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Cult of personality

For years, *Far Cry* has sent you to exotic locations full of wild animals, armed militia and rolling grenades. For the next game in the series, Ubisoft is trying something different. *Far Cry 5* takes place in Montana, a remote part of the USA under siege by a family of cultists. Is it a change for the better? Andy finds out in this month's cover feature.

Also, this issue, our bumper review section is filled with enough great games to see you through the rest of the year. It begins on page 58, with our six-page verdict on *Destiny 2*.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE

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The PC Gamer team



ANDY KELLY

Specialist in Twitter, fame

Twitter
[@ultrabrilliant](https://twitter.com/ultrabrilliant)

This month

Made a Twitter bot so popular that Louis Theroux read out its tweet. This isn't a joke.



TOM SENIOR

Specialist in Space, guns

Twitter
[@PCGLudo](https://twitter.com/PCGLudo)

This month

Spent many hours in *Destiny 2* trying to decide between marginally different space trousers.



PHILIPPA WARR

Specialist in Water, geese

Twitter
[@philippawarr](https://twitter.com/philippawarr)

This month

Endeared herself to our art editor with a Why I Love about a grey room filled with water shaders.

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MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Visceral's staff are being moved to new projects and teams where possible



THE TOP STORY

RAGTAG REWORKED

But reports of the death of single-player have been greatly exaggerated

This month saw the closure of Visceral Games, the EA studio behind *Battlefield Hardline* and the *Dead Space* series. Visceral's Star Wars project – codenamed *Ragtag* – has thus been reassigned. The linear adventure is being reworked into a “broader experience”. EA's Patrick Söderlund described what the company is aiming for as “an experience that players will want to come back to and enjoy for a long time to come”. His statement sparked discussion of whether single-player games are viable.

Interestingly, one of the people refuting that ‘death of single-player’ narrative is Zach Wilson, a senior level designer at Visceral. According to a report by gamesindustry.biz, Wilson notes that the only narrative you can

really derive from Visceral's closure is that “games are incredibly difficult to make”.

IT'S COMPLICATED

It's easy to interpret Söderlund's words on the Star Wars game rework as a description of exactly the kind of multiplayer game which allows for or encourages loot boxes. The fear, then, is that single-player was junked for an opportunity to nickel and dime players via multiplayer.

VISCERAL'S STAR WARS PROJECT HAS THUS BEEN REASSIGNED

But it's not like multiplayer is a commercial panacea. This month, Gearbox's hero shooter *Battleborn* received its final update before development on the game ceased. We've also had *LawBreakers* director, Cliff Blezinski, doing interviews about growing the gravity-defying shooter from a small launch base.

Coverage of both games has often been dominated by concern over the low numbers of concurrent players and the impact that has on those games' prospects. I mention that not to rub salt into the wounds of either studio but to underscore the point that games are these complex, difficult things to make. With that in mind, reducing their success or failure (or the reasoning behind their reworking) to a single factor is rarely useful. ■

Philippa Warr

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WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

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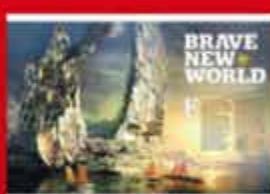
N

ight falls and The Spy springs to action. Slinking between laser beams, deactivating security cameras, scuttling down vents and knocking guards out in search of that most coveted of prizes: warm PC gaming rumours. You might think The Spy finds these nuggets of intel by merely searching for them on Google, but you'd be wrong. Work has dried up for The Spy in the digital age, granted, but there's always something to do. Lairs to infiltrate. Safes to crack. Governments to topple. Rumours to uncover. So, please, enjoy these crumbs of information The Spy has unearthed, and do keep a pinch of salt to hand, because the internet is a cathedral of lies.

Crystal Dynamics, the Square Enix-owned studio behind the recent *Tomb Raider* games, may be teasing a new *Legacy of Kain* game. Its vampiric series is well loved, especially reality-bending action game *Soul Reaver*, and the studio has been tweeting images of lead character Raziel. It's worth noting that the company is also celebrating its 25th anniversary, so this could just

The Spy leaves no beans unspilled.

This month in... 2010



ISSUE
219, November 2010
ON THE COVER
Guild Wars 2
IN THE CHARTS
Jay-Z feat Alicia Keys – Empire State of Mind



3 In the features section, Craig Pearson takes an early look at *BioShock Infinite*, three years before it was released. "The key to *BioShock*," says creator Ken Levine, "is being taken to a world that's weird and strange and fantastical, but also grounded in the human experience." Craig predicts the game will be bolder than the first, which certainly proved to be true.

1 Our cover this month loudly proclaims *Guild Wars 2* to be the saviour of the MMO genre. In the feature writer Josh Augustine calls it "fresh, flexible, and sub-free", and although claims it would "transform the genre" weren't quite true, it was (and is) one of the best MMOs on PC. It would be two years after this was printed before the game was actually released.

2 Al Bickham says he had a little cry after finishing his playthrough of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* in his review of the indie horror hit from Frictional Games.

be the team reminiscing about its legacy. But hopeless optimists like The Spy think it might be testing the water to see if people are still interested in the series. Probably not, but The Spy can dream. If they aren't planning a new *Legacy of Kain* game, they could be remastering one of the old ones. The Spy would definitely play a prettified *Soul Reaver*.

Cult Dreamcast martial arts adventure *Shenmue*, infamous for its record-breaking \$70 million budget, may be coming to PC (along with the sequel) in the form of an HD remaster. With a Kickstarter-funded third game on the way, it's the perfect time for Sega to bring the beloved series back. The only way to play the

Red, could be as much as three years from release. The Polish studio has been keeping details about the game under lock and key, but there have been a few leaks from an anonymous source claiming to have inside information about the project. The latest claims that the game will have a *Destiny* 2-style social hub that bridges the solo and multiplayer aspects of the game. Not terribly exciting, granted, but for a game as secretive as *Cyberpunk*, the slightest morsel of information is like a royal feast. After all, knowledge is power. Just ask the government who secretly paid The Spy a small fortune to find out what colour of underwear a certain world leader wears. Electric purple, if you were curious.

Finally, Steam sales. Everyone loves a Steam sale, when you think you're being thrifty – spending 3 quid here and 4 quid there – only to realise you've bought 20 games you probably won't get around to playing until you've retired. Well, you'll be glad to know that the Steam winter sale is set to happen from December 24 to January 4. That's a lot of days of deals in which to hunt down the best bargains in the festive season. So something to look forward to, then. This hasn't been confirmed by Valve yet, but there's credible evidence that these are the right dates. So get your wallet ready, because Uncle Gabe is going to be shoving his hand inside and removing all your money. Not literally. That would be ridiculous. Spy out. ■

The Spy



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WHAT MAKES A GOOD SEASONAL EVENT?

Which games do Christmas well?

Phil: It's the season! Which season? I'm not sure. Magazine production lead times still confuse me. But, when you're reading this, it should be slightly after Halloween and slightly before Christmas. As such, games will both just have and be about to update with themed seasonal events. Have any of you spent a festive season in *Overwatch*, *World of Warcraft*, *Dota 2* et al? And what's the key thing that prevents a good seasonal event from being a Christmas turkey?

Andy: I like it when MMOs do their own version of Christmas, which is usually called something like 'Frostmas' or 'Winterfest.' When you play these games for hundreds of hours, a sudden change of scenery – and the ability to throw snowballs at other players – adds some welcome variety. It's all a bit frivolous and daft, but hey, so are most games.

Pip: Yeah, I think when festive modes of any kind are done well they feel like the last day of term. You get to kick back and do daft things in amongst snowy or spooky or fireworky spaces. I'll talk about *Dota 2* as that had a festive mode which sticks with me – The Greeviling. *Dota 2* has a tendency to topple over into SRS BSNS. Matches take an hour or more, they can feel like actual work and you can end up having almighty rows with friends. The Greeviling put all of that to one side by turning the river to slippery ice and introducing the ability to turn into a comical monster with a wobbly bum at the blow of a whistle!

Phil: What I liked about The Greeviling – and I say this as someone who has never played it – is that it was a mischievous infestation of *Dota 2*'s actual Christmas event, Frostivus. That's a rubbish name. And as Andy points out, most of them are pretty lacking when it comes to imaginative alternatives to the season. *Guild Wars 2*'s is just called

Wintersday. If you printed that on a coffee cup, you'd get angry letters and an incensed national newspaper campaign. Generally, though, we seem to be in agreement that they're a fun distraction from high-strung competition. Are there any that don't work?

Pip: The Greeviling had layers, man. Nowadays Valve farm Christmas – sorry, Frostivus – out to the community. It's like realising you're a grown-up and you have to make Christmas happen for other people and get no presents of your own. Frostivus is thus one example of something I don't think works. I'd also point to the morass of limited-time events where it feels like the actual game mode or whatever is just a vector for loot boxes. I want to see some originality or a sense that the devs were enjoying mucking about too. You can't just jam a pumpkin on

a gun and call it Halloweenmastide! CS:GO had chickens with pumpkins on their heads one year and that was no good either. The year of the chickens in little ghost costumes, however? Amazing.

Andy: Sometimes 'Christmas event' just means a bit of snow and some Santa hats. If you played *Operation Flashpoint* on the 24th or 25th of December the pine trees would have decorations on them. Play *Darwinia* at Christmas and the little stick men have Santa hats on. I mean, it's cute and all, but a token effort compared to some other games. I feel like the Grinch complaining about this, though, and I struggle to think of a time when I thought a seasonal event actually ruined a game. I don't think it's ever happened. I do like how Calendar Man will tell you about some of the horrible seasonal murders he did when you approach him on a holiday day in *Batman: Arkham City*.

Phil: I always liked the idea of *GTA V*'s snowy Los Santos, but it only appears on Christmas day, I'm told, and I'm always away visiting family. I'll never see it – I'm not even convinced that it's real. In conclusion, then: festive minigame playgrounds and seasonal murders are good, limited edition skin dispensaries and certain varieties of chicken cosplay are bad. It's rare that these pages end so definitively.

Sorry Tracer, but you're no ghost chicken.



THE DISCUSSION IS OVER, BUT WAS IT A TRICK OR A TREAT?
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MAKING GAMES IS HARD

THE DOMINO EFFECT

How and why games are built from such fragile webs

ABOVE: GTA:
San Andreas
courted
controversy
with a scandal
erupting due
to the
existence of a
sexual
minigame
lurking in the
game's code.

RIGHT: The
amount of cut
content in
KOTOR II is
staggering,
giving the
game a second
life once it got
into the hands
of modders.

FAR RIGHT:
You can still
see hints of
plot points and
character roles
by diving into
the files of
*Fallout: New
Vegas*.



The 'domino effect' is a term introduced to me by Bill Gardner, lead designer of *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*, to describe an intriguing aspect of game development. It's a term for the pitfalls of the iterative nature of game making, and the fact that the further along you are in development, the more likely it is that changing even a small aspect of a game can break massive sections of the entire project.

David Pittman, cofounder of Minor Key Games and creator of indie immersive sims *Eldritch* and *Neon Struct*, explains why: "A mechanic in isolation may look simple, but the intersection of mechanics creates a complex system of dependencies. That's usually a good thing for systemic games; it provides the player with a coherent simulation that enables them to plan, act, and react. But complex systems can also be the source of many bugs and delays, as the combinatorial interactions of systems are difficult to predict."

The Deep End Games found this to be true on a narrative as well as systemic level in its recent attempts to remaster its horror adventure, *Perception*. "We had a few domino effect moments, but our remaster patch that included major changes to Chapter 2: The Ticket, had to be the most drastic," says writer, producer, and cofounder Amanda Gardner. "This chapter follows the story of a war bride named Betty, who wants to serve in the war beside her husband to keep him from harm. Betty's brave attitude was overshadowed, we found, by confusion among fans as to what actually happened to her at the end of the level." This prompted a series of changes that resulted in an overhaul of the chapter, including the removal of a sideplot focused on a lucky gun that they had unintentionally emphasised to the detriment of the story.

"When we decided to remaster *Perception*, we did an amount of story streamlining, but removing references to the gun shifted a lot of moving pieces. For example, the first use of 'Friendly Eyes', the app where Cassie (our blind protagonist) can get descriptive assistance from a person with sight, had to be moved. But because it was an introduction to the app, we had to 'teach' people how to use it at a different point in the game, which made us have to move around some other audio touchstones."

"We also realised how removing the gun would be a great way to reframe Betty and underline the feminist themes," Amanda says. "When Betty is presented in the original, she is feeding breakfast to a hallucination of her husband's dead body. We realised this made Betty seem unstable. By removing references to the gun and presenting the opening scene in a different light, we were able to present Betty as a level-headed woman in a precarious situation, rather than a grief-mad widow."

Such ripple effects become more likely the further you get into development, especially as certain assumptions (such as having a first-person perspective) are set in place. "To change one of those assumptions later in production requires tearing down the entire building," Pittman tells me, "at a great cost and loss of productivity."

JUMPING THROUGH HOOPS

Even something as seemingly simple as the inclusion of jumping can be a huge commitment. "The gist is that

once you choose to add jumping to a 3D game, then every asset needs a collision mesh, and anywhere you don't want the player to be able to get to needs collision planes placed to block it off," says *Fallout: New Vegas* writer and designer Eric Fenstermaker. "Any errors in the placement can result in the player getting stuck."

Due to engine limitations, the physics calculations for *New Vegas* only occurred in a new frame. This allowed the player to get stuck in the environment if the framerate plummeted, in any asset they might step on. The problem was only exacerbated if players didn't have an adequate hardware setup. "I remember there was a section at the end of the monorail track at Camp McCarran that we didn't want the player to be able to get beyond," Fenstermaker recalls, "but no matter how I placed collision planes, QA would always find a way to get through it. What should've been a simple fix took hours and hours of back and forth."

David Pittman also explains why features, visuals or plotlines

can remain in a game's code long after being cut. "A feature that seems important during preproduction may be vestigial by the time a game ships. When that happens, it may be easier to leave the vestigial feature in than to cut it out, especially if it's a 'load-bearing' feature that could cause a domino effect by its removal."

If you've ever wondered why a developer won't make a seemingly simple change, or pieces of what a game used to be still lurk in a title's code, now you know. ■

By Xalavier Nelson Jr

"WHAT SHOULD'VE BEEN A SIMPLE FIX TOOK HOURS AND HOURS OF BACK AND FORTH"

Shifted Compositions

SEQUELS THAT FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED THEIR SERIES



1 DEAD RISING 3
Reducing the importance of *Dead Rising*'s time limit gave players more time to accomplish objectives, but also diluted the route memorisation and prioritisation that made the series stand out.



2 BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY
With a larger sandbox came the ability to not just glide, but fly. Spaces grew larger to accommodate this, causing some players to mourn the densely packed secrets and focus of *Arkham Asylum*.



3 RESIDENT EVIL 4
Replacing the clumsy controls and rigid cameras of previous games left Capcom with a genre-defining hit, and an awkward question: how do you build on one of the most groundbreaking games ever released?



4 FALLOUT 3
If you've ever wanted your favourite series to shift perspectives, *Fallout 3* shows what would happen. This critically-acclaimed and divisive entry marked the series' new first-person focus on apocalyptic action.



Participants are torn between work and the jaw-dropping scenery.

WHAT'S A GAME JAM?

Popularised in the early '00s, game jams are group events where participants plan, design and develop videogames and/or board games within a predetermined time limit – normally between 24 and 72 hours. Jams tend to incorporate a central 'theme', made to inspire ideas and provide structure. How this is interpreted, however, is up to individual participants. The theme for this year's Splash Jam was 'rotations'.

PCG INVESTIGATES

MAKING WAVES

SPLASH JAM: the two-day Norwegian game jam that's set on a boat under the Northern Lights.

Splash Jam isn't your typical game jam. For starters, the 48-hour event takes place on an eight-deck cruise ship. It departs from Tromsø, Norway – the third largest urban area north of the Arctic Circle – and travels 700 miles to southern Trondheim. Towering fjords and snowy mountain ranges line the journey, and, free from light pollution, meteor showers are as ubiquitous as the crisp sea air. If you're lucky, you might even see the Northern Lights. For game developers, balancing inspiration with distraction can be as tough as creating the games themselves.

Partly inspired by Train Jam – a 52-hour pilgrimage that runs from Chicago to San Francisco – Splash Jam 2017 marks the event's second annual get together. "I love the idea of doing a game jam on a train," says cofounder Runa Haukland. "But the longest train journey in Norway is just eight hours. Even then you need to change trains, so doing it this way just wasn't feasible. This boat sits a lot of people, it goes on forever, and also allows us to show off the beautiful country we live in."

Haukland's counterpart Henriette Myrlund adds: "Sure it's a little outlandish, but Splash allows us to put focus on Norway as a game developer. Also: elsewhere in the world, jams tend to be more commercial-minded. In Europe, exploration seems more important."

This sense of intrigue is clear from the jam's outset. Gathered in a quaint Norwegian ale house just off Tromsø's main drag, the 'kickoff' sees participants – strangers at this point – forming groups and drafting ideas. From the sublime to the ridiculous, the jam's 'rotations' theme provides much food for thought. Four hours and several pints of craft beer later, projects are tenuously outlined, and it's time to board the MS Finnmarken just after midnight. Jammers are here faced with their first major dilemma: Do they head to bed for a fresh start, or relax in the ship's on-deck jacuzzi?

VITAMIN SEA

Bleary eyed or bushy tailed, day one is about turning last night's considerations into reality. Overly ambitious ideas are whittled down, while some projects are scrapped entirely. Throughout the day, jammers divide their time between work in the conference centre, three-course meals in the dining hall and sightseeing on the viewing deck – a balance that's occasionally interrupted by group stretching exercises, or inter-team brainstorming by the omnipresent coffee machine.

Despite the restrictive nature of these events, interpretations of the jam's theme are wide and varied. A tourist simulator pokes fun at the nuances of language. A local co-op game sees players controlling individual car wheels to hilarious effect. A top-down



Hotline Miami-like shooter randomises weapons by way of a carousel. A Tinder-esque app considers how sexual assault is portrayed in the media and wider society.

With deadline looming, day two is more focused – a fact underscored by the previous evening's jaw-dropping Northern Lights display. It's not the worst of compromises, but there's an argument to be made that Splash Jam offers too much in the way of distraction.

"For me it's been hard to adapt," says developer Peter Smith, whose war game is based on soldier rotation. "There was a moment last night where everyone was really locked in. And then someone comes in and shouts: 'Hey, everyone: Northern Lights – go!' Immediately, there's this sense there's something bigger happening that you can't ignore. It puts into perspective the stressful side of the jam, it offsets it, which is nice."

For some, two days at sea provides a different distraction: seasickness. Anders is a retuning Splash Jammer who was forced to adapt his plans due to migraines on day one. Instead of staring at a screen all day, he's now crafting a MacGyver-esque board game, made of cardboard coffee cups, post-it notes and scraps of paper.

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Across the room, Robin Baumgarten tinkers with a hardware installation comprised of spring projection door stops and LED lights (with diffraction glasses

Not Very PC

IT'S NOT ALL CODING AND PROGRAMMING AT SPLASH



1 CARD GAMES

This eldritch card game explores your innermost fears, depicted by some gruesome hand-drawn artwork. Be it burning to death, drowning, addiction, or dealing with a codependent friendship, this unnamed gem is a genuine terror.



2 BOARD GAMES

After suffering a bout of seasickness on day one, one Splash Jammer got creative with torn up coffee cups, post-it notes and scrap paper. A Blue Peter-inspired deal, this worker placement game sees a papercraft spider defending its lair.



3 INSTALLATIONS

Made of spring door stops and LED lights, this quirky installation was the jam's most outlandish project. In its final state, the hardware was used to create a whack-a-mole-type game. Its special glasses made it sparkle.



4 MUSIC

And, of course, what are games without music? Seasoned game jammer Ellie Abraham spent their time at Splash writing signs and perfecting a series of catchy tunes that complemented six different projects.

Image credit: Mikkel Bang Andersen

purchased from an online EDM rave store), while another group fleshes out the rules of their eldritch card game. Little is off limits at Splash, and while it produces some great projects – the standard of the final product is unashamedly determined by each team's ability (or not) to overlook the diversions along the way.

"I took this trip for the first time last year when we did Splash Jam and, to be honest, I was glad I wasn't making a game," says Haukland. "It was nice to just take it all in. We are talking about making some changes next year so that it might be easier to enjoy the trip fully."

Myrlund agrees: "We might even make it into a workshop or conference, so that you don't have the pressure of finishing a game. You can take a dip in the jacuzzi without feeling guilty. We might even add an extra day."

Adding another day would of course cost more money, and while Splash Jam is funded by public and private sponsors,

maintaining their interest is crucial to the jam's future. But with so much to offer – not least its gorgeous scenery – the jam's organisers remain confident this is but the beginning of something big.

"The Northern Lights are of course a big draw for the jam, however we play it down just in case it doesn't happen," says Myrlund. "We're never sure, we'll cross our fingers. And then, suddenly, boom! This makes it extra special. It's the cherry on top, for sure."

Joe Donnelly

THE JAM'S ORGANISERS REMAIN CONFIDENT THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING BIG

PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer 2018DEVELOPER
Frontier DevelopmentsPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
www.bit.ly/jwevo

JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION

Can you succeed where John Hammond failed?

Due for release in summer next year, *Jurassic World Evolution* is a theme park management sim with the added danger of dinosaurs roaming around your attractions. It's being developed by Frontier, creator of *Elite Dangerous*, and will see you following in the footsteps of dino-resurrecting entrepreneur John Hammond as you try and build the world's greatest dinosaur-themed amusement park. And, like the films, there's the constant threat of something going wrong and your guests being eaten by rampaging dinosaurs. But that's all part of the fun. Dealing with natural disasters and escaped dinosaurs will be just as important as making a profit and keeping your guests happy.

"We make games about things people are passionate about," says game director Michael Brookes. "With *Elite Dangerous* it's space and astronomy. With *Planet Coaster* it's rollercoasters and theme parks. And for *Jurassic World*, well, who doesn't love dinosaurs?" With games such as *Zoo Tycoon*, *A Dog's Life*, and *Kinectimals* in its back catalogue, Frontier is no stranger to making games based around creatures great and small. "We have a history of bringing animals to life in computer games," says Brookes. "Dinosaurs are the ultimate challenge, but one we're happy to be taking on."

"The core fantasy is building your own *Jurassic World*," says lead designer Andrew Fletcher. "You have an incredible island setting, you can bioengineer amazing dinosaurs, attract visitors and try to keep them safe, and build a business. That's what we see in the films and that's what we want to give players the chance to do themselves." As in Frontier's other, less dangerous theme park sim, *Planet Coaster*, you'll actually build your amusement park, placing buildings and facilities, decorating it and creating

enclosures for your dinosaurs that hopefully won't fall to pieces when one of the tropical storms that frequently batter the region comes rolling in.

The game will be set across five islands, which fans of the *Jurassic Park* franchise will know as the Muertes Archipelago, or Five Deaths. "They're the main locations in the game," says Fletcher. "Isla Nublar (the island where the *Jurassic Park* films and *Jurassic World* take place) will feature too, but we can't say how that fits in yet. The cool thing about having multiple islands is that they have different characteristics and will throw different challenges at the player. Each one represents a clean slate. Every time you expand your empire, your operation strength increases and you get access to more resources, more dinosaurs. This means you can approach each new island in a new way."

REX APPEAL

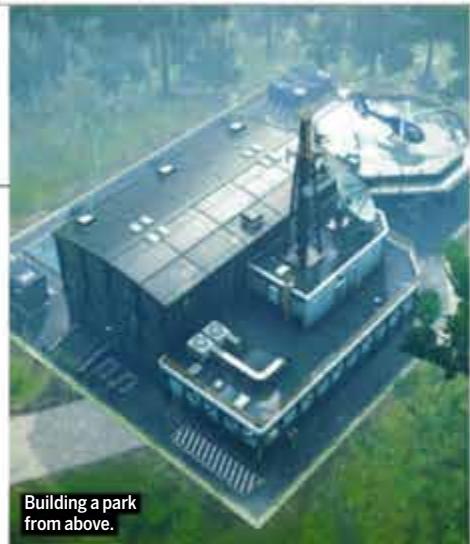
The footage released of the game so far focuses mainly on the dinosaurs. Even though it is, like *Planet Coaster*, a game you'll mostly play floating above your park, you're treated to some impressively detailed and animated dinosaurs when you drop to ground level. We see herds of giant long-necked herbivores traipsing through a rainstorm, the silhouette of a *T. rex* roaring against the setting sun and even a few glimpses of dinosaurs fighting one another. That's another problem you might have to prepare for when you start filling your park with different breeds of dinos. It's a good-looking game, and it's clear Frontier isn't skimping on its production values.

Like any good strategy game, there are multiple ways to win in *Jurassic World Evolution*. 'Win' meaning becoming successful in a particular field, and not having too many guests being turned into dinosaur chow. The three paths you can take are entertainment, security and science. These are what Frontier describes as the pillars of the game,

LIKE ANY GOOD STRATEGY GAME, THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS TO WIN

PREVIEW

Jurassic World Evolution



Building a park from above.



This fella looks hungry.

around which all of its systems orbit. You can follow all three and have a balanced, jack-of-all-trades style park, or you can doggedly pursue one. Both are legitimate ways to play, and you'll have a different experience depending on which path you decide to lean into when you start building and operating your park.

"Entertainment follows the dream of John Hammond in *Jurassic Park* and Claire Dearing in *Jurassic World*, where the dinosaurs are attractions," says Michael Brookes. "You're using them to attract tourists and make as much money as possible. Security is about how fierce you can make your dinosaurs. How dangerous they can become. But also being able to manage them safely. There's a very big risk/reward factor. And science is about understanding how they lived, what they were." So if you start tinkering with DNA and making your own savage, colossal dinosaurs, you're going to have to spend resources on keeping them away from your customers.

To complicate things you'll have a team of advisors to wrestle with, each of whom represents one of the three paths. "They have competing personalities and they'll demand different resources from you, which they do through contracts," explains Brookes. "So they'll give you tasks that they want you to do, like researching a complete genome for a particular dinosaur or constructing a certain facility." I'm not sure yet, but it seems likely that ignoring one advisor to help another might affect your reputation with them. I'm interested to see how deep this system goes, and whether they'll go rogue or cause problems if I refuse to support their requests. Smuggling embryos to sell on the black market like Dennis Nedry, perhaps?

"There's a further layer of management above this which is managing disasters," says Fletcher. "We all know from the movies that things don't always go to plan, and we want to represent this in the game and turn it into an engaging gameplay system. You'll encounter emergency situations like a heavy tropical storm that will damage your infrastructure. This can damage your park and upset your dinosaurs." I see a

glimpse of this in one of the handful of screenshots that Frontier has released so far: a concrete wall with a gaping hole in the side, presumably caused by a natural disaster. Pretty much the last thing you want if you have a load of hungry velociraptors behind said wall.

NEW BREED

But perhaps the most interesting feature in *Jurassic World Evolution* is being able to meddle with DNA and create your own dinosaurs. You'll remember that in the most recent movie scientists genetically engineered the 50-foot-long *Indominus rex* to try and attract more guests, and you'll be able to do the same – but hopefully with less disastrous consequences. Or maybe you'll create one with disastrous consequences specifically in mind. The beauty of these games is being able to create your own stories, and I'm sure people will have fun saving their parks, then purposefully letting dinosaurs go to watch them run rampant. Unlike John Hammond, however, you can always reload your park and try again.

"You'll start by sending fossil dig teams around the world, who'll return with dinosaur bones that you can extract DNA from," says Fletcher. "You'll build the genome, and can even make slight adjustments to it. It's about trying to key into the science of the movies. Once you have a genome, you have to incubate the dinosaur and then set it free in your park." Frontier has yet to reveal the intricacies of this system and how much control you actually have over the creatures you create, but it sounds fascinating. A special building called a hatchery is where your embryos will hatch and grow, and I wonder if you'll be able to hire employees like Chris Pratt's Owen Grady from *Jurassic World* to train or tame the dinosaurs from birth.

I haven't seen much of *Jurassic World Evolution* in action yet, but the passion of the developer is clear. Frontier's history of making strategy/management games is also encouraging, and I can't wait to watch my carefully constructed park fall to pieces as tropical storms surge, hungry dinosaurs break free from their pens, and guests have their holidays spoiled. I mean, it wouldn't be a Jurassic Park-related thing without everything going to shit, would it? We'll check in with the game again when there's a playable build available, but for now colour me interested to see more. And fingers crossed they get Jeff Goldblum to play one of the advisors.

Andy Kelly

I CAN'T WAIT TO WATCH MY CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED PARK FALL TO PIECES



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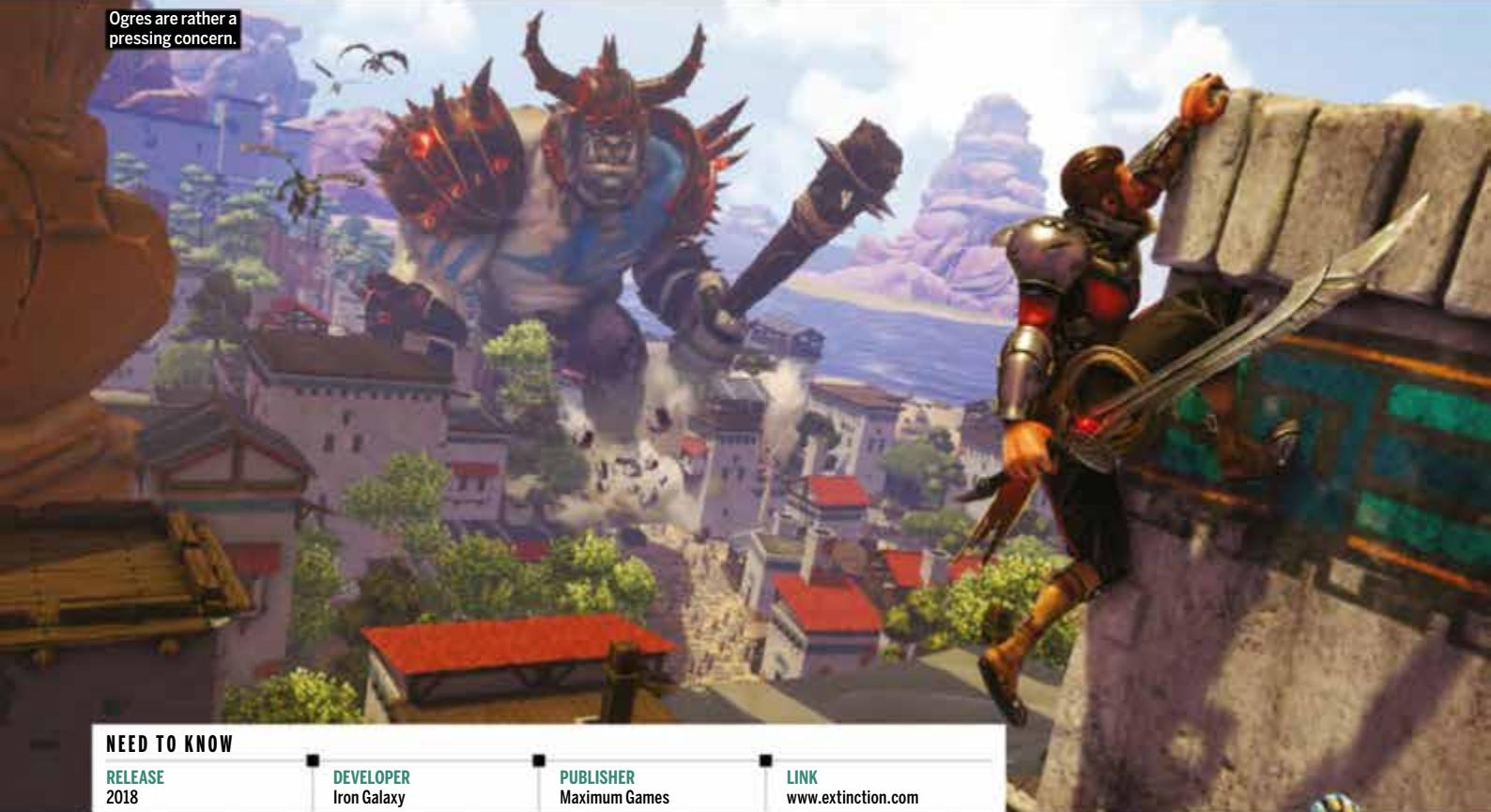
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Ogres are rather a pressing concern.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2018

DEVELOPER
Iron Galaxy

PUBLISHER
Maximum Games

LINK
www.extinction.com

EXTINCTION

Ridiculously big troll heads will roll

The pick-up-and-playability of *Extinction* – an ogre-bothering fantasy action game from the studio behind *Divekick* and season two of *Killer Instinct* – is undeniable. In under five minutes I had rescued two dozen citizens, obliterated as many mobs and was scampering up the back of a 150-foot tall jerk, ready to administer a fatal blow.

PLAYED IT

The point of *Extinction* is not to save the world, but to save as many people as you can while ogres and other ne'er-do-wells are bashing it to bits. Prioritising action is important – do you deal with the ogre destroying the city to give you more time for the civilians or do you go civilians first to get them out of danger? Do you save the nearby person who isn't being attacked or the one who is further away but being punched by mobs?

Once you've made that decision, it's all about the fight, working out the timings for pressing X (I was on an Xbox pad



connected to a laptop) to attack, B to dodge and left trigger to line up your slow-mo mega slashes to destroy ogre armour, lop off ogre limbs or relieve ogre necks of their heads.

Slower taps of the X button took me through a sword swipe and into an area-of-effect circular slash, holding down X launched me and the current enemy into the air where I stabbed at them away from their friends.

GETTING AHEAD

Right bumper uses a whip to grapple you towards whichever point is highlighted. You can use that to move around or scale ogres, gaining height and neck access.

You can't do the finishing move without stocking up your energy bar. You do that

by rescuing civilians, clearing mobs and completing objectives. This also gives skill points which unlock skills which you can use to either shore up weaknesses in your own playstyle or augment strengths.

I watch executive producer, Derek Neal, play a later level. He took on a scrawny grey ogre in gold armour. That armour was harder to destroy than the wooden stuff I'd faced but also offered grapple points so a player could theoretically bypass the limb-chopping and just vault up to the neck area. Other flavours include spiked armour you need to get the ogre itself to destroy and bright steel which is entirely indestructible.

I am competent but Neal is proficient, combining skills and manipulating systems. He tells me that the game will provide various ways to compare results – modes where players can test their skill or see how they measure up against friends, a daily challenge with leaderboards, a horde mode, and a skirmish mode with a code so friends can play the same scenario – all offering ways to monitor or show off your mastery.

Philippa Warr

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PREVIEW

Untitled Goose Game

It's me! Your friendly neighbourhood goose!



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2018

DEVELOPER
House House

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.househou.se/goose/

UNTITLED GOOSE GAME

Let's have a gander

It's a lovely weekday morning in the village and you are a horrible goose, says the pitch for House House's upcoming nature caper currently referred to as *Untitled Goose Game*. The trailer swept across social media like nits in a playground, the delightfully spiteful protagonist honking its way through a to-do list of mischief.

FIRST
LOOK

There are suggestions of stealth, of problem-solving, and of the ability to be a butthead to humans. I spoke with Nico Disseldorp – one of the quartet which makes up House House – about how *Untitled Goose Game* is shaping up.

House House have been referring to the project as 'slapstick'. "It plays like the kind of physical comedy you might see in silent films," says Disseldorp. "To succeed you have to trick people, steal things, hide in bushes, and honk a lot."

The idea first surfaced when fellow House House-er Stuart Gillespie-Cook



posted a stock image of a goose into a group thread with the caption, "Let's make a game about this."

A key part of the appeal is how creatively spiteful it seems. "I don't think you have to do much work to make a goose seem that way," says Disseldorp. "We just tried to make a goose."

Part of making that goose comes from actions you can perform. You have controls to honk, to move your neck, to flap and so on. The other part is how human characters react to you. "It's often the groundskeeper's responses that makes the goose seem so bad."

The trailer shows a garden near a lake and an accompanying task list ("rake in the lake" and "get the groundskeeper wet" being two of the challenges). "We've got a

bit more planned than what you see in the trailer, such as more spaces, characters, more items on the to-do list," says Disseldorp. "But within each area the game is open and sandboxy."

WINGING IT

The closing moments of the trailer show two geese harassing the groundskeeper so will there be multiplayer? "We aren't ready to talk about it," he says. "The day we posted the trailer, Jake (who is one of the devs and edited the video) asked me, 'Does putting the shot with two geese in the trailer mean that we are making a co-op mode?' and I said, 'It doesn't matter, I bet no one will see the video anyway.' That was over 400,000 views ago.

Feedback since the trailer was released into the wild has been reassuring. "All the things people are excited about seem to be the same things we are excited about," says Disseldorp. "So rather than change what we are aiming for, the reaction has given us more faith in our choices so far, and lots of encouragement that what we are doing is okay."

Philippa Warr

HOUSE HOUSE HAVE BEEN REFERRING TO THE PROJECT AS 'SLAPSTICK'



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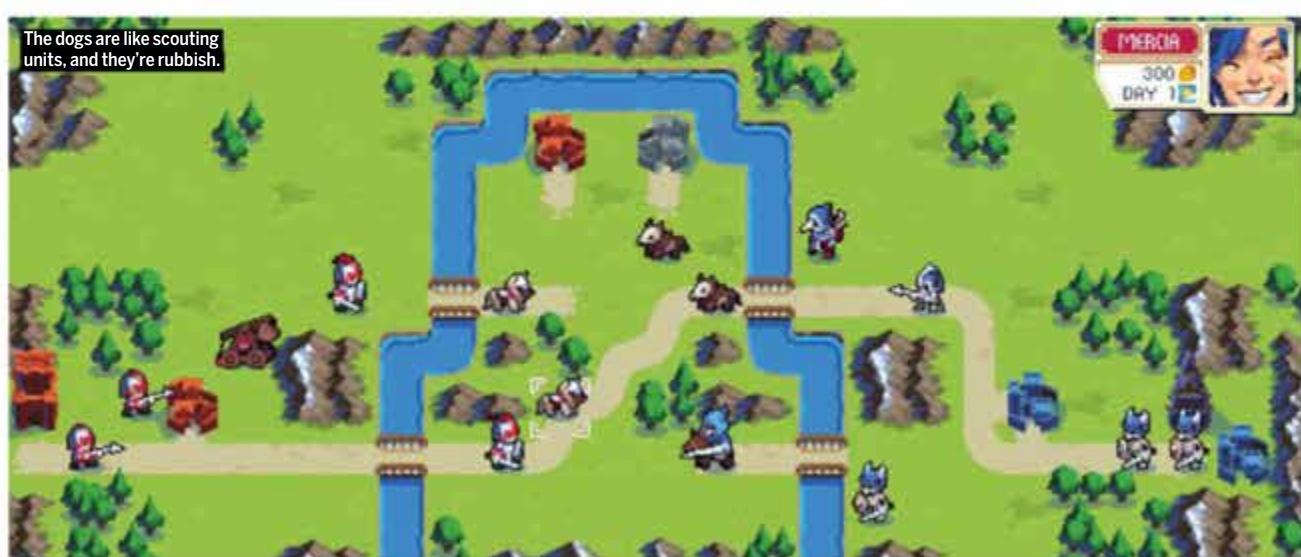
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PREVIEW

Wargroove





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Early 2018DEVELOPER
ChucklefishPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
www.wargroove.com

WARGROOVE

Our impressions after two couch-based PvP rounds

I expected a match of *Wargroove* to last about 15 minutes when I visited Chucklefish's offices recently. Turns out it takes more like 30-60 minutes in this turn-based strategy game. I found myself spending far too much time fretting about exactly where to move a unit, or whether to buy an archer or save my money for a stronger knight.

Such caution isn't unwarranted in *Wargroove*. The deeper you get into a game, the more fraught it is to leave a unit one square further behind enemy lines than you're comfortable with. You might be putting that knight or spearman in range of a trebuchet, or an archer.

Your goal in *Wargroove* is to kill the opponent's commander, or take over their base. Either will trigger a victory. Across the map, there are buildings that act as resource points. The more you control, the more gold you have coming in per turn. Capturing an enemy building requires killing the guard unit inside first. Though each of the game's factions have different commander units, they otherwise have an identical selection of units, aside from the way they look.

For this game, we're playing on a desert-y field, with my base on the left, and my opponent's on the right. We quickly grab half the buildings each, and the fight converges in the central lane.

The one key thing I learned from the last match is that a couple of spearmen placed close together form a good wall in the early game of *Wargroove*. I didn't find

the basic swordsmen units useful for anything other than grabbing buildings in the first few turns, so after that I focus on spearmen instead. After a few tentative turns where I focus on low-level units, my opponent drops a golem, a huge unit that stomps across the field. When it arrives, my spearmen are probably going down.

Since we've got the same amount of money coming in per turn, though, I've got enough gold for a knight, so that's what I deploy. They can move five squares at a time, and if an enemy is on that fifth square, you'll land a critical hit.

GOOD KNIGHT

This is how I counter the golem – the knight races in and takes it down to about a quarter of its health, forcing my opponent to withdraw it, wasting 1,200 gold. The golem's demise underlines the idea that everything has a counter in *Wargroove*. My knight, for example, can't cross mountain range tiles, nor can it take control of a building – it can only kill the units occupying one. Alternatively, the trebuchet, which costs 900 gold, would've been effective against the golem too, but that can't move and shoot in the same turn. That feels like the type of unit you'd only deploy if you have some units to protect it, then. I buy a trebuchet and wipe out most of the other player's remaining troops.

Nothing feels overpowered in this build. If anything, some units could be more threatening, particularly the commanders. Of the two I sample, one, Mercia, has a healing power, and another, Valder, has the ability to summon a basic knight unit from the dead, but both abilities take a while to charge up. I ended up leaving them out of the fight because they felt too fragile. This seems to be the area where the most balancing is going on – working out how long it takes for each commander's 'Groove' to charge, and how game-changing that ability will be.

The most exciting thing in *Wargroove* is experiencing those turning points, where the right set of moves can wipe out every enemy unit on the map in a single turn. The push towards victory is genuinely exciting. I look forward to losing my temper when one of my colleagues demolishes me on their 20th turn.

Samuel Roberts

MY OPPONENT DROPS A GOLEM, A HUGE UNIT THAT STOMPS ACROSS THE FIELD

PLAYED
IT



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

PUBLISHER
In-house

DEVELOPER
Chucklefish

LINK
www.chucklefish.org

SPELLBOUND

FIRST
LOOK

Head to magic school in this neat-looking RPG/sim

Spellbound is the working title for the next game from *Starbound* developer, Chucklefish, and it's set in a school for witches and wizards. It's in a similar vein to *Stardew Valley*, with sim-y elements and relationships to build and a soft, cheerful art style. Here's what we know about it so far.

Samuel Roberts

WORLD BUILDING

In its current state, it sounds like Chucklefish has already designed the complete world – now it is creating interesting scenarios for the characters to be in.

BORROWING FROM ZELDA

Right now, Chucklefish is looking to older *Zelda* games for an action-oriented combat system. I sense it's still a long way from release, though, and that this could change.



Rise of Industry

Rise of Industry is usually focused on the 'big picture', but it's got charm close up as well.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Early 2018

DEVELOPER
Dapper Penguin Studios

PUBLISHER
Kasedo Games

LINK
www.bit.ly/riseofindustry

RISE OF INDUSTRY

Supply and demand in this strategic tycoon sim

Rise of Industry reminds me why I'm not an entrepreneur. Seconds after learning I could open both wineries and distilleries I devised a 'perfect' plan to devote two different towns on one map to wine and whiskey production respectively. 'The Battle of the Booze', I called it. No one on the map actually seemed interested in spirits based on the tooltips scattered across the map, but I shrugged it off. If I just built it, I figured, they would come. I blame it on growing up in the '90s.

Take a moment to marvel at my well-intentioned hubris. *Rise of Industry* is an attractive sim that covers both logistics and production, so I went all out. I built my distillery, of course, and I also built farms and water siphons. I even built glassworks to make the bottles and sand pits to make the glass itself. I was pumping in money by the millions, convinced that the appeal of my product would be enough for the AI to open some shops to meet the demand.

And for what? The town I'd chosen for my experiment might as well have been a convent. No stores wanted my exquisite spirits. The Battle of the Booze was a bust. Don't follow your dreams, kids.

Success, *Rise of Industry* tells us, is all about figuring out what other people want, not what you want. It makes this clear from the moment you generate a new location with Quick Start or whip up a custom one, unveiling a hamlet-dotted prairie ripe for early 20th century capitalist exploitation. It's about studying

PLAYED
IT

the tooltips for the randomly generated scattered buildings and discovering your neighbours have the hots for orange juice and orange soda rather than exquisitely packaged 90-proof rye. Profits and smarter decisions followed almost immediately after I plopped down an orange orchard along the street. The modestly smart AI followed suit, opening a paper mill specialising in cartons nearby.

MAPPING IT OUT

Rise of Industry is a fairly deep production sim, offering control of the entire production line from raw resources (sand) to components (glass) and finally to products (bottles) and finished goods (bottled whiskey). You'll want to lay your roads and railroads for optimal routes across a sprawling map, set up harvesters, build warehouses to handle the surplus and micromanage the three destination trucks are allowed to deliver goods to. Sometimes communities will tire of some product and prefer another, forcing you to adapt to their needs.

And, miraculously, this never got out of hand. The menus are informative and elegant, and the currently dry text-based tutorial barely feels needed. City planners in the real world could benefit from studying such elegant simplicity.

That elegance extends to the scenery. *Rise of Industry* features just enough realistic detail to make zooming in on my little whiskeyphobic towns a joy, and just enough abstraction that I never lost sight of how all my trade routes and operations fit together. It's beautiful. At least in cartographic conception.

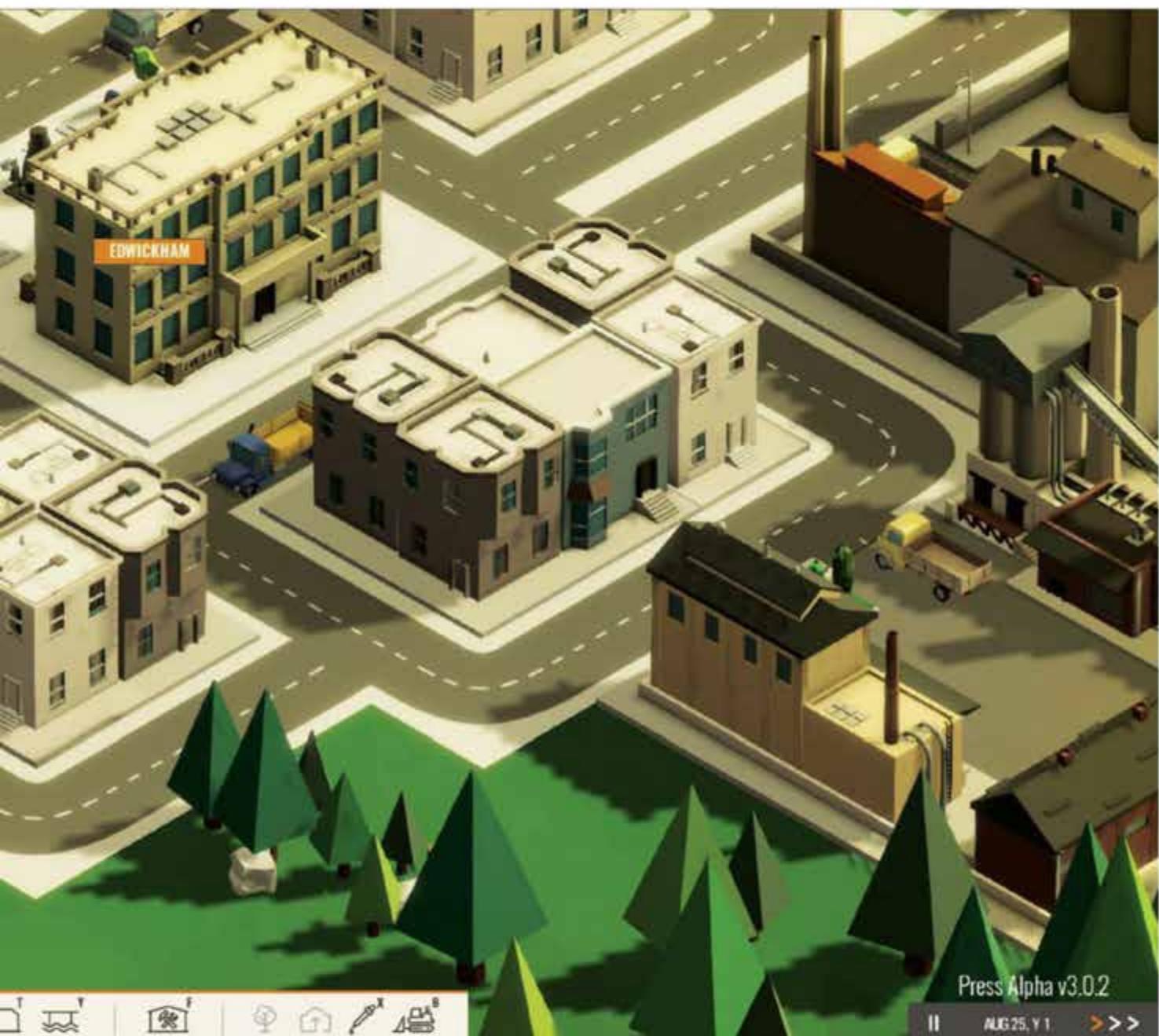
The sparse landscapes of *Rise of Industry*'s huge maps left me all too aware how quickly I was turning the Shire I'd started with into a Mordorscape of torn earth and rusted steel. I grew sad and rich in equal measure. The sight made me look forward to future updates, which will bring features like landscaping, terraforming, and pollution management.

All of which reminds me: as the green vanished under asphalt, as the roar of trucks increased, as the smoke thickened, I looked around and saw that shops wanting whiskey had finally started to pop up. Sign of the times, innit?

Leif Johnson



SUCCESS IS ABOUT FIGURING OUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE WANT, NOT WHAT YOU WANT



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COVER FEATURE

Far Cry 5

FIND OF DAYS



How Ubisoft Montreal is bringing rural Montana to life, and creating a sinister apocalyptic cult, in **FAR CRY 5**. By Andy Kelly



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COVER FEATURE

Far Cry 5

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hen you think of *Far Cry*, your mind is filled with images of faraway jungles, misty mountains and exotic tropical paradises. Which makes Ubisoft Montreal's decision to set the fifth game in, of all places, rural Montana a peculiar one. But, surprisingly, it totally works. The rocky mountains, rolling grass plains and shimmering lakes of the Treasure State are every bit as intimidating, vast and beautiful as Kyrat or the Rook Islands.

"*Far Cry* has typically been an odyssey that takes you to distant shores," says Dan Hay, creative director of *Far Cry 5* (and who was also executive producer on *Far Cry 3* and *Far Cry 4*). "You're away from home, the rules are different and you feel disconnected from your regular life. So bringing the series to a place like this was a significant challenge for us. It's fun going on an adventure away from home and having that feeling of coming back. But the stories happening right in people's backyards can be interesting, too."

The Father, leader of the Eden's Gate cult, chose Montana because it's isolated, rugged, and remote. "But it's beautiful, too," says Hay. "We picked a place where the people are

self-reliant and resourceful. We wanted your experience to feel vaguely familiar, but where the rules you're used to have been twisted. It feels real, it feels like you know it. It feels like a place you might have been to, with people you might have met. And then we twist that."

Eden's Gate, like any good cult, believes the world is about to end, and the Father is gathering disciples to shelter them from the incoming biblical storm. You play as a blank canvas, a rookie deputy, who finds themselves trapped in Montana and joins a resistance force that wants to drive the cultists out of the state. Which is easier said than done in such a large, dramatic slice of rugged countryside cut off from the world.

"We didn't want it to be too much of a caricature," says Phil Fournier, associate producer. "Everyone has seen American movies, so it was important we get all the details right while still maintaining really fun gameplay. And that's a fine line. We based it on the real place using Google Earth, but making it fun was our real priority."

Ubisoft Montreal is using a technique called photogrammetry to build its world, which involves taking photos of scenery – rocks, trees, etc – from multiple angles, then turning that data into intricate 3D models. "This speeds the process up quite a bit," says Fournier. "You're working from source material that already has all of the detail that we'd usually craft by hand, which is difficult and time-consuming. There's a lot of iteration and research. But with photogrammetry we have all this stuff that looks good already."



TOP: Planes are a first for *Far Cry*. Expect crop duster dogfights with airborne cultists.

TOP-RIGHT: With a landscape this big, you're going to have to 'borrow' cars and trucks on the reg.

WORLD CLASS

Variety is another concern I had when I heard the game was set in Montana, but that was ignorance on my part. It's a diverse landscape, the best bits of which Ubisoft is squeezing into the game's scaled-down, romanticised version of it. "We wanted to have a lot of variety in the different regions," says Fournier. "In previous games the whole world feels quite similar, but now we want it to almost feel like a new game when you move into another region. In one region you'll see farmland and animals like cattle, sheep and so on. Then in another region it will be wilder and more vertical."

"Our vegetation is placed procedurally using the rules of the natural world," adds Fournier. "Stuff like sun orientation and humidity will create different zones of forests, plains, wetlands. This allowed us to speed up the process and create the base layer of the world, which is just terrain and biomes. Then we start building the world from there."

Stepping into Montana myself, it strikes me how different the place feels to other *Far Cry* games. My mission is assaulting a small town in the middle of an open plain that the Father controls. It's a classic outpost mission, but a much more organic-feeling space than the walled-in outposts from previous games. And the town itself is impressively detailed, with buzzing neon signs, advertisements for local stores and other clues about what life was like here before the cult rolled into town.



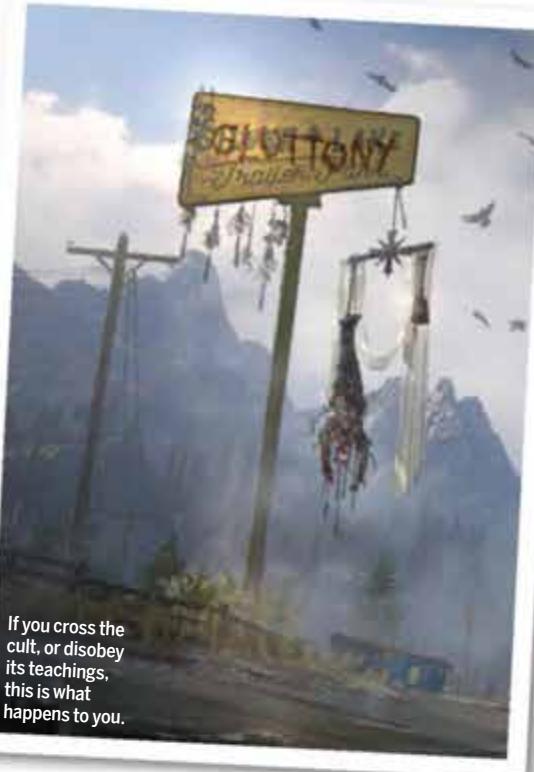
LEFT: Boomer is trained to fetch weapons and ammo if you've run out. Oh, videogames.



I climb a water tower and from here the scale of the place really hits me. Some folk call Montana 'Big Sky Country' and I can see why. It's the biggest, bluest skybox I think I've ever seen. Later, in the middle of a field of golden crops, I see a huge radio tower. I climb slowly to the top and the view is dizzying. I can see the mountains stretching beyond and a nearby lake where I go fishing. I jump off the tower, equip my parachute, and drift back to ground level, shooting at some passing cultists before I hit the dirt, triggering a chaotic, impromptu firefight. Yep, this is a *Far Cry* game alright.

In creating Eden's Gate, Ubisoft Montreal consulted with cult experts. I ask Hay why he thought this was necessary, rather than just using pop culture as inspiration. "I always want to learn something I don't know," he says. "I always want ideas I have and what I think is right to be challenged or eroded. I want to learn a fact or a truth that I didn't know. And what I'm always asking the team when they write something is, 'What did I learn in this scene?' I never want to watch a movie or read a book that doesn't educate me in some way. So it's important to consult with experts. The devil's in the details."

"They have a completely different language," he adds. "So by understanding that, and what they do day to day, you realise how you can make *Far Cry* feel different. They make it different. What these people do, what they care about, what their faith is. I don't want to make a story



If you cross the cult, or disobey its teachings, this is what happens to you.

"WE BASED IT ON THE REAL PLACE USING GOOGLE EARTH..."

Q&A

Cult expert Rick Ross



How did you get involved in *Far Cry 5*? Ubisoft approached me and wanted me to do some reality testing. To see if their ideas were grounded in historical fact, which I found was true, repeatedly!

Is this the first time you've worked on a piece of fiction? No, I have consulted on books, movies. I was the advisor to Harvey Keitel when he played a cult expert in the film *Holy Smoke*. I've done a lot of documentary work and so on. But this is my first experience in the world of videogames.

How real is the cult in *Far Cry 5*? There isn't anything about the Eden's Gate group that isn't grounded in reality. Ubisoft has taken various bits and pieces from history, from many different groups, and created a composite that is their own unique, destructive cult.

Who is one of history's most effective cult leaders? Charles Manson. What he was able to do was turn people into killing machines. He did it with drugs, isolation and just hammering away at them. He took people with no record of criminality and made them butchers. It's one of the most shocking cases.



that's just about one bad guy. I want it to be about a family, and I want the conversations they have, and how they interact, to be real. Someone questioned whether cults are actually like this, so I asked. And talking to cult experts, they say these groups are like families. You can't run something like this on your own."

Hay says that because of the logistics of what Eden's Gate is trying to achieve, they need people with different skills to achieve it. But that also means clashing beliefs within the group, which will factor into the story. "This is someone who believes the end of the world is coming and they've built this project to save a large group of people. So just to pull that off you need to have different personalities involved. We've created a cult that's unique, but real enough that the experts say, 'Yeah, that makes sense, that works.'"

SOUND OF MUSIC

The cult spreads its message through song, and everywhere you go you hear hymns: through loudspeakers, echoing from churches, hummed by enemies. The hymns were written by Dan Romer, a producer, songwriter, and composer whose work you may have recently heard on Netflix drama *Beasts of No Nation*.

The idea of the songs is that, if you don't listen too closely to the lyrics, you'll find this gospel-style music beautiful. But as you get to know the cult, their teachings, and their beliefs (chiefly that the world is about to end and anyone who doesn't

ABOVE: Outposts are back, and feel more naturally connected to the environment than in previous *Far Cry* games.

FRIENDLY FIRE *Allies who can help in battle*



NICK RYE

A mechanic and bush pilot, Nick will fly his crop duster overhead and drop gunfire on attacking cultists, with satisfactorily explosive results.



BOOMER

Yes, it's a dog. This spirited pooch will pounce on enemies and chew them up, and can even fetch you weapons and ammunition if you're in a pinch.



GRACE ARMSTRONG

A sniper who will clamber up to high ground during a battle and provide fire support from above. A silent, reliable guardian, if lacking Nick's firepower.

join them is doomed), the songs take on a sinister new meaning. "When the world falls into the flames," I hear a soaring choir sing. "We will rise again!" The songs were recorded with a real choir in Nashville, which gives them a suitably epic sound.

The hymns also echo in the game's score, which changes depending on which region of the world you happen to be causing trouble in. When you're somewhere

safe, an area where the cult has been pushed out, you'll hear nostalgic country music. In Holland Valley the soundtrack has a glam rock feel; the kind of music you might hear blasting out of someone's truck. Around Whitetail Mountains the music will be droning and industrial. And in Henbane River it'll be influenced by ambient and post-rock.

It's a bold mix of genres, and I wonder if Ubisoft Montreal will segue between so many different styles and still sound coherent. "That was one of the puzzle pieces we had to put together," says *Far Cry 5* audio director Tony Gronick. "I wanted each region to have its own distinctive flavour. I kinda look at it like the game telephone, where you tell a friend a story, then they tell another friend and so on, and at the end the story is a little different, but still kinda there. And the music in the game is the same."

"WE HAVE TO GET ON A PLANE, GO TO MONTANA, AND LIVE IT"

The artists travelled to Montana for research.



"We start with the Father and as it branches out there are different interpretations of that music by other family members. So when you get to a region, it might sound more industrial than Americana. But the music still matches, because you know the hymns. So there is a cohesiveness there. You won't hear the score and the hymns competing, but you will hear familiar melodies in the score. In the industrial region, it'll take a bit more investigation to hear the connection."

And as well as the hymns and score, you'll hear licensed songs on the radio when you drive one of the game's vehicles. In Holland Valley, the music is described as "your favourite driving mixtape", while you'll hear '50s doo-wop and pop while driving through Henbane River. "There's a different feeling driving around shooting out of the window of your

BELOW: There are a few friendly characters in Montana, some of whom will help you fight the cult.

BOTTOM: An abundance of domestic animals and wildlife ensure you're never short of crafting materials.

car to something like Earth Angel than heavy metal," says Gronick. "It's the same action, but it's a different emotion." The song list isn't finalised yet, but in a presentation at Ubisoft Montreal I heard snippets of Bobby Day's Rockin' Robin and Barracuda by Heart, which should give you some idea of the songs you'll hear.

STATE OF PLAY

To get a flavour of what life in Montana is like, Hay and his team visited the state for a scouting trip. "We have to get on a plane, go to Montana, and live it," he says. "And it's there where a lot of our thoughts adjusted. We met people and we started to understand the value of the resistance in the game, your guns for hire. We met some incredible people. It's a stunning state. It's a wilderness, but it's a place where you can go and get the sense that you can handle

anything on your own. We met people who have been doing that for years. And I fell in love with the state, the people. We met real characters."

"We met real salt-of-the-earth people in Montana," he adds. "And through their personalities we were able to shape the people in the game and make them feel more authentic. Even in the way they walk, how they talk, the things they wear and care about." As for the player character, I find it interesting that they've gone for a blank canvas. Previous games featured voiced, realised characters after all. "I don't like it in games when the player character doesn't echo what's happening in your head," says Hay. "So with this character you go in and you learn from the people in front of you as you go. It's a mute character, an empty shell that you fill in with your own personality."

It's clear Ubisoft is going to great lengths to create a unique, detailed setting. That's the focus of my interviews. But I make a point to ask Hay how the structure of the game itself will be different from previous games, if at all. "In previous *Far Cry* games you're used to walking out into the world and meeting people in the same order your buddy does. You'll play it in a specific way. You get to snack on the story or take a few outposts. It's a specific choice. But after everything goes south in *Far Cry 5*'s first mission, you're set loose in the world and free to decide what's next. Not everyone will be funnelled the same way. You can go in any direction and just drink it all in." ■



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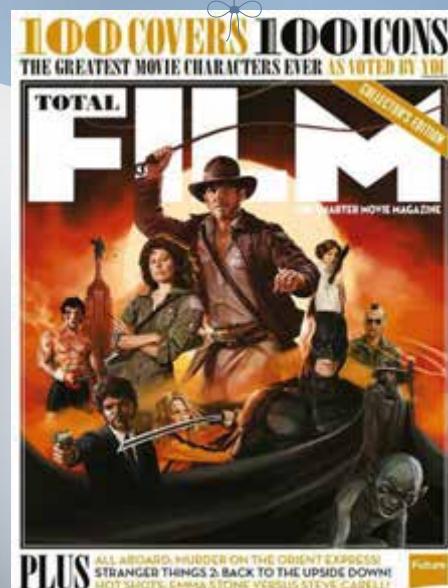
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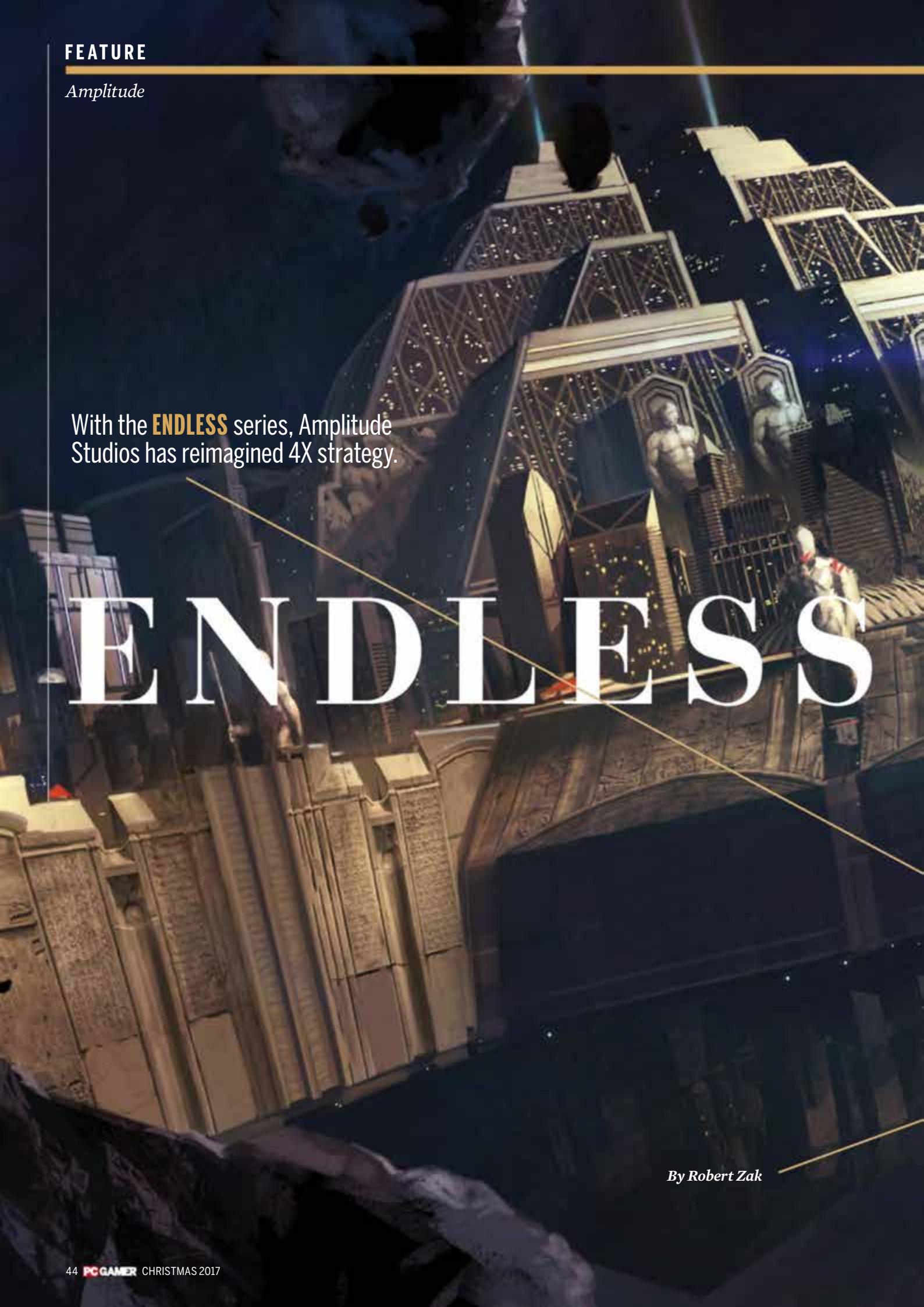


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The background image shows a futuristic city at night, featuring tall, multi-tiered buildings with intricate metallic and glass structures. The city is illuminated by various lights, including street lamps and building facades, creating a glow against the dark sky. A few figures are visible on the rooftops, one in the foreground and others further back. The overall mood is mysterious and grand.

With the **ENDLESS** series, Amplitude Studios has reimaged 4X strategy.

ENDLESS

By Robert Zak

CHANGE

The arrival of a new 4X game is a special event in the PC gaming calendar, like a solar eclipse passing across a world split up into tiny hexes. It's rare enough to feel monumental, yet comforting in its cyclicity, a sporadic dose of complexity reminding us PC gamers that, despite our growing propensity for couch gaming, there are some pleasures that remain unique to us. One year there'll be a *Civ* game, another year there'll be a *Gal Civ* and then an *Age of Wonders*. Fill

any gaps with meaty DLC, and repeat the cycle.

But between 2012 and 2017, a trifecta of games from an upstart French developer shook up this 4X hegemony. Amplitude Studios' *Endless Space* (2012), *Endless Legend* (2014) and *Endless Space 2* (2017) reinterpreted the 4X playbook, working within its strict rulesets to push the genre further than it had ever gone before. Two of the leading figures in this 4X supernova are Romain de Waubert, cofounder of Amplitude Studios, and Jeff Spock, narrative director on the series.

The *Endless* games have a strong narrative thrust, interconnected by a story about an extinct, advanced civilisation – the titular Endless – that destroyed itself through infighting. There is no expository intro in any of the games. Instead, you learn about the lore by finding artefacts, carrying out quests and exploring planets and the vestiges of lost civilisations. Even something as fundamental as researching technologies is a pithy lesson, as most techs in the game originate from the Endless.

Spock believes that the 4X genre lends itself naturally to a subtle brand of worldbuilding, which still affords the player the agency they've come to expect from a 4X game. It was important to maintain that *Civ* ethos of enabling the player to create their own narratives, all the while offering compelling stories. "Because it's a procedurally generated game, you don't need a traditional storyline. It's the player's story, not the designer's story," he says. To that end, there are no cinematics. Instead, the *Endless* series relies on hand-drawn pictures and evocative prose. Quests are tales of monsters that you can hunt in haunting, misty oceans, or of species that worship mysterious beings that predate even the Endless.

"I think it's more interesting to use text and 2D images, and allow the player to come up with the rest of the imagery. All we want to do is keep throwing coal into the engine so whatever they're imagining is rich and meaningful," Spock tells us. "We definitely shouldn't take over the imagination of the player," adds de Waubert, "because then it wouldn't be 4X anymore."

Even in the short time span between the games, Amplitude has made iterations to abide by de Waubert's sandbox paradigm. It's why between *Endless Legend* and *Endless Space 2*, the faction quests evolved from linear to choice-driven. At a story juncture for the tree-loving Unfallen faction, for example, you need to pick between showing the galaxy that the faction won't be swayed from its pacifist principles, or – in a flourish of doublespeak –

that it's prepared to defend those principles with force. The quest goals force you to channel production either into influence or military power, but you can take the path best suited to your unique circumstances in a given game. The faction quests become integrated into the game's systems, rather than layered over the top of them.

BREAKING GOOD

Balancing is a major preoccupation for 4X devs, and the megapatches that tend to follow most releases spend much of their time tweaking units, movement, faction bonuses and buildings to make sure the game feels just right. But Amplitude has embraced the joys of imbalance, making each faction drastically different. "With every other faction [apart from humans], we try to break at least one major rule," says de Waubert. "And by breaking this rule, we accept that our game will probably not be very well balanced in the end. But that's fine, because once the player's aware of that, it lets them go crazy."

So where an expansionist empire in *Civilization* may get a unique building with extra productivity and a couple of passive traits to help you spread your borders, an

Endless game takes the idea to its extreme. "We'd be in a meeting with designers and say, 'We need a faction that's expansion-oriented – they need to keep growing and conquering,'" says Spock. "So maybe it's uncontrollable population – rabbits in space, you know?" The end result of this thought process was the Craver faction of *Endless Space* (though the only cunical thing about them is their invasiveness). These insectoid creatures were created by the Endless for war, and their voracious consumption makes them the only faction to fully deplete planets of all their natural resources, forcing them to move onto the next star system, enslave whoever lives there, bleed it dry, then move on again. The Cravers are incapable of signing peace treaties, so you play in a perpetual cycle of consumption and war. Balance be damned.

BALANCING IS A MAJOR PREOCCUPATION FOR 4X DEVS



TOP: The Broken Lords from *Endless Legend* use the in-game currency of Dust instead of food. Tasty.

LEFT: Linear narratives can be at odds with the sandbox nature of 4X, so in *Endless Space 2* Amplitude made the faction quests more choice-driven.



ENDLESS REFERENCES

Inspiration for factions comes from many places



THE RIFTBORN
Inspired by: Demogorgon (Stranger Things)
De Waubert watched the Netflix TV show while *Endless Space 2* was in Early Access, and used its monster as an inspiration for the Riftborn.



ROVING CLANS
Inspired by: Asian Nomads
Initially written as Silk Road-style merchants, this faction's inspirations moved eastward over time, eventually settling on Mongol-style horse tribes with a splash of colour.



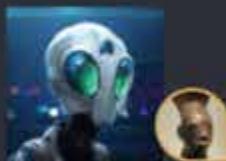
UNITED EMPIRE
Inspired by: House Harkonnen (Dune)
The leader looks more Donald Sutherland than Baron Harkonnen. But with its royal houses and military ideology, it takes plenty of cues from Herbert's epic.



HORATIO
Inspired by: Narcissus
Horatio, the massive egomaniac who has cloned himself into an entire faction, is based on the myth of Narcissus – the hunter who fell in love with his own reflection.



ARDENT MAGES
Inspired by: BDSM/Brom
The self-mutilating Ardent Mages base their society around suffering to gain power. Rather than your usual shtick, their look is like an Elizabethan twist on the art of Gerald Brom.



THE SOPHONS
Inspired by: Greys, Mangbetu traditions
The obvious reference point here is the traditional 'Grey' alien of pop culture, but the team also looked to head binding practices for the elongated skull shapes.

These kinds of idiosyncrasies exist across most *Endless* factions. The Cultists can only build the one city but amass armies by indoctrinating minor factions around the world. The Riftborn from *Endless Space* need to spend industry to reproduce (they're manufactured rather than conceived). The Roving Clans can't declare war, and instead exert control through the Marketplace: a global market with a dynamic economy that they can shut other factions out of.

In a sci-fi or sci-fantasy world, de Waubert believes that the "alien-ness of aliens" needs to be captured, praising the variety and weirdness of interstellar species in the TV series Babylon 5 and Iain Banks' Culture novels. "If we were to say, 'Here come these amazing mushroom men that reproduce through spores, but they have +2 Growth and -2 Industry, it just doesn't work,'" says de Waubert. "They have to break the game, otherwise the whole imagination of the sci-fi universe is broken."

A similar approach has since been seen in the *Total War: Warhammer* series, from Creative Assembly. The fantasy premise has allowed it to let loose with systems that weren't possible in the historical settings. In *Warhammer II*, Skaven cities only appear as ruins to other players, while High Elves can manipulate and spy on their opponents via diplomacy. De Waubert reveals that the two fellow Sega developers have been exchanging ideas, but stops short of claiming credit for *Total War*'s innovations. "We try to learn from their experience, and share everything we can with them," he reveals.

CLEAN COMPLEXITY

All these asymmetries and imbalances may sound intimidating to the 4X outsider. But where the blockbuster *Civilization* series is, to an extent, fettered to



ABOVE: The slick hologram terminals used by these Vodyani captains are basically what it feels like to use the elegant *Endless Space 2* interface.

its own legacy, and inhibited from making drastic changes to make it more accessible, Amplitude got to approach the genre afresh, with a new generation of potential 4X gamers in mind. "When you're starting on a blank page, you can do things differently," de Waubert says.

"Half the effort with traditional 4X games was trying to figure out the interfaces," says Spock. "You'd have to click through three menus then find a slider bar and under that you'd find another few options. We wanted to put an end to that." Take the 'Citizen Management' screen in *Civilization*, where you assign population to gathering science, food and industry. For years, it's remained largely similar – a system where you assign citizens to specific tiles surrounding the city, counting the amount of each resource on each tile. The *Endless* series simplifies this by not even having a separate screen for managing city production, but a small table overlay where you can drag and drop citizens between the resources you want them to generate. All the info you need is right there in the table, and the effects are immediately obvious.

Spock says that the goal of this "beautiful, streamlined interface is that the player could get anywhere in two, three clicks", but that doesn't capture the omniscient feel of managing your empire in *Endless Space 2*, where you can seamlessly zoom from a galaxy-wide view to a star system to a planet in a couple of seconds by scrolling. Press the spacebar on a planet or star system, and you

'scan' whatever is highlighted. The interface posits you as an emperor, interacting with your hologram terminal, using graceful hand gestures; it feels like a modern, less intrusive answer to those clunky metallic interfaces of '90s titles, like *Fallout* and *Alpha Centauri*, which aims to immerse players by allowing them to look at the game world diegetically.

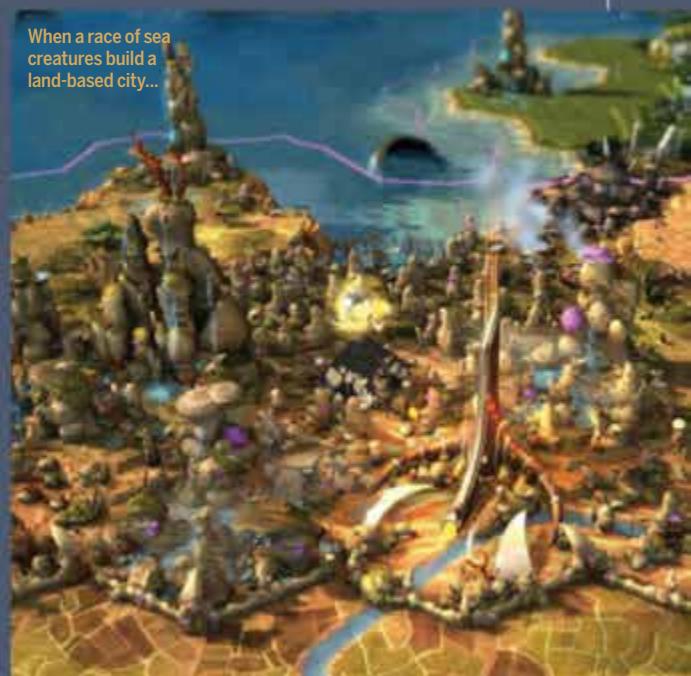
"WE HAD A BUNCH OF IDEAS, BUT DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO MAKE 4X"

ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

This is a series of decluttered design elements, and both *Endless Legend* and *Space* follow the same principles to keep things looking clean. There are only a handful of unit types per faction, and you're best off keeping them stacked in dedicated hero-led armies. Instead of inundating

the player with increasingly advanced units through the tech tree, the games let you upgrade existing unit types through new weaponry and equipment – a system that's instantly familiar to a playerbase more attuned to roleplaying game elements than it was even ten years ago. "Today, RPG elements are a reflex for the player, and a reflex for the creator," says de Waubert. "But you need to not get lost in it. You have to keep in mind that the player is still an emperor, not a bunch of heroes."

Citybuilding in *Endless Legend* borrows from its cosmic counterpart, where you're confined to colonising existing planets and star systems. In *Legend*, the rule is that you can only build one city per region. "Having to handle 20 cities in the late game isn't so much fun, and we



didn't want to bog players down with micromanagement," de Waubert tells me. Some of the greatest moments in *Civilization* come in those first 100 turns, when the world is uncharted and uncovering it is fraught with danger and excitement. By preventing overdevelopment of an empire, de Waubert says, "You get to keep these wild places in the world where mystery always exists."

"It's more interesting if you have five or six important cities, where each of them matter and develop a character," adds Spock. "The science one on the river, the military seaport city – this change from traditional design adds a layer of immersion that we feel improves the experience." One of the big introductions in *Endless Legend* was districts, letting players spread cities across multiple tiles, bringing in more resources as well as building a distinct visual character for each city. When *Civilization VI* was announced in 2016, a similar districts system was its most touted feature, offering players 'de-stacked' cities for the first time in the series. Amplitude is proud to have fed back into the series without which it acknowledges that its own venture wouldn't have been possible. "We know guys at Firaxis.

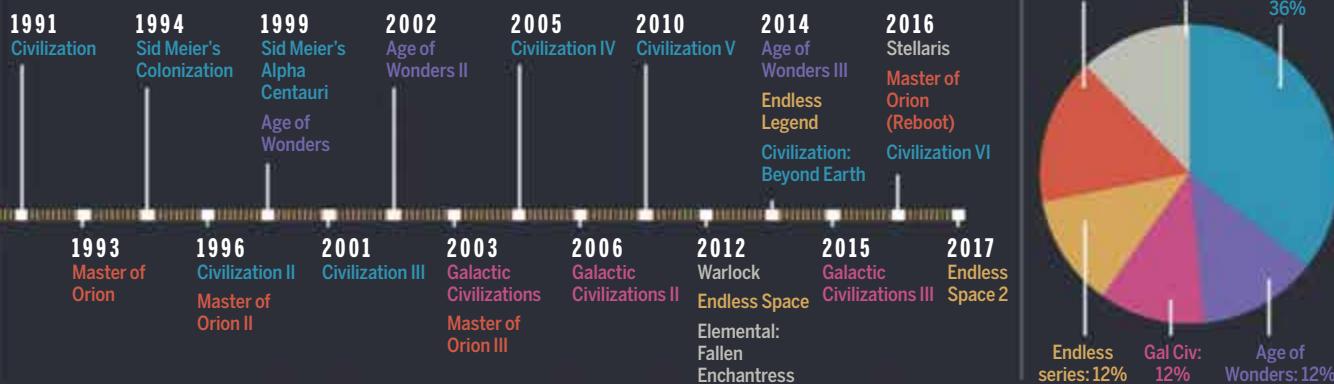
It's a collegial competition," says Spock. "If we always get jealous guarding our things and spiteful when people use them, the ultimate loser will be the player."

The design philosophy of the series can be partly attributed to Amplitude swearing by the Early Access model, building up a community of backers that's been offering nonstop feedback since 2012. It's helped the studio understand what players want from a 4X game, especially in the early days when, de Waubert admits, "We had a bunch of ideas, but didn't know how to make 4X."

Five years on, and Amplitude has created the first great 4X series of the Early Access generation and a distinctly *modern* classic of the genre, offering a fresh perspective that the stalwarts are already learning from. They've overcome longstanding 4X problems, combating mid-game lulls with compelling narratives and creating interfaces that aren't tied down by a lineage dating back 15 or more years. De Waubert assures us that "this is only the beginning" for the *Endless* saga – the first intrepid turns in a new instance of the 4X game, where rules are being broken and balance has been thrown out of the airlock for the better. ■

ABOVE RIGHT:
Amplitude uses plenty of RPG elements, but were wary of bogging players down in micromanagement. Now, should my Drakken hero wear red socks or blue socks?

TIMELINE A brief history the 4X genre



KNOWING

Firewatch's musical identity was forged when the team threw ideas together for its reveal trailer.

the SCORE

What goes into creating a
memorable soundtrack?

By Sammy Maine



Whether you're switching radio stations in *GTA* or trekking across epic mountains in *The Elder Scrolls* as a choir serenades you, music and games often go hand in hand. A soundtrack can make or break a game's success, even more so when it's emotionally and narratively driven. It can tacitly evoke a character's turmoil or elation, immersing us in the story with a vividness that visuals alone could never achieve.

Adventure games have been the de facto example of this. In 2015, Dontnod's *Life is Strange* launched, hooking in over 3 million players. Months later, *Oxenfree* saw Night School tap into the supernatural, while *Firewatch* was a successful debut for Campo Santo.

FEATURE

Memorable soundtracks

All three are considered fan favourites, and while their success is attributed to their storytelling, it's their soundtracks that have allowed them to flourish. I spoke to the music creators behind these adventures to find out what goes into crafting an acclaimed auditory accompaniment.

"[Musical] scores are 50% of the experience, and I definitely think that with games," explains Night School Studio cofounder Sean Krunkel. "When you look at it, it's the one part of the game where one vision can come to fruition without too many other things breaking it. In a game, you've got mechanics, art, animation, technology, you've got all these things that have to work together and if one doesn't work, the whole system sort of breaks."

CULTIVATING CREEPY

Oxenfree's soundtrack was created by musician C. Andrew 'scntfc' Rohrmann, who pieces together electronic nostalgia with a darkened, brooding intimacy. Depicting a group of teenagers who disturb something ancient and mysterious, the music for *Oxenfree* needed to feel eerie while also steering clear of horror tropes. "I feel like I was able to find that creepiness in other musical concepts. There's plenty [of] 'creepy' in old recordings, so let's just really accentuate that sort of thing," he explains. "I made it a part of the music writing. It wasn't like 'music is written and now let's make it sound old'. Some of that stuff was recorded to 50-year-old tape machines."

Like a lot of games, Rohrmann didn't have much to work from in terms of the game itself. Music in gaming often comes before the story is finished, meaning most music supervisors and musicians have to create a soundtrack from a few key points. One sheet of the story and a little bit of concept art was all Rohrmann had to work from, but, as Krunkel explains, it allowed the musician to have more of a hand in the design of *Oxenfree*. "You know those weird tape loop things where you end up interacting with the timeline background track? That was an idea that we had worked on in the creative brainstorms super early on that wouldn't have been in the game without him," Krunkel says.

"A lot of the game doesn't sing until everything is in and unfortunately for Andy [Rohrmann], a lot of his stuff comes in last because it's the stuff that's supporting the rest of the experience. Andy had to work sort of blind for the first half of the game. He gave us a large buffet menu of a lot of ingredients to work with and it would be like 'this is thematic of something frightening or melancholic' just to create tension, and that became this big bucket of tools to work with. Our general aspiration would be, if every second could be scored perfectly to what the player is doing, that would be awesome. But that's kinda difficult."

While Rohrmann was able to integrate his musical ideas into the story and design of *Oxenfree*, Chris Remo didn't really have a choice. As



ABOVE: Rohrmann used combined analogue and digital recording methods when recording *Oxenfree*'s soundtrack.

both a designer and the composer of *Firewatch*, the Campo Santo team member says it was often difficult to navigate his multiple roles. "When we had to put out the trailer and straight up had to write some music for it, that was so valuable because it gave me this baseline," he says. "The vibe of the soundtrack ended up changing from that original trailer but it was a starting point and that was incredibly valuable."

Remo describes *Firewatch* as "70% to 90% atmosphere," believing that to be "ideally true" of most games. When embarking on a soundtrack in gaming, Remo says that the crucial thing is to "holistically understand what your game is about".

"No matter how satisfying a game's systems are, no matter how gripping the plot is, or how relatable the characters are, plot and characters and world are things that other forms of creative work can also achieve," he continues. "Game mechanics are very specific to games. The thing that you get when you marry interactive systems and mechanics with those other elements that are not unique to games, like worldbuilding, character, plot and visual representation of those things, the thing you get is a really specific form of atmosphere that is unique to games."

The *Firewatch* soundtrack is an almost jarring collection of both acoustic and electronic elements, with the feeling of isolation at its core. Due to its popularity, Campo Santo went on to release the soundtrack on vinyl but, as Remo

LEFT: The soundtrack for *Life is Strange* included tracks from José González, Foals and alt-J.





It's crucial to use the right music to fit your game's tone.

continues, it was never his intention to have the soundtrack front and centre. "So much of my effort on the game was on the design side and making sure that all of the elements meshed between the story, the game design, the atmosphere, that's really the point of *Firewatch* – the marriage of those things," he says. "So I saw music as more of a tool to achieve that goal rather than a standalone suite of music unto itself. It was important to me that the music never distracted you. This is where being a designer on the game was intrinsic to how the soundtrack worked."

SOUNDING OUT

One team that wasn't so involved with the design aspect of the game but were intrinsic in securing its success is Feel For Music, which worked as music supervisors on *Life is Strange*. "A lot of the starting place

with that was about trying to get that emotional and human feel to the whole thing," explains Feel For Music's Ben Sumner. They nailed this human feel with tracks from the likes of alt-J, Syd Matters and Bright Eyes – songs that evoke that intense

"IT WAS IMPORTANT TO ME THAT THE MUSIC NEVER DISTRACTED YOU"

navigation of impending adulthood, much like the game's characters.

"The thing that's gone down well is the fact it's different from a lot of other videogame music," Sumner continues. "The idea of having an acoustic, folk-y type sound, there's

not any other games that spring to mind that have such a strong identity with that kind of sound. The focus on narrative for that game lent itself well to having an emotive, simple acoustic kind of sound."

Sumner says a lot of the team listened through a lot of the songs while they were making the game, allowing them to test which tracks were working and which weren't. "They had this drive for it to have a specific sound that was emotional. They thought a lot about lyrics and how that played in with the storyline, what happened at the key points in the game and the main characters," Sumner adds. "Music can be the last thing thought about but the first thing complained about. Some of the best scores are ones you don't notice, they sit there and help enhance the mood but don't take the spotlight."

While the composers and music supervisors on *Oxenfree*, *Firewatch* and *Life is Strange* perhaps never intended for their soundtracks to become as renowned as the games themselves, it's not surprising that players have formed intense connections to the music. "The thing that you're left with is this crystallised emotional experience and music is just a huge part of that," Chris Remo says. "When so much of the value and the emotional impact of the medium does come down to atmosphere and tone, it only makes sense that music is going to mesh with that closely and powerfully in almost a multiplicative way. That's a powerful thing and I don't think there's any substitute for it."

CAUGHT IN THE STORM



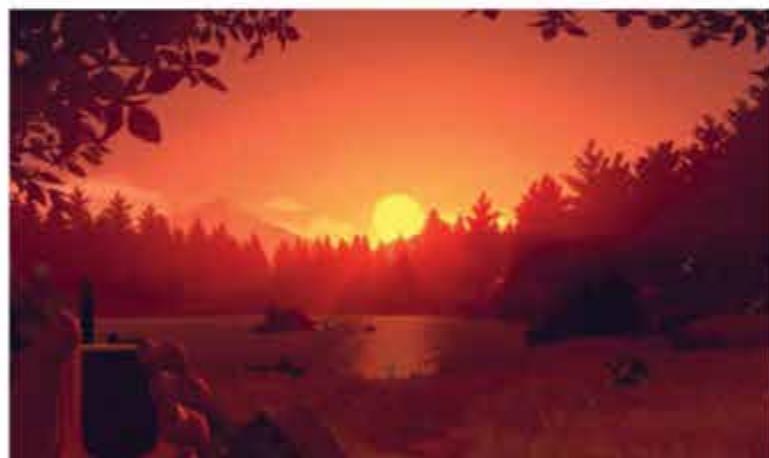
Daughter's Igor Haefeli on the soundtrack for *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*

London-based Daughter had never thought of creating a soundtrack for a videogame. When it was approached by Deck Nine, the trio had never even heard of *Life is Strange*. But as guitarist and vocalist Igor Haefeli explains, it allowed the band members to step outside of their own experiences.

"It all happened quickly from the moment we said yes," he says. "Apparently, [Deck Nine] had been listening to our music as inspiration. I guess they felt our music fit well with the story. They wanted us to do whatever we wanted to do. They said they really liked our music, the way we approach things, the way we tackled some themes in the past."

The band were given a synopsis but they had to create the music before the game was ready. "We sent stems to the audio team and they were able to time things appropriately for different scenes they wanted to use the music in."

"Our artistic ambitions and sensibilities, things we want to express, were always there," Haefeli adds. "We always knew that it was to help someone else's vision. We wouldn't have had it any other way."



Daughter image credit: Sonny Manora

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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions.

ALPHAS & BETAS

This means we'll review any released alpha, beta or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently buy. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time in their current state.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be hours-long new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. Either way, if we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example Gettysburg: Armored Warfare

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little to no reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples Trials of the Blood Dragon

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples Aliens: Colonial Marines

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples Life is Strange, Planet Coaster

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples Overwatch, Mass Effect: Andromeda

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples Forza Horizon 3, Dishonored 2

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Traveler's tales

It's finally here. After years of console players talking about Xûr, Gjallarhorn and wizards that came from the moon, Bungie's sci-fi shooter series has finally arrived on PC. *Destiny 2* is an exciting, eccentric and often ridiculous game, full of quirks and idiosyncrasies. It's also an accomplished and satisfying shooter, with some of the best gunplay around. Will you enjoy it in the long-term, though? That's a complicated question, and one that Tom digs into across the next six pages of our lead review.

Elsewhere this issue, everything gets an 80. Okay, that's not quite true – sorry, *Shadow of War* – but this is still a strong month filled with a variety of styles and genres. From the contemplative *A Mortician's Tale*, to the obsessive *Forza 7*, there's plenty to enjoy.



Phil Savage

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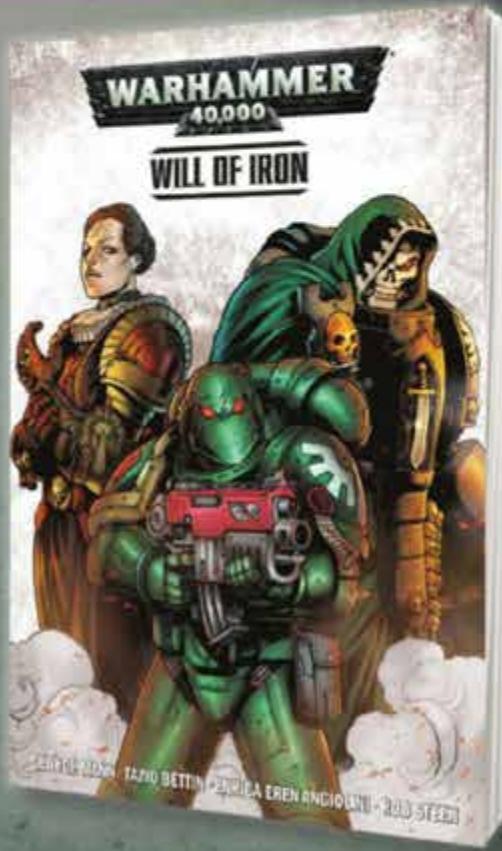
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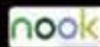
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REVIEW

Destiny 2



SHINING LIGHT

DESTINY 2 is the batshit gun-crazy space opera you've been waiting for. *By Tom Senior*

Welcome to the era of the lifestyle game, where products are sold as persistent experiences, intended to become a cornerstone of your leisure time. MMOs have given way to snackable games that use loot boxes and uneven rewards to entice us into putting in a few hours every week. *Destiny 2* is your next lifestyle game. Not because its progression systems are more enticing, but because it is a world-class shooter.

Destiny 2 is a persistent online FPS set in our solar system in the distant future. Four alien factions have converged on Earth to seize the power of a vast orb called the Traveler, which acts as humanity's silent protector. The Traveler's tiny drones, known as Ghosts, resurrect humans to serve as immortal Guardians charged with defending the planet. There are three flavours of Guardian to choose from. Warlocks can zap enemies with lightning, Emperor Palpatine-style; Titans throw down shield walls and punch bad guys really hard; Hunters shank foes while dodge-rolling and tethering hordes with shots from a bow made of glittering purple energy. You pick your class, design your character and get levelling.

It's a game of three phases. The singleplayer story gets you to level 20 and introduces the universe map, which you'll use for the next hundred or so hours to fly between planets to

explore their open world zones, take on three-player Strikes (dungeons, basically), fight other players in four-on-four Crucible contests, and eventually take on the six-player raid. As you move through the story

I get a rare feeling of satisfaction from taking a headshot

Destiny 2 starts laying the groundwork for phase two, beyond level 20, when you start hunting for weapons and armour to grow your new power level from 100 up to 305. This means repeating strikes, taking on public events in open zones and doing short missions called adventures. Phase three kicks in when you're close to the level cap. At this point most activities in the game drop worthless rewards and the game splutters. You can expect 30 or so hours of quality shooting before you hit *Destiny 2*'s doldrums. The journey is worth it.

CABAL GUY

Destiny 2's plot is simple. A warlord called Ghaul leads the lumbering group of aliens called the Cabal in an

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An online shooter set in a glittering futuristic vision of our solar system.

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
Activision

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-2500K
3.3GHz, GTX 970,
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to six in PvE, up to eight in PvP

LINK
www.bit.ly/destiny2pcg



attack on Earth. He wants to siphon off the Traveler's power for himself, and you have to stop him across five or six hours of missions scattered across Earth, Titan, Nessus and Io. As the old Arthur C. Clarke saying goes, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. *Destiny*'s fiction lives in this blurred area. Guns housing advanced AI fire ammunition that breaks apart reality. You might find yourself wearing a far-future astronaut suit, or a helmet made from the bones of an extinct race of space dragons.

Destiny's universe works better when you consider it as an anthology of these cool sci-fi ideas rather than a linear story. The Cabal is the main threat in this game, but every faction can bring their bespoke on-brand apocalypse scenario to bear whenever Bungie releases an expansion. The zombie-like Hive want to consume everything to feed the symbiotic worm creatures that infest them. The cybernetic Vex want to resolve the ambiguities of the universe into a perfect network, which involves wiping out species that inconvenience them.

They all die beautifully, and the vast majority of your interactions with *Destiny*'s curious universe happen at end of a gun. I get a rare feeling of satisfaction from taking a headshot in *Destiny 2*, and there is a deeply rewarding rhythm to combat encounters. Whichever class you choose, you have access to a grenade and a melee attack, which recharge on cooldowns after each use. You have a loadout of three weapons to hand (though it's easy to duck into the menu to swap these out if you wish). Kinetic weapons deal standard damage; energy weapons carry elemental charge that you use to shatter shields; heavy weapons are your big hitters and include shotguns, sniper rifles, rocket launchers and even swords. With practice you find yourself switching between weapons on the fly to take care of specific threats, chucking grenades into mobs,

ARMED AND READY

Destiny 2's best guns, and a sword



SUNSHOT

Gun type: Hand cannon
Perfect for: Duels at dawn
Special thing: Bullets make enemies explode with the power of the sun.



RISKRUNNER

Gun type: Submachine gun
Perfect for: Tesla fans
Special thing: Arc damage makes it more electric.



WARDCLIFF COIL

Gun type: Rocket launcher
Perfect for: Firing torrents of mini-missiles
Special thing: Looks like a big old dildo.



QUICKFANG SWORD

Gun type: Sword
Perfect for: Slashing, not shooting.
Special thing: Chops up Guardians in PvP.

punching charging enemies into a million crackling pieces and repositioning with a jet-powered jump. If enemies are massing, a tough boss turns up, or you've just had enough, you can activate your super ability. Hunters can break out the bow, one-shot enemies with a flaming gun, or dice up mobs with an electric staff, depending on the subclass you have equipped – Warlocks and Titans have their own variants of this.

POWER PORT

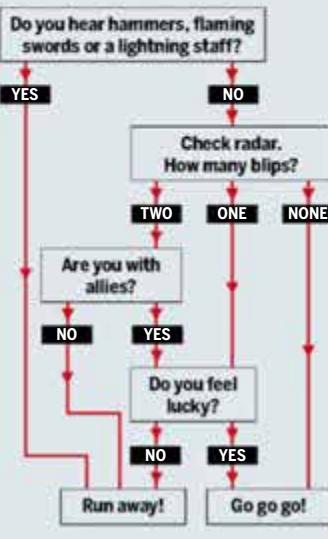
After hundreds of hours of *Destiny*

and many hours of *Destiny 2*, it still feels great to dismantle a mob like this, and Bungie's shooter expertise translates surprisingly well onto PC. Mouse and keyboard controls,

combined with a stable 60fps of performance, adds an extra sense of control and fluidity. My experience with the PC version has been excellent. *Destiny 2* has extensive settings menus that let you gear the game to your rig. It feels great to broaden out the field of view and absorb more of the game's gorgeous space vistas. Some of the default key bindings are off for me, but these too can be extensively rearranged to fit your setup.

PVP DILEMMA

'Should I go round that corner?' A guide



Destiny 2's first 20 hours are exhilarating. You see new planets, each of which benefits from some extraordinary art direction. Titan's missions take place on an industrial complex on stilts, which sustains a vast Golden Age Arcology overrun by the Hive's corruption. The zone flows from man-made superstructures into a defunct futuristic museum. The range of visual ideas in this one place alone would be enough to sustain a game by itself. Inevitably the splendour of the universe fades as you start blasting through zones to find a public event and try to secure

some 280-power trousers, but there are few sci-fi games on PC that match Bungie's vision. The Raid – *Destiny 2*'s endgame activity – takes place in an opulent golden space palace.

It's a spectacular place to be, especially with friends. *Destiny 2*'s positive multiplayer environment is as vital to the game's success as its weapon and encounter design. There is no public chat. Instead you opt in to communication, via voice or text, with your team mates in PvP, or your co-op fireteam. If you set the option in the menus, you can choose to receive whispers from strangers, but otherwise your communication with strangers is limited to comedy emotes. Agile menus let you seamlessly glide into co-op fireteams. Few games let you segue in and out of co-op so easily, and *Destiny*'s imposed silence leaves no room for shitty behaviour.

Destiny 2 is a limited game if you play purely solo, but it is almost impossible to do that. Singleplayer missions move in and out of public spaces, and the game seems especially likely to trigger public events in these moments. These impromptu free-for-all missions often see an alien faction drop an objective into the world – a mining drone, perhaps, or a scanner – which you then have to defend against waves of incoming enemies. Everyone who runs into the area joins the event and becomes part of a ragtag assembly of fellow Guardians blasting hundreds of enemies for the promise of a treasure chest. *Destiny* is designed to let you flow organically through the gamut of activities, teaming up with friends and strangers as you go. Each play session consists of a selection of

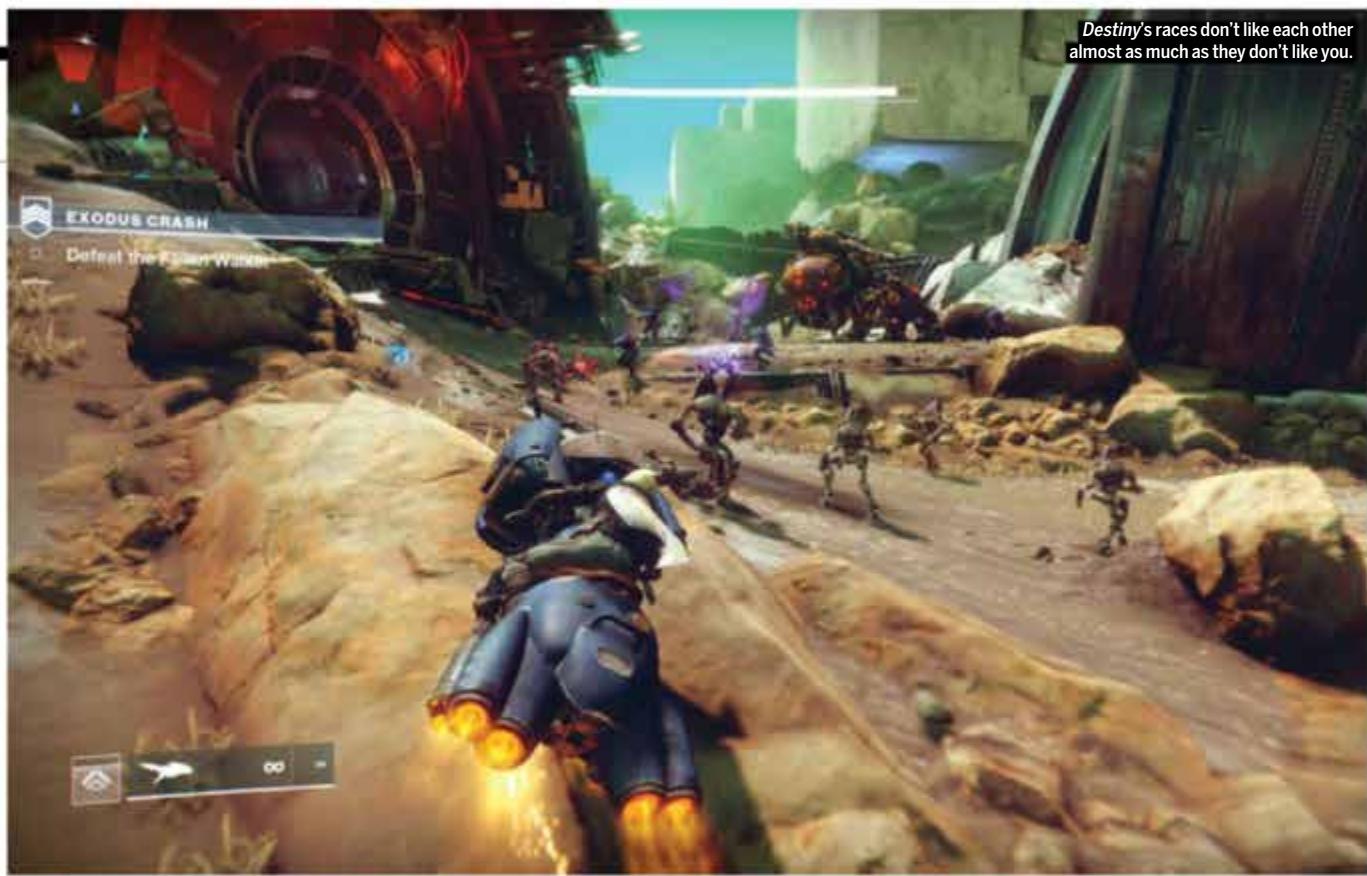
public events, adventures, lost sectors (very short dungeons in public zones featuring a boss and chest), the odd Strike, and PvP.

The PvP Crucible is divided into two playlists called 'quick play' and 'competitive', and each consists of a selection of rotating modes. All of the bouts are four-on-four contests. All level differences are removed, but everyone is free to bring any guns from their armoury into the fight. A quick play match will randomly throw you into a team deathmatch scenario, a control point capture mode or Supremacy, which is the best of the three. In Supremacy, every player drops a glowing crystalline crest when they die. You pick up enemy crests to score points, and secure friendly ones to deny your opponents. Supremacy creates an exciting tension between long and short-range weapons – picking someone off with a sniper is useless if you can't pick up their crest, but might be the right move if allies are closer to the kill zone. Expect lots of baseball slides to secure crests, and look out for Guardians rampaging with swords.

BOMB SQUAD

Competitive mode is split between a *Counter-Strike*-style attacker-vs-defender bomb defusal mode, and the brilliant survival mode. This gives each team a pool of eight lives, shared between players. It's team deathmatch with extra reason to be cautious. Tension escalates as both teams go low, and rounds can often end with a clutch play in a one-on-one showdown. Both of these modes also feature in the elite Trials of the Nine challenge, which is scheduled to arrive at weekends from November onwards. Here the most skilled Guardians with the best gear battle for access to a special vendor who sells her own set of elite items.

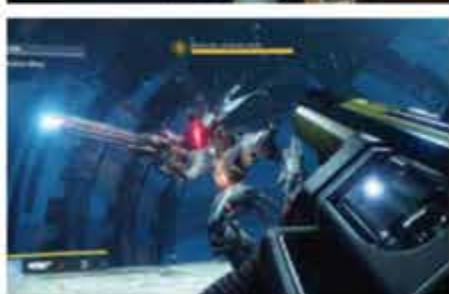
Destiny PvP is unconventional by PC shooter standards. Positioning and skillful reading of the radar are essential abilities. The best teams sit on comms and carefully manage their supers and loadouts to maximise their killing efficiency (letting off a super generates power orbs that pals can collect to charge more supers). Twitch skill is certainly a bonus, but mobile objectives, small teams and smartly designed maps strongly discourage camping and lone snipers. It's a fun drop-in



He's travelled through time to be shot by you.



Let's put that name to the test.

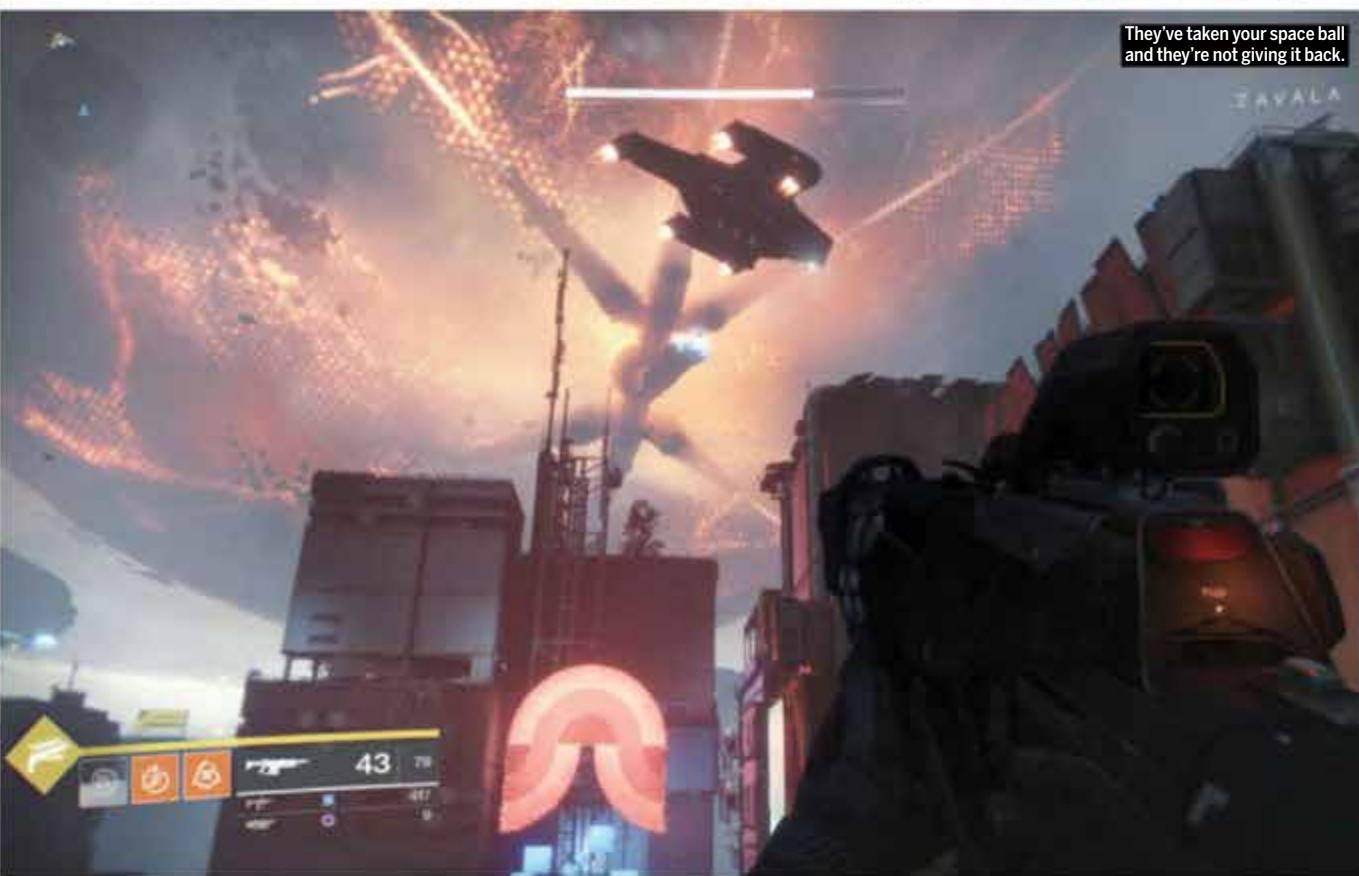


The Farm is a space to meet and go shopping.



Ikora is quietly *Destiny*'s greatest badass.

They've taken your space ball and they're not giving it back.



You'll be visiting a lot of very pretty caves.



The Cabal have a chunky, industrial aesthetic.

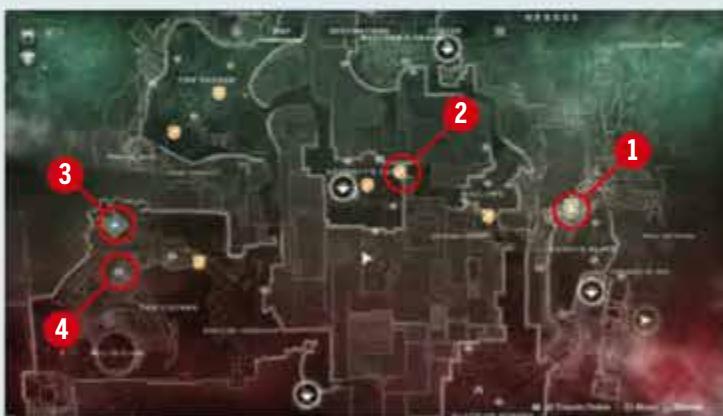
experience that serves as a consistently entertaining diversion, though if you are mainly interested in a strong player-versus-player team shooter, you are better off with any of the big dedicated arena shooters.

Co-op Strikes are another important feature, but it's telling that they feel so superfluous at the moment. There are five, but they are only accessible via a random playlist. Strikes are full missions set in specially built areas. They normally consist of a series of combat encounters that culminate in a big boss fight, but feature some neat twists, like the Inverted Spire's quarry of giant whirling blades that comically splat your fireteam. Bosses tend to be huge, tough enemies that cycle through several phases as you deplete their health bar. One hides behind energy shields and snipes you, and you have to defend glowing pressure plates to pierce his defences. They are decent missions, especially when you start taking on their weekly Nightfall variants, which introduce time limits, extra elemental damage and other modifiers to increase the challenge. However, *Destiny 2*'s loot systems offer little incentive. The rewards feel slim for the time investment compared to public events.

More of these problems emerge as you move towards the end of *Destiny 2*'s levelling curve, and the game settles into a holding pattern. Bungie launches semi-regular, week-long events to give you the chance to come back and earn some new gear. In Iron Banner the gravel-voiced hero Saladin invites you to fight in the crucible for his favour. Week-long Faction Rallies also ask you to pledge allegiance to a faction and fight in their name in any *Destiny 2* activities with the hope of beating the other factions and earning their special gun. It's a neat idea, and the comingings and goings of Trials of the Nine and the weekend vendor Xûr, make *Destiny 2* feel like a living game. The problem is that after a while most items, especially armour, start to feel like purely cosmetic upgrades.

Exotics are the most valuable drops in the game. You can only hold one exotic weapon and wear one piece of Exotic armour at a time, and they even come with a few

ZONE OUT *A few activities from one exploration zone.*



1 FACTION VENDOR

Swap area tokens you find here for guns and armour.

2 ADVENTURE

Short missions that continue *Destiny 2*'s story.

3 PUBLIC EVENTS

Team up with nearby Guardians to fight off enemy waves.

4 LOST SECTOR

A cave with a boss in it protecting a treasure chest.

paragraphs of prose that teaches you a bit more about *Destiny*'s dense but fascinating lore. However the four Warlock Exotic helmets I have all offer inscrutable ability recharge buffs that don't feel as though they change my character at all. The same issue applies to the entire mod system, which lets you slot small upgrades into armour to grow your overall power level and gain minor buffs that might let you reload energy weapons a little faster, or grant you more resilience. As long as your

power level is on point, the type of gear you wear barely matters.

RISK REWARD

Weapons are more interesting, especially when they are tuned to specialise in certain situations. Risk Runner

becomes charged when you take Arc damage, for example, so it's particularly good against enemies like the Fallen, who routinely carry weapons that spew Arc damage. Items like this have character and utility that makes them desirable, and *Destiny 2* could use more of these at the top level of the game to give *Destiny 2*'s most determined players something to chase.

The layers of level values, stats and damage numbers in *Destiny* can give the wrong impression. *Destiny 2* is fundamentally a great shooter slotted into a lightweight levelling structure. Don't expect much in the way of RPG-style character building with skill trees and strong character builds. The three stats that govern your character's speed, resilience and

recovery values have a minor effect on moment-to-moment play, but it's not worth worrying much about, and the simplistically organised subclasses leave little room for character customisation. My Warlock feels like any other player's Warlock in the game.

It's a shame that *Destiny 2* runs out of gas in its final stages, but there's a chance that the DLC drops and the promise of reorganised reward structures will bring *Destiny*'s multitude of activities back to relevance. When the supply of spectacular new locations, new bad guys and new guns runs out it's remarkable how those extraneous progression systems – the ladder of incremental damage value upgrades, grinding for drops – becomes the entire focus of the game. I suspect Bungie sees the loot system as the means, rather than the end, a way to draw players back together to enjoy social experiences. It comes back to the lifestyle game you want. If you're after an infinite action RPG then *Destiny 2* is a few DLC packs and expansions away from that, but if you're after a regular light dose of beautiful sci-fi shooter fun, the perfect post-pub co-op jolly, or the game that will have your fireteam shouting in joy at your monitors when a raid boss goes down, *Destiny 2* is a well-made shooter and one of the best co-op games on PC. ■



PC GAMER

Gorgeous guns, a glittering universe, and a great port. *Destiny 2* is an endgame away from true excellence.

VERDICT

85

SCARE TACTICS

Ride the open road to hell in
THE EVIL WITHIN 2. By Joe Donnelly

The Evil Within 2 revels in its grotesqueness. In the opening five minutes, you're forced to watch a young girl burn to death. Later, you repeatedly observe a man's head explode by gunshot. Then you witness a scene so horrifically graphic I worry recounting it will cause me to bring up my lunch. It's punctuated by stomach-churning moments throughout – this is a psychological horror game determined to terrify beyond jump scares.

For the most part, it works. And, while cheap frights are served by the game's zombie natives on occasion, its tortured antagonists, manifestations of guilt-driven grief and open world elements present a far more ambitious game than the original. Like its forerunner, it struggles at times with the B-movie trappings, jarring narratives, and ham-fisted voice acting, yet *The Evil Within 2* rarely feels disposable.

It drops protagonist Sebastian Castellanos into the simulated world of Union – a corrupted, monster-ridden town that's thought to contain your (presumed dead) daughter Lily. It's here that the game experiments with an open world structure, as you make your way back and forth across a handful of well-sized maps, each filled with accessible buildings and collectible items. Early on, you pick up a communications device that allows you to track Lily's whereabouts, as well as a host of

optional side ventures, such as the locations of weapon parts and caches, and bits of additional storytelling.

This presents a more thoughtful approach to progression. During the earlier chapters, I regularly found myself abandoning the main story, instead trekking to the furthest corners of the urban sprawl in search of loot and ammo. The loot was often well guarded, which forced me to engage with the game's new cover system: two

modes that allow Castellanos to hug surfaces when crouched, and portray him as a greyed-out silhouette when hiding in long grass.

While this marks a departure from pure survival horror, it benefits the game's stealth systems since you're no longer required to distract foes with smashable bottles. Open areas are less densely populated, although enemies are more aggressive. With this in mind, the first game's optional enemy visibility indicator is switched on by default,

The game experiments with an open world structure

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A psychological survival horror game with a range of open world features.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Tango Gameworks

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

REVIEWED ON
GTX 980, Intel i5-6600K, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
theevilwithin2.bethesda.net



which I'd suggest sticking with given how easy it is for enemies to get them drop on you.

Variety in your means of attack is important, as your environment can often be manipulated to suit your circumstances. One failed attack saw me hightailing it from a horde of The Haunted. I unscrewed a fire hydrant, waited till the group was ankle-high in water, and blasted the pool with a Shock Bolt, taking down six enemies at once. Another botched onslaught had me setting a crowd alight in a petrol station oil spill. These tactics add a nice twist to the conflict.

FRIGHT RETURN

The story tells a familiar tale of anguish, where beleaguered hero Castellanos has again been duped by the Mobius corporation. We learn that his daughter, Lily, is the core of the crumbling STEM neural network – within which Union is housed – and her extraction is being blocked by two distinguished and charismatic villains. These foes are unhinged art lover Stefano Valentini and power-mad cultist Theodore Wallace. Both will keep you on your toes in the story as well as in battle.

In pursuit of this double act, you'll traverse a familiar set of corridors that spawn mysterious doors and unsettling messages, before facing off against a number of shit-scary foes – not least The Guardian, a shrieking she-devil composed of writhing corpses and saw blades. *The Evil Within 2* always looks great, but these set pieces look extraordinary and sound terrifying.

Almost everything has been improved, yet it still feels like a classic survival horror, one infused with enough psychological scares to keep it feeling fresh. ■

MONSTER MASH Know your nemeses



STEFANO VALENTINI
An ex-war photographer who considers death the ultimate art form. Mind manipulation is his forte, as is hanging corpses on display.



OBSCURA
Stefano's pièce de résistance, this beast is comprised of butchered limbs and barbed wire, with an antique camera for a head.



THEODORE WALLACE
One of Union's most influential individuals. Father Theodore Wallace is a twisted cult leader obsessed with power. And fire and brimstone.



HARBINGERS
Theo's flamethrower-wielding lackeys want nothing more but to convert you to their cause. Persuasion to them means burning you to death.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

An intense psychological survival horror sequel that improves on its forerunner in almost every way.

80



FIRESTARTER

GUILD WARS 2 goes back to basics with **PATH OF FIRE**. By Phil Savage

With *Heart of Thorns*, ArenaNet laid out a template for new expansions. Its follow-up, *Path of Fire*, follows that formula almost exactly. A new way to traverse the world? Check. New masteries? Check. New specialisations? Check. A new land, events and storyline? Check, check and check. Despite this, *Path of Fire* kicks against the template, showing how versatile this approach to expansions can be.

Take, for example, the public event system, which populates the map with objectives that scale based on the number of people working to complete them. *Heart of Thorns* was built around map-wide meta events, pulling everybody on a single instance together to complete a series of interlocking objectives. Exciting in principle, they relied on fully populated maps and the guidance of people who knew what they were doing. *Path of Fire* returns to *Guild Wars 2*'s original, standalone series of events and chains – many of which can be completed solo.

That's not to say *Path of Fire*'s event style is better (although it's less dependant on other people, and is therefore more consistent). Rather, the difference helps build the sense

of variety across *Guild Wars 2* as a whole. In fact, much of *Path of Fire* feels like a considered counterpoint to *Heart of Thorns*, offering a separate style of adventure. It's less experimental as a result of that, but in a way that feels effortlessly natural.

These are the sort of high-minded, macro level design shifts I think about when I'm sat, looking at a blank document, tasked with writing a review of *Guild Wars 2: Path of*

Fire. But it's not what I'm thinking about when I actually play the expansion. In the game, I'm more concerned about whether I can use a Springer mount to get up a steep mountain to secure a collectible mastery point, or if my Raptor can leap over a gorge containing an intimidating number of hydras. I'm

It's effortless to play and packed with distractions

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The second expansion for *Guild Wars 2*, the subscription free MMO.

EXPECT TO PAY
£26

DEVELOPER
ArenaNet

PUBLISHER
NCSOFT

REVIEWED ON
i5-3570K, 16GB RAM,
Radeon R9 Fury

MULTIPLAYER
Massively

LINK
www.guildwars2.com



bouncing between events, mopping up the occasional quest and hunting the hero points and vistas that build your progress to map completion.

It's effortless to play and packed with distractions and amusements. Over here: a chef wants you to chuck ingredients at him. Over here: this quest-giver will unlock a new mount. Over here: a team of players, organised under a commander icon, are completing the bounty board – a non-stop train of difficult boss encounters. Before you reach them, a new event pops up, and other players gather to complete it.

THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

During one evening's play, I set off in the direction of a story mission marker, but am almost immediately distracted by a huge, dilapidated temple. I change course, head inside and, as I'm working my way through a band of enemies, discover a door I can't open. Further in, I find some NPCs gathered near a rune. I grab the rune and take it back to the door. It opens. Interesting.

Over the next few hours I delve further into the temple, which has been overrun by monsters and lava. One door offers runes to open another, and another, and each contains weapon pieces that can be collected to unlock new weapons and – always more crucially in *Guild Wars 2* – their cosmetic skins. I've completed plenty of jumping puzzles and mini dungeons in *Guild Wars 2* – shortform, repeatable challenges that end in unremarkable loot. This was something different. I rarely pay much attention to the collections system, but by marrying it to specific, one-off gear, collected across your exploration of a single area, it led to a memorable few hours that resulted in some valuable rewards. It's a great example of how *Path of Fire* uses *Guild Wars 2*'s existing framework to do something new and memorable.

The density and variety of stuff to do proves essential, because otherwise *Path of Fire* could easily

CITY LIVING Things to do in Amnoon

1 BE A SÔUS CHEF

A grouchy chef enlists your services as his second-in-command. Throw ingredients at him until food happens.

2 BE A BOUNTY HUNTER

A bounty board lists multiple criminals and monsters. Take them out for rewards, but bring lots of friends.



3 BE A LITTER PICKER

For some strange reason, coins are frequently scattered across the city. Trade in any you collect at the casino.

4 BE A RAPTOR RACER

Get on your mount and have a race. But only when the city's front gate isn't under attack by cactus monsters.

These crystals are evil because of dragons.



You're dealing with a god this time.



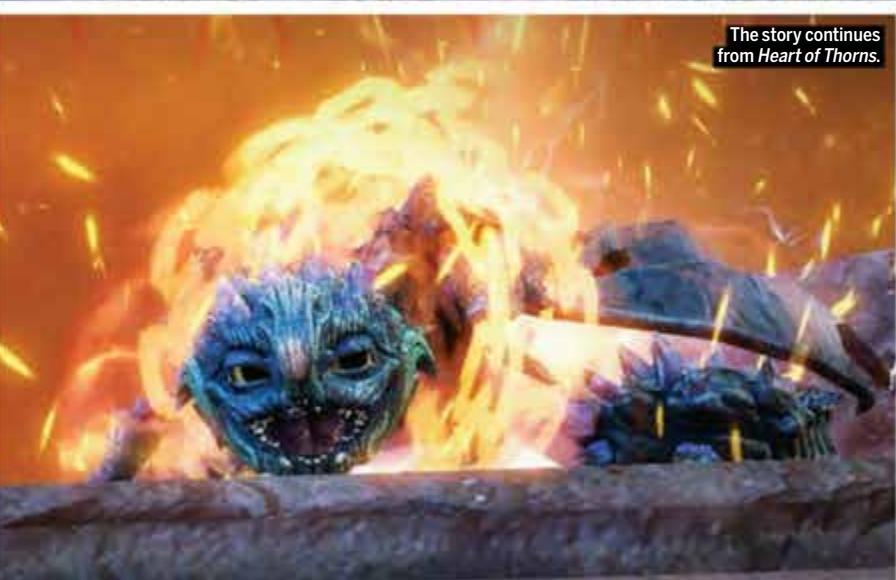
You thought a desert expansion



wouldn't look vaguely Egyptian?



The story continues
from *Heart of Thorns*.



The pyramid is sick
from too much magic.

MMOs: sometimes
you gotta fight a cactus.



Who does your
backlighting?



Me and my
rabbit pal.



feel directionless. This is a natural consequence of *Guild Wars 2* having never raised its level cap. Load into the expansion and you can wander anywhere and do anything. It has no specific endgame because it's all endgame – sitting alongside every other bit of endgame ArenaNet has made since launch. It's a design philosophy that can make *Guild Wars 2* as a whole feel scattershot, seeming to bounce between a focus on PvP, raiding, Fractal dungeons and meta events without rhyme or reason. But after five years of updates and two expansions, that approach is starting to build into a rich, varied tapestry of stuff.

The downside is that, often, I'm not entirely sure what I'm working towards. I only really play one of my characters – a Thief – and I'm pretty happy with my armour and weapons. Extra bonuses, like Legendary weapons, often feel a long way off, and more immediate Exotic loot drops tend to be sold or salvaged for an incremental increase to the amount of gold and materials that accrue in my bank.

Fortunately, aimless exploration is fun on its own terms, thanks largely to the new mounts. On paper, it's an underwhelming inclusion. Almost every other MMO already offers mounts, and *Guild Wars 2* doesn't really need them. They work in *Path of Fire*, though, because each offers a specific ability that changes how you travel. Raptors can leap large gaps, Springers jump a great height, Jackals can blink forward and travel through sand portals and Skimmers, well, skim across things.

It's a fun way to traverse the world. Springers are a little awkward, yes, their enthusiastic high jump not playing well with *Guild Wars 2*'s camera. But having a new way to interact with the environment has a big effect on the feel of play. You can also take mounts out of *Path of Fire* and back into *Guild Wars 2*'s previous maps, creating new routes through familiar locations.

Each ability is different enough that it's obvious what mount you need for any particular obstacle, but their inclusion still gives ArenaNet the tools for creative puzzle and environment design. Plus, mounts offer something concrete to work

YOU CAN BE SPECIAL TOO Path of Fire's best elite specialisations



RANGER: SOULBEAST

Merge with your pet to acquire their skills, and also use daggers.



THIEF: DEADEYE

People already hate Thieves, so, hell, you might as well be a sniper too.



ENGINEER: HOLOSMITH

All about managing heat. Perfect for charr, who presumably can't sweat.



NECROMANCER: SCOURGE

Finally answers the question: what if goths were really into sand?

towards. On the first map, Crystal Oasis, I stumbled upon a location called Sanctum of Nabkha. It featured a sprawling sand portal puzzle, only available to those with who had unlocked the relevant mastery reward, leaving me with a reason to work towards that particular goal.

As in *Heart of Thorns*, masteries – unlocked by earning XP – offer passive buffs that aid exploration. In *Path of Fire*, though, masteries are entirely based around the abilities of your mounts. That's a major upgrade to the system. *Heart of Thorns* had plenty of unlocks that served little purpose, as well as some designed to gate your progress through the story. But mounts are frequently useful. You'll use them constantly as you

travel through the new areas and so any upgrade to their abilities is a boon.

The new maps look great, too, carrying on *Guild Wars 2*'s excellent environment design.

Yes, it's a desert world, and that means the land is full of sandy dunes, but there's variety throughout the five maps. One is an undead stronghold, surrounded by poisonous rivers flowing through long, winding gorges. Another has been corrupted by crystals, bathing the area in a washed-out hue punctuated by purple. There are villages, oases and a vibrant city that looks completely unlike those found in *Guild Wars 2*'s original landmass.

LORE AND ORDER

There's also plenty of history to dig into for players of the original *Guild Wars*. The main story follows your character as they and their guildmates hunt down the god Balthazaar. It's rich in lore, to the point that I – as someone who didn't

play the first game – found myself tuning out of some of the more intricate historical explanations. Still, as a series of missions, the campaign does try (at times unsuccessfully) to move away from the game's standard mission template. The variety is welcome, even as the specifics of the narrative never hooked my attention.

That's okay, though. MMOs serve different functions for different people. A reason that I'm not breaking down how successful the new specialisations are, for instance, is because I've spent five years in *Guild Wars 2* playing mostly one class, and rarely in PvP. I'm also not versed in the lore, and only somewhat invested in the story's ancillary characters. For me, *Guild Wars 2* is about travelling my way through a gorgeous world and forming ad-hoc groups with random players – briefly collaborating to take down some large monster, or hold off against waves of soldiers. At providing this type of experience, *Path of Fire* excels.

While five new maps might seem slim for an expansion – albeit still more than *Heart of Thorns* launched with – it's important to note that *Path of Fire* is far from finished. That's thanks to the Living World updates, which, assuming they follow the last season's format, will launch every few months – adding a new map each time. The current version of *Path of Fire* is a new chunk of land filled with interesting things to do and find. The *Path of Fire* that will exist by the time *Guild Wars 2*'s next expansion launches will be far larger and more varied still. ■

PC GAMER

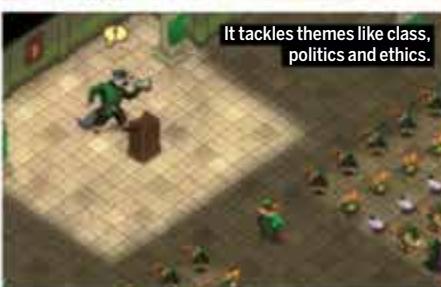
VERDICT

Not the most inventive MMO expansion, but a robust chunk of new maps that flesh out the best MMO around.

80



Each of the four campaign acts features a hub area.



Most missions come with special rules and scenarios.

KILLER CRITTERS

TOOTH AND TAIL is an RTS that feels great with a controller. *By Fraser Brown*

Many developers have tried to hammer the real-time strategy genre into a form that works well with a controller, but few attempts succeed. However, *Tooth and Tail* completely bucks this trend by not trying to be something it isn't. It embraces the controller rather than treating it like an obstacle that needs to be worked around or bypassed entirely.

A revolution is taking place in a land of critters. *Tooth and Tail*'s lavish, pixel art world calls to mind a mix of Animal Farm and Redwall. Dragging all of these adorable squirrels and owls to their deaths are a group of charismatic leaders, the only units you can directly control.

Leaders can build, order troops to move and attack, either by class or all at once, and scout the procedurally generated battlefield.

The only thing they can't do is fight, making this powerful unit the most vulnerable. Controlling them is effortless, and an order never requires more than a button press.

Instead of evoking the likes of *Halo Wars* and other controller-based RTS games, *Tooth and Tail* shares more similarities with *Pikmin* and *Little King's Story*. Move your commander toward enemies (think

of them as the cursor in a traditional RTS), and press a button to rally them around you, or hold it to have them focus on a target. It feels great, and it removes a lot of the micromanagement that isn't possible, let alone fun, without a mouse and keyboard.

Some concessions have been made. *Tooth and Tail* doesn't really do precision. When you order units to attack, for instance, you'll automatically select the nearest

enemy or structure. You're less a commander, sometimes, than a flare, and if you, say, want to split your long-ranged artillery ferrets into two groups so they can attack from two different sides, you're out of luck. You can only select all of them.

It's disappointing when you can't pull off something so simple, but it rarely comes up. The broad range of

Tooth and Tail shares more similarities with *Pikmin*

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A brisk, streamlined RTS designed for a controller.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Pocketwatch Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5-3570K
8GB of RAM, GeForce GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op, online or local

LINK
www.toothandtailgame.com

units means that there are still plenty of common sense tactics that can be employed, and even more in co-op.

In battle, there's one other concern: food. Everything costs food, and it's the catalyst for this whole revolution. Even in objective-based battles, food remains king, and whoever controls it is the victor.

MEAT FEAST

Food is supplied by gristmills, but both they and the farms around them are vulnerable to attack, and each field quickly becomes fallow. There's a hard limit to the amount of food that may be generated, and it's reached quickly. Starving your opponent is not only a viable strategy, it's a key one, and ensures matches rarely go over ten minutes.

Novel sums up *Tooth and Tail* rather effectively. With its rapid battles, low barrier for entry and couch or online co-op, it's the sort of thing that's great to pick up and play on a whim. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Tooth and Tail is an elegant RTS that's perfect for newcomers or anyone wanting to play on the couch.

80

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AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS is an excellent shooter with an entertaining story, but it's not as fresh as its predecessor. *By Samuel Roberts*

In one particular cutscene in *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, a pretty serious conversation between two characters on BJ Blazkowicz's stolen U-boat base is interrupted by someone who's just finished using the toilet. That's the tone of the game encapsulated, really: moments of genuine sincerity punctuated by the silliest of jokes. It was something that MachineGames introduced with *The New Order* and it permeates the sequel.

Like with *The New Order*, this is a fun wrapping for a first-person shooter where you kill many Nazis. This time Blazkowicz and his friends have gone to the Nazi-occupied USA, with the intention of teaming up with a few other resistance groups and starting a revolution. Meanwhile, Frau Engel, the unhinged villain from the first game, is on a relentless and bloody hunt for BJ. Your journey takes you to places like Manhattan, Roswell and New Orleans, where you can see the various ways in which the Nazis have imposed their rule, before shooting them all in the face.

I won't say too much about the specifics of the settings in *Wolfenstein II*, mostly because I avoided everything about *The New Colossus* since its E3 reveal and really enjoyed the surprise of discovering them. But, as you might expect, you'll find yourself shooting different varieties of Nazis in nondescript corridors throughout.

The New Colossus still has some of the best guns in any FPS game

One of the most memorable parts of the story is exploring a disturbing, alternate reality Galveston, Texas, during a Nazi parade while Blazkowicz is disguised as a firefighter. Members of the KKK are casually walking the streets. One woman tries to kiss up to a Nazi officer and ends up committing a faux pas that gets her reported, while one newspaper seller thinks he knows the truth about who BJ really is.

The ambience of it reminded me of exploring Columbia during the opening of *BioShock Infinite*, or indeed Rapture in *Burial at Sea*. It's just worldbuilding and triggering NPC conversations, really, but the detail and atmosphere is nothing short of extraordinary.

MOTHER BASE

Sadly, it's the only sequence of its kind in the game, and I think a few more populated areas like this would've helped make its setting feel

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The America-set FPS sequel to *The New Order* and *The Old Blood*.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
MachineGames

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5
3570K@3.40GHz,
8GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
wolfenstein.bethesda.net

even more real. Your home base is expanded this time, though, which compensates. After every mission, all of your supporting characters will have new things to say, and some will offer (mostly dull, actually) little sidequests to take on. If you enjoyed the tense Frau Engel train sequence in *The New Order*, too, you'll be pleased to know there are a bunch more like it in *The New Colossus* that I found just as effective.

BATTLE SPROWL

As with the first game, you can optionally sneak around and take out all the enemies in a given area instead of going weapons free, and killing an officer will prevent further reinforcements from turning up if you're caught. The difference here is that the environments are a lot larger, and there's usually more than one way to get around, even if it's just the classic games thing of moving through a couple of vents. I managed to take out a chunk of the officers stealthily, but it definitely feels harder to do that given the scope of environments and the amount of people who can spot you within them. That's not an issue, though, because *The New Colossus* still has some of the best guns in any FPS game, and using them is always more fun than any of *Wolfenstein*'s stealth interactions – despite BJ having a lovely hatchet melee takedown move.

The shotgun is the standout for me, as it was in the first game. This time it's got three rotating barrels, and with the game's weapon upgrades found dotted around the world, you can make it fire from all three at once, as well as adding ricochet damage that lights up the environment. These aren't as transformative or exciting as the recent *Doom*'s gun mods, but they still give you the feeling that your arsenal is evolving across the game. Another one I like is the nailgun upgrade for the submachine gun, which downgrades it to single fire but also makes your bullets deadlier.

FALLEN AMERICA The places you'll travel to

1 NEW ORLEANS
BJ gets drunk with a resistance leader here to gain their support.

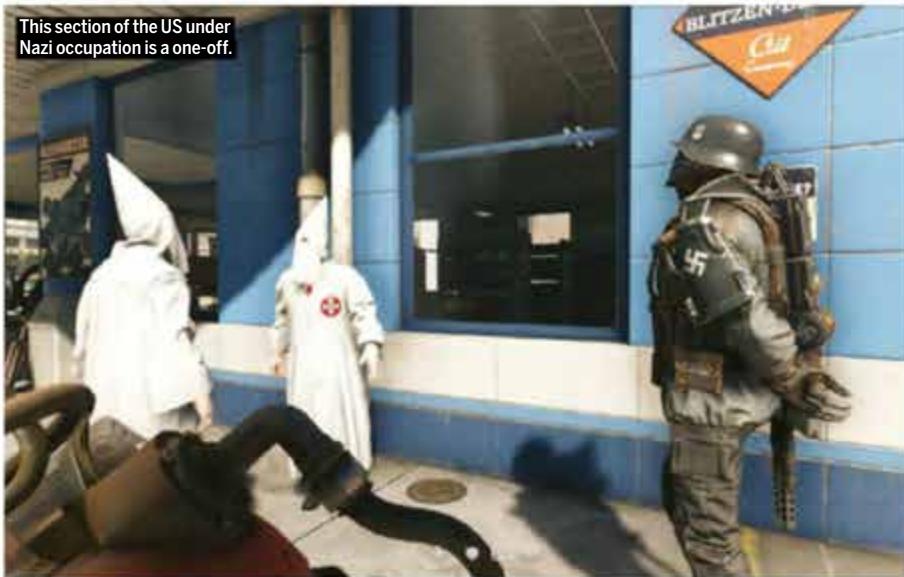


3 GALVESTON, TEXAS
A Nazi parade is going down here, and BJ sneaks in dressed as a firefighter.

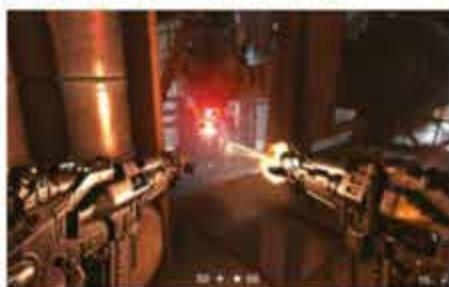
4 ROSWELL, NEW MEXICO
Here, BJ's tasked with blowing up the Nazis' US headquarters.



This section of the US under Nazi occupation is a one-off.



The heavy weapons are fun but leave you exposed.



BJ sees himself on a journey to the grave at the start of the game.



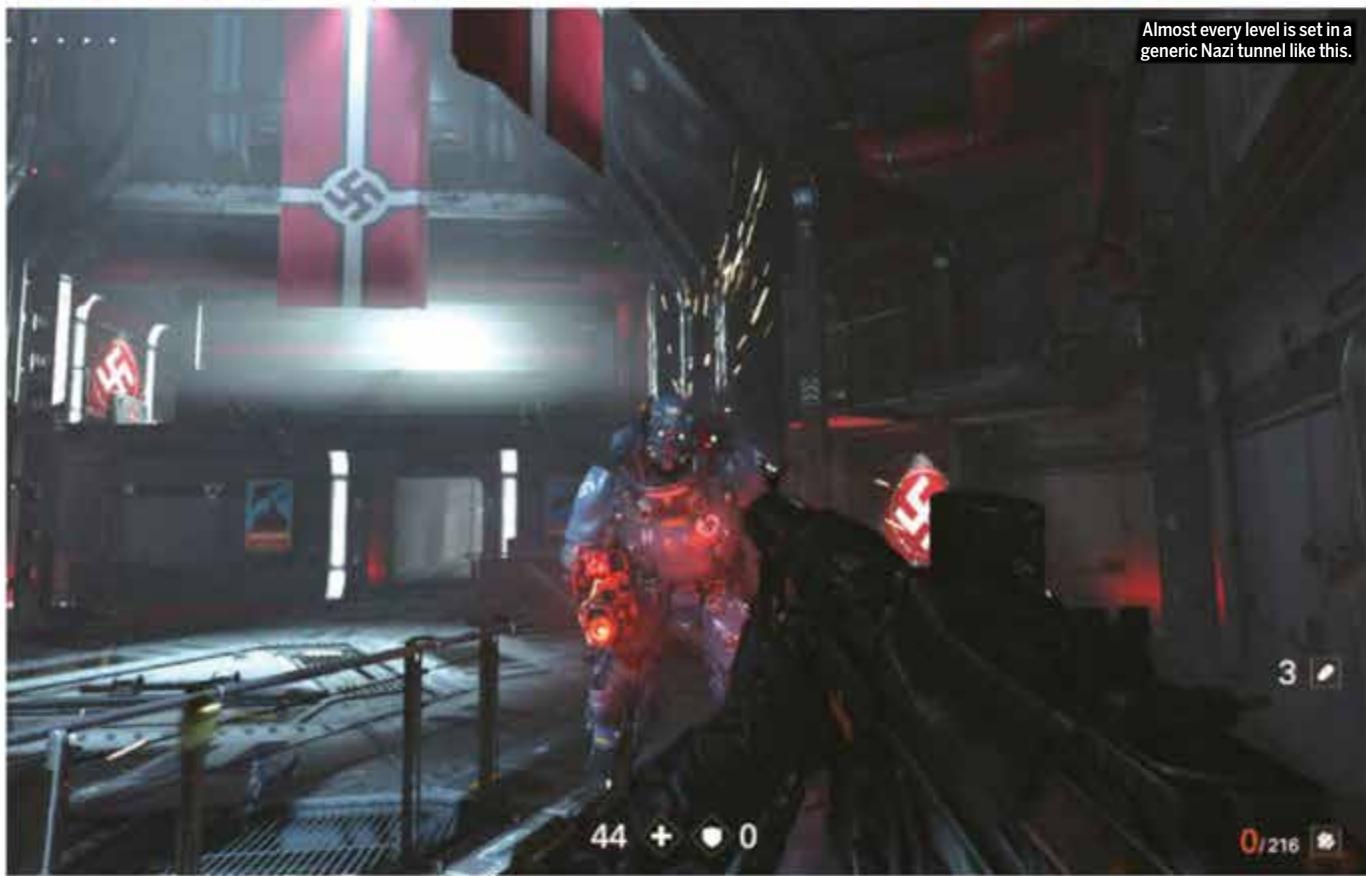
The U-boat is a great hangout spot.



BJ goes looking for allies in *Wolfenstein 2*.



Almost every level is set in a generic Nazi tunnel like this.



Half-cat, half-monkey.
Games in 2017.



An open firefight with these dudes is devastating.



Combined with the suppressor, it's a pretty useful gun for quietly downing multiple enemies before they can set the alarm off.

I feel like the armoury could've been a bit wackier, though: a few of the heavier guns let you fire strong laser beams and blobs of flame, and even a black hole-like orange gravitational blast. Since you can't move very fast while carrying them, though, more often than not they just make you a slow-moving target. It might've been more fun if these guns were a permanent part of your arsenal and didn't slow you down, especially as later enemies include robot dogs, mechs and robots that can blink around the environment.

TIMELINE TROUBLE

At the start of *The New Colossus*, you can pick which timeline you followed in the first game, whether polite American pal Wyatt or Glaswegian pilot Fergus survived. I picked Fergus like I did in the first game, and your choice grants you use of a certain weapon: a fire-based Diesekraftwerk if it's Wyatt, and a Laserkraftwerk in the case of Fergus, which can vaporise enemies. Who you saved also changes certain cutscenes throughout the game, which is a nice touch, even though I found Fergus's wacky adventures with his misbehaving mechanical arm and constant disagreements with resistance leader Grace Walker to be a bit much.

New to MachineGames' *Wolfenstein* are contraptions; a set of abilities that BJ can acquire from the halfway point of *The New Colossus*. One is focused on stealth, quieting your footsteps and letting you sneak through tiny spaces. Another gives you a height boost to reach better tactical areas, while the other lets you kill enemies by ramming into them. You initially choose one, and are later given optional sidequests to pick up the others. Having tried all three, being able to turn BJ into a battering ram who can gib officers by barging into them is by far the best. In these later levels, too, you can reach new areas by running through certain types of walls, which feels badass. I wish they were in the game from the start, though. By the time you acquire a contraption, you're slightly too close to the end of the story to really get the most use out of it.

There are some optional asides on top of the story, though, if you want

BJ UPGRADED *The three contraptions you can give BJ*



CONSTRICTOR HARNESS

This makes you super thin, and able to crawl through extremely small spaces.



RAM SHACKLES

Turns BJ into a battering ram, and will splatter Nazi officers everywhere upon impact.



BATTLE WALKER

Basically gives BJ stilts so he can reach high areas, which is neither that exciting nor useful.

to go back and have more fun with your growing suite of toys. Killing officers gets you enigma codes, which you can then use to unlock extra missions that take you back to previous level locations, where you're tasked with killing high-ranking Nazi officers while dealing with a slightly tougher range of enemies. I did a bunch of these, and they're a nice extra for those who want more from the game after the credits. It took me 14 hours to finish *The New Colossus*, while taking the time to explore environments properly and do extra missions, and depending on the difficulty, methodology and the type of player you are, I imagine it would take most people 11-15 hours. I recommend quicksaving as much as possible – the checkpointing isn't terribly generous, and firefights can go on for a while.

SPACE NAZIS?

The variety of levels is still impressive, although it didn't dazzle me as much as *The New Order* did in that regard. I think the game peaks just under halfway through with Area 52, which features some large, multistorey hangars that are fun to clear out, as well as a moving train section where you're emptying out tight corridors of Nazis. If, like me, you were wondering how MachineGames would top the whole Nazis-on-the-moon scenario in the first game, you'll enjoy how the developer answered that, even if I found the level in question to be a slog compared to some of the earlier ones. The final level, meanwhile, features a battle with a couple of larger enemies that I just found arduous. I was ready for it to be over by the end.

The developers take the time to expand on BJ Blazkowicz's

background, which yields mixed results. The game generally has a wider tonal range than the original, touching upon racism and abuse, but it doesn't really dwell on those subjects long enough to have anything to say about them. I don't expect tons of thematic depth from a game with *Wolfenstein* in the title, obviously, but as it stands, they just feel like extra details to ensure the player knows the world around them is harrowing – and they didn't really register any emotional impact on me as a player either way, mainly because they feel half-explored.

I've got a few other gripes, too. Climbing and jumping over bits of the environment is a pain in *The New Colossus*, and it feels like picking up items could be a bit slicker than it is.

There's some mild texture pop-in, as well, most noticeably around our U-boat base, where your allies' little rooms are lovingly stuffed with details that reveal more about their personalities.

I'm still won over by *Wolfenstein II*'s variety and gunplay, though, and even if it doesn't feel as fresh to me as *The New Order* did in 2014, I love the escalating firefights that play out in its various mini sandboxes. I appreciate that you can find singleplayer games like this in 2017, where there's so much attention paid to details like characterisation, sound design and facial animation, on top of how wonderful the guns feel. *The New Colossus* is fun and funny – a decent successor that's not just more of the same. ■

PC GAMER

Wolfenstein II dips towards the end and isn't as fresh as *The New Order*, but it's still a top singleplayer FPS.

VERDICT

81



ZERO TO HERO

Rival superhero franchises go to war in
SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE. By Andy Kelly

While 2014's magnificent *The Stick of Truth* skewered Tolkien, *Skyrim*, and high fantasy, *The Fractured but Whole* is an anarchic send-up of superheroes – from comic book clichés to endless money-spinning movie franchises. You play as the mute New Kid, whose heroic deeds in the previous game are forgotten because, well, the kids are playing a different game now.

Tutored by the Coon (alter ego of Eric Cartman), you begin your adventure as a lowly sidekick and must earn the right to establish your own superhero brand and potential Netflix series. Yet no matter how hard you work, he'll still always refer to you simply as 'Buttlord'.

The Fractured but Whole (named as a reaction to retailers refusing to stock a game with the word 'butthole' on the cover) is an accessible RPG

with a wonderfully fun turn-based combat system. The fighting in *Stick* was cool, but lightweight. Now it's deeper, richer and more strategic, with some brilliantly designed battles that require genuine tactical thinking. There are buffs, debuffs, elemental magic and summons, as well as dramatic, superbly animated ultimate attacks. And a new grid system adds extra complexity, with chain attacks, knockbacks, and powers that force you to think about where characters are positioned on the battlefield.

Environmental hazards mix things up further, with exploding chemical barrels, pools of lava (actually piles of

red Lego), and a dad with the power to freeze (well, ground) your party forcing you to think carefully before each turn. It's one of the most enjoyable combat systems I've ever encountered in an RPG, and honestly,

who expected that from a South Park game? There's a hell of a lot of combat, but it's so varied that I never once got bored with it.

The story concerns two rival superhero franchises: Coon and Friends and Freedom

Pals. Your stablemates include Super Craig, The Human Kite, Fastpass, and the Coon himself, who each come with their own unique abilities. The Human Kite can buff allies with a protective shield, while Super Craig's powerful punches will knock enemies back a few squares on the grid. On the other side are Mysterion, Doctor Timothy, Tupperware, and Toolshed, who you fight in Civil War missions. This rivalry is the focus of much of the storyline, although a greater evil emerges that raises the stakes and threatens both groups.

When you're not fighting you're probably exploring the streets of

It's so varied that I never once got bored of it

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A superhero RPG set in South Park.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft San Francisco

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK
fracturedbutwhole.com



South Park. Getting to wander around the town, entering buildings and talking to people, is a thrill for any fan of the show. And there are countless items, puzzles, jokes and sidequests to discover, which makes poking around in every house and store worth it. I also love how customisable your character is. As you explore you find bits of costume that you can mix and match and recolour, to create your own distinctive superhero.

FRIEND REQUEST

Establishing Coon and Friends as South Park's foremost superhero franchise involves becoming popular on Instagram-spoofing social network Coonstagram. When you meet someone the option to take a selfie will sometimes appear. Take the snap and they'll follow you back, although some people will ask you to do something for them before they agree to a photo. It's a strangely compelling distraction, and an opportunity to meet some of South Park's vast cast of characters.

Because *The Fractured but Whole* is so full of surprises and unexpected twists and turns, I have to avoid talking about some of its best features and moments. But if you love South Park, it's another faithful adaption of the series. The story is the only real weak link, with the pace occasionally grinding to a halt, satire that, surprisingly for South Park, lacks bite, and a general feeling of stale predictability – bar a few moments that are South Park at its crude, anarchic best. You may also find everything outside of the combat a little too familiar if you played *The Stick of Truth*. Otherwise this is a streamlined, imaginative, and enormously entertaining game. ■

QUAD DAMAGE The four classes I combined



BLASTER
Ranged and fire-based attacks that inflict burning on enemies.



ELEMENTALIST
Powerful healing and offensive powers based on the elements.



GADGETEER
Build automated turrets and exploding decoys on the battlefield.



PLANTMANCER
Specialises in healing and revival magic with a focus on team support.



PC GAMER

VERDICT

A slick RPG with superb tactical combat, a detailed world to explore, and a gleefully crude sense of humour.

86

Cartman leads
Coon and Friends.



Fighting with
Captain Diabetes.



Big Gay Al's cats
have vanished.



Literal toilet humour.



BLOODY MORDOR

Take the fight to Sauron in **MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR**. By Andy Kelly

The orcs are the real stars of *Shadow of War*. Decorated with skulls, piercings, and plates of battered armour, these toothy brutes sneer, jeer and brag like rowdy drunks. And before you fight them they delight in detailing all the ways they're going to kill you, gut you like a fish and present your head to Sauron. It's almost endearing how much they obviously love being orcs and serving their Dark Lord, which is more than can be said for the game's dreary human characters – and that includes hero Talion, an undead Gondorian ranger with all the joie-de-vivre of a concrete bollard.

The lauded nemesis system, first introduced in *Shadow of Mordor*, is back and expanded. So if an orc captain or warchief kills you, they'll gleefully taunt you about it next time they see you. And if you defeat them, but they manage to escape, they'll remember and reassure you that this time you won't be so lucky. Forging bitter feuds with these expressive enemies is the heart of the game, and easily the best thing in it. They're the only characters who seem to be having any fun in this cursed world, and the vast array of positive and negative traits they have make them infinitely interesting to fight.

The game's fun, crunchy combat is in the *Arkham* mould, with timing-based counters and an ever-increasing pool of moves and powers that increase its complexity. But before you wade into combat it's worth interrogating weak-minded orcs to discover intel about their

superiors: things they're scared of, weapons they're weak against and so on. There's something gratifying about making a scarred, snarling orc called Lûga Skull-Cracker flee in terror because one of his underlings revealed he has a secret fear of Morgai Flies. Waging psychological war on orcs is often more fun than fighting them directly.

But it's not all about rivalries: you can make a few friends, too. Thanks to the power of the ring crafted by surly Elven wraith Celebrimbor in the first game, it's possible to weaken orcs, bend

them to your will and recruit them as allies. Az-Grels Mountain-Eater, a hulking great lump of ugly muscle wielding a six-foot club, was my personal bodyguard for a while. Summoning him in battle and watching him charge in with his enormous club swinging was hugely satisfying. You can also call upon a handful of Gondorian soldiers to fight

Waging psychological war on orcs is more fun than fighting them

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world action game set in Middle-earth.

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Monolith

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.shadowofwar.com

by your side, but they're ultimately little more than squishy orc fodder.

I love the new tribes system, which dramatically increases the variety of the orcs you encounter – both visually and in how they behave in battle. Orcs belonging to the stealthy Dark Tribe are fond of ambushes and trickery. Machine Tribe orcs are clad in thick metal armour. And the Mystic Tribe uses dark magic and cursed weapons. There are more, but I'll let you discover them for yourself. The important thing is that, because of this added variety, almost every orc you meet feels like a distinct, original character, which makes the friendships and rivalries you form with them seem more personal.

In *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, Frodo, Sam, and Gollum briefly stop at Minas Morgul, home of the Witch-king of Angmar and the Nazgûl. In *Shadow of War* you get to visit this place before they claimed it as their fortress, back when it was the city of Minas Ithil in Gondor. The game ties into Peter Jackson's films like this often, and in some clever ways, but equally has no qualms about hammering its own ideas into the lore. Talion forms an uneasy alliance with the giant spider Shelob, who appears to him as a beautiful woman; a pouting goth Galadriel who slinks about in black silk speaking in riddles, but never once gets hopelessly stuck in a bathtub.

It's a shame about the story, where the writers have focused squarely on the mystical, doomy side of *Lord of the Rings*. People solemnly discussing Sauron's growing power, lamenting the war ahead. But where's the warmth? The *heart*? People love this series because it mixes its grand fantasy with humour and humanity – Legolas and Gimli's unlikely friendship, anything involving the hobbits. In comparison, *Shadow of War* is almost entirely self-serious and in love with its own sense of grandeur. Its only really funny character, an Aussie orc called Brûz

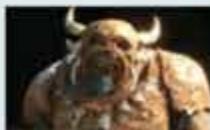
BAD INFLUENCE A few of the orcs I met



OLROK GOLD-FANG
Class: Marauder Trickster
Strength: Immune to stealth attacks
Weakness: Mortally vulnerable to poison



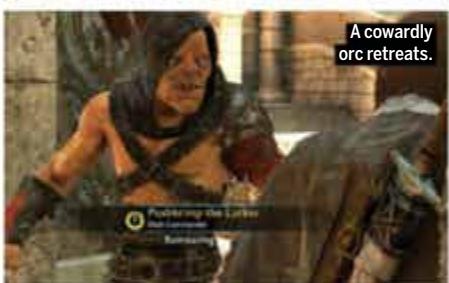
STAKUGA THE BLOATED
Class: Terror Destroyer
Strength: Equipped with bombs and mines
Weakness: Fear of flies



AR-SAKU SKIN-PEELER
Class: Terror Tank
Strength: Gets a second wind before death
Weakness: Hates arrows



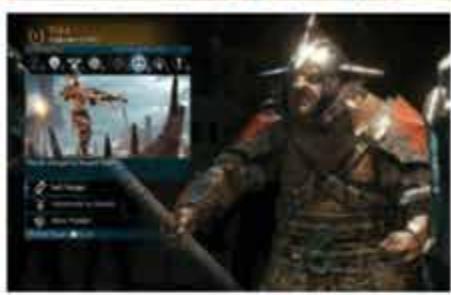
GOND HOT TONGS
Class: Fiery Machine Tank
Strength: Wields a flaming weapon
Weakness: Dazed by execution attempts



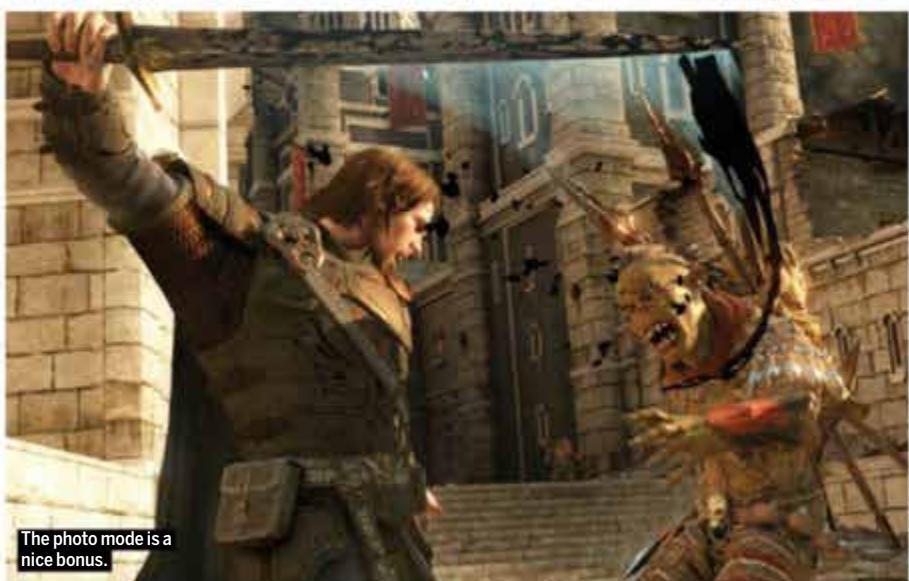
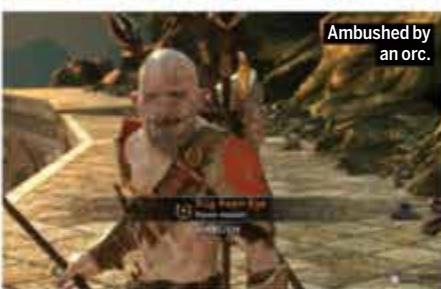
The bigger they are...



Talion has absolutely no charisma.



Ambushed by an orc.



The photo mode is a nice bonus.



CHARACTER SHEET *Friends and foes*

**SAURON**

The source of most of the evil in Middle-earth. Obsessed with the One Ring and the main villain of *Shadow of War*.

**CARNÁN**

An ancient, primeval force of nature who dwells in the forests of Mordor and commands plants and beasts alike.

**BRÛZ**

One of the first orcs you bend to your will. Australian-accented Brûz delights in violence, making him a strong ally.

**BARANOR**

Minas Ithil's second in command, this lad grew up in a wealthy family but ultimately left it all behind to be a soldier.

**IDRIL**

This lady is the Shieldmaiden of Gondor and the daughter of General Castamir, Minas Ithil's military leader.

**SHELOB**

A giant, hairy spider in Tolkien's books, but a sultry goth in the game. Best not think about that too much.

the Chopper, is little more than a walking tutorial.

SAD SACK

And Talion is one of the least likeable heroes I've ever encountered in a game. A morose charisma vacuum who spends most of the game bickering with the equally humourless Celebrimbor, his spectral tag team partner. The game tries to paint him as a stoic, heroic force for good who'd rather not be fighting this war at all. But then, on the battlefield, he gleefully pops heads and elaborately executes people, clearly loving every second of it. It's telling that any of the game's randomly-generated orcs has more personality than this bearded bore. A new character called Eltariel, an elf chosen by Galadriel to hunt the Nazgûl, would have made for a much more interesting protagonist.

As the title suggests, war looms large in this sequel. When you arrive at Minas Ithil you find the streets filled with battle-hungry orcs, siege machines and Gondorian soldiers defending their home. The sense of scale is impressive, and you can climb to the top of the immense tower that gives the city its name. Monolith has brilliantly captured the grand, epic feel of the films, but the world has a sludgy, muted look that, while appropriate for a place like Mordor, makes for some bleak, uninspiring environments. Nûrnien is an exception, however, with its green forests offering a welcome burst of colour and vibrancy.

Continuing the war theme, conquering enemy strongholds – or nemesis fortresses as the game describes them – is one of *Shadow of War*'s most elaborate new features.

Once you've built an army using Celebrimbor's ring and weakened the enemy's defences through killing warchiefs and destroying monuments, you can attempt to capture the fortress for yourself. These battles are wonderfully chaotic and you can join the fray, making use of siege machines and helping your soldiers gain territory by capturing victory points. Capture them all and you get the chance to enter the fort and challenge its ruling overlord.

After the siege, if you were successful, you can promote one of your own captains to be overlord. This grants you certain bonuses depending on which tribe he's in, but you do have to invest in defences – and level up your captains – to

maintain your control over the region. There's fun to be had in conquering fortresses, but it does also feel a little like managing a small business. *Shadow of War*'s biggest problem is being overloaded with

systems that don't feel integrated into the game in an organic way. And it's constantly screaming at you to do things, which makes it feel like a fantasy to-do list. "Purify the Haedir towers!" "Reveal Shelob's memories!" "Open the Ithildin doors!" "Collect the Gondorian artefacts!" They might sound exciting, but they involve little more than finding a thing then interacting with it.

There's just too much going on. Too many menus, too much clutter on the screen, too many half-baked features. I would have preferred a smaller set of lean, refined systems to all this bloat. I had no interest in half the icons littering the map, and I found it difficult to get immersed in the story because of how unashamedly videogame-y it all is.

I soon grew tired of endlessly finding near-identical items

"Our greatest asset is stealth!" Celebrimbor says as he teaches me how to dominate orcs with the ring, which would sound insane if someone said it in the films or books. I never felt like I was in Middle-earth, and I rarely have trouble suspending my disbelief in games.

LOOT SUIT

Other new features include a fashionable tiered loot system, which sees you picking up armour, swords, daggers and other gear from fallen warchiefs and captains. While this did tap into my collecting instinct and I was, at first, eager to see what loot would drop, I soon grew tired of endlessly finding near-identical items with only minor stat upgrades. This is one of many examples in *Shadow of War* that bigger is not always better. If you removed it from the game completely it would barely feel any different. Also, Talion's clothes and weapons reset back to their default look in cutscenes, which is annoying.

But it all comes back to the orcs. They're the reason I kept playing, even when I was losing interest in everything else. A motley, gruesome, ill-mannered crew of swines that are a constant joy to fight and befriend. And the increased variety and depth of the nemesis system makes for a richer experience overall. I just wish the game wasn't quite so overfed. A lot of developers think sequels need to be bigger and offer more to get people interested, but I'd prefer it if they were just *better*. *Shadow of War* is a great action game that feels like it's yearning to break free from a prison of open world busywork. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT
The nemesis system shines in this unwieldy, bloated, and occasionally magnificent fantasy epic.

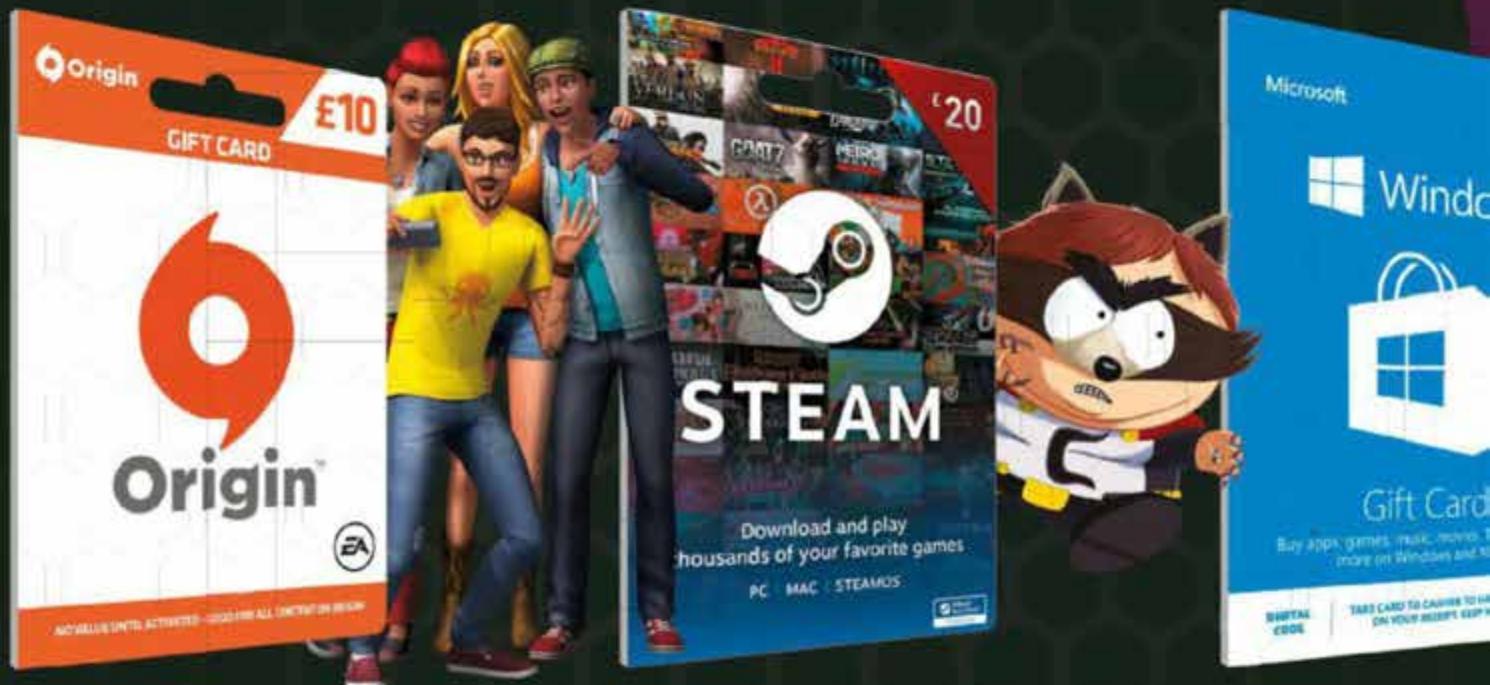
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LIVING DEATH

Explore death positivity in
A MORTICIAN'S TALE. By Philippa Warr

I've just hooked a cadaver up to an embalming machine. First I made an incision with a scalpel, then I dragged a tube called a cannula to the carotid artery and connected the rest of the tubing for fluid delivery and drainage. As the machine comes to life I start tracing patterns with my mouse over the body. This simple action is there to represent the way a mortician massages the body to evenly distribute preservation chemicals.

A Mortician's Tale is a curious project. It takes the death positive movement, especially the work of people like Caitlin Doughty and The Order of the Good Death, as its inspiration and marries it to the simple inputs you'll find in those free browser games where you heal horribly mangled Disney princesses or deliver babies. What you end up with is a thoughtful tool for presenting ideas around death.

The core of the game is concerned with destigmatising death, returning to it as a natural thing which it's okay to think and talk about instead of something to hide from.

You join a family-run funeral home as a mortician. Your first job is preparing a body for a closed-casket service and burial where the family has requested no embalming. All that's required of you is to wash the body with a sponge and leave her with a colleague to be dressed.

Cremations require you to remove items – pacemakers, jewellery and so on – then run the remains through a cremulator. Embalmings involve the most steps and require you to think about the logistics of presenting a corpse. For example, one step is inserting eye caps. Eye caps look like spiked contact lenses. The curvature of the cap helps give the impression of a rounded eyeball under the eyelid and the spiked surface helps hold the eyelids in the closed position.

All of the actions are simplified, compulsory and repetitive. In *A Mortician's Tale* I think that actually works – it lends a sense of ritual to the game which feels important, plus

You must go through all the steps, including paying your respects

the fact that nothing is optional means that players aren't given the space to disrespect their cadavers. You must go through all the steps, including paying your respects at the service. The game itself is short

enough that even if you chafe against the lack of choice I don't think it's a dealbreaker.

The simplifications do mean the game doesn't confront putrefaction, mess, disfigurement or gore

but I think here,

although that might be one of the realities we shy away from, presenting death full-force might detract from opening up conversation and making death less abhorrent.

DYING ART

The influence of the death positive movement and, particularly, sites like The Order of the Good Death and Death and the Maiden is clear. You'll find it in the far-ranging death-

DYING ARTS

Fascinating funeral subjects



ALKALINE HYDROLYSIS

This is pitched as a more eco-friendly option than burial or regular cremation. It uses a strong alkaline solution plus heat and pressure to break down the body.



MUSHROOM SUITS

These are infused with a mushrooms and other organisms. The idea is that this helps with decomposition and could help break down toxins from the body.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A simple mortician simulator which aims to open up conversations about death.

EXPECT TO PAY

£12

DEVELOPER

Laundry Bear Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-5820K,
16GB RAM, GeForce
GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.laundrybear.com



related subject matter which flows through your character's inbox – mushroom suits, water cremations, behaving at a funeral.

You'll also see it in the messages your character's friend sends about her work in a pathology museum and it's reflected in how the game positions your initial employer – a small family-run business – and the subsequent intrusive upselling and impersonal attitude of the megacorp which acquires it.

You'll even see it in the look of your character, Charlie, whose dark hair with blunt bangs seems to reference both Caitlin Doughty and Sarah Chavez – prominent voices in the death positive community.

Without any direct experience of the funeral industry I can't speak to how accurate the story is – suffice it to say that it presents small-scale, green, personal funeral experiences which take account of individuals as the ideal and an impersonal profit-driven funeral corporation as bad. As with the mortician processes, that feels heavily simplified and the ending inevitable. But the flow of engaging and curious information through Charlie's inbox about so many facets of death will, I hope, still end up tempting players to investigate further and allow the game's ideas to spill outside the confines of its play space.

So far, in the time since playing I have Googled: "pathology museum near me", "eye caps for embalming", "home burials", "massage for rigor mortis", "how deep do you have to bury a body?" and, "can I bury a body myself?" All of those produced fascinating results. Alas, my current search – "can I bequeath my teeth to a friend?" – is not yielding such a clear answer. ■

PC GAMER

An overall approachable and thought-provoking meditation on life's only certainty.

82



Without circulation you need to help the fluids along.

The eyeballs deflate once the body starts decomposing. Click and drag an eye cap into each eye socket to give it shape.



COURSEWORK

Expansive and beautiful, regressive rewards nearly steer **FORZA MOTOSPORT 7** off the road. *By James Davenport*

I will play *Forza Motorsport 7* for years, but I will never drive all of its 700-something cars. I won't drive every circuit under every possible weather condition, or during every night and day variation. I won't ever turn off all the driver assists or know how to properly homologate vehicles on my own, which is an actual thing. Instead, I'll continue my quest to catch them all (the vans, specifically), tricking them out with anime liveries and critiquing their intricate dashboard designs.

Forza Motorsport 7 is so vast and all-encompassing that not only can I turn it into a stupid game about vans, I can also make it a game about conquering my van obsession and finally learning how to drive cool sports cars. It's simultaneously a goofy car toybox and a semi-serious driving simulation. It'll rock your expensive wheel controllers to and fro and teach you about physics, inertia and

sweet shiny chrome. Or you can treat *Forza* like *Mario Kart*, bashing into every vehicle in your way. Just don't forget to admire the sunset (and avoid the puddles).

Forza Motorsport's PC debut marks it as the most feature-heavy and malleable of racing games – an elegant, gorgeous, accumulative work marred only by a regressive reward system and a few inconsistent performance problems.

Within the first hour of play, I drove trailer trucks through the desert surrounding Dubai, drifted a limo through man-sized bowling pins

and raced the newest Audi RS LMS against a parade of earlier generations of itself. Each showcase event doles out silent lessons in how to go fast more efficiently.

With the right setup, *Forza* is downright incredible to look at

The trailer trucks taught me that I really need to take my corners with care. Limo bowling taught me to brake and drift in even with the most unwieldy automobiles. The Audi race was a history lesson, a competitive car gallery that put technological progression and design in perspective. I appreciated every car, even as I blew by honking. And with the underpinning driving physics tweaked to near perfection over the course of seven games, *Forza* knows how to make a low-riding formula car feel volatile and sensitive versus the lumbering acceleration of a van or the pure efficiency and raw power of a Ferrari.

Everything comes together in the Forza Driver's Cup, a massive campaign that's filled out with more traditional racing events, designed to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A racing simulator with broad a car selection, track variety, and difficulty options.

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Turn 10 Studios

PUBLISHER
Microsoft Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-5960X,
Nvidia GTX 980 Ti,
32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Online competitive modes

LINK
www.forzamotorsport.net

give you an abridged world tour through the history of automobile design and competition. It's a potent teaching tool for anyone with a modicum of car lust, carried forward by an impressive breadth of vehicle types, race configurations, and a car-collecting macro game that might as well be *Pokémon* for steel cage enthusiasts.

COLLECT-'EM-ALL

As you collect cars of a specific rarity, your collector score increases, and as you level the score up, new cars and the events they're attached to become available for purchase. I don't just feel the incentive to perform and complete every event – *Forza* encourages collecting every car and filling every space in a huge bingo card of 700-plus automobiles. Or you can be like me and always swipe right on the vans.

Most of the locations are returning from *Forza 6* and *Forza 4*, with Dubai as the only new setting. The upside is they're all augmented with 'dynamic weather' and time of day effects. It might start raining halfway through an endurance race, turning the back half of 23 laps into a game of dodging puddles in low visibility before giving way to a bright sunshine that turns the wet track into a blinding menace.

My favourites are the night tracks, though. They're truly dark, total blackness interrupted only by strings of headlights, inky ambience, and if you're lucky, the gradual sunrise. I didn't know a damn car game of all things could move me.

Racing is no longer strictly a matter of finding a line and mastering a track's corners – it's about learning how every vehicle handles in adverse conditions and reacting to those conditions on the fly. The simulation difficulty level is more challenging as a result, though anyone playing on the easier tiers will still have plenty to ogle at. First place has never been so pretty. And with the right PC and monitor setup, *Forza* is downright incredible to look at.

WHEELY WEIRD

Give *Forza*'s strangest cars a test drive



LOTUS ELEVEN
Looks like it belongs in *Speed Racer*.



BMW ISETTA
A car for babies, truly. Just look at it.



LANCIA GROUP 4
The ripped cousin of a Mars rover.



M-B TRUCK
Not your typical Mercedes-Benz.

Top Gear is overrated.



Any bets?

Forza is a very serious simulation.



The sun is about to come out.



Night tracks get nearly pitch-black.



The moment before I spin out.

Performance is improved over *Forza Horizon 3*, too, but this road is still a bumpy one. At nearly 100GB, it's a hefty download, which will put some dangerous pressure on anyone with a monthly data cap. I've experienced three crashes while in the menus. On two machines running Nvidia GPUs, I noticed a good amount of stuttering in the pre-race and post-race scenes and menus, but I haven't noticed any issues while racing. I didn't get any stuttering in menus with an AMD GPU, and our early benchmarking reports suggest better performance on AMD GPUs overall. That's all with a capped framerate, though.

4K HORSEPOWER

Framerates are inconsistent when uncapped, fluctuating wildly and seemingly at random. In our testing, during some races the framerate would drop from 200 fps to sub-60 fps without warning. That's going to be a massive pain for anyone running monitors with high refresh rates, which likely makes up a lot of sim racing enthusiasts. The trade off is that *Forza* is able to hit 4K resolutions on mid-range machines at high settings with more ease than other sims. It's going to look great on your PC, even if it's five years old. GPU driver updates and a few patches from Turn 10 could smooth everything out in the next couple months as well.

In its breadth, *Forza* sacrifices some depth. Pit stop animations aren't there; numbers just tick up as invisible power tools sound off. Opponent AI is still awful in crowds, with cars bumping into one another like a lazy demolition derby. Players who strongly prefer a single vehicle class will hit a dead end quicker than most, running out of courses tailored specifically for open-wheel racing or vintage stock. *Forza* has never been the kind of sim a professional driver could train with.

But for new players, a growing suite of driver assists allow for gradual entry into the hot car bath. With options ranging from the new friction assist that equalises tire grip on every surface, puddles and dirt included, to enabling or disabling a realistic damage model, finding your personal comfort zone is fairly easy.

You're free to tweak them at will, but it might be a good idea to keep the ABS on if you're turning off the suggested line for the first time, or

FINE-TUNED TERMINOLOGY

Get to know these terms and what they affect



TYRE PRESSURE

Adjusts acceleration, braking and handling.



DIFFERENTIAL

This tweaks the turning speed of each front tire.



ANTI-ROLL BARS

Self-explanatory, but tighter bars make for stiffer turns.



DAMPING

Affects how quickly suspension rebounds.

keep the rewind function around if you're thinking of turning friction assist off. With enough patience and the will to experiment, *Forza* has the toolset to take anyone from casual arcade racer to *iRacing*'s front steps, officially a budding Car Person. It'll just take a bit more motivation in this version of *Forza*.

LIFE ON THE STREETS

Driver Gear is *Forza* 7's new token cosmetic, a driver avatar only ever spotted in brief glimpses through windows or between racing events. They're all over the damn menus, though, a stiffly animated character with little purpose other than to make you feel like you've earned something. You can choose a gender and swap outfits, but that's about it. I don't dislike their inclusion, but the drivers reflect a new design ethos that's completely desiccated *Forza*'s traditional reward cycle. It was inevitable, but *Forza* also has loot boxes.

Prize Crates are available for purchase using CR, the in-game currency, and reward you with driver gear, player badges, cars, and mods, depending on how much CR you're willing to spend. Right now, they can't be purchased with real money and aren't required, but they're the only way to get mods, one of two ways to boost your CR earnings and fill out your car collection at a reasonable pace. You can equip three mods before you start a race to change the variables for CR gains, imposing weather conditions, removing assists, or guaranteeing small reward bumps. After a few uses, they're gone for good.

With Turn 10's plan to introduce a new currency, purchasable using real money, the whole system takes

on a troubling light. Mods and loot crates would be fine as an additional layer of incentives to inch your way towards a higher driving difficulty, but in previous *Forza* games as recent as *Horizon 3*, simply turning off individual driver assists boosted your race rewards.

Now, to get credits quickly, you need to invest in prize crates, which get you mods, which help you get more credits to purchase more mods, with any residuals going towards direct car purchases. Increasing the AI difficulty boosts CR earnings, too, but racing more challenging opponents on a comfy driver-assisted plateau only encourages players to stay where they're at. With the new system, Turn 10 gutted the incentive

for new players to improve along a natural curve, reducing rewards to random drops that place random conditions on a race with no attention to individual player learning.

Prize Crates are an irritating blemish on the bodywork of an otherwise elegant series, but *Forza* is still formidable, even with this greedy grabby monkey perched on its back. An uneven drip of credits don't make driving a '70 Chevelle in first person on a rainy track as the sun cracks through the clouds any less stunning and awe-inspiring. It's the songbird of cars, the sublime ocean cliffside filling the car poet with wonder and respect. Not much respect for time or skill, but respect for cars, at least. ■

PC GAMER

Light performance problems and a irritating loot box system can't quite distract from *Forza* 7's quality.

VERDICT

82



TIKI-TAKA

Solid improvements and a strong story make **FIFA 18** a top-flight player. *By Tom Hatfield*

Ostensibly, *FIFA* and *PES* are trying to simulate the same sport. In reality, both of these games approach football in a radically different way: it's like the difference between watching Brazil and Germany play actual football. They're both undeniably good at what they do, and pretty good fun to watch, but they're each playing a fundamentally different game, with their own unique approaches.

FIFA's long passes are far riskier and its players move slower, resulting in far more emphasis on rapid, short passes. When this works it's fantastic; you can get into a mindset where you're pinging Xavi-esque passes around without even looking because your mind is two or three moves ahead. Yet I still missed the ability to accurately launch the ball across the field, and when you're not quite in the zone it can feel like you're just moving the ball in circles waiting for a chance to present itself.

Things aren't precisely the same as last year; crosses have been reworked and players seem better in the air, turning high balls that would certainly lose possession in *FIFA 17* into 50/50 chances. In theory this broadens the tactical options, yet I still found myself falling back on short passing more often than not.

I also prefer *FIFA*'s more active approach to defending compared to *PES*, rewarding the player far more

for a well-timed standing or slide tackle than endless jockeying.

Worth mentioning is the new Squad Battle mode in Ultimate Team, which gives you the ability to play against other people's squads of footballer-Pokémon in singleplayer without having to go online. Not that finding opponents is a problem. Unlike in *PES*, I found myself getting games reliably, and usually with a player of about the same level of

ability. Less interesting is the addition of cutscenes to career mode, which now seems like a shadow of *FIFA*'s story mode: The Journey.

I was one of the biggest cheerleaders for The Journey last year, and the sequel is even better. The broad strokes of the plot are thus: Alex is tempted by the prospect of a move to a high-profile club, but he's forced to move to LA Galaxy instead, exploring a different side of football's global landscape. Like last year, this is used as a backdrop for

I'm scoring *FIFA* higher because it reliably works online

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

One of the two big-name yearly football franchises

EXPECT TO PAY

\$37

DEVELOPER

EA Canada

PUBLISHER

EA

REVIEWED ON

Intel i5, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER

One-on-one, online

LINK

www.easports.com/fifa



grounded character drama, with most of the narrative taken up with Alex reconnecting with his estranged father. Meanwhile, secondary characters, like Alex's blustering friend Danny and Kim (a new character who plays for the US women's team), feel three dimensional. It would have been very easy for *FIFA* to deliver a clichéd tale of triumph, but at every turn it attempts to be more nuanced.

ACTING OUT

It doesn't always work out. One big mistake this year is the overuse of real footballers. Roles that would have gone to a fictional character last year are now occupied by celebrities like Thierry Henry or Gyasi Zardes. Thomas Müller is a fine player, but in the context of the game he's a thin character with wooden acting. Meanwhile the match where I briefly took control of Kim, on as a substitute with only a few minutes to make or break her international career, were some of the tensest moments in the game.

FIFA 18 is an improvement, then, an upgrade on last year's instalment in nearly every way. But the majority of people reading this review will be asking a simple question: should I buy *PES* or *FIFA*? Unfortunately, I don't have a simple answer for you. I'm scoring *FIFA* higher because it reliably works online, but if I was playing local multiplayer with friends I'd pick *PES*. *PES* doesn't have anything like The Journey, but *FIFA* doesn't have an answer to Master League, either. The two games are offering two different experiences, and which one you pick is going to depend on which part of the game appeals to you. Those who can afford it may even consider owning both. ■

STAR POWER The Journey's footballing cameos: ranked



1
GYASI ZARDES
The LA Galaxy player actually has a (small) character arc!



2
RIO FERDINAND
Turns up and does his best Jeremy Paxman impersonation.



3
THIERRY HENRY
Offers an optional friendship path, however he's non-romanceable.



4
THOMAS MÜLLER
Has an actual "+1 Thomas approves" compatibility meter



5
CHRISTIANO RONALDO
Says, like, two lines because he's on the cover.

PC GAMER

FIFA 18 brings nothing original, but it's an improvement over last year's instalment in every area.

VERDICT

84



WATER-KICK DOWN

OVERGROWTH is fast and brutal, but feels like it's missing something. *By Tom Hatfield*

It is obligatory that every article on *Overgrowth* start with a bit on how long it has been in development, so here's mine. When Wolfire Games first started work on its rabbit beat-'em-up, both George W Bush and Gordon Brown were still in office, the first Android phone had not yet launched, and there was only one Marvel Cinematic Universe movie. The Humble Bundle was a spin-off project from *Overgrowth*, that is how much the industry has changed while this game's development trundled on.

So, after nine years of continuous, open development, you probably want to know what *Overgrowth* is, and the answer is this: *Overgrowth* is fast. *Overgrowth* is very, very fast. The protagonist, Turner, is a giant rabbit man, which means he has the proportional strength and speed of a rabbit (it's probably best to not check the actual science behind this). He runs with astonishing speed, he can leap hundreds of feet through the air and his man-rabbit kicks are devastatingly brutal.

And he kicks a lot. The majority of your time in *Overgrowth* will be taken up with kicking other rabbits to death (plus cats, dogs, rats and a few wolves). The combat system is incredibly simple, requiring only two buttons: attack and defend. As you read that sentence, you're probably imagining an *Arkham*-style system with carefully timed rhythmic button presses, but it's not like that at all. Instead, holding down the left mouse button (you can use a pad, but unusually I felt more comfortable with a mouse) leads you to constantly auto attack, while holding down the right automatically blocks and dodges. Direction keys influence both, with a direction hit just before a dodge leading to a throw, and jumping and crouching while attacking resulting in sweeps and sweet dive kicks.

What this all means is that fights in *Overgrowth* are fast, incredibly fast, far faster than it could be if you had to click for every attack. Fights rarely last longer than a few seconds, but

when your careful plan goes wrong you'll instead be locked into a desperate struggle of dodging and kicking. It's impressive to see a system that is as fun when it all goes perfectly as when everything descends into farce. So frantic are the battles that it wasn't until the second playthrough on a higher difficulty setting that I felt that I 'got' the system properly, and wasn't just desperately reacting to things.

BUNNY HOP

Unfortunately, combat is only half the *Overgrowth* experience. The rest of the game is taken up with far weaker platforming sections, where Turner's

Unfortunately, combat is only half the *Overgrowth* experience

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Long awaited rabbit puncher

EXPECT TO PAY
£23

DEVELOPER
Wolfire Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 16gb RAM,
Nvidia GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.wolfire.com/overgrowth



prodigious jump and wall-running abilities are used to scale linear obstacle courses. When the game started I was convinced I was going to love this aspect. There's a joy to sailing through the air as Turner, and the wall-running brought back pleasant memories of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. Annoyingly, I spent a good proportion of my time watching Turner grab the wrong thing, ignoring the ledge that I was aiming for and instead mounting a jutting out piece of rock and doing chin-ups on the edge for basically forever. Thankfully, there's an instant restart and some generous checkpointing, so you're rarely inconvenienced by a missed leap, but it has the feeling of punishment and repetition that the exhilarating combat largely avoids.

BEAT-TRIX POTTER

I'm honestly torn on *Overgrowth*. I love the speed and brutality of the fights, but at the same time they are so fast, and so brief, that the game almost feels insubstantial, a problem not helped by a paper thin antihero plot. Perhaps the developers realise this, which is why they've added the less-impressive platforming sections to pad everything out. It's such a strange-feeling game, it seems impossible to tell who will like it.

In the end, *Overgrowth* remains what it always appeared to be through all those years of development: a curio. It's a weird, unique creation, a window into an alternate approach to beat-'em-ups, a strange and beautiful place to visit, but it just doesn't feel substantial enough to make your home in, at least to me anyway. It is a game to blast through in a weekend, enjoy, and then never think about again. ■

FANTASTIC BEASTS AND HOW TO FIGHT THEM

DOGS
Tough, but slow. These often come at you clad in armour.

CATS
Kind of the fencers of this world, they're agile and well armed.

RABBIT
Pretty good all rounders. They kick hard and they jump stupidly high.

RATS
They are absurdly fast and good with knives... like all rats?

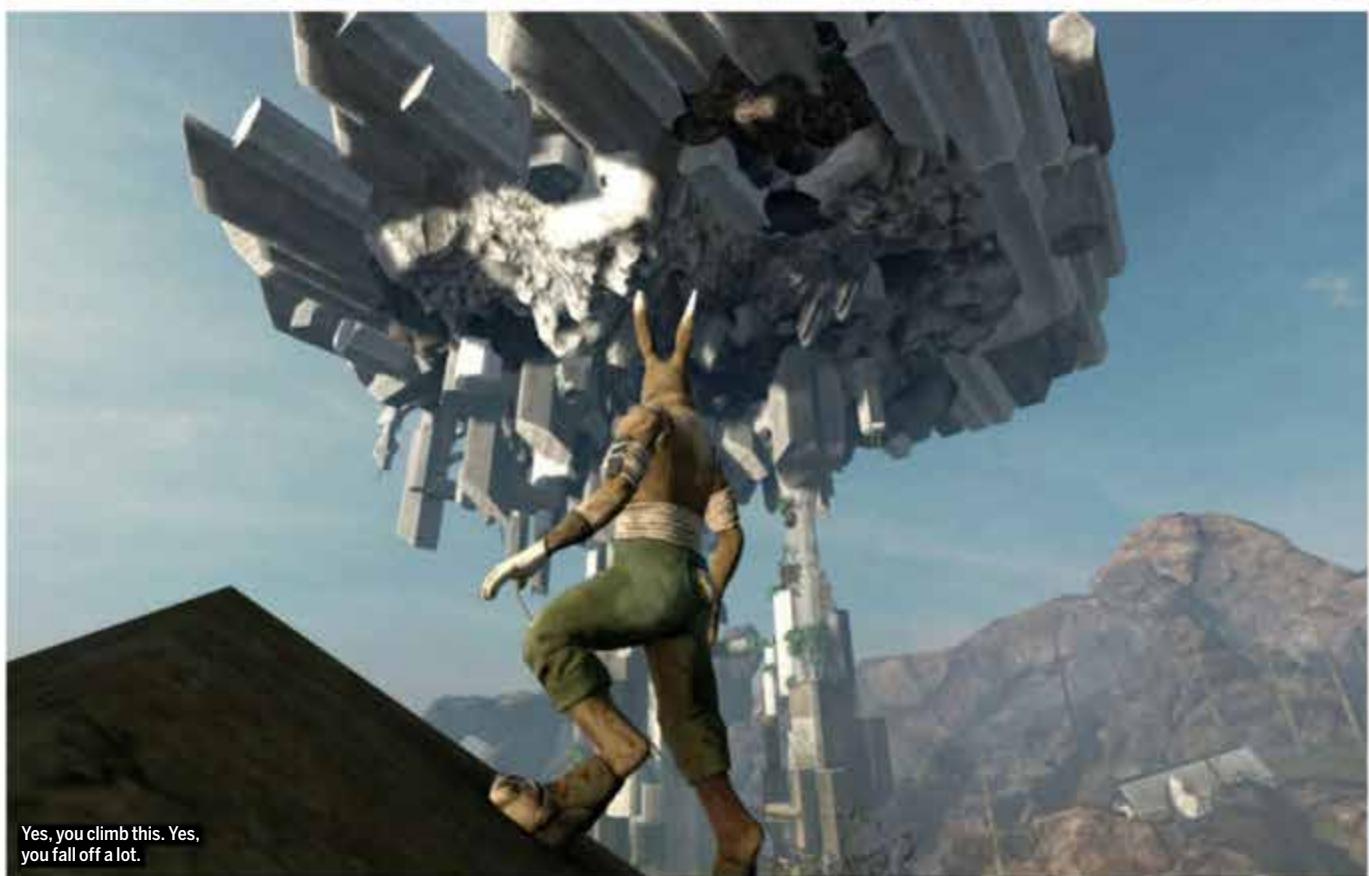
WOLF
Unstoppable murderbeast, vulnerable only to jump kicks.

PC GAMER

A unique, frantic combat system interspersed with mediocre platforming and buggy controls.

VERDICT

72



THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Chris Thursten



Pictured: every game noun from the period 1990–2002.

AAAAAAA

A meditation on the art of **SERIOUS SAM HD: THE FIRST ENCOUNTER**

I think what I love most about *Serious Sam* is the fact that no part of it stands up to what you could call 'scrutiny'. Take the audio, for example: to recreate the experience of listening to *Serious Sam*, find whichever setting on your Casio keyboard sounds the most like screaming. Then turn the reverb up and hit a key. Then Google 'free game sfx' and start clicking files. Explosion? Perfect. Yelling man? Yes please. SHOTGUN_LOOP_v1_xR0gu3Cl4nx_edit? Oh baby.

This is videogame-as-Geocities website, an act of throwing ideas at a wall produced at industrial scale. This HD remake, itself pretty old, turns up texture quality and makes a better fist of lighting but can't do anything about *Serious Sam*'s deep internal jankiness. A horde of surging horse-skeletons flinch back from your minigun with the exact same canned reaction animation, each twitch offset by however many microseconds fit

between bullets. It is laugh-out-loud wonky at times, but there's something charming about these games that hasn't been captured outside of the *Serious Sam* series.

I think it has something to do with scale. It's easy to describe *Serious Sam* as a latter-day *Duke Nukem* revival, and that's certainly part of what it is – early in the

campaign. *Sam*'s first few worlds toy with being a game about mazes and monsters, where you dash from pickup to pickup while blasting away at giant scorpions and hungry floating torsos and screaming men

with bombs for hands. This is an experience worth celebrating: we all got very excited when nu-Doom revived precisely this sort of game last year. Yet *Serious Sam* doesn't stop there: after a while the corridors start to

fall away, until you're alone in a vast empty desert plain and instead of a handful of screaming bomb-men you're fighting hundreds.

It is at this point that you've blasted through 1996 and plunged through shooter history back to 1982. *Serious Sam* is, at its heart, less *Quake* than *Robotron*, except you're there on the ground and each enemy isn't a

You've blasted through 1996 and plunged through shooter history

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A man with several guns runs in a big circle. Other men, screaming, attempt to stop him.

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Croteam

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-6700K,
16GB RAM, GeForce
GTX 980, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
You bet

LINK
www.croteam.com/seriousam

robot viewed from a distance but a clattering skele-horse that wants nothing more than to get right up in your grill. And the advantage of a first-person perspective, as ever, is that you can toy with scale. A big pixel monster is one thing; a naked demon the size of a pyramid, which you know because you can also see a pyramid, is another.

FRAMES PER SHOOTER

Returning to *Serious Sam* is doubly worthwhile because in the year 2017 we have midrange-ish PCs that are capable of rendering all this at the triple-digit framerate that it deserves. I wouldn't normally be one to get excited about that kind of thing, because typically literally everything else about a game is more interesting, but it compounds my sense that *Serious Sam* has never stopped being relevant. Its good bits get better with time; its wonky bits are retro quirks waiting for their moment. I think we can all aspire to that. ■

PC GAMER

It's just a lot of bulls and skeletons and monsters in a 3dfx graphics card demo nightmare, but very good.

VERDICT

81

STEAM REFN'D

Turning the clock back with **HOTLINE MIAMI**

It turns out that I can't play the original *Hotline Miami* without thinking about how much I hated the sequel, which is a shame because otherwise I might have listed this among my favourite games. Now it slides into place alongside a set of other things that seemed very sexy in the period between 2011 and 2013, the majority of which involve Ryan Gosling and a lot of pink and blue light.

To be fair to both *Hotline Miami* and 2011-era Ryan Gosling, however, the issue is not the original material but the influence that it subsequently had. Given the subsequent surge of modern retro, hyperviolent action games and films where Ryan Gosling is an emotionally unavailable man fixated on crimes or jazz or whatever, it's easy to forget just how striking this was when it arrived. Hell, Devolver Digital practically owe its

entire not-your-daddy's-middleweight-publisher thing to *Hotline Miami*'s chicken-masked murder man and the hot pink '80s fever dream he occupies.

So let's turn the clock back five years. Here is an action game that does not waste your time, where every inch of movement matters and each click makes something terrible happen. You don't swap weapons: you grab and use and throw them, sending anonymous Tarantinoid mobsters flying across bloodslick vinyl floors. Between 'jobs', a music video's worth of plot is meted out. And each 'job' is defined by its soundtrack as much as its design or story progression, an entire game acting as a showcase for throwback synthwave that promised that this decade was going to be like the '80s but better. As opposed to, y'know, the '80s but worse.

85



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY £7

DEVELOPER Dennaton Games

PUBLISHER Devolver Digital



GRAVITY BONE

This is a ten-minute-long, completely-free spy story told through wordless vignettes. Brendon Chung (him, again!) has identified the exact thematic middle ground between John LeCarre and *Minecraft*, which is an act of aesthetic gymnastics that I will never not be impressed by. This is an adventure that'll stick with you despite being the length of an EP. Games trend towards bigness and expository overworditude, whereas *Gravity Bone* is content to imply a short, funny, tragic mystery that your brain pieces together after the fact. Who was that woman? Who are you? Why are there so many seaplanes in Brendon Chung games? And so on.

90



WESTERADO

Westerado isn't terribly old, come to think of it, but it is one of those great little ideas that deserves to be dug up and paraded around every now and then. That's what you do with old things, isn't it? I forget. In any case: this is a free roaming pixel cowboy RPG where you do cowboy adventures and seek out clues to the identity of the bandit what done burn down yer ranch. You can accuse almost any character in the game of being said bandit, and if they disagree you can just draw your gun mid-conversation to convince them. If you shoot them and they turn out to have been both plot-critical and innocent, who cares? The game, happily, keeps going.

83



THE POLYNOMIAL

This month's forgotten neon thing of the month is *very* neon. *The Polynomial* is a music visualiser where you fly around inside a nebula made out of the souls of MP3s. It stands out among visualiser games for the fact that you're not on rails: you fly around inside the game like a spaceship, firing lasers into monsters that are like bad Pac-Mans. It doesn't matter what the monsters are. It doesn't matter if you shoot them, either. *The Polynomial* is a little sparse in that regard, but it is *very* neon.

60



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GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



98

GROUP TEST

Want your games to look their best? Treat them to a massive screen.



106

BUYER'S GUIDE

Whatever your budget, our guide will help you build or upgrade.

Peggle has never looked so grossly incandescent.

[UPGRADE]

GROUP TEST

By Ed Chester

4K MONITORS

Seven of the best Ultra HD displays around

**Q&A****Which LCD panel type should I get?**

It's always the same question when buying a monitor: IPS, TN or VA? And the usual rules apply: IPS is best for overall image quality, VA is great for video and TN is cheap and suitable for gaming. However, with 4K refresh rates at a current maximum of 60Hz, TN is less appealing as there's little gaming advantage.

Large screen or small?

You'd need a 40-inch monitor at 4K resolution to get the same pixel density as a 27-inch 1440p display. If you do a lot of reading or writing on your PC, you'll need as big a screen as possible. However, if you only need your monitor for video, pictures and gaming, a smaller screen will get you an incredibly sharp image.

Why only 60Hz?

The main limitation with 4K screens right now isn't the panel itself but the interconnect. Older DisplayPort and HDMI standards don't support the 1.2 trillion pixels per second that are required to run such a massive resolution at 144Hz. The latest DisplayPort will support this, and the latest HDMI supports up to 10K at 120Hz.

Dictionary**Colour temperature:**

A measure of colour as related to the temperature of a very hot object. The cooler the object, the redder the light. The hotter it is, the bluer the light. Our sun's daylight is 6500K so this is the standard for monitors.

Hz: The refresh rate, as measured in hertz (Hz), is how many times a monitor changes image in a second. 100Hz feels best for gaming, but 60Hz is the max for current 4K monitors.

DisplayPort and HDMI: The two current PC and multimedia video connection standards. Both support audio and video and come in a variety of versions.

Windows scaling: In order to make most programs on your desktop readable when using high-res displays, Windows has a setting that lets you 'zoom in'. This makes things appear larger and allows apps to bypass it if needed, letting you view pictures, videos and games at full resolution.

**SAMSUNG U28H750**www.samsung.com £400

→ The prolific Korean manufacturer has something of a knack for making surprisingly stylish-looking budget displays, and the U28H750 is no exception. In fact, this display even gives the Acer S277HK a run for its money.

1

It can't match the Acer's build quality but it's commendable for the price. The only thing to keep in mind is that the stand is a bit wobbly. On a sturdy desk it's fine, but if you have a lightweight desk then the U28H750 can start to wobble as you type. Its connectivity is basic, too. You get two HDMI to go with the one DisplayPort, and there's a headphone jack but no USB hub nor speakers.

The biggest cost-cutting measure here, though, is that this is a TN display, and in fact it's worse than the Asus MG28UQ. Both have poor viewing angles, mediocre colour accuracy and slightly low contrast, but the Samsung suffers that much more from one of the most distracting qualities of many TN monitors: they struggle to reproduce the light grey colours that are used as window dressing in apps and websites.

Not that this display is bad, by any stretch. It's mostly fine, and one of the cheaper screens in our test. But a video or picture editor's dream this isn't.

70%

**ACER S277HK**www.acer.com £430

→ The S277HK is a designer screen. With its all-metal stand, white rear and hidden bezel, it ticks every style box. It may not sit well next to your RGB-filled black box of a PC, but it's ideal for minimalists.

2

The only caveat being that there's a mass of connectivity on the back, and it's not as elegantly integrated as, for instance, the rear of an iMac. Still, you do get plenty of connectivity. DisplayPort, mini DisplayPort, HDMI and DVI video ports are all on offer, along with an audio input and headphone jack.

Its image quality is largely impressive. It uses an IPS panel, so viewing angles are excellent. As a 27-inch display, you don't get a huge desktop boost from the resolution, as you'll want to have Windows scaling set to 150% most of the time to make things readable. Nonetheless, for video and gaming, it's superb. The only problem is that contrast is a bit low. It's okay for desktop work, but it takes a bit of the punchiness out of video.

Otherwise, the only major downside is the stand, which offers only tilt adjustment with no option to swap it for an alternate stand. If you're happy to height-adjust via stacking books, though, then the S277HK is a really nice 4K monitor option.

85%



4

AOC AG271UG

eu.aoc.com £600

→ AOC's AG271UG is a direct competitor to the Acer XB271HK and Asus ROG PB279Q. All are 27-inch 4K IPS displays that include G-Sync to reduce screen tear. But AOC's model is the cheapest of the three.

3

Available for around £600, it's by no means cheap, but with its competitors asking for closer to £700, it still offers a good saving. What's more, it doesn't slip up elsewhere, making this an excellent display.

It all starts with the elegant design. The frame is slim and simple, and the stand is similarly understated in solid metal. That stand also offers a full range of adjustments and VESA compatibility. It even has a dial on the side that makes it easy to reset the height back to exactly where you like it.

You get a couple of rare extras, too. On the right edge, for instance, there's a flip-down headphone stand that sits above two USB 3.0 ports and the headphone jack, making for a convenient little zone of connectivity. One of the USB ports also supports fast-charging.

The display offers very good image quality, too, even if the colour balance needs a bit of tweaking to get the best from it. All told, this is the best 27-inch 4K G-sync display on the market for the price.

90%

PHILIPS 328P6VJEB

www.phillips.com £550

→ Philips offers a couple of large 4K displays, including the massive 40-inch BDM4037UW. The 32-inch 328P6VJEB is likely a more practical size for most people's needs.

4

This display uses a VA panel, the chief advantage of which is great contrast. This makes it fantastic for watching video. However, it's not just a one-trick pony and also works well for work duties.

One thing it can't claim, though, is to be stylish – there's an obvious cheapness to the overall look. What it lacks in pizzazz, though, it makes up for in practicality. The stand offers height, rotation and tilt adjustment and can be swapped for a VESA-compatible alternative. You also get plenty of connectivity, with DisplayPort, HDMI, DVI and even VGA connections on the back, as well as four USB 3.0 ports on the side.

Overall image quality is good, with the massive 2,317:1 contrast really bringing movies and games to life. Being a VA panel, gaming isn't its strongest suit thanks to the technology's slow response time, but it's still okay for non-competitive games.

Overall, it offers a good set of features and will appeal to those that like to sit back and watch movies on their PC.

75%



5

ACER PREDATOR XB321HK

www.acer.com £800

→ Acer offers two premium 4K monitors that, for the most part, only differ in size. Both offer 4K resolution, an IPS panel, a 60Hz refresh rate and G-Sync, so it just comes down to how big of a screen you want.

5

Pay more and you do get more, though. That's because a larger screen means you can reduce Windows scaling, resulting in more desktop real estate. A 27-inch screen with Windows scaling set to 150% reduces the effective resolution to 2560x1440, whereas this screen lets you use 125%, for a resolution of 3072x1728. Fire up a game or movie and you also get a bigger picture overall.

Resolution and size considerations aside, the XB321HK has loads going for it. The design is not too offensive and is likely to sit comfortably alongside most PCs. The stand also offers height and tilt adjustment, though not rotation or pivot. It does support VESA monitor mounts, though.

As for image quality, it's fantastic. The IPS panel produces accurate colours and great contrast right out of the box, and when combined with G-Sync it makes for some truly fantastic gaming.

It's no competitive monster but it's a superb all-rounder that's great for all other forms of work and play.

85%

ASUS MG28UQ

www.asus.com £375

→ There's an argument for saying that 4K and TN just shouldn't mix. With 4K refresh rates limited to 60Hz, the gaming advantage of TN is null, while the lower quality of TN negates the point of having a large resolution.

6

However, there are a couple of reasons why a display such as the Asus MG28UQ might suit you. First, there's the price. You're getting a large 28-inch display, all those pixels, a fully adjustable stand and FreeSync all for well under £400.

Nonetheless, the MG28UQ does struggle to convince. This one has a grey finish to its stand and frame that just cheapens the overall look. It also feels like a noticeable step down in build quality from Asus' more premium models.

Some of the image quality issues of TN panels are also obvious. Contrast is low and the viewing angles aren't a patch on other display types.

Still, the stand is great in terms of practicality and is removable, plus you get loads of connectivity with three HDMI ports alongside the DisplayPort. Plus there's a couple of USB 3.0 ports.

Nonetheless, there's not quite enough here to convince. You can get 4K for less and, without a fast refresh rate, gaming performance is compromised.

70%



6



7

LG 27UD68P

www.lg.com £400

→ LG has hit a winning formula with some of its displays. They're great value, combining elegant design and a minimum of features with IPS panels that deliver reliably good image quality. The 27UD68P is such a model.

7

Take this 27-inch display from its box and you can feel the cost saving as its plastic stand and lightweight construction shows that it's no professional-grade display.

However, once set up, its simple, curved stand, plain black rear and low-profile bezel makes for a stylish display. And so long as you treat it right, it should continue to look good for a long time.

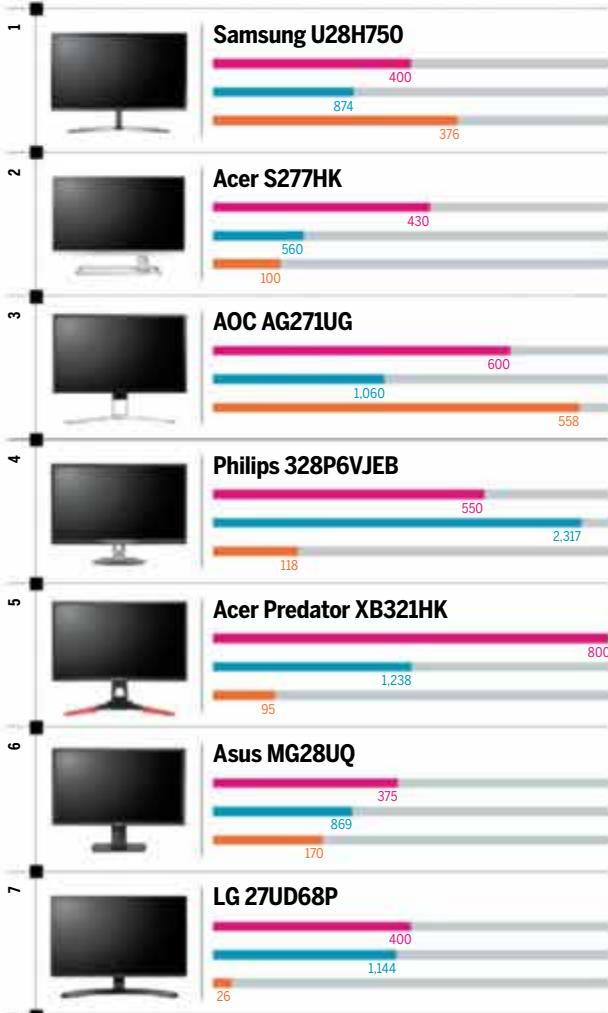
This is even something of a step up model in LG's range as it offers height adjustment and pivot so you can use it in portrait mode. The stand can also be removed to reveal a 100x100mm VESA mount. Otherwise you get no extras here. Connectivity is one DisplayPort and two HDMI, but there's no USB hub or speakers.

The image quality is great, though. IPS glow and backlight evenness might be a touch worse than premium models, but that's just nitpicking. Overall, it's superb right out of the box. If you're looking for a cheap 4K screen this is the one to get.

80%

STACKED UP

■ PRICE (£) ■ CONTRAST
(The higher the value the better) ■ COLOUR TEMPERATURE (K)
Deviation from 6500K (the lower the value the better)



ESSENTIALS

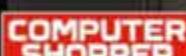
	Screen size	Panel tech	Resolution	Response time
1	28 inch	TN	3840 x 2160	1ms
2	27 inch	IPS	3840 x 2160	4ms
3	27 inch	IPS	3840 x 2160	4ms
4	32 inch	VA	3840 x 2160	4ms
5	32 inch	IPS	3840 x 2160	4ms
6	28 inch	TN	3840 x 2160	1ms
7	27 inch	IPS	3840 x 2160	5ms



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HYNIX 250GB Sata3 SSD
WD/SEAGATE 1TB HDD
FRACTAL DESIGN CORE 1100
500W PSU
INTEL Integrated HD630 Graphics
WINDOWS 10 64Bit



i5 TITANIUM

£499.99

INFANTRY Brigadier (INF2)

INTEL Kaby Lake i7 7700K (O.C 4.9Ghz)
ASUS STRIX Z270H Gaming
CORSAIR DDR4 16GB 3200Mhz
SAMSUNG DVDRW 24x*
2 x SAMSUNG 256GB M.2 (Raid 0)
SEAGATE 4TB HDD Sata3
PHANTEKS Eclipse P400S
750W FSP PSU Silver
NVIDIA GTX1080 Ti 11GB
WINDOWS 10 64Bit



£1999.99

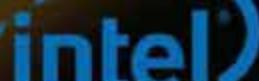


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SAMSUNG DVDRW 24x*
CRUCIAL 480GB SSD Sata3
SEAGATE 3TB HDD Sata3
Dragon Gaming Case - Red LED
750W FSP PSU Silver
NVIDIA GTX1070 8GB
WINDOWS 10 64Bit



RYZEN £1099.99



CPU-MOTHERBOARD-RAM
BUILD YOUR OWN
BUNDLE

MULTI-MONITOR

RANGE AVAILABLE



REVIEWS

By Zak Storey



MSI GEFORCE GTX 1080 TI GAMING X TRIO

www.msi.com £770

GPU

→ We already know the GTX 1080 Ti, is the king of all GPUs. If you're looking for a high-end, 4K-capable GPU, there truly is no other option.

But it's been a while since we looked at an aftermarket variant. MSI's latest Gaming X Trio is the first in its new line of triple-fan-cooled cards. Although we've seen these designs from MSI before, they were typically only available in the expensive Lightning line.

91%

The elegant black aesthetic coupled with intuitive RGB lighting and exceptional fan curves keep it quiet, whilst still hammering the framerates at 4K.

GPU: PASCAL / LITHOGRAPHY: 16NM FINFET / CORES: 3584 / MEMORY: 11GB GDDR5X / MEMORY BUS: 352-BIT



ASUS MX34VQ

www.asus.com £717

MONITOR

→ If you're after the most premium experience you can get, 21:9, 1440p and 100Hz is definitely the place to be.

It's not cheap, not by any measure. The MX34VQ is the perfect combination of super wide aspect ratio, high refresh and pixel density, perfect for those looking to have it all. The 21:9 aspect ratio makes it perfect for enjoying media, maintaining productivity and enjoying any and all games out

88%

there. It's not got super low response times or crazy refresh rates, and it does take up a fair chunk of desk space, but experiences in story-driven games are unparalleled.

SCREEN SIZE: 34INCH / PANEL TECH: VA / NATIVE RESOLUTION: 3440x1440 / REFRESH RATE: 100Hz / RESPONSE RATE: 4ms GTG / CONNECTIONS: 1x DISPLAYPORT, 3x HDMI

ROUND-UP



LOGITECH BRIO

www.logitech.com £180

→ 4K and HDR in a webcam? Yep, it's finally happened. No more messing around with overly pricey DSLRs and the like. Logitech has done the seemingly impossible and finally integrated all those high-end features into a camera worth its salt. Yeah, it's a little pricey, but for a plug-and-play USB webcam at this calibre, it's hard to argue with.

85%

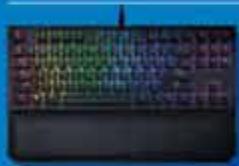


XPG EMIX H30 GAMING HEADSET

www.adata.com £190

→ Adata are doing headsets, and damn are they good. I went into this fairly apprehensive, but this headset-and-DAC combo is exceptionally impressive. And it wants to be for £190. There's a bit of sound leakage underneath the earcups, but the comfort and quality is exactly where you want it to be for the price.

90%



RAZER BLACKWIDOW CHROMA TE V2

www.razerzone.com £140

→ This wrist pad is so comfortable. Razer's keyboards are exceptional, and this TE variant of the Blackwidow is lush. Fully RGB, with a silent mechanical switch, it's perfect for any FPS gamer, or anyone who values a smaller footprint for their peripherals. It's pretty pricey, though.

88%

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

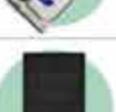
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.



BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

**TOTAL
£883**

MOTHERBOARD		H270M Bazooka MSI £85
PROCESSOR		Pentium G4560 Intel £56
GRAPHICS CARD		GTX 1060 3GB EVGA £215
MEMORY		Fury Black 8GB @2400 HyperX £90
POWER SUPPLY		500BQ EVGA £53
SSD		SSDNow UV400 120GB Kingston £50
HDD		Caviar Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £40
DISPLAY		Asus VE247H Asus £110
KEYBOARD		K30 Corsair £35
MOUSE		Rival 100 SteelSeries £29
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £67
CONTROLLER		Xbox 360 Wired Controller Microsoft £15



MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

**TOTAL
£1,637**

MOTHERBOARD		SLI Plus MSI £119
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 1400 AMD £144
GRAPHICS CARD		GTX 1070 SC Gaming ACX EVGA £420
COOLER		Kraken X31 NZXT £91
MEMORY		Fury 16GB (2x8GB) DDR4 @2666 HyperX £139
POWER SUPPLY		RMx 650W Corsair £87
SSD		850 EVO 250GB Samsung £89
HDD		Caviar Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £84
DISPLAY		Q2778VQE AOC £225
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS Cherry MX Blue HyperX £85
MOUSE		Castor Mionix £49
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £67



ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

**TOTAL
£3,506**

MOTHERBOARD		Crosshair VI Hero Asus £222
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 1700 AMD £280
GRAPHICS CARD	 NEW ENTRY	This is for the Twitch streamers, the pro gamers and the video creators. Eight cores, 16 threads, stunning value.
COOLER		Kraken X62 NZXT £150
MEMORY		The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.
POWER SUPPLY		Vengeance LED 32GB @2666 Corsair £340
SSD		32GB of RAM is excessive for anyone gaming today. Use the excess either as a RAM cache or for video editing in After Effects.
HDD		HX750i 80 Plus Platinum Corsair £127
CASE		Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.
DISPLAY		960 Evo 250GB M.2 PCIe SSD Samsung £110
KEYBOARD		A cost-effective OS drive delivering sequential read and write speeds of 3200MB/s and 1500MB/s respectively.
MOUSE		MX300 1.1TB SSD Crucial £246
HEADSET		At 1TB, this SSD from Crucial is fantastic value, and more than big enough for all of your AAA gaming titles.
		Enthoo Evolv ATX TG Phanteks £160
		The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.
		AGON AG271QG AOC £621
		It's £200 cheaper than Asus's PG279QG, and we can't tell why. 165Hz, IPS, G-Sync, 4ms response... this is the perfect screen.
		K70 LUX RGB Corsair £145
		Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.
		Rival 700 SteelSeries £65
		Swappable sensors, back plates, 3D printed rear guards and an OLED display. The most comfortable, adaptive mouse we've used.
		ATH-AG1X Audio-technica £270
		What's life without a nice set of cans? The ATH-AG1X set is the pinnacle of headphones, and it's super comfy to boot.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



Tidy camp, tidy mind.

“I haven’t starved and therein lies a mighty victory for pedantry”

Making waves in **DON’T STARVE**

I haven’t starved. That’s what I cling onto every time I try to get somewhere with Klei’s rock-hard survival game, *Don’t Starve*. I’ve died a gazillion other ways, but I haven’t starved and therein lies a mighty victory for pedantry.

There were the shadow monsters, which is how I remembered about sanity. There was that encounter with those snakes, which taught me that poison doesn’t wear off. There was the decision to avoid disturbing the bees, which saw me channel my thwarted desire to poke something with a spear into disturbing three spiders instead... but I haven’t starved, and am therefore still winning.

PHILIPPA WARR



THIS MONTH
Was let down by rafts, trees, food and snakes.

ALSO PLAYED
Watching a lot of *League of Legends*

The thing which lured me into this hellscape was a screenshot of the *Shipwrecked* DLC. I’m a sucker for anything oceanic and the thrill of coral reefs, curling waves and sea monstrosities was too much to resist.

I think that’s why I’ve stuck with *Don’t Starve* this time. I just like how the sea looks. It soothes my twitching eyelid as I pulverise the latest batch of grass patches or chop at trees to slog my way towards my umpteenth

science machine. Instead of traversing fields I surf my way to gold nugget-yielding boulders and that seems to make all the difference.

But it’s not smooth sailing. The developers and I have some disagreements when it comes to object interactions and craft materials. They feel butterfly wings are an emergency foodstuff. I’m of the opinion that if I collect enough butterfly wings I should be able to craft an iridescent cape worthy of being worn by Titus Andromedon.

THIS WAS A RACE TO FIND SOMETHING ELSE TO KILL ME BEFORE I COULD STARVE



“I’m ambushed by a giant corpse”

Encountering imaginative nonsense in **ENCLAVE**

Klei also seems to think my spear – a tool made from flint, rope and twigs – should be allowed to conduct electricity. My bright idea of using one to stab a jellyfish was only bright in the sense that it delivered me an electric shock while the jellyfish bobbed away unscathed. I was so cross with this that I tried it several times in protest. You can see why I am not well suited to survival games.

I was pondering how to spend my time in the game and remembered I'd found a treasure map marker to investigate. Unfortunately, my larder management skills seemed to have deserted me. As I landed on the island, I was starting to starve.

GOOD DECISIONS

A quick recce told me there was no food in the vicinity. The race was on! Not to survive. No, that'd be absurd. This was a race to find something else to kill me before I could starve.

No evil creatures were available for prodding, and the game doesn't seem to let you set yourself on fire. But my sanity meter was hovering perilously close to empty! I set sail and crashed into waves, seeking out sea monsters and other terrors. As my sanity started to drain, shadowy creatures faded into view.

Standing still in the centre of the screen I waited for the monsters to chomp down. Possessions spilled from my dead body.

But I hadn't starved and am thus I am still winning.

SAM GREER



THIS MONTH
Looked at Starbreeze's back catalogue.

ALSO PLAYED
Divinity Original Sin II,
Death of the Outsider

Before Starbreeze became the studio behind FPS cult classics like *Escape From Butcher Bay* and *The Darkness*, it tried its hand at action RPGs. Namely, *Enclave*. It is a very silly game.

Enclave is set in a dreadfully typical fantasy world, where the forces of good and evil are separated by an ancient chasm formed in a battle centuries ago. Why are they fighting? Is it hard to build bridges in this fantasy world? Look, it's not important. The premise, like the story, is paper thin. As best I can tell, it's simply an excuse for Starbreeze to string together a load of daft levels.

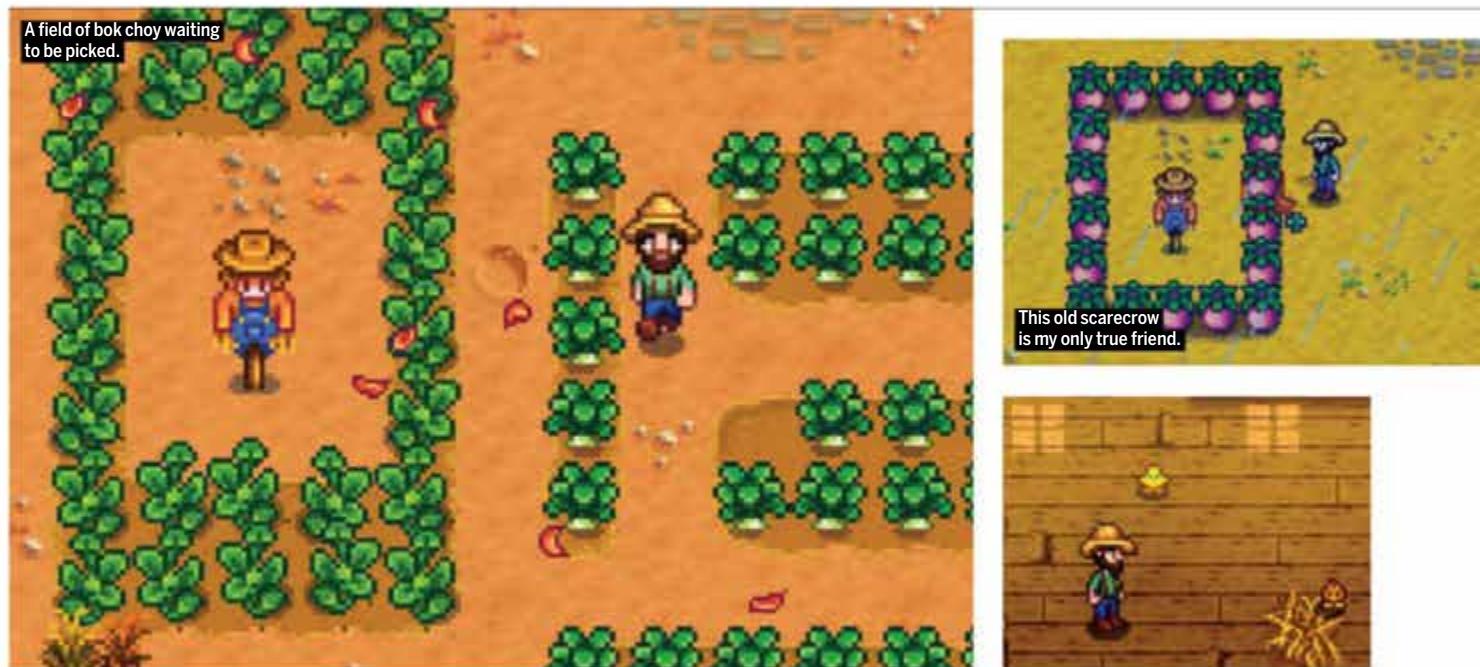
For instance, there's the one where I fight a giant skeleton. I've been sent to retrieve some magical staff (why? It's not important), and, in the deepest pits of some hellscape, I'm ambushed by a giant corpse. I wave the staff and I'm whisked into the shoes of my own massive undead creature. It's hard to argue with the logic: what better way to fight a giant skeleton than with another giant

skeleton? Here I am, slapping this giant with my bony arms. It's the kind of nonsensical moment that just can't help but make me laugh.

The combat is hopelessly shallow but I feel like Starbreeze knew this and so concocted a load of these absurd detours in the hopes that nobody would notice. Seeing as I now remember the game fondly, perhaps it worked. I didn't recall the rubbish combat or the wonky platforming. No, I remember that time you find yourself in control of a giant skeleton for absolutely no reason. I also remember visits to underwater fortresses, towns teetering on the precipice of the underworld and haunted mansions full of traps. It's to the game's credit that I remember the good stuff, silly as it all may be.

BUTCHERED

Enclave doesn't showcase the talent for atmosphere, character and story that Starbreeze would demonstrate with *Butcher Bay*, *The Darkness* or *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*. In these offbeat moments, however, is the imaginative spark that would form the consistent surprises littered throughout their games. Featured here are hints of Jackie Estacado's detour to hell or Riddick's seemingly endless stint in cryo detention. The DNA of a studio is a hard thing to pin down but you find it in unexpected places. *Enclave* is no classic, but it's a fun look at where a lauded studio first flexed its muscles.



“I’m sure the town thinks I’m a weirdo who never stops working”

Enjoying a quiet, simple life in **STARDEW VALLEY**

Once I used to play *Euro Truck Simulator* to rinse my brain of the anxiety and stress of modern life. Now I exfoliate it with *Stardew Valley*, a wildly addictive farming simulator by ConcernedApe. In the past I've lost hundreds of hours to the likes of *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon* on Nintendo consoles, and this scratches all the same itches. It's the kind of gentle game that you can play while listening to a podcast or binging on a Netflix show. But also has enough variety and depth to satisfy the urge for something with a bit more meat on the bone.

Everyone plays *Stardew Valley* differently. There's a whole friendship and romance system where you can talk to townsfolk, give them gifts and become a member of the community. But I haven't touched any of that. For the first year, I'm here for profit. To harvest crops, sell them, and upgrade my homestead. It's just turned winter and I'm betting most of the people in Pelican Town don't know who the hell I am. I only roll in there in the morning to buy seeds from Pierre and gather coral. I'm a recluse, sure, but a rich one.

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Toiled on an imaginary farm for imaginary profit.

ALSO PLAYED
Resident Evil 2

My farm's looking good. I have a coop, a couple of happy chickens, a silo stuffed with hay for the winter and a cat. There's something wonderfully calming about playing *Stardew Valley*, especially if you turn the music off and just listen to the sound of the wind howling and birds chirping. And I love how the landscape is transformed as the seasons shift, from the crisp green of spring to the golden brown of fall. When I'm tilling the soil and feeding my chickens, my troubles melt away. And selling off a bumper crop and making a fortune is hugely gratifying.

I'm fat on wealth and eggs, and it'll be winter in a couple of days.

THE GAME IS CONSTANTLY EXPANDING, REVEALING NEW SECRETS AND TREATS

Honestly, I'm looking forward to not having to water or tend to crops for a while. Maybe I'll use this free time to start meeting people. Or maybe not. There are mines to plunder, mushrooms to forage and trees to chop down. I actually think the solitude adds something to the game. It makes it more peaceful. Although I'm sure the town thinks I'm a weirdo who never stops working. I love that there's no pressure to play *Stardew Valley* any particular way and no real time limits.

ACTION PLAN

A lot of *Stardew Valley* is busywork, but the difference between this and bloated open world games is that you're always working towards something you need. You know that after carefully watering those pumpkins for 12 days you're going to make a huge amount of money and be able to upgrade your farm, unlocking new ways to play and make money. The game is constantly expanding, revealing new secrets and treats, and that's why it's such a lethal timesink. I can lose entire evenings to this game without ever being aware of time passing, which is dangerous, but a soothing balm for an anxiety-ridden brain.

“I wanted to make choux buns, not serve insatiable goblins”

Trying to keep my cool in **COOK, SERVE, DELICIOUS! 2!!**

My mother introduced me to the delights of cooking at a young age. Whether it was making delicate little butterfly cakes or filling the house with the scent of freshly baked cookies, my childhood was happiest in the kitchen.

Two decades later and I'm downloading *Cook, Serve, Delicious! 2!!*. People have warned me about the challenge that awaits, but come on. I've thrown dinner parties before (as in I've served three people chilled beer and fish tacos around a cramped table) and I can make a hollandaise sauce without it curdling. How hard can it be?

The fantasy of cooking has me hooked. It's a slice of heaven, with a catalogue that describes the history of every food item you can make, plus the chance to take over a variety of restaurants. "This game was made for me," I think, looking at a fast-food joint that serves juicy burgers and baskets of golden fries. Hunger pangs take over and I run to the kitchen to snaffle down some cashews.

If you're a foodie, *Cook, Serve, Delicious! 2!!* is a joy for the senses.

KIMBERLEY BALLARD



THIS MONTH
Burnt her wrist on the hob trying to make an omelette.

ALSO PLAYED
A Mortician's Tale,
The Botanist

I soon realise, however, that this game isn't so much about the joys of cooking as it is military precision. Instead of spending minutes decorating dishes with tangles of watercress or cooing over a cranberry reduction, I'm sweating over getting five dishes out at once. There's a finite amount of time until customers walk out in impatience, so you need to grapple with preparing several meals while washing plates, taking out trash and cleaning the bathrooms.

One restaurant proves too much to handle – excuse me, but *how many* croutons did you say you wanted on your salad? I try to find solace in the

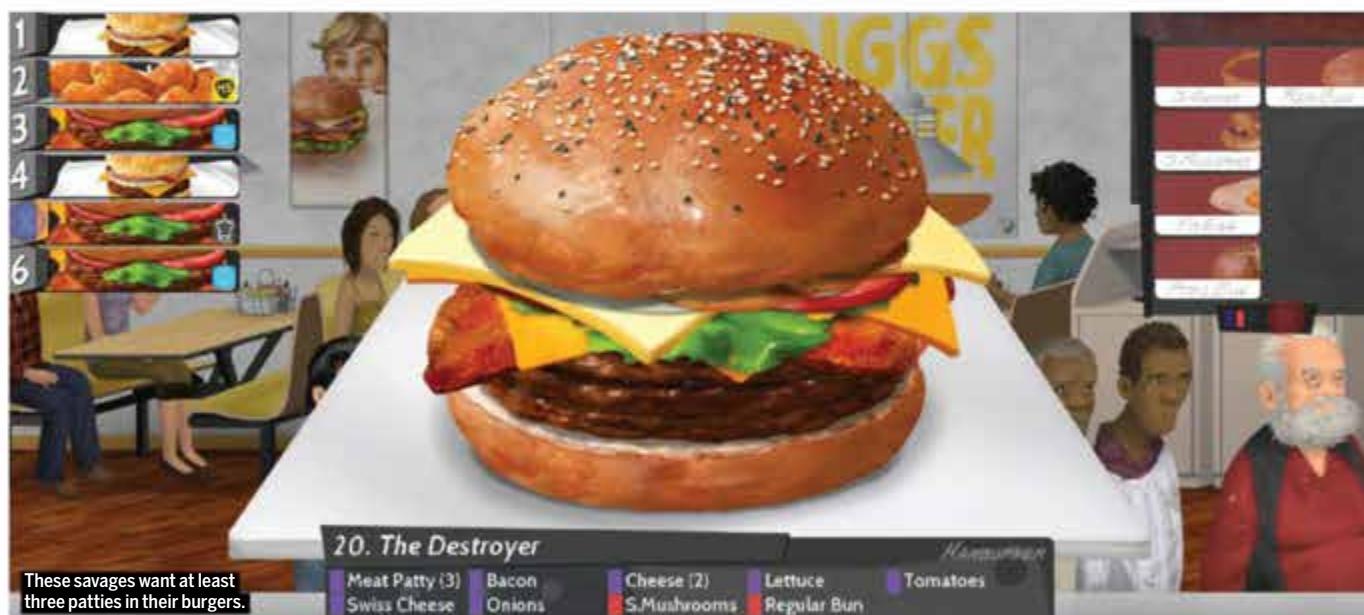
I SHRIEK AS CUSTOMERS WALK OUT WHILE I'M TRYING TO COOK TEN DINNER ORDERS

Chilly Bowl, a parlour that serves sundaes and dessert pies. My sweet tooth sings and I head in. This should be easy-peasy. I mean, what's so taxing about a scoop of ice cream and sprinkles? But then the hordes arrive and ruin everything. They want every topping imaginable, and recalling which item is mapped to which button makes me want to cry.

CHOUX NO HARM

Isn't cooking art? Isn't food supposed to bring me unmitigated joy? I almost shriek as several customers walk out while I'm trying to cook ten dinner orders, meatloaf burning to a blackened brick in the oven. I wanted to spend my time in this game making choux buns, not serving insatiable goblins who order burgers with three patties and four different types of cheese and pickles. Have you not heard of chronic indigestion, you fool?

This is not fantasy. It's gruelling. If this is what it takes to be a chef in the real world, I don't want to be a part of it ever. I shed a tear as I hastily close the game down and quickly eat four cream puffs in a row. I think it's best to dream about cooking at my own sweet pace. ■





TOP 10 DOWNLOADS

FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB by Tom Sykes

Instead of a crowbar, *Caged* gives you a plunger.



1 HALF-LIFE CAGED

MOD Return to Gordon's original adventure

Thanks to series writer Marc Laidlaw, we finally kind of know what would have happened in *Half-Life 2*'s theoretical third episode. With that loose end wrapped up, we can begin to explore other stories in the *Half-Life* universe. Stories such as *Half-Life: Caged*, a big new mod for the original game.

Caged is the work of Future Games Select and Cayle George, the latter an ex-Valve developer who worked as a level and game designer on *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal 2*. He knows what he's doing, then, and as a result this substantial singleplayer campaign is better constructed than many fan-made mods. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to get out of

jail, something you achieve by first diving into the prison's sewer complex.

Be honest: you've missed the days of finicky platforming in first-person shooters, and if not, well, I have some bad news. There are plenty of precise jumps required in *Caged*, but they're perhaps appropriate in a game released before the millennium. This being the first *Half-Life*, the weapons don't pack much of a punch, either. However, in another respect, *Caged* is bang on-trend. There's an excellent, '80s-style soundtrack provided by synthwave artist Lazerhawk, and a developer commentary by Cayle George. It's also comes with paid DLC: tongue-in-cheek content that replaces the default toilet plunger weapon with a special 'executive' version.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/HalfCaged](http://bit.ly/HalfCaged)

2

A GAME BY ITS COVER

FREWARE Never judge a... oh, nevermind

T

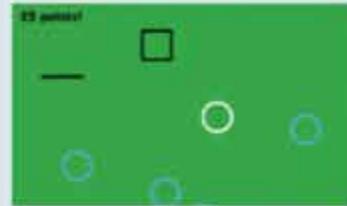
he A Game by its Cover jam is development, backwards: devs pick a fictional cover and title, and then create the game they imagine would have that box art. These are just a few of the games made over the course of a fortnight for the competition. There are over a hundred more, if you're interested in looking for yourself.



A

HIKARI'S STATION
Take some selfies in the Tokyo-set *Hikari's Station*. Depending on who you take them with, you'll make friends, or even enemies.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/ByItsCover1](http://bit.ly/ByItsCover1)



B

EAT DOTS
A simple arcade-style game about eating coloured dots and avoiding nasty lines. It's well made and it features a catchy soundtrack.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/ByItsCover2](http://bit.ly/ByItsCover2)



C

HELL
A point-and-click that looks a lot like classic Mac adventure games. You've been sent to hell, and whatever you do, don't touch that egg.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/ByItsCover3](http://bit.ly/ByItsCover3)

3 HOLEY SUIT

FREWARE A space-y survival game

You've been blown out of your destroyed spaceship by jerk aliens, and you only have a few moments to locate your escape pod, which has been blasted somewhere into the distance. The key to surviving is to shoot wildly into the expanse of space, using the kickback from pulling the trigger to propel your space suit backwards. The problem with this should be evident: there's no gravity, and if you shoot too much you'll be pushed too far into the vast sea of stars.

Holey Suit is a great physics game, with a satisfying drift to the movement and guns that feel great to wield. In addition to trying to make it to your pod while worrying about space debris and oxygen levels, you also have to contend with aliens, who will pester you if you get too close. There's only one level at the moment, but a bigger game is coming.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/HoleySuit](http://bit.ly/HoleySuit)



4 FIVE SECRETS

WEBGAME Hello? Is it nan you're looking for?

Most people can summon their grandmothers with a phone call or a yell, but in *Five Secrets* you call grandma by dropping items into a magic ritual circle. You're doing that because she's dead, I hasten to add, and you're trying to summon her spirit using items of personal significance to you and your dearly departed gran.

Five Secrets is a wonderfully tactile and attractive puzzle game. The key to successfully summoning nan for a chin wag lies in which items you grab with the cursor and plonk into the chalk circle. You'll need five of the 20-or-so objects to get through to gran, but which five? Well, that would be telling.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/GranChat](http://bit.ly/GranChat)



A BALANCING ACT
This shows each item's energy, which you have to balance.

B GRAN TOUR
Once you can chat with your nan, this circle will light up.

C CHALK IT UP
You drag items into this chalk circle to complete the ritual.



5

SHORT TRIP

WEBGAME Trundle through a bygone world in this adventure

It's time to take a short, er, voyage in the gorgeous *Short Trip*: a game where you play as the driver of an old-fashioned vehicle in a quaint rural town. Specifically, you're a driver of trams, those ramshackle train-bus hybrids that used to be everywhere back in the day. In this masterfully hand-drawn, side-on adventure, you hop onto the tram and then hold right to gently advance through the town and countryside, as the art and the excellent sound design transport you to a pleasant place and time. If you want to be a good tram driver, you can pause at stops to let people off and on – complete with cute animations of passengers bustling in and out of the carriage.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/ShortTrip](http://bit.ly/ShortTrip)

6 BATMAN IN SKYRIM

MOD Holy arrow in the knee, Batman!

If you hadn't guessed, the *Batman in Skyrim* mod adds the comic world's most miserable billionaire to Bethesda's frosty RPG – or if not Batman, then someone who looks an awful lot like him.

The cute thing about this mod is that it claims to fit in with the lore of the game. So, you're not playing as Bruce Wayne exactly, but as a member of a new race blessed with the skills required to dress up in a bat costume and terrify various local thugs. You're given an overpowered Batsuit so you can do your best George Clooney impression, and a big old mansion that you can strut

about in between supervillain encounters. There's even a Batcave included in the tunnels beneath.

But it's the small touches that make this mod worthy of note. You'll notice that your estate comes with its own butler, and a tough, Bane-style villain has been deposited somewhere in the world for you to duff up. The luchador-mask-wearing maniac can be found massacring in Markarth, and that's something you should put a stop to, I reckon. Speed is of the essence, so you might want to hop onto your Bathorse and get there pronto.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/BatSkyrim](http://bit.ly/BatSkyrim)



7 ALL-STAR FRUIT RACING

DEMO Fruit of the zoom

There's been a notable lack of cartoony kart racers recently, particularly on PC, so here's a demo for *All-Star Fruit Racing*, which is in Early Access. The whole world is themed around fruit, with huge apples, strawberries, bananas and cherries towering over each course from the background. It's your typical kart racer, but with a twist: each character has a 'juicer' on the back of their kart. You fill this up by collecting smaller fruit as you race around, with a tank each for red, yellow, blue, and green varieties. When each of the four tanks is full, you can use a power-up, and you can also combine flavours to pull off combo moves.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/FruitRacing](http://bit.ly/FruitRacing)



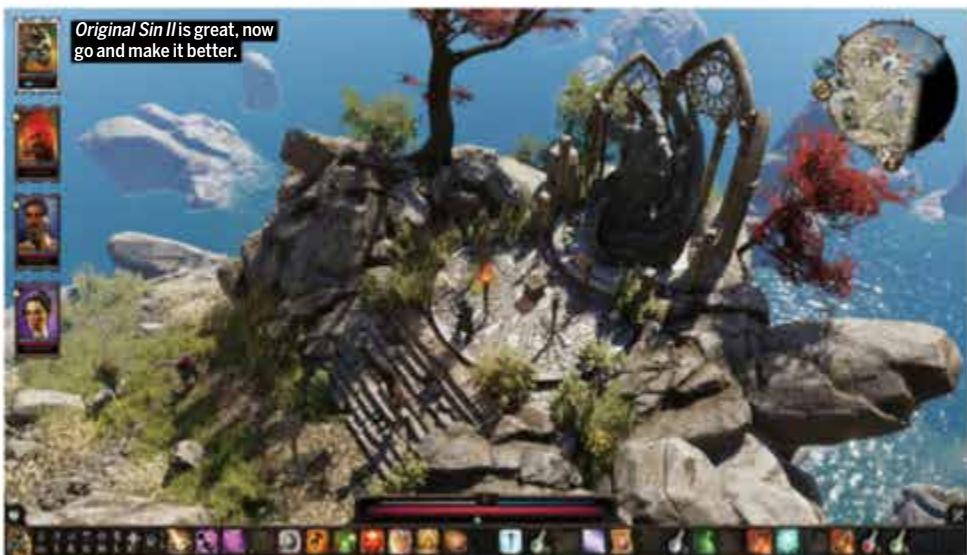
8 GRAND THEFT SPACE

MOD Head to the stars by stealing a NASA rocket

Grand Theft Auto V is no stranger to ambitious mods, but *Grand Theft Space* might be the most audacious fan-made addition yet. It lets you hop into a rocket and fly off into space, and while it's not a seamless transition as in *No Man's Sky*, it's still nifty to be able to control a shuttle outside the Earth's atmosphere and to visit a few of our neighbouring worlds. You can gad about on Mars, Venus, and

the moon here, either on foot (complete with reduced gravity) or on a special space buggy. There's not much to do there at the moment, other than stare in awe at the Earth, or fight the aliens which inevitably turn up, but the creators of this impressive mod see it as more of a platform for other modders to build on. I'm looking forward to seeing what the community comes up with.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/GrandTheftSpace](http://bit.ly/GrandTheftSpace)



9 ORIGINAL SIN II MODS

MODS Larian at your convenience

Divinity: *Original Sin II* is out, and by all accounts it's incredible – but not so fantastic that a few tweaks wouldn't go amiss.

Modders have been busy adjusting and expanding Larian's fantasy epic, and I've listed three of the best mods in the sidebar to the right. However, here's another you should probably invest in, if you're interested in making the most of the game's colourful NPCs.

The skill Pet Pal returns from the first *Divinity* to let you converse with animals, of which there are loads scurrying about. It's such a useful ability that you'll be missing out if you don't pick it immediately, so you really don't have much choice over that initial skill point. The Free Pet Pal mod returns that choice to you, making Pet Pal an innate skill for all classes in the sequel. Now that you can talk shop with rats, here are three more ways to embiggen your *Divinity II* experience.



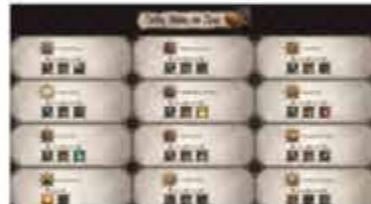
A BRIGHT LIGHT

FREEWARE There is a light that never goes out

If you need a game to unwind in, *A Bright Light in the Middle of the Ocean* offers a beautiful little island to explore for a while, complete with an enormous lighthouse sticking out of the lonely rock. After ascending its lengthy spiral staircase, you're treated to a delightful view of the area, which has been rendered with the aid of

SIN-PLY THE BEST

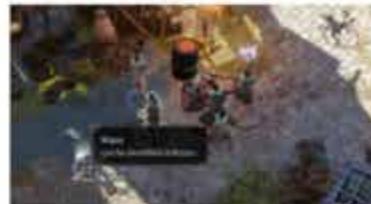
To err is human, to mod divine



A CRAFTING OVERHAUL

As the name suggests, this expands the crafting system, letting you recycle junk into handy materials.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DivinityMods1](http://bit.ly/DivinityMods1)



B EXPANDED PARTY SIZE

This mod which lets every available party member tag along with you on your adventure at once.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DivinityMods2](http://bit.ly/DivinityMods2)



C UNLOCKED SKILLS

This mod adds cheap skill books that will enable you to learn abilities that are gated behind race or origin.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DivinityMods3](http://bit.ly/DivinityMods3)

WORLD OF WARPLANES

Version 2.0 is more reinvention than update. *By Fraser Brown*

It's been a few years since I practised my Immelmann turns and barrel rolls in *World of Warplanes*, but any fears about being out of the loop were put to rest when I jumped into *World of Warplanes* 2.0 and realised that everyone was in the same situation. This is, effectively, a new game. And in many ways, a much better one.

The old *World of Warplanes* was a dogfighter. You had to learn how to fly a roster of planes, sure, but once in a battle, the objective was simply to destroy as many enemies as you could, and survive until the end of the match. This is no longer the case.

Conquest is the new primary mode in 2.0 and it's objective-based, dramatically changing the flow and focus of the aerial battles. Each team must fight over a variety of ground objectives, like garrisons and airfields, in an attempt to gain air superiority. Control is gained by bombing structures, taking out AI defenders and then defending it from enemy attack. Success demands teamwork, rather than seeking individual glory.

These battles, then, are much more purposeful, and there's more to winning them than just being a flying ace. If you love dogfights above all else, however, then there are still plenty of one-on-one scraps to be

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Wargaming

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.worldofwarplanes.com

found. Fending off enemies and hunting down bombers is just as important as capturing locations. Conquest doesn't remove dogfights, it just adds more diversity.

If anything, it improves on dogfighting by introducing a modular damage system. While planes have hit points, destroying an enemy is no longer a matter of just keeping it in your sights and firing. Pilots, gunners, wings and the engine can all be damaged, temporarily reducing the plane's effectiveness, making it a softer target. Combined with the objectives, it makes battles feel more tactically complex.

SECOND LIFE

They're also a little less harsh, as death no longer means the end. When your plane is destroyed, you can respawn. It means you get more chances, and you won't be punished for one mistake. That said, the high stakes are maintained, since reinforcements are eventually halted by bad weather, meaning that pilots can't respawn anymore. This way, that tension persists, but everyone gets plenty of chances to pull off



some slick aerial manoeuvres and riddle their enemies with bullets.

Despite being rusty, I actually felt like I was able to contribute to every fight, and as I unlocked new planes, there was even more that I could do. See, objectives have made plane roles more clearly defined. There are new bombers that take out ground targets, fighters that get into dogfights, heavy fighters for taking out tough targets, and multi-role fighters that dabble in a bit of everything.

Bombers were introduced with 2.0. While other planes can carry explosive payloads, bombers get a unique bomb sight for accurate destruction, and they're able to deposit their bombs from higher altitudes, reducing the risk of being intercepted. When they do have to tango with enemies, they're blessed with thick armour.

In battle, it's hard to find something that hasn't been improved.



I ACTUALLY FELT LIKE I WAS ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE TO EVERY FIGHT

It looks better, too, thanks to a visual overhaul. There's nothing quite like chasing a burning plane through AA fire while tracers crisscross the screen – it's a striking spectacle. Outside of battle, however, problems appear. The hangar and the accompanying menus continue to be hard to parse, made even worse by Wargaming's Byzantine business model, with its myriad currencies and loot boxes. And those aforementioned bombers? If you want to fly them, you'll need pay up.

Locking an entire class behind a paywall doesn't seem like the best way to seduce players back into a game that sorely needs more bodies. There was an event that let players unlock them for free, which finished on 2 November, but even that required a lot of effort, playing through oddly severe daily missions in an effort to get random loot boxes.

World of Warplanes 2.0 is easily the best the game has ever been; it's essentially a sequel that fixes a whole mountain of problems that had been ignored for years. It's just a shame it's shackled to a counter-intuitive free-to-play system. ■

PICK YOUR BOMBER

The three new bomber-class planes



BRISTOL BLENHEIM MK IV

Drop your 250-pound payloads from high altitudes where fighters will struggle to reach you, and then use your speed to get away, or your rear 7.7mm machine gun to deal with anyone foolish enough to follow you.



DOUGLAS A-26B INVADER

Twin .50-cal turrets and six frontal machine guns should come in handy when you're getting ready to drop your 16 x 100-pound bombs. Not surprisingly, this payload covers quite a large area.



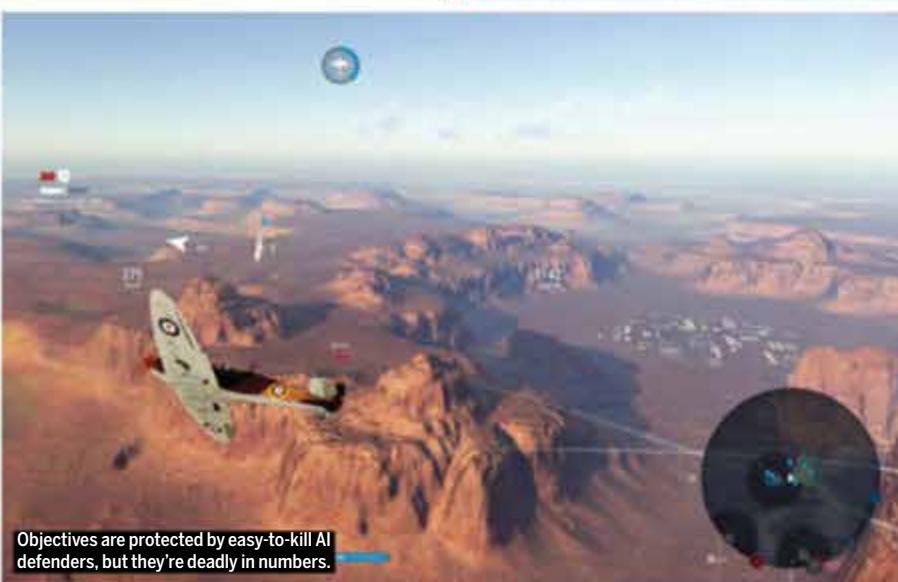
MYASISHCHEV RB-17

With light, 100kg bombs, you'll be able to drop six at a time instead of four, making up for their small size. And if you're being harassed from behind, get on that 23mm cannon and deal with those pesky fighters.

When an enemy is on your tail, you can now take over your rear gun.



Holiday destination or warzone?



There are more than other planes to worry about; some battles contain ships.

Objectives are protected by easy-to-kill AI defenders, but they're deadly in numbers.

Objectives can be dangerous places, full of AA fire.



08

THE DARK MOD

The best fan missions for the *Thief*-style sim. *By Sam Greer*

Are you feeling forlorn for the halcyon days of the *Thief* series? You may already be aware of *The Dark Mod*. It's a fan-made standalone mod that recreates the gameplay and style of *Thief*, but isn't set in the specific universe. With it, fans can create levels for others to enjoy. Having been out in the wild for years now, it's amassed a huge library of missions.

If you're new to *The Dark Mod*, I'm here to help you find the best the game has to offer. And if you're a veteran taffer, I've picked out some of my favourite new missions as well. Fair warning to those eager to jump in, though, *The Dark Mod* can be a bit rough around the edges, with cringeworthy narration and more than a few bugs to interrupt your plans. It's also worth downloading the tutorial mission. Whether you're new to *Thief* or not, *The Dark Mod* does a lot of things in its own way, especially with regards to controls. If you're able to get on board with that, you're in for a good time.

Let's start with *The Tears of St Lucia* by Springheel and jdude, which is still one of the mod's most elegant creations. You're tasked with infiltrating a slum's well-guarded church to steal everything you can, but the robbery is just a cover. Your real task is to vandalise a local statue that's been proclaimed as a miracle. A bit of theft and vandalism is all in a good night's work. It's quite simple but is nonetheless full of secret entrances, patrolling guards and a few hidden treasures. St Lucia may be among the more conventional missions available, but it works as a great showcase for what *The Dark Mod* can do.

FAN SERVICE

Whilst I found *Tears of St Lucia* a bit straightforward, *A Score to Settle* (also by Springheel) is far larger and

more complex. This sprawling level encompasses intertwining streets, tunnels and hideouts, with an objective to embarrass a notorious gang leader (you can't say these fans aren't inventive with their objectives). I was impressed with just how much of the map you can traverse, climbing over fences and ledges, which is handy not just for reaching goals, but for getting away from a pesky guard in pursuit. And once you've wrapped up all your objectives, you need to make a daring getaway across town. A perfect night out.

HORROR AND INTRIGUE

If you want to see *The Dark Mod* really flex its muscles, then look no further than *Full Moon Fever* by Spoonman. This is a classic, enticing *Thief*-style mission. A sprawling manor to rob, with the untimely death of its lord serving as a mystery at the heart of it all. The wonderful

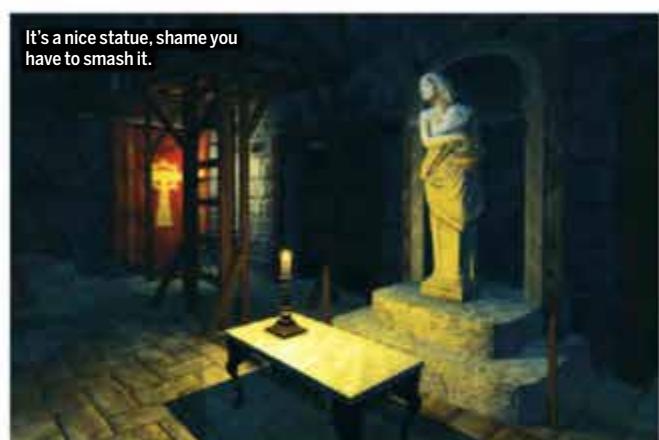
THE DARK MOD DOES A LOT OF THINGS IN ITS OWN WAY, ESPECIALLY WITH REGARDS TO CONTROLS

thing about the mission is how it starts out offering an elaborate mansion full of guards to navigate and overcome, but then you find out that's not even half of what it has to show. Investigating the murder of the lord leads to the level flipping on its head, going from a classic robbery mission to a full on horror show. And there's more! I almost burst out laughing as it just kept going and going, offering yet another exciting area or twist. It's a true pleasure to play through, thanks to a fairly deft hand for environmental storytelling.

From the same creator comes another stellar mission, *King of the Mountain*. This one is much more



These might be fan missions but they're truly lavish.



Not just your regular old haunted mansion.





These dark streets have plenty of spots to hide.



The Dark Mod looks its age but that fog is exquisite.

straightforward: you're a prisoner looking to escape a notorious prison. Simple. Of course, you have to do so without any equipment whatsoever, and you need to navigate this labyrinth without any map or clues. With plenty of guards around every corner, the odds feel decisively stacked against you, so prevailing feels all the more satisfying. Yet what lingers with me – as with Spooman's previous map – is the ability to tell a story through the sights you find around the level. A makeshift boxing ring in one corner of the prison tells you all you need to know about the kind of place that you're escaping.

Speaking of such details, let me introduce *Down by the Riverside* by Dragofer, a fun and atmospheric mission that opens with you hidden aboard a boat to reach a remote and supposedly haunted mansion. This one's a doozy, packed full of surprising turns as it tells the tale of a troubled family. It can also be unbearably tense at times – the manor's creepy atmosphere is almost suffocating as you try to avoid looters and worry about what's actually in the basement. If this mission owes a debt to anything from *Thief*, it's Robbing the Cradle from *Deadly*

Shadows. Being able to remind me of that horror classic speaks to this fan creation's quality.

ATMOSPHERE IN SPADES

Last but by no means least is *Briarwood Manor* by Chris 'Neonstyle' Kilgariff. This is a lavishly presented mission, that even comes with its own introductory FMV cutscene. It all takes place in a manor shrouded in fog, with a complex interior that oozes atmosphere. I found the whole place a little unhinged, with its flickering lanterns, upset horses and the steward, who finds the place cold and unwelcoming despite having stayed there for months. There's more to it than just the presentation, though. With no map, no blackjack and limited water arrows, this is a real test of your skills. I found myself holding my breath on more than one occasion. All in all, it's one of the finest missions *The Dark Mod* has to offer.

These are some of my favourite single missions, but there's plenty more available – from short, quick robberies, to multimission stories like the *William Steele* trilogy. And, if the community is anything to go by, there'll be plenty more classics for years to come. ■

DARK DOWNLOADS *How to use the built-in downloader*



- Click the 'New Mission' option, and at the bottom you'll find an option for 'Download Missions'.



- You'll now see the server's list of all available missions. Simply click one and select for download.



- Helpfully, you can select multiple missions at once, add them to your queue and download them all together as a batch.



- Whenever you wish to play a mission, you'll have to install it first, and you can only have one mission installed at a time. Uninstalling loses your save data.

The FMV sequences are both dreadful and lovable





COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN

It took our time but gave us plenty. *By John Strike*

Was I the only one who used to misplace my stealth tanks? It was a problem I had in 1995's *Command & Conquer*, so imagine my woes in 1999 when C&C's sequel, *Tiberian Sun*, introduced cloaking devices that made entire bases disappear. Thanks, Westwood.

Tiberian Sun is the sequel to C&C, set after the first Tiberium War. It was the first game released after *Red Alert*, which was conceived as an expansion for the original C&C. *Red Alert* became so impressive, however, that Westwood marketed it as a

standalone game. *Tiberian Sun*, meanwhile, was teased on *Red Alert*'s installation disc as a first-person *Mechwarrior*-style game that would eventually become *C&C Renegade*. The real *Tiberian Sun* was spared such ignominy, and became one of my favourite games in the series.

In the context of the C&C universe, *Tiberian Sun* isn't the first game you'd install if you were to replay the series. It is, however, one of the most important. While it lacked the contemporary military feel and tank rushes central to the *Red Alert* games, it was a leap forward for the genre for many other reasons. Crucially, its futuristic setting allowed

for more unusual units, in turn offering a new perspective for how different factions in a real-time strategy could be balanced (or not) against one another.

I reinstalled it because most of us played *Tiberian Sun* at a resolution of around 800x600, which made the unit models look blocky and almost cell shaded – worse in some ways than *Red Alert*. I remember being disappointed at how the units looked when I installed the demo off the PC Gamer cover disc.

Today, with a quick edit of one of the game's text files, you can play the game at whatever resolution you want. At a native resolution, more than double what you'll have used in 1999, the game looks crisp, and the extra visibility means less blundering around with the minimap, and more time staring at incoming attacks.

Tiberian Sun immediately feels much more cinematic in comparison



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
27 August 1999

PUBLISHER
EA

DEVELOPER
Westwood Studios

LINK
www.cncnet.org



Take that, research center.



If you close your eyes and listen suddenly C&C stars Darth Vader...



...Or just close your eyes and don't listen.

to its predecessors, and though the FMV sequences and animations have aged like a bad curry, *Tiberian Sun's* handsome budget brings us Michael Biehn and James Earl Jones. Biehn is as convincing as a cat wearing a false beard in a basket full of miniature schnauzers, though, and the presence of James Earl Jones doesn't make this Star Wars – nor does painting an AT-AT yellow and stencilling 'Mammoth Mk II' on the side.

Crucially, *Tiberian Sun* took the leap from a straight top-down view to a more three-dimensional looking isometric engine – thoroughly frustrating for the furiously retentive among us who love vertical and horizontal walls, but nonetheless a

brilliant investment for the genre. Features such as dynamic lighting, scripted night-and-day cycles and even meteor showers combined with electrical storms all create an eerie and compelling atmosphere. Basic destructible scenery as well as repairable bridges, working trains and large urbanised cities all make their C&C debut in *Tiberian Sun*.

I'M A MECHANICAL MAN

Tiberian Sun's importance is proven in the fact that most of the new mechanics it introduced were adopted by all of the C&C games that followed. Being able to queue the construction of units is the best example. The idea of a hotkey to

select all unit types on screen is another, as was the introduction of veteran statuses for units who'd seen more combat than others.

Sadly, elements such as *Red Alert's* thrilling sea battles are missing. Fast-paced attacks with standard tanks are gone, too, replaced instead by unusual sets of futuristic units and infantry. Some even need to be deployed to be used, which is an important factor in lending the game a slower and more considered pace. Having more time is key, as *Tiberian Sun's* strange combinations of units for both NOD and GDI mean you need to think about which to use to be effective. In *Red Alert* you wouldn't go far wrong whipping up a dozen Mammoths and sending them rumbling into the enemy base – mostly because each Mammoth has anti-tank, anti-infantry and anti-air capabilities, plus regenerative armour. *Tiberian Sun* isn't as forgiving.

Attacking as NOD, for example, requires at least half a dozen artillery, but they need to be deployed to be used, meaning you have to shuffle them across the map in stages. Equally, the more standard tick tanks can be deployed, too, but you need to

BALD-ER DASH A quick C&C quiz

Between Tiberium augs and moisturising twice daily, Kane never appears to get older. Can you put these five images in chronological order of game release, and name each game?



ANSWERS: 3: Command & Conquer; 4: Red Alert; 1: Tiberian Sun; 5: Tiberium Wars; 2: Tiberian Twilight



IT'S DESIGNED TO BE PLAYED IN THE LATE HOURS, WHEN EVERYONE'S GONE TO BED

make sure the mobile repair units stay nearby and that flame tanks are close to mop up any infantry that the artillery miss. That's not all, though. NOD have no effective anti-aircraft unit, so you need to fill subterranean APCs with rocket infantry. Good luck finding them in the midst of battle, especially when you've already lost your cloaked base. Chances are they'll get roasted alive by your own flame tanks when things kick off and the whole attack will go belly up. The game requires time. It's designed to be played in the late hours, when everyone's gone to bed. Throw in a pint of tea and a sausage dog asleep on your knee and you're set.

GOING COMMANDO

Tiberian Sun's campaign missions are enjoyable, and very few of them begin with the dreaded words 'timer started', meaning you can sit back and employ some tactics. The FMV

sequences are both dreadful and lovable, and *Tiberian Sun's* improved engine allows more of the story to unfold in the game itself. Commando missions still play a big part, and the battle for Hammerfest base, as well as defending the huge UFO crash site, are ones that stand out. *Tiberian Sun's* missions are all about offering new challenges beyond the usual 'just blow up the ones in red'.

Chasing after a runaway train, shooting Michael Biehn's brother with a tranquilliser dart, and even instigating a prison break with mutants (and a pig) are all in there.

Though the game is set in a bleak post-apocalyptic Earth, *Tiberian Sun* does dip its toe into silliness. In one NOD mission you're poised to attack a civilian mutant base whilst masquerading as GDI, but you soon find they're counter-attacking in a fleet of schoolbuses and winnebagos equipped with missile launchers. As if such absurdity isn't enough, once you've dealt with the militia, you get ambushed in a Tiberium field by mutant boars with luminous green hair that fire high velocity snout-propelled bogies.

In addition, some maps are covered with orange Tiberium 'weed' which, as well as being a harvestable resource for NOD's toxic missiles, is lethal to vehicles and grows from some kind of central sand anus. Naturally when your units attack the anus it blasts out green gas that then poisons any unfortunate bystanders, instantly turning them into aggressive pulsating blobs. It's an absurd ecosystem that only becomes more bizarre with the additional Tiberium monsters in the expansion, *Firestorm*.

For me, *Tiberian Sun's* main problems are little more than niggles. Many of the unit cameos in the construction menu, for example, are just screenshots of each item from the game, which feels lazy. And small details, like the way subterranean units still throw up brown soil when they burrow in the arctic missions, instead of snow, seem overlooked.

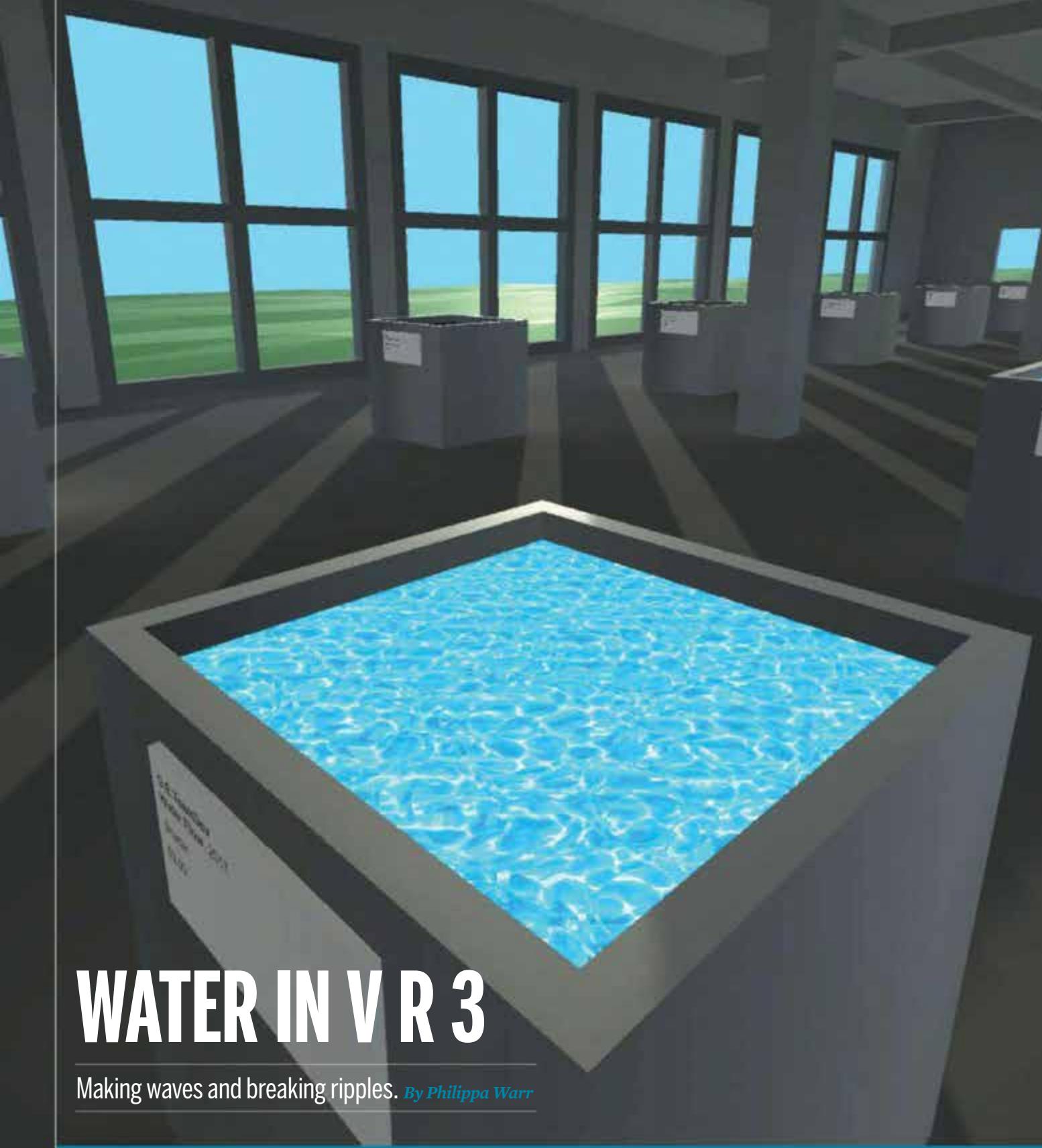
Overall it's got a lot of gaming time to offer, some cutscenes that are worse than you remember and naturally a whole host of community-made mods (*Twisted Insurrection* in particular is a favourite). Just remember to assign hot keys to your stealth tanks, for goodness sake.





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

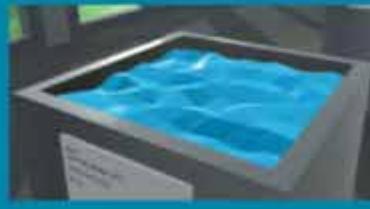


WATER IN VR 3

Making waves and breaking ripples. *By Philippa Warr*



RIGHT: Low Poly Water by Jolix looks simple but, under the hood, you can play with light absorption, customisable waves, and more.



There's a water library I like to visit and a water library I dream of visiting. The one that I dream of is Vatnasaðin in Stykkishólmur, Iceland. It's an art installation by visual artist Roni Horn – a collection of melted ice from glaciers laid out in 24 glass columns in a former library. You buy tickets to the Library of Water from the nearby Volcano Museum. I've wanted to go for ten years.

The one I can get to regularly is called *v r 3*. It's an exhibition of different water shaders you can browse, and you'll find it as a digital download created by Pippin Barr. As he explains the idea:

"Water is perhaps the archetypal technology we use to assess how 'good' a game engine or game is in terms of realism, a kind of benchmark. I liked the idea of a speculative future in which, rather than playing a game with water in it, people would choose to simply contemplate the water itself as an activity. Thus *v r 3* represents a museum/gallery experience where the audience pays attention to water."

One of the buildings you encounter in Barr's museum is dedicated solely to different examples of the Unity game engine's own water shaders. Each sits within a grey cubic basin with information about the refraction colour, clipping, wave scale and more as a museum-style placard on the front. The other building is for third-party water you find on the Unity Asset Store and offers wilder variation. I love that room.

By yanking the water shaders out of their game context, Barr makes the work of creating the right type of water apparent. Nestled at the back on the right of the official Unity room

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
29 March 2017

EXPECT TO PAY
Nothing

OUR REVIEW
N/A

LINK
www.pippinbarr.com

HIGH WATER MARKS *Four games with noteworthy water*



SECRETS OF THE WAVES

A glorious storm hits your isolated boat in the mid-section of this Global Game Jam 2017 project.



ABZU

Wafting kelp, refracting light and currents which push you around all act in concert to give the sense of being in water.



A GOOD GARDENER

It's the sound effects which delight here as you collect rainwater in your watering can and tend your crops.



DON'T STARVE

Exaggerated animated waves and sketchy surf perfectly suit the Lemony Snicket-like art style of the survival game.

is a container of oscillating red liquid – maybe something you'd use for a cistern tainted by blood. Towards the middle of the room is a glossy, sky-blue liquid where the surface motion implies a current – this one's better suited to a slow summer river.

In the third-party room is an option that's jet-black and unmoving. Two basins away from that is a shader so unruly that it won't stay within the confines of its vessel and keeps clipping through with waves that look more like tiny mountains. Deko's Animated Water Texture reflects sunlight streaming through the game's window off ragged ocean swells, while Ciconia Studio's Cartoon Water Shader is entirely flat – maybe a handful of translucent layers moving over one another to give the illusion of rippling caustics.

UNRULY EXHIBITS

Barr ran into fascinating problems while making the library, trying to bend these waters to his will. One water came with a ready-made version scaled to be the size of a lake and in scaling it down for the basin cube it broke because the parameters worked on the assumption the body of water would be large. "This water 'wants' to be a lake, and I want it to be a puddle," is how he put it. One water ignored his scaling completely and flooded the gallery by rendering to the horizon anyway.

It's from these visits to *v r 3* that other thoughts tend to flow. One visit reminded me of the way *The Sims 4*



players make waterfalls. They hide multiple fountain jets in rocks so that you see sections of the spray and not the jet nozzle. By layering enough of them you give the impression of water cascading down surfaces.

Another visit prompted a thought about water in *Scanner Sombre* by Introversion. You spend your time in that game firing dots at surfaces to render them visible but the dots that land on the water gradually dissolve. The way you see the water in that game is thus either as an absence of dots or as a reflective surface offering

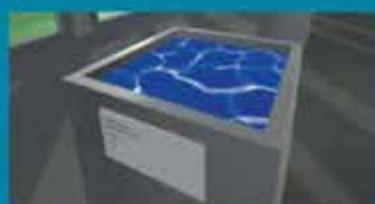
IT'S FROM THESE VISITS TO VR 3 THAT OTHER THOUGHTS TEND TO FLOW

a blurry mirror for dots that have landed elsewhere

v r 3 isn't the only way you can digitally isolate water, it's just a personal favourite of mine. If you're more into playing and shaping, rather than observing, I'll leave you with a couple of digital water toy recommendations. A simple prospect is David Li's *Waves* – a square of ocean you can reshape and rescale using sliders. For something more in-depth there's *Seascape* by Alexander Alekseev. It's a lovely one to fiddle with in-browser via the Shadertoy website, tweaking variables as the camera glides across the endless sea surface.



RIGHT:
Jonathan3D's
Stylized Water
Shader sloshes and
clips through its
container. Fake Water
is far more sedate.



PHIL SAVAGE

If not for games, I'd spend my 30s watching back-to-back episodes of *Deadliest Catch* and *Hell's Kitchen*. That's no way to live.

**GUILD WARS 2: PATH OF FIRE**www.guildwars2.com

→ *Guild Wars 2* remains my casual obsession. I'm glad I found an MMO that doesn't require me to play every day, or even every week or month. Instead, I return every now and then to investigate the latest story update, and leave when I've had my fill. Also, the expansion adds a raptor you can ride around on. Ace!

**GETTING OVER IT WITH BENNETT FODDY**www.foddy.net

→ If you've ever played *QWOP*, you'll be familiar with Bennett Foddy's brand of physics-based sadism. *Getting Over It*, a homage to 2002's *Sexy Hiking*, is a game about climbing a mountain. With a hammer. In a pot. It's also a game about what it means to make this type of game.

**WEST OF LOATHING**www.westofloathing.com

→ I nearly missed this in the seemingly endless deluge of brilliant indie games. I'm glad I didn't, as it's the funniest thing I've played this year. Part-RPG, part-comedy adventure, *West of Loathing* is a delightful parade of silly interactions, rewarding (and punishing) your curiosity with loot and jokes.

**DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II**www.divinity.game

→ I'm 11 hours in, and no, I still haven't left the first island. The sheer density of stuff in *Divinity: Original Sin II* is remarkable. A confession, though: I'm playing on the easiest mode. I'm more interested in the possibilities of combat – electrocuting blood or setting fire to things – than the challenge.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Phil Savage

**FORZA HORIZON 3**www.forzamotorsport.net

→ *Forza Motorsport 7* is out now, and supposedly it's very good. But I don't think it's aimed at me: someone who doesn't actually care about cars. *Forza Horizon 3* is more my speed. It, too, loves cars to an embarrassing degree. But it also loves me, and wants me to muck around with those cars in a lavish, entertaining world.

**WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER**wolfenstein.bethesda.net

→ This was meant to be a recommendation for *Wolfenstein II*, but I haven't had the time to play it yet because being the editor of a magazine means you're busy almost all of the time. Self-pity aside, *The New Order* was one of my favourite shooters of the last few years. If you haven't played it yet, do.

**DESTINY 2**www.destinythegame.com

→ What a big, dumb game *Destiny 2* is – and I say that with all the fondness in the world. It's a game about being invaded by fascist space turtles, about repeatedly shooting waves of enemies and scanning endless doors, and of getting together with friends to enjoy some of the finest gunplay around.

**REZ INFINITE**www.rezinfinite.com

→ I originally played *Rez* as a student, which is to say I was exactly the right age and in exactly the right environment to buy into it. Now that I'm older and have a job, I thought I'd be immune to its pretentious claims of transcendental synesthesia. But no: the PC version is great, and its VR level is beautiful and immersive.

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IT'S ALL OVER...

~~Destiny 2
exotic weapon
ideas~~

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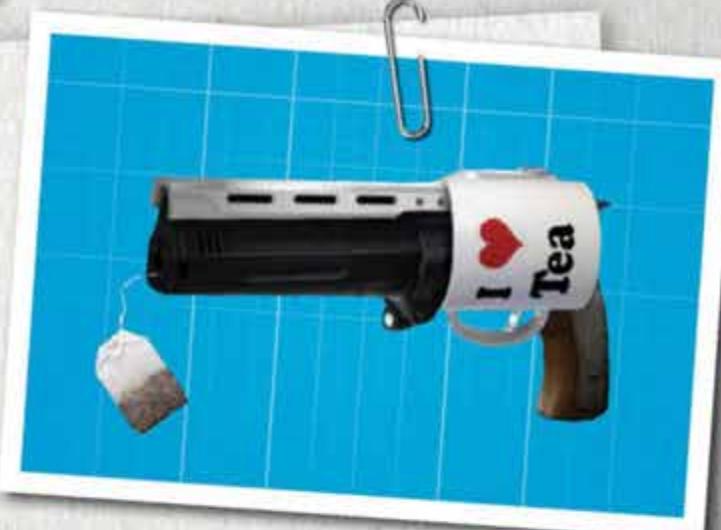
MORNINGBANE

This solar-type hand cannon has a chance to dispense a lovely cup of tea with every round fired. Excellent for Guardians who have trouble getting up in the morning.

"Just five more minutes,
oh god why is everything
so bright go away"
-Variks

LOVEBRINGER ZETA

A grenade launcher designed by the legendary romantic Lord Zorgog. Launches grenades filled with pheromones, charming enemies and making them want to kiss instead of kill you. Use with caution, especially around the Cabal.



VAINGLORIOUS DISCOTHEQUE

Vomits out pink and blue neon beams everywhere, drawing in the ire of every nearby enemy. Ideal for a blaze of glory, or for trolling your raid team during a jumping puzzle.

"Voluntary self-destruction is a mathematical certainty. Have a nice day" - Failsafe



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