst career choices you could make. You're surrounded by people who are active and passionate about what they're doing, and maybe you'll be swept up in that, but if you're not the same you're not going to be able to handle the less positive aspects around development, like crunch – although, at Bossa, we don't do crunch ever. Getting an education is a good base, but you need to learn other things on your own. A game jam is a great opportunity to start something you love enough to give you the motivation you need to work on it in your own time."



**Location** Dundee, UK



### **DR WILLIAM HUBER**

Head of Centre For Excellence In Game Education  
[www.abertay.ac.uk](http://www.abertay.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
"I've been playing Beeswing, a hand-drawn exploration game. It has an amazing slice-of-life feel to it."

### **INDUSTRY PROSPECTS**

"The game industry is inherently international, and Abertay graduates find positions in studios all around the world. In this context, one of the most important assets a student can develop is a professional network, starting with their colleagues at Abertay. Our graduates become part of an international alumni network that has been growing over the past 20 years."

# Abertay University

A pioneering university that's passionate about games

**A**bertay launched the world's first industry-focused degree in 1997, so it has plenty of experience in teaching development hopefuls. It's continued to adapt since that time, and now offers a number of courses that cover every corner of the game creation process. And with Dare To Be Digital, the university's annual student game-making competition, Abertay continues its commitment to games beyond only education. **Dr William Huber** explains more.

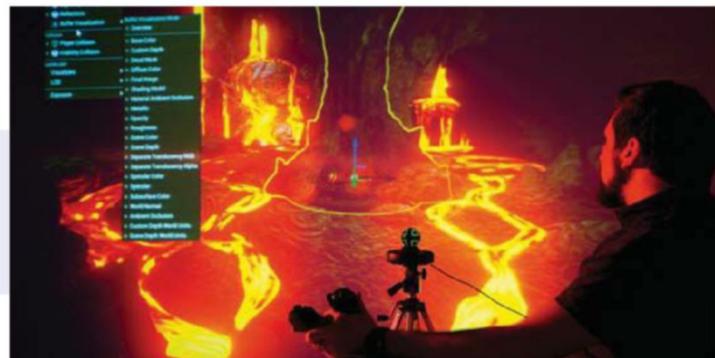
#### **Why is Abertay the right choice?**

Abertay is completely committed to game education – we host the oldest computer game education programme in Europe, and one of the oldest in the world. We're a designated centre for excellence in game education, and the only programme in Europe ranked in the top 25 by the Princeton Review. We have courses across all aspects of game design and development, from art to programming to production and audio, and importantly there's extensive collaboration across the different disciplines of game-making throughout each student's time here.

## "We're a designated centre for excellence in game education"

#### **Do students collaborate across those different disciplines?**

Students work on teams throughout their time here, and all participate in a major group project during their third year, taking external briefs from industry partners and other sources, and learning how to apply the skills they've honed in their first two years while working with students in other programmes and disciplines, including designers, programmers, producers,



Abertay researcher and lecturer Matt Bett developing tools for virtual production, using Unreal Engine

artists and sound engineers. Our game design programme is in game design and production management, so making teams work effectively is an essential skill.

#### **Which tools do you focus on?**

We have access to the engines, tools, platforms and technologies being used in the industry today. We work closely with industry partners and platform vendors – especially Sony and Microsoft. Significantly, though, we're not a one-tool shop – students produce games using Unity, CryEngine, Unreal,

and very large studios. Five years ago, teaching in another game design programme, I felt like I was facing a dated set of expectations about the trajectory of a games career. Now, students look at those successes which began as small indie studios, like Mojang, Rovio and Project RED. And many who aspire to produce original work in a small studio at some point see the value in working for some time in a larger studio, as a kind of apprenticeship that will give them the perspective – and professional network – which will allow them to be successful if they strike out on their own later.

#### **And when they leave you, what do you hope graduates will take away?**

We view game education as being about more than just preparation for a first job – we see it as a new creative and intellectual discipline, a new way of understanding and interacting with the world in which we live. Abertay students learn how to work collaboratively while thinking independently, and they take the vocation of game-making seriously. That's why our alumni are enthusiastically recruited into studios around the world. ■

Source and PhyreEngine, learn a range of programming languages, and develop assets using software from Adobe and Autodesk. They target PC, consoles and mobile.

#### **Does it mean students are prepared for all levels of game development?**

I think that students at Abertay, and in game programmes around the world, understand that their careers may involve moving between very small



**Abertay  
University**

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Abertay University taught the creator of Grand Theft Auto, and is ranked in the world's top 25 universities to study game design by the Princeton Review.

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**Location** Beaconsfield, UK



**JON WEINBREN**  
Head of games  
[nfts.co.uk](http://nfts.co.uk)

Currently playing:  
"I've just finished *Firewatch* on the PS4, which I enjoyed. It has its flaws, but the tone and performances of the characters are very beguiling."

## INDUSTRY PROSPECTS

"These are exciting times for our graduates, but of course it can be tough and we do our best to help. One scheme that's been very successful is the Bridges To Industry programme we run with the Wellcome Trust. I'm also frequently contacted by those inside and outside of the industry looking for people to commission or contract, and I'm delighted to recommend our recent grads."

# National Film And Television School

An innovative course in which students focus on creativity

Four years on from the introduction of its Games Design And Development MA, the National Film And Television School's course has made a name for itself as a comprehensive and fiercely creative undertaking. Head of games **Jon Weinbren**, who has 20 years' industry experience, including roles at EA and Sony, tells us what sets it apart.

### Why should students choose NFTS?

There's really no other place in the country – if not the planet – like the NFTS. It's one of the world's top film and television schools and we have the awards, accolades and alumni to back this up. At its heart is a set of two-year MA programmes in different film and television specialisms, and during their time here students work together on a variety of exercises and outputs, culminating in key graduation projects across fiction, documentary, animation, television entertainment and, of course, games. It's a great experience for the game students to be working with screenwriters, music composers, sound mixers, production designers, producers, visual effects people and other



The National Film and Television School has been training graduates for the creative industries since 1972

create meaningful, evocative and engaging playable experiences.

### What do you look for in prospective students?

Many of our students come from beyond the confines of a traditional games background, so since we started our students have always aimed to bring something fresh and new to the medium. In fact, what I now see is the

and so on, but we also have a range of more obscure packages that enable us to automate character creation, rigging, environment building, materials and texture creation and more. Since our students have to specialise in everything, they need ways of quickly creating content without access to a 15-person art and animation department. So we use previsualisation techniques used in the VFX industries to rapidly create assets we can use in both prototypes and in final game projects.

### What do you hope your students will take away from their time at NFTS?

Our students get the opportunity to work with the best and brightest future practitioners from across the media production disciplines, and they'll come out with a portfolio of game projects that shows off their ideas, vision and practical development skills. They'll also have had two years' inspiration, two years of relentless motivation to make great games, which inspire and engage with players beyond the norm, and two years of extremely hard work and a lot of fun along the way. ■

## "Our students have always aimed to bring something fresh and new"

specialists, many of them set to be the best and brightest in their future fields.

### Why did you decide to add a game course to NFTS's portfolio?

The game course was set up to be an engine for games innovation – a place where a diverse group of people from all sorts of different backgrounds can develop their creative and technical skills across all areas of game design and development, and learn how to

industry starting to speak more of that language – a realisation there's a world of untapped possibilities to explore.

### Which tools do you focus on?

We do a lot of work with Unity, but we're not averse to looking at the alternatives if students are particularly keen to work with them. We have access to all the engines if we need to. Art/animation-wise we use Autodesk products such as Maya, the Adobe suite

# MA Games Design & Development

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**Games at the NFTS. The place for videogames innovation.**



Image from *Filly the Kid*, designed and developed by Ellie Silkstone, showcased at Develop Expo, GameCity and EGX 2015. Ellie is currently working on a Wellcome Trust funded game project for release next year.



**Location** London, UK



### **DR KELLY BOUDREAU**

Lecturer, Game Design & Theory; MA programme director, Digital Games Theory & Design [www.brunel.ac.uk](http://www.brunel.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
"Amplitude – I'm a big fan of rhythm action and puzzle games."

### **INDUSTRY PROSPECTS**

"You really have to want a job and go that extra mile to get it. This is where I think our students have an advantage – they're multi-skilled, creative communicators. They aren't just ideas people, they're students who can think critically about what's needed, adapt ideas in game mechanics and then make those mechanics a reality. They're valuable additions to any work force."

# Brunel University London

Where cultural understanding is valued as much as coding prowess

Brunel University is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, but its long-standing foundations don't mean it isn't at the cutting edge of videogame education. It offers a range of videogame-focused courses, and here Digital Games Theory & Design MA programme director and lecturer **Dr Kelly Boudreau** sets out Brunel's approach to game education.

#### **What makes Brunel stand out from other institutions?**

There are two things I think make Brunel stand out. Our programme is one of the few in the UK that offers creative, technical and theoretical components that were designed as one cohesive whole. Students come away from their degree having a firm grasp on the skillset required to make creative and innovative games, as well as a deeper understanding of the theoretical and cultural aspects of games, and understand games as part of our larger culture. Also, our course is taught by a team who all have various ranges of industry experience. Understanding how the industry works and being actively engaged in it gives our students



The Brunel University team that won UKIE's 2016 Student Game Jam, its biggest yet, with *Lost In Babel*

the undergraduate programme and introduced three new pathways in Game Design with a more concentrated focus on art, theory and technology.

#### **How do you go about choosing the tools to focus on?**

We believe in teaching our students skillset and a way of thinking about game design, which means they can

working on or playing games together. Our students participate in game jams, we host board game evenings and other activities, in which the lecturers also take part, and we've even set up a game design team to run this year's charity Colour Run. These social activities coupled with the team work designed into many of the modules have helped cultivate a culture of collaboration here at Brunel.

#### **What can graduates expect to take away with them?**

They learn not only how to make games, but also how to think about the process in an informed and critical way from a team who are passionate about making and studying games – they gain an awareness of games as cultural objects that offer players a huge range of experiences. Our graduates gain a skillset that prepares them not only for the practical world of game design and the game industry, but they're also equipped with transferable skills that can help them excel in anything they choose to do. ■

## **"Students gain an awareness of games as cultural objects"**

confidence that what they're being taught will serve them well as they work towards their careers in games.

#### **How do those industry links influence the course?**

Our course was designed with the understanding that the industry changes at an accelerated pace, so students are taught the fundamentals of game design informed – but not led by – current trends. And this year we've redesigned

adjust to any toolset that becomes available over the course of their career.

#### **How about fostering collaboration skills between students?**

Our annual intake is capped so we have a strong cohort each year, which allows space for students to get to know each other much more easily than on large courses with hundreds of students. Our labs are open 24/7 and they're always filled with students either



Brunel  
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Location London, UK



### SIMON FENTON

Head of games  
[www.pearsoncollege.london.ac.uk/games](http://www.pearsoncollege.london.ac.uk/games)

Currently playing:  
"I've just got into *The Witcher III*. I couldn't shake the ghost of *Skyrim*, but now I've stopped comparing it, it's amazing."

### INDUSTRY PROSPECTS

"I think we're in a golden age. There are so many avenues open to graduates now, and as well as the sheer amount of studios that have sprung up in the UK, the potential to work abroad is huge. All that said, graduates need to rise above all the noise to make themselves heard, which is a challenge. It takes dedication, a high level of professionalism, having an online presence, and above all else being flexible."

# Escape Studios, Pearson College London

An academy that prides itself on creating industry-ready game artists

**E**scape Studios is a digital arts academy that has been training world-class artists for the past 13 years. Escape offers a wide range of undergraduate, postgraduate and short courses in visual effects, game art and animation. Head of games **Simon Fenton** has 22 years of industry experience and spent a decade working as the lead artist on a variety of games at SCE.

#### What sets Escape Studios apart from other options available to students?

Our focus and passion for producing games artists drives everything surrounding the course. It's a cliché, but often our students say that they learnt more with us in three weeks than they have in three years studying elsewhere. We visit many developers within the industry and canvas them regarding the skillsets they require a games artist to know, and our course covers everything an artist needs to learn to work in game development. All of our briefs are industry based and we have technical artists and FX artists from major studios teaching scripting and FX workshops respectively. We're also very focused



Rare is part of Escape Studios' advisory board, with the legendary developer setting briefs for students

our games artists, our head of animation, Alex Williams, who worked on *The Iron Giant* and *The Lion King*, will step in. We make sure that we have VFX tutors who have worked in film, teaching rigid bodies and fluids for creating baked simulations, which we then take into Unreal. They bring their VFX focus but it's couched in the needs of FX for games.

them to be flexible in their approach to creating artwork.

#### Which tools do you focus on?

We only look at tools the industry uses or are gaining traction in development. On our games art course we use Maya, Substance Painter, ZBrush, Speedtree, Ndo, Knald, Xnormal, Photoshop, Unity and Unreal engine.

#### And what, ideally, do you hope Escape graduates leave with?

Escape Studios was founded on the basis that no course out there offered everything you need to go straight into a games art role. After our intensive industry-standard training in game art tools and approaches, Escape students will have worked on multiple industry briefs to gain the skills necessary to create great work and will have a deep appreciation of what it takes to be a games artist. We hope that our students graduate knowing they have everything they need to dive straight into their career, from actually learning the skills to having a studio-ready portfolio. ■

## "Our focus and passion for producing artists drives everything"

on students understanding the importance of art direction and having strong aesthetic judgement.

#### How does your broad reach across visual effects, animation and game art benefit your students?

One of the key strengths at Escape is that tutors don't teach outside of their professional industry experience. I have done a lot of animation, but when we teach animation principles and tools to

#### Are those skills relevant across all types of game development?

We teach games artists a range of approaches so they can work at mobile or high-end. But that gap is closing and many games use a mixture of both techniques. A good games artist should have a large box of tricks to draw upon and know when to use them, and our focus on the differences in realtime rendering and optimisation for both mobile and triple-A platforms prepare

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**Location** Swansea, UK



### **JOHN CARROLL**

Senior lecturer and programme director for Creative Computer Games Design MArts [www.uwtsd.ac.uk](http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk)

**Currently playing:**  
"I'm playing the new *Doom* on Xbox One. I'm really enjoying the retro approach with a modern twist."

### **INDUSTRY PROSPECTS**

"For the art and design graduates that are looking to move into the UK game industry I would say build a strong portfolio and be confident in the work you display within it. Tailor your portfolio specifically for the opportunities that you're applying to. With our course, students will also have the advantage of being able to productively work within a team."

# Swansea College Of Art: UWTSD

A historic institution with a team-led approach to learning

**S**wansea College Of Art is part of the Art & Design faculty within the University Of Wales Trinity Saint David, and spread across three campuses in south west Wales: Carmarthen, Lampeter and Swansea. It's the latter campus in which senior lecturer and Creative Computer Games Design MArts programme director **John Carroll** prepares students for the videogame industry by grouping them into production teams from the very beginning of their study programmes.

#### **What sets your course apart from other UK offerings?**

We assess individual contribution within game production teams, rather than individual projects. Students spend the first two years of the course working on an agreed-upon game idea. The first semester of the first year is spent entirely on pre-production and concepts, while the second semester has the students working in their teams to develop and model the environment assets characters and other game content. In the second year these student production teams implement the gameplay elements, characters, animation and environments



**Swansea College Of Art: UWTSD was formed through the merger of the oldest universities in Wales**

design team dealing with the core structure of art, design, animation and technical. The collaboration is further developed through our School Creative Practice common modules, which allow our students to mix with the other

because the visual scripting aspect of Blueprints is more accessible for the type of students we have on the course. We also use software such as Autodesk Maya LT, ZBrush, Photoshop, After Effects, Premier Pro and Substance Painter when developing characters and environments for Unreal 4. Sketching and drawing are a big part of the course as well.

## "We assess individual contribution within teams rather than projects"

using Unreal 4, and students are then individually assessed during a team presentation of their game demo at the end of the second year. The third-year major project develops these skills further as they create their own student lead game demo again as part of a small production team.

#### **What form do these student production teams take?**

Each student is part of a balanced

disciplines from the School Of Film & Digital media to develop small projects. For example, if a small team of game students want to produce a little game idea and they need music and sound effects, they can bring in music students to develop that content.

#### **Which tools do you focus on throughout the course?**

As this is an art and design course, we use Unreal 4 as the core game engine

#### **What do you hope your students take away from their time with UWTSD?**

I would say that the collaborative nature of all the work our students do gives them a better understanding of what it's like to work productively and apply their core strengths to any industry project. While the software and equipment have their place on a game design course, I think that the core principles of design, game theory and good production practice prepare the students more effectively. ■

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**Location** Hull, UK



### **WARREN VIANT**

Senior lecturer  
[www2.hull.ac.uk](http://www2.hull.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
"Bohemia Interactive's  
*Arma 3*: I find the  
nature of the game – a  
pseudo-realistic military  
simulator coupled with  
a great community –  
very appealing."

### **INDUSTRY PROSPECTS**

"Although the fortunes of the UK creative industry may fluctuate, there remains an increasing demand for IT-related careers. When planning our degrees, we ensure that at their core is an emphasis on educating software developers who understand the fundamentals and are flexible enough to transfer their knowledge across platforms and market sectors as necessary."

# University Of Hull

A long-established institution with strong industry links

The University Of Hull distinguishes itself with a particular focus on industry experience that includes an in-house commercial development studio, SEED, run by students and staff. Hull's Computer Science For Games Development course offers a three-year BSc, one-year MSc or integrated four-year MEng, and is delivered by staff such as senior lecturer **Warren Viant**.

#### **Why should students choose the University Of Hull?**

Over our 20 years of game programming education, we've acquired a reputation for graduating high-quality game programmers. We have alumni in most major studios, and these studios often visit us to provide guest lectures to students and give us feedback to use in our curriculum development. So between these industrial links and our focus on staff development, we're able to predict which skills students are likely to need when they graduate with a good degree of accuracy. Another major advantage that Hull offers is the opportunity to work on real, commercial projects within SEED, our in-house



SEED is currently working with HFR Solutions to produce VR training systems for the emergency services

solutions to this, allowing us to teach valuable employability skills and expose students to real commercial software development with a wide range of clients. One of SEED's most successful products is an Emergency Service Command & Control system used by many UK fire services. The importance of this experience is hard to overstate. Students are exposed to the project life cycle: they meet customers, gather

for use in projects, and our students have used them to great effect in game jams and competitions. The skills they develop with us mean they can quickly learn and use other technologies, which is important as they pursue their careers in this ever-changing field.

#### **What do you hope your students will gain from their time at Hull?**

The big advantage – and the one that makes Hull unique – is the opportunity for high-quality industrial experience for students in SEED and HIVE, which is guaranteed for all masters students. There are other, wider benefits to this too, including an increased awareness of, and involvement in, commercial software development by academic staff – over half of us are actively engaged in SEED-related activity. The availability of relevant commercial software development also provides case studies we can integrate into the teaching of software engineering. This gives students a valuable insight into their future careers and helps to ensure all our programmes minimise the skills gap between graduation and employment. ■

## "We have alumni in most major studios, and they often visit us"

software development unit, or HIVE, our virtual environment centre.

#### **What's the thinking behind those initiatives?**

Being able to program well is key, but employers want more than just robots who can churn out C++ code – they also want to see a wider skillset: teamwork, communication, dealing with clients, and professionalism are all critical skills too. SEED and HIVE are our

requirements, agree the specifications, develop the software, and deliver, install and support the product.

#### **Which tools do you focus on?**

In terms of tools and software development kits, we focus on Visual Studio 2013/2015, Parasoft C++ Test, Intel Parallel Studio, Sony PlayStation Suite, DirectX, HLSL, OpenGL and GLSL. However, libraries and game engines such as Unity and Unreal are available

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*"The University of Hull produces highly skilled graduates with a focus on core game engine technology combined with a strong emphasis on delivery." Andrew Perella, CTO, Eutechnyx*

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Indie Keynote: Funomenal Feel Engineering

Robin Hunicke, Funomena



Second Generation Crowdfunding: How to Make  
Crowdfunding & Kickstarter Work for You

Tomas Rawlings, Auroch Digital



7 Ways VR Confounds Design Expectations

Noah Falstein, Google



Let's Talk Narrative with Rhianna Pratchett

Rhianna Pratchett, Award-winning Writer



Building Great Games in VR - What We've Learned..

Simon Harris, Supermassive Games



Developing for VR - Lessons from the Leaders

Graham McAllister, Player Research



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Research and Development: A Rational Approach

Ray Dey, SCEE

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indie



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**JAMES LEACH**

## Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

I've just been asked to do one of my favourite things. Something I love but I still find important to the point of being scary. Some friends who run an independent game development company Skyped me to see if I'd give their next project a decent name.

Names are such a big deal that it beats me how anyone is actually brave enough to name anything. And I speak as one who's named lots of things, including a child. If you actually stop to imagine the thing you've named being used, printed on things, talked about and judged, you'd be forgiven for calling everything 'Project X'. Although that doesn't work as well with children, as my daughter PlaceHolder\_Title would attest.

People who bother to share their opinions on the Internet are largely agreed that the best game names are *Metal Gear Solid*, *Deus Ex* and *Max Payne*, and it's easy to see why. They're tough, powerful and you're not embarrassed to say them in public. That's the key, although I once had a conversation with someone that went on far too long as I tried to work out why he was so looking forward to, as he called it, *Due Sex*. It reminded me of the magazine I once worked at, where we would put 5p into a cup every time a reader referred to 'Rouge Trooper'. By that Christmas we had enough for a large night out.

So as I sat and failed to think of a decent name for the indie game, I thought of my all-time favourite. It was a Mega Drive effort (I know, I know) by Technosoft called *Herzog Zwei*. I have no idea why I loved it, really, but I did and still do. At a pinch, I'd say it was the toughness thing, coupled with the exotic Germanic vibe. I never played the original *Herzog* because the name wasn't as cool, and because it was only available on MSX, which nobody can remember, but *Herzog Zwei* was, as far as I'm concerned, the dog's as a name and as a game.

Names, it seems, work better if they don't entirely make sense. As I say, they're good in German, an entirely made-up language, Latin, a dead language, or simply just words. After



I can't even take comfort in the idea of letting The People decide. We do not need Gamey McGamface

*Theme Park*, Bullfrog Productions, where I worked, made a similar game set in a hospital. We angsted about what to call it and I pushed hard for *Theme Hospital*, because it made no sense, and because if we'd done loads more, we could have put 'Theme' in front of all of them. I still wish we'd made *Theme Prison*, although I would possibly have fought to name it *Umkreisen Enten Zehn*, just because, you know.

Such random title bravery can go too far, though. There was, in 1989, a game called *Tongue Of The Fatman*. That's like taking the delicate world of naming and carpet-bombing

it. I have no idea if the game itself was any good, and neither do you, because you were in no way prepared to even pick it off a shelf. *Tongue Of The Fatman*. 'Fatman' was actually one word, but not even that rescues it. I mean, people presumably slaved over creating that game. And not even ironically, because you cannot slave ironically for more than a day, and Lord knows I've tried.

The civilian version of game naming is of course the gamertag. I've had profound Xbox battles with someone called, pleasingly, MortalWombat, and have both buttocks handed to me on several occasions in *Grand Theft Auto V* by Apocalypstick. These people know what they're doing. They treat gamertags like celebrities treat the naming of their real-life children; it can be silly and fun for both because they know they'll always win. The world is a better place owing to all this. As a kid I used to feel sorry for the Soviet-era children my age who'd have to drudge through icy darkness to attend soul-crushingly titled places like, for example, School 16. Nowadays, as a parent, I simply wonder whether little Ivan had lived just outside the catchment area for schools 1 to 15. I bet School 1 was oversubscribed.

Anyway, I have yet to come up with a good name for the indie game. Distracted by the likes of *Ninjabread Man*, *Spanky's Quest* and *Frogger: Helmet Chaos*, which are all real games, I can't even take comfort in the idea of letting The People decide. We do not need Gamey McGamface. Although on the flipside I'd happily play *Call Of Duty: Hitler Did Nothing Wrong*. Nope, the trick is simply to name with honest confidence. Back in the day, Taito once went with *Panic Restaurant*. That tells you so much about the game, you didn't even need to play it. The last word must surely go to the brand-new tester at Bullfrog who once watched us 'working late', playing *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* on LAN: "With a name like that, I reckon the first five were cuter".

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

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