

PC GAMER®

ANNUAL

2018

THE MAKING OF

*The best
levels
in PC
Gaming*

The
100
PC GAMES
★ 2017 ★



DISHONORED

MAKING LADY
BOYLE'S LAST PARTY



ARMA 3
PC GAMER GOES
HEAD TO HEAD



EXTRA LIFE

MEDAL OF HONOR:
ALLIED ASSAULT
NIER: AUTOMATA
WOLFENDOOM
& MORE!



ENDERAL

SKYRIM'S BIGGEST MOD
MAKES IT FEEL BRAND NEW



EVE ONLINE

STORIES FROM THE
SCI-FI SANDBOX

ISSUE 300
SPECIAL FEATURE

CELEBRATING
300 ISSUES OF
PC GAMER

Digital
Edition

PC GAMER®

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2018

Make or break

Welcome to the PC Gamer Annual. In your hands is a collection of the best features and stories from the magazine's recent history. Our approach to features this year was to focus on the specifics of great development through a series of articles about



our favourite things in PC gaming. We told the stories of how specific levels were made, in features such as my report on the making of Hitman's Sapienza. We showed how developers think about specific approaches, in features such as Rick Lane's exploration of gaming's greatest villains. And we celebrated the esoteric by getting Andy Kelly to ask developers about toilets.

PHIL SAVAGE
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The PC Gamer team



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
FPS, porcelain
Twitter
[@ultrabrilliant](https://twitter.com/ultrabrilliant)

This year
Found out how
everything was
made, from Fort
Frolic to toilets.



STEVEN
MESSNER
Specialist in
MMOs, jerks
Twitter
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This year
Was a biographer
of space jerks in
fetish wear.



FRASER
BROWN
Specialist in
RPGs, sidequests
Twitter
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This year
Left the critical
path. Found Chris
Avellone.



SAM GREER
Specialist in
Mods, masochism
Twitter
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This year
Advocated for a
mod that makes
Stalker even more
miserable.



SAMUEL
ROBERTS
Specialist in
Web, promotions
Twitter
[@SamuelWRoberts](https://twitter.com/SamuelWRoberts)

This year
Made a move from
mag deadlines to
PCGamer.com.

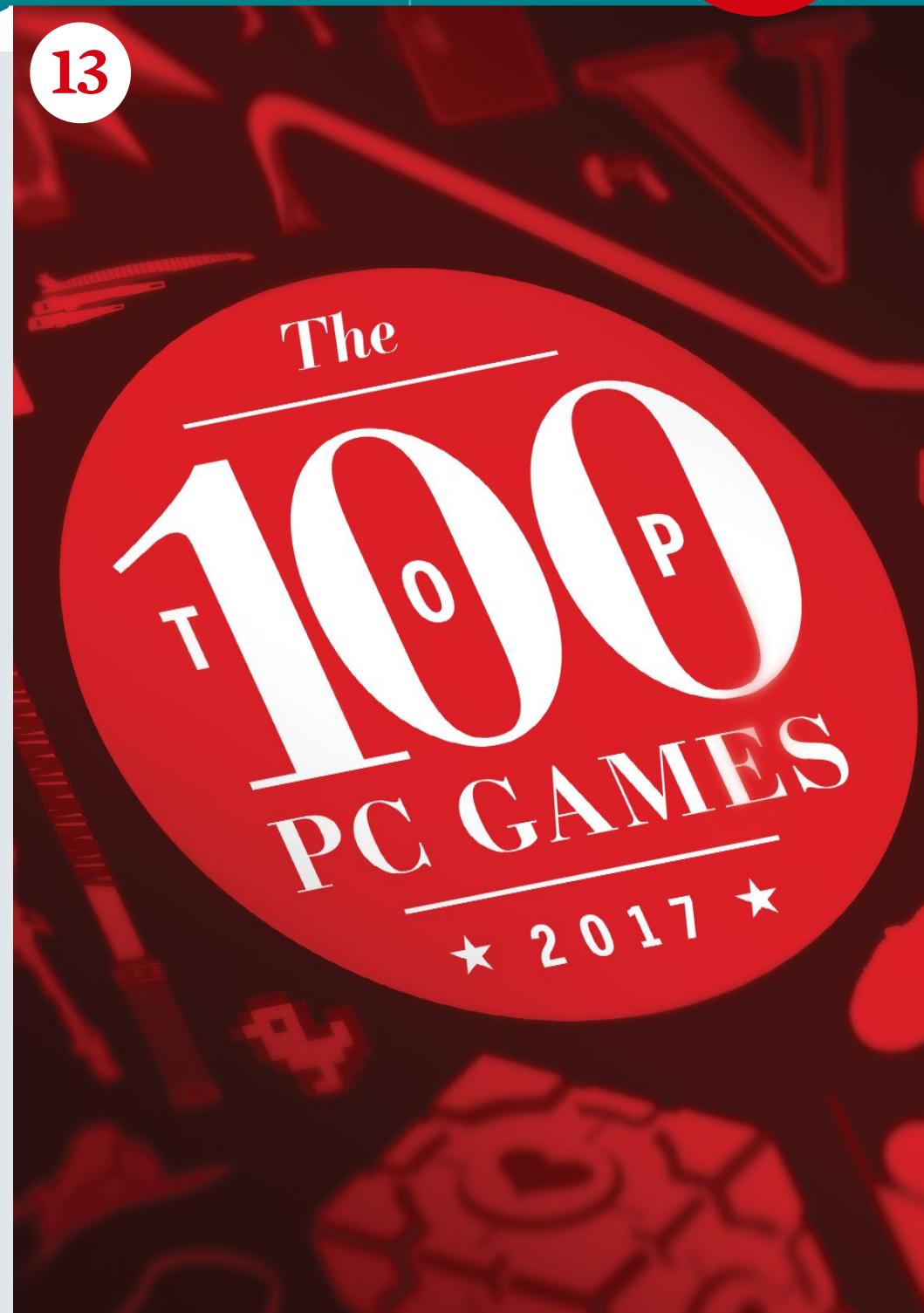
Contents

ANNUAL
2018

SUBSCRIBE TO
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SEE 160



13



Features

06 The history of PC Gamer

We celebrate 300 issues of PCG.

13 The Top 100

The annual list returns. Who's made it to number one?

40 The best free games

We highlight 50 great games you can download for nothing.

The making of

48 Bioshock's Fort Frolic

How Bioshock's best level was made.

54 Dishonored's Lady Boyle's Last Party

Inside Dishonored's iconic mission.

60 Hitman's Sapienza

IO Interactive talk us through the creation of Hitman's holiday hotspot.

66 Deus Ex: Mankind Divided's Palisades Bank

Crafting the perfect crime.

74 Villains

We talk to the creators of some of PC gaming's greatest baddies

80 Sidequests

RPG developers tell us how to make the perfect sidequest.

Stories

86 Toilets

We ask industry professionals about videogame bogs.

90 Eve Online: The great escape

The story of an unexpected rescue.

96 Eve Online: Snuffed out

Turning the tables on EVE's deadliest Titan hunter.

102 Arma 3: War games

The PC Gamer team has a sports day in the very serious war sim.

13 THE TOP 100

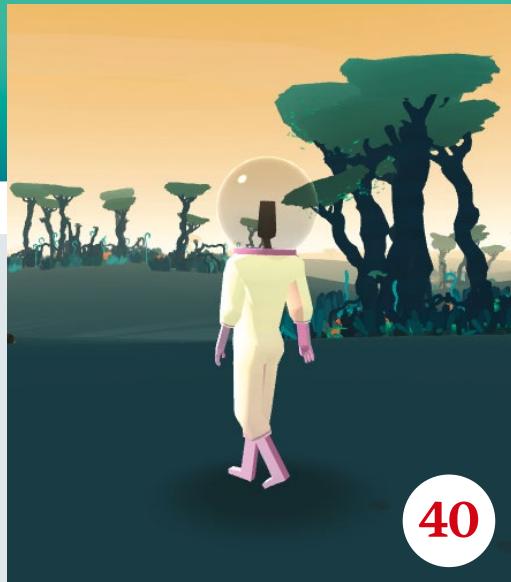
Here we go again: 27 pages of the best PC games you can play right now, as assembled by our global team. Do we have a new number one? Head here to find out.

40 FREE DOWNLOADS

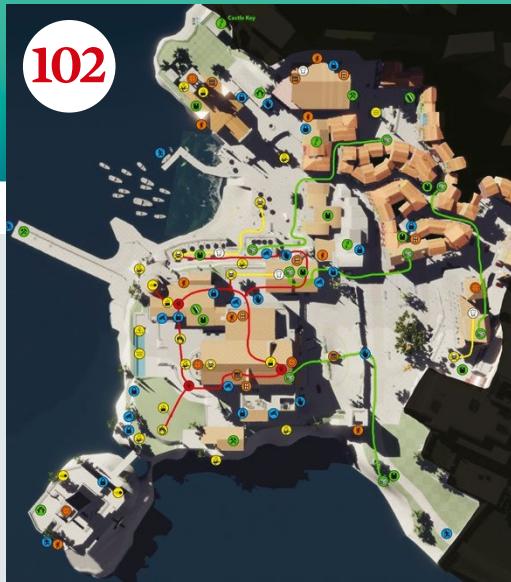
Our annual list of the 50 best free games around, including *Dwarf Fortress*, *Spelunky* and *Red Alert*.

60 MAKING SAPIENZA

We talk to IO Interactive to find out how Sapienza, Hitman's best episode, was made.



40



102



112

102 ARMA 3 WAR GAMES

We go head-to-head in a series of bizarre challenges devised by our games master, Andy Kelly.



128

112 GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

PC Gamer attempts to bring peace to Bolivia. Instead brings noise, explosions and failure.

128 MEDAL OF HONOR

Phil returns to *Allied Assault*. Is it really an FPS classic, or has the world of war moved on?



132

Extra Life

AFTERACTION REPORT

112 *Ghost Recon Wildlands*

116 *Dawn of War III*

MOD SPOTLIGHT

120 *Long War 2*

122 *Enderal*

124 *Stalker: Lost Alpha – Director's Cut*

126 *WolfenDoom: Blade of Agony*

REINSTALL

128 *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*

132 *Deus Ex*

136 *SWAT 4*

140 *Alpha Protocol*

144 *Pharaoh*

WHY I LOVE

148 *Age of Empires II*

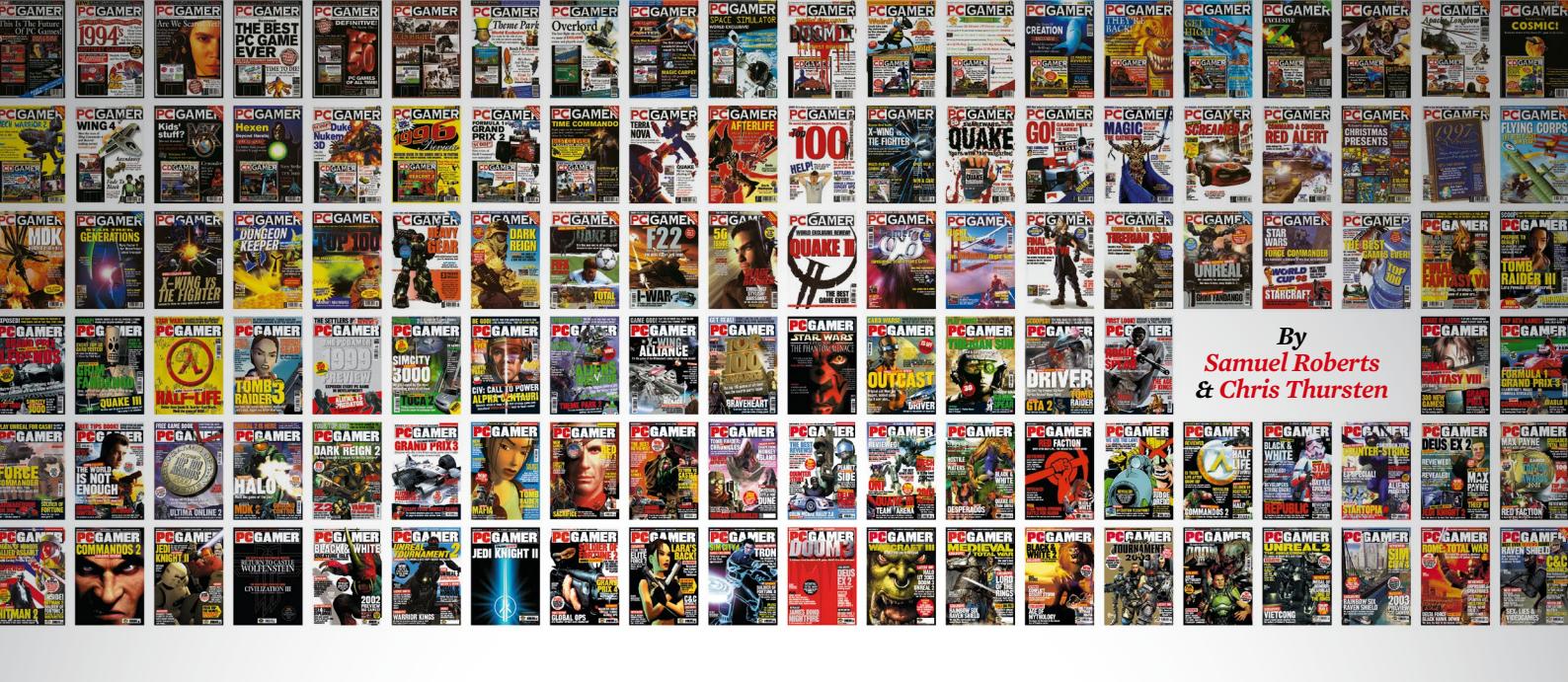
150 *Life Is Strange*

152 *Nier: Automata*

154 *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

156 *Team Fortress 2*

158 *Dragon Age: Inquisition*



By
*Samuel Roberts
& Chris Thursten*

a HISTORY of

PC GAMER®

in 20 ISSUES

We've been around
forever. Here are **20**
ISSUES of significance
in our illustrious
history.





Issue 1, December 1993

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
IndyCar Racing, **93%**

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Tesserae (Basically a shit-looking puzzle game – Ed), **21%**

WE SAID:

"The continued rise of PC for leisure purposes looks not just likely, but inevitable."

– Matt Bielby introduces PC Gamer

Our first issue features launch editor Matt Bielby balanced on a pile of CD-ROM boxes, hailing a future in which our platform will become dominant. On the cover, he promises to give you your money

back if you don't like the magazine, which you can probably still take him up on if you can track him down. On the demo disc: Graham Gooch World Class Cricket. Strap line: "You are Graham Gooch". **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Mr Blobby – Mr Blobby



Issue 11, October 1994

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Doom II, **95%**

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Jump Raven (worst name ever – Ed), **10%**

WE SAID:

"To watch Doom co-programmer John Romero play is a frightening experience... thousands of hours have given him reactions like a rattlesnake." – Gary Whitta at id Software

One of PC Gamer's first big exclusives: Gary Whitta reviews *Doom II*, and visits id's Mesquite, Texas office where the team is snapped in the most '90s photoshoot possible – Gary notes the sports cars in

the car park outside. id's Jay Wilbur states with some certainty that *Doom III* will never happen, and trumpets the upcoming *Doom* movie produced by Ivan Reitman. Also of note this issue: *System Shock* gets 90%. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Love Is All Around – Wet Wet Wet



Let's be honest, it would be a better world if Westwood were still around making C&C.

Issue 37, December 1996

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Red Alert, **95%**

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Microsoft Soccer, **16%**

WE SAID:

"What if the demo really is destroying sales of PC games? The enemy has now been identified by some, whether it truly is a problem or not." – James Flynn on PCG's demo discs

There's a feature in this issue about PCG's demo discs, and whether they were killing the industry at the time – some publishers really believed they were. Meanwhile, *Red Alert*'s super daft CG

cutscenes were described as "[telling] a compelling story of Einstein, Hitler and time travel." Einstein killed Hitler, remember? Compelling! Tony Ellis contributed to this issue – 20 years later, he's still with us. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS I Feel You – Peter Andre



Looking back through our covers, this one is outstanding. It's bold, brassy and instantly catches your eye.

Issue 51, Christmas 1997

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Quake II, **95%**

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Daytona USA Deluxe/Overboard, **41%**

WE SAID:

"We used our imagination and tried to guess what Baby Jesus would get from his colleagues were he born in Jerusalem in 1997." – Steve Owen, from the feature 'Christ, they're good games'

After years of average or bad covers, finally you get this striking image. This was a landmark issue for big reviews: *Quake II* (95%), the first *GTA* (92%), *Tomb Raider II* (94%) and *The Curse of Monkey Island*

(94%) – what a month! There's an admirably blasphemous feature on what the Wise Men would buy Jesus for Christmas. *Blade Runner*, among others, because Joseph was a carpenter and so was Harrison Ford (?). **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Too Much – Spice Girls

FEATURE



ISSUE 300
SPECIAL EDITION
PC GAMER

Cover and packaging deadlines can be very early. Going big on a rendered logo like this might mean key art arrived too late.

Issue 63, December 1998

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Half-Life, 96%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Bass Masters Classic, 38%

WE SAID:

"In years to come, Half-Life will remain a benchmark for aspiring developers to match. Believe us, and play it."

– Mark Donald

This issue feels enormously significant, due to that garish but iconic *Half-Life* logo cover, and PCG's 96% score (the third, after *Civ II* and *Quake II*) for Valve's masterpiece. Anything above

90% is still a big deal for us. *Baldur's Gate* gets just a one-page preview (the ultimately guff *Shadowman* got two pages. Blunder), where writer Mark Donald says "this will keep you quiet for a bit". Too right. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Believe – Cher



Issue 87, October 2000

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Deus Ex, 95%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Deer Avenger 1 and 2, 5%

WE SAID:

"It's a slap in the face, it reminds us of how good videoart can be. And this is art. It's beautiful. And I'm going to stop now before I cry." – Kieron Gillen, from his Deus Ex review

The arrival of *Deus Ex* was another PC Gamer milestone, although for the cover we went with one of the 5,000 *Tomb Raider* games released around then. The lead news story is a decent bit of

journalism: we asked whether contentious gory FPS *Soldier of Fortune* was racist or not, and grilled the developer about it. There's also a big reveal of *Mafia*, which was the king daddy of open-world games at the time. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Black Coffee – All Saints



This artwork of Gordon and Alex has become one of our most-used over the years, in celebrations of *Half-Life 2* and PC gaming in general.

Issue 123, June 2003

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Medieval: Total War – Viking Invasion, 86%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
The Watchmaker, 16%

WE SAID:

"Gabe also told us that after September 2002 Valve 'cut anything that wasn't ready ... to be used in Half-Life 3.'"

– Steve Brown's cover feature

Did Valve once make games? This lovely 16-page exclusive reveal feature on *Half-Life 2* suggests so. Inside, writer Steve Brown discusses the five-year wait between games and how it was

worth it. Nine years after *Episode Two*'s release, it doesn't seem all that long. It was due out in September – then Valve was hacked and what would be the defining PC game of that era was pushed back to late 2004. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Bring Me To Life – Evanescence



Issue 146, March 2005

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
GTR, 92%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Seal of Evil, 37%

WE SAID:

"The little guy can afford to experiment, to treat us to new ideas ... in an industry like ours, that's the only way to live."

– Mark Donald's intro

One reason I chose this issue is because Mark Donald's editor's intro picked up on a steadily emerging trend in PC gaming: he singles out *Darwinia* and *GTR* as indie games that don't owe a thing to

big publishers. Elsewhere, in Ross Atherton's *KotOR II* review, he pretty much nails that game's brave exploration of the Force: "It's a better roleplaying game than the original (just), but it's not a better game." **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Dakota – Stereophonics



ISSUE 300
SPECIAL EDITION
PC GAMER



FEATURE

Issue 100, September 2001

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Max Payne, 95%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Technomage: Return To Eternity, 30%

WE SAID:

"It's hardcore without wearing a Half-Life anorak ... the DVD is full of crap you'll never run. It's PC Gamer. And like Frinton-on-Sea, it's here to stay." – Jim Flynn

Both the Top 100 issue (Half-Life was number one, Deus Ex number two) and the 100th issue, this features at least two topless pictures of former PCG staffer Ian Roxburgh, which wouldn't happen in my era

since our new cafeteria opened. There was also a competition to win the PCG office, which was essentially the crap on everyone's desks, including an Action Man figure and one of the endless EverQuest expansions. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS Can't Get You Out Of My Head – Kylie Minogue

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Grand Prix 4, 92%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Monsterville, 17%

WE SAID:

"Deus Ex 2 provides an environment so rich with detail, you could almost move in."

– Keith Stuart, from his preview. Little did we know that Cairo would basically turn out to be a corridor in *Deus Ex: Invisible War*.

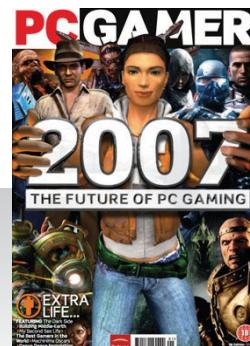
There are months in this business where you just don't get the cover art you want. This faux *Doom 3* logo is one example. The game is "the undisputed hit of E3 [2002]" according to editor Matt Pierce.

Deus Ex 2 looks better here than the final game did and, bafflingly, there's an interview with former England manager Sven Goran-Eriksson. I'm just livid they didn't ask him what he thought about *Daikatana*. **SR**

IN THE UK CHARTS A Little Less Conversation – Elvis vs Junkie XL



One of our weaker covers: there's no central character, and the artwork looks to be mostly molten tarmac.



Issue 165, September 2006

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Armadillo Run, 88%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Moto Racer 3 Gold, 24%

WE SAID:

"It's game design suicide, without an ounce of commercial sensibility"

– Oblivion impresses in the Top 100

Tim Edwards' eight-page reveal of Will Wright's *Spore* demonstrates the appeal of that game at its most intoxicating: a life sim where you can make anything and do everything. The game would

never live up to that potential, elegantly mirroring the promise and disappointment that *No Man's Sky* would deliver ten years later. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, released that year, triumphs in our Top 100. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Sexy Back – Justin Timberlake

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946, 91%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Earache Extreme Metal Racing, 13%

WE SAID:

"The popularity of e-sports has been growing for nearly ten years now ... but we suspect they won't grow much further."

– Tom Francis on the E-Sports World Cup

PC Gamer looks to the future, with features on the imminent Windows Vista and something called 'e-sports'. A preview of 2007's forthcoming RPGs offers a glimpse at *Mass Effect*, *The*

Witcher and *Fallout 3*, while *Stalker*, *Crysis* and *BioShock* lead the charge for shooters. We also looked forward to Valve's multi-pronged release schedule. What a year this was shaping up to be, eh? **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS A Moment Like This – Leona Lewis

FEATURE



ISSUE 300
SPECIAL EDITION
PC GAMER



Issue 180, November 2007

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Team Fortress 2, 94%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
You Are Empty, 36%

WE SAID:

"That Pixar comparison isn't fair. TF2's gurning murderers look better." – Tom Francis reviews Team Fortress 2

We celebrate the release of Valve's Orange Box by shipping the magazine in... an orange box (not pictured). The triumvirate of *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*, *Portal* and *Team Fortress 2* dominate the

issue (and rightly so) but there's also an early glimpse of *Borderlands* – before the switch to the cel-shaded art style the series is now known for. Judging by what we show, it was a smart decision to change. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS About You Now – Sugababes

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Braid, 92%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Leisure Suit Larry, 19%

WE SAID:

"You don't mess with rats. Those bastards will chew the veins from your legs" – Quintin Smith's feature on Wurm Online

The dawn of our second century heralds a substantial redesign under the watchful eye of editor Ross Atherton. The features section expands, as does Extra Life, and the mag sees the first

use of the phrases "winzorz" and "faidogs", confirming that it's 2009. *"StarCraft II* is nearly finished," Tim E proclaims in the cover feature, a full year before *StarCraft II*'s release. Ah, Blizzard. Blizzard never changes. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Bulletproof – La Roux



Splashed in a bold fluorescent orange Pantone ink, this mischievous cover is one of our favourites.

Issue 256, September 2013

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
The Swapper, 88%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Marvel Heroes, 42%

WE SAID:

"Fuck GTA. Fuck Battlefield. Fuck Skyrim and FIFA, The Sims and StarCraft. And fuck Call of fucking Duty. What have they discovered lately?" – Alex Wiltshire launches an indie manifesto

Editor Graham Smith realises a career-spanning dream and puts an Introversion game – *Prison Architect* – on the cover, while longstanding deputy editor Rich McCormick leaves for Japan. Alex

Wiltshire's searing celebration of indie games makes the case that the PC is the home of homebrew, and we look forward to another PCG alumnus's development debut: Jim Rossignol's *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Roar – Katy Perry

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
FIFA 14, 89%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Takedown: Red Sabre, 49%

WE SAID:

"If you're like me, the Rift will blow all that dust off and make your brain flip all over again." – Graham Smith on VR

Graham Smith's final issue doubles as PCG's 20th birthday. We stuck art ed John Strike on the cover wearing an Oculus Rift, with a tagline – "this is the future of PC games" – deliberately borrowed from

issue 1. A cadre of legendary developers share their predictions for the next 20 years of gaming, while Graham sticks his head into the Rift and gives virtual reality a queasy but enthusiastic thumbs up. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Happy – Pharrell Williams



Issue 218, October 2010

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Civilization V and StarCraft II, 93%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Commander: Quest of the Americas, 67%

WE SAID:

"The randomly generated, infinite landscape looks like Lego Just Cause fan art" – Craig Pearson discovers Minecraft

Tom Francis visits Valve to see *Portal 2* and Gabe Newell lays out the company's avant-garde philosophy in a candid interview (but he won't talk about *Half-Life Episode 3*). *Civilization V* and

StarCraft II both score 93% reviews while quietly, in a dusty corner at the back of the magazine, we share your feedback on something called "pcgamer dot com", which we've just launched on "an internet". **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Love The Way You Lie – Eminem ft. Rihanna



Issue 263, March 2014

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Nidhogg, 93%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Assassin's Creed: Liberation HD, 61%

WE SAID:

"I'm all for team unity, but Ben is currently trying to axe-murder me. Even so, I feel a little bit bad as I shoot him in the chest." – Phil in our DayZ diary

The brief reign of acting editor Chris Thursten (me!) ends with the triumphant accession of Samuel Roberts. This issue stars *DayZ* and includes one of our best team diary features ever, an epic

zombie apocalypse escape with a horde of bloodthirsty internet strangers on our tail. Elsewhere, Rick Lane takes a critical look at the new trend of early access games, and Valve's Steam Machines were still a thing. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Rather Be – Clean Bandit ft. Jess Glynne



Issue 246, December 2012

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Dishonored, 92%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
Damage Inc., 40%

WE SAID:

"Everything that was important in my life at that point was arbitrated by in-jokes and DotA" – Cara Ellison on Defence of the Ancients

A cover dedicated to *Minecraft* – including a spectacular subscriber variant featuring a render of our own community server – celebrates the defining PC game of the decade. In features, Cara

Ellison remembers the original *Defence of the Ancients* and Tom Francis – by this time a successful developer himself – interviews other developers about the best tools newcomers can use to get started. **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Psy – Gangnam Style



(Above) For our redesign issue, we brought long-time PCG illustrator David Lyttleton back for one last job.

Issue 282, September 2015

HIGHEST SCORING GAME
Infinifactory, 93%

LOWEST SCORING GAME
LEGO Minifigures Online, 73%

WE SAID:

"If videogames are ever going to grow, we need to stop bluntly categorising and dismissing them." – Andy Kelly's editorial on gaming diversity

Samuel oversees PCG's regeneration into its crisply modern current form, a full redesign that includes new fonts, layouts, a new Spy, and more. *XCOM 2*, one of this year's best games, graces the

cover. A review section shadowed by the sudden withdrawal of *Batman: Arkham Knight* instead celebrates worthy newcomer *Rocket League*, a defining game of Samuel's editorship (in that it has ruined his life). **CT**

IN THE UK CHARTS Can't Feel My Face – The Weeknd



The subs cover of our *Minecraft* issue had a specially bevelled PCG logo.



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The 100 PC GAMES

★ 2017 ★

Every year, the team compiles a list of the 100 best games you can play today. Our process is deliberately subjective: each participant picks their personal top 15 games, and then the team gathers to narrow that list. We only allow one entry per series, with a couple of notable exceptions. You'll also find some of our personal picks thrown in. Enjoy.

100



100 DWARF FORTRESS

RELEASED 2006 | LAST POSITION • New

Wes: In *Dwarf Fortress* I've seen the circle of death and rebirth. It's less of a game, more of an ambitious simulation, representing the complexities of existence in ASCII. Eventually you'll feel like Neo, seeing the truth behind the symbols. Just remember: losing is fun.

Shaun: You don't even need to play *Dwarf Fortress* to marvel at its achievement. Hell, the patch notes are a marvel of their own.



99 SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Fraser: In *Shadow Tactics*, every infiltration of an enemy palace or compound is a puzzle overflowing with obstacles. Being sneaky is fun. Being murderous is better. Planning the demise of the game's guards is a singular delight. I'm a fan of the ol' tanuki distraction method – the little critter distracts a guard by being adorable while one of my ninjas pounces on him from a roof.



98 SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION • New

Jody: It's funny that one of the few games to get cyberpunk right is also one with elves in it, but *Shadowrun* reduces fantasy and cyberpunk to their essentials while emphasising what's best about both. *Dragonfall* is basically *Baldur's Gate 2* with turn-based combat set in near-future Berlin, where hackers and samurai raid corporations and watch a talk show hosted by a dragon. It's as great as it sounds.

97

FEAR

RELEASED 2005 | LAST POSITION • New

Andy C: Combat in *FEAR* is magnificent chaos. Glass shatters, dust billows, and sparks, paper, and body parts fly in loud, explosive gunfights against some of the finest, most believably 'real' AI ever created for an FPS. Enemies flank, they take cover, they chatter and they toss grenades with infuriatingly good timing and accuracy. But what I love most about it is the way it weaves a genuinely horrific tale through all that action, breaking up the manic combat with intensely disturbing stretches of creepiness and a few moments worthy of any pure horror game.

Andy K: I reinstall *FEAR* at least once a year just to experience that amazing shotgun again. Every shooter has its own unique shotgun, but there's something immensely satisfying about the one in

FEAR. How it violently kicks back when you fire it, and the exaggerated way enemies tumble when you shoot them in slow motion. I'm not usually one for fetishising weapons, but I'll make an exception here.

Steven: Speaking of fetishising guns, how can we not talk about the 10mm HV Penetrator, the gun that fires giant steel stakes and crucifies enemies against walls? I get that *FEAR*'s shotgun deserves a lot of praise, but to me the Penetrator is one of the greatest guns of all time. It's the perfect weapon to use against *FEAR*'s ragdoll enemies. I used the gun so damn much that I feel like whoever had to go through after me and clean up all the dead bodies probably suffered some pretty severe trauma from seeing hundreds of people nailed to cubicle walls.



96

GRIM FANDANGO REMASTERED

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION • New

Tom S: Manny Calavera is one of the coolest heroes in PC gaming, and he happens to live in one of the coolest worlds in PC gaming. It's a vibrant take on the afterlife, and a great place to set an epic noir love story. Even after all these years *Grim Fandango* is funny and is still worth everyone's time. Play it and enjoy the jokes.

Andy K: I love it when you explore Rubacava in year two. Reading beat poetry at the Blue Casket, listening to Glottis play the piano in Manny's casino. It's like stepping into a classic film noir, albeit one populated by skeletons and giant bees.



95 METRO LAST LIGHT

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION • New

Shaun: It seems wrong to describe a FPS set in a decrepit metro network as 'beautiful', but *Last Light* manages it. Between the often-unforgiving combat and the light-but-rewarding survival elements, this sequel manages to tell an engrossing tale which isn't at odds with the relentless violence involved.

Samuel: Probably my favourite apocalypse in games – it's realistically dour, yet still gorgeous and unsettling.



94 SPIDER & WEB

RELEASED 1998 | LAST POSITION • New

Jody: This is a free text adventure that begins as a story about a guileless tourist, then frames that as a cover invented by a spy under interrogation, then continues switching between the game you play and the interrogator interrupting to say, "That's not what happened!" Each flashback gets closer to a truth you the player wants to learn, but you the protagonist want to hide. It's clever, twisty, and explosive.

93

NUCLEAR THRONE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 74

Wes: Perhaps the greatest use of Early Access as a model for development, *Nuclear Throne* is a punchy top-down roguelike shooter honed over nearly 100 weekly updates. Like the best games of its type, what seems like a simple setup – collect powerful guns, survive randomly generated levels as you progress to a final boss fight – belies hidden stages and characters and secrets to give you the upper hand. The roster of heroes gives



you so many different ways to play. I'm partial to the samurai Chicken, who can briefly survive without his head, and the noob-friendly Crystal, who can reflect bullets. But the real reason to play this over other roguelikes is how great the action feels. It nails that rhythm of explosive action, bullets and enemies flying towards you, with brief moments of respite as you inch towards whatever's around the corner. Action anxiety perfected.

92

NIDHOGG

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION • New

Tyler: The best sickly-looking fencing game there is, *Nidhogg* speeds up the mind games and finesse of *Street Fighter*, chaining tiny, rapid duels between stabby pixel people into hilarious, constantly tense tug-of-war sessions.

Joe: Don't let appearances fool you: beneath the modest veneer lies a deep and engaging versus mode masterpiece. Be it tactful fencing, aerial karate kicking, sword javelin tossing, or turning tail and

running – there's a strategy for everyone as you push your stick-figured foe back one screen at a time, spawning at either side as you die and regenerate, regenerate and die. *Nidhogg* also comes with a less enjoyable singleplayer mode that can be wrapped up inside half an hour. Often hilarious, but equally known to bring out the competitive streak in any player who enters the fray. Be prepared to lose friends over this one.

PERSONAL PICK

Samuel Roberts



JAZZPUNK

A funny and weird first-person game that I've recommended to people a lot over the years. It's got loads in common with Naked Gun and Airplane, in replicating that rapid-fire, sketch-style humour, which is a hard thing to do successfully in a game. It's a true original. I love it.

PERSONAL PICK

Evan Lahti



PAPERS, PLEASE

Wielding a rubber stamp, the lowly government drone is cruel or martyrish. Taking bureaucratic paperwork and making it tough, fun, and intensely meaningful is a big achievement. It's as relevant and valuable as ever, in this time of border walls, visa restrictions, and immigration bans.

PERSONAL PICK**Tom Senior****EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR**

It has its issues, but of all the historical *Total War* games this is the one that captures the series' aim: to deliver the ultimate grand strategy game. Whether you're protecting trade routes or rushing cannons to your frontlines, the campaign has an unmatched sense of scale.

PERSONAL PICK**Chris Livingston****GARRY'S MOD**

Part-sandbox and part-toybox, this is a goofy physics playground for building, destroying, inventing, and collaborating. There are a million things to do and, thanks to hundreds of thousands of custom creations from the community, you'll never run out of entertainment.

**90 TEAM FORTRESS 2**

RELEASED 2007 | LAST POSITION 20

Evan: What began as a class-based FPS was transformed into a free-to-play platform for mapmaking, hats, and machinima with a horde mode, events, and a number of bird heads that you can unlock. Valve's learnings from *TF2* helped transform PC gaming at large. **Phil:** This is the lowest *TF2* has placed on our list by some margin, but that a decade-old multiplayer FPS appears at all is downright heroic. *TF2* is eternal.

**89 EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2**

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 82

Andy K: This makes it into our top 100 every year, with good reason. On paper it sounds boring, but there's something hypnotic about hauling goods across its beautiful recreation of Europe. **Phil:** I slightly prefer *American Truck Simulator*'s vast, desolate atmosphere, but *ETS2* remains the brighter star, thanks mostly to the size and variety of its continental recreation. This is a huge, relaxing world to travel through.

91**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II**

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION • New

Fraser: Everything 'Star Wars' about it is subverted. The result is one of the most interesting yarns in the franchise, peeling back a lot of the fantastical elements of Star Wars and exploring them.

Samuel: As I watch the new films I feel like they're not showing us anything we haven't seen before. Perhaps that's because I've been spoiled by *KOTOR II*, where there's more nuance in the portrayal of the force and memorable characters.

Wes: The biggest game I've ever completed, even with the essential fan patches. Still worth it for Kreia.

88**RESIDENT EVIL 7**

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION • New

Tim: Few series live long enough to reinvent themselves successfully once, let alone a second time. But that's exactly the dark miracle *Resi* has pulled off – first with *Resi 4*, which redefined its predecessors' clunky third-person exploration into frantic crowd control, and now with this, which has breathed terrifying new life into the haunted house schtick. The switch to first-person, though obvious given the success

of indie shockers like *Outlast* and *Amnesia*, still feels bold and thrilling. Much of that is down to the unhinged Baker family, each of whom must be faced in their own grand encounter, the best of which are frontloaded towards the start of the game. The generic baddies and a undercooked final act let things down, but the sense is still of a series which has, again, found its feet, even if it's still waist deep in oily viscera.

87**KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO**

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION ▲ 100

Joe: The fact that *Kentucky Route Zero* has only launched four of its five chapters speaks volumes for its placing on this list. Here's a game that's yet to be finished, but rubs shoulders with the best PC gaming has to offer. Alongside its cast of idiosyncratic characters, it weaves themes of self-reflection, discovery and the supernatural into its world. Relatable vignettes and playful metaphors stand before a

stylish art style. Whereas a sense of dread underpins *Acts 1* through *3*, *KRZ*'s penultimate entry eschews its wider picture to focus on the minutiae of each scenario – and its Twain-esque jaunt down the river hones in on the imperfections of your dysfunctional crew. The as-yet unannounced *Act 5* will mark the end of the road for *Kentucky Route Zero*, yet what's come before it is nothing short of wonderful.

86

GUILD WARS 2

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION 45

Phil: *Guild Wars 2* is what happens when you take over a decade's worth of MMO wisdom and decide to do something better. What if instead of looking for quest givers who ask you to kill ten boars, you collaborated with an entire map to complete objectives that build towards a big boss monster and a chest full of loot? What if instead of being inconvenienced by low-level friends, you were rewarded for partnering up and having a good time? What if instead of paying a subscription, the base game was free? This is one of the most

generous MMOs around, and ArenaNet's experimentation continues, even now. From rebuilding its central city from scratch, to releasing new story chapters, *Guild Wars 2* is always building towards something new and exciting.

Tom S: Its dazzling world hosts some of the best combat in the genre. Attacks are template-based and dodging matters. I've had a blast taking on enormous bosses with my necromancer and dozens of other warriors. Its events are huge pile-ons that create amazing spectacles and a sense of community.


85 RISING STORM

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 79

Evan: It blends fragility and power better than any FPS of its kind. As a Japanese soldier on Iwo Jima, I like to smuggle a MG behind my opponents, get prone and drop as many unaware attackers as I can. Real war is unfair, and *Rising Storm* manages to make a fun game out of its asymmetries.

Tyler: Life in *Rising Storm* is 90% war movie extra and 10% leading role.


84 TERRARIA

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION 42

Tom M: Like the finest wine or the smelliest cheese, *Terraria* keeps on getting better with age. It's staggering to look back at everything that's been added since it launched – a stream of updates has introduced over 3,000 items, new biomes, bosses and countless other improvements. It's dense with exciting things to do and discover, and there's sure to be even more by this time next year.

83

DARKEST DUNGEON

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION 53

Evan: As you lose men to madness, syphilis, heart attacks, vampiric blood thirst or other maladies, you'll come to the realisation that you shouldn't treat your adventurers as precious assets to be cared for, but as batteries in the shape of men. That gives the game a different emotional texture: you're not a faithful commander, you're a brutal middle-manager. I love its artistic cohesion and the genius use of a single, ominous narrator (Wayne June) throughout the game to set the mood and speak for the characters, enemies, and the dungeon-as-character.

82

CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 89

Fraser: Why is building roads so compelling? There's a lot going on in *Cities: Skylines*, Colossal Order's city builder, but getting the teeming masses to their destinations scratches an itch like nothing else. I'm diversifying into blimps now. Seeing my citizens politely queueing up in their thousands to take to the skies makes me a happy mayor. Sure, I had to bulldoze a school to make room for one of the stations, but now all the children are being educated by floating billboards.

Phil: Fraser's populace is doing a lot better than the occupants of my last town, many of whom died after a sewage disaster. But when I'm not battling a tide of brown water, I love the degree of fine-tuning that *Cities: Skylines* supports. The zoning system is inspired – enabling experimentation by letting you earmark a part of your town for farming, nightlife or legal pot use.



81 KILLING FLOOR 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ● New

Evan: Flick an RPG into a crowd of zeds and watch intestines, bile, and whole torsos vomit out the blast radius. It's zombie bowling made by gun nerds, with gaming's best slow-motion inviting you to savour every frame.

Hannah: Is there a game that makes tearing apart monstrosities as fun as *Killing Floor 2*? It's the best and most surprisingly diverse horde mode anyone's ever made.



80 MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION ▼ 22

Chris L: The ultimate game for popping in for a few minutes and then looking around blearily when you realise a dozen hours have passed. Its world can be whatever you want it to be: a singleplayer crafting and exploration game, or a multiplayer sandbox experience. Throw in thousands of mods, custom games and speciality servers, and the near-infinite world of *Minecraft* gets even bigger.

79

WARHAMMER: END TIMES – VERMINTIDE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ● New

Matthew: This is more than *Left 4 Dead* with ratmen – a characterful recreation of The Old World you'll want to stop and explore (though the rats will devour you). Each character is a distillation of a Warhammer race, and watching them interact is a treat. The humour contrasts nicely with the hopelessness of it all.

Evan: It's a Warhammer B-movie in the best way possible.



78

NETHACK

RELEASED 1987 | LAST POSITION • New

Wes: Roguelike once literally meant 'like the game *Rogue*', the ASCII dungeon crawler made for '80s mainframes. But most modern roguelikes owe more to its descendant *NetHack*, first released in 1987 (and still updated and actively played to this day). The simple graphics allow for a deep dungeon crawler compared to any other I've played. Why pick a lock when you can kick down a door? Why eat a pie when you can use it to blind an enemy? If you value mystery and discovery in games, nothing does them better than *NetHack*. Play online on nethack.alt.org to encounter the remains of other players who never made it out of the dungeon's depths.

77 **OVERCOOKED**

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Evan: The best same-screen co-op game on PC. This would be higher if it worked well as a singleplayer game.
Phil: Shamefully, I have watched a lot of Hell's Kitchen USA. *Overcooked* is like if Ramsey's competition was more cartoony and collaborative, with less swearing – most of the time. Success requires coordination of resources and time – which almost always results in glorious culinary chaos.

76 **DOOM II**

RELEASED 1994 | LAST POSITION 69

Chris L: Rather than trying to reinvent the original, *Doom II* just gave us a heavier dose of everything we wanted: more monsters and bigger levels. It's still an utter blast to play.
Phil: *Doom II* boasts incredible mod support. You can warp the campaign with over-the-top effects, or you can enjoy the many total conversions, from the *The Adventures of Square*, to the incredible *WolfenDoom*.

75

SUNLESS SEA

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION • New

Fraser: In *Sunless Sea*, you get a vulnerable ship and a sinister ocean to explore. There's action, trading and permadeath, but what really defines Failbetter's nautical romp is the exceptional writing. It jumps between whimsy and menace. One moment you're solving a dispute between rats and guinea pigs, the next your crew are eating each other. It's a game about crafting weird, tragic stories. The captain-turned-spy who

made one too many enemies in the east. The explorer who risked everything to climb out of the Unterzee and back to the surface. There are countless paths, all leading to strange places.

Andy K: The mystery of what lies on each island is what keeps me pushing through the many hardships. A gruelling game, but worth enduring for the wonderful stories you're told whenever you dock somewhere.

74

VVVVVV

RELEASED 2010 | LAST POSITION • New

James: You flip gravity (by pressing the V key) to bounce up and down between the floor and ceiling avoiding spikes (they look like this: VVVVVV) while exploring a psychedelic 8-bit open world in pursuit of your friends, Violent, Vermillion, Victoria, Verdigris, and Vitellary. Developer Terry Cavanagh created VVVVVV as an experiment in level design – abilities never change, but how surfaces behave and the

conditions of the world change constantly. In one stretch, thin lines throw you about like gravity-defying trampolines, and in another the level scrolls on its own, forcing you to think quickly. In one lonely corner of the map, a massive elephant cries. All you can do there is frown. But it's hard to stay down with such a buoyant soundtrack. It's one earworm after another, an assembly of upbeat, catchy chiptunes that still haunt me today.

PERSONAL PICK**Tim Clark****DON'T STARVE**

I don't play Klei's Goth whimsy survive-em-up nearly as much as I used to, but I'm not sure I'll ever feel as attached to anything as I did to my 300-day-old dream camp. Before the Meat Effigy catastrophe ended it all. The expansions add plenty of value, too.

PERSONAL PICK**Jody Macgregor****THE WALKING DEAD**

I gave up on the comic, don't watch the show, and I'm fussy about adventure games. But I love *The Walking Dead* because it replaces puzzles with choices and lets me make altruistic, hopeful ones in contrast to most zombie fiction's cynicism. Also, I cried at the end.

PERSONAL PICK**Fraser Brown****BLACK DESERT ONLINE**

This is an MMO, so I should be in a cave murdering things, but instead I'm spending my days bossing my workers about, taking jaunts across the world with my loaded cart and selling booze. Murdering monsters and helping NPCs are only side jobs. It's wonderful.

PERSONAL PICK**Katharine Byrne****STEAMWORLD HEIST**

SteamWorld Heist is a true masterstroke. While its wily cast of robotic space pirates do much of the heavy lifting, the ability to aim and fire in real-time, pulling off trickshots, elevates this above the competition. Did we mention there were also collectible hats?

**73****LADYKILLER IN A BIND**

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Hannah: When I say *Ladykiller in a Bind* is a NSFW visual novel about horny teenagers, there's probably a certain image people generally imagine – crude, poorly written, and often embarrassing, the gaming equivalent of that time you found an adult magazine in the local park. *Ladykiller In A Bind* goes against that with smart writing, enjoyable characters, and lifelike depictions of intimacy (or, the chaos of it). It's aware of the stereotype, and so does its best to dismantle it by portraying those teenage years with the maturity of a game designed for those a little older.

**72 FALLOUT**

RELEASED 1997 | LAST POSITION • New

Jody: The original *Fallout* nailed an atmosphere of black comedy, combining post-apocalyptic grit with goofy retrofuturism. It also nailed the RPG standard of having three solutions to a problem, but where other games went with 'violent', 'sneaky', and 'magical' solutions, *Fallout* replaced the third option with 'diplomatic'. It's as good a game about talking your way out of trouble as has ever been made.

**71 VALKYRIA CHRONICLES**

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION 49

Tom M: Even though it arrived on PC late, *Valkyria Chronicles* is still one of the freshest takes on a strategy game I've seen. It's a mix of turn-based strategy, third-person shooter and JRPG that, against all odds, comes together to form an cohesive whole. The art style and melodramatic story don't scream 'hardcore strategy', but underneath all that is a one-of-a-kind tactics game that shouldn't be overlooked.

70**BASTION**

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION • New



Jody: *Bastion* is an action RPG with trimmings so wonderful we sometimes overlook the strong combat at its centre. You carry two weapons, and each is balanced for multiple situations. Control schemes can be tweaked, and the challenge shrines are a neat way of tweaking difficulty. Those trimmings are wonderful, though: the city that rebuilds itself, the narrator who responds to your actions, the perfect soundtrack and the story

that reaches a genuinely affecting conclusion.

Phil: The worldbuilding is exceptional – and not just in the immediate sense, as levels tend to literally build themselves around you. The songs the characters sing are pulled from the history of the world Supergiant has created, and imbued with a deeper meaning that feeds back into the more immediate story. It really helps sell the emotions behind the drama that unfolds.

69**N++**

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Shaun: Ah, the primal gaming pleasure of running and jumping one's way to the end of a level. That's essentially all you do in *N++*, but it's incredible just how varied this platformer feels despite having over 1,500 levels and an artstyle as barebones as they come. The star attraction of the *N* series – which started off as a Flash game – has always been the floaty movement of its stick-figured ninja, who feels so good to direct that

it barely matters how many thousands of times you'll die. And while it's true that 'running' and 'jumping' is basically all you do in *N++*, it's the subtlety in the way these actions are executed that matters – momentum and timing is important, but crucially, luck never is. Add to all this a cooperative mode and a level editor, and it feels like *N++* is just about the last twitch platformer we'll ever need. Or, at least, it seems a tough task to top it.

68

SYSTEM SHOCK 2

RELEASED 1999 | LAST POSITION • New

Andy C: This has everything: guns, hacking, frightening enemies, a tale of betrayal, a pumping soundtrack, ambiance and a villain who makes the greatest videogame entrance ever. Throw on one of the updated texture packs and you've got a game that's as brilliant now as it was in 1999.

Tom S: The enemy models aren't chilling now, but the sense of struggle is intact. The Von Braun is still an interesting place to master, and the splicing of shooter/RPG systems just works. Games like *Dishonored* have since taken the formula to new heights, but even

that game can't match the tension of this ingenious original.

Samuel: I wouldn't recommend that someone plays *System Shock 2* over *BioShock* now. That's a better and more refined game in a bunch of different ways. I disagree with Tom on the scare factor, though – the primitive animation and sound design make the enemies nice and scary to me, even now.

Phil: Part of what makes that so effective is the soundtrack is one of the great '90s videogame scores. Sparse and creepy, it's instrumental in defining *System Shock 2*'s style.



67 FEZ

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 55

Phil: A relaxing platformer that's filled with fiendish secrets. On the surface, *Fez* is a charming game about rotating a 2D world to complete puzzles and create new routes. But scratch beneath its surface, and *Fez* reveals its heart. You'll translate languages, decode runes and break through the fourth wall. It's meticulously constructed, and all set to a soundtrack that builds a lasting, memorable sense of place.



66 PLANTS VS ZOMBIES

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION • New

Chris L: Charming, challenging and endearing, defend your home from zombies with an army of deadly plants – like corn cannons, exploding cherries, and hypnotic mushrooms. It's masterfully balanced, introducing new threats and defences at the perfect pace that brings what at times feels like a casual and colourful war to a nail-biting conclusion. PvZ is tower defence at its finest and funniest.



65 BURNOUT PARADISE

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION ▲ 66

Hannah: Which *Burnout* game is the best is a tricky topic, but I'm adamant it's *Burnout Paradise*. A great variety of streets to race down, loads of cars to unlock and, oh baby, the destruction when a car gets wrecked. Wheels bend into the wrong directions, metal shards ping off, all in glorious slow motion. The regular obliteration of cars is the icing on the cake to the most well designed arcade driving game ever.

100



64 PILLARS OF ETERNITY

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 59

Joe: With a wonderful story that's bolstered by an intuitive battle system, *Pillars of Eternity* echoes roleplaying stalwarts such as *Icewind Dale*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Fallout*. A classic. **Andy K:** As someone who grew up with Infinity Engine RPGs, playing something that captures their distinctive magic, but with a modern sheen, was a delight. Deep, rich, and compelling, roleplaying on PC doesn't get much better.



63 MAX PAYNE 2

RELEASED 2003 | LAST POSITION ● New

Samuel: There's not a single cover shooter around that's more fun than Remedy's bullet time sequel, in my opinion (there's perhaps an argument for *Vanquish*). Diving into every enemy-filled room with two pistols blazing is like a puzzle to solve, and the sound design and feedback of the guns is terrific. Its noir styling is at once ironic and sincere, and I still love it. You can pop *Gears of War* in the bin, thanks.



62 ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ● New

Katharine: The cute critters in Moon Studio's platformer will make you go d'aww almost as often as the nails hard platforming makes you go arghhh. Its Studio Ghibli-esque animation and soaring soundtrack are both top of their class, and the ability to slingshot Ori off enemy attacks brings something genuinely new to the platforming table, making me very excited for its upcoming sequel.



* (Playfully crinkling through the leaves fills you with determination.)



61 UNDERTALE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 92

Matthew: There's something about *Undertale*'s subversive, retro take on the top-down RPG that sweeps you up and takes you back to a place that's half nightmare, half adventure. It recalls the best and worst of fairy tales – a mix of excitement and understated menace – and it's brought to life by a smart sense of humour that makes the whole thing strangely relatable. It's particularly essential for anyone who's skipped classic games for fear of standardised JRPG tropes – turn-based combat is tweaked with bullet hell minigames and you can bond with the monsters you face in battle instead of straight-up slaughtering them in cold blood. The sacred foundation stones of an entire genre are smashed and rebuilt into something genuinely unique, and the result is a game that anyone can engage with. It's a strange, wonderful and curiously nostalgic experience: however old you are, playing *Undertale* will make you feel like a plucky youngster trying *EarthBound* for the first time.

Steven: I absolutely adore *Undertale*'s combat system. It's often overshadowed by the story and characters but as someone who knows the pain of sitting through yet another turn-based fight with the same enemies, *Undertale*'s combat never feels like a slog. It's a system on par with *Super Mario RPG* for the SNES, where every attack and block can double its efficacy by carefully timed button presses. But in *Undertale*, you move a little heart around bullet hell minigames, transforming the combat from a passive experience into an active one. Turn-based combat systems are historically all about rolling dice and thinking one step ahead, but again *Undertale* subverts expectations while still feeling true to the source material.

Tyler: It's about fandom and death of the author, self-interested themes that could've made for an indulgent misery. But love for games flows through *Undertale*, and it instantly endeared itself to me. Run from almost every game that parodies games except for this one.



60

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 | LAST POSITION 34

Tyler: This should be higher. Maybe it will be, next year, after I launch a campaign to force everyone affiliated with PC Gamer to play the remastered version – which, thankfully, doesn't tamper with a single line of dialogue. *Torment* is a witty, weird RPG that emphasises story and dialogue, and is filled with surprising events that feel like they could've been made up by a clever DM on the spot. I remember, early on, how you can let an embalmer who thinks you're a zombie fill you with stitches – increasing your max HP. Every little thing matters, nothing is filler, no sidequest is boring.

PERSONAL PICK

Hannah Dwan



TIS-100

Zachtronics designs the most impressive puzzle games around – *TIS-100* is its greatest success. Design algorithms using logic and computing to fit a solution: it's smart in a way that can only work with plain logic puzzles. It also pushed me towards learning about actual computing!



59 WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION 68

Leif: WoW has some fantastic competition these days, but it remains the MMORPG in the mind of the public at large. And rightly so. Blizzard's behemoth is a world not just in terms of space, but also in how successfully it's evolved after weathering more than a decade of shifting tastes and audiences. Be it in dungeons, PVP, or thrashing Alliance in the Temple of Kotmogu, it's still easy to find the fun.



58 CIVILIZATION VI

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION New

Evan: Through its Districts system, *Civ VI* made city planning matter. I like having to think long-term about each tile placement. Hopefully religion and espionage will get deeper.

Tyler: When *Civ V* came out, everyone, including me, said that *Civ IV* is better. The same is happening with *Civ VI* and *Civ V*, but with full mod support and the city planning Evan mentioned, which I love, *Civ VI* is the one to play now.

57

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

RELEASED 2002 | LAST POSITION 44



Leif: It may be a fantasy RPG, but it shoves bearded wizards and stodgy castles aside in favour of an alien wonderland resembling fever dream during a mind meld of Frank Herbert and Frank Frazetta. But looks alone don't secure its legacy, as funky as its mushroom towers and racist elves may be. Its greatness lies in how thoroughly it wrapped us in its weird world, forcing us

to remember details from tomes and chats to see the saga to its end.

Matthew: I'm still sad I can't experience it all over again. For me, no other *Elder Scrolls* game has come close to delivering a story with the scale and nuance of *Morrowind*, and the setting is the most vivid. A dense, generous, deliriously compelling RPG (with the best giant mushrooms in gaming).

PERSONAL PICK

Andy Kelly



HACKNET

One of the best sims of 'movie hacking' on PC. An elegant command line interface and imaginative mission design makes cracking into these systems a joy. One minute you're stealing a recipe from a restaurant chain, the next you're battling a rival hacker for control of your system.

56

COMPANY OF HEROES

RELEASED 2006 | LAST POSITION 84

Tom S: A World War II RTS that distills the noise and fury of *Saving Private Ryan* into a clinical game of take and hold. The first *Company of Heroes* is still a design peak for Relic. The asymmetrical power curves of the Axis and Allied forces create an absorbing tug-of-war. In a long-fought game infantry armies give way to tank warfare, and the destructible maps are gradually levelled. There's a sense of escalation to

every fight, and the campaign features some of the best levels Relic has ever made. I keep coming back to it every year to see if it has faded yet, and it still hasn't happened. It looks great for an 11-year-old game, and sounds incredible, too. The unit barks are baked into my mind, but the chatter still gives the battlefield a sense of life, and the ker-chunk discharge of a tank's main weapon is as impactful today as ever.

PERSONAL PICK

**Joe
Donnelly**



FOOTBALL MANAGER 2017

I've played *Football Manager* on and off for close to 20 years now and I enjoy it more with each iteration. *FM* is the quintessential football simulator that's as much about multilayered micromanagement as it is about winning trophies and signing your boy or girlhood heroes.

PERSONAL PICK

**Matthew
Elliott**



FRIDAY THE 13TH

Right now, Friday the 13th is the only thing I want to play. I'll admit that it's hilariously shabby, but with the right group of people it's impossible to stop playing. Every failed escape attempt keeps me coming back, and every game is different. It's an enthralling and violent game of hide-and-seek.



55

ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 43

Evan: When I think of *Arma*, I think of the photos of soldiers goofing off inside their FOB, posing and pranking one another. They do it, I'd guess, to alleviate the tension that comes with fighting. *Arma* is authentic because it recreates that need for silliness to balance its seriousness. Its need for tactics and fidelity demand some amount of military lingo, compasses, maps and an eye for spotting enemies far away. But, inevitably, someone will do something stupid: barrel rolling their Little Bird, firing a Javelin at a sedan, shooting a heli with a sidearm. Somewhere within that balance of sim and silly is the cloth from which breakouts like *Battlegrounds* are cut.



54 DOTA 2

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION 12

Chris T: There are a lot of games that are superficially like *Dota 2*, but there's only one game that actually *is* *Dota 2*. This is competitive Calvinball, macroeconomics with wizards, a game of high-stakes five-a-side with more rules than one person can ever know. What this complexity amounts to is a vibrant language shared by everybody who loves this mad game. Shame about all the angry internet men.



53 TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION • New

Fraser: One of the rare spinoffs that's better than its progenitor. It gives us a broader look at the anarchy of Pandora and its demented inhabitants, but more importantly it's blessed with a trick that a lot of otherwise funny games don't have: comedic timing. **Phil:** By avoiding the more wacky elements, *Tales from the Borderlands* is both funny and heartfelt. I'd argue it's Telltale's best work.

52

CRUSADER KINGS II

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION 31

Chris L: It's unusual for a grand strategy game to be so personal. Rather than playing as a faceless leader, you're an actual person with flaws and desires, and the people surrounding you are unique individuals with their own goals and needs. It makes for an engrossing blend of managing the big picture of world events, while dealing with the domestic soap opera of relationships and betrayals. There's more character building and storytelling in

Crusader Kings II than in most RPGs. Your character also has a realistic lifespan: even if you survive assassination attempts, battles, illnesses and other threats, you're still going to die of old age, at which point you resume the game as an heir. The impermanence of your characters and the passing of the torch from generation to generation gives your dynasty a real history, and your choices and actions real meaning.

51

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION 25



Tom S: *Left 4 Dead 2* has supplied me with the best co-op experiences of my life. It's a fascinating experiment in automatic pacing, but the AI director that controls the zombie army would be useless without the beautifully designed levels.

Evan: A guaranteed fun Friday night: download a bunch of dumb character and gun mods and play *GoldenEye 4 Dead* with your friends, – it's a surprisingly inspired,

zombie-filled recreation of the N64 classic shooter. **Wes:** *Left 4 Dead 2* is still the perfect co-op experience on PC. Moments of mindless zombie blasting give you time to chat, horde rushes and special infected send you yelping for help, and you can't help but laugh at the chaos around you. Showdowns demand real teamwork if you want to make it out alive. And the Community maps can keep you going forever.

INVISIBLE, INC

RELEASE 2015 | LAST POSITION • New

Chris T: Klei's inability to make a bad game allowed it to flit from *Mark of the Ninja* to this: *XCOM* with cyberpunk secret agents. *Invisible, Inc.*'s genius lies in its transparency – you always understand what the outcome of your decisions will be, and are left with the gratifying challenge of unpicking each turn-based stealth challenge as you encounter it. It gives the sense of being both punishing and fair, something that *XCOM* has traditionally struggled with.

Katharine: Klei's developers are clever. The way this mixes *Don't Starve*'s survival themes with *Mark of the Ninja*'s acrobatics gives us the ultimate heist sim: a world where you're a cool badass until a single turn of fate triggers a desperate, but thrilling, scramble for life.

50



49 COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION 38

Evan: CS:GO doesn't get enough credit for its asymmetry. In the most popular competitive FPS in the world, one team carries a gun that can kill with one shot (the AK-47), and the other doesn't.

Andy K: The tense rhythm of a match is thrilling, stressful and exhilarating. It's a game that demands careful tactical play, where every stupid mistake can mean defeat, which gives you no choice but to work at being a better player.



48 BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

RELEASED 2000 | LAST POSITION 41

Andy K: The feeling of adventure when you emerge from Irenicus's grim dungeon to find the city of Athkatla sprawling out before you is hard to beat, and the sheer freedom you have to shape your character is exhilarating.

Phil: The first *Baldur's Gate* offered a slow journey to its titular city, but this gives up the goods immediately. It imbues *Baldur's Gate II* with a welcome sense of sprawling adventure.

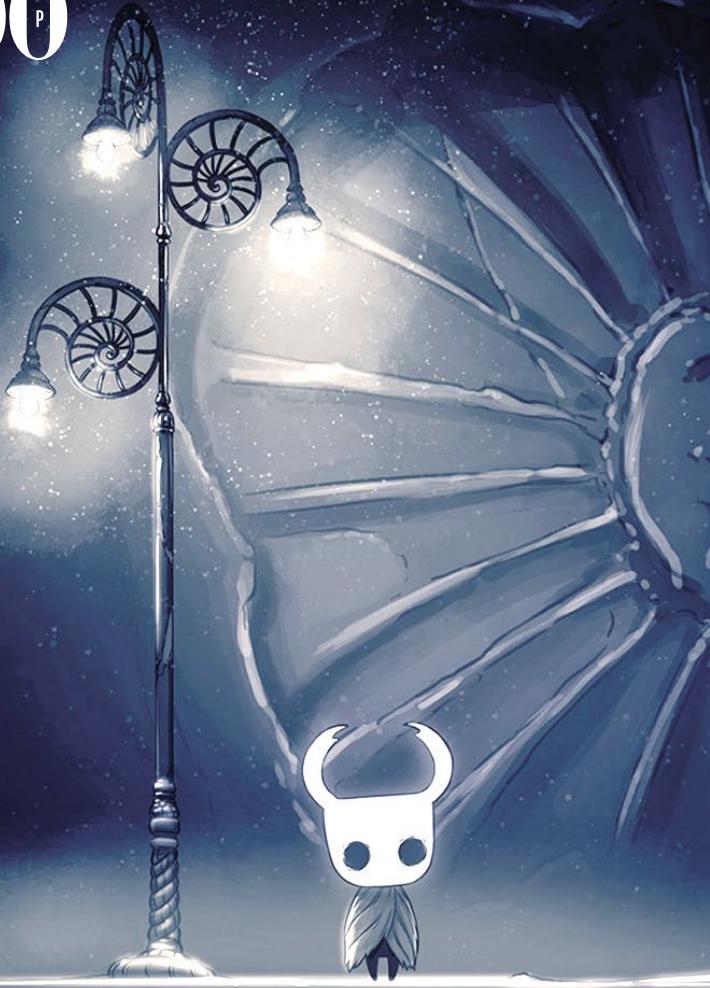
47

TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

James: Both the most acrobatic modern FPS of the decade and the best big robot friend sim at once. *Call of Duty* meets *Quake* with mechs makes for a continually surprising campaign where every level is an experiment in something singular, whether it's first-person parkour, mech combat, or time travel. Time travel. Accompanied by a multiplayer suite growing fatter with regular free updates, *Titanfall 2* is an easy recommendation.

Samuel: I enjoyed the campaign, but it's no *The New Order* or *Doom* 2016, so it's in the right place on this list.



46

HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION • New

James: It's time to put the dull term 'Metroidvania' to bed and start calling all 2D action exploration games 'Hollow-likes'. *Hollow Knight* deserves the new useless crown. As a blank-faced bug armed with only a nail, you delve underground and tour a fallen kingdom while piecing together its story and your true purpose. Huge chunks of the map, entire levels with unique enemies and music, are hidden behind breakable walls and locked doors. With something like 20 bosses,

a significant number of which are optional, it's possible to breeze by hours of exploration and combat without a clue. But chances are you'll find most of it, because *Hollow Knight* inspires curiosity. Environments are brimming with mystery, depicting fallen cities, abyssal nightmares and stinky dung piles. Animated in an adorable hand-drawn style and accompanied by a lovely soundtrack, *Hollow Knight* is an adventure that will play as well as it does today, forever.



45 HEARTHSTONE

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION • 47

Tim: For all the memes about random cards generated by random cards and four-Mana 7/7s, the fact remains that *Hearthstone* is a helluva game. Whisper it, but right now *Hearthstone* is at its rudest health for a long time. A lot of that is down to the diversity ushered in by the brilliant *Journey to Un'Goro* expansion, but also the communication and leadership shown by Ben Brode, the game's avuncular director.



44 EVE ONLINE

RELEASED 2003 | LAST POSITION • 14

Steven: As a sandbox where players can either vie for power by wielding the might of thousand-person armies or spend an evening drunk, shooting rocks for minerals, *EVE Online* is unparalleled in scope. At 14 years old you might think the stories of betrayals and epic battles would all have been told by now, but *EVE* always finds a new way to shock me – both via the ingenuity of its players and their relentless cruelty.

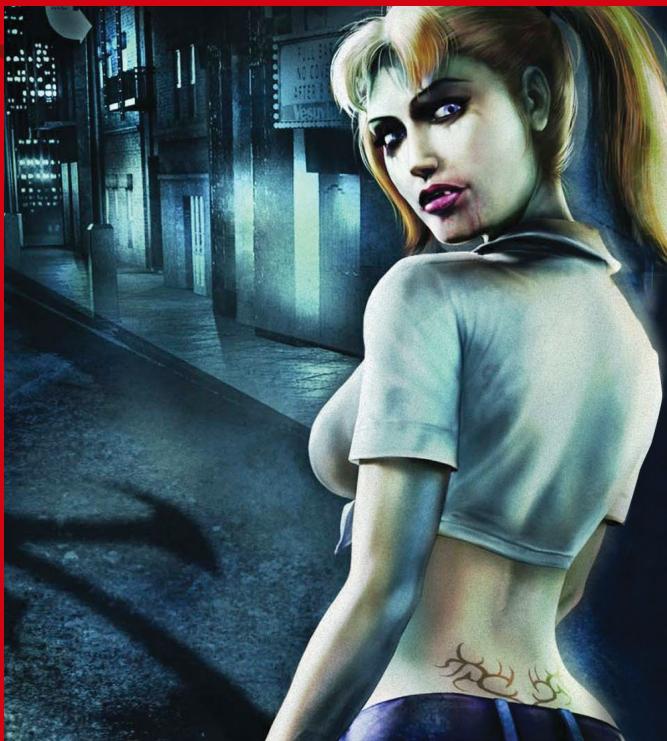
43

C&C RED ALERT 2

RELEASED 2000 | LAST POSITION • New

Phil: The *Command & Conquer* series has never boasted the balance of, say, *StarCraft: Brood War*, but that's not the point. *Red Alert 2* is my favourite RTS because it combines a great campaign, varied units, and a silly sensibility, most evident during its amazing FMV cutscenes.

Samuel: It's the peak of the series, I think – the unit types are daft but cool, and the campaign is probably the best one Westwood ever did. You can send Allied dolphins in to mess up Soviet squids. Which genius thought shutting Westwood was a good idea, again?



42

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION ▲ 65

Andy C: This is a perfect recreation of undead life in the glittering, grimy streets of late-night LA. It's smart, frightening and layered with memorable characters, all of it filtered through the unique perspectives of the game's seven playable clans.

Phil: It's the sidequests that I love. Can you kill a vampire hunter who's working at a stripclub? Should you trick a reporter into returning to the den of a flesh-eating vampire? It's a delightful mix of ancient vampire politics and petty LA powerplays.

PERSONAL PICK

Leif Johnson



THE LONG DARK

The survival genre in its purest form.

No zombies or rideable dinosaurs cross your path here; instead, it's just you, your calories and some scattered junk against the cruel menace of the deep Canadian winter. Quiet, beautiful and contemplative, it reminds us there's poetry in despair.



41 STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

RELEASED 2009 | LAST POSITION ▼ 35

Chris L: I've never experienced more tension and dread in a game than in *Stalker*. Each excursion into the Zone leaves me exhausted, jumpy, and shaken, and each return to one of Pripyat's few safe zones is accompanied by a exhalation of breath and a slow unknotting of my neck and shoulder muscles. Bleak, grim and unrelenting, *Call of Pripyat* remains unmatched in atmosphere and horror.



40 FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION ▲ 54

Steven: This does something I've never experienced before in an MMO: it makes me care about the characters. Weaving MMO grinding with a story that rivals *Final Fantasy*'s best, XIV is one of the most vibrant and engrossing MMOs I've played. What's better, the latest expansion, *Stormblood*, is the series' best achievement. It tells a captivating story of war and rebellion that no *Final Fantasy* fan should miss.

39

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 11

Chris T: It marries the time-absorbing pull of construction with the challenge of a good puzzle while simulating just enough of real rocketry to make you feel like you're learning something. Getting a rocket and its crew safely into orbit is a substantial challenge, something you'll feel rightly proud of when you crack it – and the game only broadens from there, with each new goal stretching out organically ahead of



you. If that doesn't appeal to you, *KSP* is flexible: if you want to focus on building a giant rocket-powered robot, go for it.

Tyler: I shot a Kerbal into orbit and accidentally left him there. I'm afraid to reopen the game because he's still floating there in orbit, and I feel like as long as *KSP* isn't running he's at least in stasis. I'd like to apologise to all of Kerbalkind for what I've done. Anyway, 10/10 for sure. Brilliant game.

PERSONAL PICK

James Davenport



LITTLE NIGHTMARES

I've never been so deeply unnerved while running from left to right. A simple sidescroller with a disgusting aesthetic, filled with gruesome creatures that look like they're moulded from pig grease. It's short, but its images hit close to home and linger long after the credits roll.

38

HEROES OF THE STORM

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ● New

Steven: By stripping away so much of the complexity of MOBAs, *Heroes of the Storm* manages to be both accessible and still incredibly strategic. Similar to what *Hearthstone* did for *Magic: The Gathering*, *Heroes of the Storm* distills the drama of a MOBA into something that anyone can enjoy. It also has some of the zaniest hero designs I've ever seen. Two players each playing a separate head of a single ogre? Fantastic. If *Heroes of the*

Storm has always been looked down upon as 'baby's first MOBA' then to hell with it, being a kid is way more fun anyway.

Hannah: I'm confident in saying it's the most well-designed game of its genre. Perhaps the most impressive feature is its diverse strategy – with each map being unique, every niche strategy is catered to in some way, no character or playstyle ends up dying at the feet of a metagame.

PERSONAL PICK**Andy Chalk****LEGEND OF GRIMROCK II**

It expands on its predecessor in every way, with multiple multilevel dungeons, outdoor environments, new monsters and secrets galore. The genre is too niche to ever allow for major mainstream success, but for fans of that old-school style (like me!), this is as good as it gets.

PERSONAL PICK**Steven Messner****NIGHT IN THE WOODS**

Adventure games tend to bore me, but when they capture the emotions of being a cocksure teen trying to find their place in an adult world, it's hard not to be engrossed. *Night in the Woods* is part-ghost story and part-coming-of-age story and it's touching, evocative and hilarious.

**37****80 DAYS**

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 76

Andy K: A colourful alternate history elevated by exquisite writing, and it's endlessly replayable thanks to the multitude of routes you can take across the globe and the many choices you can make in its unpredictable story. Moving, funny, intelligent and surprisingly challenging, *80 Days* is, and I don't say this lightly, a masterpiece of interactive fiction.

Samuel: Fantastic writing and scene-setting art bring this steampunk adventure to life.

Katharine: Phileas Fogg may be a bossy asshat, but balancing the ticking clock of his wager against soaking up every last diversion is tremendous fun.

**36 ZERO ESCAPE: THE NONARY GAMES**

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION ● New

Katharine: Bundling together two of the best visual novels around, *The Nonary Games* drums up tension from the simple act of left-clicking text boxes. Both stories lock you in deadly games of trust, with story paths that shine new light on one another and allow for audacious twists. Add some fiendish 'escape room' puzzles to break up the (excellent) reams of text, and this feels like serious nourishment for the brain.

**35 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER**

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ● New

Matthew: Everything you need to know is in the name, and Creative Assembly delivers brilliantly on the promise of vivid battles in the Warhammer world. If you've ever consumed army books or drybrushed a Beastman, there's a joy in seeing it come to life in a game that rewrites the lore every time you play. Every race plays like a different game, but I'll always be happy spending days rebuilding the Dwarf empire.

34**THUMPER**

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ● New

James: Five minutes into the scarab's journey down *Thumper*'s hell road, my hands lose color and a pool of sweat drips down into my lap. Tapping buttons and turning sharp corners to a beat with a bizarre time signature while lights strobe and impossible geometry blurs by isn't easy. *Thumper* is, after all, a punishing rhythm game designed to make you feel uncomfortable. Through punishment and a drip feed of new rules, *Thumper*

teaches as it tortures. Most will never master it, but that's the point. The joy comes from stemming a hellish tide, from survival and syncopation with a daunting, dangerous force.

Phil: What if *Audiosurf* didn't like you? That's *Thumper*, a game that weaponises time signatures to create intense rhythm action.

Evan: *Thumper* is actually a documentary about the path you take to heaven or hell when you die.

33**DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN ENHANCED EDITION**

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION 23



Tom M: Playing an 80-plus-hour RPG entirely co-op was a strangely intimate experience. A flurry of quick saves for the first 20 hours gave way to a rhythm of wordless and efficient combat. But as the game reached those last 20 hours, *Divinity* ramped the difficulty back up and the dialogue restarted – we moved methodically through each fight, formed fine-tuned

strategies to safely take on Death Knights, and at one point even built an obstacle course out of chairs and boxes to slow down a hasted demon. *Divinity: Original Sin* rewards you for creative thinking, and isn't afraid to beat you down until you understand that. And working through those challenges with the right partner is an RPG experience I haven't found anywhere else.

32

BAYONETTA

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION • New

Samuel: I'm so glad this glorious hack-and-slash game finally came to PC, and it's the best version. Unlocking the extra weapons and perfecting the combat system means you can play *Bayonetta* for about 100 hours if you want to.

Katharine: PlatinumGames is a studio that cut its teeth at the arcade and made its living on console, but on a technical level PC feels like a more natural home for its action delights. Chief among them is *Bayonetta*, a take-no-prisoners workout for the fingers that has you slipping through cracks in attacks to slow time and unleash combos built from your own hair. Which other hero delivers damage by the megaton, can materialise a guillotine for a finisher or simply give an angel a good spanking? This. Is. Videogames.

Chris T: It's a treat to have *Bayonetta* on PC at long last. This exuberant, outlandishly camp brawler from the

creators of *Devil May Cry* is imaginative and deeply, deeply silly. It's gaming's own hyperviolent Rocky Horror Picture Show starring a fourth-wall-disregarding, leather-clad nun-witch with guns strapped to her stilettos who kills angels by turning her hair, which is also her clothes, into dragons and bondage devices. Games are rarely this free, fun or surprising.

Phil: It's fun and campy, but don't let that fool you: *Bayonetta* boasts the best combat around. The rhythm feels great, as you chain kicks and punches before topping it all off with a hair-based finisher that acts as the exclamation mark to a combo. But *Bayonetta* goes deeper still, with slow-mo evades and dodge offsets. You can get by with the basics, but take the time to master its high-level combat systems and *Bayonetta* feels unlike anything else.



31 THIEF GOLD

RELEASED 1998 | LAST POSITION • New

Jody: 'The first *Thief* game is the best' is a hill I'll die on. *Thief* has as much level variety as three other games, from wealthy mansions to tombs with zombies and deathtraps to straight-up horror. Where it's arguably weak is the AI, but even that becomes a strength when guards go haywire and the story acknowledges it with running jokes about their drunkenness – notes of comedy to alleviate the tension.



30 DIABLO III

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION ▲ 32

Tom S: Help, I can't stop playing this game. Every time I charge through a level in adventure mode with a new character, I like it even more. I just love blowing up hundreds of monsters with satisfying abilities. After years of updates, *Diablo III* is a beautifully fast and generous game that showers you with experience, legendary weapons and new ways to kill monsters. The best action RPG ever, for my money.



29 FORZA HORIZON 3

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Phil: A pitch-perfect sandbox that combines lighthearted race events with a fetishistic appreciation of cars. *Horizon 3* is big, bombastic and beautiful – set in one of the most vibrant environments I've ever explored. The events are fun, but the real masterstroke is found in the skill system, which creates a thrilling tug-of-war between risk and reward. It makes time spent in its world a joy.



28 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 | LAST POSITION 87

Joe: Contrary to popular opinion: the Mojave wasteland is the most interesting settings of all the *Fallout* games. Learning each survivor's tale and how to play them against one another makes for some interesting morally grey decision making.

Samuel: I really like *New Vegas*'s reactivity to your decisions in the story, but it's the worst of the 3D *Fallout* games for exploration, for me.



27 WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION • New

Andy K: Exploring the Finch residence and uncovering the lives of its residents is one of the most emotionally stirring experiences I've had in a videogame.

Evan: I was not expecting tentacles.

James: It has one bizarre scene after another made devastating by a bittersweet story about family and loss.

Phil: This is what you'd get if *WarioWare* was a cohesive tale about life, death and family.



26 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION 10

Chris L: What it lacks in polish and looks it makes up for tenfold in the freedom it provides. *Skyrim* has a story, but more importantly it's a place for players to create their own story, to build characters from the ground up and play the way they want. It's also flexible, which has enabled modders to create hundreds of extra hours of content, meaning we'll be playing *Skyrim* long after its sequel arrives.

25

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION • New

Evan: One: it compresses the time and space that survival games like *DayZ* give you, forcing you into contact with other players and out of your comfort zone. And two: it oscillates between serious and silly – you're shouting compass bearings, then you're backflipping a motorbike over your friends.

Andy K: And for the solo player, *Battlegrounds* is just as thrilling. Playing it as a stealth game, with humans instead of AI guards, and ducking between cover is wonderfully tense.

Steven: Solo is awesome, but co-op is where it really takes off. Having a buddy you can rely on really expands your strategic options. There's rarely a decision made during a duo match that doesn't feel meaningful.

Chris T: The magic of *Battlegrounds* is the way it makes every encounter feel meaningful. When only one can win and death comes quickly, every choice you make matters: getting the drop on an foe and stealing their stuff is great, but there's catharsis to getting caught, too.





24

NIER: AUTOMATA

RELEASED 2017 | LAST POSITION • New

Leif: You could be forgiven for dismissing *Nier: Automata* as a generic Japanese RPG based on looks alone – in some ways it embraces those expectations in order to subvert them. But this is a science fiction masterwork; a richly imagined tale with a meaning that grows more bizarre with each playthrough as we see events through the eyes of different characters. It's also a blast to play, swapping between third-person action, shoot-'em-up and platformer genres effortlessly.

Phil: I prefer *Bayonetta*'s combat, but the world of *Nier* is a tragically beautiful space. *Automata* also offers what is sure to be 2017's best soundtrack.

PERSONAL PICK

Tom Marks



WARFRAME

You can play *Warframe* for 100 hours and only scratch its surface. It's a game that's perfected grind, making the simple act of moving through its procedural levels and smashing into enemies a high-flying joy. Few games feel as empowering, and next to none are updated as often.



23 DEUS EX

RELEASED 2000 | LAST POSITION ▾ 13

Andy K: The visuals have aged horribly, to the point where it's almost offensive to modern eyes, but get over that hump and *Deus Ex* is still one of the best, richest, most expansive immersive sims on PC. Vast levels filled with NPCs, alternate paths, and optional missions, a twisting, conspiracy-laden plot and a bleak, dystopian atmosphere make it an essential PC game, despite being almost 20 years old.



22 STARDREW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ▾ 97

Phil: A farming RPG created by one person. It's a heartwarming success story and a legitimately great version of a genre that was underrepresented on PC. The valley is packed with activities, from fishing to dungeon crawling, in addition to the day-to-day task of growing crops, milking cows, baking and refining your raw produce into more desirable materials. Gentrification has never been so entertaining.

21

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION ▲ 78

Samuel: At the last NYE party I went to, we played *FTL* as a group, and I found myself shouting tips for how to deal with slaver ships, mysterious signals and that crazy guy on the planet's surface, who can either join your crew or do damage to your ship. I'd recommend it to sci-fi fans and strategy devotees equally – but it's also a great introduction to strategy generally.

Matthew: Failure, panic, and the quiet acceptance

of death: these are the hallmarks of *FTL*, a space exploration game with roguelike elements which is far more fun than I've made it sound. It's like experiencing your most beloved sci-fi reveries with a dose of relentless realism. Things will burn. People will suffocate. You probably won't survive that heroic rescue. But when you do, it honestly feels amazing. Just don't rename your crewmates after your friends.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



LIFE IS STRANGE

A beautiful time travel adventure that builds upon and surpasses Telltale's template. Whatever you might think about the hella dated dialogue, Dontnod should be commended for crafting a memorable tale that makes you care about what happens to its two main characters.

20

BATTLEFIELD 1

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Evan: Who expected *Battlefield* to find its stride in WWI? The technological constraints of the nineteen-teens inspired the series' most interesting infantry gunplay. The Madsen MG is powerful, but its vertical magazine blocks your vision. The absence of plentiful armoured transport makes the 70-ton Char 2C supertank feel like a baby Godzilla when it hits the map. Gorgeous art and sound design don't hurt.

Andy K: The shift from high-precision modern weapons provided the shot in the arm *Battlefield* needed. It's a delight to return to the mud and rust of an older war. And enough licence is taken with the history to ensure it doesn't feel like a cartoon depiction of WWI. The St Quentin Scar map is a highlight: a stretch of farmland dotted with interesting architecture to capture. Every minute feels chaotic and urgent.

PERSONAL PICK

Chris Thursten

**PREY**

This love letter to the likes of *System Shock* deserves praise for the way it lets you chart your own course through a believably simulated space station. Not all of its ideas come off – the Nightmare creature is a bit of a dud – but *Prey* is a victory for player-respecting design nonetheless.

PERSONAL PICK

Tyler Wilde

**DEFCON**

A simple game of mutually-assured destruction. Build your airfields, silos, and naval fleets and then pointlessly defend your state by exchanging nukes with the world – kill more than the enemy, lose fewer than the enemy. It's more challenging than it sounds, even though no one actually wins.



19

HER STORY

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 39

Samuel: I recently found myself in a position of recommending PC games to someone who normally plays on consoles, and the first thing I did was bring up *Her Story*. A fantastic, one-of-a-kind mystery game.

Tim: I think at some point in the future we're going to look back on this game as the herald of non-shit FMV games, but few of the flood that have followed so far have borne any comparison to *Her Story*. And that's because Sam Barlow's elegant concept, strong writing, and the standout performance by Viva Seifert all feel like bottled lightning levels of brilliant. A rare treat.

Hannah: *Her Story* is the bar for detective games. With the uniqueness of searching through a poorly-sorted database to piece together a mystery, you put together the threads of its story yourself. The FMV nature only adds to how unsettling it can become.

**18 WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER**

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION ● New

Tom S: It's a simple formula: put some Nazis in a level, give a player some massive guns and you've got a decent FPS. *The New Order* goes above and beyond regular shooters with great characters and a sense of humour, and stealth that works. It's an intelligent update of a classic series that reflects on the inherent silliness of its setup, even as it invites you to indulge, ideally with a machine gun in each hand.

**17 BIOSHOCK**

RELEASED 2007 | LAST POSITION ■ No change

Samuel: Still fantastic, and it's aged beautifully. Before audiotapes were overdone as a narrative device, this perfected them – a brilliantly written and acted way to discover the story of this fallen city.

Andy K: I still get goosebumps when screen drops to reveal the majesty of Rapture, and it only gets better as you delve deeper into Andrew Ryan's fucked up metropolis.

16

ROCKET LEAGUE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 8

Steven: Other multiplayer games, like shooters, rarely stop to let both you and your opponents soak in a critical moment of the match, but *Rocket League* forces you to relive every one. After each goal, you sit down and watch that amazing pass and aerial shot, basking in the glory of it. Or maybe you sit in shame and stew the horror of choking and missing the game-winning save. Either way, the spectrum of emotions of a match in

Rocket League, like any real sport, is engrossing.

Samuel: I didn't vote for *Rocket League* this year, that's why it's dropped a bit down the list. I had to stop playing it for my sanity, after seeing rocket cars in my dreams.

Joe: I love football and hate racing but, despite there being cars, balls and goals here, Psyonix's ball-cage-car-'em-up is a different beast. It's bloody good too and, as Samuel suggests, is pretty moreish.

15

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ 27

Shaun: This tense tactical shooter has delivered some of the most stressful and memorable moments I've ever had in games. The destructible maps, coupled with the unique abilities of each operator, makes every match feel minty fresh. Many hands were wrung when Ubisoft announced this would be multiplayer only, but it has since become the most enduring PVP game in my library, and Ubisoft is giving it the care it deserves.



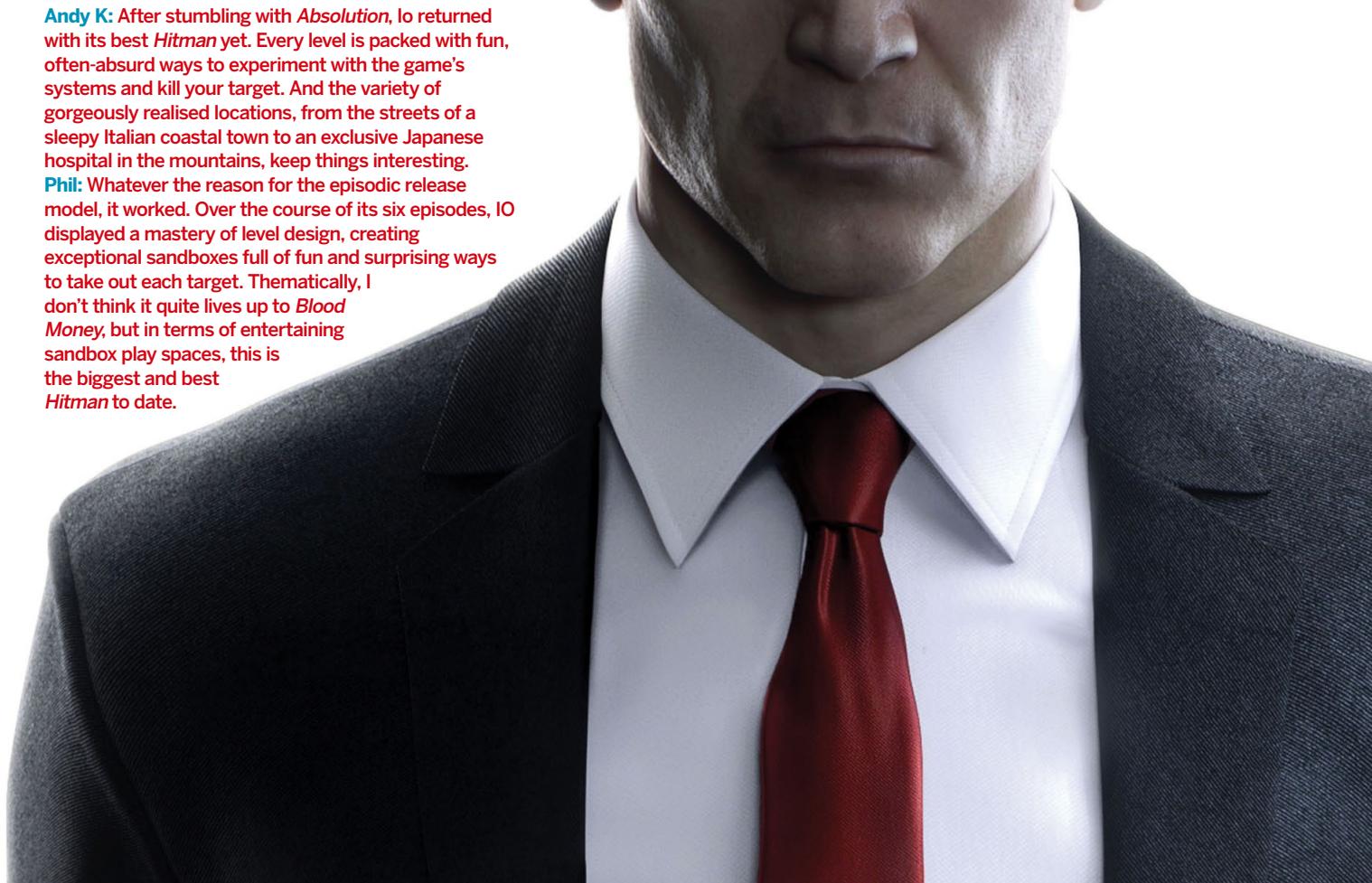
14

HITMAN

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • New

Andy K: After stumbling with *Absolution*, IO returned with its best *Hitman* yet. Every level is packed with fun, often-absurd ways to experiment with the game's systems and kill your target. And the variety of gorgeously realised locations, from the streets of a sleepy Italian coastal town to an exclusive Japanese hospital in the mountains, keep things interesting.

Phil: Whatever the reason for the episodic release model, it worked. Over the course of its six episodes, IO displayed a mastery of level design, creating exceptional sandboxes full of fun and surprising ways to take out each target. Thematically, I don't think it quite lives up to *Blood Money*, but in terms of entertaining sandbox play spaces, this is the biggest and best *Hitman* to date.



13 OVERWATCH

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION • 24

Phil: While Samuel will tell you that *Overwatch* is silly because it has a hyperintelligent gorilla, I will tell you that it's good because his abilities, a) make sense for a hyperintelligent gorilla, and b) allow you to fill a necessary role. Hero shooters are insanely popular today, and *Overwatch* is the best of them. Its characters are fun, clever and cute as all hell, and its design supports a variety of playstyles.



12 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION • 9

Andy K: One of the finest playgrounds on PC. Production values don't get higher, and the story is 30 hours of colourful fun, with few dips in quality. I've finished it three times now, and I rarely replay games all the way through.

Samuel: I wish I had the time to give *GTA Online*, but *GTA V* is still all about enjoying that world. It's all I ever wanted: *GTA IV*'s detail with *San Andreas*'s scale.

11

HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 | LAST POSITION • 3

Chris L: We waited for years for a game that could top 1998's seminal FPS *Half-Life*, and it's fitting that Valve would be the only ones who could deliver. *Half-Life 2* shared the original's creative level design and memorable scripted sequences that left us feeling like we were finding our own way through the world, despite it being a linear shooter. Gordon Freeman remains a beloved and enduring figure, despite never uttering a word or appearing as more than a pair of gloved hands, and his gravity gun is still the best tool/toy/weapon ever to grace a game.

SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION ▲ 15

Shaun: This is the roguelike every other roguelike aspires to topple. But they rarely achieve the intricacy of *Spelunky*, because even though most players know the secrets this game hides within, it still feels important to see them for yourself. I've never finished a hell run, but I'm still trying to do one. Every week.

Phil: My favourite moments in *Spelunky* are when I hear a distant explosion. It usually means I'll be dead soon, but also that I get to reverse engineer the chaotic comedy of errors that is a *Spelunky* chain reaction.

10



9
DOOM

RELEASED 2016 | LAST POSITION ● New

Samuel: Between this and *Wolfenstein*, Bethesda has brought us the best shooters in years. *Doom* has the edge for me because its guns, and their overpowering mods, are terrific fun. The knockback/melee counter element gives it a unique rhythm, which is a hard thing to find in a genre as overcrowded as the FPS.

Phil: Between the chunky gunfeel, the multistorey arenas and the one-two punch of gun blast and melee finisher, *Doom*'s combat feels unlike anything else. I love its pace, and the contrast between the frenetic gunplay, and the methodical exploration of its arenas.

Evan: The soundtrack is a miracle sent from hell. Mick Gordon managed to show complete reverence for Bobby Prince's MIDI tracks while adding his own style of throbbing, swirling metal.

8

ALIEN: ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | LAST POSITION ▲ 16

Samuel: The best horror game ever. I would even argue its best moment involves no alien at all, as an eerie showroom filled with androids comes to life. A masterpiece.

Tom S: *Isolation*'s commitment to the source material is inspiring and horribly convincing. It is also a fascinating AI experiment. For years I've wanted more interesting, dynamic enemies, and few are better than *Isolation*'s Xenomorph.



7



MASS EFFECT 2

RELEASED 2010 | LAST POSITION ▲ 4

Samuel: This is still the king of BioWare's sci-fi RPG series. The best companions, the most exciting scenario and a real sense of being a cool bunch of outsiders in this galaxy.

Andy K: I've never cared about a cast as much as the ragtag crew of the Normandy SR-2. As much as I enjoyed exploring an exciting, vividly realised galaxy, I just looked forward to returning to my ship and checking in with all my weird space pals.

Phil: Truly there has never been a better game about sexing up a badass lizard assassin. *Mass Effect 2* cut a lot of its predecessor's chaff. What remained was a competent shooter that underpinned a memorably characterful sci-fi adventure.

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▲ No change

Samuel: MGSV is pretty much a perfect systems-driven stealth-action game. Its upgrade tree constantly offers new and better ways to improve your tactics well after the game is finished. It took me about 90 hours to get the Fulton upgrade that can yank any object through a wormhole. Worth it.

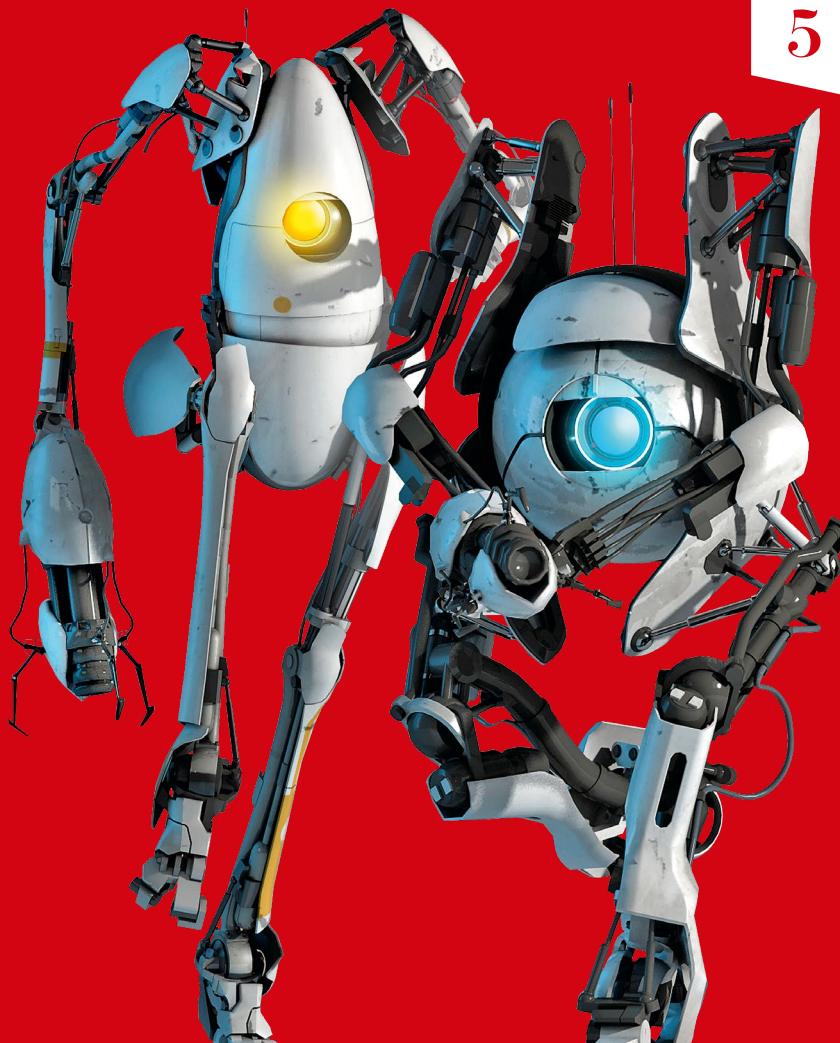
Tom S: Are there any other open world sandbox stealth games like this? If not, why not? Because this one is brilliant. You have to forgive it for the batty plotting and terrible boss enemies because the rest of the game is so huge and rich with possibility. That's thanks to its mad gadgets, like the one Sam described, but I love the companions too. Do you go with the knife-wielding dog, the photosynthetic sniper or the miniature mech suit? These are the choices I want to be making in games.

Andy K: This has ruined stealth games for me. The sheer variety of entertaining ways to tackle a mission in MGSV makes almost everything else feel disappointingly shallow and unambitious in comparison. And the more daft gadgets and weapons you unlock, the more fun it gets, whether it's a rocket fist or a wormhole generator. As a longtime MGS fan, the story is disappointing, but the richness of the sandbox make up for it.

Phil: I told a horse to poop in the road, and my target drove over it and crashed. *Metal Gear Solid V* is the best game.



6



5

PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION ▲ 28

Andy K: A game so good you wonder how Valve pulled it off. Everything in *Portal 2* is pitch perfect, from the design of the puzzles, to the voice acting, to the journey through the various periods of Aperture Science's history. Stephen Merchant is superb as twitchy robot Wheatley, but it's JK Simmons as Aperture founder Cave Johnson who gets the biggest laughs. However, as funny as it is, there's also a dark streak, particularly the sinister backstory of how GLaDOS came to be. *Portal 2* excels as a puzzle game, a comedy, and a piece of evocative science fiction, and represents Valve at the absolute peak of its craft.

Tom S: Funny games are so novel now, and *Portal 2*'s sense of humour has not grown old. I enjoyed the magic paint puzzles and flying through

the air in *Portal 2*'s large testing chambers, but the puzzles never felt as new and exciting as the original. Those moments instead appeared in *Portal 2*'s superb co-op mode.

GLaDOS taunts you and your partner and plays you off against each other in a hilarious struggle of power and wit.

Phil: The main story isn't as pure a puzzle game as the original *Portal*, but it makes up for it with its comedy craft. I can't say for sure, but I'm convinced that the achievement notification for 'The Part Where He Kills You' was fine-tuned to pop at the funniest possible moment. But even away from Valve's mastery, *Portal 2* is significant for its community contributions,

and the thousands of new puzzles and campaigns available through the Steam Workshop.

XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ▲ 19

Tom S: Turn-based strategy games are rarely capable of generating the drama of an *XCOM 2* campaign. In fact, few games of any genre are. *XCOM 2* recasts the *XCOM* project as a plucky resistance outfit, raising the stakes and bringing even more tension to the campaign. When you're securing funds and personnel it feels like a survival game. When you're ambushing aliens and clearing buildings in one violent turn, it feels like a power trip. Excellent soldier customisation and exciting upgrade trees mesh nicely with *XCOM*'s slightly cartoon presentation, but it's the war stories that stand out – that time an alien murdered your star sniper or that time a ranger chopped their way to the extraction zone. *XCOM 2*'s soldiers really matter. That means the lows can be harrowing, but the highs are sensational.

Joe: I've sunk more hours into *XCOM 2* than I care to admit, but let me tell you a secret: I'm not that good at it. Which speaks volumes for the game itself, as one which whips my backside yet has me continually coming back for more.



4



3

DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New

Andy K: I didn't think Arkane could top the first game, but here we are. *Dishonored 2* is one of the most beautifully designed stealth games on PC, with systems that allow for a huge amount of creative expression. Countless ways to combine your powers punctuate every moment of play with a feeling that you're in control, making your own mark on the world, rather than playing how the developer wants you to. And Karnaca is a stunning setting, with an organic, hand-crafted feel that few games manage.

Joe: Mixing and matching melee skills, conventional weapons and supernatural abilities when offing enemies is where *Dishonored 2* shines. Harder working players than me will tell you it's best played in stealth mode, where you slide your

way around its wonderful settings, but I prefer bloodshed. And little excites me more than having Emily match multiple foes with a four-link Domino blast, before taking her enemy troupe down simultaneously with one incendiary crossbolt bolt to the head. Nice.

Phil: As a sandbox of emergent systems, *Dishonored 2* is without equal. That applies not just to the action, but also to how the world reacts in response to your choices within the story. Take, for instance, A Crack In The Slab. It's a fantastic level with a clever time-skip gimmick, and it features a potential outcome that beautifully rewards your curiosity and initiative. *Dishonored 2* is a frequent showcase of Arkane's talent for anticipating a player's actions.



2

DARK SOULS

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION ■ No Change

Joe: What can be said about FromSoftware's infamous action roleplayer *Dark Souls* that hasn't already been discussed? Probably nothing, which means you can add me to its loyal horde of sun-praising worshipers who get turned on by its difficulty, swear by its intricate and not-at-all ambiguous lore, and bend the ear of anyone who'll still listen to us harping on about its really rather fantastic level design. I've genuinely lost count of the number of times I've returned to Lordran, and have steadily upped my trip tally to *Dark Souls II*'s Drangleic, and the series' third (and supposedly final) entry's Lothric since it landed last year. It's been five years since the first *Dark Souls* debuted on PC, and you can bet your humanity it'll be on this list five years from now.

James: *Dark Souls* is easier to recommend on PC than ever thanks to the tireless efforts of modders throughout the years. With *DSfix* you can play it at just about any resolution

with high-res textures (or just Shrek on everything). *Dark Souls Mouse Fix* makes mouse-and-keyboard play a legitimate control method. Item location randomisers make it an infinitely replayable roguelike. And mods such as the *Shovel Knight* armour or the fidget spinner weapon skin show the game's got a near infinite extended life after launch. *Dark Souls'* reputation began as a difficult, punishing game. On the PC, it's evolved to become whatever you want it to be.

Tom S: In terms of combat, weapons, enemies, *Dark Souls III* is a more

IT'S EVOLVED TO BECOME WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO BE

consistent game. Yet I would still recommend the original *Dark Souls* over its sequels because the stories you tease out of the stonework and item descriptions are more powerful by far. A lot of games tell you that you're a hero in a cursed world, but with every death and rebirth, *Dark Souls* does a fantastic job in making you feel it.

For all its brilliance *Dark Souls* is a thoroughly inaccessible game that is actively hostile to new players. For a long time I read the praise for *Dark Souls* with a degree of cynicism, assuming that membership of the exclusive *Dark Souls* lovers club was the main appeal. Now I am one of those members. It's a gruelling and memorable combat roleplaying game that has kept its singular identity, even as more and more games start to copy the formula. I could go on (and on), but perhaps the best praise I could give is to say that, all these years after release, *Dark Souls* is still worth wanking on about.



1



THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ■ No change

Andy K: No game makes me feel like I'm on an adventure as much as *The Witcher 3*. It's when I'm riding my horse through the wilderness with no specific goal in mind, seeing what quests I stumble into, that I love it the most. Geralt as a wandering samurai, rather than someone trying to save the world. And it helps that almost every quest you find has something interesting about it. I wouldn't go so far as to say every sidequest is meaningful, but it comes damn close. There's always some nice little twist in the story, or a weird new monster to fight, and the writing is consistently excellent. I'll never forget the first time I landed on Skellige and rode through those snowy mountains. It's a breathtaking place, with its own rich history, culture, and politics, which you can choose to get involved in. Or you can just get on your horse and see where the freezing winds take you.

Phil: In some ways, *The Witcher 3* is similar to those Ubisoft-style open worlds in which you clear a map of its hundreds and hundreds of icons. But while many open world games trade on emergent systems that support rote (albeit entertaining) interactions, *The Witcher 3*'s best icons lead to stories of interesting characters trying to make their way in a dark, gruelling world. Every main quest, every sidestory, every monster contract, every treasure hunt – they all help build up the richness and texture of this vast, fascinating world. It helps that you view all of this through the lens of Geralt, one of the most likeable protagonists around. He knows his place in this world, and guides you through it with a gruff, world-weary affability. Elsewhere on

this list you'll find games with better combat, or more intricate RPG systems, or even a more consistently gripping story. But there's a reason *The Witcher 3* has been named our best game for two years running. It works to create an unforgettable, unforgiving atmosphere, and casts you as a singularly capable problem solver – not good, not evil, just the right man for the job.

Tom S: When I started playing *Baldur's Gate* and other RPGs I dreamed of the game that would let me live in the fantasy books I loved. *The Witcher 3* comes closer

THERE'S ALWAYS SOME NICE LITTLE TWIST IN THE STORY

than any other to delivering the scale and spectacle of a quality dark fantasy novel. It's gritty and dark in places, like the swamp of Crookback Bog, but wide and open in others. It was a rush to take a little boat away from the mainland and see the mountains of Skellige grow on the horizon. Every island there has a story – a rogue giant here, a tormented werewolf there. It's derivative in many ways, but in this case production values really matter, and *The Witcher 3* is way ahead. Great characters, great stories and cool monsters.

Steven: One of the best aspects of *The Witcher 3* has always been landscape.

Velen, for example, is little more than rolling grasslands, forests, and swamps, and lesser RPGs would combine those biomes to make something functional but forgettable. But *The Witcher 3* has an incredible grasp on how to design environments – the way a road winds through a copse of trees swaying in an evening breeze that you can almost feel. Books are brilliant because their worlds leap to life in our minds as we read them, but I don't think I could ever imagine a world as vivid as the Northern Kingdoms.

Shaun: As a games enthusiast who vehemently mashes the skip button on cutscenes, *The Witcher 3* stands as one of only a few games in which I play for the story. Even on a second and third playthrough, I've got an eye out for tiny nuances in the world's characters that I might have missed previously. *The Witcher 3* is remarkable for this reason, at least as far as I'm concerned: it's able to transfix both a fantasy and videogame story naysayer. And I can't even watch an episode of *Game of Thrones* without idly scrolling through the PC Gamer Discord channel.

Andy K: And we haven't even mentioned the expansions! I think I love *Blood and Wine* even more than the main game, which thrusts Geralt into a world of pageantry, chivalry, and knightly pomposity. Placing the grizzled, weary Witcher into a colourful fairytale land is a great concept, and seeing evil creep into this idyllic setting makes for a fascinating contrast. It's 20 hours of fantastic quests, more great writing, and an absolutely stunning setting. Toussaint is all golden fields, sleepy villages, and vineyards, with a gleaming white castle at the centre of it all, and it feels completely different to anywhere in the Northern Kingdoms. And while not as dramatic a change in tone, the other expansion, *Hearts of Stone*, is a superb chunk of new story with a strong villain and some memorable quests. So with the main game plus the expansions, you're looking at hundreds of hours of the finest roleplaying on PC. CD Projekt Red has set a new benchmark for RPG design that other developers will have to work extremely hard to beat.



THE *Top* 50 FREE DOWNLOADS

SPELUNKING into the world of freeware to find the best games that money can't buy. What treasures have you overlooked?

By Tom Sykes

There's never been a better time to play free PC games, given just how many of them are released every single day. Thousands exist on platforms such as Game Jolt and Itch.io – so many that it can be difficult to spot the gold when it comes glittering by. Every so often you need to celebrate not only classics from the past, but also more recent gems that haven't gained quite as much attention.

In that spirit PC Gamer presents our now yearly edition of the Top 50 Free Downloads, an unordered list of the best games you can download without needing to open your wallet – no, not even for microtransactions.

We haven't been able to fit every great freeware game we know of in here, and there are doubtless others that have slipped our minds. Nevertheless, you will find exemplars from a wide variety of genres – strategy, survival, platforming and more. Take a look, and you'll be sure to find plenty of distractions to tickle your fancy.



01 SEIKLUS

Back in 2003, before 'Metroidvania' was a common term, non-linear platformer *Seiklus* grabbed the nascent indie community by the heart. It's a colourful exploration game with no dialogue or combat, and only a handful of hostile creatures. What it has is a huge amount of charm. Few of the more feature-rich Metroidvanias it inspired lived up to this early star of the Game Maker scene.



02 AN UNTITLED STORY

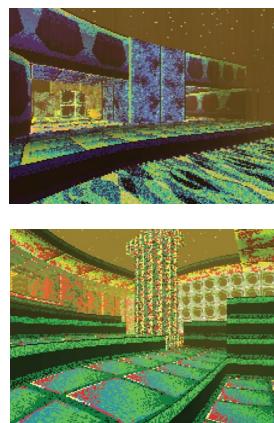
Here you play as... an egg. Not an anthropomorphic egg with arms and legs, like Dizzy. You're an actual egg, albeit one that can admittedly leap to incredible heights. This is an enormous game, with plenty of abilities, secrets, boss fights, challenges and traps to keep you from fulfilling your eggy destiny.

03 TRIBES 2



Stop what you're doing and search for *Tribes Universe*. You'll be taken to an official site containing free versions of every *Tribes* game, yes including the original *Earth sieges* – and even PS2-exclusive *Aerial Assault*. *Vengeance* is the one to start with if you don't plan on playing online, but if you do, get your mitts on *Tribes 2*. The unofficial patch at *TribesNext.com* will restore online functionality.

04 KNOSSU



Jonathan Whiting's puzzler takes place in a non-euclidean labyrinth – a geographically tricksy maze that doesn't link up in quite the way it's supposed to. What appears to be an empty archway from one direction is an open portal from another, and one that connects seamlessly to a different region of space. *Knossu* takes things a step further when you realise you're being hunted by a truly terrifying foe.

05 UNREAL WORLD

The roguelike meets the survival game in a work released well before either had exploded in popularity. Over the decades, *Unreal World* has grown in size and complexity, and now offers a compelling experience set in a procedurally generated version of Iron Age Finland. Investigate supernatural mysteries, or make your way as a hunter, trader, fisherman, etc. Just try to stay alive.



06 DAGGERFALL

The second *Elder Scrolls* isn't necessarily the best, but it is by far the biggest, offering nearly 89 square miles of (partly procedurally generated) world to explore. One of six endings awaits if you manage to finish the thing.

07 CAVE STORY

A labour of love for its unassuming creator Pixel, this managed to take many of the best parts of *Metroid* and *Mega Man*, while putting its own spin on the non-linear platformer. There's nothing else quite like it, even today.

08 BROGUE

If you're looking to get into ASCII-based roguelikes, this is the place to start. An elegant mouse-based control scheme replaces the old keyboard commands, while the sophisticated lighting system creates a tangible atmosphere.

FEATURE

The Top 50 Free Downloads

09



OPENTTD

OpenTTD embiggens *Transport Tycoon Deluxe* with much larger maps, increased player support, and additional transport methods, including canals. Thanks to an updated control scheme, it's easier to play too.

10



MARATHON TRILOGY

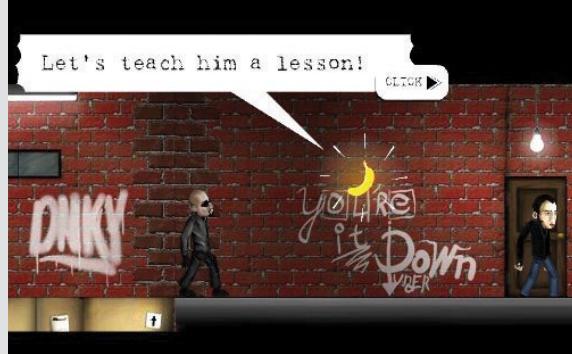
The series was a saving grace for frustrated Mac owners, denied plenty of great shooters back in the day. *Marathon* holds up nicely next to any of them, thanks to its inventive sci-fi universe and satisfying weaponry.

11



BIRDLAND

A funny and insightful story of self-discovery at summer camp, that just happens to involve surreal dream sequences featuring talking birds. These dreams shape the character of nervous teenager Bridget, affecting the real world in interesting ways.



12

MY FRIEND PEDRO

This sidescrolling platform-shooter borrows *Max Payne's* balletic gun-fu, and naturally its bullet-time, to tell the strange story of a hardened gangster and his talking, invisible banana sidekick. But then, it would be difficult to tell a serious story in a game that uses ragdoll physics to fling its tough-guy characters around.



13

DWARF FORTRESS

"I'll give this a proper go someday," you keep telling yourself, and when the time comes, be sure to make the most of the various graphical mods and helper utilities. What other game will let you generate an exhaustively detailed world, complete with centuries of history, and even randomly assembled poetry?

14

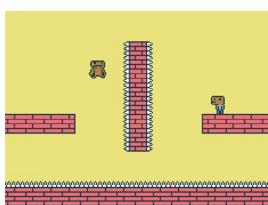
CRYPTWORLDS



It has a dedicated 'piss' button – and that's not even the strangest thing about this surreal first-person adventure. It takes place in a world (or, worlds) that will allow you to fulfil your "darkest desires", and that's true if those desires including eating corpses and widdling on things. It recalls the early days of 3D, when textures were a mess of soupy pixels, and you had to figure everything out yourself.

15

CACTUS ARCADE

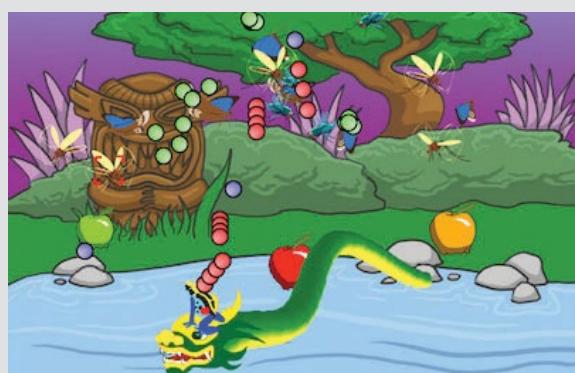


Before *Hotline Miami*, the alarmingly productive Cactus amassed a vast collection of freeware titles, including hyperactive arena shooter *Seizeduredome*, concisely titled shmup *Fuck Space*, and *Shotgun Ninja*. The best are collected in *Cactus Arcade* volumes 1 and 2, so if you enjoyed the trippy ultra-violence of *Hotline Miami*, and you'd like a little more, here are over 30 energetic and inventive freebies.

16

FROG FRACTIONS

Now that the sequel is finally out – true to form, *Frog Fractions 2* was hidden inside another game – let's spare a few moments to appreciate the inspired original. While it appears to be a simple, amphibian-based edutainment title, if you pick away at the surface you'll be taken on a wild ride across multiple genres and settings, in a game that will make you laugh, time and time again.





17

RAFT

This open-sea survival game is a little different from the other crafting games currently piling up on Steam. It's free, for one thing, and while a paid release seems likely further down the line, you can fill your boots with this in-development yet feature-rich early version. The other great thing about

Raft is the raft – the game takes place entirely on a bit of wood in the middle of the ocean. Handily, you appear to be downstream of a constant source of wood and other detritus, which you can use to expand your planky home into a small island, and to craft tools and supplies, not to mention weapons you can wield to defend yourself from a hungry patrolling shark.



19

HEROINE'S QUEST

Inspired by Sierra's *Quest for Glory* series, this mixes point-and-click adventuring with combat and stats more common in an RPG. Like most fan projects, it's a labour of love, sporting beautiful pixel art that compares favourably to Sierra's best, while offering a fresh Nordic setting and a memorable protagonist. Developer Crystal Shard could easily have charged for this sizeable game.



20



SKIPPING STONES TO LONELY HOMES

Alan Hazelden has made several devious puzzlers, but this open-ended work just might be his best. You're trying to cross a series of islands, using only cleverly placed stones and lily pads.

21



LA-MULANA

Inspired by a forgotten Konami game, and made to look like it belongs on the little-known MSX console, but there's nothing obscure about this beloved indie platformer. Explore an ancient temple, full of puzzles, foes and traps.

22



CREATURES SUCH AS WE

If you take the dating element of BioWare games, remove the combat and the apocalyptic threat, and set it on the Moon, you'll have something like this beautifully written philosophical romance story.

23

the room is hot.
the fire is roaring.
the room is warm.
the fire is burning.
dried bones, scraps of fur,
bits of meat, strange scales and
scattered teeth.
dry brush and dead branches
litter the forest floor.
the mysterious wanderer returns,
cart piled high with fire.

A DARK ROOM
An idle clicking game with a twist, that twist being that it's not a naked manipulation of your free time. OK, so it is that too, but it's also a genuinely engaging text adventure set in a gradually expanding world. Look, just play it.

24



SPACE STATION 13

This complex sim puts you on a space station with other players, each with a role. You can either perform your assigned tasks, or go off the reservation, taking advantage of the smart, interlocking systems.

25



CELESTE

Blessed with the power of air-dashing, you have to leap around a world that's quite determined to do you in – but that's all part of the fun in this charming arcade platformer, which is currently awaiting a remake. Play it anyway.



26

DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST

It might be over before you've finished pronouncing the title, but this brief comedy game will have you chuckling for a long while after, primarily thanks to Simon Amstell's increasingly desperate narration. Taking place behind the scenes of a seemingly much more

exciting (but assuredly less funny) game, *Dr. Langeskov* plays out like a far more concentrated *Stanley Parable*. Confounding Amstell is exceptionally entertaining, as you'll discover for yourself as you ignore all his instructions, push every wrong button, and generally drive the game's neurotic, high-pitched designer up the wall.



27

CAESAR'S DAY OFF

If you've not had the pleasure, it's worth exploring webgame maestro Major Bueno's fantastic back-catalogue. This hilarious game, for example, plays like an interactive comic strip, imaging what Caesar gets up to on his rare days off.

28

TREASURE ADVENTURE GAME

This open-ended platformer scratches an itch few similar games do. While there are NPCs and enemies, and a surprisingly large story, this is primarily a game about exploration – of a series of inviting islands you rinse for shiny trinkets.





29 STREETS OF ROGUE

This procedural game ticks all the boxes, mixing roguelike mechanics with an emergent, open-world city, and adding a sprinkling of four-player co-op. The only thing missing is the kitchen si- oh wait, there it is. These elements probably shouldn't work together, but through sheer force of will, this unholy fusion does.

31 OFF-PEAK

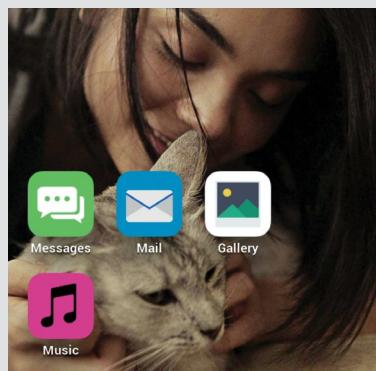


One of the best things about games is their ability to transport you to another place. *Off-Peak* takes you to a bizarre train station full of odd exhibits, unusual shops, and secret passageways linking the circuitous station's nooks and crannies. The people are even more enigmatic, hinting at an interesting setting that never quite comes into full focus. The jazzy soundtrack offers the perfect accompaniment.

33 SPELUNKY

You'll need the HD remake to spelunk with a chum or take part in the daily challenges, but most of the best things about *Spelunky* are in the free original, which also boasts some truly scrumptious pixel art. Its deceptively simple (but still bastard-hard) platforming soon gives way to reveal a canyon-deep roguelike with seriously well-hidden secrets – not to mention piles of tantalising treasure.

30



SARA IS MISSING

In this thoroughly modern adventure, you're snooping around a damaged mobile phone. A woman has gone missing, and you must comb her messages, photos and whatnot to find out where she is. *SIM* takes place entirely inside this setting, with a convincing interface that adds an unsettling element of voyeurism. The only way to find Sara is to unravel her handset, and her life.

32

THE ENTERTAINMENT



Between each episode of its adventure series, *Kentucky Route Zero* creator Cardboard Computer has released an equally magical freeware game: first an interactive art installation, and later a very strange conversation with an automated phone line. This is the best of the lot, a sort of interactive play in which you're an extra, rather than one of the main characters. You can even play in VR.



34



THE SPIRIT ENGINE 2

This huge and somehow free roleplaying game harks back to the glory days of JRPGs. The hook is the unusual sidescrolling presentation, where you explore, converse, and battle on the same 2D plane.

35



WINDOW FRAME

You're probably used to playing games in a window, but this one makes a virtue of it. In this vampire-themed puzzler, you can drag the game window to expand or shrink the stage, creating or removing barriers from your path.

36



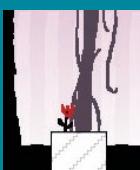
CORRYPT

This is one of the more approachable Michael Brough games, which isn't saying too much, as it's still a brilliantly unusual puzzle game you'll have to figure out on your own. Magic is key, and that's all I'm saying.

FEATURE

The Top 50 Free Downloads

37



KNYTT STORIES

The *Knytt* games differ from most platformers in that they don't feature combat. The challenge comes from using your acrobatic abilities to master each elegant world. *Knytt Stories* also lets you create your own.

38



PERSPECTIVE

Dimensions combine in this impressive student work, which overlays a sidescrolling platform game onto a 3D space. You walk around in first-person to find certain perspectives, and these then allow the hero to progress.

39



WILL YOU EVER RETURN

There's a raw, unconstrained energy to Jack King-Spooner's early games, and you never know where this claymation adventure is heading next. For a more heartfelt experience, check out *Beeswing*.



40

FREECIV

If you prefer *Civilization* before it went all 3D, and you have 125 friends who enjoy turn-based historical scheming, the open-source and feature-resplendent *FreeCiv* is for you. Firaxis' 4X strategy games have the edge when it comes to looks and approachability, but this has them roundly thrashed when it comes to scale. There are currently 550 nations, and support for over 100 online players.



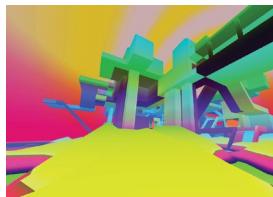
41

C&C: RED ALERT

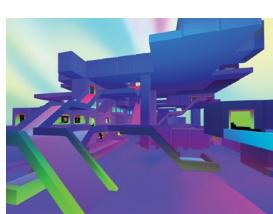
If the early *Command & Conquer*s are playable online over on CnCNet, including *Tiberian Sun*, and even Westwood's *Dune 2000*, which shares the series' DNA if nothing else. Choosing between them is madness, but not as mad as the bonkers alternate history of *Red Alert*, which begins with Einstein travelling back in time. The campaigns are available as freeware, too.

42

THESE MONSTERS

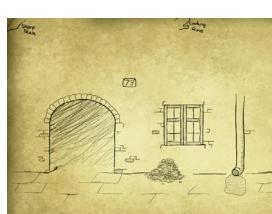


Strangethink's day-glow exploration games look like nothing else, thanks to their defiantly garish colour schemes, and the procedural artwork. These Monsters traps you in an endless loop of infinite museums: galleries where bizarre slogans are displayed on upturned television sets, and alien faces peer out from austere portraits. Search for a way out, or at the very least some kind of meaning.



43

BAD DREAM SERIES



If *Myst* was a horror game it would resemble this collection of sketchy first-person adventures set in creepy environments that include a graveyard, a hospital, and a childhood home. In each you point, you click, and you prod at things you should probably leave alone. Psychological terror is mixed with occasional jump scares and shocks, but even so it's far classier than your average horror game.

44

SANG-FROID: TALES OF WEREWOLVES

In this wintry strategy game, you have to defend your homestead from a procession of feral enemies. You lay traps and shore up your defences by day, but at night you step into the fray and batter supernatural beasties personally.





45 ORCHIDS TO DUSK

What would you do if you only had a few minutes left to live? If you're reading this while crossing the road, then we may already have an answer, however your options are a little more numerous in Pol Clarissou's meaningful sci-fi adventure. You play an astronaut stranded on an alien planet, with a

dwindling supply of oxygen. Now, you could try to conserve O₂ by staying exactly where you are, but this is a world that needs to be seen, by trekking away from your crashed pod and into the strangely green desert that lies before you. Without giving too much away, you'll begin to find other things out in the expanse as well – things that look eerily familiar.



FLOOR 1/15 HP ♥♥♥

Z - Wait

1 2 3

46 TINY HEIST

Super Hexagon dev Terry Cavanagh is also responsible for many freeware works, including this fantastic procedural stealth game. It's *Rogue* meets *Metal Gear Solid*, inviting you to sneak across levels of guards, nippy dogs, and security cameras.

47 HOW DO YOU DO IT?

An eleven-year-old girl explores the mysteries of the reproductive system in this adorable physics adventure. Alone with two plastic dolls, you attempt to decipher the secrets of sex by pushing, rotating and jostling the naked figurines together. The ragdoll physics makes it, as does mum's imminent return.



48



SLENDER: THE EIGHT PAGES

Slender had a revolutionary effect on horror games, inspiring devs to strip away extraneous elements to focus on the thrill of being hunted. *Slender Man* might be a long-armed bozo, but he sure is a scary one.

49



GALATEA

Emily Short's groundbreaking interactive fiction game does away with many genre conventions, to deliver one extraordinarily detailed conversation with a living statue. It's a chat that will lead to one of around 70 different endings.

50



YUME NIKKI

This Japanese adventure will stick with you long after you stop playing, given how convincingly dreamlike – and nightmarish – it is. It takes place in a girl's surreal dreams – but what does all the strange imagery mean?

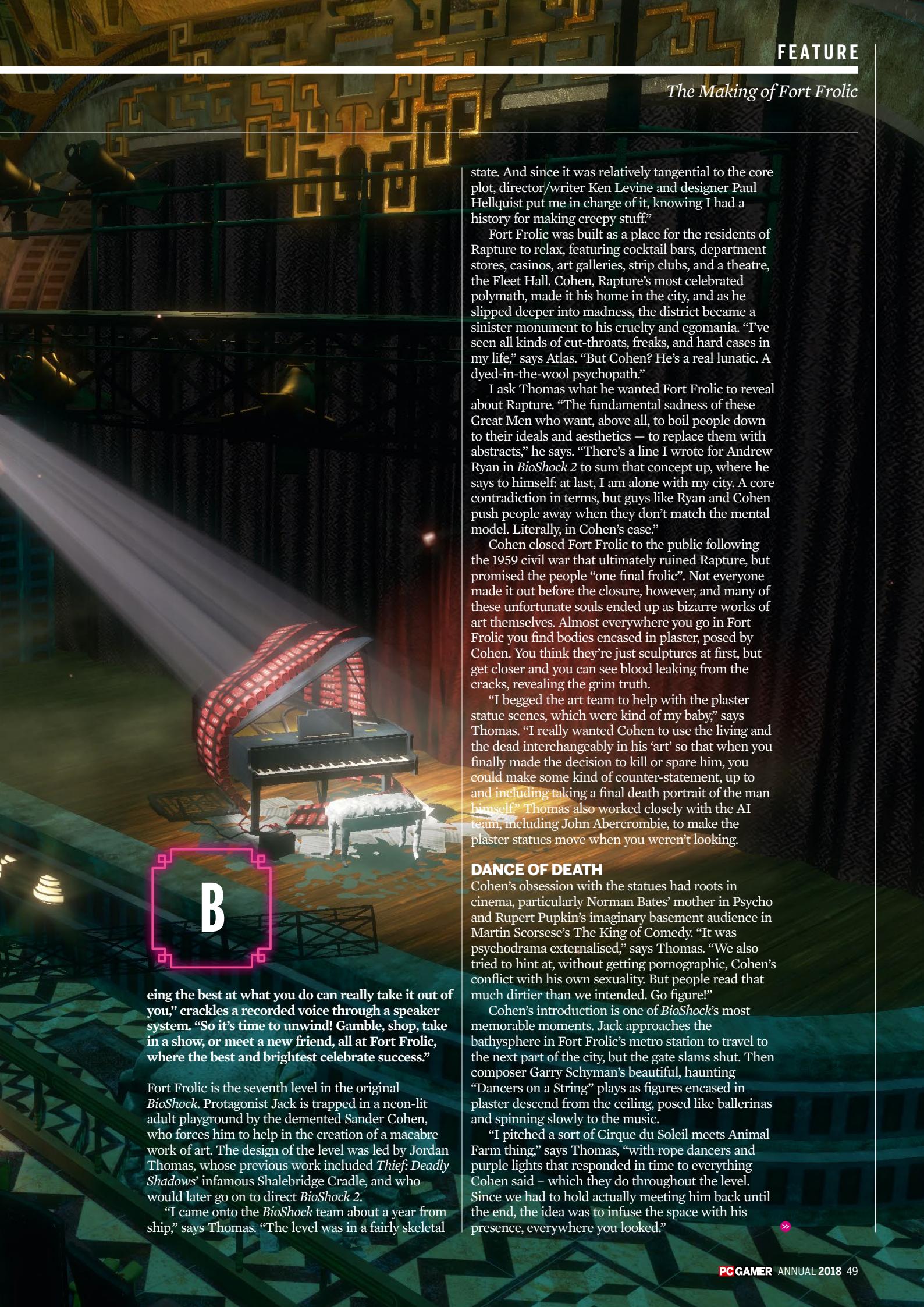
The Making of Fort Frolic

The making of **FORT FROLIC**, BioShock's most twisted and memorable level.

DARK ARTS



By Andy Kelly



B

eing the best at what you do can really take it out of you," crackles a recorded voice through a speaker system. "So it's time to unwind! Gamble, shop, take in a show, or meet a new friend, all at Fort Frolic, where the best and brightest celebrate success."

Fort Frolic is the seventh level in the original *BioShock*. Protagonist Jack is trapped in a neon-lit adult playground by the demented Sander Cohen, who forces him to help in the creation of a macabre work of art. The design of the level was led by Jordan Thomas, whose previous work included *Thief: Deadly Shadows*' infamous Shalebridge Cradle, and who would later go on to direct *BioShock 2*.

"I came onto the *BioShock* team about a year from ship," says Thomas. "The level was in a fairly skeletal

state. And since it was relatively tangential to the core plot, director/writer Ken Levine and designer Paul Hellquist put me in charge of it, knowing I had a history for making creepy stuff."

Fort Frolic was built as a place for the residents of Rapture to relax, featuring cocktail bars, department stores, casinos, art galleries, strip clubs, and a theatre, the Fleet Hall. Cohen, Rapture's most celebrated polymath, made it his home in the city, and as he slipped deeper into madness, the district became a sinister monument to his cruelty and egomania. "I've seen all kinds of cut-throats, freaks, and hard cases in my life," says Atlas. "But Cohen? He's a real lunatic. A dyed-in-the-wool psychopath."

I ask Thomas what he wanted Fort Frolic to reveal about Rapture. "The fundamental sadness of these Great Men who want, above all, to boil people down to their ideals and aesthetics — to replace them with abstracts," he says. "There's a line I wrote for Andrew Ryan in *BioShock 2* to sum that concept up, where he says to himself: at last, I am alone with my city. A core contradiction in terms, but guys like Ryan and Cohen push people away when they don't match the mental model. Literally, in Cohen's case."

Cohen closed Fort Frolic to the public following the 1959 civil war that ultimately ruined Rapture, but promised the people "one final frolic". Not everyone made it out before the closure, however, and many of these unfortunate souls ended up as bizarre works of art themselves. Almost everywhere you go in Fort Frolic you find bodies encased in plaster, posed by Cohen. You think they're just sculptures at first, but get closer and you can see blood leaking from the cracks, revealing the grim truth.

"I begged the art team to help with the plaster statue scenes, which were kind of my baby," says Thomas. "I really wanted Cohen to use the living and the dead interchangeably in his 'art' so that when you finally made the decision to kill or spare him, you could make some kind of counter-statement, up to and including taking a final death portrait of the man himself." Thomas also worked closely with the AI team, including John Abercrombie, to make the plaster statues move when you weren't looking.

DANCE OF DEATH

Cohen's obsession with the statues had roots in cinema, particularly Norman Bates' mother in *Psycho* and Rupert Pupkin's imaginary basement audience in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*. "It was psychodrama externalised," says Thomas. "We also tried to hint at, without getting pornographic, Cohen's conflict with his own sexuality. But people read that much dirtier than we intended. Go figure!"

Cohen's introduction is one of *BioShock*'s most memorable moments. Jack approaches the bathysphere in Fort Frolic's metro station to travel to the next part of the city, but the gate slams shut. Then composer Garry Schyman's beautiful, haunting "Dancers on a String" plays as figures encased in plaster descend from the ceiling, posed like ballerinas and spinning slowly to the music.

"I pitched a sort of Cirque du Soleil meets Animal Farm thing," says Thomas, "with rope dancers and purple lights that responded in time to everything Cohen said — which they do throughout the level. Since we had to hold actually meeting him back until the end, the idea was to infuse the space with his presence, everywhere you looked." >>



The atrium is one of the most visually striking locations in Rapture.

» The bunny masks worn by the splicers in *BioShock* have become a big part of the game's visual identity, and they're also a strong presence in Fort Frolic. "Thank God Scott Sinclair loved animal masks!" says Thomas of *BioShock*'s art director. "The bunny theme really caught on with him, then Ken wrote it in. It helped us fight back against people thinking Cohen was just The Joker."

The deranged artist's voice booms from some unknown source as the bathysphere sinks into the water. "Atlas, Ryan, Atlas, Ryan," he says wearily. "Time was you could get something decent on the radio. The artist has a duty to seduce the ear and delight the spirit." Then he perks up suddenly. "So say goodbye to those two blowhards, and hello to an evening with Sander Cohen!"

At this point, Cohen

tests your mettle by sending a group of splicers after you. After you defeat them he grants you entry to the atrium – a visually stunning central hub for the Fort Frolic level. It's dark when you first enter, then Schyman's score swells as a

collection of gorgeous, colourful neon lights advertising Frolic's stores and bars blink into life. When Cohen speaks the lights in the room turn purple, and if you anger him – attacking his artwork, for example – they turn red to mirror his rage. This is a subtle way of telling you that Cohen is intrinsically linked to this place.

"Honestly that was me stealing from myself, as far back as the Cradle," says Thomas. "I love the moment when a semi-abandoned space comes to life, with power restored. It asserts, wordlessly, that it is a character unto itself. That's something of a cliché now, but as of the first *BioShock* that idea still felt new to me." Scott Sinclair and his art team were responsible for the bold, colourful look of the atrium, and Thomas adds that took him a while to get used to it. "I was raised in Seattle and we draw back from bright colour and hiss like flabby draculas."

However, despite this vivid use of colour, there's still plenty of darkness elsewhere in Fort Frolic. *BioShock* is, after all, a horror game. A lot of its creepiest moments happen in the basement areas, including the surreal image of a plaster sculpture sitting on a chair, facing a corner, lit by a flashing light as Patti Page's recording of "(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?" plays eerily. It's clear Thomas put his experience with the Cradle to good use when creating these moments.

FALLEN ANGEL

Rapture is a city filled with tragedy, but one story in particular is especially moving – that of Jasmine Jolene. In her early days she was a chorus girl in one of Cohen's Broadway musicals, before catching the eye of Andrew Ryan. He invited her to Rapture where she became a dancer at Eve's Garden, a club in Fort Frolic. We see posters all over the level describing her as "Andrew Ryan's favourite gal!" – a detail that becomes tinged with dark irony

as we venture deeper into Fort Frolic and learn more about her.

Through her story a major plot point is revealed that gives her extra significance – particularly to Jack. And there's a haunting moment when you enter a room in the back of Eve's Garden and find her brutalised body next to a blood-spattered poster of her in her prime. There are bloody bodies all over Rapture, of course, but the added context and relevance to your character makes this one pack an extra emotional punch. "My heart breaks a bit for Jasmine," says Thomas. "She was an attempt to make just another dead body posed in the environment have multiple layers of significance that hit you harder and harder the deeper you go."

Jack's journey through Fort Frolic involves him visiting the Southern Mall, a shopping district littered with further examples of Cohen's "human art", a

DESPITE THE VIVID USE OF COLOUR, THERE'S PLENTY OF DARKNESS IN FORT FROLIC

**DIRTY DANCING**

This club hides a dark secret involving dancer Jasmine Jolene.

MAKING A MONSTER

The concept art origins of Sander Cohen



1 An early portrait of Sander Cohen by Robb Waters, who also worked on *System Shock* and *Thief*.

2 Cohen's pancake make-up, based on Joan Crawford in the 1962 thriller *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

3 Notes on this concept art say Cohen's face should be 'wet and greasy'.

4 The waxed moustache was inspired by surrealist painter Salvador Dalí.



ADULT ENTERTAINMENT

Key locations in Fort Frolic



METRO STATION

It's here you're first introduced to Cohen as he seals off the bathysphere and forces you to take a detour.



ATRIUM

Fort Frolic's impressive central hub, decorated with neon signs advertising the shops and venues within.



POSEIDON PLAZA

A shopping and entertainment district with bars, casinos, and Eve's Garden, the club where Jasmine Jolene performed.



SOUTHERN MALL

A trendy, upmarket commercial district containing a neon-lit cocktail lounge, a fancy high-end clothes store, and a beauty salon.

LOCAL FLAVOUR
The only people left in Fort Frolic are either dead or spliced up.

» cocktail bar where the well-to-do would drink the night away, and a cigar shop. Later he moves through Poseidon Plaza and finds Sir Prize, a casino filled with one-armed bandits, and learns the horrible truth about Jasmine Jolene through ghostly flashbacks. There are bigger levels in *BioShock*, but Frolic makes up for its smaller scale with an incredible attention to detail and rich environmental storytelling.

When the player, as Jack, finishes helping Cohen create his "masterpiece" — a demented sculpture built around pictures of former disciples he forces you to kill and photograph — the man himself makes a grand entrance in the atrium. Fireworks explode, the recording of a cheering audience plays (another nod to *The King of Comedy*), and he marvels at his grim quadtych. "It's beautiful!" he coos. "You'll find your path to Ryan is now clear."

Usually when you meet a major character in *BioShock* they're safely hidden behind a wall or out of reach, so it's a surprise when you see Cohen walking around openly. This lets the player know that, yes, you can kill him if you want to. But refusing to attack him unlocks an otherwise inaccessible "Power to the People" upgrade station later in the game, in Olympus Heights, so it's worth sparing his life. The option is there, at least.

"This scene was a nightmare of scripting and effects work, and trying to make the player realise they had a choice. A fight was not forced, which was an attempt to seduce you into at least questioning whether, in his state of mind, Cohen deserves to die." When it was finally working with minimal bugs, Thomas stood up and shouted "It's done!" to an empty office at 3am. "I realised the irony of my lonely 'masterpiece' and went home."

Cohen is clearly mentally disturbed, and in many ways deciding whether to kill him or not is a more interesting moral choice than harvesting or sparing the Little Sisters. He's a murderer and a villain, but there's a tragedy to him as well. Through audio diaries we learn of his mental decline, and his burning resentment of Andrew Ryan. "I could have been the toast of Broadway, the talk of Hollywood," he broods in one recording. "But instead I followed you to this soggy bucket. When you needed my starlight I

illuminated you, but now I rot, waiting for an audience that never comes."

It's also suggested by Anna Culpepper, a musician who wrote songs criticising Rapture's elite, that Cohen was being used, perhaps unwittingly, by Ryan as a propagandist. "Cohen's not a musician," she says in an audio log. "He's Ryan's stableboy. Ryan's corrupt policies crap all over the place, and Cohen flutters around clearing it up. But instead of using a shovel, Cohen tidies with a catchy melody and a clever turn of phrase."

DELETED SCENES

Some ideas for Fort Frolic were left on the cutting room floor, including the planned inclusion of a ferris wheel — which later appeared in a console-only "challenge room" DLC. The developers also planned to make a zoo part of Fort Frolic, and some have expressed regret at having to cut it. No assets from the

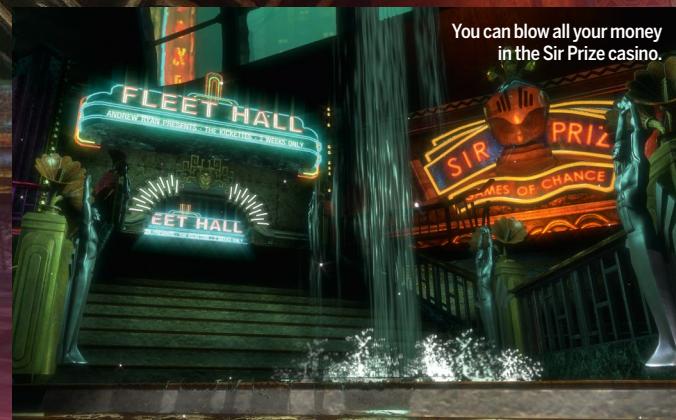
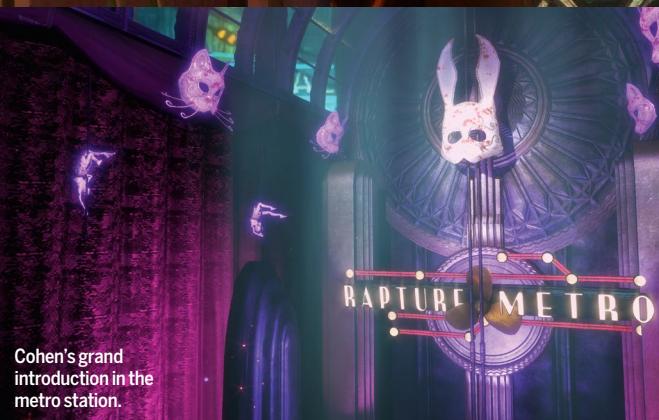
zoo have been discovered by data-miners, so it seems likely it never made it far past the concept phase. A shame, but Rapture itself is like one giant aquarium, so perhaps it didn't need one.

Early in *BioShock 2*'s development,

players were supposed to pass through the flooded atrium of Fort Frolic on their way to Dionysus Park. "You'd be going through a sunken version of a level you'd remember from the first game," designer Eric Sterner writes in the Deco Devolution *BioShock 2* artbook. This idea was ultimately scrapped, but concept art shows the flooded ruins of the atrium.

"Fort Frolic taught me that narrative in games is all about theme, from the gross musculature down to the cellular level," says Thomas, reflecting on the lessons he learned making the level. "The ideal case is that theme is a kind of space in which the player is invited to move to and fro, and the more pervasive, the less you have to worry that they won't 'get' it." The level is about art, narcissism, "and the struggle to include others in one's private vision". Everything the player does and sees, Thomas says, is a reflection of that. "The quest is literally to take photos of a scenario you can concoct, and players got very, uh, creative with their compositions. Suffice to say, I think Cohen found a lot of new disciples out there." ■

COHEN IS A MURDERER AND A VILLAIN, BUT THERE'S A TRAGEDY TO HIM AS WELL



Uninvited GUEST

The making of **LADY BOYLE'S LAST PARTY**, our
favourite *Dishonored* mission.



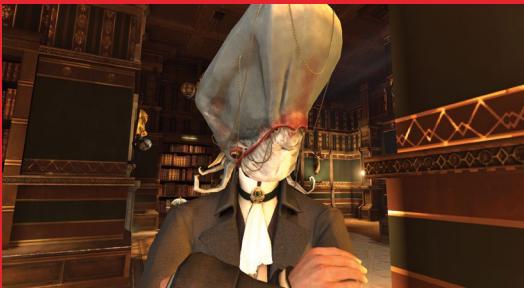
By Andy Kelly



sk any *Dishonored* fan what their favourite mission is and there's a good chance they'll say Lady Boyle's Last Party. Your target is Lady Boyle herself, the setting a lavish masked ball in her opulent mansion, and there are countless ways to complete your objective. It's an amazingly complex level, both in terms of its layout and the intricacies of the mission itself. My first question for Harvey Smith, co-creative director, is a simple one: where on Earth did they start? »

FEATURE

Dishonored



» "We had a whiteboard of interesting setups for missions," he says. "Things like there being three targets, but only one of them is the correct target. Then in another column we had a long list of locations including a costume party, which of course became the setting for Lady Boyle's Last Party. We were basically mixing and matching ideas. Some were thrown out straight away, though, like a mission where a train stops and you have five minutes to kill a passenger before it leaves the station."

One of the most interesting things about the level is the stark contrast between the starting area and the mansion. Corvo's first objective is to find a way into the party, and to do so he has to make his way through a section of moonlit, plague-ridden city streets. "One thing that makes the level work is the chunk of urban architecture beforehand," says Smith. "You're roaming this apocalyptic city and avoiding guards, then suddenly you're in a place with masked aristocrats where you can move around freely."

One of *Dishonored*'s major themes is the abuse of power. "That can be a guard punching a dude in the mouth just because he can get away with it," says Smith, "or it can be a mythic figure offering you supernatural powers with the cynical expectation that you're going to abuse them. It's about one person living a wealthy life while a thousand others are living like rats."

In Lady Boyle's Last Party, the sharp divide between the grim surrounding streets and the grand house, hidden

safely away from the infected citizens and rats, reflects this theme. "You go through the streets, which are rat-infested and littered with diseased corpses, then you cross over into this palatial home where there are gold-plated frames and tables loaded with little crab cakes that someone has spent all day making."

BEHIND THE MASK

The guests, whose faces are obscured by bizarre masks, represent the richest, most influential people in Dunwall. "We want to avoid 'poor people are good and rich people are evil', but it's true that power tends to make people grotesque, or it puts people in situations that are hard to resist," says Smith. "Rich families profited from selling chemicals to the Nazis. People are

making money from housing projects in Detroit. It's a tone-deafness to human suffering in exchange for personal profit that some of the upper class citizens in Dunwall are guilty of."

The mansion itself is one of the best examples of *Dishonored*'s incredible art design and world-building. Like many locations in the game, it doesn't feel like a level; it feels like a place. "One of the secrets to the worlds we build is that

they're messy," says Smith. "There isn't 'the stealth corridor' and 'the hacking hallway'. Instead, we try to blend these things naturally into the environment. And it helps that European cities, which inspired Dunwall, are inherently more organic than grid-like American ones. When they say 'all the money is on the screen' about a film, that's true of Lady Boyle's Last Party too. We put so much work into it."

The masks worn by the party guests are another example of Arkane's sophisticated visual design. "I remember the meeting," says Smith. "At first we were thinking about cats,

jack-o'-lanterns, stuff like that. Traditional Halloween imagery. But then we ended up with the more surreal designs that ended up in the game, like a baby coming out of

someone's head and a fox with a corn cob pipe. When we combined these with the pseudo-Victorian aristocratic costumes, it really worked."

As dark as *Dishonored* is, the game also has a sense of humour, including the ability to sign the guestbook at the party as yourself, despite potentially being the most wanted man in the city. "Our world is grim, terrible, and plague-infested, but what makes that work is having a little relief. Signing the book as Corvo Attano feels almost perverse. And it creates gossip later. Is it possible he was actually there? 'No, it's someone's idea of a joke.' And players love that kind of humour in the middle of all this darkness."

But while the non-lethal solutions in a lot of *Dishonored*'s missions are darkly comical, the one here is just plain dark. "Regrettably dark," according to Smith. A partygoer called Lord Brisby, who has an unhealthy obsession with your target, asks you to "deliver" her to him, and in return he'll make sure she's never seen again. So >

"PLAYERS LOVE HUMOUR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DARKNESS"

GUEST LIST *The people behind the party*



HARVEY SMITH
Co-creative director
Previous work:
Deus Ex, Thief: Deadly Shadows



SÉBASTIEN MITTON
Art director
Previous work:
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic, BioShock 2



DAMIEN LAURENT
Lead architect
Previous work:
Splinter Cell: Double Agent, BioShock 2



RAPHAËL COLANTONIO
Co-creative director
Previous work:
Arx Fatalis, Dark Messiah



CHRISTOPHE CARRIER
Level design director
Previous work:
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

**GROUND FOR CONCERN**

There are several ways to slip into the mansion if you get creative with Corvo's powers.

WATCH DOGS

The fact that guards won't bother you if you stay out of trouble gives the level a unique feel.



FEATURE

Dishonored



AIR QUALITY
The lighting, and effects like this hazy smoke hanging in the air, create a rich atmosphere.

FOLLOWING ORDERS
The way the guards move around gives the level an almost *Hitman*-like feel in places.





One of the Boyle sisters. But is it the right one?

► while you aren't killing her, you are helping a possibly mentally disturbed man in a creepy scarecrow mask to spirit her away somewhere from which she'll never return. It's one of the most sinister examples of the game's characteristic moral greyness.

Lady Boyle's Last Party is also one of the finest examples of *Dishonored*'s detailed simulation and open-ended design. The fact that you can move around as you please gives you more time to formulate a complicated plan, whether you're going for a high or low chaos approach. But you have to determine which of the three Boyle sisters is your target first. Because, brilliantly, every time you play the level your target is a different sister.

Reading their diaries will reveal something about their personalities, which is one method of discovering the correct target. Waverly, for example, is

paranoid, and you can convince her that her life is in danger and lead her to the cellar to quietly deal with her. Esma, on the other hand, has an insatiable sexual appetite, and you can exploit this and have her lead you to her bedroom. And Lydia – the hardest to kill quietly – is a music lover, and will retreat to the music room occasionally to play the piano. There are so many layers and so many possible routes and outcomes that it's no surprise that this mission has become a fan favourite.

IN CONTROL

"In our games we don't have those scenes where the player's in a helicopter and it crashes into a building and it collapses," says Smith. "We'd rather let you drive the action yourself. It's a different kind of drama, knowing that you did it, that you had an impact on the simulation. It's harder to sell, of course. The helicopter is a much easier, more immediate sell. But you walk away with a more unique experience."

The level is full of Easter eggs and reactivity that reinforces this idea of you having a direct impact on what's happening – some of which carries over from previous levels. If your chaos level is high, some of the guests will sneeze, implying the plague is spreading more rapidly. If you repeatedly bother a certain guest, he'll call the guards and you'll have to make an excuse. Make the wrong one and you'll be asked to leave the party. Eat

the apple belonging to the guard at the gate and he'll exclaim "My apple! Just who do you think you are?" Small details, but they bring the level to life.

I ask Smith if any ideas were scrapped before they made it into the final level. "All the major movements were there from the start. The exterior area, getting the invitation, and even subtle stuff like signing the guestbook. We did originally intend for more people you knew to be at the party, but we couldn't figure out how to keep them alive. Raphael [Colantonio] has all these funny sayings from his aunts and grandmother. He says that if an idea is cut early then we 'killed it in the egg', so anything that didn't make it into the

mission was probably killed in the egg before we spent time on it."

Dishonored always struck me as a game with a very driven, singular vision, and this response seems to

confirm that. They had a strong concept, a costume party assassination with a mystery target, and ran with it, never losing sight of the original idea. The result is one of the most entertaining, deep, and complex levels in the history of the immersive sim.

It's the perfect expression of the genre, giving you a fun simulation to experiment with, a rich setting to exploit, and engaging tools to create unique stories with.

"*Dishonored* is about your own problem solving, plan formulation, and epiphanies," says Smith. "It's about the drama of your own experiences." ■

PARTY CRASHER

Three ways to infiltrate the party



BLINK
The easiest way to sneak into the party is to use Blink to jump over the wall from a rooftop. As soon as you set foot in the grounds, the guards will assume you're a guest.



INVITATION
A partygoer outside the mansion will drop their invitation, which you can use to waltz straight through the front door. You can also find one in the House of Pleasure mission.



FISH
Possess a fish in the street section and you can swim through the sewers until you emerge beneath the mansion. You can then make your way up to the party through the cellar.

FEATURE

Hitman's Sapienza

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THE ITALIAN JOB

The story behind
SAPIENZA, Hitman's
best episode.

By Phil Savage



Sapienza, the second level of *Hitman*, began as two words: Coastal Town. "This was the only direction we got," says Torbjørn Christensen, lead level designer. "So we really had a lot of freedom to be creative." That coastal town would

become the game's standout level, against which subsequent *Hitman* episodes are compared. For many, myself included, it was the level that proved IO knew what it was doing – that after *Absolution*, and despite a controversial episodic release plan, the studio was back to making quality assassination sandboxes. >

FEATURE

Hitman's Sapienza

➤ *Sapienza* was developed in parallel with *Paris*, *Hitman*'s first level, and in part as a response to it. The Showstopper mission was built around exclusivity – the idea that 47 is able to infiltrate any location. “This night-time gala feeling was something that we felt was important to *Paris*,” says Christian Elverdam, creative director for *Hitman*. “I think the contrast to *Sapienza*, then, was obviously daytime; relaxed, casual and all that.” Where *Paris* is enclosed, with muted lighting and soft colours, *Sapienza* is bright, open and vibrant.

“The level was created by an environment artist and myself,” says Christensen, who spent two weeks mocking up a rough version during IO’s summer holiday. “During those weeks the good weather was definitely an inspiration, and we could work undisturbed because everyone else was on vacation.” He based the look on towns along Italy’s Amalfi coast, using both the colourful yellow buildings and the unusual topography. “We especially wanted to explore the verticality in coastal towns, and how streets and corridors connect everything.”

“If I say to you, ‘You’re going to infiltrate a palace,’ I think immediately your mind starts to imagine what that means,” says Elverdam. “You understand roughly what a palace is; it has different floors, it might have a basement, it might have an attic. It might have a main entrance, it might



have a rear entrance, it might have a garden. You can mentally encompass it easily. Whereas with something like *Sapienza*, if we tell you you’re infiltrating an Italian coastal town, it’s much harder to guess where the level starts and stops, which makes the organic exploration of the level so satisfying, in my mind.”

For Elverdam, *Sapienza* represents the pinnacle of what he calls Swiss Cheese design. “We used this feeling that we built a volume filled with connections, and these connections mean that you will never get lost.” The

idea is you should be able to go in any direction – through a different hole in the cheese – and, when you come out at the other end, find a new way to progress. “You don’t have to backtrack necessarily, if you don’t want to.”

CONNECTED

As the theme and layout took shape, IO needed a target to fill it. The Italian setting offered an obvious solution. “We quickly decided that the target should be a mafia boss living in a huge mansion,” says Christensen. “The mafia idea spawned the secret cave under the mansion, where various illegal activities could take place. One idea was that Silvio used his seaplane to get rid of enemies out at sea – a rather extreme version of ‘sleeping with the fishes’.”

In the end, Silvio Caruso’s profession was altered from gangster to scientist. But the team still wanted him to feel like a stereotypical Italian. “He was very attached to his mother, still lived at home, likes his mother’s spaghetti, has a temper, etc.” The underground hideout became the obvious location for a laboratory.

I was surprised to learn the story could have such an effect on the design

TRAVEL COMPANIONS *This isn't a holiday, 47*



SILVIO CARUSO

Shy, awkward, psychologically abused. Many of his Opportunities centre around the emotional turmoil caused by his deceased mother.



FRANCESCA DE SANTIS

Ostensibly the head of Caruso’s virus project, she moonlights as a spy to make sure he doesn’t become a threat to the programme.



DNA SPECIFIC VIRUS

A virus designed to kill specific targets based on their DNA. Clearly Caruso has been playing too much *Metal Gear Solid*.





LEFT: Both targets live in the mansion, but can be coaxed down into the town.

BOTTOM: IO wanted the player to feel like they were on holiday.

of a level, especially as *Hitman*'s plot had, until the last few episodes, seemed inconsequential to the action. I ask Elverdam to elaborate on how the designers work with the writing team. "It's a back and forth all the time. In this case I think story reasons is maybe a simplification – it was also a thematic thing." For Elverdam, contrast is a key tool in creating atmosphere and adding environmental context. "In *Hokkaido*, as an example, we have the super beautiful but very raw nature, in stark contrast to this high-tech facility and very pleasant interior of the hospital. It's an interesting thing, and you feel a little bit like a prisoner looking out at this wide mountain range."

Contrast can add depth to character, too. In *Marrakesh*, banker Claus Strandberg is hiding out in the Swedish consulate. "It's almost meant to build up Strandberg's arrogance," says Elverdam. "The whole building is an affront to the Moroccan culture, in the sense that it's air conditioned, and completely Scandinavian in its outlook. There's a certain arrogance there that they're not even trying to assimilate."

The most obvious contrast in *Sapienza* is between the idyllic setting

and Caruso's own internal turmoil. Opportunities are story driven threads that 47 can use to manipulate and kill targets, and those designed for Caruso often lean upon his relationship with his mother. Created as a collaboration between writers and designers, for Elverdam Opportunities are a way for IO to push the fantasy of the *Hitman* experience. "I think some of the powerful moments are obviously when I enter the Moroccan Embassy and, dressed as a cameraman, I feel almost like I'm part of a spy thriller," he says. "Or when I'm sitting, waiting for Caruso as a psychiatrist, it feels like the chessmaster version of Agent 47 – this feeling that he's one step ahead."

Some Opportunities are complex design tasks, such as the chandelier that can be made to crash down onto the stage in *Paris*. Others are subtler, but just as memorable. "The psychiatrist moment is actually very downplayed, and it's still pretty powerful," says Elverdam. "They also allow us to do some meaningful banter with Agent 47, where he's actually talking to the different targets or sometimes just introducing himself." The double meaning when Agent 47, dressed as a psychiatrist, reassures a member of Caruso's household "I'm the best", is a way to add a touch of personality to the character.

Delving further into the backstory of the targets has some interesting effects. While Christensen seems disappointed

he didn't get to create the full mafia fantasy, Elverdam seems happy with Caruso's final form. "When I look at the feedback from *Sapienza*, a lot of people for the first time said they didn't feel necessarily comfortable killing Silvio," he says. "The fact that he's just a mamma's boy, and he's been bullied and downtrodden throughout his life, makes him more interesting as a character than if he was sort of a top gangster boss." For Elverdam, the moral ambiguity is a sign of a character with a little more complexity. "It felt a little bit like a deeper target than maybe what we've done before."

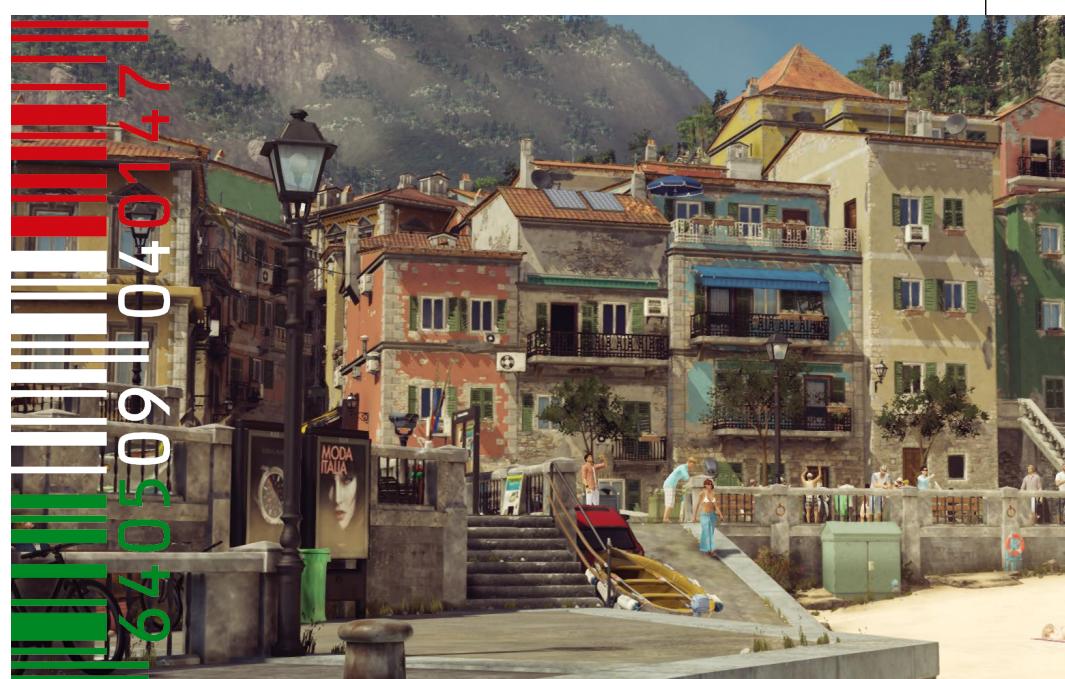
ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

Opportunities can lead to some showpiece moments, but each level must also support more player-driven solutions. "When you take the role of a hitman, it should feel like the world is full of ways to kill people," Christensen says. "In addition to the more custom setups, we try to have many other possible ways to kill targets. Accidental death should lurk around every corner in the world of assassination." The challenge is filling the world with ways to kill a target, but not make the act itself trivial to perform. Hence the civilians and guards, who will notice if you do anything suspicious.

NPCs are added early to the level, and refined from there. "We try to make every NPC have a purpose, and only place them where it makes sense," says Christensen. "The 'enforcers' that can see through disguises are often added later, once we start playtesting the mission in depth. Their exact placement, or the direction they look, will be tweaked numerous times to make sure it feels difficult in a fun way."

IO had never before created a level on this scale. They were attempting to ➤

"PEOPLE DIDN'T FEEL COMFORTABLE KILLING SILVIO"



FEATURE

Hitman's Sapienza

create environments much larger than *Blood Money*, but with the NPC density of *Absolution*. “We were building some very large levels, and we had some fundamental questions,” says Elverdam. “How do you navigate? How much traversal is acceptable? How much do people like it?”

Playtesting was invaluable, and helped IO refine many aspects. One of the big changes of this period was to target loops – the route a target will travel and repeat. Initially, Francesca De Santis, *Sapienza*'s secondary target, would wander around the town. “She went to the church and the cave during her main loop,” says Christensen. “Because of the very long travel times between those locations, we decided to not do this, as it wasn't fun to wait that long for her to do her loop. Silvio had similar issues, so in order to fix this, both targets' main loops were shortened.” For both, Opportunities were implemented that let the player trigger events to lure out their targets – furthering the *Hitman* fantasy of manipulating your quarry.

With both targets confined to the mansion, the town feels quiet and peaceful. Crucially, it still has a purpose. This is one of *Sapienza*'s most distinctive features – containing the main challenge in the mansion, but filling the town with weapons, secret routes and Opportunities. “Making the town free to explore was a deliberate choice,” says Christensen, “and *Sapienza* was not filled with busy crowds on purpose, as we wanted a more relaxed ‘siesta’ feel.”

Nevertheless, it was something of a bold departure from previous games. “We were a little bit afraid of the density in small pockets,” says Elverdam, “but I also think that's one of the things that actually turned out very

BELOW: The mundanity of the location contrasts against 47's dark mission.

nicely with *Sapienza*. It has some space in there and you can actually breathe.”

Each episode is designed to be played many times, in multiple configurations. Where the World of Tomorrow mission keeps things centred around Caruso's mansion, the Escalation and Elusive Target missions take place all across the town. These alternate missions focus on different targets, often with extra complications for 47 to consider. But while both were part of *Hitman*'s development plan, neither had an effect on the way *Sapienza* was designed. “Elusive Targets are not thought of as part of how we build the levels,” says Elverdam, “because the complexity of the sandbox really should dictate that if we build a swiss cheese from the get go, and on an organic level where you can move around, then there should be room for an Elusive Target.”

According to Elverdam, the team responsible for creating Elusive Targets



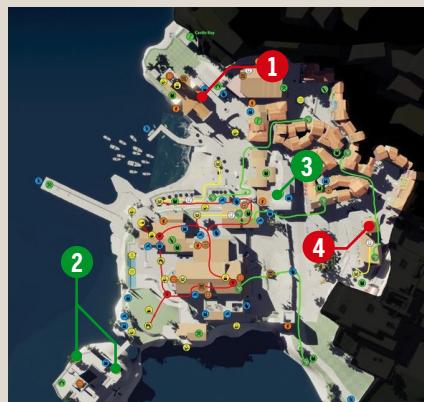
TOUR GUIDE *Things to do in Sapienza*

1 PLAY DEAD

Get here early enough and you'll meet a scientist with a handy dongle.

2 CANNON RUN

These cannons still work. You just need your target to walk into position.



3 OVERWATCH
The tower offers a perfect view of the mansion. Sniper rifle supplied separately.

4 HOLIDAY HOME

47's safehouse contains an experimental exploding golf ball. Use your imagination.

use heatmap data to see where players spend the majority of their time. “If we see that a lot of people don't necessarily spend a lot of time in the gardens of Paris, then we'll put in a little garden party and so forth.”

You might assume the same holds true of Contracts – custom missions that players can create and share. Apparently, that's not the case. “Contracts mode is a little bit more embedded in the early thought process of the level,” says Elverdam, “in the sense that, while Contracts mode does not dictate what a level looks like and how it's built, there is a pass where we make sure we put in enough patrolling NPCs that they can become interesting targets.” Too many generic NPCs would restrict a Contract creator's options.





"We need to make sure that there are enough small characters and moments and identifiable targets on a level that Contracts mode feels it could take off."

LOCATION SHOOT

A more substantial *Sapienza* remix happened over summer, with the release of *Hitman*'s bonus episode. It centred the action on the town, turning it into a film set. "It allowed us to use the town square as a trespassing zone, which is something you would almost never do otherwise," says Elverdam. "The town square and the streets are typically – obviously – for the public, right?" The film set also allowed the team to do something surprising. "I think the idea for a robot invasion in Italy is as far from what people would expect as can come."

Sapienza has clearly been a success, but not every aspect works as well. 47's final objective is to destroy Caruso's virus. "The first time you find the secret cave, and have to find a way to destroy the virus, it works pretty well," says

ABOVE: It's the sunniest murder playground in the game.

Christensen. "Playing *Hitman* can be somewhat of a Groundhog Day experience, and, in that perspective, the virus doesn't work quite so well ... it quickly becomes a rather annoying thing you have to do, especially considering mission replay value."

This was something I brought up in my *Sapienza* review, and clearly

"HITMAN CAN BE A GROUNDHOG DAY EXPERIENCE"

something IO has learned from. "I think that has affected how we think about these objectives," says Elverdam. "I don't think it's a bad thing doing them, but we need to be mindful on how, and can we be even more creative in how you accomplish them." Elverdam stresses that this was their first time building around an objective

that wasn't a target. "I think it's down to the fact that the way you destroyed the virus maybe doesn't feel like a 'hit'. It doesn't feel like as gratifying or as much of a conclusion ... That's probably the angle I would attack it from."

It sounds as if *Sapienza*'s success has helped build IO's confidence. "When I look at the willingness to experiment on *Colorado* and *Hokkaido*, I don't think any of us would have been as willing if it hadn't been for that," says Elverdam. It's easy to forget that it's been ten years since *Blood Money*. IO wasn't sure there was still an audience for this style of *Hitman* design.

"When I look at where IO is today," says Elverdam, "it's pretty clear to me that one of the biggest things we've achieved is this belief in the *Hitman* sandbox. Both how to build it, and that there are people who actually like to play it. It might sound straightforward now, but it might not have been as straightforward back then." *Sapienza* didn't just reassure *Hitman*'s fans. It helped convince IO as well. ■





THE PERFECT CRIME

The making of **DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED**'s best and most formidable level, the Palisade Bank. *By Andy Kelly*



Get to know

CLÉMENCE MAURER

Maurer began her career in game development working as a QA tester for Ubisoft and Quantic Dream. She then moved into level design, working on *Remember Me* with Dontnod, before joining Eidos Montreal to work on *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*.

Reading the reviews of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, I noticed a trend. Almost every one of them, including my own, mentioned one level in particular: the Palisade Bank. This dense, complex map is arguably the highlight of the game, and a neat microcosm of everything I love about *Deus Ex*. It's an intricate web of security systems and shortcuts, with severe brutalist architecture and gleaming marble floors. And the first time I set foot in it, the urge to cause trouble and test the limits of the security was irresistible.



This unassuming reception desk is the face of the Palisade Bank.



➤ The design of the Palisade Bank level was led by Clémence Maurer, who worked on it from the earliest concept to its completion. "It was always planned," she tells me. "We have a high-level story document called the blueprint, which details all the places the player will visit during the game and the most important branches of the story. And the idea of breaking into a highly secure data haven was a core part of the game from the early stages of development."

The initial pitch was simple. Jensen has to break into VersaLife's vault and get something. They didn't know what yet. And that's all it took to fire Maurer's imagination. "I used some concept art depicting the exterior of the bank to inspire me," she says. "Then I started working with this shell, testing various gameplay spaces within it. It was still pretty organic at this stage, as I didn't know exactly how the space would function. Everything in *Deus Ex* must have a meaning and must feel plausible, so I couldn't just place random objects everywhere. The layout had to make sense."

The first design was more conventional. The kind of big city bank you might have queued in yourself on occasion. "It had a front desk, offices, people waiting in lines, etc. But as the story developed and it became a corporate archive, I realised that it shouldn't be a bank where people go to withdraw money. It's a cold, elite, very secure place to keep top secret information, where the megacorps

GUIDED TOUR

Key areas of the Palisade Bank



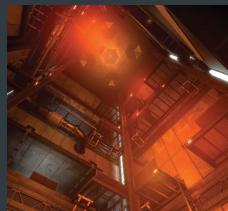
PLAZA

A public plaza littered with stone monoliths, with segregated areas for naturals and augmented people. A large sculpture in the centre bears the Palisade logo, establishing their control over the district.



LOBBY

You can wander this public space freely, which gives you a chance to survey the building and get a sense of how tight security is. A striking animated sculpture made of undulating cubes hangs from the ceiling.



SHAFT

You can sneak into this shaft through the parking lot under the bank and access the secure vaults of companies including Tarvos Security Services and Tai Yong Medical, providing you've found the key cards.



LOCKERS

These lockers aren't as secure as the main vaults, but you'll still need a key to get in. Bypass the door, however, and you can hack and rob every locker, providing Jensen has the requisite hacking upgrades.

MAXIMUM SECURITY
There's a heavy police presence around the bank.



keep their most valuable data. Not something as trivial as money."

The Palisade Bank is where the sinister corporations that rule *Deus Ex*'s dystopian society keep some of their darkest, most precious secrets. There's no vault with a heavy circular door stuffed with gold bars, but thousands of sealed containers filled with data and things they don't want the world to see. Break into the vault belonging to Tarcos Security and you'll find experimental armour and computers tracking the company's enemies.

"I started rethinking the space," says Maurer. "Where is the data locked away? Is there a vault, and what would it look like? Are there offices and people working there? How would the security systems work? Answering these questions was meticulous, demanding work, made even more

difficult by the fact that this kind of building doesn't exist in real life."

VAULT BOY

The vaults are stored in an immense vertical shaft, which players can sneak into with some effort. "The idea of a shaft containing movable vaults came pretty early. I wanted this to be the backbone of the layout, used as an alternate entrance and exit. It was originally more connected to the structure, at the very back of the lobby. You used to be able to see the shaft from the main lobby and vice versa. But now it's below the parking lot."

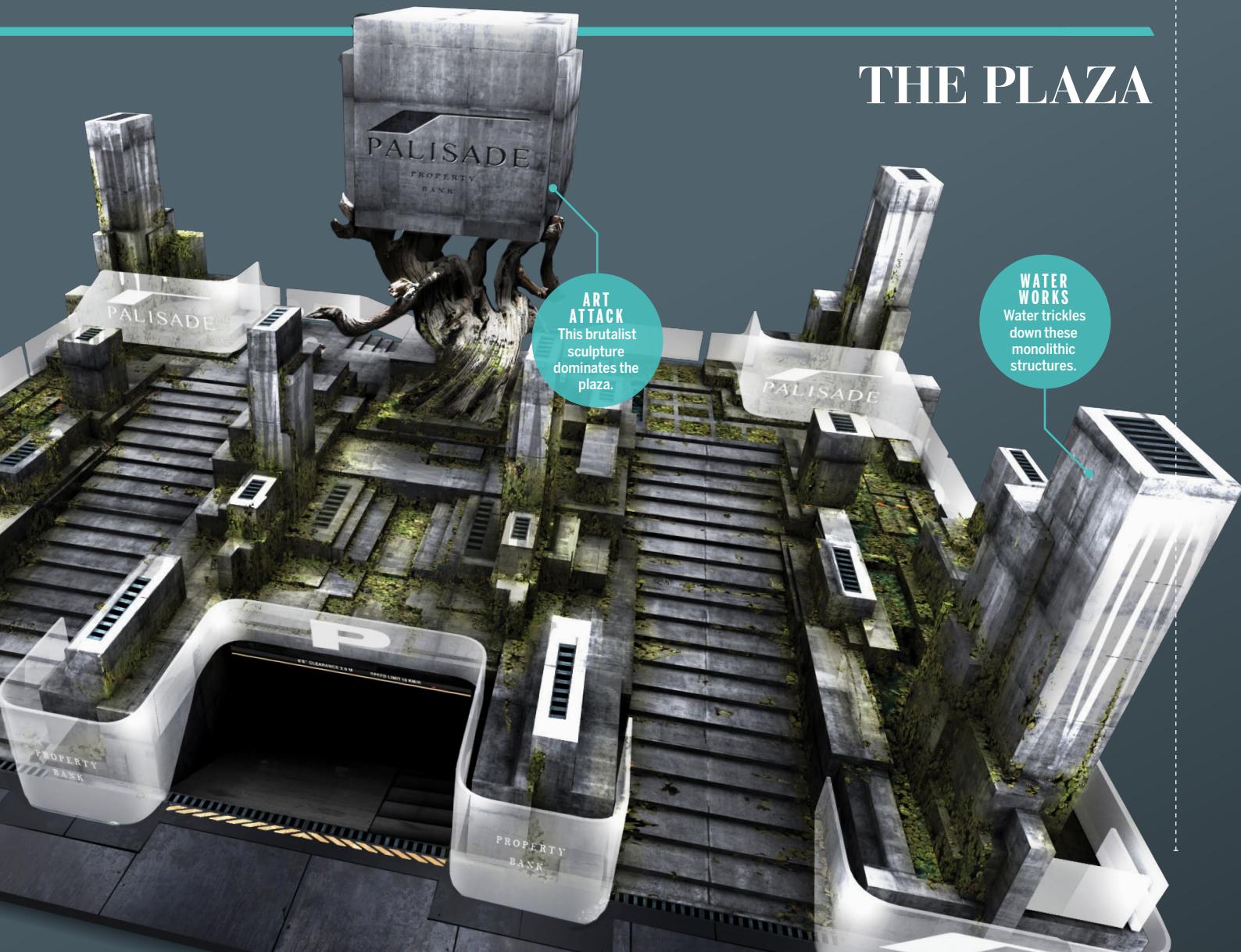
After three months of work, the bank was starting to take shape. "The art direction was very clear," says Maurer. "This is not a bank where a lot of people work. It's so elite that very few clients visit, and most things are

"THERE WAS A LOT OF RESISTANCE... THEY DIDN'T REALLY GET IT"

automated. That's why you don't see many people."

When Jensen finally reaches VersaLife's vault, he finds himself in a vast chamber with containers stretching as far as the eye can see. "This was much harder to conceptualise," Maurer says. "We knew there would be a vista. We knew there would be big boxes full of corporate secrets, and that one would be brought to the player. Making this system come to life, and appear grounded and functional, was the toughest part of the bank's design for me."

Some of her problems were external. "There was a lot of resistance to the idea of a shaft containing nested vaults. And as I presented the map to my superiors, they didn't really get it. So it was tremendously important that my design be bulletproof, allowing me to answer every question about how the space worked. It also had to provide engaging gameplay, meet the requirements of the story and art direction, and not blow the budget." ➤



THE LOBBY



**NO
ENTRY**
Security systems
flank the edges of
the lobby, blocking
your path.

**STYLE
GUIDE**
Art and sculptures
give the lobby a
feeling of
opulence.

**GROW
HOME**
Tree roots snake
between the
architecture in
some areas.

The logic behind how the vaults worked was finally settled on, with help from Eidos Montreal's team of talented concept artists. There would be an immense archive room with thousands of vaults stuffed with corporate secrets. And when a client (or Jensen in this case) requests their vault, a crane plucks it from the stack and brings it over to them.

Production on the bank proceeded quickly, and after six months the basic layout was set. "A few areas were a bit awkward and would need a lot of refining," says Maurer. "This was due to the fact that most people were working on the vertical slice of the game, which was of course a high

priority task. Overall I worked on the bank for about two years, but I was also working on the Prague city hub at the same time."

As well as being responsible for the grand vision of the Palisade Bank, Maurer also paid attention to the smallest details. "I'm a big believer in subtlety," she tells me. "I didn't want to just throw codes and key cards at the player. So that's why I spent a lot of time designing stories to give these items context. I also tried to convey useful information in a subtle way –

like a clue to the manager's door code – so some players could find these things themselves rather than be handed them."

HARD LUCK

I've always thought of *Deus Ex* levels as giant puzzles that you're given the tools to creatively solve, and I ask Maurer if that was the intention. "That's exactly what it's meant to feel like," she says. "We give you the tools, but not the answers. It's a tough, rich, and super dense map, and rewards smart and adventurous players who explore every corner of it. The pieces of the puzzle are not meant to be given away, but earned."

The bank was also designed to be one of the toughest levels in the game, and was in fact originally designed as a playground for the new remote hacking upgrade, at a time when it was forced on the player. "We eventually ditched that idea," says Maurer. "We never want to push augmentations on players. But it made sense that only a heavily augmented person could break into the bank using a combination of abilities.

"It seems almost impossible when you first enter the bank. Especially if you aren't well equipped. I paid

>>

"I WORKED ON THE BANK FOR ABOUT TWO YEARS, BUT ALSO PRAGUE"

POWER TRIP

The best aug for breaking into the bank



REMOTE HACKING

The abundance of security cameras in the bank makes this augmentation vital. You can avoid their gaze, of course, but being able to disable them for a few seconds from a safe distance makes your life much easier.



GLASS-SHIELD CLOAKING SYSTEM

The cloak arguably makes *Deus Ex* too easy, but there's no denying its effectiveness. As well as sneaking past guards, it also lets you move through laser grids without triggering the alarm.



ICARUS DASH

Those stylish brutalist sculptures in the lobby aren't just for show. You can use Icarus Dash to climb up them and access alternate routes through the level. Also comes in handy when moving around the vaults.



LIDAR MARK-TRACKER

There are Tarvos guards all over the bank, but with this eye augmentation you can mark them on your HUD and track their movements. Upgrade and you can track 40 at once.



Clients wait in the lobby.
It is a bank after all.

THE VAULT



» attention to how the challenge would evolve between your first visit by day to returning at night. I actually made it more difficult the first time you visit. This really makes you feel the power of the place, and rewards players who attempt to break in before they have to as part of the story. This also gives players who took the time to do this unprompted an edge later on, but they have to earn it.”

As well as the main vault, there are two chambers branching off from the lobby containing the executive lockers. I remember finding my way in here and feeling like a kid in a cyberpunk candy shop, merrily hacking every locker I could find and stealing the contents. Credits, ammo, Praxis points, biocells. I left with Jensen’s pockets bulging and a sense of dubious satisfaction from robbing the place without alerting anyone.

“I used the executive lockers to entice players back to the bank when they found a code or key card in Prague,” says Maurer. “This would reward them with some nice loot, and

some cool storytelling that would expand their knowledge of the universe. If you get caught in there, the lockers will actually retract into the floor, leaving you exposed and making them inaccessible.”

Although Adam Jensen is, in theory, one of the good guys, *Deus Ex* encourages thievery like no other game. In my save game I’ve cleaned out every

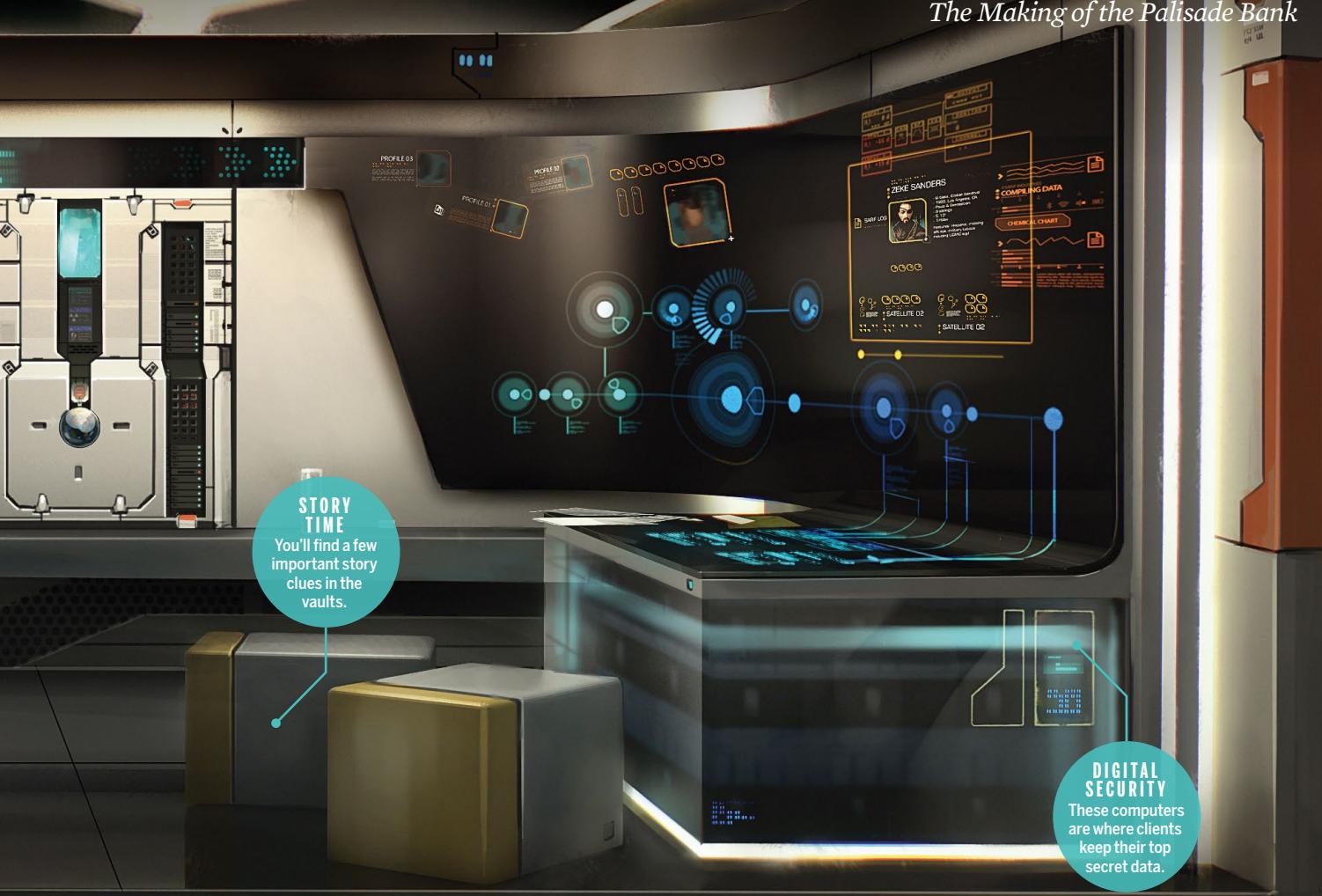
accessible apartment in Prague, for no reason other than they were there. But Maurer is, of course, well aware of this, and makes allowances for players like me when designing her levels.

“When I design levels, I always have those players in mind who will explore every inch of it,” she says. “We support other player types, but I have a fondness for explorers.”

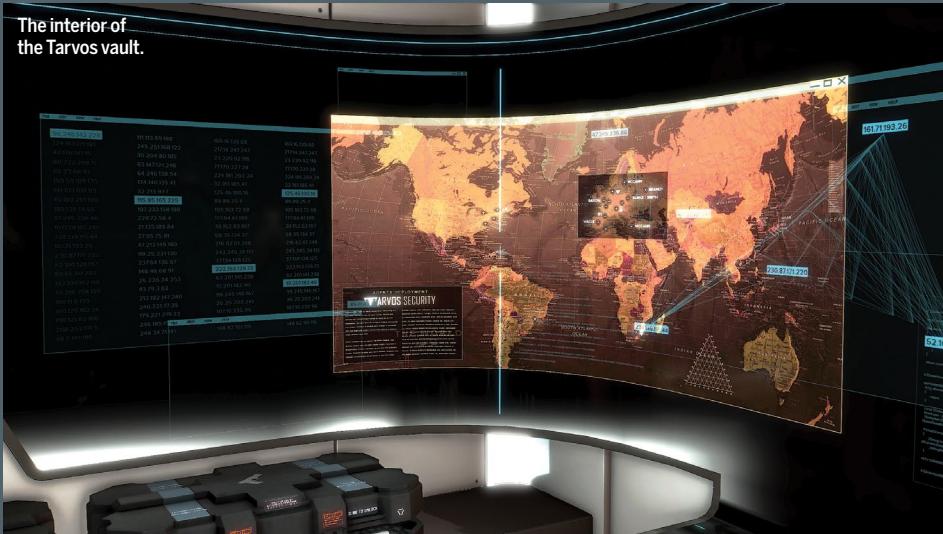
“WE SUPPORT ALL PLAYER TYPES, BUT I HAVE A FONDNESS FOR EXPLORERS”

Eidos Montreal took on a considerable job when they decided to reboot *Deus Ex*, and they did it justice. But of all the places Adam Jensen visits, from Detroit to Prague, the bank sticks out as one of

SUCCESS STORY



The interior of the Tarvos vault.



the best examples of the series' detailed, open-ended level design. When you've cleaned out every executive locker, office, and vault, and casually stroll out without raising so much as an eyebrow, the feeling of satisfaction is immense.

I ask Maurer if she expected such a positive reaction. "I had my doubts at first," she says. "But I'm glad people liked it. I think people appreciate how

challenging it is, and how rewarding it is to bypass this seemingly impossible security. All of this is contained within a pretty small map, but it's absolutely packed with content."

Sadly, the *Deus Ex* series is on hold as Eidos Montreal turns its attention to the Marvel universe. Who knows when it'll make a return, but the Palisade Bank is a hell of a parting gift. ■

CRIMINAL PAST

Great gaming heists

IMPERIAL PALACE OBLIVION

Your dubious career with the Thieves Guild in the fourth *Elder Scrolls* game peaks with the mother of all heists: breaking into the heavily guarded Imperial Palace and stealing a priceless Elder Scroll.

THREE LEAF CLOVER GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

An epic bank heist inspired by Michael Mann's *Heat*. Robbing it is the easy part, because as soon as you leave the LCPD throws everything it has at you, including deadly SWAT teams.

THE BIG BANK PAYDAY 2

An enormous bank stuffed with untold riches. One of the most lucrative heists in Overkill's bank-robbing co-op shooter, but fighting through the cops if you sound the alarm will test even veteran bank robbers.

PANAMA BANK SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

Sam Fisher has to quietly sneak into the heavily guarded Banco de Panama and steal \$50 million in bearer bonds without alerting any of the many armed guards who patrol the building.

FEATURE

Virtual Villainy



Is the Alien a 'villain'?
Try being stalked by it
in *Alien: Isolation*.

ANATOMY OF EVIL

We ask some of the industry's finest writers what makes a great villain.

By Rick Lane

M

ore than any other artform, gaming is defined by antagonism. From the earliest arcade machines to the most extravagant FPS, pitching the player against an external threat has been one of the industry's foundational elements.

As gaming evolved beyond the quickfire pleasures of the arcade, so have the opponents the player faces. The barrel-lobbing, space-invading pixels of the '80s have been replaced by evil fantasy overlords, megalomaniacal dictators and rogue AIs. Many of gaming's most iconic characters are its villains, from *Monkey Island*'s ghost pirate LeChuck, to *System Shock*'s almighty SHODAN.

At their finest, villains can challenge the player not just on a physical level, but on a moral and ethical one, and gaming is uniquely equipped to portray these scheming, deceptive opponents. It can enable them to get inside the protagonist's head – literally, in some cases – or allow the player to judge their twisted morality for themselves. Soon, gaming may even be able to present us with villains that adapt to the player's behaviour.

"Everyone likes villains," says Tom Jubert, the writer behind Frictional's *Penumbra* series, *The Swapper*, and the *Talos Principle*. "They're just more fun... you can have them do some crazy, really far-out stuff. They're super-interesting because they have to be conflicted, and they have to wind up doing these terrible things for plausible reasons. So everyone likes villains before you even start."

Villains are particularly enticing because they allow us to explore thoughts and actions which are unacceptable in everyday life, embracing and exploiting power or anarchy without being burdened

"GOOD PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE OF TERRIBLY EVIL THINGS"

by feelings of guilt or shame that would normally accompany such behaviour. "Who isn't a little bit moved by the anarchy of the Joker?" says Jubert. "There's always something a little bit glamorous, a little bit attractive about their worldview. That's what makes it really exciting."

This idea of villains being more fun as characters is particularly relevant to games, where the player often fills the protagonist's role. Much of Jubert's work has been on projects where the game is first-person and the main character is mute. "That in itself means that the villain is going to take on a hell of a lot more of the character of the game than the central character is," he points out.

It's not surprising that this style of storytelling has produced some of the industry's most memorable villains. *System Shock*'s SHODAN, *BioShock*'s Andrew Ryan, and *Portal*'s GLaDOS are frequently ranked among gaming's best villains, and they all star in games where the player character is barely fleshed out at all. Devoid of a compellingly written protagonist, the antagonist must shoulder the burden of making the game spark with character.

Jubert's own villains are very much in this vein, although intriguingly, many of them don't take physical form either. "There's a weirdly high proportion of my villains who don't even exist before the game starts," he laughs. The most well-known of these is Clarence, the antagonist of *Penumbra: Black Plague*. Clarence emerges as the result of a strange virus that infects the protagonist early in the game. Initially part of the protagonist's mind, Clarence gradually forms an identity of his own.

Jubert first conceived of Clarence as a computer virus with whom the player would interact in a branching narrative, but the Frictional team were uncertain about developing interactive dialogue, so he came up with something else. "I wanted to do something

that took advantage of the few resources that we had. We knew we were never going to have an on-screen character," he says. "So to put it inside the character's head was a nice way of how to avoid another radio character going on."

As a character, Clarence bears many similarities to Batman's Joker. He is by turns comical and sinister, and likes to manipulate the player into dangerous situations and committing morally compromising acts. But what makes Clarence memorable is how he

LESSER OF TWO EVILS *Not all great game villains are criminal masterminds*



COMBINE SOLDIERS *HALF LIFE 2*

HL2's cannon fodder are fascinating for one reason. What's behind those masks? Are these once-human entities controlled directly by the Combine, or are they just trying to get by?



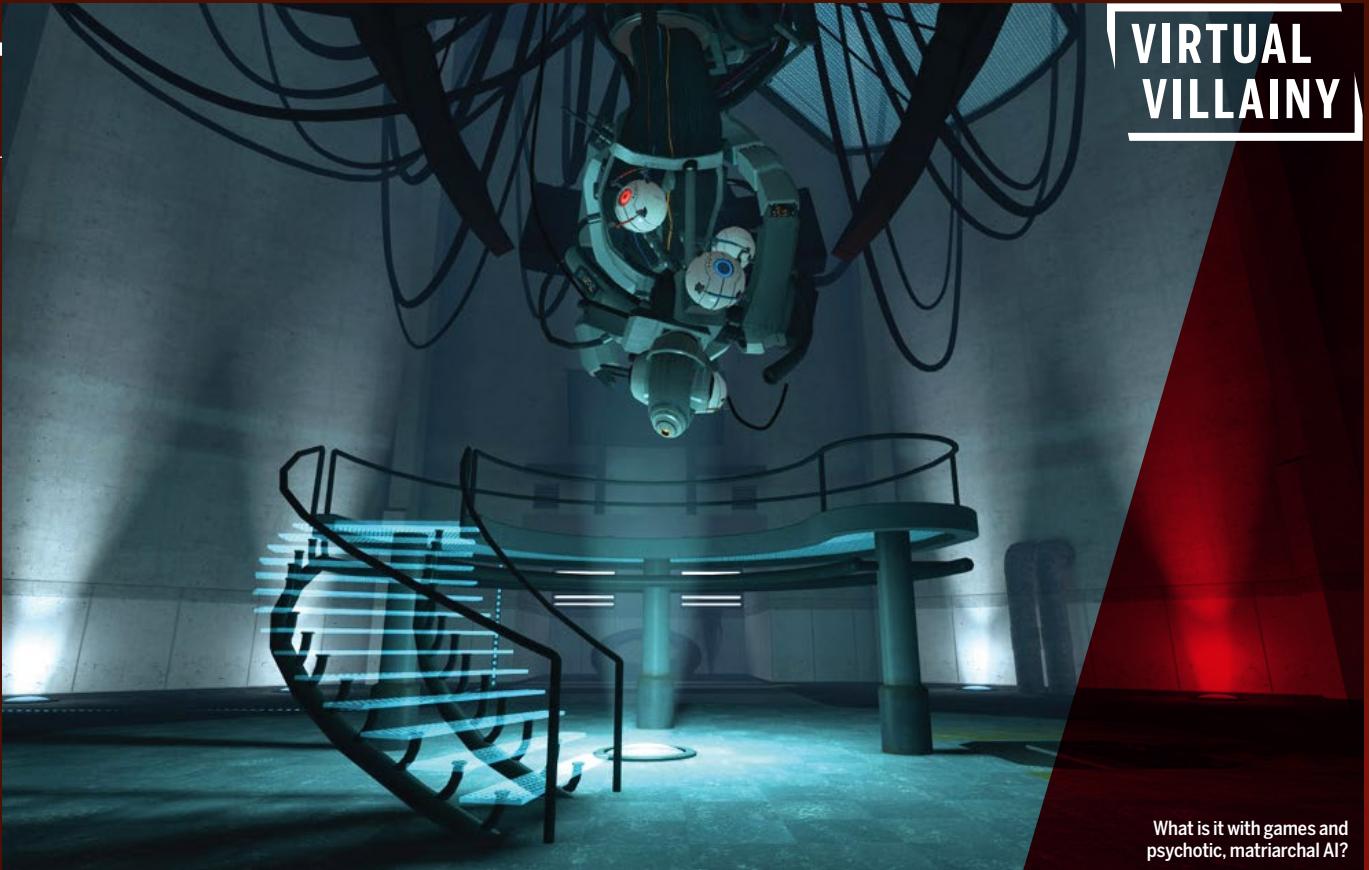
THE CITY WATCH *DISHONORED*

The Watch come to life through Corvo's magic Heart, which offers insight into their lives, and reveals a complex moral spectrum from noble soldiers to depraved psychotics.



SLIGS *ODDWORLD*

The cybernetic, tentacle-faced guards of Rupture Farms, *Oddworld*'s sligs are a prime example of lacing humour and menace into even the lower orders of your game's enemies.



What is it with games and psychotic, matriarchal AI?

messes with the player's perspective. Early in the game, Clarence discovers he can alter what the player sees. At first he uses this to play practical jokes on the player, making doors vanish and reappear. But as he grasps the extent of his power, his pranks become far more malicious. "I was really proud of those bits, because they cost nothing to do," says Jubert. "It's just teleporting the player around some cheap level design. But the impact combined with the writing can be, I think, quite powerful."

This technique is also used by Rocksteady's *Batman* games, particularly in the Scarecrow sections of *Arkham Asylum*, and Batman's projection of the Joker in *Arkham Knight*. It's a simple but effective way of demonstrating the villain's power over the player, while exploring the relative nature of the player's perspective, inviting them to question the nature of their identity.

INCARNATE

Games excel at portraying these kinds of villains, the post-human puppet-masters who pull the player's strings. Rarely seen yet ever-present, they manipulate the player remotely, often forcing them to run a deadly maze while they await a final confrontation in some distant ivory tower. Yet while the likes of Clarence and *Arkham*'s Joker are showstopper characters, always ready with a memorable one-liner or a brilliantly insane plan, they're difficult to empathise with, to relate to on a human level.

The most terrifying villains are not all-powerful AIs or gleeful psychopaths, but people who you can see yourself in if you had just made different choices. These more human villains are considerably rarer in gaming, simply because creating convincing characters in a game world is one of the hardest things a developer can do.

Nevertheless, there are some superb examples of human villains in gaming, and one of the best is Loghain Mac Tir, the main antagonist of BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins*. Loghain commands the armies of king

Cailan in the fight against the Darkspawn, but he abandons Cailan during a climactic early battle. Leaving the king to die, Loghain declares himself regent, seizes power for himself and declares any who might oppose him traitors to the crown.

David Gaider was lead writer on *Dragon Age: Origins*, and he explains that Loghain formed part of the game's general shift toward a more morally ambiguous form of RPG. "A lot of *Dragon Age* was us at BioWare reacting to things we did or didn't like about Dungeons & Dragons as a game system or a setting, so I'd say the effort to move to something more morally grey was intentional. Good people are capable of terribly evil things, and terrible people are capable of great good."

The reasons behind Loghain's betrayal of Cailan are deeply complex, stemming partly from a concern that Cailan plans to abandon queen Anora – Loghain's daughter – in pursuit of a marriage alliance with another realm, and partly from his view that Cailan's reliance on bravery and valour over a sound tactical advantage will prove poor weapons against the Darkspawn. Nevertheless, for Gaider, the core motivation behind Loghain's decisions remained the same. "It was always that Loghain would >>





VIRTUAL VILLAINY



A face only a deranged prison psychiatrist could love.

» be someone who perceived himself as the good guy," he says. "I think those are the villains that intrigue me the most, the ones where you can put yourself in their shoes and imagine you'd make exactly the same decisions even if you opposed them."

This is a concept that's been explored further in games such as *The Walking Dead* and *The Witcher 3*, where the line between good and evil is so blurred that at times it's difficult to tell them apart. In *Dragon Age* the water isn't quite so muddied. Many of Loghain's actions are undoubtedly evil, but motivating them are visibly human emotions: fear, conviction, and love for his daughter, Anora. Where *Dragon Age* goes farther than most games is in how it allows the player to make a final judgement on Loghain.

In a climactic encounter at a gathering known as the Landsmeet, the player can duel with Loghain and, if he is defeated, decide whether to kill him, spare him, or even recruit him into your party (at the cost of another party member, Alistair). "Part of making Loghain's motives understandable is allowing for the possibility that a player might not hate him, and might picture him as simply misguided. It was intentional, and in many ways I myself viewed him more as a tragic figure," says Gaider. "It made the decision to kill him more poignant, I think, in that there was also the option for redemption."

This kind of flexibility in a villain's character and how the player can respond to it is entirely unique to gaming. It isn't just the remit of RPGs either, games like *The Stanley Parable* offer an antagonist whose relationship constantly alters toward you depending on the choices you make.

That said, nearly all the games mentioned above rely heavily on the ability of the writer to create such memorable villains. Is it possible to construct a villain entirely through a game's systems? Certainly, developers can create *antagonists* this way, a practice you can see anywhere from racing games to computerised chess. But a villain is more than a mere opponent. They are singular, with a clear identity and motivation. And they need to be cunning, capable of deceiving and manipulating the player.

SILENT VILLAIN

One game that demonstrates many of these elements is *Alien: Isolation*, The Creative Assembly's stealth horror game in which the player is stalked through Sevastopol station by the Alien. Because it is ultimately an animal, the Xenomorph has no dialogue and therefore no script through which it can be infused with personality.

Instead, the Alien's character is formed systemically, through how it dynamically hunts the

CRIMINAL ERRORS *Three of the many potholes on the path to writing a great villain*

1 THE HENCHMAN KILLER

One of the laziest characterisation tropes for a villain is that, with minimal provocation, they will brutally murder one of their own subordinates. Just to show us how terribly evil they are. "It's ineffective, because we immediately lose any sense of this being a real person," says Tom Jubert.

2 THE MIND-CONTROLLER

The original plan for *Dragon Age*'s Loghain was that he would be mind-controlled by the more powerful Archdemon. "My feeling was that this deprived Loghain of agency," Gaider says. This is true, but it also deprives the mind-controller of depth. The best villains are those who subtly manipulate others to do their bidding, rather than using force.

3 THE WORST CRIME IMAGINABLE

Early in the story, they will do something unspeakably depraved. "We see a lot of terribly rapey villains, just because it's the worst thing, it's the most emotive thing someone can think to put in there," Jubert says. Not only is this lazy, it deprives the villain of any moral complexity, and puts them beyond redemption in the player's mind.

player. Far from simple patrol paths, the creature is scripted to be unpredictable yet deliberate, to exhibit all the cunning and moment-to-moment decision-making of an apex predator.

To achieve this, The Creative Assembly built a unique, multi-layered AI system. "Our basic premise for the AI was 'not to cheat,'" says Clive Gratton, technical director on *Alien: Isolation*. "The level is pre-processed to find interesting places for the Alien to search. We then drop it in with a few parameters to say how fast to search, where and what size radius. If the Alien hasn't spotted the player then it'll do a leisurely search of a large area." By comparison, if the Alien has spotted the player running into a room, then it will do a far more thorough search of that particular region.

Part of this "honest" approach to AI design was to keep the Alien's presence in the ship consistent with how the player perceives it, and this applies equally to when the Xenomorph is not on screen. "If you can hear the Alien in the vents close to you then there's more chance that it can hear you and will come down. It is actually traversing through the vent network," Gratton says. This approach is a fascinating inversion of how villains like Clarence and Loghain are designed, where deceiving the player with narrative tricks is a key part of making them "feel" villainous. Here, any trickery would simply make the player feel like the game was cheating and spoil the immersion.

Alongside its artificial intelligence, *Isolation*'s level design is almost as important in making the Alien's character convincing. Not only do the environments aid the Xenomorph's navigation, containing objects that "call out" to the Alien as locations it should

search, but the overarching level design had to be extremely precise in size and layout to sustain the threatening atmosphere.

"We wanted the Alien to be big so that it had presence," Gratton says. "We wanted the environment small so that it was claustrophobic. This made animation, AI and locomotion difficult at times because the character had to negotiate the world very accurately so that it didn't bump into doorways and look silly."

This potential for slapstick and weirdness, a feature that is actively encouraged in open-world games and management sims, is what makes creating a systems-driven villain so difficult. Even for an enemy as fundamentally inhuman as the Xenomorph, creating a convincing effect requires a meticulous design.

But *Alien: Isolation* has shown that it is possible to frame a horror game around a single character, and now other developers are looking to build on its template. Capcom's *Resident Evil 7*, for

example, has a similar structure to *Isolation*, but switches out the Xenomorph for a family of virus-infected hillbillies, attaching those deadly hide-and-seek behaviours to human adversaries.

It's also no great stretch to imagine *Isolation*'s design applied to a game like *System Shock*. Imagine a SHODAN who doesn't just taunt you over the space station's intercom, but can lock and open doors, switch off gravity or suck the oxygen out of a room at will, all through systemic decision making rather than scripted narrative. Gaming is becoming increasingly adept at engendering character through systems. This, I believe, is where the next big leap forward in virtual villainy lies. ■

ANY TRICKERY WOULD FEEL AS IF THE GAME WAS CHEATING



The Stanley Parable narrator's frequent attempts to murder you mark him out as a villain.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

RPG designers tell us how to make the perfect sidequest.



By Fraser Brown

The typically epic main quests of Western RPGs represent only a small portion of an adventure that might last for over 100 hours. In between these gargantuan set pieces are countless sidequests, asides and ancillary diversions with the power to flesh out characters and worlds, guiding us down the paths less well trodden. Sidequests help define their respective RPGs, reinforcing their themes and letting us dig even deeper into these elaborate fictional universes when the critical path is ignored and deviated from.

"From a design standpoint, the most important thing for a sidequest is that it needs to bring some added value," explains CD Projekt Red quest designer, Patrick Mills. "Usually, this means exploring a topic, situation or theme that's implicit in the main story, but not foregrounded. From a player experience perspective, a sidequest should give the player something different from the main content. Sometimes that means a new gameplay element, but it could be as simple as mixing up the tone of the narrative."

Hidden inside *The Witcher 3*'s final expansion, *Blood and Wine*, is one of

the game's most memorable quests – the Equine Phantoms contract. A woman is being plagued by nightmares and spectres, leading grouchy Geralt to drink a hallucinogenic potion in an attempt to get to the root of the problem. The result? The itinerant monster hunter starts hearing the voice of Roach, his horse. It turns out that his mare enjoys expletives and is none too impressed with Geralt, but it's only by working together that they can figure out what's going on.

The contract manages to contain just about every element of the series in one single quest. Mystery, magic,





» comedy, tragedy, even Geralt relying on a strong-willed woman, or in this instance a strong-willed mare – it's all there. "It's impossible to work on something like *The Witcher 3* for years and not internalise those themes and tropes to the point where it's just how you do things," explains Mills. "But on the other hand, there was a definite attempt on our part to use this quest to deconstruct the style of *The Witcher 3* quests, particularly the monster hunts, and to some extent subvert them by putting it all in such a ludicrous context."

Equine Phantoms' origins stem from a simple idea: Mills wanted Geralt to finally be able to talk with the companion who stays with him through thick and thin, throughout the entire game. And he wanted it to be funny. "The most difficult part of making a quest like this, particularly in an open world game, is trying to anticipate what the player might do and how to deal with it. For Equine Phantoms, the biggest challenge is that the player needs to ride on Roach for the quest to work. But it needs to be logical, and not arbitrary, so I came up with a monster that could only be caught on horseback. We need to justify why it's not possible for Geralt to brew his own talk-to-animals decoction, so we establish that the mushrooms used to make it are extremely rare. And there's other things like what happens if I leave the area, and so on."

And what does happen if players leave the area instead of completing the quest? Well, Roach completes the monster hunt herself, without Geralt. It's a clever, subversive contingency

IT HAD TO BE PART OF THE GAME WORLD AND HAD TO HAVE VALUE

that most players will never see, inside a quest that you need to go out of your way to find. It's a reward, then, for exploring and charting CD Projekt Red's massive dark fantasy world. And Mills doesn't begrudge the fact that players might miss it entirely.

He likens it to the cult comedy series, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. "One thing I learned from those guys is that you shouldn't ever tell a joke just because someone might not get it. If you have a large enough audience, someone will get it, and it will be

funnier for that person because they are the only ones getting it. For me, quests like Equine Phantoms are kind of like that. If it was something that's on one of the main roads or linked to a notice board, everyone would see it. Instead, it's a quest for those players who get on Roach and roam around, looking for cool stuff and adventures."

PILLOW TALK

Larian Studios founder Swen Vincke knows a thing or two about making heaps of optional conversations and quests around talking animals. In *Divinity: Original Sin*, players can pick a talent, Pet Pals, that lets them chat to every critter in the world, from rats who offer sage advice, to lovelorn cats.

"We wanted you to talk to animals because you could do that in the previous games," Vincke explains. "But





in a game like *Original Sin*, you have to be able to explore gameplay by making certain character developments, so we hid it behind a talent. The consequence of that was we had to put it all over the game because we had a rule where if you have an ability or talent, it had to be part of the game world and had to have value, which led us to expand heavily on it, and it turned into something cool."

One of the most memorable animal encounters, the Kitty Love quest, happens early on. Players are asked to help a cat, Sam, seduce the Mayor's pet, setting off a series of events that lead to a dungeon romp and a tricky battle – as well as two happy felines.

"We first had a cat that was in the Mayor's house," Vincke recalls. "Then we had another cat that was in the tavern. They were disconnected. They had nothing to do with each other. We started expanding on the Pet Pal idea, adding more gameplay value, then came the idea that we could attach



Nothing weird about getting a cat a date.

rewards to these things and tell players secrets. We had a problem at the time, and that was getting players to the Black Cove, and so we were putting in hints to why players should go there, and we decided to put in some Pet Pal things to create an exploration goal."

The ultimate objective of not just this, but many of *Divinity: Original Sin*'s sidequests, was to give players extra incentives to veer off the beaten track. It's one of the pillars of sidequest design, according to Vincke. "Typically you want to encourage players to explore certain types of gameplay. So, for instance, you might have a sidequest motivating the player to explore a certain area of the world they wouldn't naturally go out and explore. We just made one this morning [in *Divinity: Original Sin II*] that challenges players to explore parts of the systematics that they probably haven't experienced before, and in doing so they can learn new tricks that they can use in further adventures."

AVELLONE'S PILLARS OF SIDEQUEST DESIGN

The general principles that make for compelling quests

1

Sidequests should inform the lore and ambiance of an area without obscuring it.

2

Pace the types of quests so it's not all combat, combat, combat or puzzle, puzzle, puzzle.

3

Sidequests should lead to other points of interest, or intersect with other quests, along their path.

4

Sidequests should seek you out based on actions that you've performed in the environment.



5

A good sidequest has a 'memorable moment' that sums it up and makes the player glad they did it.

6

Sidequests should have an objective that can be accomplished in multiple ways.

7

Sidequests involving an area should be championed by the area designer that's familiar with the area.

8

They should be short. I don't like designing sidequests that take more than 15 minutes to complete.



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Like Mills, Vincke sees the frustration of players missing sidequests or other bits and pieces as ultimately worth it in the long run. "It's super important.



Going to the Dark Side is better with pals.

Rewarding a player for player agency is always a good thing. Stumbling on something that's very well hidden, when you're doing your first playthrough, rewards you for exploring. We reward you for exploring because it's an element of gameplay that we want to promote. As a result of that, we have spent quite a lot of time putting in things that you will probably never see. It can be very frustrating for a designer when they know that only 2% of players will see a piece of content they spent two or three months working on. But those 2% of players are going to say, 'Look what I discovered,' and share the experience."

Original Sin, and the *Divinity* series in general, is heavily inspired by *Ultima*. Vincke cites the mission to build a hot air balloon in an attempt to reach the Shrine of Singularity in *Ultima VII* as one of his favourite quests, however inspiration can also strike from more unexpected places. A fan-favourite encounter in *Divine Divinity* sees a pair of existential skeletons debating the strangeness of their existence, ultimately leading them to reason that they shouldn't exist at all. So they don't. It was actually a visiting studio fan who came up with the whole idea, when Vincke was

struggling at the time to think of something to liven up a dungeon.

"We put it in there and it turned out to be one of the moments that everyone who plays that game talks about. It's often the very small pieces of inspiration that lead to something that everybody enjoys."

Equine Phantoms and Kitty Love both have their fair share of levity,

breaking up the serious, epic nature of the main quests, but narrative asides and optional content can just as easily go in the other direction, exploring mature subjects and character trauma that the main arc doesn't have time to delve into.

In *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II*, players have the ability to turn almost all of their companions to the Dark Side, exploiting their fears and desires to corrupt and twist them. You've got to gain their trust and tear down their defences, but there's resistance. They don't merrily skip down the path to the Dark Side – they've got to be seduced, manipulated and occasionally pandered to.

"Having companions that have real agendas in the game world makes the player's actions more significant," says Obsidian alumnus and veteran RPG designer Chris Avellone. "The reason companion reactivity works so well is because you can usually count on a selection of companions always being with the player, so they can act as an immediate sounding board to the player's choices, and the ways you can influence your companions turns them into another progression path or another reactivity path that makes the player see they are having an effect in the game world. It's been said your hero's strength is measured by the strength of the villain – I'd add that a great supporting cast can give both the hero and the villain even more strength as long as their presence doesn't upstage either one."

Creating a character that makes sense as either a Sith or a Jedi, despite being diametrically opposed, isn't the tricky part, explains Avellone. As long as the climax of the arc is foreshadowed, it can still feel organic.

A BIT ON THE SIDE

More great RPGs filled to the brim with memorable missions



PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

While jumping around Planes, quests skew to the weird, whether you're being paid to let someone kill you or digging around your own body and mind to find answers about your past. It's just as gross as it sounds.



THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

It might not be as beloved as its predecessor, but *Oblivion* has some of the best sidequests in the series, not least of which are the Dark Brotherhood quests. Also, you can travel into a painting, and it's lovely.



PILLARS OF ETERNITY

With the sequel on its way, now's a good time to get stuck into *Pillars of Eternity*. Like the Infinity Engine games that inspire it, *PoE* is laden with diverting adventures with sometimes unexpected consequences.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES

This has a multitude of great sidequests, with the best ones turning you into a vampire detective. Yes, you can pretty much be Angel and forget that his unlife was cut short when the show was cancelled.



"In *Knights of the Old Republic II*, I think some foreshadowing was more successful than others," he says. "But there were a lot of moving parts – something as seemingly innocuous as even a voiceover line with the wrong tone can prevent that arc from being fully realised."

QUALITY QUESTING

The games Avellone's worked on are often peppered with thoughtful, optional pieces of dialogue that open up new paths. He remembers this happening a lot in *Planescape: Torment* and the *Fallout: New Vegas* DLC, *Dead Money*, but Avellone's tastes are diverse. "I have a soft spot for exploration quests, new quests that can arise from thoroughly and logically understanding a quest you're on and quests that aren't quests at all but are logical extensions made from absorbing the lore in the environment."

There's a *Fallout 2* quest that's stuck with him. It's an assassination mission with the well-protected Vice President of the NCR as the target. Breaking in and gunning him down is a risky, and probably fatal, solution. "Observing the area, you notice the VP's son runs back and forth to talk to his dad, and you suddenly realise rather than walking in and gunning the man down, you could plant some timed explosives in the kid's backpack and then let him run to his dad and explode." It stands out not just because it's "so incredibly cold-blooded", but because it's a puzzle that



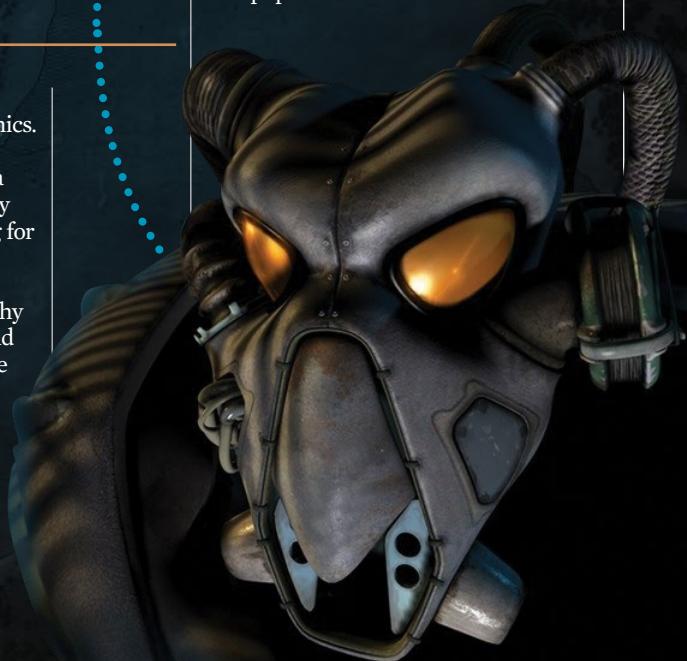
YOU REALLY HAVE NO ONE TO BLAME BUT YOURSELF

rewards observation and an understanding of the game's mechanics.

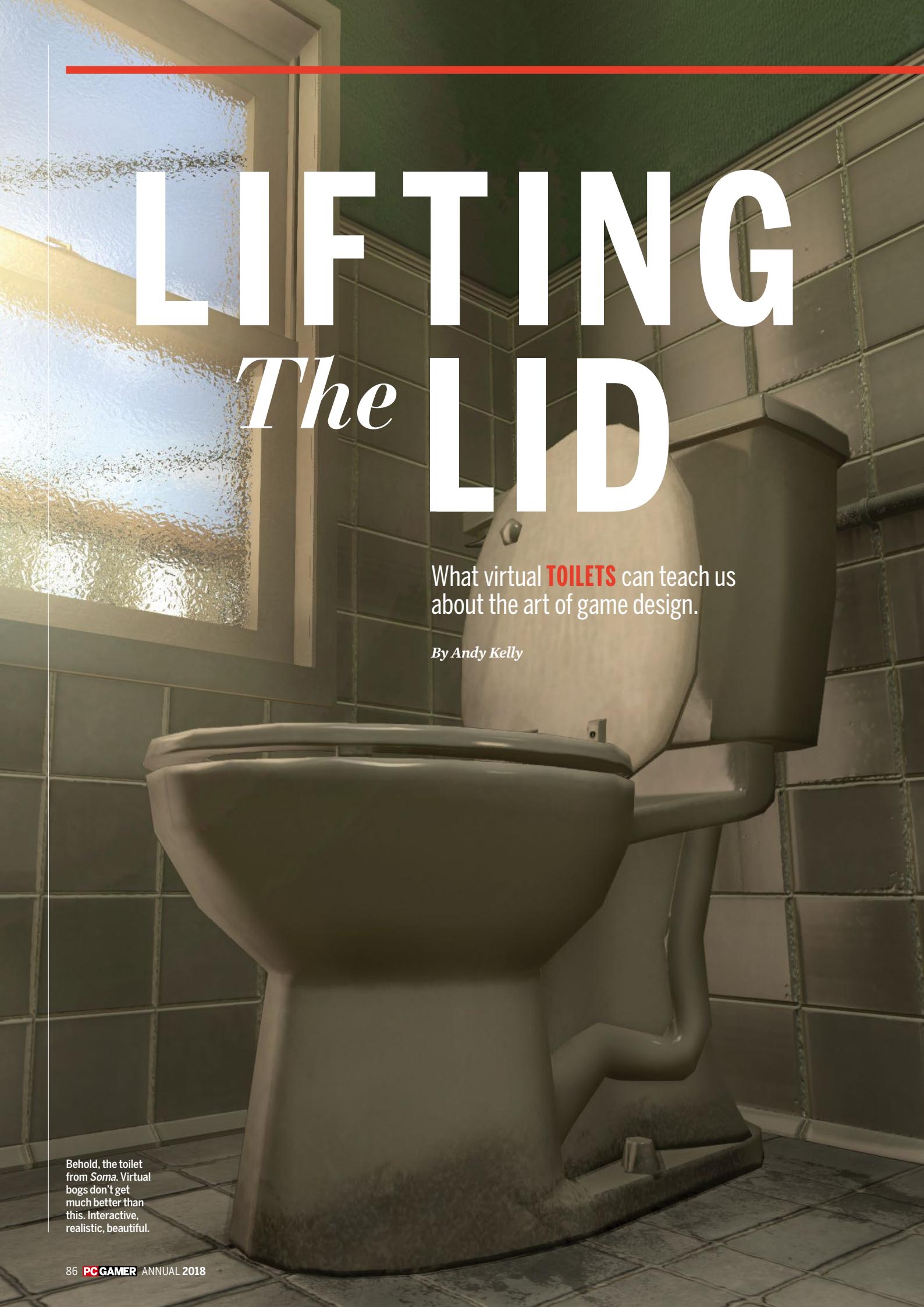
But can that degree of freedom make it challenging to predict how a player might react? "For me, not only do you get used to it, but accounting for that freedom is one of the most fun parts of the quest and story design," notes Avellone. "The main reason why it's not frustrating, or why you should be frustrated with yourself as a game designer or writer, is that if you've willingly designed systems or a plot that allow a player to perform certain actions – steal from anyone, kill anyone, be good, be evil, be a member of one of four

or more factions, gain other reputations – and you discover that it's a lot of work to make it meaningful and truly reactive, then you really have no one to blame but yourself."

The various ingredients that make a great RPG sidequest are much the same as they were two decades ago. It's why games like *Ultima VII* and *Fallout 2* retain their lofty reputations among players. It's much more than rose-tinted glasses or nostalgia – even a game like *Divinity: Original Sin*, which wears its inspirations on its sleeve, comes across as thoroughly forward facing and novel by building on these ideas through, for example, hiding a hint system inside the countless rats that populate the world. ■



LIFTING *The* LID



What virtual **TOILETS** can teach us about the art of game design.

By Andy Kelly

Behold, the toilet from *Soma*. Virtual bogs don't get much better than this. Interactive, realistic, beautiful.

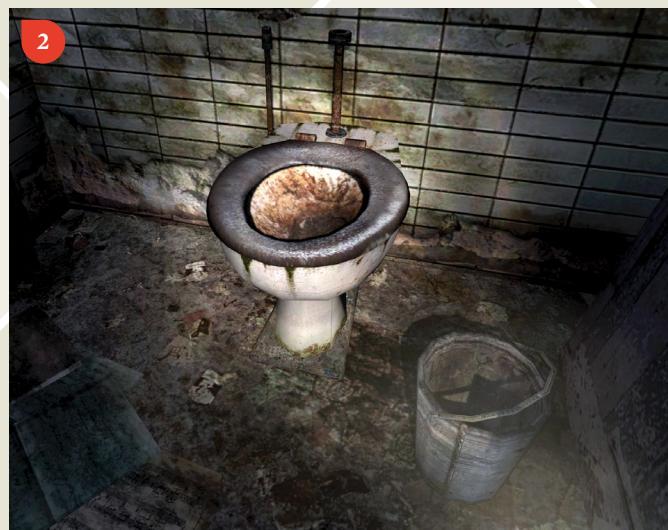


here came a point in history when humans stopped shitting on the ground and started shitting into a receptacle, and the toilet was born. The people of Mohenjo-daro, an ancient settlement uncovered by archaeologists in Pakistan, were using toilets as far back as 2800 BC. The Romans figured out how to flush them long before the invention of the iPad. And the Han Dynasty built their toilets above pigsties so they could simultaneously empty themselves and feed their livestock.

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1



2

Today, the human race's obsession with the humble commode, and the activities that occur in and around it, has manifested itself in an exciting new way: the videogame toilet. I've always been fascinated by the idea that every time work begins on a new game, someone has to model, texture, animate, script, and record sound effects for something so mundane. But the truth is, videogame toilets are incredibly important.

"Toilets are valuable precisely because they have no real relevance to the game at hand," says Fullbright's Steve Gaynor. "They exist as interactive objects to flesh out the 'realness' of the game world as a functional place. It's about supporting player expectation. If there's a bathroom, there should be a toilet. And if there's a toilet, it should flush. It's these little pieces of seemingly pointless interactivity that maintain the illusion of being inside a functional other place, not just a place-shaped box."

Toilets also reveal something about the people who build them. You can tell a lot about a developer's approach to world-building by the authenticity, and flushability, of its crappers. "They're a direct peek into a studio's personality," says Blendo Games' Brendon Chung. "It's very personal and it's very revealing. We spend a lot of our lives trying to understand each other, and a toilet is a moment of vulnerability."

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

"One of the joys of toilets is how familiar we are with them," Chung adds. "I couldn't tell you the first thing about a plasma bolt cannon, but we're all familiar with the minutiae of toilets, resulting in plenty of latitude for designers to play with expectations."

Developers are well aware of players' fascination with toilets, and

they're always leaving surprises there: whether it's loot, a hidden enemy, or in *BioShock Infinite*'s case, a raw potato. According to Arkane's Shawn Elliott, the man responsible for that potato, this relationship goes both ways. "The proliferation of flushable toilets nudged designers to include content in and around them," he says. "And this encouraged players to go poking around in them, which pushes designers to continue the tradition."

TURD WORLD

But why a potato? Initially, Elliott is evasive. "In an act of meta-commentary I placed a consumable potato in one of Columbia's toilets," he says. "It was an interactive pay-off for inquisitive toilet inspectors, and also an acknowledgement of the absurdity of where items are found in our world. Pineapples in cash registers and so on." He adds: "really, though, it just looked like a turd."

I asked several developers what their favourite videogame toilet was, and the same game kept coming up: Frictional's psychological horror game *Soma*. "There's an incredible toilet in the first few minutes," says Brendon Chung. "You have fine analogue control over the toilet seat and flush handle. Flush it and you see the water swirling in the bowl. This is an absolutely luxurious amount of control reached by no other developer."

"One of the big problems in game design is figuring out what to fill the world with," says Frictional's Thomas Grip. "Offices and storage rooms are used a lot, but it can be hard to make them feel natural. But with bathrooms the space is well-defined and there are a lot of simple and fun

1

Alan Wake
From Alan's New York apartment.

2

Dear Esther
A grotty Hebridean toilet.

3

GTA V
Trevor's toilet is beyond cleaning.

4

Portal
Futuristic curves. Nice.

5

Gone Home
One of the Greenbriars' many loos.

BOG STANDARDS

The official PC Gamer toilet rating system

Can your character actually use it?
20 points

Does it flush?
10 points

Is there a swirling water effect?
10 points

Is there toilet paper nearby?
5 points

Can you lift the lid?
5 points

Is there loot hidden in/around it?
5 points

interactions such as flush handles, stall doors, and hand-dryers.

"Many of the environments we go through in games are supposed to have been inhabited by humans," he adds. "A game might be set in a laboratory, but it needs to make sense for people to be there. And if there are, or were, humans in your environment, you certainly need to fulfil two needs: eating and shitting. Food can be handled simply with, say, food containers littered around the place. But unless the situation is really dire, humans require a specialised place to do their business. So in a way, toilets are part of the justification for having that cool laboratory."

There's something about entering a bathroom in a horror game that somehow puts you on edge more than any other location. "Public toilets are strange," he says. "We're surrounded by people as we





3

do something that is very private to us. So there's an underlying tension to visiting one. They make us feel vulnerable, which is perfect for horror."

"They have fluorescent lights that flicker," he adds. "They're usually white, which is a great contrast to filth and blood. Clinical yet dirty at the same time. The stalls are a great place to hide

A TOILET IS A PORCELAIN WINDOW INTO THE SOUL



4



5

things in, and you can use the gap in the door to give players an early hint of something horrible inside. There are drains and faucets that drip and create nice ambient sounds. And there are mirrors, which you can do all kinds of scary stuff with."

GOLD FLUSH

As for the process of building a videogame toilet, it can be a surprisingly tricky task. I ask Frictional artist Aaron Clifford, who created *Soma*'s peerless khazi, about the process. "The toilet was in good shape, but I wasn't happy with the flush. It didn't do it justice. It was impossible to make a decent swirling effect using particle systems, so I used an animated water texture that moved along a strip of polygons. Then all I had to do was bend and twist the strip to have the water flow down the bowl."

That's a lot of effort and ingenuity to expend on a toilet, but it's completely worth it. If it wasn't there, or it didn't flush, you'd be disappointed. "Certain players want maximum value for money," says JP LeBreton, a designer who worked on *BioShock* and *The Cave*. "Every inch of the world must dance for them if they demand it. A player chooses, a toilet obeys."

But toilets are more than just props. A toilet is a porcelain window into the soul of the artist who created it, and through it you can learn a lot about their personality and their design philosophy. And they reveal something about us as players too. Our expectations, desires, and what it takes to make us believe in a game world. So the next time you pass a virtual toilet and, of course, attempt to flush it, take a closer look at what happens. You may be able to divine some hidden truth about the game you're playing and the people who made it. ■

THE ESCAPE



How a scam in
EVE ONLINE turned
into its greatest
rescue mission.

A fleet of alien spaceships, resembling dark, bulbous pods with glowing blue energy ports, are shown flying through a star-filled space. The ships are moving from left to right, creating a sense of motion. The background features a gradient from light blue on the left to dark black on the right, with numerous small white stars scattered across the sky.

By Steven Messner

GREAT



The moment the fleet of Svipul-class tactical destroyers crashed through the gates of Standing United's home system was the greatest moment of Circo Maximo's virtual life. Leading the charge was a man who had once tried to take everything from him. But today, *EVE Online*'s most notorious scammer Scooter McCabe would be his saviour. As the hundred-man fleet warped into the star system, Scooter McCabe sent a message in the local chat channel: "We are the Goonberets and we are coming to liberate the oppressed."

Though Circo didn't realise it, he had just become the target of *EVE Online*'s first humanitarian-aid mission.

Weeks earlier, The Mittani, leader of the massive Goonswarm Federation and Scooter's boss, asked him to settle a personal vendetta against another player. The mark was a small-time pilot who went by the name of Scottmw15 and had made a crucial mistake when he called The Mittani's personal friend a bitch. Scooter would teach Scottmw15 a lesson about making the wrong kinds of enemies.

In *EVE Online*, veteran pilots often play with multiple accounts at the same

time. This allows them to specialise in several key areas, such as having a powerful combat pilot and another who oversees complicated industrial production chains. For Scooter, each of his 'alts' is a suit of digital skin that he wears to become someone else. This time he'd become Neerah Otomeya, a quiet, likeable pilot. In a harsh sandbox MMO where trust is everything, people like Scooter are the very reason it's in short supply.

"The idea was that I would infiltrate his corporation, befriend him, get a leadership role, and then rob everything," Scooter says. Making matters easier, Scottmw15's corporation, Standing United, recruited only brand-new players. It seemed like a simple scam.

HEART OF DARKNESS

In November 2016, *EVE Online* launched a limited free-to-play option that allows players to explore New Eden without the intimidating cost of a monthly subscription. As fresh pilots spawned for the first time, they were bombarded by recruitment notices from corporations looking to capitalise on the population explosion. It was *EVE Online*'s own career day.

"I'd never played before and I'd been told *EVE Online* is really involved and complicated," Circo Maximo tells me. "I knew I wouldn't be able to function that well on my own." Scottmw15 recruited him within 24 hours.

"He took them out to Russian space where the only people who spoke English were the people in the corporation and him," Scooter tells me. "They were off and isolated, and once they were there he put them to work."

The tales of glory and wealth that Scottmw15 promised to recruits like Circo was a lie. Instead, he forced them to 'rat' – kill respawning NPC pirate ships to collect their bounties – every hour they were logged in. While hunting real pirates is an adrenaline rush, killing the AI variety is a monotonous grind.

"It was basically a '20s mining company," Scooter says. Scottmw15 had cranked up the corporate tax rate so that a massive portion of every bounty would go directly into his wallet. What's more, he'd force the recruits to sell him whatever loot they found at a fraction of the price so

that he could flip it on the market for double the profit. While Scottmw15 got rich, Circo and the rest barely made enough to survive. But Scottmw15's cruelty ran deeper than exploitation.

"He would yell at people if they did anything other than ratting," Circo says. "He'd make examples of them." On Standing United's Discord chat server, Scottmw15 would frequently humiliate and terrorise players. He even spammed links to weird dating sites he owned and forced them to click on advertisements to generate ad revenue. Those that resisted were cut loose and left to die penniless and alone at the hands of the Russians. Scottmw15 wasn't running a corporation, he was running a forced labour camp.

The moment that Neerah Otomeya – Scooter's spy alt – exploded into flames at the hands of her compatriates in Standing United, he knew his plan was working. For days, he had launched a one-man siege against Standing United, and the cracks were beginning to form.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Meet the major players



CIRCO MAXIMO
A days-old player lured to *EVE Online* by its new free-to-play programme.



SCOTTMW15
The mark. A small-time pilot with a reputation for exploitation and abuse.



ALEXYA FISULFATIA
An on-again-off-again newbie who decided to give the game one more shot.



SCOOTER MCCABE
A smooth-talking con artist sent to take down Scottmw15.



MARKONIUS PORKBUTTE
Spy master in the Goonswarm Federation and KarmaFleet founder.



NEERAH OTOMEYA
Scooter's spy character he used to operate from the inside.



THE MITTANI
Leader of the Goonswarm Federation, the largest alliance in *EVE Online*.



As Neerah, Scooter worked his deception from the inside while as Scooter McCabe, he piloted a strategic cruiser more powerful than anything Standing United could match.

"Scooter made everyone's life a living hell," Circo recalls. "It was awful. Nobody could do anything – he pretty much shut down the entire corporation just by himself." The moment anyone undocked, Scooter was there to destroy them. Circo lost millions of ISK to Scooter personally, and others lost much more. The threat of death meant Scottmw15's labour empire had ground to a halt. "He flat out told people that he was here strictly because of Scottmw15, and then Scottmw15 would tell us that he was full of it and that everything was a lie."

But more than physical damage, Scooter's siege was quickly eroding the morale of the entire corporation. Cooped up inside their station and safe from his missiles, Scooter began playing mindgames with them. "As I sat there

LEFT: The region of space where most player-empires reside is called null-sec due to its lack of security and game-enforced laws.



BELow: The Svipul tactical destroyer is capable of switching between three combat modes, including the nearly uncatchable propulsion mode.



on comms as Neerah, I took details I heard and belched them back out as Scooter," he says. It worked.

"Scottmw15 was super paranoid," Circo tells me. "He thought everyone was Scooter."

Players were screamed at and interrogated. But eventually suspicion fell on Neerah and Standing United ambushed her, destroying her ship in an attempt to interrogate her. But this wasn't Scooter's first rodeo. A carefully planned alibi in the form of a kill report that showed Neerah had killed Scooter in a past career proved they couldn't be the same person. "There's no possible way Neerah is Scooter because who would do that to himself?" A crafty scammer, that's who.

BREAKING POINT

However, the witch hunt was taking its toll. Many gave up *EVE* altogether, and those that persisted were miserable. Convinced that Neerah was his ally, Scottmw15 began to suspect everyone else and the pressure was causing him to crack. And then he crossed a very personal line. "I suffer from lung cancer," Alexya Fisulfatia, one of the recruits, tells me. Weeks ago, Alexya had told Scottmw15 this in confidence. But then Scottmw15 used Alexya's cancer as leverage. "He says, 'Hey leave us alone because this guy has cancer – we must pity the cancer kid,'" Alexya says. "I was humiliated."

"It was a really shitty thing to do," Scooter adds – and that's saying something for a professional scammer. "I'm talking to these guys as Neerah, and suddenly as they're explaining the situation to me, I realise all of them are >





» nice fucking guys.” While burning Scottmw15 was still Scooter’s plan, he needed to find a way to make sure the innocent members didn’t get caught in the crossfire.

STANDING DIVIDED

Returning to The Mittani, Scooter told him everything. “We’re going, this is fucked up. This guy is actively hurting the game itself. I know in the past I’ve scammed people, but shit, those people have been in the game for years and should know better,” he says.

Together with Markonius Porkbutte, a Goonswarm spymaster, Scooter and The Mittani reached out to rival null-sec alliances to put aside differences and devise a strategy to liberate the trapped Standing United newbies. Over the next few weeks, each



BELOW:
Scooter flew a deadly Tengu strategic cruiser that has modular components it can mix and match to suit a variety of combat scenarios.

alliance would seed spies into Standing United and foment a mutiny and get them into proper corporations.

And then everything collapsed.

While hunting Scottmw15, Scooter ran into a band of Australian soldiers known as the Swords of Damocles roaming into nearby regions looking for fights. As it goes in *EVE*, they destroyed Scooter’s ship. But their leader was curious, what was Scooter doing way out here? “I told him about Scottmw15, and it turns out he knew him from the past and knew he was an asshole,” Scooter says. Seeing an opportunity, he told them about a 100 million ISK bounty Scottmw15 placed on his head and asked if they’d do him a favour and collect it. They did one better.

In an in-game mail, Swords of Damocles’ leader informed Scottmw15

of their recent kill and their intention to collect the 100 million ISK bounty, except with just one twist: they demanded 20 billion ISK instead or Standing United was as good as dead. Everyone panicked.

“Now that we didn’t just have Scooter coming after us, Scottmw15 completely lost it,” Circo says. What they didn’t realise was that Swords had no intention of collecting. Scottmw15 bought their bluff all the same.

To Circo and everyone else in Standing United, Scottmw15 had cracked. While Circo tells me there was always something “weird” about him, he was now fully unhinged.

“He said God punished me with cancer because I deserve to die,” Alexya says. “I went berserk.”

Scooter’s idea worked too well. Within minutes, the Standing United voice server devolved into mutiny. Pushed to the edge, forced to endure verbal torture and monotonous labour in a videogame they played for fun, and now seemingly the target of powerful alliances, Circo and Alexya were done. They accused Scottmw15 of exploiting them for profit and lying about Scooter’s intentions in front of the whole corporation.

“You bastard, you made us slaves!” Alexya screamed at him. Before anyone could respond, Alexya was gone – Scottmw15 had banned him from Discord and booted him from the corporation. Soon after, Circo suffered the same fate.

One by one, Scottmw15 began kicking recruits from Standing United. Days old, barely able to navigate through space, and locked out of all



their ships, it was game over. "He kicked the entire corp and left them stranded in Russian space where they can't speak to the Russians and essentially told them to go fuck themselves and die," Scooter says. He watched everything in silence as Neerah and realised he couldn't wait.

"We got to get these guys out, we got to send a fleet in now because if we don't it'll be a bloodbath," he wrote in a message to Markonius.

"Let's roll," Markonius wrote back.

THE GOONBERETS

While Alexya made a run for safety, Circo stayed behind. For days he had secretly ferried what few items he had out of Russian space in anticipation for a collapse. Though only days old, he knew the route well enough. "I was telling everyone, 'Come follow me and I'm going to get you to [high-security space] and, once in Hise, I'll lead you guys to the Goons,'" he says. "I was going to take my ship and scout ahead and if I blew up, I blew up. I was going to get those guys to safety."

Scooter couldn't maintain his disguise any longer. "Sit there and don't move," Neerah wrote to Circo. He didn't have time to explain because in a second window of *EVE Online*, he was guiding a fleet of Goons through the 62 jumps of enemy territory that sat between Goonswarm and Standing United. An hour later, Circo saw the biggest fleet of his life.

"We crash into the system with Scottmw15 and the Russians there," says Scooter. "The local population all of a sudden spikes, and I can see, as Neerah, the Russians going, 'Oh shit.' I'm telling everyone as Neerah that the Goons are coming and to relax. As Scooter, I write into chat, 'We're the Goonberets and we're coming to liberate the oppressed. Russians, if you undock we will fucking kill you. Scottmw15, you had this coming.'"



ABOVE: In null-sec, pirates fly powerful brawlers like the Cynabal pirate cruiser to destroy unsuspecting players.



Scottmw15 would never see that message. Minutes earlier he received word of the incoming warband and logged off, presumably in terror. For all he knew, the whole galaxy was coming to kill him. Scooter tells me that, to his knowledge, he's never logged in again (Scottmw15 couldn't be reached for comment on this piece).

For Alexya, Circo and the rest of the recruits, the rescue operation was akin to being liberated from a virtual labour camp. "They don't know me, but they spent hours to come out and get me and bring me back," Circo says, amazed. "I lost all this money, and these people just met me and they showered billions [of ISK] on us. They just threw it at us."

But more important than the ISK, Alexya says that it was the realisation that *EVE Online* wasn't the cruel and abusive world he thought it was. "I was told by Markonius and Scooter that I was among friends right now," he says. "People were so friendly."

Markonius extended each member of Standing United instant admission into KarmaFleet, Goonswarm's own

new-player corporation. For Circo and Alexya, they could finally experience the real *EVE Online* – not the exploitation and harassment, but the sense of belonging found among friends in an unforgiving galaxy. In the end, over 25 players had been liberated.

Both were lured to *EVE Online* by its stories of war, intrigue, and scandal, but neither imagined they would become the centre of it. "I always wanted to join something big and have my moment of fame, but I never could expect something like that to happen," Alexya explains. "It's just such a weird coincidence."

"It was awesome," Circo says. "After it happened I pretty

much loved the game."

For Scooter McCabe, it's a reminder that even after all these years *EVE Online* and its players can still surprise him. Scottmw15, he says, "is an awful fucking human being. Not just in the *EVE* way, but I mean this guy in real life is an awful human being. I didn't even make money off this but this was the most rewarding thing I've ever done in this game." ■

WE WANT YOU!

New-player corps that won't exploit you

1

KARMAFLEET
A member of the largest alliance, Goonswarm Federation, KarmaFleet is exceedingly well-organised with an impressive infrastructure aimed at helping new players.

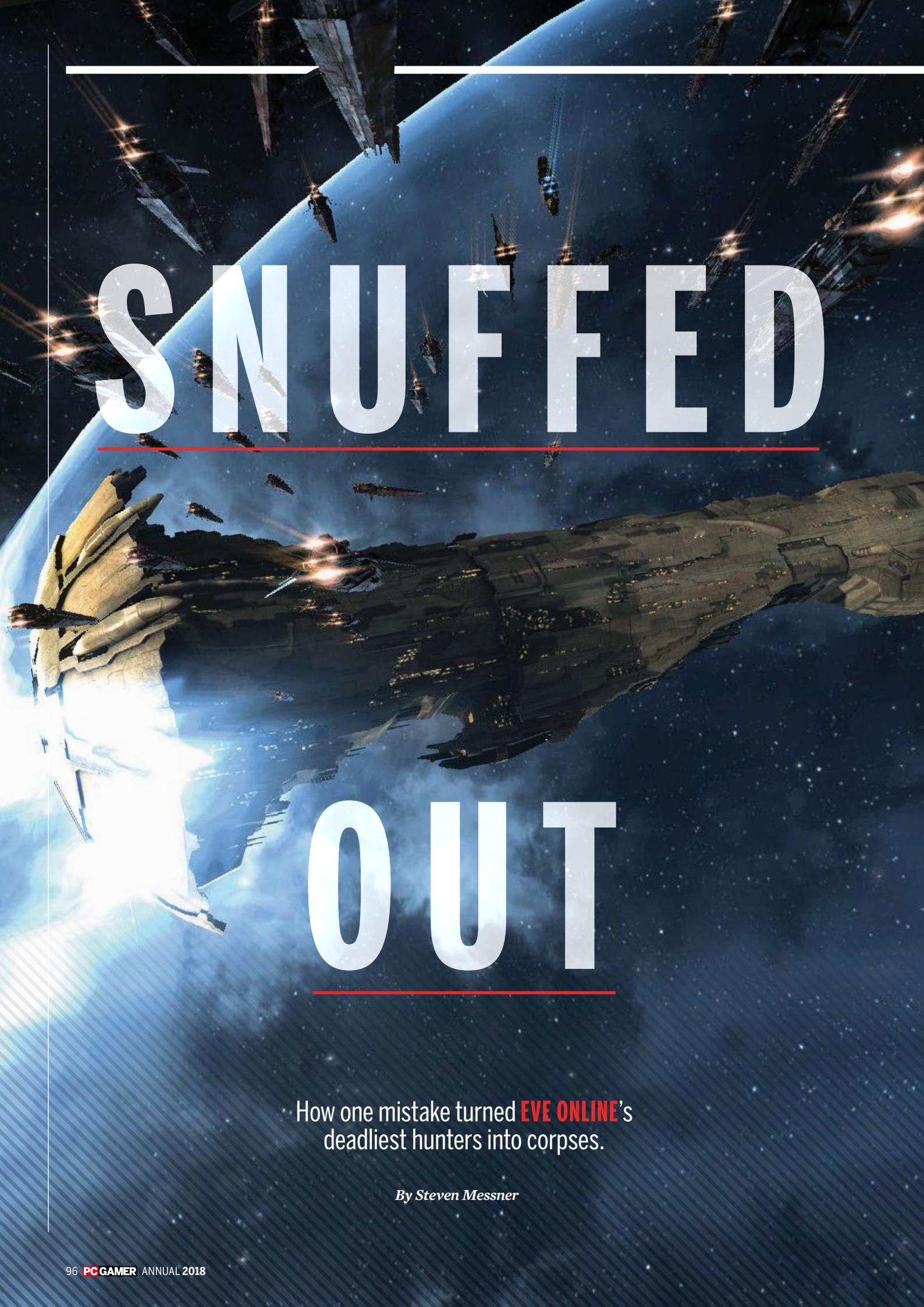
2

PANDEMIC HORDE
The yin to KarmaFleet's yang, Pandemic Horde is a ragtag bunch of newbies for players who thrive by taking the initiative and making their own fun.

3

BRAVE NEWBIES INC
Though diminished from their former glory, this group pioneered the idea of a new-player-friendly corp and can still be found slugging it out against *EVE*'s biggest empires.

"THIS WAS THE MOST REWARDING THING I'VE DONE IN THIS GAME"



SNUFFED

OUT

How one mistake turned **EVE ONLINE**'s
deadliest hunters into corpses.

By Steven Messner

TITANS ARE THE MOST MAJESTIC THINGS IN EVE ONLINE.

THESE COLOSSAL SPACESHIPS SPAN UPWARDS OF

18 KILOMETRES IN LENGTH AND COME EQUIPPED WITH

DEVASTATING 'DOOMSDAY' WEAPONS THAT CAN

EVISCERATE ENTIRE FLEETS IN ONE FELL SWOOP.

THEY TAKE ALMOST A YEAR OF TRAINING TO FLY, COST

NEARLY 100 BILLION ISK TO BUILD, AND ARE THE

BACKBONE OF ANY MAJOR EVE ALLIANCE.

AND ROCKET X KILLS THEM FOR A LIVING.





meet Rocket in the media room at *EVE Online's* annual Fanfest in Iceland. For the average *EVE* player, nearly every minute of this week is spent reuniting with corpmates, drinking beer, and celebrating PC gaming's dauntingly complex spaceship MMO. But my meeting with Rocket X has a different, more sombre tone. I'm here to talk about one of the most embarrassing moments in his 13-year career as a pilot.

At 26 years old, Rocket has been playing *EVE* for half of his entire life. He's a director in one of the game's most storied alliances, Pandemic Legion, and he personally heads up RekkingCrew, an infamous gang of tenacious and savage Titan killers. Composed of elite pilots from various alliances, RekkingCrew unites them for one purpose: the thrill of the hunt.

"We're known being one of the most prolific hunting groups in the game," Rocket says with a proud smile. "The way we look at the game, if we log out and we haven't ruined someone's day, then we've not had a good day. When you lose one of these ships, it hurts. It's six or seven hundred pounds of ship. It's not like you pay a bit of gold in *World of Warcraft* and you get it back. It's like crashing a car."

Rocket and his crew play *EVE* in a way that only a handful of people will ever experience. As Super Capital hunters, he and RekkingCrew don't fight Titans and their smaller siblings, Supercarriers, head-on. Instead, they track them down, learn everything they can about the pilot in the captain's chair, and orchestrate elaborate traps that spring so swiftly that, if it weren't for the couple million tonnes of floating wreckage left behind, no one would know they were there. "It's very intensive," Rocket says. "A lot of it is research, figuring out who someone is, what times they log in, what they do and how they're likely to react if you present them with a certain scenario."

Like a virtual version of Captain Ahab, Rocket hunts *EVE*'s very own white whales. "It used to be something that hadn't really been done," he explains. "Titans and Supercarriers were always viewed as ships owned by large alliances and you wouldn't be able to kill them unless you fought that alliance directly. But we set out in 2010 to prove they were as vulnerable as anyone else. We transformed it from something that happened occasionally and made it a science."

He tells me he once tracked a Titan for three years before finally killing it. That dedication to the hunt is what made him one of *EVE*'s most deadly pilots. To date, Rocket has destroyed 5,482 ships and only lost 39. The value of those destroyed ships is nearly 8 trillion ISK — almost as much as *EVE*'s largest single battle. Despite this, these aren't the first things I learn about Rocket. During Fanfest, a friend and fellow *EVE* player approached me. "I heard you were looking for stories of betrayal?" He said. "Well, I've got one that you have to hear."

THE NICKED NYX

It was in December of last year when Rocket made a mistake that cost him dearly. Over the Christmas holiday, RekkingCrew members had scouted a Supercarrier-class 'Nyx' parked inside the shields of an undefended player-owned starbase. Called POSes, these tower-like structures emit a force field where players can camp out safe from the guns of their enemies.

Though considerably cheaper than a Titan, Supercarriers are still the second most powerful ships in *EVE*. Fielding squadrons of deadly automated fighters, they're a worthy prey to hunt. The only problem was that this particular Nyx, which Rocket hilariously describes as "a green pancake with holes in it", was untouchable behind the shields of the starbase. Given that most RekkingCrew members were enjoying the Christmas break, Rocket didn't think he could muster the numbers needed to crack open the shields. "We just decided to shelf it for the time being," he explains.

Then something serendipitous happened. One of Rocket's crew was approached by a character named Boneless Steve, from the nearby Curatores Veritatis Alliance (CVA), requesting an audience. "We're not particularly hostile to CVA, we'll shoot

them if we get the chance, but we have nothing against them, so I was like, 'Okay fine, what's the deal?'" Rocket explains. "So he says he had this Nyx and it was stolen from him and he doesn't know where it is but he knows which person took it." It would be next to impossible to steal the Nyx back, so Boneless Steve wanted it and the thief dead. Just like that, RekkingCrew had all the ingredients they needed to set a trap. While they might lack the firepower to bring the POS shields down, Rocket had a hunch that they could bait the Nyx into leaving its protection with Boneless Steve's help.

The plan was that Boneless Steve would fly out to the POS in a battleship and begin shooting the shields. A battleship is no threat to a Nyx, but it would appear like Boneless Steve was trying enact some kind of desperate revenge. Rocket bet that the Nyx pilot would fly out beyond the shields to destroy the battleship and salt the wound, and that's when RekkingCrew would pounce. It was a plan they had pulled off dozens of times.

But as Rocket should have known by this point, few things in *EVE* are ever serendipitous.

BAIT AND TACKLE

On the evening of December 29, RekkingCrew set its trap. One by one, a dozen RekkingCrew pilots logged into multiple characters that they would control simultaneously and suited up for the operation. With just a Nyx on the menu, the team still needed a sizeable force of five Nyx Supercarriers and a dozen smaller ships to 'tackle' the

enemy Nyx using warp disruption modules. Titan pilots would be waiting on call should their extra firepower be needed. And then there was the most important ship of all, a single Battleship-class Vindicator.

WHEN YOU LOSE ONE OF THESE SHIPS, IT HURTS

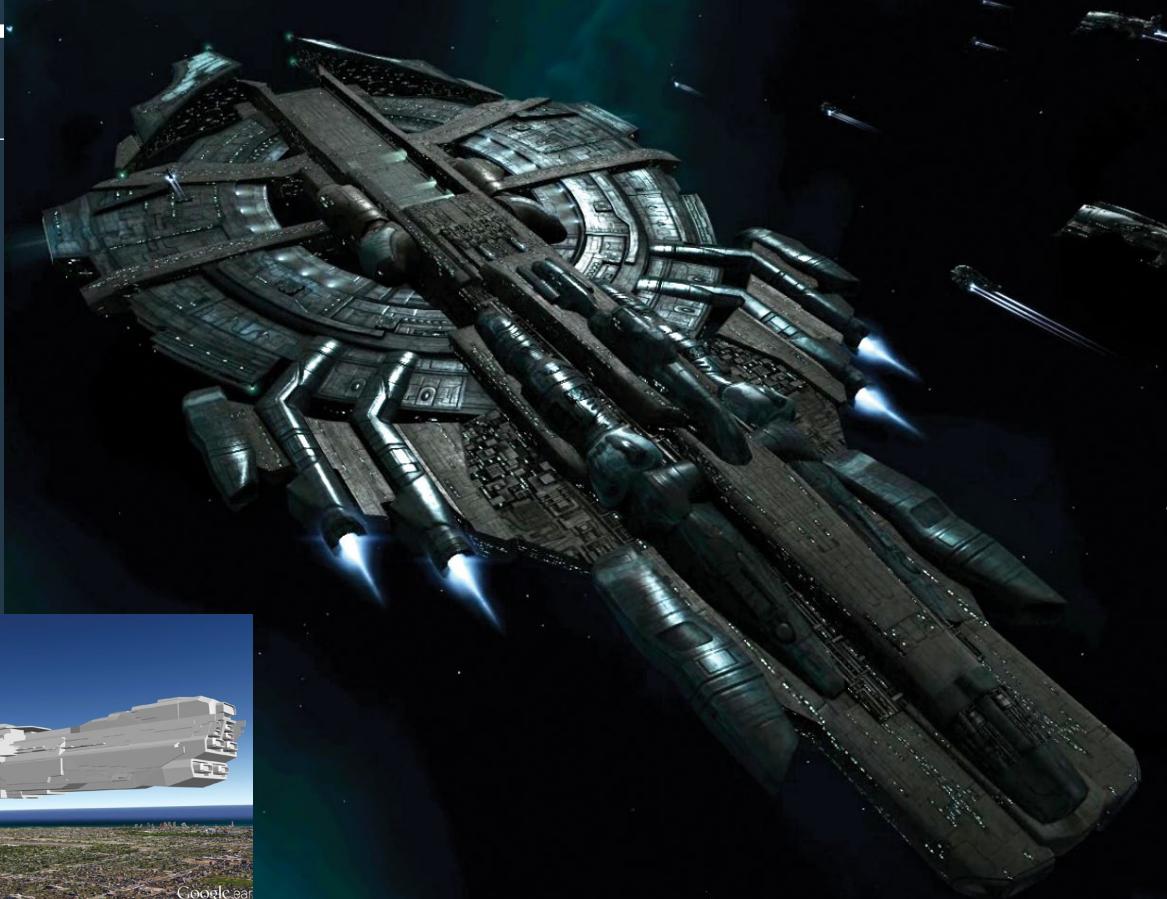
Piloting this Vindicator, Rocket would exploit one of *EVE*'s most unusual gameplay quirks. While ramming an enemy ship does no damage, it can push them off course. It's a tactic that players have turned into an art that requires masterful piloting of *EVE*'s clumsy ships. Rocket tells me he was the only one he could trust to get it right. Using his Vindicator, he would repeatedly ram the Nyx, pushing it a little further from the safety of the POS's shields each time. Then, when there was no hope of the massive Supercarrier making an

1

1 The Nyx Supercarrier is a little more elegantly designed than a “green pancake with holes in it”.

2 A 18-kilometer-long Leviathan as it would appear over downtown Chicago.

3 A screenshot from a video recording of a Snuffed Out pilot as RekkingCrew's capitals were destroyed one by one.



2



CREDIT: TONYMVEE111

3



REMEMBER THE TITANS *Meet the capital ships of EVE Online*



CARRIERS

Fielding waves of frigate-sized automated fighters, carriers are powerful capital ships that excel at destroying Subcapital ships, such as Cruisers.



DREADNOUGHTS

Cheaper than Titans, these aren't as risky to deploy in dicey fights. By entering 'siege mode', they lose in mobility what they gain in firepower.



SUPERCARRIERS

The nasty big brothers to Carriers, Supercarriers, like the Nyx, field heavy fighter drones that can tear apart other crucial capital ships.



FORCE AUXILIARIES

The clerics to EVE's warriors, Force Auxiliaries, like the Minokawa, fit powerful triage modules to keep their fleets shields up and armour repaired.



TITANS

The atom bombs of EVE, Titans are fitted with weapons that can wipe fleets off the field. You better hope your side has more than your enemy.

4



4 Titans have special jump drives which can open portals for smaller ships to use, enabling fleets to move suddenly and unexpectedly.

5 If EVE proves anything, it's that overcompensation is a concept that also exists in space. Just look at the size of that monster!

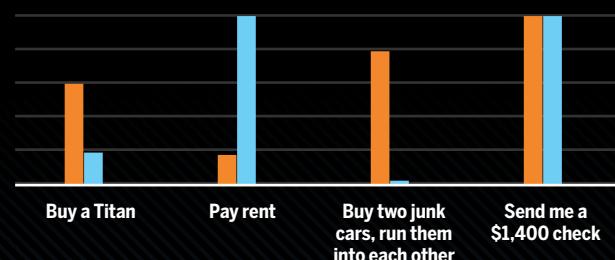
6 Based on stolen designs for the Gallente Megathron, Guardian Angels' pirate Vindicator is an intimidating and deadly battleship.



5

THINGS THAT COST LESS THAN A TITAN

Titans are valued at roughly \$1,400. Here's some better ways you can spend that money.



6



escape, RekkingCrew would then call in the cavalry.

But this was RekkingCrew, the most feared killers in all of New Eden, after all. A little flair is always necessary. The shining gem of the RekkingCrew fleet was its Revenant – one of the rarest ships in the entire game. These bulbous, alien-like Supercarriers can only be constructed from an incredibly rare blueprint that drops from Sansha pirate Motherships that periodically appear to launch invasions on various star systems. Revenants are estimated to cost a whopping 100 billion ISK for just the hull alone, and only five of them have ever been destroyed in *EVE's* history.

With the RekkingCrew fleet formed, all it needed was their bait, Boneless Steve. Only Boneless Steve wasn't ready. He told the team he needed some more time to prepare. For an hour, RekkingCrew waited anxiously while the Nyx sat idle behind the safety of the forcefield. The clock was ticking.

When Boneless Steve finally arrived, it was without a ship. Frustrated by his incompetence, Rocket gave him one of his own Dominix battleships which he could use to shoot the POS. Boneless Steve then journeyed out to the system of Hothomouh where the Nyx was waiting, warped to the starbase, and unleashed hell upon its shields. A cloaked scout in the system spoke up on comms: "The Nyx is moving."

On Rocket's orders, the scout lit a cynosural beacon. Several systems away, a RekkingCrew Titan locked onto the beacon and opened a warp bridge through space that the fleet then entered. As the Nyx broke away from the safety of the shields and launched a squadron of fighters at Boneless Steve's Dominix, a portal opened right next to it. Led by Rocket in his Vindicator, a small force of cruisers and battleships flooded through. Rocket engaged his thrusters, charged the Nyx, and rammed it just as it began to turn back towards the shields. "Once he was safely off and couldn't get anywhere, it seemed like an easy kill," Rocket says and shrugs.

HERE COMES THE CAVALRY

A month after talking with Rocket, I manage to track Boneless Steve down in the game. Unsurprisingly, Boneless Steve is a burner character – a decoy account. His real name is Catelyn Stoneheart. The thief who stole the Nyx, named Hy Wanto Destroyer, is actually a friend of his.

Both are members of Snuffed Out, another alliance that, in its spare time, hunts Supercapital ships. Only Snuffed Out plays by a different set of rules than most. While RekkingCrew often relies

on the kindness of strangers for its intelligence, Snuffed Out works from the inside.

"Rocket's guys walked around *EVE* like they were untouchable," Catelyn says. "They needed to be put in check." So in late December, Snuffed Out's leader, DonnieDarko, decided to hatch a plan.

When Rocket and his team sprung their trap, Boneless Steve and DonnieDarko sprung theirs.

Several hundred kilometres from the POS, the stolen Nyx was as good as dead. Rocket tells me he then gave the order and a second cynosural beacon was lit. Again, the Titan locked onto the beacon and opened a bridge. A second wave of RekkingCrew Supercarriers warped through, led by the Revenant. They locked onto the Nyx and just then, Rocket tells me he saw a third cynosural beacon light up.

"Is that ours?" Rocket said. And then he got his answer.

A wave of 22 Heavy Interdiction Cruisers exploded through the warp bridge and launched their warp disruption bubbles. In seconds, the RekkingCrew fleet was trapped, unable to escape. Then came the real cavalry: 53 Dreadnaughts and 13 Carriers. "My stomach dropped out and I froze for a moment," Rocket admits. "But as a fleet commander, the worst thing you can do is freeze. You have to keep giving instructions and even if they're the wrong ones you have to keep talking and keep your guys focused."

But the enemy had brought nearly three times as many guns to the fight. As the Dreadnaughts' first salvo sliced through the armour plating of each Supercarrier, Rocket spoke up on comms. "There's nothing I can do, you're all going to die," he said. "Just try and kill what you can."

Ten minutes later it was over. Being in a Vindicator, Rocket was one of the least threatening ships on the field. "I had to sit and watch them die around me and there was nothing I could do," Rocket says sadly. "As a fleet commander, that's horrible."

As RekkingCrew Super Capitals erupted in flames, Catelyn says that the team's pilots began lashing out at him, thinking he was a spy. In a delicious twist of irony, Rocket stepped into the argument to defend him as he wasn't convinced that Catelyn was at fault. "It was pretty hilarious," Catelyn says with a laugh.

But there was more salt to the wound. On his overview window, where ships signatures are arranged so that pilots can make better sense of a crowded playing field, Rocket saw the fleet had members from CVA. "That was just another kick in the teeth right there. The alliance we thought we were helping was there to kill us."

The stolen Nyx wasn't the target, RekkingCrew was. Rocket tells me only then he realised why Boneless Steve took so long to meet them. He was stalling so Snuffed Out could form its fleet. By then, Boneless Steve had exited their comms and was long gone.

Snuffed Out did more than just deflate one person's ego, however.

Rocket confesses that this was RekkingCrew's "first loss in six years" and the *EVE* community took notice. Once the battle was made public, Rocket says his inbox filled with

MY STOMACH DROPPED OUT AND I FROZE FOR A MOMENT

people looking to gloat. More than just wounded pride, Snuffed Out's trap cost Rocket and his crew a devastating 300 billion ISK. It took some RekkingCrew pilots weeks to rebuild and get back into the captain's chair of new Supercarriers. The Revenant, which contributed to a whopping third of the total damages, would likely never be replaced. One of RekkingCrew's Nyx crafts was fitted with expensive 'Officer' modules, making it the most expensive Nyx kill in two years. "It's a huge loss," Rocket says with a frown. "To lose a Super Capital, you're one of a very select group of people. A lot of my guys are still very bitter about it."

I ask Rocket what went wrong and he shrugs. "It's my responsibility to always make sure the information I have is correct," he says. In the aftermath, Rocket realised that his teammate, who Boneless Steve first contacted, never did a background check on him. It was a simple mistake that cost RekkingCrew billions of ISK and its 'untouchable' reputation. Despite that, Rocket takes the blame. "It's my responsibility to always make sure the information I have is correct. When I made that call to tell them to jump in, that's on me."

"You have to command [Snuffed Out]," he adds diplomatically. "There's no way I can have any animosity against them because at the end of the day it's a game and I got bested."

Snuffed Out, however, isn't nearly as kind. "The only thing I regret," Hy Wanto says with a sneer, "Is that I didn't get the killing blow on Rocket." ■



1

2

3

4

5

PC GAMER'S ARMA 3 WAR GAMES



Andy becomes Zeus in **ARMA 3: APEX**, and sets us a series of sporting-style challenges across Tanoa.

Set on the jungle islands of Tanoa, our first ever Arma 3 Sports Day will put the team through five brutal trials of skill and fortitude. These challenges, orchestrated by the almighty deity Zeus (well, Andy), will test essential skills such as

marksmanship, driving, avoiding lightning bolts, and hiding from a helicopter in a bush. The challengers won't know what each event involves until the chaos begins, and the mischievous Zeus will keep things interesting by throwing a few surprises into the mix, usually involving sheep. Who will be the champion?

MEET THE TEAM

1**ANDY KELLY (ZEUS)**

I've played a lot of *Arma 3* and am well-versed in Zeus mode, particularly spawning sheep.

2**SAMUEL ROBERTS**

I've only played *Arma 3* once, for a feature, and had to be taught how to climb over things again.

3**CHRIS THURSTEN**

I've played a bit of *Arma 3*, but needed to replay some of the campaign to get up to speed.

4**PHIL SAVAGE**

What's the crouch button? What's the get in car button? It's been a while since I last *Arma'd*.

5**TOM SENIOR**

I've never really played *Arma* either. This hardcore war sim can't be that hard, right?

Arma 3: Apex

Arma 3 is a very serious military simulator.



EVENT 1

DEATH KARTS

La Rochelle Aerodrome

Andy: I don't know why *Arma 3* has go-kart DLC. There's something absurd about a soldier decked out in full military gear skidding around in a tiny car. Which was the inspiration for my first event, Death Karts. The guys have to make three laps of the runway, which I've littered with wrecked vehicles and sheep. I'll also be flinging lightning bolts and maybe the occasional mortar strike, just to spice things up.

Phil: We set off. I dodge tanks, rusted boats and other detritus (is that a sheep?), and, as I approach the halfway point of the first lap, I'm in the lead. The shouting from nearby desks suggests that I might be the only one left moving. Then I explode. Er, Andy, what was that?

THE RULES

Race three laps, avoiding obstacles, mortar strikes, and other dangers. The challenger in first place, or the last man standing, wins.

Andy: Yeah. Death Karts was maybe a little too deadly. Rather than exciting obstacles to avoid, the mortar strikes were just annoyingly powerful. Halfway through the first lap, everyone's either dead or their karts are broken. So I decide to start again minus the artillery. And because it's taken us 40 minutes to get to this point, I decide that one lap is enough. Now it's time for Slightly Less Deadly Karts. Go!

Chris: I'm lagging behind Sam as we reach the end of the runway for the first time, but then he clips the side of one of our own ruined karts, does a forward flip, and dies. I thread a safer course, by which I mean I run over his head. I'm clear in the lead: Phil's lost his kart by this point, and Tom died early. But then I hear gunfire: Tom sprints back onto the track from the respawn point, takes aim, and kills me. Nobody wins.

Tom: Welcome to the senseless horror of Death Karts, Chris. If I can't win, everybody dies.

Samuel: My death was sudden and embarrassing.

Phil: Technically I'm alive, but I have no wheels. I can move, but slowly, and always to the right. If we had a few hours, I might make it a few metres down the road. We don't, though, so instead we persuade Andy

to give us another go.

Tom: I am officially disqualified from earning any points because of my previous unsportsmanlike behaviour. In my despair I crash into a downed helicopter and explode.

Chris: I manage a pretty clean run on our final attempt at this, pulling ahead and staying there because I know that you can hold down Shift to make cars go faster. Nobody else knows this, and I do not tell them until after I've crossed the finish line. I savour my gold medal, even though it comes with the silvery tang of betrayal. Mmmm.

Phil: What! I press Shift and, sure enough, I get a burst of speed. I would be annoyed, but the revelation allows me to overtake Samuel for second place.

Samuel: I'm just grateful to make it round the track, which I do. I'm furious that Chris didn't share this detail, but hopefully karma will get him back in a coming event.

WINNER – CHRIS



1st
Chris

2nd
Phil

3rd
Samuel



EVENT 2

BIRD OF PREY

Comms Alpha

THE RULES

Challengers are trapped in a mountain base while Zeus attacks in a helicopter. Last man standing wins.

Andy: Comms Alpha is a military outpost on the precarious edge of a dormant volcano. I'll be assaulting it in an Mi-48 Kajman attack chopper. There are a few buildings for the guys to hide in, but I'll be able to flatten them with my missiles. I spawn the Kajman a few miles away then slowly make my way towards the base. I wish there was an option to play 'Ride of the Valkyries'.

Tom: Ah, the cowardice challenge – I've got this. At one end of the base there's a huge building shaped like a golf ball. I'm certain Andy won't be able to resist destroying that first. In fact, I think buildings are generally a death sentence here so I pick a largeish bush on the outskirts of the base, lie on my stomach and unceremoniously roll into the roots as far as I can. In first-person view I can see a wall. From third-person I can only see leaves. I'm not moving.

Andy: I realise how bad I am at flying helicopters. Precise Gatling gun fire is out of the equation, so I just pummel the base with rockets and hope for the best. Of course I destroy the giant golf ball first.

Phil: Unbeknownst to me, I've hidden in the same bush as Tom. As Andy rains hellfire down upon the



buildings, I wedge myself further into my leafy sanctuary. This is a good plan! Suddenly, unexpectedly, I'm dead. I ask Andy if my movement had tipped him off. It turns out no. The downside to lying in the grass as an attack helicopter flies overhead is that there's nothing to protect you from a stray rocket. Writing that sentence down after the fact, it sounds really obvious.

Samuel: I get in the nearest building, because it's so obvious I don't think

"ANDY RAINS HELLFIRE DOWN AS I WEDGE INTO MY LEAFY SANCTUARY"

Andy will search there first. I see the smoke as Andy destroys the building next to me – this is like a survival horror game where the monster is a chopper. It's genuinely tense. Andy clips me with ricocheting bullets but I heal myself as he restocks.

Chris: I've got a plan. We can't shoot each other, or Andy, but there's more to a *Arma* character than guns. I hide in a building with a window

overlooking Tom's bush. I suspect he's safe down there, so as Andy passes over I ready a red smoke grenade and attempt to throw it down at him. It bounces off the inside of the window and goes off at my feet. Shit. Red smoke billowing from the window I'm at, I flee and enact plan B: hide from Andy by running directly beneath him. This does not work because helicopters are faster than people. As he fires aimlessly at the containers I'm hiding behind, I take a hit. I just about manage to heal and sprint away.

Tom: There is a lot of scary noise, but all I can see is the bush I'm in. Save me, sweet bush.

Chris: I hide in one of the perimeter huts for a while but Andy gets dangerously close, so I move to one of the bushes on the far side of the base from Tom. It's there that I get clipped by a stray round, crippling my ability to sprint. I'm not going to last long like this. I've got one last shot at revealing Tom: I've got to find Phil's body. I walk-crawl across the base, hiding in the ruins Andy has left in his wake. Miraculously, I make it from one side to the other in the gaps between several passes. There, in the bushes, I find Phil's bloody corpse. I loot it for grenades and turn, locating Tom by the faint squadmate indicator on my HUD. I throw first the red smoke and then the white smoke towards him. All I need to do now is wait. I take cover next to Phil... and am promptly shot to death as Andy strafes towards Tom's position.

Tom: I had no idea that Chris did this until I saw the replay later. It's a fitting act of revenge. We're all square, so I'm sure this will be the end of it. Yes, very sure.

Samuel: It turns out the building I hid in was impossible to destroy, which is Andy's fault. So I win.

WINNER – SAMUEL



1st
Samuel

2nd
Tom

3rd
Chris



Andy after an accidental collision with a radio tower.



This looks way more exciting than it was.

EVENT 3

DEEP TROUBLE

Nani

Andy: A simple race next. The guys have to drive a pair of 'water scooters' (basically non-copyright-infringing Jet Skis) from the tip of one landmass to another. I can't place obstacles on the water, so this'll be a lot less nerve-racking than Death Karts. Although I will be spicing things up with the occasional lightning bolt. And I also set the weather to stormy

THE RULES

Race from the tip of Nani to Muaceba on water scooters, avoiding Zeus's lightning bolts. The first person to reach the shore wins.



so the seas will be rough. I don't want to make it too easy for them.

Phil: We point ourselves at the target and go! And keep going. I don't mean to criticise – you're doing great work here, Andy – but where exactly is the trouble in this event?

Andy: Yeah, turns out Deep Trouble is very light on actual trouble.

"TURNS OUT DEEP TROUBLE IS LIGHT ON ACTUAL TROUBLE, BUT IT IS DEEP"

Although it is deep! It's basically very difficult to make a straight race across some water exciting, even when chucking lightning bolts around. So consider this a nice break before the drama ramps up again. It might have been more fun if the water scooter controls weren't terrible. There's a lot of things Arma does badly, including the handling of various non-military vehicles, but I won't hold that against

Bohemia. They probably didn't expect some idiots to use their game to stage a Jet Ski race.

Chris: I should not have gloated about the power of the Shift button. Use of the Shift button is all that separates winners from losers in this game of riding a Jet Ski in a straight line, and I do not win.

Samuel: I win! Probably because I had slightly more luck with the waves than the others did, or I guess I cheated and left the starting line half a second early. That event was... uneventful.

Andy: Zeus screwed this one up, but you try using an engine designed for military simulation to create a comedy sports day. I should have called in a few mortar strikes.

WINNER – SAMUEL



- | | |
|-----|--------|
| 1st | Samuel |
| 2nd | Chris |
| 3rd | Tom |



EVENT 4

SHOOT TO KILL

Blue Pearl Industrial Port

Andy: And now for a test of marksmanship. I ask the guys to climb to the top of an enormous cargo crane at the Blue Pearl docks. It looks out over a long row of shipping containers, which I'll be zigzagging through. Each challenger will take it in turns to kill me. I was originally going to have them all firing simultaneously, but it was too

THE RULES

Zeus runs between shipping containers. Challengers have to kill him as quickly as possible from a sniping spot. Shortest time wins.

difficult to determine who killed me. So this way works a lot better.

Tom: I'm up first. I make sure I'm crouched, because that improves the stability of your aim in *Arma*. Then I make sure I'm shuffled up close enough to the safety rail for my weapon's bipod to deploy. That should make aiming even easier.

There are tense moments as I look down the range, then I spot a tiny figure booking it across open ground. I fire wildly. Dust kicks up behind the tiny dude as my bullets hit the dirt. This must be terrifying for Andy.

Andy: Being under fire in *Arma 3* is genuinely scary. I hear the whistle and crack of Tom's bullets around me, but I manage a few laps of the containers without getting hit. My guy keeps running out of breath and slowing down, because this is *Arma* and simulation governs everything. Eventually I keel over and die.

Tom: Andy's simulated asthma attack is the only reason I'm accidentally able to eventually take him down. Turns out a bipod and good combat posture are useless if you get a massive giggling fit halfway through the challenge.

Phil: My turn. I'm initially thrown when Andy adds a slight variation on his route, and later when Tom crawls onto the edge of the crane in an attempt to put me off. Soon, though, Andy is back on course and Tom is plummeting off the crane to his

death. It takes a couple of loops, but I bring Andy down in what I hope was a respectable time.

Andy: I was sticking roughly to the same route, but throwing in a few curveballs to keep things exciting. Fair? Not entirely, but this ain't the Olympics. If I was in charge of that it'd be a nightmare, and absolutely covered in sheep.

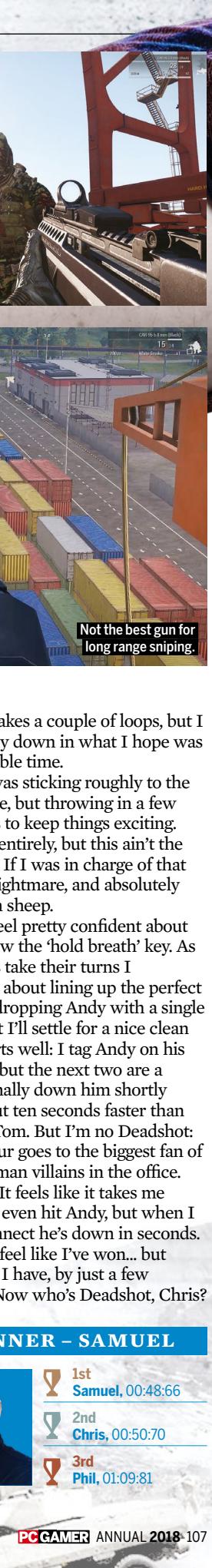
Chris: I feel pretty confident about this: I know the 'hold breath' key. As the others take their turns I daydream about lining up the perfect shot and dropping Andy with a single round, but I'll settle for a nice clean kill. It starts well: I tag Andy on his first pass, but the next two are a wash. I finally down him shortly after, about ten seconds faster than Phil and Tom. But I'm no Deadshot: that honour goes to the biggest fan of C-list Batman villains in the office.

Samuel: It feels like it takes me forever to even hit Andy, but when I finally connect he's down in seconds. It doesn't feel like I've won... but somehow I have, by just a few seconds. Now who's Deadshot, Chris?

WINNER – SAMUEL



1st	Samuel, 00:48:66
2nd	Chris, 00:50:70
3rd	Phil, 01:09:81



EVENT 5

BATTLE ROYALE

Ile Sainte-Marie

Andy: And now for the grand finale. Ile Sainte-Marie is one of the smallest islands in Tanoa. The perfect arena for a fight to the death. There's a large rocky outcrop in the middle surrounded by thick jungle, which should give the team plenty of hiding spots. I give them a minute before the round starts to choose a starting position, then the chaos begins. The last man standing wins, and there are

THE RULES

A fight to the death on a small island. Challengers have a minute to select a starting point. The last man standing is the winner.

no rules. I'll also be randomly spawning civilians and animals, just so I have something to do.

Tom: The island is heavily forested, and foliage has betrayed me once already in this challenge. If I wander into the trees, spotting other players will be a matter of luck, so I come up with a different plan. I run until I'm out of sight of the others, then I wade into the sea and start to circle the

island. I keep my head just above the water so I can see.

Chris: Tom and I had the same plan, it seems. I know this because I can see him poking out of the sea, just down the shoreline from me. We look at each other awkwardly as Andy gives the 'go' command, but I've got time to bring up my sights and drop him with a single shot. It turns out there was a crucial difference in our positions: his gun was under the water, but mine wasn't.

Tom: Idea good; execution bad. I'm rubbish at soldiering.

Phil: I, like Iron Maiden before me, run to the hills. This may be a mistake. For some reason, I'm running out of stamina really quickly, even when walking at a normal pace. I think I may be over-encumbered. That'll teach me for stealing some of

"ANDY MAKES A FLOCK OF BIRDS ERUPT FROM THE BUSHES NEAR ME"

Chris's rockets out of his backpack.

Chris: I stalk away from the shore towards the undergrowth and soon spot Phil coming down the slope towards me, facing away. I manage to land a hit, at which point he scurries behind a tree. We trade shots for a while and then... an old man in a blue T-shirt runs past my gunsights. He runs around me in a circle, then stops in front of me. "Andy?" I say, stupidly. Of course it's Andy. I hear the sound of an RPG and Andy explodes.

Phil: Wait, that was Andy? In my panic, I fired on the first thing I saw moving, not stopping to wonder why it was dressed in a plain shirt and denim. I switch back to my rifle, but I'm exposed – I left the safety of the tree to get a clean rocket shot. I fire





off a few bullets, but I'm an easy target, and quickly taken down.

Samuel: With just me and Chris left, I suppose I'd better leave the outcrop of rocks I've been perched on while the others sorted each other out. I head towards Chris, who hasn't spotted me yet – past the civilian's dead body, which is unnerving.

Chris: I loop around the hilltop.

Sheep and chickens are spawning all around me and Andy makes a flock of birds erupt from the bushes at my position. It's not subtle. I spot Sam in the distance, and fire. I miss and hide behind a tree. Time to take some notes out of Phil's playbook.

Samuel: I fire at Chris and miss. He turns toward me, there's an explosion and Chris is dead! What happened?

Chris: I ready my RPG and lean around the tree just a few inches. There is a sheep looking at me. I place Sam in my sights and pull the trigger before he can respond.

...but here's the thing. RPGs, right? They've got a big scope, and it sticks out substantially from the actual rocket-propelled-grenade part of the apparatus. The big tube that blows things up. What I am saying is that while I am pointing the scope out from behind the tree, I am in fact pointing my RPG at solid bark. I fire. I blow up.

Samuel: In retrospect, I could have won this round without firing a bullet. Amazing scenes. I feel like luck has played a part in at least two of my victories, especially as someone who hasn't even finished the tutorial. But the important thing is, I won.

WINNER – SAMUEL



- | | |
|-----|--------|
| 1st | Samuel |
| 2nd | Chris |
| 3rd | Phil |

THE RESULTS



EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Contents

AFTER ACTION REPORT

- 112** Ghost Recon Wildlands
- 116** Dawn of War III

MOD SPOTLIGHT

- 120** Long War 2
- 122** Enderal
- 124** Stalker: Lost Alpha – Director's Cut
- 126** WolfenDoom: Blade of Agony

REINSTALL

- 128** Medal of Honor: Allied Assault
- 132** Deus Ex
- 136** SWAT 4
- 140** Alpha Protocol
- 144** Pharaoh

WHY I LOVE

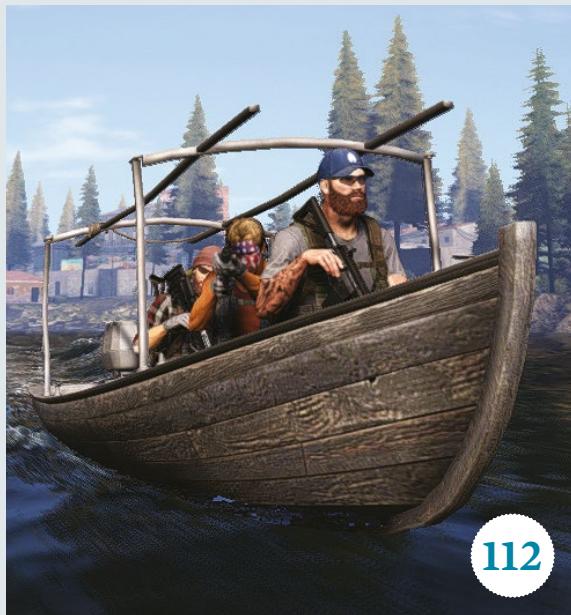
- 148** Age of Empires II
- 150** Life Is Strange
- 152** Nier: Automata
- 154** The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 156** Team Fortress 2
- 158** Dragon Age: Inquisition

150



132





112



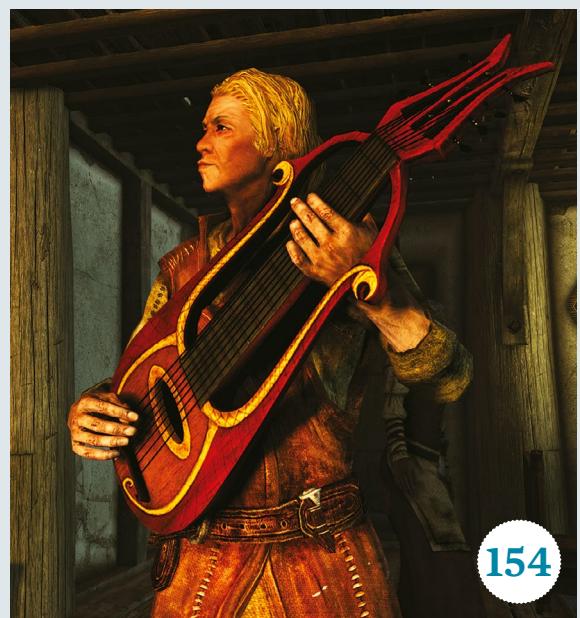
144



128



148



154

AFTER ACTION REPORT

Bringing peace to Bolivia in GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

PC Gamer's spec-ops squad is ready for action.

B

rought together by their love of knockabout open-world shenanigans, the PC Gamer team has infiltrated near-future Bolivia. It's a more serious assignment than they're used to. *Ghost Recon Wildlands* is ostensibly a game about highly trained special-ops agents completing objectives in an efficient, professional, and – most of all – silent manner. We're going to be taking on missions in some of *Wildlands'* hardest and hairiest zones. The only problem: Phil is the only member of the team who's played the game.



LEFT: Four good lads in a slightly shitty river boat.





Phil: I spend a couple of hours unlocking new missions in the hope of finding stuff that will be (a) exciting, and (b) manageable. My plan is to see if I can take these new recruits and temper them in the forge of battle – albeit a silent ghost battle that none of our enemies will notice. Hopefully my leadership skills are better than that metaphor. First up, we're heading to an airfield to destroy some chemicals being used in the manufacture of bad criminal drugs. My team join, and, after a couple of minutes of messing with audio settings, I exit the settings menu and... oh, who destroyed all the cars?

Samuel: Someone blew up my motorbike while I was riding it, and now I'm dead, and the bike is a fossil. Which of you pricks stitched me up, big time?

Andy: The Ghosts have no jurisdiction in Bolivia, and the US government will deny all knowledge of their existence if they're caught, so I've given my guy some stars-and-stripes facepaint and a big American eagle tattoo. Hiding in plain sight, baby. I test my gun by shooting and destroying all the vehicles in the area, which forces us to seek alternative transport: a rickety old fishing boat parked in a nearby river.

Joe: This is first time I've played online with the PCG team and I'm naturally shunted to the front of the boat. I pretend to myself this is an initiation-type scenario, when in actual fact I couldn't face the unbearable pressure of (mis)steering the boat, and so have meticulously orchestrated my seat placement. My plan works as Samuel is forced to do the honours.

Samuel: We sit there for 20 seconds while I work out how to make the boat move. Eventually we're off.

Phil: The airfield is close to a river. By approaching from the west side, away from the road, we should avoid any security patrols. I choose to think of this as a deliberate tactical decision by my squad, and feel a small amount of pride. Also concern. Lots of concern.

Joe: We ride in silence for a moment while taking in the gorgeous landscape. At one point I expect to hear banjos. It all feels a bit Deliverance.

Andy: I'm not sure what the objective is because I didn't really listen to the briefing. I was too busy enjoying the

PHIL SAVAGE



The team's most veteran *Wildlands* player, in that I've actually played it.

SAMUEL ROBERTS



Which button throws grenades? Oh, that button. I've thrown one now.

ANDY KELLY



I've played enough *Wildlands* for a lifetime. So about three hours.

JOE DONNELLY



I'm new and therefore I'm just happy to be included.

scenery on our little boat trip. It's quite nice out here, actually. Shame we have to go and shoot a load of drug dealers with guns and spoil the ambience.

Samuel: We disembark after I collide the boat with the bank in a way I thought would be reminiscent of an action movie, but actually looked a bit shit.

Phil: We head up the embankment, towards the airfield. Crouching in the bushes, I deploy my drone. It's being jammed. That's not a surprise – the harder missions tend to increase the number of security measures – but it might make things more complicated. I get my binoculars out, and scout out the nearby area. Almost directly in front of us is the jammer. That's a stroke of luck. If we take it out...

Samuel: No problem, pal. I assume there's only one way to take out a jammer, having played this game for a total of five minutes, and that's by throwing a hand grenade at the spinning thing so it explodes. So that's what I do. It blows up. Boom!

Phil: ...by flipping the switch on its side. Oh, no, Samuel's blown it up. On the plus side, I can now use my drone, but all it's going to show is that the entire base is now shooting at us.

Andy: As the alarm wails I take a few guys out, but despite having a silenced MP5, they see where I am and suddenly I'm dead in the bushes. This is a lot harder than I thought it would be, especially considering I have the most basic gear possible and no upgrades or abilities whatsoever. A smarter approach is needed, I think.

Joe: Samuel's unorthodox approach to stealth has alerted a chopper manned by two gunmen. It rains fire over the wooded area we're camped in and, in my blind panic, for whatever reason, I begin repeatedly hitting the crouch button. Suddenly, I'm taking bullets while performing The Worm. If only the jungle floor were made of linoleum. Eventually I regain my composure and spot Andy in need of first aid a couple of hundred metres away.

Samuel: I appear to have fucked the mission for everyone, but at the same time, I generated an anecdote, which is all I ever really want to do. An enemy helicopter turns up as well, and starts circling the trees where we're concealed ➤



RIGHT: The dress rehearsal for our escape faltered.



➤ (except Andy, he's dead). I've no idea if you can blow up a chopper with a machine gun, but I guess I'll keep firing at it and see.

Phil: I had hoped to get a bit further into the mission before the shit met the fan, but here we are. While the rest of the team starts shooting and dying, I switch to my sniper rifle and take out the alarm before it can call in reinforcements. That done, I start popping heads. I'd specifically retrieved this gun – the MSR, arguably the best sniper rifle in the game – last night, in order to look badass in front of my colleagues. It's sort of working. I'm making some pretty amazing kills. Unfortunately, everybody else is too distracted to notice.

Samuel: I've been firing at this chopper for ages. Looks like it's doing naff all. Oh, hang on, it's down! I watch it spin out of control and explode somewhere behind the trees, and make my way closer to the base.

Joe: After Samuel downs the bird (wow, I've taken to the lingo fast), I head for Andy. The wreckage isn't far from his position, yet I can see two enemy blips next to him on the map. The long grass obscures my view but as I creep closer I notice that, bizarrely, both gunmen are still in situ taking shots from the very much crashed helicopter. I take them out, fix Andy and we're on our way. This game is weird.

Phil: Wait, is Andy in a plane now? This is getting out of hand. Still, Samuel and I seem to have cleared a path to the hangar, where the objective is. We start shooting barrels of drug juice.

Andy: Yeah, I found a plane. It was unattended, so I had to fly it. In the air, I thought about finding a bunch of enemies and slamming the aircraft into them. But I forgot the controls and ended up just sort of falling out of the sky and bouncing against a wall. But I didn't die! And now I'm behind enemy lines. I'm a great Ghost.

Phil: Oh, Andy's on the ground now? He chucka a grenade into the second hanger and the mission is done. Take that, drug boys! Now we need to escape. Luckily, we're in an airfield.

Samuel: I take another plane, and wait for Joe to get in. Before we even try to leave the runway, though, its propellers



seem to be on fire and we're forced to evacuate, like in some kind of farce. There's a second plane, which I make for and get in. Now I just have to wait for these lads to get their arses inside.

Phil: Andy and I get into our own plane. It's also on fire, and we crash shortly after take off. Diving into a car, Andy drives us over to Samuel. I get out, and Sam – unaware that we need a lift – runs me over. How is this going worse than the actual mission? I'm revived, and we all pile into Sam's plane. That went... OK? Shall we try another mission? There's one here to extract a prisoner from the heavily guarded base of the state military.

Samuel: I spend a while awkwardly reversing the plane so I'm not going to crash into a tree, then I go for it on this,



2/4

ANDY AND I GET INTO OUR OWN PLANE. IT'S ON FIRE AND WE CRASH SHORTLY AFTER

the tiniest runway in the world. We're in the sky! Not bad. How is it that this game somehow looks both impressive and ugly at the same time? Phil sets another waypoint and I fly us over there.

Joe: This gives us another chance to wonder at the scenery, this time from thousands of feet above ground. Then a thought occurs to me: I'm not sure if we've got parachutes. Um, Phil... do we have parachutes?

Phil: Oh, right. Parachutes. The ones you unlock through skill points you haven't earned yet, by spending resources you haven't collected. No, you don't have parachutes. I do have one, though, and I don't see the point of us all dying. Er, good luck?

Joe: Phil jumps from the aircraft and all eyes turn to Samuel. I hope that his plane-landing abilities are better than his boat-docking skills.

Samuel: I slow the plane and try to land on a road outside the base we're raiding. I'm steadily bringing the plane down... and then it blows up before dropping to the ground. But we still seem to be alive. What a great landing by the pilot! We get out and make a run for the



RIGHT: A successful landing, no matter what anyone says.





treacherous Phil Savage, who's already in cover in a building inside the base. I get shot and killed before having the chance to rendezvous with him. This mission isn't going quite as well.

Andy: I accidentally wander directly into an enemy compound and am instantly killed. Then the game spawns me a fair distance away from the mission. I try to run back to the other guys, but I die again. As the screen fades to monochrome and my life ticks away, I decide my contribution to this particular operation is over. I've done my part by doing nothing at all, which is what I'll have etched on my gravestone.

Joe: With the team dropping like flies the pressure is on. I sneak into a nearby building, take aim at an enemy soldier and... I'm out of ammo. This is going from bad to worse. Seconds later I'm crouched behind a desk as a foe peppers the room with machine gun bullets. Seconds after that, I too am face down on the floor.

Phil: Unlike the cartel, the military will keep sending reinforcements until they lose track of you. So by flying a plane directly into their base, we (by which I mean everybody but me, the guy with the parachute) have done the worst possible thing. I try to revive Samuel, but there's just too many soldiers. I die. Everybody dies. Our spec-ops career is over. You win this round, drug boys. ■



AFTER ACTION REPORT



3v3 in DAWN OF WAR III

PCG goes to war in the grim darkness of the far future.

We're playing the *Dawn of War III* closed beta, and all getting duffed up individually. We decide to team up and take on other players in the intense 3v3 power core mode. You have to contest resource points across the map, then march into the enemy base and blow up that shiny thing on the right. Phil picks Space Marines, Samuel picks Eldar and Tom picks Orks. We're up against two Ork armies and an Eldar one.



RIGHT: Sam and Phil's assembled Space Marine and Eldar forces prepare to bulldoze the enemy.





Samuel: I send my Bonesinger builder units to grab a couple of the nearby capture points in the centre and top lanes while I start churning out the Eldar's basic Dire Avengers. We leave the point at the centre of the map for now. No need to start a fight while we're still assembling an army. I send my Dire Avengers to a point north of our base, where Tom's building up his Ork force.

Tom: The map is arranged into three loose 'lanes' and I've got the top one. Scouting ahead I discover I'm up against more Orks, so it's going to be a glorious greenskin massacre up north. A couple of units of Sam's Eldar arrive at a key moment as we push ahead to secure the mid-lane resource point and fend off a sizeable enemy force. We both throw down some forward base buildings and make the place our home. The crappy, wobbly Ork buildings look completely shambolic next to the Eldar's sleek, glowing structures.

Phil: Samuel and Tom immediately set to work building units and capturing points. I'm still trying to work out where my things are, and how to make more men. Samuel asks me to capture the southern control point, and I reply in the affirmative. Secretly, though, I have no idea what the control point is, or what I'm going to capture it with. I knew I was going to be out of my depth here, but I didn't think it would be this bad. I try to parse the minimap, and realise that it's swarming with yellow and blue icons. The yellow is moving and growing, the blue isn't. That means I'm blue. Thanks to this, I'm able to locate one of my buildings. I select it, and click on the picture of a Space Marine. A drop pod arrives from space, and men come out of it. This is progress. I send them to what I assume is the capture point.

Tom: I build loads of axe-wielding Boyz. I respect the audacity of warriors that are happy to bring axes to a giant robot laser fight, but I also know that they will not last long. Happily, though, I can press a button that makes them punch the air and get hyped up. I use their enthusiasm to push up and grab another resource point on my lane as Sam's Eldar change position.

Samuel: Phil's being pushed by Orks and Eldar on the lower side of the map, so I send my troops over there, as Tom

PHIL SAVAGE



has played a little bit of *Dawn of War II*, but that's about it. Likes the big robot.

SAMUEL ROBERTS



is pretty well-versed in *Dawn of War*, but didn't do spectacularly at the *DoW3* closed beta.

TOM SENIOR



has played a lot of *Dawn of War*, a lot of *Dawn of War II*, and a few games of *DoW3*. Likes Orks.

seems to have a pretty good handle on his lane. I help Phil fight them off one of our resource points. They bring an Ork elite, so I use a mix of Dire Avengers, melee-happy Howling Banshees and cloaked sniper Rangers to fend them off. From here, I decide to keep my army on Phil's lane, since together our skills probably add up to one decent RTS player. The centre lane isn't particularly well-guarded, but so far they haven't tried to push us there so it'll probably be OK. I build a warp gate near Phil's resource point, which buffs my nearby troops. I've also upgraded my buildings so they can now teleport around the map – which will help as me and Phil try our luck at pushing that lane. Time to start building our armies up.

Phil: I'm pretty happy that I managed to repel the enemy's exploratory advance through nothing more than luck and Samuel's invaluable help. I'm starting to get the hang of how to build things, too. I discover that my weird cyborg dude – one day, I will learn the Space Marine's names – can build new buildings. I start plopping things down and randomly clicking on menus, and pretty soon I've built a nice little force of men with guns.

Samuel: Let me assure you, Phil, that I have no idea what I'm doing either. I've just built one or two of every unit in the vague hope that when we push, something will counter something else. I am not vying for Pro status. How's your lane going, Tom?

Tom: Orks! Orks! Hundreds of Orks everywhere. My army repeatedly clashes with enemy Ork forces, and I'm getting the upper hand. My forward base is now a shabby little town that spits out big green delinquents, namely the Ork's toughest warriors – Nobs. Orks need to gear up at scrap piles so I've built a copse of towers to create piles of junk. The Nobs rummage around, hack together some huge two-handed axes and then follow waypoints to the front line where they smash up my opponent's ordinary Orks with ease. I push right up to the shield generator and manage to destroy it. The enemy Eldar force come across to push back, but that just gives Phil and Sam another huge opening.

Samuel: Phil and I decide to push, on Tom's suggestion. We target the next



LEFT: Listening posts can help you fend off those pesky encroaching Eldar forces.



capture point on the bottom lane and roll out. It's not much of a fight, really – we've both got pretty big armies at this point and we take it almost straight away. But the enemy isn't going to let it go without a fight. After we take the point and start building our resource points on top, the enemy realises what we've done and a pretty gigantic Ork army is suddenly on our doorstep.

Phil: Oh snap, the Orks are here! Despite the success of this point capture, my army is a little worse for wear, and I haven't finished building reinforcements. Again: I click randomly on stuff. That's how I realise that earlier I'd managed to accidentally queue up the drop pods I didn't realise I had. They slam down from space, and yet more marines pour out. It looks really cool, and, best of all, intentional. Suddenly, my army's back up to strength. I think I actually cackle.

Samuel: I deploy the Eldar's leader power, the Eldritch Storm. It's essentially a sci-fi whirlwind that fucks with everyone's shit. It arrives at just the right time. Between us, we easily push back the Ork assault. I teleport my base forwards, and start adding some heavier troopers such as Wraithguards and deadly Shadow Spectres to my army. Farseer Macha is also among them – an elite who can throw and activate a radius spear attack. Our forces are swelling, and it feels like we've got the upper hand. I feel bad that we've abandoned Tom, but then he seems to be doing OK in that top lane. He seems to have made his way to the enemy resource generator on that side – a bit ahead of where we are.

Tom: It's an elegant two-fist approach. One fist is a big angry Ork army, and the other a multicultural alliance of bastards in giant robots. By taking it in turns to push we've kept the enemy in a state of imbalance, and now they're resource-starved thanks to the fact that we own most of the map. All we have to do now is convert our resource advantage into a push that can bring down the power core and win the game. I've unlocked my giant Morkanaut robot, which can take insane amounts of damage and launch a rocket-powered fist at enemies. I also have enough elite

points to call down a meteor. I've pushed over the enemy turret and my Ork opponent seems to have largely given up. I keep building until I hit the population cap. That's a lot of Orks. This could be the time to finish it.

Phil: Are we winning? I think we might be sort of winning. This is a surprise to me, but we do have the advantage of being a group communicating over Skype. This, it seems, makes up for my incompetence. Once again, Samuel and I push the bottom flank. We're heading to the Elite control point. For a while it looks like we'll be able to roll through unchallenged, but finally, as we ascend the stairs to the point, we clash into a horde of Orks and Eldar. Time for my secret weapon: a big laser robot of death. I call in my elite unit, and the missiles start flying.

I COMMAND MY MORKANAUT TO PUNCH THE WHIRLWIND. THIS HELPS NO ONE

Samuel: Yeah, so I basically lost my entire army during that push for the Elite point. We've taken out the enemy's turret and generator on this side, though. Luckily, the fight went on for so long that I've got plenty of resources to generate another in no time. It feels like we're close to victory, with the enemy now running low on resource points.

Phil and I knock over the defenceless point at the centre of the map, then prepare for a final push. **Tom:** My PC has rarely been tested as much as it is during this final fight. All six players apparently have access to their faction super ability, because there are at least three meteors, a space laser and various electric whirlwinds in the fight. I lose track of my army in the carnage. I double-tap F1 to centre the view on my general. He's wandered into the middle of everything, the idiot.

All my Nobs have been incinerated too. I command my Morkanaut to punch the whirlwind. This helps no one.

Samuel: I've got no idea what is going on in this cataclysmic final encounter, but



LEFT: Morkanauts can create this handy portable bubble shield, as Tom demonstrates here.





there is so much death. I unleash a last-minute Eldritch Storm, and the scale of the chaos is ridiculous – there are enemy Orks and Fire Prism tanks everywhere. At the end of the fight, I just have Bonesingers left, and Phil's being shredded too. We won't need to rebuild to push again, though. The power core is about to be destroyed by the remaining forces of Tom Senior.

Phil: I've been bemused through the majority of this match, but this final push really takes the exploding laser death cake. The world is naught but light and fury, and my armies are being melted by a ridiculous onslaught of stuff. They did well, though, and I've even got a few snipers left taking pot shots at the core. I think we're about to win, so I'm just going to enjoy the show.

Tom: All my Orks are dead. Nothing in the universe of Warhammer 40K could survive what just happened to the enemy base. Luckily as the fight was starting I built five long-range artillery cannons, which now sit just outside the apocalypse, passively shelling the area until the core capitulates. Nothing else lives. It's a very 40K outcome.

Samuel: I feel I was being strategic for the first two thirds of the game. In the final third, I merely appreciated the brawl. But what great fun. I'm certain this will be the only time I'm ever part of a winning team in *Dawn of War III*. ■



LEFT: Behold, the moment at which we basically lost control of everything that was going on.



LONG WAR 2

This is a must-play reinvention of *XCOM 2*. *By Tom Senior*

The word ‘mod’ undersells *Long War 2*. Mod implies an aesthetic tweak, a UI correction, a new weapon perhaps. In fact, this is *XCOM 2* as developed in a parallel universe. *Long War 2* does add lots of new weapons, classes and skills, but all these serve a set of bespoke design aims that turn *XCOM 2* from a survival strategy game into a gradually paced army and territory management sim with expanded combat encounters.

For players who have mastered *XCOM 2*'s story and power arcs, or now find them predictable, *Long War 2* is an essential download. The mod forces you to break out of your habits and re-engage with the game again at the most basic level. Even soldiers are valued differently. You can field up to ten in a mission, and you start with a large roster. Consequently, losing agents isn't the body blow it can be in traditional *XCOM*, and you have more room to experiment with ability and weapon combinations across your force.

Your whole stance as a resistance commander feels different to ordinary *XCOM 2*, which forces you into a reactive position with must-fight emergency missions. In *Long War 2* missions are more like leads that you can choose to spend time and resources to follow up. Ordinary missions are preceded by an infiltration period that asks you to devote a squad to a location for a variable number of days. If they achieve a high degree of infiltration (represented by a percentage marker that ticks upwards daily), they face weaker forces in that mission.

This introduces some new concepts to *XCOM 2*. Firstly, you can take a pass on missions. Secondly, it's entirely viable, and often useful, to send an under-strength squad to a mission, because smaller squads can infiltrate more quickly and effectively.

This creates an interesting separation within your roster, between large teams of newbies and small teams of highly levelled, well-equipped crack special forces operatives. Moving between sub-squads introduces more variety to combat encounters as well. In *XCOM 2* you're likely to develop a small team of precious warriors. In *Long War 2* you nurture a broad, diverse stable over a longer period.

BUSIER COMBAT

Even if you decide to deploy a small squad, combat encounters tend to be busier. Enemy reinforcements can drop in while you're waiting for extraction. If a mission is going badly and you choose to extract, you have to wait longer for your ship to arrive, and thus fend off more enemies. There are new enemy varieties too, such as colour-coded versions of ordinary Advent soldiers with different loadouts and behaviours.

 **THE MOD FORCES YOU TO BREAK OUT OF YOUR HABITS AND RE-ENGAGE WITH THE GAME AGAIN**

These expanded firefights have an interesting effect on the way chance operates. By growing the number of chance rolls the game makes, the effects of variance are reduced over time. You will still see massive swings of good and bad luck, of course, but the length of the campaign and the reduced value of soldiers softens the harshest elements. The extra bit of ablative armour that recruits wear also helps.

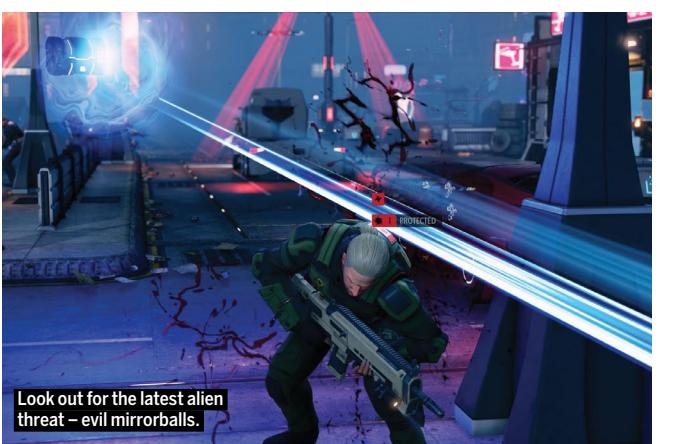
The extra soldiers and the glut of missions give you more room to enjoy the new classes. The sword-wielding Shinobi shares some similarity to the assault class, but with a much greater emphasis on



"It's just a scratch, sarge. I didn't need that intestine."



No wonder they're knackered, they just fought 20 giant alien snakes.



Look out for the latest alien threat – evil mirrorballs.



stealth and ambush tactics. At high levels, with the right skills, Shinobi can break stealth, attack multiple enemies and re-enter concealment, or mitigate damage with buffed evasion rolls (dodging an attack means you take a small amount of 'graze' damage, far preferable to the full-whack when fighting mid-tier enemies or higher). They are supported by knives and swords, and benefit from the new SMG weapons, which let you sacrifice mid-range accuracy for speed. There's also a new Technical class, members of which wield a wrist-mounted flame-thrower/rocket launcher secondary combo weapon, which is as amazing as it sounds.

There are plenty of new mission types for these new soldiers to tackle, including prison breakouts and enemy base assaults. The rewards for these missions have been redesigned to affect the heavily reworked map layer. You still fly the Avenger around the globe to camp on spots and suck up resources or activate missions, but *Long War 2* introduces an additional layer of territory management. Once you've made contact with the resistance in an area, you can assign resistance members based there to different jobs that generate supply and intel. You can assign engineers

and scientists to regions to supply additional boosts. Resistance members can also fend off alien influence in an area, and Advent moves troops around on the map in an effort to install new alien bases and move the Avatar project forward.

PACE CHANGE

The changes bring a dose of 4X strategy to *XCOM 2*. This slows the pace considerably – this is *Long War*, after all. This dilutes the impact and drama of an *XCOM 2* campaign to an extent. The way the core game gives you a narrow stream of high-stakes decisions is one of the reasons I loved it so much when I reviewed it last year. However, I've found it fascinating to see how *XCOM*'s core mechanics work in this new context. *Long War 2* is a thoughtful and effective reworking of the *XCOM 2* formula, and the new weapon, class and mission additions are slick and well-integrated – they could have come from Firaxis.

Speaking of Firaxis, it's great to see studios work with modders, particularly in instances where the mod team wants to substantially rework the studio's original vision. The result is a neat Earth-B take on the concept that unlocks hundreds of hours of extra playtime. ■

ONE PERFECT SHOT

A rocket ambush is a beautiful thing



1
Eight enemies, one roof, one rocket. Ridiculous amounts of damage.

2
Shortly after impact the roof collapses, killing any survivors.

3
Enemies then swarm in from the shadows to investigate.

4
Fellow soldiers in overwatch mow down every last one of them.

ENDERAL

A *Skyrim* total conversion. *By Phil Savage*

You're a child, walking down a bright, sunny road. It's idyllic, until it's not. When you meet up with your father, things get dark, quickly. It's a strong, unsettling opening for *Enderal*, an enormous total conversion for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* that dazzles with its quality and professionalism. It's not perfect, but *Enderal* is leagues ahead of what I thought possible from an amateur team working with an almost-six-year-old game.

The opening sums up this running theme of imperfect but impressive. It's well crafted, but poorly paced. The eerie cold open is revealed to be a dream, after which you're still a long way from getting out into the world proper. There's an admittedly accomplished cutscene – an animated tapestry of events that fills in the history of this world. There's your character, a stowaway on a ship bound for the island country of Enderal. There are many conversations, a mysterious veiled woman, an execution, some mystical mumbo-jumbo and an opening tutorial dungeon. Strap in, because *Enderal* takes a while to get going.

Instead of *The Elder Scrolls'* Tamriel, *Enderal* is set in Vyn – the world of SureAI's previous total conversion, *Nehrim: At Fate's Edge*. As such, one of *Enderal*'s more major stumbling blocks is its whirlwind of lore. It's dense, and the delivery doesn't let up. The story follows after the events of *Nehrim*, and so expect many names, events and concepts to wrap your head around. It can be difficult when a character casually mentions The Paths, the Light-Born, or the specific details of thing-a-me's relationship to whosit. There's wisdom in calling your faction of thieves a Thieves Guild. In *Enderal*, there are multiple mage factions, all with esoteric names and subtly different ideologies.

At times I was just along for the ride, letting the story happen around me and waiting for a known concept to latch onto. However, as you start to osmose the basic concepts of the world, the story hits its stride. Where *The Elder Scrolls* has drifted further into high-fantasy nonsense, *Enderal* tries to be somewhat more philosophical. Its idea of magic is the manifestation of alternate realities. This is more than empty lore, because it ties into the mod's systems of magic use – specifically the concept of Arcane Fever.

FEVER METER

Arcane Fever, much like Saturday Night Fever, is a terrible thing – used to penalise potion use. Your fever meter rises if you drink healing potions or use healing spells, making combat feel more dangerous. It's one of a couple of systems that are designed to make things more

 **ARCANE FEVER, MUCH LIKE SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, IS A TERRIBLE THING**

challenging. While I'm usually not a fan of when mods spike the difficulty for the sake of it, this is a well conceived penalty that enriches the combat. Should your Fever meter fill up, you die, and so you're encouraged to heal out of combat by eating food or sleeping in a bed. Potions are still available, but they're now more of a last resort.

In moment-to-moment play, *Enderal* is similar to *Skyrim*. Nevertheless, a few reworked systems – Arcane Fever included – make a big difference. Not all of these changes work for me. Take levelling. Whereas *Skyrim* lets you improve by doing, *Enderal* goes for a more



Teleport scrolls let you peace out of creepy rooms, post haste.



I'm imagining an alternate reality where you're dead from lightning.



Here's an interesting new creature called 'Bear'. The fire is optional.



traditional system. Points earned by levelling can be spent on various passive perks – much like *Skyrim*'s celestial skill trees – but improving a specific skill, like archery or heavy armour, requires skill books, bought from traders. On top of this, you can only use said skill books if you have enough memory points, also earned by levelling. This is a finicky system, requiring both XP and money. Given the fairly rapid escalation of difficulty in quests, it means that getting good at something can be a grind.

Not that it's a chore to spend time out in the open world. Far from it. For all the high-concept drama of the main quest, I've spent most of my time wandering the world, checking off some of the often more lighthearted sidequests. *Enderal* has a more temperate environment than *Skyrim*, and its designers have a good eye for framing its most spectacular sights. At times that makes for a more directed experience, but it's often worth it. You're told, during your journey to the main city of Ark, that your companion will only follow when you're travelling on the road. It's a strange restriction, but stick to it and you'll journey across a winding path that leads out into a stunning view of the cliffside capital.

Ark is a great RPG city. Built as a series of distinct districts – similar to *Oblivion*'s Imperial City – it still manages to feel like a cohesive place. It's a treat to explore, and packed full of stories to learn, quests to compete and even board games to win. Much of the architecture in *Enderal* is taken

directly from *Skyrim*, but here it's built into something with an identity all of its own. I particularly love how, with time, you can achieve a sense of belonging. There are no guilds to join, but you can still make your mark by completing sidequests that reward an ownership share in a local business – earning a daily pay out from the city bank.

VISUAL APPEAL

Visually, *Enderal* is on par with a heavily modded version of *Skyrim*, with better faces, denser foliage and an over-the-top use of lighting effects. The god rays are almost distracting in their splendour. There are enough tweaks here that, running a GTX 1070 at 1440p on Ultra, my PC couldn't maintain a steady 60fps while outside. Perhaps the most surprising thing is the quality of the voice acting. It's variable, of course, but there's a great variety of different voices, many of who are genuinely quite good. It all sounds professionally recorded, too, which is a treat for veteran mod players used to a world full of fantasy characters who all sound as if they're in an echoey bedroom.

Despite a few complaints, *Enderal* is one of the most accomplished mods I've played. It's a spectacular effort, and shows the versatility that *Skyrim* can offer a team adept at shaping it to their needs. It's worth experiencing, not just to see what *Skyrim* can do, but also to enjoy the many hours of quality RPG adventuring that *Enderal* provides. ■

TO AFFINITY AND BEYOND

How skill trees combine to make ad-hoc classes

SHADOWDANCER

This sneaky psionics expert mixes Sinistrope and Infiltrator. Uses 'Ghostwalk' to raise downed enemies as allies.

BLACK MAGE

Part Elementalist, part psionics-wielding Sinistrope, this class's Shock Nova ability leeches health and mana.

ROGUE



ASSASSIN

Infiltrator and Blade Dancer paths combine to form a stealthy build that increases your chance of a critical hit.

BLADE BREAKER

Combine Keeper and Blade Dancer paths for a sword and board build that reduces damage resistance.

MAGE



WARRIOR



STALKER: LOST ALPHA - DEVELOPER'S CUT

Perhaps the definitive Stalker, and it's free. *By Sam Greer*

There is a scene in the classic Tarkovsky film *Stalker*, the game's inspiration, where a fog rolls in and seems to change the landscape. The enigmatic Zone shifts around its guests, turning the familiar into the strange. *Lost Alpha*, an effort to recreate a version of *Shadow of Chernobyl* that never made it to the public, is like this. It's a space you know and yet nothing is where you remember it. Those familiar with the games will wonder in confidence only to find themselves lost.

In that sense *Lost Alpha* was a remix. Not an improved or 'ideal' version of the original *Stalker* but rather a reimagining of it. Familiar components were reshuffled. Areas were redesigned, made bigger. New ones were created entirely. The story was the same yet followed a different series of events on way to its conclusion. There were new set pieces littered throughout that gave some direction to a traditionally formless experience. It wasn't always enjoyable, however. An adventure through *Lost Alpha* exposed why the creators probably dispensed with certain ideas, such as huge stretches of empty levels and unforgiving set pieces ill-suited to *Stalker*'s kind of gunplay. Though in making the familiar new again, *Lost Alpha* was certainly an interesting experience.

The *Developer's Cut*, then, is an attempt to turn the original *Lost Alpha* into a polished, coherent experience. This starts with the visuals. This is easily the best-looking version of any *Stalker* game and certainly the most appealing for modern players. Time hasn't been kind to the character models but the

environments, lighting and weather still have the power to make you pause. Nowhere in gaming has ever captured my imagination quite like the Zone, the radioactive and twisted world surrounding this alternate universe Chernobyl. None of the ambience has been lost here. Washed out landscapes and dreary buildings remain but with a dose of lush foliage and high-res textures, the Zone is able to exist in the haunting beauty you recall instead of the now dated version from 2007.

IN THE ZONE

The environments are much more expansive, too, as they were in the original version of *Lost Alpha* but

 **THIS IS
EASILY THE
BEST-LOOKING
VERSION OF ANY
STALKER GAME**

now populated with entirely new NPCs and secrets. What they've brought back from the forgotten version of *Shadow of Chernobyl* is additional strangeness, like the weird alien growths clinging to the ceilings of abandoned shacks. Making the already-alluring Zone even stranger has made *Lost Alpha* a near definitive-experience for anyone looking to play the series.

The overall plot is the same. You wake up without your memory, with only a single objective logged in your PDA: 'Kill the Strellok'. Finding out what the Strellok is and why you want to kill it is the bulk of the game as before, with similar beats. Yet there's



You'll be dependent on new allies in the early hours.



The Zone has never been weirder.



Gathering round a campfire is an essential part of the series.



more detours and a lot more room to wander off the beaten path, finding loads of entirely optional areas and quests. More than ever before the Zone feels completely independent of you and your main quest. It's a liberating feeling for anyone who has ever wanted to just lose themselves in the strange world of *Stalker*.

Stalker's fundamentals remain absorbing. Anomalies litter the hills and navigating these physics-defying traps remains a novel pleasure. They seem a lot denser than before as well, requiring a lot of careful tiptoeing as you throw bolts a few paces ahead to test for unseen dangers. Learning the behaviour of the mutants, who roam freely under the control of the game's much-lauded A-life simulation, is another important part of survival. The new additions to the game make both these tasks exciting again. It manages to immerse you in this strange role within a strange world, a real delight in videogames. Much of what *Lost Alpha* did made the core of *Stalker* new again, restoring the mystery fans encountered the first time they stepped out into the Zone. *Developer's Cut* now brings along a level of polish that makes it more consistently enjoyable. It's still rough around the edges, with plenty of dodgy animations and awkward translation work. Still, for a free and standalone game, it's a small price to pay for an experience that remains as novel as *Stalker*.

There is also a much kinder difficulty curve, with a series of quests in the starting area offering a much nicer ease into the challenges of the Zone and making sure you're well learned before you venture alone into the truly dangerous areas. This

starts with a new NPC, encountered when you leave the starting bunker, who guides you through a few small quests and becomes your first ally.

STALKER PERFECTED

Among the list of improvements are a few features taken from *Call of Pripyat*, including the very nuanced gunsmithing, enabling you a lot of control over your arsenal. Weapon customisation so often seems like one of those brainless additions in shooters but in *Stalker* being able to tailor your gear to your needs is transformative. Struggling to find the right ammo type for your weapon? Modify it so it takes something more common. In a world as harsh as the Zone, where resources can be few and far between, these options make your ability to survive feel more like an accomplishment. By the time your journey is over, you feel like you've gone from rookie to professional. You see subtleties to enemy behaviour and environmental cues that seemed invisible at the start.

If so much of this sounds familiar it's because *Lost Alpha* doesn't change the fundamentals. This is *Stalker* as you know and love. The original *Lost Alpha* release was an attempt to recreate a discarded version of the game, to as exact a specification as they could but the *Developer's Cut* is more creator Dezwave's own beast. It brings a whole host of new surprises that make it a great return for fans and an endlessly deep treat for newcomers. If you've never played an entry in the series, *Lost Alpha - Developer's Cut* is a tremendous place to start. It's huge, it's unique, it's standalone and it's completely free. ■

WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE WILL KILL YOU *A few helpful tips*



1 THE DETECTOR IS YOUR FRIEND

Use your detector to find anomalies until you can learn to detect them by sight/sound. They're near-invisible and deadly in the early game.

2 LOOK UP FROM TIME TO TIME

These strange growths populate even the starting area, and, like most unidentifiable growths on ceilings, are best avoided.

3 ALWAYS BE ON YOUR GUARD

Campfires with fellow Stalkers remain the safest areas in the game world but you're never truly safe. Attacks can and will happen here too.

4 STAY AWAY FROM RADIATION

When your screen desaturates and becomes filled with static, you're soaking up radiation. Listen out for your Geiger counter.

5 WATCH OUT IN THE WILDS

Be wary of these moving anomalies out in the wilds. They can chase after you and spawn fire traps that can be difficult to deal with.

6 BEWARE THE BLOODSUCKER

They can turn invisible and will only be detectable by the glow of their eyes and their distinctive, growling breath.

WOLFENDOOM: BLADE OF AGONY

An old-school shooter that feels modern. *By Phil Savage*

The reveal of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* has put me in the mood for some mindless fun. What better way to sate that urge than with more *Wolfenstein*? *WolfenDoom: Blade of Agony* is a GZDoom mod and an unofficial successor to *Wolfenstein 3D*. Downloading it, I assumed it would offer an answer to the unasked question: what if id Software had stuck with Nazis, instead of messing around with demons on Mars? In fact, it's so much more.

There are elements of *Wolfenstein*, such as the chunky Aryan bosses dual-wielding arm cannons. And there are elements of *Doom*, notably the combat, which has *Doom*'s pace, if not its plasma gun. But what makes *Blade of Agony* exceptional is that it's more than just PC gaming alt-history fan fiction. This is not *Wolfenstein 3D* by way of *Doom*, but rather *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* by way of two decades of experimentation and dissection from the *Doom* modding community at large.

You play as BJ Blazkowicz, Nazi killer über alles, drawn back to the frontlines after a period of administrative leave. *Blade of Agony*'s first major surprise is its cinematics – specifically, the fact that it has them. It opens on a dolly shot set to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, as Blazkowicz's brother-in-arms Cpt 'Dirty' Douglas Blake types out a letter urging the American beefcake to return to active duty. The way the camera moves through the low-poly room lends an amount of depth and drama to the otherwise retro style.

Blazkowicz returns, of course, but isn't immediately sent to the battlefield. Before each mission, there's a briefing at allied high

command. Here, in an imposing mansion surrounded by picturesque countryside, General Miller sets out the upcoming missions – complete with a slideshow consisting of tactical maps and grainy black-and-white photos. The presentation is on point: the mansion is full of detail. The walls are covered in flags, and accurate posters of WWII-era films such as Confessions of a Nazi Spy and Hitler – Dead or Alive.

I'm not au fait with the limitations of id Tech 1, but it's clear that much of this is only possible thanks to the innovations of source ports like GZDoom. While *Blade of Agony* looks similar to *Doom*, it's filled with lavish extras. And that's reflected in the performance. One of the downsides of *Blade of Agony* is its

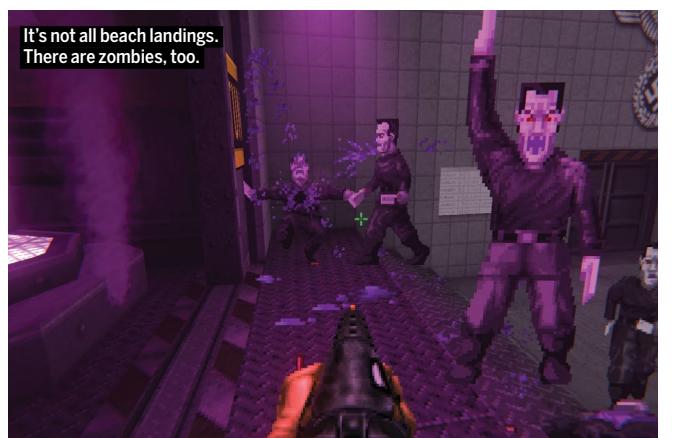
**IT BECOMES A
FAST SHOOTER
THAT REWARDS
EXPLORATION AND
THOROUGHNESS**

framerate dips, even on a powerful PC. I experienced more performance problems here than while playing id's most recent *Doom* game.

Missions are set across the breadth of World War II's many fronts. The first, Operation Speerspitze, takes place in Tunisia. It's a night infiltration mission, and feels reminiscent of the opening levels of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. There's a distinct difficulty curve to the opening mission, as Blazkowicz starts equipped with just a knife. Here's where *Blade of Agony* reveals another neat trick: stealth. It's basic, but it's possible to kill enemies by creeping up to them unseen.



Before each mission, you can visit HQ for a briefing.



It's not all beach landings. There are zombies, too.



The facial expressions are on point.



Much of the first mission is spent managing ammo. It's fiendishly difficult, as marksmen hide on the rooftops, chipping at your health. But after this period of desperate scavenging, the pickups come thicker and faster, and the action transitions to something more familiar. As you collect weapons and ammo, *Blade of Agony*'s pace evens out. It becomes a fast shooter that rewards exploration and thoroughness. At HQ, you can spend money on armour, health packs and even a metal detector. You're encouraged to leave no room unturned, and no Nazi unskinned.

It also becomes increasingly *Wolfenstein*. The opening would suggest a serious, realistic story, but occult elements and weird science are slowly introduced. A recurring boss, Dr Josef Schabbs, is a giant in a lab coat, who throws handfuls of syringes in your direction. Before long, undead Nazis are thrown into the mix. It's a weird mix of styles, but, thanks to the presentation – the mix of 3D environments and 2D sprites, and the exaggerated *Doom*-style death expressions – it never feels so serious as to be jarring. And that's despite their being a mission set during Operation Overlord.

Yes, as a World War II game – even a silly one with supersoldiers – there is a Normandy mission, as Blazkowicz works to disable flak cannons with C4. One of my favourite things about *Blade of Agony* is the

distinct colour palette of each location. Allied HQ is warm, almost sepia in tone. Tunisia is dark, with a blueish tint against beige and yellow brickwork. Normandy, of course, is so gray as to be almost monochrome. The amount of effort that's been poured into these maps is admirable, and I regularly found myself impressed by some small detail.

SLICED UP

Much like those early id shooters, *Blade of Agony* is split into episodes. Two have been released so far – the second, *Shadows of the Reich*, having arrived in June. It shows definite ambition, opening with Blazkowicz stealthing through a Nazi prison – again subverting the later action with an unarmed section and a careful crawl towards your first pistol. Later, you fight alongside an AI companion and man the turret of a tank.

Throughout, you're running and gunning, but there's enough variety to keep things from feeling stale.

Blade of Agony isn't the best example of combat in a *Doom* mod, nor is it filled with the purest, most intricate maps. But its scope is remarkable. It's an amazing showcase of the malleability of GZDoom, and a fascinating clash of shooter styles into an ambitious campaign that somehow still feels cohesive. It's not yet finished but these first two episodes are a great start, and well worth your time. ■



WAD YOU LIKE Other great Doom total conversions



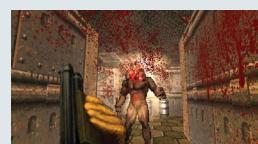
THE ADVENTURES OF SQUARE

Set in a colourful cartoon world, you, a square, straight up murder a whole bunch of circles. You monster.



PIRATE DOOM

It's *Doom*, but with pirates. Full of neat touches, from the soundtrack, to the guns, to the Hell Knight barmaids.



BRUTAL DOOM 64

Brutal Doom arguably gets a little too much attention. This violent remake of *Doom 64* is neat nonetheless.



TOTAL CHAOS

It's not out yet, but this open world survival horror looks amazing, and should be available some time this year.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



**“Allied Assault feels old fashioned,
and not because it’s 15 years old”**

It's like a war movie,
but more polygonal.



MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT

How World War 2 felt before the Call of Duty. *By Phil Savage*

June 6, 1944. Omaha. You're in a landing craft, waiting. Behind you, a crude representation of a face somehow manages to convey terror. A mortar explodes, hitting the adjacent craft and sending its occupants into the sea. You reach the land. The craft stops and, for a moment, everything is peaceful. Then the whistle blows and the guns start to fire. You run, die and reload, over and over again.

Medal of Honor: Allied Assault is one of the highest-scoring FPSes of PC Gamer's history. Our reviewer, Steve

Brown, praised its confident plot and outstanding level design, calling it "the best FPS we've seen since *Half-Life*". I, too, have fond memories of the best entry in EA's *Medal of Honor* series, and particularly of the atmospheric beach landing sequence. And yet, going back, it's not quite the standout sequence I remember. It's not bad, but... well, as painful as it is

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2002

DEVELOPER
2015, Inc.

PUBLISHER
EA

LINK
www.bit.ly/alliedassault

to say given everything the series has become, *Call of Duty* did it better.

June 6, 1944. Three miles west of Omaha, and three years after *Allied Assault*. You're in a landing craft, waiting. A more realistic-looking soldier empties his stomach over the floor. A mortar explodes. A stray bullet hits one of your squadmates and everybody takes cover. There's no peace, just escalation. The whistle blows and... you fall. You watch, helpless, as your comrades run and die. Someone is shouting at you, but you can't hear them over the sound of your beating heart.

DAY OF DAYS

Allied Assault feels old fashioned, and not just because it's 15 years old. The *Call of Duty* series has changed how war is portrayed in an FPS. The opening of *Call of Duty* 2's American campaign, a beach landing on Pointe du Hoc, is directly comparable to *Allied Assault*'s Omaha mission. Such similarities are unsurprising – Vince Zampella and Jason West were both part of the 2015, Inc. team, and would go on to found Infinity Ward. But what sets Pointe du Hoc apart is Infinity Ward's talent for set piece design, and an eye for memorable





» directed experiences that would forever change the genre.

Much of *Allied Assault* is drawn from *Saving Private Ryan*, with settings and scenarios recreated from the film. But ironically, despite Spielberg's involvement with the *Medal of Honor* series, it's *Call of Duty* that feels more cinematic. That moment when you're lying injured in Pointe du Hoc is drawn directly from the language of film. It's essentially a Band of Brothers sequence – all excitement and melodrama. It's also exactly as interactive as a Band of

Brothers sequence, by which I mean it isn't at all. It's a series of moving images, constructed to not be ruined by a player enacting their agency.

Allied Assault is arguably the better approach, because its design favours playable scenarios over fixed camera placement. Its beach landing is harrowing not because of the scripted deaths of your comrades, but because it's difficult to play. Making it across the beach requires using the Czech hedgehogs for cover, however they're an awkward shape – forcing you to jostle squadmates to avoid

being pushed out into the gunfire. It's a loud, tense and disorienting sequence, even though age has stripped away much of its sense of scale. Even playing now, I died a lot.

Call of Duty 2's set piece sequence has, alas, aged better, and offers a more consistent and less frustrating experience. *Allied Assault*'s attempt to craft an atmosphere primarily through interaction is laudable, and feels preferable to *CoD*'s more directorial approach. But my many Omaha deaths didn't make me think about the tragedy of war, so much as the annoyance of quicksaving in a location far away from the one medic hiding across the beach. It worked at the time, but I'm looking back through the lens of over a decade of *Call of Duty*-influenced design. Put simply: *CoD* won the war, and this is history as written by the victor.

Incidentally, EA's other war series, *Battlefield*, produced an affecting sequence about the endless brutality of war that is conveyed through play. *Battlefield 1*'s prologue switches character on every death, hammering home the relentless churn of lives through the war machine. It's great, by which I mean it's very sad.

DISHONOURABLE DISCHARGE What the MoH series became



MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT
Released: 2002
PCG Score: 95%
The good one. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, but a game.



MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT
Released: 2004
PCG Score: 83%
Great set pieces, but not a classic.



MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE
Released: 2007
PCG Score: 88%
Lets you parachute anywhere in a level. Surprisingly good.



MEDAL OF HONOR
Released: 2010
PCG Score: 75%
EA's answer to *Modern Warfare*, only it was not as good.



MEDAL OF HONOR: WARFIGHTER
Released: 2012
PCG Score: 35%
Boring and ethically suspect, *Warfighter* killed the series.



MUCH OF ALLIED ASSAULT IS DRAWN FROM SAVING PRIVATE RYAN

Across the board, *Allied Assault* is a product of its time, unaware of the lessons of both *Call of Duty* and *Half-Life 2*. But where Omaha is a messy attempt at creating an ambitious, singular experience, elsewhere the lack of heavy direction is a boon. The opening is classic war drama, effectively expressed. You hide in the back of a truck as part of a convoy that's infiltrating a Nazi camp in North Africa. A guard checks the documentation of the truck behind you, and your squadmates wonder whether he's buying the ruse. It's a short introduction that sets the tone, giving the scant justification needed to shoot up a level full of Nazis.

These opening missions feel like a way to bridge the original *Medal of Honor* games with *Allied Assault*'s later focus on being the unofficial companion to *Saving Private Ryan*. Both sections feature excellent mission design and variety. There are



stealth sections, sniper sections, solo infiltrations and full-scale invasions. There's also some turret sections, because, despite everything else, *Allied Assault* is still a '00s FPS. There's a brilliant early mission that involves walking disguised through an enemy base, using a false ID to bypass checkpoints. Still, the lack of a cohesive through line does make the campaign feel scattershot.

WHY WE FIGHT

The protagonist, Lt Mike Powell – yes, I had to look that up – has no real personality. He's a cipher for a collection of war experiences, with no story to link them. Neither are his comrades noteworthy. Powell works as part of a squad, but his allies are disposable and quickly killed off. By Omaha, which doesn't occur until the third chapter, I was desensitised to the plight of the basic AI.

In the years since, FPS campaigns have done more to characterise squadmates, and often use multiple protagonists to justify the whistle stop tour of different war scenarios. It's easier to connect to characters facing impossible odds than with the vague terror of a terrible war.

Despite time not being kind to its presentation, *Allied Assault* is still a good shooter. It feels precise, with a focus on longer range combat. If you're caught by surprise, the enemy can be deadly, and so there's an emphasis on scouting, particularly in the open areas. Fortunately, *Allied Assault* features a recreation of the M1 Garand that still holds up. It's a fantastic gun that's crisp to fire and has more personality than many of the game's characters. *Allied Assault* is no simulation, but a nice quirk is your inability to reload the Garand mid-clip – something considered too awkward to be worth attempting in the middle of a firefight.

Allied Assault is still an entertaining war shooter, and a fascinating step in the journey from *Wolfenstein 3D* to the upcoming *Call of Duty: WW2*. That the *Medal of Honor* series would destroy itself trying to mimic *CoD* is a shame, because *Allied Assault* proves that effective systems design can shine outside of Hollywood set pieces. This is, at times, a subtle representation of war, with a lightness of scripting that creates a distinct, now almost unrecognisable tone. ■



DEUS EX

Revisiting Ion Storm's cyberpunk RPG. *By Andy Kelly*

In the earliest *Deus Ex* design document, written three years before the game was released in 2000, Ion Storm established the philosophy of their ambitious cyberpunk RPG. “The key to role-playing is giving players the freedom to act as they see fit,” it reads. “And a deep world simulation that allows them to solve problems in a variety of ways is the best way to do this.”

And that’s the core of what makes *Deus Ex* a PC classic. The sheer breadth of its systems and the complexity of its level design is unmatched, even today. A lot of things were cut from that document – including a level set on a space station – but Warren Spector and his

team’s original vision of a deep, rewarding RPG set in a rich, simulated world remained intact throughout development.

When *Deus Ex* was being developed, *The X-Files* was deep into its fourth season. And Chris Carter’s cult show is an obvious influence on the game, with its government conspiracies, shadowy secret organisations, men in black, and bug-eyed aliens. The design document confirms this, describing the story as “leavened by its dark, mysterious, conspiratorial tone” and any tinfoil hat conspiracy theory you can think of, from Area 51 to the Bilderberg Group, factors into the story in some way. It’s a world where paranoia about ancient secret societies pulling the strings of government is entirely justified.

In the ‘high concept’ section of the design document, Ion Storm asks: “Is it better to live free in a world of chaos or live safely in an ordered world of someone else’s design?” And that’s one of the major themes in the sprawling, labyrinthine story. You play as JC Denton, a government agent enhanced with augmentations that grant him superhuman powers.

When the game begins he’s employed by a branch of the United Nations created in response to the growing threat of international terrorism. But after learning that his bosses have ties to a sinister Illuminati plot, he joins his brother Paul in the resistance against them. “*Deus Ex* plugs into two popular fantasies,” reads the document. “The millennial madness that’s gripping the world, exemplified by *The X-Files* and a general fascination with conspiracy theories. And the desire to play with high-tech espionage toys.”



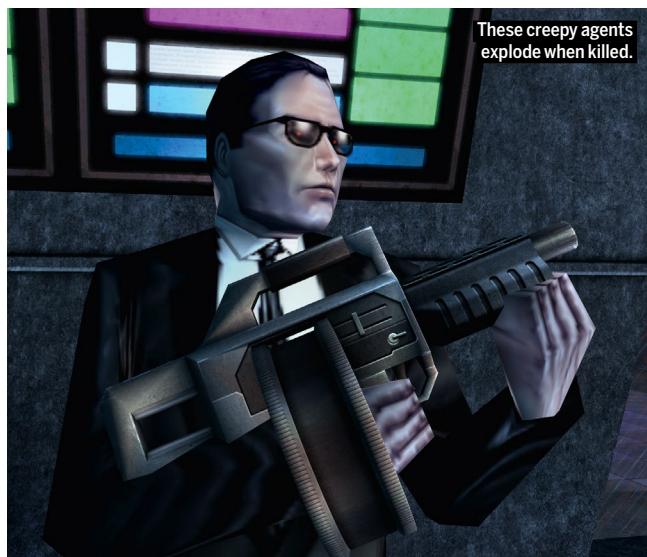
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2000

PUBLISHER
Eidos Interactive

DEVELOPER
Ion Storm

LINK
www.deusex.com



AROUND THE WORLD Key locations in Deus Ex

1 NEW YORK CITY

Plagued by a mystery virus called the Grey Death and deadly street drug Zyme, this future New York is a bleak, dangerous place.

2 PARIS

The French capital is the base of Silhouette, a terrorist group with ties to the Illuminati, and is patrolled by Majestic 12 troops.

3 VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE

This base is the HQ of X-51, an MJ12 splinter group who disagree with their shadowy plans for the world.



4 HONG KONG

Villain Bob Page's sinister VersaLife corporation is based here, as well as several warring factions of Triad gangsters.

5 AREA 51

The infamous 'top secret' USAF base in Nevada is secretly home to a mass surveillance system that's covertly spying on the world.

And it's these toys, as well as Denton's augmentations, that makes every playthrough of *Deus Ex* a wildly different experience. The first level, Liberty Island, showcases everything that's great about the game's open-ended design and how it rewards creative thinking. It's smaller than other levels, and I'm still finding new ways to infiltrate it. The statue not only provides a useful navigation

point, but her missing head, blown off by terrorists, is an evocative piece of world-building. A clue that maybe everything isn't totally cool in this dystopian vision of the future.

Terrorists have taken over the island, and you have to deal with them. But how you go about this is truly up to you. There are dozens of entry points into the statue, some more dangerous than others. If you

want to waltz in through the front door, you can. But you'll have to find a key, hack a series of cameras, and deal with a security bot. Or you can stack crates to climb up to the statue and avoid the security systems altogether, but will have to deal with a group of terrorists in an open area without much cover. You learn these things through experimentation, and that's part of what makes *Deus Ex* so compelling. You're presented with these big, complex puzzles and the game leaves you to figure out how to solve them by yourself. And when you do, it's hugely satisfying.

WALK AND TALK

But it's not all espionage and infiltration. Outside of missions you're free to explore, talk to NPCs, complete sidequests, and learn more about the state of the world through documents and news reports. *Deus Ex* is an enormous game, featuring three massive cities – New York, Hong Kong and Paris – and other locations including Area 51. You simply couldn't make a game this big today with the visual fidelity expected of modern games. In New York you witness the devastating

>



» effects of the mysterious Grey Death virus, while in Hong Kong you team up with Tracer Tong and the Triads to investigate an Illuminati presence there. There are so many secrets hidden in these city hubs – and overwrought philosophical debates to be had with talkative NPCs – that a thorough playthrough of the game could easily take 50 hours.

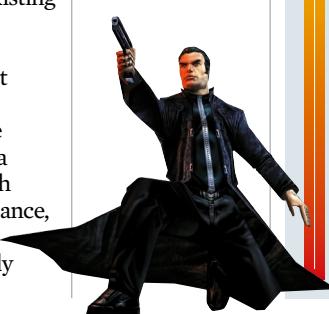
But while the levels are huge, they're not big for the sake of it. This was another thing Ion Storm outlined in their design document as being important. "So many games simulate huge worlds and brag about it," it reads. "Witness *Daggerfall* with its hundreds of generic towns, its shallow conversations, and its randomly generated quests. We feel there's more to be gained by limiting the size of our simulation so we can increase the density of interaction."

And this density of interaction is another of *Deus Ex*'s many strengths. Its levels are filled with things to prod, poke, switch on, and mess with – from incidental details like flushing toilets to intricate security systems that can be manipulated to help you sneak through the level. "This gives the illusion that this is a real, vital

place," reads the design document. "It makes the levels feel like they have a life of their own, independent of player action."

And it has a sense of humour too, often as a result of this freedom and interactivity. If you stumble into the ladies' bathroom in UNATCO's Liberty Island HQ – which most players will as they hunt for secrets and hidden items – your boss Joseph Manderley (who recently appeared in *Mankind Divided*) will give you a stern talking to about it. Ion Storm knew players like to explore every nook and cranny of a level, and they made a joke in response to it.

It's a small detail, but one of countless tiny reactive moments that reinforce the idea you're having an impact on this world, not just existing in it. And who could forget mechanically-augmented agent Gunther Hermann ranting about getting the wrong soda from a vending machine, convinced the maintenance man has a vendetta against him. The story deals with some heavy stuff – mass surveillance, corruption, conspiracies, viral epidemics – but it offsets it nicely with some dry humour.



NEW WORLD ORDER

The Deus Ex series so far, from best to worst

1 DEUS EX

It's showing its age, badly in places, but the original's sprawling levels, deep systems, and conspiracy-laden plot are hard to beat.

2 HUMAN REVOLUTION

A worthy sequel with beautiful art direction, intricate level design, and two uniquely atmospheric, detailed future-cities to explore.

3 MANKIND DIVIDED

Definitely a great *Deus Ex* game, but the weak, aimless story and single city hub mean *Human Revolution* just has the edge over it.

4 INVISIBLE WAR

A confused, misguided attempt to streamline the *Deus Ex* experience for consoles. But, perhaps, not quite as bad as history remembers.

5 THE FALL

A horrendous PC port of an average mobile game. *Invisible War* gets a lot of hate, but this is the true nadir of the series so far.



THE ILLUMINATI SENDS A SQUAD OF MEN IN BLACK TO KILL YOUR BROTHER

A great example of the game's reactivity can be found in the Hell's Kitchen level. Denton's brother Paul, who ends up being hunted by the Illuminati, is holed up in a grimy hotel. It's called the 'Ton by the locals, referring to the fact it was once a Hilton, but the 'HIL' on the sign has faded away. After completing a few missions in New York, Paul's safehouse is compromised and the Illuminati sends a squad of 'men in black' agents to kill him.

These guys are armed with heavy weapons and can take a ridiculous amount of damage. Paul tells you to run and escape through the bathroom window, which most players will do when faced with these seemingly impossible odds. If you escape, Paul dies and never appears in the game again. But if you stay and fight, and somehow manage to kill the men in black and the UNATCO troops who've invaded the hotel, Paul

will appear in Hong Kong. It's unlikely that players at this stage in the game, especially on their first run, will have the skill or augmentations to win this fight, but the fact you *can* is precisely why *Deus Ex* is such a special game. It has a response, even if it's just a line of dialogue, for almost everything you do.

ALL MOD CONS

One part of *Deus Ex* that's really showing its age though, is the visuals. It's a hideous game, with blocky environments, blurry textures and ugly character models. But luckily there are mods that will sort most of these problems out, including the incredible *Revision*. This overhaul is free on Steam for anyone who owns the GOTY edition, and as well as fixing bugs and remixing several maps, it makes it look slightly nicer to modern eyes. But it does change quite a few fundamental things, so if you want to play the game as Ion Storm intended it's probably best to stick to the original version.

Then there's *Shifter*, a mod that adds further depth to an already deep game and exists to, in its creator's words, "remove the suck" from the

base game. It introduces a skill point system that rewards you for feats the vanilla game would ignore, like taking out a room full of men in black. It makes enemies smarter and tougher. And it gives weapons alternate fire modes, including launching napalm bombs with the flamethrower. Again, installing this will seriously alter the game, so think carefully before trying it – especially if it's your first playthrough. Some people don't like *Shifter* or *Revision* at all, but that's exactly what PC gaming, and *Deus Ex*, are all about: choice.

The game is still totally playable without any mods, of course. But you might have to dig through some forums to find out how to get it running at modern resolutions. The Game of the Year edition (whatever that means) is often on sale for a tiny amount of money on Steam, so if you've never played it before, there's really no excuse.

There's a long-running internet joke that whenever *Deus Ex* is mentioned on a forum, someone will reinstall it. And it's something you should consider. Because 16 years later, even if the visuals don't hold up, the game definitely still does. ■



REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



“You always feel like you’re on the knife-edge of failure”



SWAT 4

Revisiting Irrational's quiet masterpiece. *By Andy Kelly*

Before Irrational dragged us down to the briny deep in *BioShock*, it took us to the mean streets of fictional East Coast city Fairview. This is the setting for *SWAT 4*, the tactical first-person shooter the studio developed two years before its underwater epic took critics by storm. *SWAT 4* deserves just as much praise, and perhaps isn't as widely celebrated as it should be.

This oversight is not helped by the fact that, until recently, it was difficult to (legally) acquire digitally. But now the game and its expansion, *The Stetchkov Syndicate*, are available on GOG. The perfect excuse to revisit Fairview and rain down some justice.

It's playing as a law-abiding, law-enforcing boy in blue that sets

SWAT 4 apart from other tactical shooters such as *Rainbow Six*. They share similar disciplines, namely formulating and executing a plan to defeat the enemy as efficiently and safely as possible. But being part of (and indeed the commander of) a SWAT team brings a lot of dangerous new challenges to the table. You're a cop, not a soldier, and it turns out that means you can't just charge in and murder everyone. You can only fire if someone fires at you, and killing a suspect who was in the process of surrendering is a fast track to a mission failure.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2005

DEVELOPER
Irrational Games

PUBLISHER
Sierra Entertainment

LINK
www.irrationalgames.com

SWAT 4's point system keeps you in check. Everything you do earns or loses you points. So handcuffing a surrendered suspect will increase your end-of-level score, while killing someone without first determining if they're a threat will reduce it. On normal difficulty you have to score 50 out of a possible 100 to unlock the next level, which forces you to play and think tactically. And if you kill a hostage, or fail to neutralise a suspect before they do, it's an instant mission failure. All of these elements combine to create a wonderfully tense game where you always feel on the knife-edge of messing it up.

NEVER THE SAME

The lack of mid-level saves only adds to this, but each map is relatively small, encouraging repeat plays to master your craft. One of the game's best features, however, is how the suspect and hostage positions are different every time you start a level, meaning you can't just memorise where everyone is. This keeps you on your toes constantly, and adds remarkable replay value. I must have played the gas station robbery mission a dozen times, and every time it's been a completely different





» experience – because of the randomised suspects and also my growing confidence with the game's deep systems.

The variety of gadgets and weapons, the richness of the level design, and the fine control you have over your squad makes *SWAT 4* a powerful story generator. Even something as simple as opening a door and entering a room has multiple layers to it. You can quietly pick the lock or use an explosive charge to blow it off its hinges. You can toss in a variety of non-lethal grenades to incapacitate the suspects, including tear gas and flashbangs. Or you can use your optiwand (basically a high-tech mirror on a stick) to peer inside the room before breaching to determine the threat.

BREACHY HEAD

Breaching a room is always a nervous moment. As you enter you hit the middle mouse button to 'shout compliance', which means screaming "Police! On your knees! Drop your weapon! Down on the ground!" and other assorted demands. Some perps will comply, especially if you've hit them with a taser or a gas grenade.

LAW AND ORDER

How to play it by the book

ALWAYS

- ✓ Handcuff everyone, even if you're certain they're innocent
- ✓ Report all injured, deceased, and cuffed suspects/hostages
- ✓ Pick up weapons dropped by suspects who surrender
- ✓ Subdue non-compliant suspects with a taser/pepper spray

NEVER

- ✗ Use deadly force unless it's absolutely necessary
- ✗ Fire on suspects who have surrendered/dropped their gun
- ✗ Let a hostage die, or it's an instant mission failure
- ✗ Leave a surrendered suspect alone without cuffing them

But others will make a run for it or open fire. If a suspect surrenders, protocol demands you pick up their gun as evidence, cuff them with a

cable tie, then report their position to HQ. Failing to follow these steps will reduce your overall score, so it pays to play it by the book. And as for the suspects who open fire, well, they've just signed their own death warrants.

Some of the levels, particularly the rock club filled with trigger-happy warring gangsters, are maze-like warrens of suspects waiting to ambush you. This is when the door wedge gadget comes in handy, letting you control their movement by blocking access to certain doors. Just one of many examples of the strategic thinking that the game encourages and rewards.

One of my favourite things about *SWAT 4* is how each mission is a standalone event, so that there's no tedious story linking the campaign together. The early missions are, by your average SWAT team's standards, fairly simple jobs. A few gangsters holed up in a Chinese restaurant. A petrol station robbery gone wrong. Here the suspects are lightly armed and inexperienced, but later you'll be facing veteran criminals with kevlar vests, gas masks, and automatic weapons. The stakes rise with every mission, from bungled robberies to



YOU DESCEND INTO A BASEMENT STRAIGHT OUT OF DAVID FINCHER'S SEVEN

jewel store heists. And as the suspects get tougher and better-equipped, you have to constantly adapt and experiment with new tactics and gear to outperform them.

What's interesting about returning now is seeing Irrational's progression towards *BioShock* in the environment design. This is where the team really started to master using mise-en-scène to tell stories. The Fairfax Residence, widely regarded as one of the game's best missions, is a great example of this. The owner, a serial killer, has kidnapped a local girl. After moving carefully through his drab, unremarkable suburban house, you descend into a basement straight out of David Fincher's *Seven*.

There are bizarre messages scrawled on the walls, creepy masks hanging from the ceiling, newspaper clippings about his killings, and other disturbing imagery. This, along with a sinister, brooding soundtrack, makes

for an incredibly atmospheric, nerve-racking mission. And when you finally confront the shotgun-toting killer, there's a chance he'll be randomly placed near the kidnapped girl, resulting in a dangerous stand-off. His mother's in the house too, but won't comply, so you have to pepper spray and cuff her as she screams "He didn't do anything!" It's an incredible piece of level design, and not the kind of thing you usually expect to find in a tactical FPS.

JOB LOT

The Stetchkov Syndicate was released a year later, and adds seven new missions. It's a great expansion, and there's a noticeable increase in graphical fidelity. The environment design is even more detailed than in the main game, although nothing quite matches the eerie brilliance of the Fairfax house. The expansion adds new weapons and new suspect behaviour, which includes suspects being able to pick up weapons after they've surrendered and dropped them, should you turn your back and fail to cuff them. The 'gold' edition on GOG comes bundled with this, giving you many hours of quality policing.



SWAT 4 holds up, and I feel comfortable saying that because this 'reinstall' is really my first time playing it. My hopeless old PC couldn't handle it back in 2005, so I approached this playthrough with some caution. I'd heard a lot of good things about *SWAT 4*, but wondered if it was just blinkered nostalgia. People still get fairly misty-eyed over it, but not to the extent of some other classic games. And some of the most revered PC games are, honestly, a bit rubbish today.

So it was a joy to discover that it's a genuinely great game, and one of Irrational's finest moments as a developer. And it's worth returning to as a reminder of that period in the late '90s and early '00s when tactical shooters were at their peak on PC – a genre that has sadly faded away in recent years. They could take the systems from this game and transplant them directly into a new engine and it would totally work. *BioShock* is Irrational's all-time classic, of course, but from now on I'll regard *SWAT 4* with just as much reverence. I don't know who owns the rights to the series now, but it's time for a revival. ■



REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Is that a gun on your...
Oh, right, it is. Carry on.

ALPHA PROTOCOL

Obsidian's clumsy spy RPG gets a thorough debriefing. *By Phil Savage*

Alpha Protocol is peak Obsidian – or, at least, peak Obsidian before *Pillars of Eternity* set a new, more stable direction for the studio. It's a wonderful mess, full of great ideas, but hampered by the sort of behind-the-scenes development troubles that plagued the studio for so much of its life. It was delayed multiple times, spent the early part of its production cycle with no project director or lead designer, faced numerous production issues, and, due to differences in opinion between Sega and Obsidian, had time consuming, pricey scenes cut.

All of this shows in the final product, and yet it's still full of things that make it memorable. This was an

ambitious undertaking, and the ideas shine through even as the execution is so obviously lacking.

The first, best idea is the setting. *Alpha Protocol* is an RPG about espionage, in which you play a Bourne-style rogue agent attempting to thwart a global conspiracy. This is fertile territory for an RPG adventure – a fiction that lends itself to complex stories full of branching possibilities. And it works. There's intrigue and drama, and a cast of people all with hidden motivations. How your character, Michael Thornton, navigates these relationships is one of the best parts of the game.

BAD CHARACTER

Unfortunately, Thornton himself is not a great character. He comes in three basic flavours, depending on

your dialogue choices: professional, suave or aggressive. Too often those choices manifest as bland, smarmy or needlessly psychotic. Thornton is, it has to be said, a bit of an asshole. At times, it fits the tone – I found a decent balance alternating between suave and professional, roleplaying a cocky jerk who nevertheless knows when to break character and get down to business. But looking back from the perspective of multiple Bourne, Bond and Mission: Impossible films, Thornton's act feels stale.

Alpha Protocol wastes no time in laying on the conspiracies and intrigue that prop up the dialogue system. It opens to a fake kidnapping, in which Thornton is drugged for the purposes of an extended tutorial. Soon after, a handler challenges him to retrieve information pertinent to an upcoming operation – a covert side-op that suggests you're not being given the full picture. And, of course,



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
May 2010

PUBLISHER
Sega

DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

LINK
www.obsidian.net



Use [W], [S], [A], [D] and [Mouse] to move, [Space Bar] to lock left password, [Left Click] to lock right.



HANDLE WITH CARE

Meet the people who will talk incessantly in your ear



MIN TANG
Your primary handler after going rogue. Nice, but also maybe lightly betrays you? Even though you never get the chance to broach the subject? It's a bit confusing.



ALBATROSS
Your contact in the G22 organisation – and a potential ally for even-headed, stealthy types. Hangs around with a mute teenager. Definitely not creepy.



SIE
A Russian stereotype with a large machine gun and a penchant for innuendo. You can have aggressive sex in the final mission if that's what gets you going.



SCARLET LAKE
A journalist. She'll publish any info you send about Halbeck's wrongdoings. Also she's an assassin who shoots the guy you're trying to protect. Surprise!



STEVEN HECK
Nolan North, here playing a wacky yet lovable psychopath who loves torturing colleagues for comedy. Voted most likely to become an Adam Sandler spin-off movie.

is talk your way past an opening fight – and it makes for a monotonous opener. It's a problem heightened by the fact that *Alpha Protocol*'s combat is not very good. Remember in *Deus Ex*, when shootouts involved standing still while your reticle slowly targeted the person you wanted to shoot? It wasn't a good system then, and, unsurprisingly, hadn't become a good idea a decade later – years after the third-person cover shooter craze of the late-aughts.

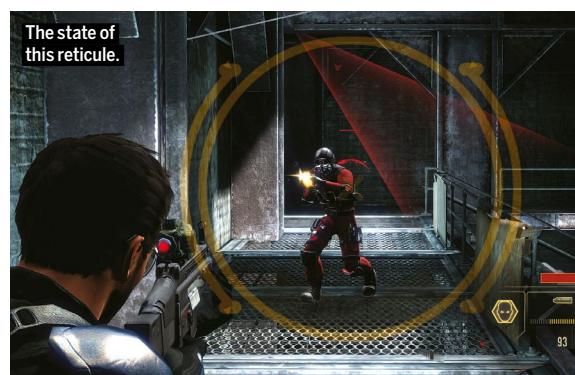
This is one of the problems of pairing shooter design with RPG mechanics. *Mass Effect* had shields, and monstrous enemies that could support lots of hit points – shifting the levelling focus to sci-fi skills that caused major damage. But *Alpha Protocol* is predominantly an RPG set in the real world. Most of the enemies are lightly armoured humans, easily killed by anyone proficient at aiming a mouse. *Alpha Protocol* attempts to redress the balance through limitations – artificially lowering your aim, and offering skills designed to reduce its self-imposed handicaps. Unsurprisingly, it makes combat inherently unsatisfying.

there's a narrative framing device, with Thornton debriefing to an unknown figure. It's a blunt-force intro to the world of skullduggery.

Untangling this mess, however, takes time. First, you're forced through a lacklustre opening that forgoes much of *Alpha Protocol*'s best systems. In place is a series of infiltration missions set across Saudi Arabia. The mission structure works well – Thornton must take on various

preparatory missions to track down a shipment of missiles stolen by the terrorist organisation Al-Samad. There's an airfield to bug, a weapons stockpile to investigate, and an arms dealer to intercept. The problem is *Alpha Protocol* gets more interesting later on. The structure becomes more varied and freeform, and everything you choose has an effect.

Saudi Arabia has none of this – the most subversive thing you can do



That's bad news for the Soldier class, but the other two styles benefit from some more rounded specialisation trees. The Tech Specialist is able to use more gadgets, which is a more enjoyable way to play – albeit one hamstrung by the need to predict and manipulate enemy AI. The best, Field Operative, favours stealth, and is comfortably the most powerful build.

While a pure non-detection run is difficult – a casualty, again, of the AI – the pistol and stun gun are both so overpowered they negate much of the challenge. An upgrade, fairly early in the pistol skill tree, lets you line up shots from cover. With this, and a couple of damage upgrades, you can reliably, quickly and silently take down enemies with a single headshot. It's absurdly effective and allows you to concentrate on exploration and the challenge of bypassing security systems.

MINI SHAME

I'll get to *Alpha Protocol's* laudable qualities soon, but I can't skip over the hacking system, which is among the worst minigames I've ever encountered. It's one of three you're

regularly asked to complete, but the other two – lockpicking and bypassing – are inoffensively bland. Hacking, meanwhile, requires you to find two passwords in a grid of scrolling numbers. Once found, you need to overlay the corresponding number string – one controlled by WASD, the other by mouse. To add a fun extra wrinkle, the mouse string doesn't keep pace with the cursor. Also, failing triggers an alarm. It's a spectacular failure – an important part of the challenge of espionage reduced to a finicky abstraction.

After Saudi Arabia, and the reveal of the conspiracy that leaves Thornton a rogue agent attempting to bring down the corrupt Halbech corporation, everything changes pace. Thornton is no longer following the agency's guidance, and instead builds his contacts by delving into each location's murky underworld. Do you bribe a Triad leader, securing his short term co-operation at the cost of a more long term friendship? Do you play along with a psychotic and possibly delusional CIA operative in order to secure his explosives expertise? Do you befriend the Russian informant, or smash his face

THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH

Places to go, people to kill

1 GREYBOX (AMERICA)

Alpha Protocol HQ, located somewhere in America. You work for them for a bit, but then you don't. That's 21st century job security.

2 SAUDI ARABIA

I think that we can all agree that terrorists are bad. Let's just hope that this doesn't lead down a rabbit hole of betrayal.

3 ROME

You're here to find out Halbech's connection to terrorist group Al-Samad. Doing so involves putting a civilian's life in danger. The feels!



4 TAIPEI

Stop the assassination of Ronald Sung, Taiwan's leader and an advocate for independence. This requires a dry cleaning employee.

5 MOSCOW

Discover the connection between Halbech and the Russian Mafia. If you're wondering if this will result in a disco boss fight, it will.

6 GREECE

You visit Greece twice, both times to stand in a room and talk to your handler on TV before leaving. Hey, you've got to build those air miles.



THE REVELATION OF SCARLET AS THE ASSASSIN YOU WERE CHASING HAS A NICE PAYOFF

in with a bottle? These are all interesting questions and, while the overall plot is broadly fixed, individual story arcs can resolve in a multitude of ways.

This globetrotting second act ups the mission variety, too. There's still plenty of infiltration to be done, but each mission is a different length and intensity. There are some real highlights, from taking out a hit list of Triad lieutenants across the streets of Taipei, to bugging a small CIA listening post in Rome.

Other missions are simply dialogue and choices. Another, also set in Rome, requires Thornton to steal evidence from an NSA outpost. He goes in disguised as an IT guy, armed with a passphrase that should get him through the door. But the NSA agent doesn't respond to the phrase the way he should, causing your handler to question whether something is wrong. Do you hold

your nerve and possibly walk into a trap, or take action at the cost of a potentially useful lead? *Alpha Protocol*'s most memorable moments are all clichéd spy fiction scenarios, but made more powerful by the branching dialogue. It's a system that rewards exploration, too. By completing dossiers you can unlock special conversation options that can alter your relationships.

Early on, you're taught that befriending people isn't always the best tactic, and that angering contacts can be a powerful tool. For the most part, that just means that whatever you do, there's always a way to progress. But the fine details feel important. Major characters can be killed or spared, and some can even be persuaded to switch allegiances. On paper it's an elegant system, although – this being *Alpha Protocol* – the execution doesn't always work.

SUDDEN END

Unfortunately, the ending feels rushed. The final act threatens the imminent arrival of WWIII – a scenario that never felt earned based on my broadly competent handling of previous missions. The conspiracies

start to collide, from Halbech's corruption of Thornton's bosses, to the treachery of journalist Scarlet Lake and the manipulations of your primary handler, Mina – something you never get the chance to resolve, even if you end up riding off into the sunset together. Some of this works. The revelation of Scarlet as the assassin you were chasing in Taipei has a nice payoff, and checks another important spy cliché off the list. But everything else feels like it needs more time to breathe. The final revelations come quickly, reducing their impact, and are paired with a final mission that features multiple, terrible boss fights.

But it's hard to stay mad at *Alpha Protocol*. It throws a lot of design spaghetti at the wall, and some of it sticks. More importantly, there are lessons here that should be learned from and built upon. There's potential in the idea, be it of letting players experience a more open, branching form of spy fiction, or just not letting RPGs languish in the realms of fantasy or post-apocalypse. *Alpha Protocol* isn't a classic, but it's earned a place as a cult favourite – just like everything Obsidian does. ■



REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



PHARAOH

Making ancient history with Sierra's classic city-builder. *By Lorna Reid*

Back in the late '90s, Sierra's historical city building series ruled the roost, garnering high review scores and oodles of respect. It comprised around a dozen games and expansions, most of which were isometric with a sim feel and a stern emphasis on micro-management. *Pharaoh* entered the scene in 1999, following the much-loved *Caesar III*. It took Sierra's series out of Rome for the first time, moving the action to Ancient Egypt, and delivering the sort of complex experience that had become typical of the series.

As with its brethren, and retro management-style games in general (*Colonization* springs to mind), it can be brutal to play in spite of how

simple it may appear. Quaint and lovely though it looks, when you shove the lid off the game's sarcophagus, you'll find it has a nastier streak than Imhotep. While it won't consume your vital organs, it will devour your time and stretch your patience to breaking point.

You play a dynasty rather than a character, and throughout the main campaign you follow them through successive generations as you rise in rank and notability. In each mission in a campaign, there are a number of smaller goals, such as filling a granary, having ten modest apartments or brewing beer; and tougher long-term goals, such as raising your Prosperity or Kingdom Rating to a certain level.

It is relatively easy to grasp the basics of building homes and supporting buildings and

infrastructure, but it isn't long before the difficulty ramps and threatens to overwhelm. With new chains of industry coming in quick succession, it feels like some sadistic wag at Impressions Games has stepped to *Pharaoh*'s metaphorical conveyor belt and tugged down a giant lever, sending new information and elements vomiting out and into my already full hands.

Knowing roughly what order in which to tackle things and trying to anticipate needs is a good strategy, but it's far from easy. There's always a spanner lurking, waiting to hurl itself into the works, especially with the game's delightful way of teaching by way of negative events. Build gold mines, I'm told. I do so. Soon afterwards, they suddenly collapse because I apparently need an Architect's Post. At this point the game brightly informs me that this new building has just become

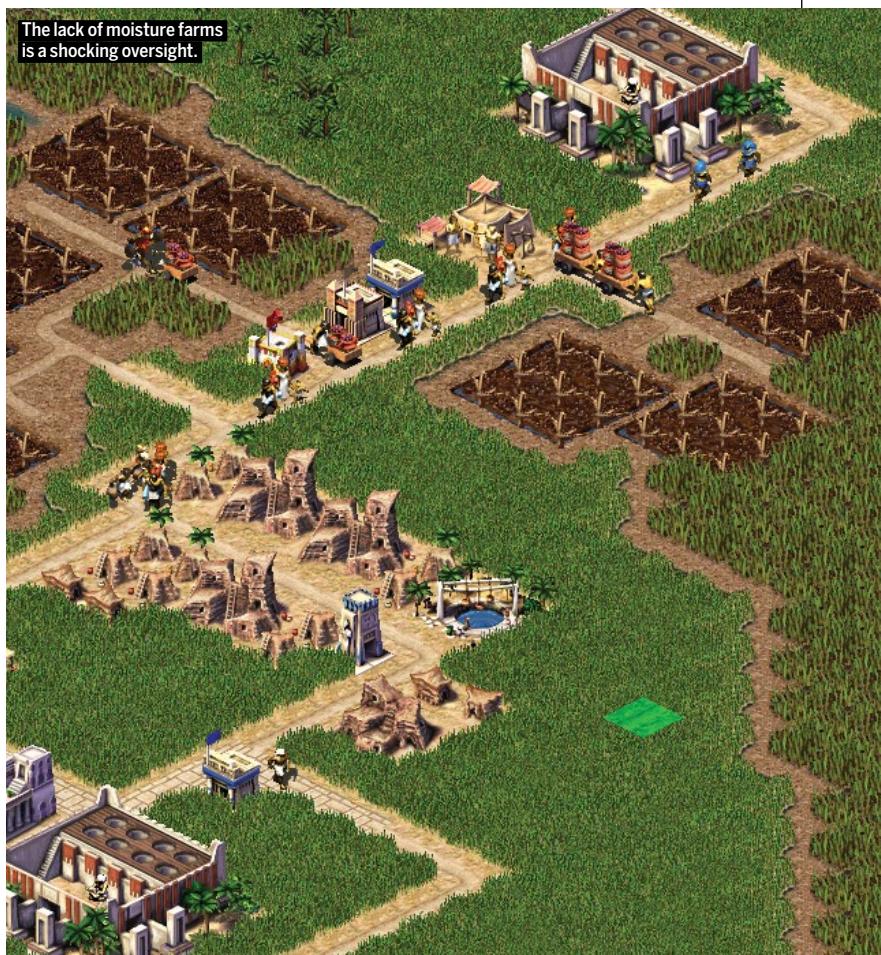
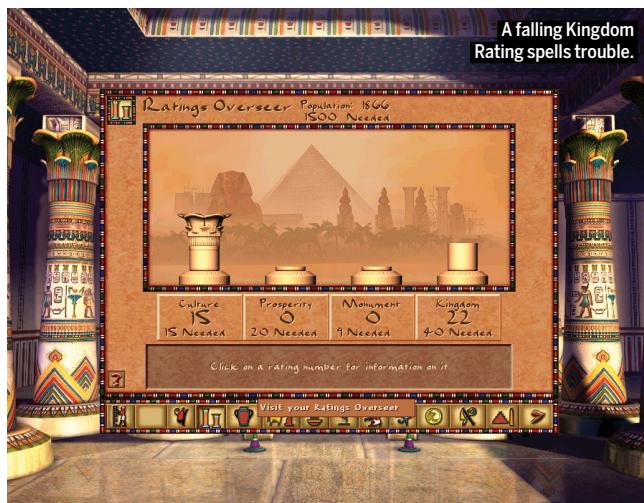
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1999

PUBLISHER
Sierra Entertainment

DEVELOPER
Impressions Games

LINK
www.sierra.com



available... while I'm still staring at the dust clouds rising from the rubble of my once splendid mines.

BAST PRACTICE

Meticulous planners are well suited to *Pharaoh*'s challenge. Players who, like me, have a predilection for winging it – who gallop through the game, throwing down houses and industry – will end up having a far tougher time. Building placement is more crucial than it first appears, and those early days laying out the bones of a city are key, especially given how damn needy the residents are.

If you want your housing to upgrade and become more desirable (often a mission goal), you'll need all sorts of resources, including pottery, beer, access to schools and healthcare – all of which have chains of buildings and resources associated with them. It's easy to let costs spiral and the city's sprawl become unorganised, which can be especially problematic if, like me, you haven't left room for buildings that will be introduced later on. Try cramming a mortuary into the back garden of a row of posh houses and see how well that goes down.

GODS COMPLEX *Keep these guys happy, or face the consequences*



OSIRIS

Keep the God of the Nile happy and he'll improve the yield of your farms. Annoy him, on the other hand, and he'll wipe them out. And probably laugh.



PTAH

Upset him and he'll torch one of your storage yards... just hope it isn't the one holding your beer supply.



SETH

Keep him sweet and he'll give your troops a boost, but vex him and death will come on swift wings.



BAST

Pay her enough respect and this cat goddess will make sure your homes and bazaars are stocked with food and not a fat slice of plague cake instead.



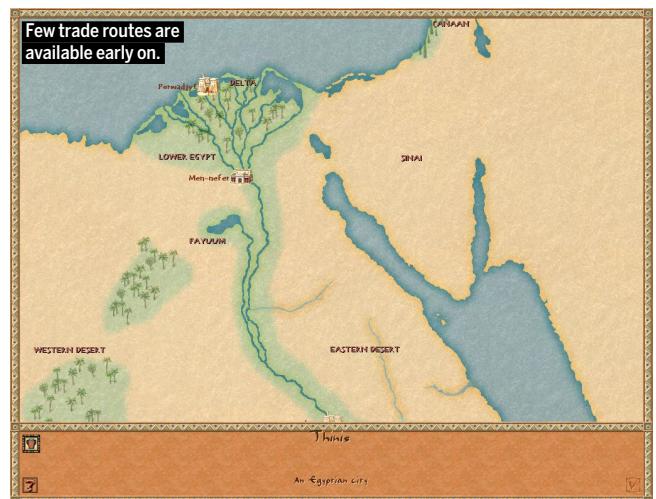
RA

Incur his wrath and your Kingdom Rating risks being sent plummeting. Recovering from that sort of hit can be an uphill struggle.

On top of this stifling amount of responsibility come the gods and their divine tantrums (no ten plagues, sadly, not even locusts or John Hannah), and an often stroppy Pharaoh whose whims must be catered to. At least the gods are marginally easier to deal with and they can be a boon if you play things well. With only a few from a selection of five gods appearing in each mission, your job is to appease all of them. Get it right and you'll be showered with blessings, but get it wrong and they will punish you.

They appreciate lavish, beer-fuelled festivals (who doesn't), which means you'll need to crack on with barley farming and beer production to prevent literal disaster.

With so much to juggle and keep ordered, it can be very hard to regain footing if you slip. When in the thick of playing, merely dragging your arse while producing a specific resource can cause an entire game to be scuppered down the line. My own frustrating downfall was caused by pottery, of all things. With a well-established city flourishing before



me, I was feeling confident as I began to field all manner of tedious Pharaonic requests, often only delivering them by the skin of my teeth. And then, suddenly, there was one I failed to meet. I'd already managed, mostly through slipshod financial management, to send my Kingdom Rating plummeting, and a lack of colourful pottery was apparently the final straw. I found myself and my Rating past the point of no return, and the Pharaoh's beefy army was promptly dispatched to dish out punishment in the form of sudden and sharp death. My army was no match for his, and his troops laid waste to my city. Bugger.

I persisted, restarted, and this time stockpiled pottery sooner, but still couldn't meet the quantity required. Once again, my Rating fell and the Pharaoh's army wiped me out. It was around this time that my mouse inexplicably broke into a dozen pieces.

The Kingdom Rating – which is *Caesar III*'s Favor renamed – is the source of many of the game's frustrations. If this takes a tumble, which it can do if you are in debt at the year's end, don't send military aid

for allies, or fail to comply with the Pharaoh's requests (me, me, me also) then you're in trouble. For a spendthrift player like myself, this is all too easy to screw up.

The debt problem isn't helped by the fact that, during some of the earlier campaigns, there are very few means of gathering money open to the player. There may only be one city that is looking to buy something that you produce, via a trade route, and the rest of your income has to come in the form of taxes. My quick

fix of raising these to bring in some extra cash did not go down well, and led to a grumbling populace and eventually a mass exodus of people and their carpets. Buildings downgraded themselves, pulling down the tone of many neighbourhoods, causing even more disgruntled citizens to throw themselves onto the streets.

Attempting to perk up the Kingdom Rating by chucking down more buildings to produce resources can risk worsening any debt. If I

HARDCORE HISTORIES *A guide to Sierra's city builders*



CAESAR III

One of the most memorable titles in Sierra's City-Building series, and one of four games to be set in the Roman Empire.



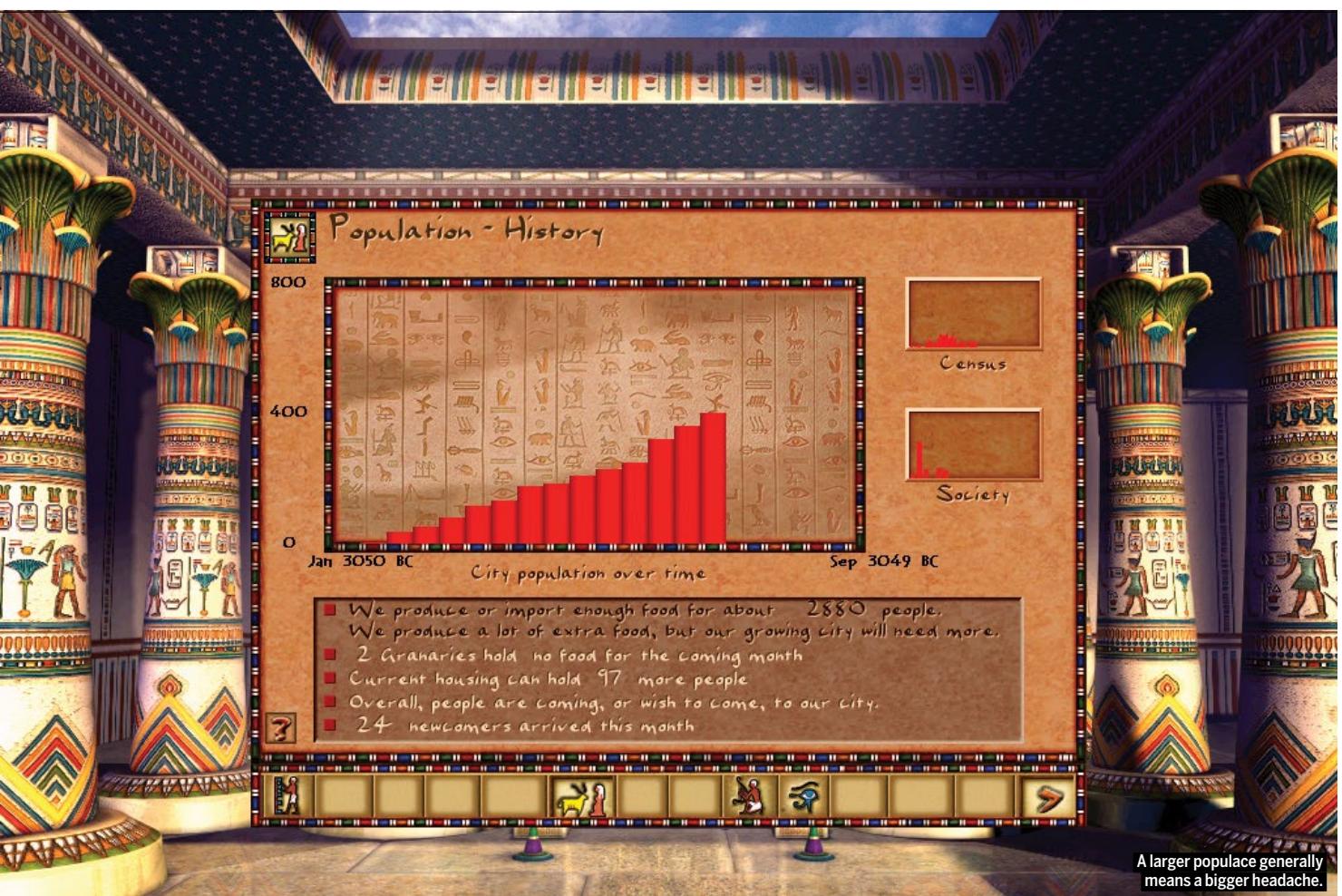
MASTER OF OLYMPUS - ZEUS

Following Sierra's premier Ancient Egyptian foray, the city-building series moved to Ancient Greece for its penultimate management-fest.



EMPEROR: RISE OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

The last of the series to use the isometric view, this time with Ancient Chinese dynasties.



PHARAOH HAS THAT ENVIALE ABILITY TO PULL ME IN AND KEEP ME THERE

wasn't playing a campaign with an aggro Pharaoh, then rather than being wiped off the map, I'd end up waiting hours for my city's fortunes to repair themselves enough to meet the now-distant win conditions.

My major issue is that the Pharaoh's army is unstoppable, and once I'd pushed past the point of no return there is no comeback. An unbeatable army seems pretty cheap – it felt like the management equivalent of being dead-ended in an old text adventure, when you realise that the thing you did back at the start has irretrievably screwed up your game, hours (or even days) down the line. In these circumstances, playing *Pharaoh* becomes almost a memory puzzle, where you try to complete the right tasks in the right order as quickly as possible to avoid a game-ending situation. It rather strips the joy from proceedings, frankly.

Such a penalty feels harsh after you've slowly, organically built a city. It takes time to get things exactly where you want them, and it can all be for naught. It does build the tension, though, and helps drive the pace, which, I suppose, is something. Thankfully, not every campaign is like this, but you still never know what's around the corner. I suppose another positive is that it inspires a greater level of focus, but the prospect of so much time going to waste isn't appealing, no matter what decade you're playing in.

SANDY BOX

And yet, as much as I want to condemn the devs to the Hom-Dai much of the time, *Pharaoh* has that enviable ability to pull me in and keep me there. Like all successful management games, it just about walks the thin line between frustration and challenge, and thus it remains, to this day, an utterly absorbing, enjoyable thing to play.

Even without the *Cleopatra* expansion – which adds new campaigns, buildings and plagues of locusts – there's much mileage to be had here, thanks to a large and varied

sandbox mode. This lets you select from a number of missions, some of which have set goals to be completed in a specific timeframe, whereas others thankfully leave you to your own devices, with no threat of military trouble. These days you can pick the game up for under eight quid which, given the sheer amount of time you can spend playing, is well worth it. Just remember to tweak the display and crank down the speed settings, or you'll be playing like Benny Hill dialed up to eleven.

Pharaoh, like its city-building kin, is a game that's ripe for a reboot. The underused but compelling historical setting, coupled with the prevailing wind of nostalgia for more retro graphical styles, and plenty of ideas to be cribbed from *Tropico* and others, could lead to a stunning return from the afterlife. In the age of Kickstarter, fan projects, and series resurrections, I know I wouldn't be the only one who'd be glad to see *Pharaoh* rise from the dead. The timing feels just right. For all the innovative deaths to be found in today's games, there is still much amusement to be had in watching a death by hippo. Where else can you enjoy that? ■



AGE OF EMPIRES II'S SCENARIO EDITOR

A simple tool, perfect for sophisticated RTS levels or just titting about with elephants. *By Samuel Roberts*



RIGHT: I call this map 'The Pond of Fatal Death'. Also, there are elephants involved.



When I was young, I had too few games but too much spare time. Now I'm an adult, I have the opposite problem, and I'm sure you do as well. That changing relationship with games means I now see them as things to be ticked off as quickly as possible, rather than to be got into as deeply as I used to. Having just five or six games as a younger man meant I would endlessly pore over them, repeating skirmishes in *Red Alert*, or missions in *X-Wing*. Everyone has done something similar, I'm sure, whether it was installing endless *Doom* WADs or conquering every last piece of land in *Total War*, long after the victory conditions were met.

Age of Empires II's map editor was the king of time wasters for anyone with just a few games in their collection. I remember the first time I discovered its potential. I opened it up and put about 30 William Wallaces on screen and sent them to battle against ten or so enemy Robin Hoods (I needed to win, of course – my self-esteem was very precious at that age). This was the dumbest representation of history imaginable: dozens of real-life figures from different eras fighting on a flat, plain grass field at the whim of a bored 12-year-old, delighted that he can defy the game's somewhat stingy unit cap by creating the worst scenarios this RTS had ever seen.

That's how messing around with a level or map editor starts. From there, you get better at it, and begin to create semi-decent levels. You learn about elevating the terrain, how to lay out a base, and how to balance the

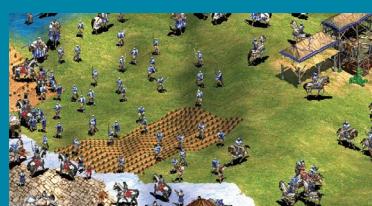
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
September 1999

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

OUR REVIEW
91%

LINK
www.ageofempires.com



RIGHT: Why not add snow or farms to make a map look slightly more legit?

THE RTS THAT NEVER ENDS

What AoE2's new expansions have brought to the game



THE FORGOTTEN

This added the post-Roman Italian republic, Slavs, Indians, Magyars and Incas to the selection of factions, as well as seven campaigns and Twitch integration.



THE AFRICAN KINGDOMS

Four new races join the fray, including the Portuguese, who bring the organ gun siege unit. You also get four new campaigns.



RISE OF THE RAJAS

As well as extra civilisations, the latest expansion brought us ballista elephants, which are actually elephants carrying giant crossbows.

difficulty so you have to strategise with your finite resources. Obviously you know your own tricks, so there's little to surprise you, but the editor is so simple you can create maps almost as sophisticated as those in the game's campaigns. You can also create unusual Skirmish setups with up to eight players, scaling the resource gathering up or down depending on how long you want the scenario to drag on for. Alternatively, you could put a hot desert next to thick ice, and watch one hundred elephants have a fight on top of it.

There's a lot of excitement in the potential chaos of it, and there's real catharsis in watching all these pieces collide when you click the Test option in the scenario creator menu. It's not really real-time strategy anymore, not when I'm in charge. It's a pit of death that's about as historically nuanced as that episode of *Futurama* where Genghis Khan and Evil Lincoln riot in Zapp Brannigan's Holoshed.

You don't even have to control your own side if you've put all your units next to their enemies, as I did for the screenshots in this piece – they'll just scrap automatically. As pointless and anti-strategy as the whole thing is, it fulfils a wish in the stupid part of my brain.

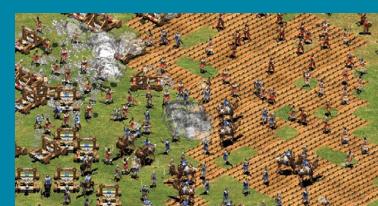
Then there's the option to download the community's own campaigns. It helps that sites like Age

of Kings Heaven have curated the best custom maps since the game's launch in 1999, but it's way easier now with *Age of Empires II HD*'s Steam Workshop support. You can add entire campaigns instantly, as well as new units and refreshed AI.

AGELESS

Age of Empires II's enduring success is a fascinating thing. In the past 30 days before I started writing this, the game averaged over 7,700 players per day according to Steam Charts, compared to just 1,600 for *Age of Empires III* and a mere 900 for *Age of Mythology*'s HD edition. This is no doubt helped by the fact that *Age of Empires II* is still receiving expansions from the team at Forgotten Empires almost two decades later, with the most recent being *Rise of the Rajas* in December. Clearly there's something about this entry that stands apart from Ensemble's other games, which are all superficially similar. As well as adding new campaigns, units and factions, the new expansions also throw additional objects into the scenario editor.

Clearly other people are making more interesting levels out of *Age of Empires II* than I am, then, but I'm content with merely defiling history on a grand scale. Which in a way befits a man who only got a C in the subject at A-level. ■





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

A SENSE OF REGRET IN LIFE IS STRANGE

Anatomising the melancholy of Dontnod's episodic drama. *By Tony Ellis*



RIGHT: Chloe's old family home is a minefield of memories for Max.



After I finished I wanted to hear the soundtrack again, so I hit YouTube. There, among the comments demanding Max and Chloe should be together forever, or saying no game had even given them such feels before, AlchemicalGames had posted "It makes me sad in a really weird way. A little nostalgic, but also a sense of wanting my life to be more like it is for max." Another commenter responded: "I thought I was the only one that felt this way."

More replies followed. "Playing this game makes you feel like you've been missing something that you never realised until now." "For me it's Max's friendship with Chloe. It's a type of friendship I've never had in teenodom." "Something in life just feels missing, and this game has it."

The last time I looked, that thread was over 40 responses long.

The sensation those YouTubers are experiencing is not actually that mysterious. The Germans, those masters of melancholy, even have a word for it: *sehnsucht* – a sort of painful nostalgia for something unknown in your life. What impresses me is that *Life is Strange* attempts to make people feel this way at all. Games tend to steer clear of the human condition. Even story-driven games rarely dare to make us feel sad as players: NPCs get sad, then usually we make them feel better by solving a quest. *Life is Strange* is that little bit more grown up in its approach. It's an episodic detective adventure, and a high-school teen drama, but this is also very much a game about regret.

Pre-teen Max and Chloe were best friends forever. They shared a close, happy childhood. When

modern-day Max explores Chloe's house in *Episode 1: Chrysalis*, it's a memory palace of reminders for her. Almost everything you click on reminds her of the good old days. An old chest of drawers: "we spent all day painting it blue." A couch: "we used to pretend it was a pirate ship." In the garden, a faded mural on hardboard shows two girls running off forever into a coloured-in world of adventure. "That took me and Chloe all day to draw."

The memories are happy, but Max isn't. Max moved away and didn't keep in touch. Chloe's dad died, and now she's angry and bitter. Their carefree childhood world is gone forever. Max sits on the swing Chloe's dad made for them, and remembers how Chloe was always there for her, while Julia Stone mournfully sings "You're somewhere, I'm somewhere... You're nowhere, I'm nowhere."

That lost, crayon-coloured Eden is the backdrop to everything that follows. Not keeping in touch with Chloe was the one selfish act of Max's life. (Seriously. She is officially the nicest person in videogames.) From here on, her determination to make it up to Chloe, to fix things somehow, is what drives the whole story to its devastating conclusion.

WISHFUL THINKING

A gently wistful mood suffuses everything. Almost every character at some point tells Max they wish they could go back and change something in their past. The soundtrack consists almost entirely of acoustic, indie, downbeat songs about missing someone, saying goodbye or wishing things were different. Is it spring in beautiful Arcadia Bay? Or summer? No. It is autumn. The time of year when the world starts dying cinematically. 'Arcadia' itself is a word synonymous with lost paradise.

So, just as well Max has got a superpower to go back and fix the mistakes of the past, right?

Well, no, as it turns out. She can't retrieve that lost childhood, Chloe and Max are teenagers now. She can't

REGRETS, THEY'VE HAD A FEW

Not only Max wants to turn back time



JOYCE

"If only I could go back." Chloe's dad died in a car crash, driving to pick Joyce up from a shopping trip.



DAVID

"We all make decisions we regret." Fought for his country overseas. Borderline PTSD.



HOMELESS LADY

"Oh, if I could go back and be your age again." She's old and homeless. Enough said.



WEIRD FISHERMAN GUY

"Too late to switch careers now, I guess." Mourns the lost prosperity of the town's fishing industry.

prevent Chloe's dad from dying, except at a hideous cost to Chloe. In the end she can only choose between sacrificing an entire town, or the one person she doesn't want to let down ever again. Either way she's looking at a lifetime of remorse.

If we feel nostalgia for the loss of Max's little world, it's simply because the devs have done such a brilliant job bringing it to life, whether we're taking an illicit dip with Chloe in the school pool, sharing a final sleepover with her in the heartbreaking alternate timeline, or just watching the scenery glide past while a Josez Gonzales track plays. None of us ever really had such a deep relationship, or lived somewhere as scenic, but we've all known something like it, so Dontnod's more intense version feels at once familiar and painful to lose.

We can't hold on to the happy times any more than Max can, and this is the brilliant secret at the heart of *Life is Strange*: that what at first seems to be a superpower to fix regret is in fact only a way of experiencing it more intensely. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
January 2015

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

DEVELOPER
Dontnod Entertainment

LINK
www.lifeisstrange.com





FASHION IN NIER: AUTOMATA

From haute couture to industrial
fetish wear. *By Kimberley Ballard.*



RIGHT: 2B's pal 9S also gets some
stylish threads, in
Moschino-esque
leather accessories
that cling teasingly to
his skin.



If you were to list three ideal qualities that futuristic androids should possess as standard, they would be intelligence, resourcefulness and, above all, beauty.

In the world of *Nier: Automata*, beauty is key. Set in the aftermath of an alien invasion on Earth, humans have retreated to the Moon and created androids called YoRHa to fight back. They're not just perfectly made subservient killing machines, but delectably dressed, in black lace, leather and gossamer.

Instead of utilitarian uniforms you may expect from an army deployed for destruction, YoRHa look like ghosts from Gothic romance crossed with children's toys. At times this feels far-fetched, especially when watching a woman fight machines in a gown and stiletto heels, but it's also a celebration of contemporary fashion from Los Angeles to Milan.

When we meet *Nier*'s protagonist 2B, she is a draped and ruffled china doll. She pirouettes across the screen in a billowing velvet dress adorned with a high collar and a delicate cut-out at the back, and is accessorised with thigh-high leather boots and black stockings. With her traditionally feminine, hyperwaisted silhouette, 2B's uniform is not about practicality, but desire. She is the femme fatale of this planetary ruin. 2B's style may have been inspired by Gothic Lolita, a Japanese fashion subculture. Like an elaborate play on Victorian fashion, young women don their dresses like tiered cakes, their bouffant skirts layered in ribbons and pleats. While the silhouette is similar, 2B's costume is more adult, swapping a parasol for a svelte sword and Mary Jane shoes for killer heels.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
March 2017

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

OUR REVIEW
79%

LINK
www.nier-automata.com

LOOKBOOK Four more fashion-forward heroes who bring style to your PC



DEDSEC *WATCH DOGS 2*

It may be full of tech experts, but DedSec is so hip it stings, with studded jackets, skull-print socks and graphic tees.



EMILY KALDWYN *DISHONORED 2*

Emily brings Victorian fashion to Karnaca, with a high-necked navy trench coat and riding boots in soft leather. Swoon.



BAYONETTA *BAYONETTA*

She's a gun-wielding sorceress and part of her charm is to look fierce, thus the beehive hairstyle and skin-tight catsuit.



LIGHTNING *FINAL FANTASY XIII*

With her bubblegum-pink hair and love of leather accessories, no wonder Lightning is an inspiration for fashion designers.

Instead, 2B's look emulates several haute couture collections. In David Koma's 2017 Spring ready-to-wear line, for instance, the Georgian designer was inspired by the opulence of Russian 20th century court dress across a monochrome palette. Similarly, in its 2017 fall ready-to-wear collection, French fashion house Saint Laurent featured a line of dresses with ruffled shoulders, draped leather and belts cinched sharply around the waist. This brute-femme aesthetic is also a favourite of sister designers Rodarte, whose 2009 spring/summer line was a sewing box of romantic, wispy garments that juxtaposed tough leather with lace.

DRESSED TO KILL

We also meet other impeccably dressed women in *Nier*, such as A2 and Kainé. Although Kainé's costume lacks the grandeur of 2B's perfectly stitched gown, her babydoll dress still looks like high-end lingerie, its colour and cut like a Betsey Johnson garment. An American designer whose clothes evoke the summer days and slumber parties of adolescence, Johnson is known for tiny, flouncy dresses and skirts in sugary colours. A2's look is even more revealing, jumping across the screen in stockings and a halter top.

Even *Nier*'s villains are given a runway of their own. One particular boss towards the beginning of the



game looks like a model from an Alexander McQueen collection: skeletal, grotesque, but still beautiful, a red ball gown spilling over its thin frame. In McQueen's fall 2009 ready-to-wear collection, models were transformed into phantasmagoria, their faces chalked out and mouths blotted until their natural beauty was twisted into unnatural shapes. McQueen, obsessed with fragmentation and decay, curiously littered the runway with glass and pieces of broken machinery, highlighting the idea of women as broken dolls.

The idea of androids as playthings is heightened further by the echoes of fetish wear. In its prevalence of blindfolds, collars and black materials, *Nier* recalls Zana Bayne, a New York fashion house described as a post-fetish leather brand. Unlike typical bondage wear, Bayne makes luxury items in buttery black leather, such as harnesses, chokers and garters. 2B could easily be a model from a Bayne runway show, in boots that look like liquid latex and elbow-length gloves.

While the costume design in *Nier* has divided players, with some criticising its practicality and others the way it sexualises women, there's no denying that its conceptual, cerebral fashion elevates the game. Fashion and videogames may be two starkly different disciplines, but *Nier* exists in its tantalising intersection. ■



LEFT: YoRHa androids are created to fight, but the sharp line that dissects 2B's skirt also turns her into an object of desire.





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

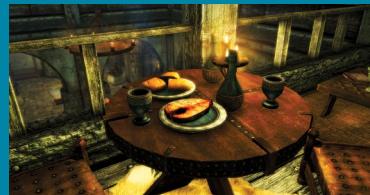


THE TAVERNS OF SKYRIM

Escape the many dangers of Tamriel's frozen north. *By Andy Kelly*



RIGHT: The hearty food of *Skyrim* is among the most delicious-looking in PC gaming. Don't you just wanna eat that lovely salmon?



Skyrim, located in the icy northern reaches of Tamriel, is an unforgiving land of freezing blizzards, ruthless bandits, and fire-breathing dragons. But nestled among all this danger, warmed by fires crackling in stone hearths, are the taverns. These cosy, calming sanctuaries offer weary adventurers respite from the cold and chaos, if only for a few minutes. The hardy, resourceful people who call Skyrim home have mastered the art of comfort and hospitality, as anyone surviving in a place as cold and brutal as this would have to.

And as you step into one of their inns, stone walls lit by the orange glow of the fire, tables stacked with cold mead and hunks of red meat, you feel like you can rest easy. Like you've come home. No mudcrabs or skeevens are going to scutter out of the bushes and attack you here. No fur-clad bandits are going to try and shake you down for gold with their bows and arrows. And, best of all, those pesky ancient dragons are too big to fit through the door.

The perpetual howl and chill of the wind is replaced by the soothing music of a strumming bard, the murmur of the other patrons and the clinking of glasses. It couldn't be more different from the white, wild outside, and it's the perfect place for a tired, hungry adventurer to grab a cold drink, a warm meal and a soft bed for the night. You could always just sleep on some grotty old bedroll outside, of course, but the Dragonborn deserves better.

Entering a tavern in *Skyrim* perfectly recreates the feeling of escaping into a homely country pub

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
November 2011

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

OUR REVIEW
94%

LINK
www.elderscrolls.com

HISTORY LESSON *The stories behind the names*



THE DRUNKEN HUNTSMAN

This Whiterun tavern was named after an incident involving owner Elrindir and his brother. On a drunken hunt, his brother shot him in the arse with an arrow because he thought he was a deer.



THE WINKING SKEEVER

Located in Solitude, this tavern is named after a pet skeever the proprietor Corpus Vinius had when he was a boy, which used to wink at him. He notes that skeever were smaller and less aggressive back then.



THE BANNED MARE

The most popular tavern in Whiterun, named after the legend of a Nord king. The unnamed monarch died in battle, but his trusty steed kept flying his banner and inspired the surviving soldiers to defeat the enemy.



CANDLEHEART HALL

A huge stone inn at the heart of Windhelm that was once the home of Vundheim, a legendary warrior of the Fourth Era. When he died, his son lit a candle above the hearth and the flame has burned there ever since.

after a long walk on a cold, windy day. That instant sense of tranquillity and peace. You know you'll have to go back out there eventually, but for now it's just you, the fire and a pint of ale. Your troubles seem like they're miles away, although the concerns of the average person in today's world certainly can't compare to the Dragonborn's quest to save Tamriel from an ancient, evil dragon which wants to devour the world.

PUB CRAWL

You're spoiled for choice when it comes to taverns in *Skyrim*, and their atmospheres reflects their locations. In the city of Riften, a hangout for criminals and other ne'er-do-wells, you'll find The Ragged Flagon and the Bee and Barb, which are the kind of establishments where you'd get a dagger in the ribs for so much as looking at someone's pint. While the Imperial capital of Solitude boasts The Winking Skeever, a luxurious, spacious watering hole with a fine selection of quality booze and grub. And as well as these city inns, there are plenty of smaller ones dotted around the countryside, including the Four Shields Tavern.

As well as offering food, drink, and beds, taverns in *Skyrim* are also great places to meet reliable

mercenaries. You'll often see these warriors sitting in the corner, like Strider in Lord of the Rings, waiting for an adventurer with enough coin to hire them. In The Drunken Huntsman in Whiterun, for example, you'll find Jenassa, a Dunmer ranger who's handy with a bow and arrow and doesn't seem to mind if the Dragonborn slaughters innocent people. But you'll need 800 gold pieces to retain her dubious services.

Taverns are also rife with gossip, which can lead to some interesting quests. Talk to the bartender and you'll hear clues about various goings on in the world, including the Imperial boy Aventus Aretino attempting to summon the Dark Brotherhood: a rumour that ultimately sees you joining its ranks. Or you might hear about a shrine to the Daedric Prince Azura, which leads to you obtaining a powerful Daedric artefact. It's a good thing the proprietors of *Skyrim*'s inns are so unashamedly nosy.

The tavern is an important part of any fantasy world, whether it's the Prancing Pony from Lord of the Rings or Game of Thrones' Inn at the Crossroads, and *Skyrim* is no different. Wherever you drink and whatever your poison, these are fine places to spend your coin. ■



RIGHT: Talking to loose-lipped bartenders is a good way of learning about interesting quests. Those beautiful gossips.





WHY I LOVE

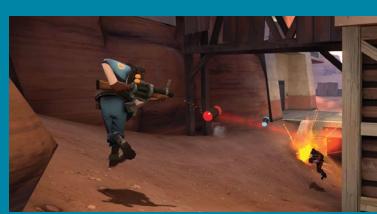
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

TEAM FORTRESS 2'S CP_BADLANDS

Paying tribute to the most chaotic map of Valve's team shooter. *By Sam Horth*



RIGHT: The map's open areas each have multiple entry points, so there's always three or four fights going on at one time.



Nine years. That's how long I've been running around cp_badlands, and it's never once felt stale. Added to *Team Fortress 2* in 2008, it quickly became a staple of the Control Point mode, where teams are tasked with sequentially capturing five areas of the map and pushing the enemy team back towards their own spawn building.

It's a remake of a Capture The Flag map from *Team Fortress Classic* and it shows, retaining two large bases at either end. Between them lies everything you could ever want as a *TF2* player: long sight lines for the Sniper, vantage points for the rocket-jumping Soldier, and hidey-holes where a Spy can lurk in wait of a wandering opponent's back.

That's pretty standard for official maps, which are fairly well designed, but there are a couple of things that set Badlands apart. On most maps, it feels as if the control points have been plonked down and the terrain built around them. In Badlands, they feel almost incidental parts of a wider arena, itself designed to give combat as much variety as possible.

Take the area around the central point: the point is on a bridge, and below lies a wide valley where players can fight around and between the supports. To the left and right of the bridge are safe houses, with balconies that overlook the area.

It's a vast space, and at any one time you can expect three or four secondary fights alongside the main battle for the point. Scouts duke it out with their Scatterguns for control of the area below, snipers camp in their buildings trying to take each other's heads off, and, inevitably, a flanking

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED February 2008

EXPECT TO PAY Nothing

OUR REVIEW 96%

LINK www.teamfortress.com

Heavy wraps around to come at the opposition from behind, being as sneaky as a giant Russian with a minigun can be. It's manic, and utterly brilliant.

The same is true of the second point. Once you've captured 'Mid' you push on to 'Yard', another open area with plenty of peaks and troughs. There are three ways to get there, providing plenty of flanking routes, and you're never sure where your opponent may come from next.

The control point itself sits close to the defending team's base, on a towering spike of rock called 'Spire'. It's easy enough to reach the top if you're a double-jumping Scout, rocket-jumping Soldier, or a crafty sticky-jumping Demoman. The rest of team is forced onto a snaking path. It's a long climb, and the defenders have battlements from which they can rain down hell.

RUN THE GAUNTLET

Some people loathe this, but dodging rockets and bullets on my hike up the path never fails to get my adrenaline going. And once you reach the top, it's your turn to have the high ground. I play mainly as a medic, and some of my best *TF2* moments have come on the top of Spire, barely keeping teammates alive as I tiptoe around its peak.



TAKING CONTROL

The pro call-outs for Badlands' centre point



1 POINT

Get on it

2 HOUSE

A safe haven, filled with health and ammo

3 HIT HOUSE

Best name ever, likely flanking route

4 BALCONY

An ideal vantage point

5 WINDOW

Yep, it's a window

6 VALLEY

Here be Scouts

7 HOODOOS

Ideal for hiding behind



RIGHT: Badlands is packed full of raised areas that give depth to team skirmishes – there's bridges, mounds of earth and rock spires.





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

COLE FROM DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

A peek inside your own mind.

By Hazel Monforton

LEFT: Cole can be found in odd places in Skyhold, but is usually in the attic of the Herald's Rest.



When Cole arrives at Haven to warn you about the Red Templars marching your way, he yells “I can’t come in unless you open!”

He’s talking to the door. And he talks to his shoelaces, and Sera’s bow, and the face cards during the game of Wicked Grace you play with your companions. Because in the Fade – the realm of spirits and demons that parallels Thedas in the *Dragon Age* series – these inanimate objects would speak. Or, at least, they would tell him things.

Spirits are reflections of a feeling, not born into a physical form – and in the Fade, Cole’s true name is Compassion. It’s why Cole can hear the tree from which Sera’s bow was carved, and the lovers who kissed beneath its boughs. Because in the Fade, they’re connected, and the divisions he experiences as a human – physical, social, and emotional – are incomprehensible to him.

Cole is one of the potential companions for your Inquisitor in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. While *Dragon Age II* gave us an example of a spirit’s existence with Justice and his possession of the mage Anders, Cole is a fully independent spirit. His origin, more fully described in the tie-in novel *Dragon Age: Asunder*, explains that he isn’t possessing a human body, but has instead managed to manifest a physical form. While it’s slyly hinted that this isn’t the first time it’s happened in Thedas, it’s strange enough to make Cole a unique companion in the Inquisition.

While his thought patterns and turns of phrase are at once poetic and inelegant (“Cole, the wooden duck I found on my bed... was that you?”/“No, I am not a wooden duck.”), from breathlessly describing another

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
18 November 2014

EXPECT TO PAY
\$18

OUR REVIEW
87%

LINK
www.dragonage.com

HELPING HAND

Skyhold is alive with reports of strangeness caused by a young man



TURNIPS

A servant finds turnips in a fireplace. Then a man mentions a soldier passing peacefully. The soldier’s last thoughts, thanks to Cole, were of the turnip stew he ate as a child.



PLUMS

A woman will mention finding plums, which are attracting flies. Later, you hear someone say that cobwebs are good wound dressings. The flies were meant to attract the spiders.



CHEESE

Cheese and mint go missing. The maids say the cook hasn’t yelled at them. The cheese brought mice, which brought cats, which act silly because of the mint, delighting the cook.



DAGGERS

A soldier will talk about finding a barrel full of missing daggers. Later a woman will mention being unable to find her dagger when she nearly pulled it on someone in a drunken fight.



BREAD

A servant will mention bread going missing. Then, a patient will talk about seeing the birds on the rooftops. Turns out they had vowed to keep holding on to life if the birds stayed in Skyhold.

companion’s emotions in alliterative whispers to struggling to comprehend a knock-knock joke, his fumbles through the physical world are both endearing and relatable. He doesn’t understand that Orlesians are wearing masks because, internally, the masks are their own faces. He didn’t think Cullen’s armor could come off because Cullen, traumatised and under enormous pressure, never drops his emotional guard. And while Cassandra corrects Cole when he calls her grandmother’s locket “Anthony’s”, Cole understands that the small portrait of her dead brother has more emotional resonance to her than a grandmother she never knew. Cole becomes a medium for characters’ emotions, helping them through their difficulties.

HUMAN OR SPIRIT?

But while he understands other peoples’ struggles, he has trouble finding and articulating his own. His personal quest comes down to a decision to determine his future as a spirit and a human; Cole confronts the man who murdered him (it’s complicated), and can either understand, forgive, and forget the hurt that caused him, or accept his own emotions. In other words, he can return to being a spirit, shedding his attachments, memories, and pain and living as Compassion, or he can choose to become more human by accepting his own emotions.

It’s a pivotal moment, not just to Cole’s storyline, but to understanding

how struggle and pain make us real. While he lives for others, Cole’s compassion does not have to come at the expense of his own emotional wellbeing. He can continue being a reflection of others’ feelings, or learn how to grow himself. It’s through this choice that we can see how a part of our humanity is a vulnerability to emotional and physical pain, and how asking for help is just as important as giving it freely.

As with all *Dragon Age* companions, Cole exists as an entry point for us to understand some

HIS FUMBLES THROUGH THE PHYSICAL WORLD ARE BOTH ENDEARING AND RELATABLE

critical aspect of the world of Thedas. While the Fade, spirits, and demons are explored in the series, Cole is the first spirit we can befriend. His manner might bewilder those around him – us included – but his story arc sheds light on both the Fade’s inner workings as well as the ways we, as humans, process our emotions. But ultimately, he makes us rethink things that are taken for granted. Speech, memory and compassion, even making someone else happy – Cole approaches each with a level of clarity that we might find confusing, at first. But as with any companion in *Dragon Age*, we’re richer for learning from his differences. ■



RIGHT: Cole helps people with their pain, but how he does it can be influenced by you.



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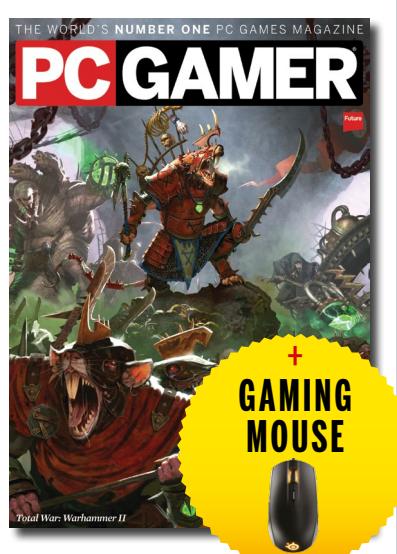
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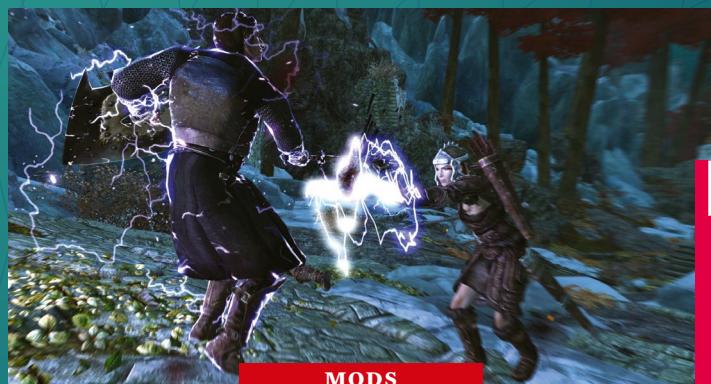
RETURN TO THE FRONTLINE IN ALLIED ASSAULT



FEATURE

VILLAINS

THE CREATION OF PC GAMING'S BEST BADDIES



MODS

ENDERAL

SKYRIM'S MASSIVE TOTAL CONVERSION