Game reviews

Game 1: Max Payne 3

After nearly a decade, sharpshooting drunkard Max Payne returns with a proven developer and a questionable haircut in Rockstar's Max Payne 3. Much has changed in the gaming landscape since Max walked the streets of New York and while the stylized third-person shooter has dropped one or two series mainstays in its new form, it hasn't forgotten the precision control and stark realism that made the original games great, sacrificing little for a modern, competent resurrection of the franchise.

Max Payne 3 finds Max where one usually finds Max: eyes down at the floor of a bar with a drink in his hand and ten more in his stomach. He's recently arrived in São Paulo, Brazil at the behest of an old academy classmate, Raul Passos, who's been busy running security for a family of politically-connected fat cats. Passos has promised Max nothing but free booze and watching rich people make fools of themselves from the safety of a bar stool, but things, as they often do for Max, don't go quite as planned. Soon, Max finds himself in a complicated war of rival South American gangs and political factions, and it's not long before he's back to his old, gun-slinging tricks.

With few exceptions, São Paulo feels refreshingly animate, more a living city than a stitched together series of boxy interior maps so common to the genre. Its denizens continually carry on about their lives without you, sometimes reacting to your ridiculously out-of-place nationality and wardrobe, sometimes ignoring you completely. The game's primary cast is equally convincing; good guys respond rashly when confronted with difficult situations, responding illogically or frightened when fitting, while the villains, though somewhat light on personality, are believably unpredictable.

Still, while the setting is immersive, Max Payne 3's delivery mechanism is flawed. Series veterans will be first to notice the removal of the games' signature graphic-novel-style cut scenes, replaced in this third installment by a slight twist on standard-fare cinematic. While the action now continues fluidly without breaking format, Rockstar attempted to keep the story sections unique by adding frantically-paced transitions; strange blurring, interlacing, and color effects; as well as double, if not triple vision. At first, the effect is novel, serving to place you within Max's drunken, pained mental state. The style, however, soon wears its welcome thin by overuse. The screen will go strange at least once nearly every time you aren't in direct control, creating a consistently distracting, and sometimes nauseating result.

Compounding that problem is the ratio of these tortured cinematics to actual gameplay, which, especially toward the beginning of the game, is severely imbalanced in favor of narrative sections. To its credit, Max Payne 3 does a tremendous job of tucking away loathsome loading screens behind what are, mostly, engaging story segments, but the final package still suffers. The tale of deceit and intrigue these cinematics tell never feels dull, but certainly isn't complex or engaging enough to warrant the raw time it's given in highlight.

Perhaps the reason those lengthy cut scenes seem to sting is because the gameplay itself is so engaging. The mechanics are precision-tuned and, with the minor exception of an infrequent camera malfunction, feel just as sharp and responsive as you'd expect from a game carrying Max's name on the cover.

Max Payne's trademark time-bending bullet time mechanic is back, once again single-handedly transforming the gameplay from a typical shooter to that transcendent experience unique to the series. As you absorb and dish out damage, a long, white meter fills near your health-bar, which can then be emptied on command to place the world, and the bullets, around you into immediate slow-motion. This ability can be activated anytime you have enough juice to do it, adding a layer of strategy to most fights that's as crucial to your survival as it is entertaining. Throughout the course of the game, you'll find yourself using it just as often for getting out of a hairy situation as you do for simply making a fight look cooler. After all, even if you didn't need to, there's really nothing like leaping backward over a second-story banister, shooting eight thugs on the way down and then watching their bodies crumple in unison as your back collides with the floor and time returns to normal.

There's even a newly-added cinematic version of bullet time that activates when you've downed the last enemy in a room. Keeping with the spirit of the game, these sequences exist for no other reason than to feed you pure eye-candy between fights. As you watch the path of your terminal bullet travel into the body of a goon across the room, you can manually adjust the speed of the scene to a standstill, watching a fountain of blood splatter from the wound you've just torn open. And if you're feeling really sadistic, you can even waste additional ammo to pump in more shots, creating even more of a violent mess than you'd already made.

This beautifully designed combination of tight gunplay with Max's signature bullet time mechanic creates a razor-sharp, gory gun fest that leaves you appreciating nearly every fight long after it's finished, and it's that same excellence that makes inconsistencies within the game's narrative package so frustrating. That being said, *Max Payne 3* is a joy to play, succeeding far more than it fails. The frenzied, balletic combat segments it offers are almost universally worth the wait to get there.

**Bottom Line:** Brilliant gunplay, and a classic character make for an exhilarating experience, but much of the narrative style distracts more than aids the final package.

**Recommendation:** Whether you're a fan of the original, or a complete newcomer, *Max Payne 3* is an extremely worthwhile experience. Just be sure to have some popcorn on hand for the frequent downtime.

Top of Form

Rating: 4/5

Platforms: PC , Xbox 360 , PS3

Game 2: Diablo III

Diablo III benefits from great writing. Not necessarily in the narrative or dialogue, both of which offer the same old gleefully stagey stuff about warring angels and ancient prophecies. No, it has great writing where it matters: in the names of its class skills. Wrath of the Berserker, Rain of Vengeance and Mass Confusion – here’s where creative effort has been spent. Here’s where you can see the density of pulpy exuberance that ten years of development can provide.

As it is for the writing, so it goes for the wider game. *Diablo III* is defined by its skills, and by the characters who unlock them. With five vividly distinct heroes to choose from blizzard’s returned to the dungeon-crawler with rebalancing in mind. Enemies drop the same coins, shields and magical trousers when you hit them, but it now seems like a minor concern compared to your own progression. *Diablo*’s still a fruit machine, but it’s far more rewarding to step away from the randomness and approach it as a series of decisions. Which power now, which one next?

The biggest decision comes right at the beginning: who to play as? The answer, of course, is everyone eventually, but that doesn’t make selecting your first class any easier. Seek the standard all-rounder for that initial playthrough and you’ll discover that there isn’t one. The Barbarian, for example, is the melee tank rendered seismic. He’s handed the bone-shaking Leap and Earthquake, the latter of which shatters the ground beneath him and brings lava oozing to the surface. However, Ancient Spear makes him surprisingly good for distanced play, since a quick tap of the action bar can harpoon mobs from halfway across the screen, while Whirlwind twists him into a tornado of blades, spinning around like Taz the Tazmanian Devil. Even core skills such as Frenzy bring to the fore leftfield ideas such as incremental speed boosts, each strike diminishing the cooldown before the next. The spirit of Conan is hard to locate within this dynamic, scene-stealing demi-god; he’s not the straightforward option you might expect.

The Wizard’s no more traditional: a youthful mage who plays like a spry angel crossed with a Tesla coil, firing frosty lasers and linking enemies together with lattices of electricity. Decked out in a schoolgirl ponytail and a bright sash, she chucks Magic Missiles like she’s pitching baseballs. And while she’s built for range, she’s an uncommonly hardy tank if you weight your deck with defensive and area skills.

After that, things get really creative. The Demon Hunter is Batman with a Gatling gun, a dark knight of traps, bows and grenades who rolls into combat and dashes between shadows. The Monk, meanwhile, mixes elements from healers with moves you’d expect from Capcom. Seven-Sided Strike rattles him between groups of enemies, and Lashing Tail Kick unleashes a powerful knockback attack that’s accompanied by the sound of a jet engine. Then, of course, there’s the Witch Doctor, the weirdest and most contradictory of the bunch. He’s a confusing blend of ranged and melee attacks, direct and indirect, and each new power represents another trip to the world’s strangest pet shop, summoning spiders, firebats, and zombie dogs that scamper after their master in a disgusting parody of the real thing.

There’s plenty of fun to be had as you use classes together in the churning muddle of co-op – letting a Wizard freeze a group in place, say, before a Barbarian sends them flying – but the addition of runestones ensures that heroes offer endless entertainment for solo adventurers. Runes unlock gradually as you level, allowing you to flare each power in unusual directions by slotting them into sockets. In a game built upon a series of incapacitating choices, they offer some real dilemmas – do you want that Cyclone Strike to be explosive or heal? Like the skills they enhance, runes can be reset at will, allowing you to play across the entirety of a class at once. *Diablo*’s always been a complex game powered by simple things, and to impulses such as greed and violence you can now add curiosity. Stat-tweaking, loadouts, bespoke resources: the campaign is both laboratory and sweetshop, offering depth as well as sugary fanboy excess. The end result is an embarrassment of rewards, an endless nested arrangement of gifts, levels, abilities, items, runes, sigils, achievements, and AI followers to play alongside.

Rating: 2.5/5

Platform: PC

Game 3: Alan Wake’s American Nightmare

Wake's journey gets less scary and more violent in the fun but flawed American Nightmare.

The constant wait for the next dark and shadowy axe-wielding horror to leap at you from the darkness made Alan wake's debut a pleasantly nerve-fraying jaunt. Marvelous narrative pacing and a brains-over-blood-spray approach gave Wake's unforgettable thriller journey through demonic woodlands and twisted townscapes loads of impact. It's a shame those same thrills and chills are absent in American Nightmare, replaced instead by morbid humor and a lighter-hearted narrative. The dusty Southwest setting and a bigger emphasis on gunplay are among several new elements that keep the formula from getting stale, but this new side trek is a very different beast from the proper story-continuing sequel players are hungry for.

American Nightmare plays out as a stand-alone episode of *Night Springs*, the well-done spoof on the classic sci-fi TV Show “*The Twilight Zone”*. The game further plays on the themes of light and darkness that permeate the original Alan Wake and its downloadable content add-ons.

The frequent interactions of Wake and his nemesis Mr. Scratch set a pleasantly demented and comical tone, thanks to the latter’s maniacal ramblings and murderous vignettes that pop up on TVs scattered around the main settings you trek through. Wake himself even takes an amusing "yeah, yeah, been here before" stance at times, which fits well with the way the latter half of the tale spins out. This overt goofiness is balanced out by the urgency of Wake's situation. Scratch can hop between the real world and the dark realm Wake is trapped in. He's set on getting his hooks into Wake's wife Alice and takes every opportunity to taunt the frustrated protagonist as he gets closer to achieving his malicious goal.

There's a lot less exposition here compared to Wake's past sprees into the darkness. The clever story which was penned with many of the reality-warping twists that made previous installments so enthralling, has left *AN* in the dust. The moody storytelling helped set the ambience that made Alan Wake so captivating. It's not that what's here isn't good—it just does not go all the way. Despite fitting neatly into the story itself, the cyclical, repetitive nature of the latter half of the campaign's trajectory grinds away at the fun in the home stretch, and a puzzling reliance on fetch quests doesn't help matters much. Hunting down manuscripts to unveil portions of the story returns once again, yet the task has a cool secondary purpose this time around. Collecting enough manuscripts lets you open special strategically placed lockers that hold more powerful guns to boost your firepower, which works hand-in-hand with this episode's determined push into more action-focused territory.

Struggling to hunt every piece of crucial gear to stay alive filled a genuine sense of fear into the original game that grew addictive. *AN* did not live up to it. Bullets and batteries are in such plentiful supply that you never run out, and it makes *AN a* much weaker experience. It's hard to capture that same feeling of fear when you can jog up to the nearest ammo dump to resupply in a heartbeat. This neutralizes both the tension and much of the difficulty. What's left is a decent shooter with a great story that doesn't live up to the glory of the first game.

The one area where the new focus on combat is absolutely welcome is in the new “Fight 'Till Dawn” arena mode. You're dropped into large enclosed stages flooded with waves of enemies sneaking in from all directions, and your goal is to survive until the sun comes up and kill as many Taken as you can to rack up a high score. The simple, straightforward arcade survival action is a lot of fun. It's worth hitting the campaign first, since collecting pages and unlocking weapons open them up for use in these challenging arena battles.

American Nightmare is a more simplified affair that lacks the weight and impact of its precursors, and is the least creepy entry in the multifaceted saga. The gritty action focus and scaled-back story don't jibe as well with the series' overall atmosphere. The adventure boils down to a flawed but entertaining pit stop with some cool moments to tide you over until the next proper full-length installment.

Platform: PC

Compiled by- Gourav Ray