



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

*Monolith concludes
its sprawling fantasy epic*

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ANDY McNAMARA
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In The Name Of Balance

I love video games, but there are also times when they fill me with audible fury. I'm not just talking about those times when I die in a multiplayer match and I go into full-on rage mode. While those are not my finest moments, they are at least quick flashes and my disgust is usually with myself for playing poorly (though I have screamed at my fair share of bugs and cheating computer A.I.).

What makes me truly annoyed, angry, at wit's end, or all of the above lately is when a game's balance is tilted and developers won't fix it. Maybe that's because it's a free-to-play game and they use the imbalance to cash in on a player's desire to win, they are blind to the problem, or they simply don't care.

I have stated the developer perspective in simple terms, so I think it is important to point out that making games is hard, and most developers probably have a fair amount of other burning issues they are dealing with or new features they are building. Stopping to tune game balance at every corner probably isn't always possible.

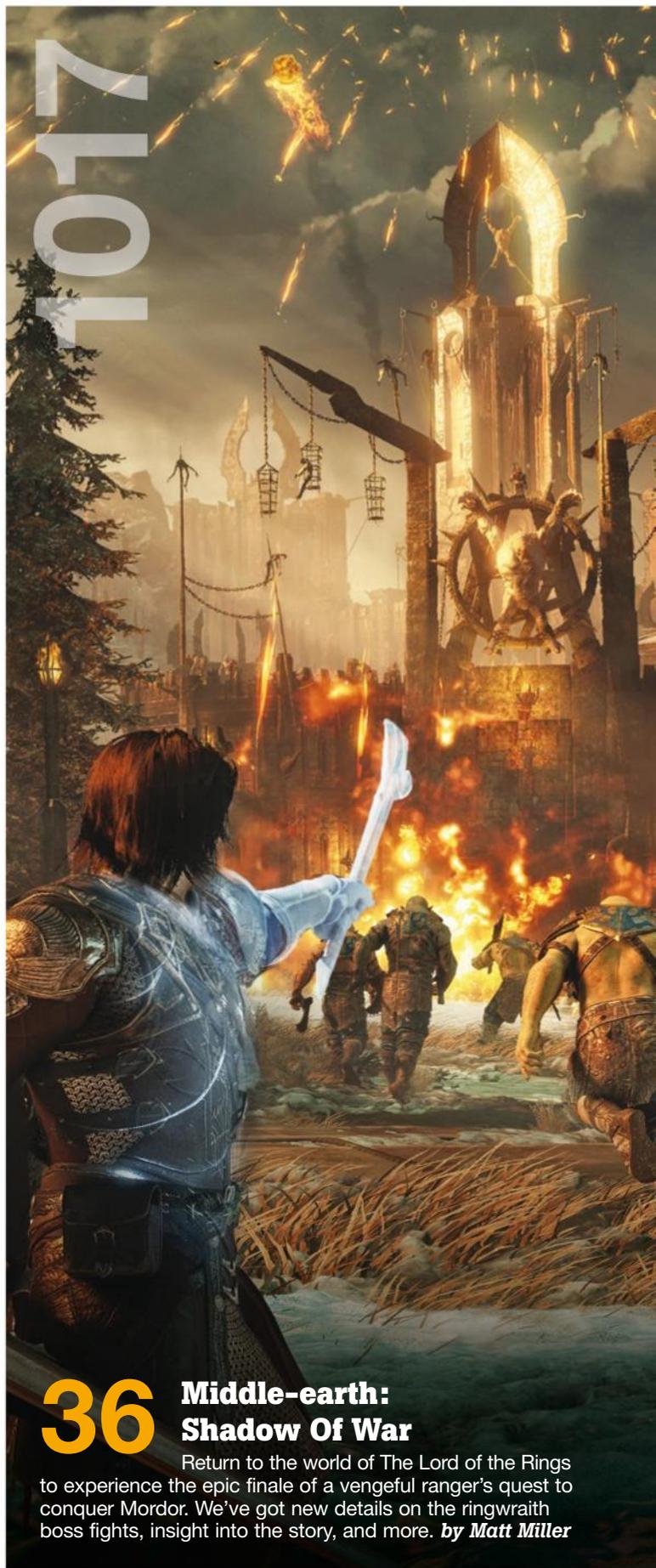
That said, as games continue to evolve as services and persistent worlds, the importance of balance and reactive development that addresses problems quickly and fairly is integral to a game's success. Nothing drives me away from a game quicker (and makes my anger froth more) than developers who leave obvious issues untouched for unreasonable amounts of time.

For example, Blizzard did a great job fixing an obviously broken Bastion in Overwatch quickly after one update. But at the other end of the spectrum it let classes sit at uncompetitive levels for months on end in its MMO World of Warcraft. Imagine putting hundreds of hours into a class then having one patch make you uncompetitive at every level. It's heartbreaking.

Like most gamers out there, I enjoy changing metas, as it keeps games fresh. Even so, there is nothing worse than when your favorite weapon or class is left out of a game's design pass, leaving you with no option other than to wait for the developers to address the problem or simply walk away. No one wants to quit a game over these issues, and no developer wants to lose players based on perceived or real problems with balance, so I hope more developers keep a watchful eye, as it is one of the most important issues facing games today.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



36 Middle-earth: Shadow Of War

Return to the world of The Lord of the Rings to experience the epic finale of a vengeful ranger's quest to conquer Mordor. We've got new details on the ringwraith boss fights, insight into the story, and more. **by Matt Miller**

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08 Gamescom 2017
We made our yearly trek to Germany to play some of this and next year's biggest games.



12 Fright Factor: Rounding Up Today's Best Horror Games
It's almost that time of the year when things generally become a little scarier. To honor the annual occasion, we rounded up some of the best horror games out there.

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We asked a collection of people much smarter than us, why do we get stuck in video games?



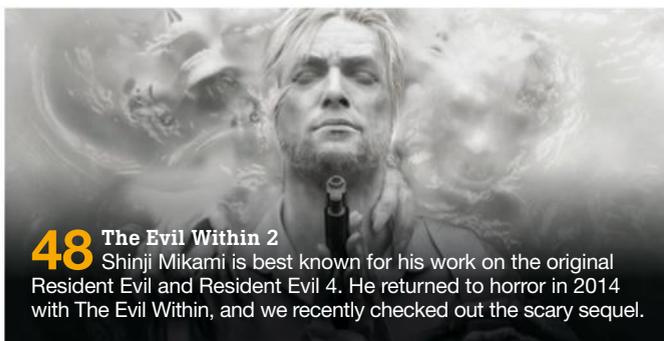
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We learned the surprising history of the developer behind the 2014 Wolfenstein reboot.



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NBA 2K's franchise mode director told us why the mode is underserved in other sports games.



54 Monster Hunter World
We played alone and with friends in Monster Hunter World. Read about our experience.



48 The Evil Within 2
Shinji Mikami is best known for his work on the original Resident Evil and Resident Evil 4. He returned to horror in 2014 with The Evil Within, and we recently checked out the scary sequel.



65 Cuphead
It feels like we've been waiting forever for Cuphead, but our excitement hasn't lessened as a result.



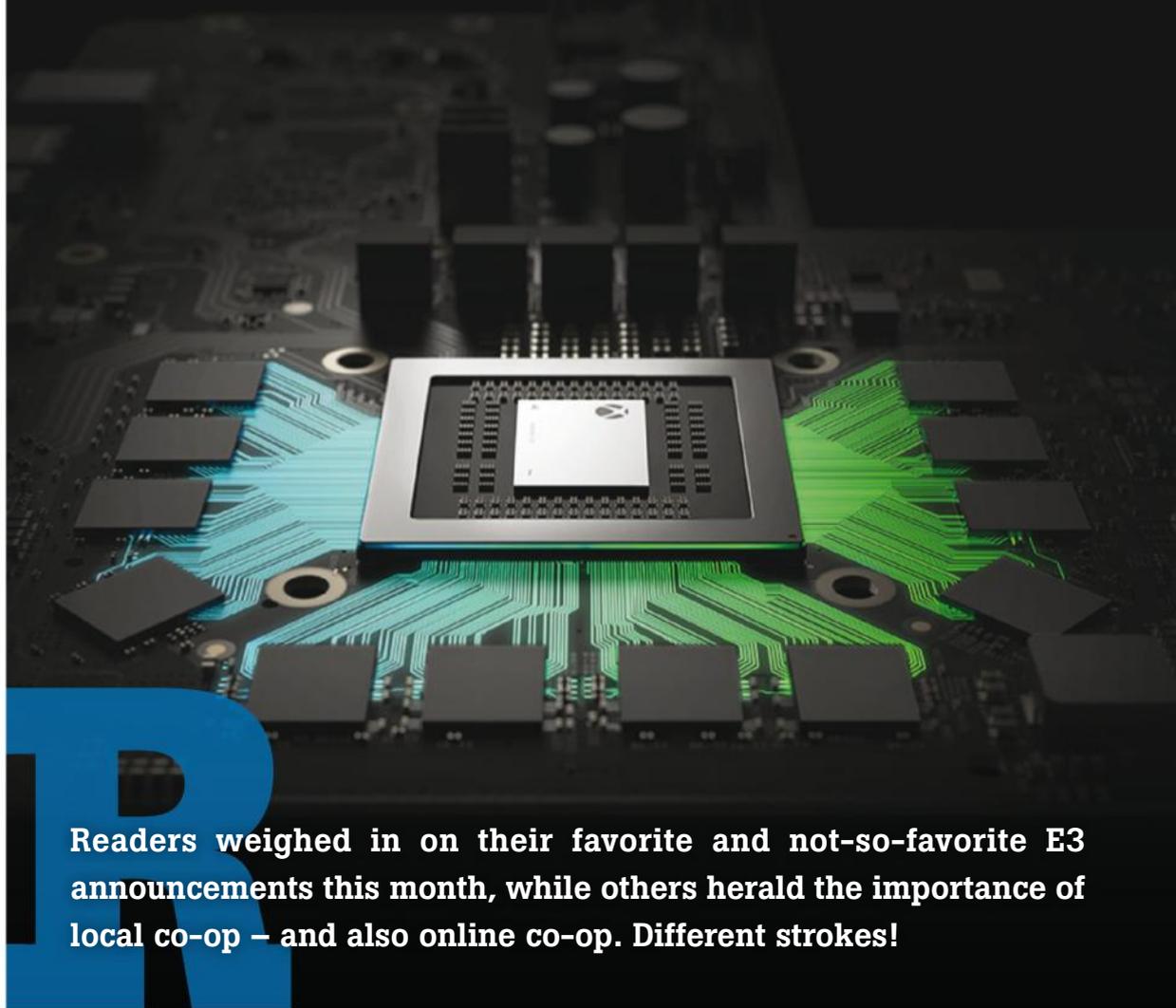
80 XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen
XCOM continues to impress with an expansion that is hugely replayable.



88 Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle
How does the unexpected team-up stack up?



87 Uncharted: The Lost Legacy
This new entry in the Uncharted series may lose Nathan Drake, but we don't miss him.



Readers weighed in on their favorite and not-so-favorite E3 announcements this month, while others herald the importance of local co-op – and also online co-op. Different strokes!

More From Microsoft?

I really enjoyed your take on Microsoft's showing at this year's E3 (E3 Report Card, issue 292). I have been an Xbox supporter since the 360 arrived on the gaming scene back in 2005. So when Microsoft unveiled the Xbox One, I jumped at the chance for a new console like many others. My question now is, why? During its E3 press conference, Microsoft's message was basically, "Buy our new Xbox One X, it has great graphics." Crisp graphics are great, but I also enjoy playing games. Where are the Microsoft exclusives? With the top genres being RPG, action/shooter, open world, and sports, it's a shame there's not even a decent baseball game for the Xbox. We have your consoles, Microsoft – now we just need some games to play.

William Tippett
via email

While Microsoft's E3 press conference wasn't amazing, I thought it was far better than Sony's. I think the Xbox One X is a powerful console that Sony does not have a competitor to. When Microsoft unveiled the Porsche GT2 RS onstage, I found it exciting as a car

enthusiast. It didn't stop the show – it made me want to buy the next Forza, because Turn 10 understands its community. Overall, I didn't mind the games lineup you were bashing, and look forward to playing said games in 4K. At this point in this generation of consoles, I think the entire gaming community needs to reevaluate the Xbox vs. PS4 debate. Sure, Sony came out of the gates strong, but in the last two years, Xbox has made a big comeback.

Reese Breischaft
via email

More readers shared their thoughts on the Xbox One this month, and once again Microsoft's Play Anywhere initiative remains a point of contention. To some, allowing all of Xbox One's first-party "exclusives" to be played on PC is a convenient feature that widens the company's player base. To others, it robs Xbox of potential system sellers. Microsoft's diminished first-party development is also a growing concern for many, but we're still waiting to see if and how the Xbox One X might affect the gaming landscape.

A Just Reward

I'm writing with a question regarding platinum trophies and earning all of a game's achievements. Why don't developers throw in extra content for the gamers who fully complete a game? I think that players who took the time to complete everything should be rewarded with something extra. I'm not suggesting that gamers should be punished for not completing every trophy and achievement – just give those who do a nice bonus. Don't you think such an idea would boost the replay value of a game?

Garth Weaver
via email

In-game rewards can be a delicate balancing act. On one hand, developers want to reward players for their devotion and for achieving herculean tasks in their games. On the other hand, it's hard to justify spending time and money to create content that only a tiny fraction of the player base will ever see. As such, hardcore gamers often must settle for bragging rights alone – but you'll never hear us complain about more cool bonuses in games.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



Credit For Captain Toad...

I'm a fan of your magazine and a longtime fan of Mario. That's why I was super excited to read about Super Mario Odyssey in your E3 Hot 50 issue. However, while reading the article, I noticed one small mistake. It stated that Captain Toad first appeared in Super Mario 3D World, but his first appearance was actually six years earlier in Super Mario Galaxy, one of the first video games I ever played. I don't want to tack years on to the fearless Toad Brigade leader's age, but I do remember him helping out with the retrieval of some power stars.

Ryan Smith
via email

Several readers wrote in to set the record straight on Captain Toad's service record, and they are indeed correct: the compact commander debuted in Mario's first intergalactic adventure, not 3D World. Rest assured, Ben Reeves will be court-martialed for his oversight.

Fantasy For Two...

We really enjoyed seeing the recent Feedback letters and your replies regarding couch co-op. My wife and I often buy games based on whether we'll be able to play together. We even bought two PS3s so we could play together, but now we would also need two accounts, which gets to be a bit much. I'm really hoping this trend of buyer demand continues so that more games support it. Particularly, we both wish there were more Baldur's Gate-type games coming out. Have you heard whisperings of any games like that coming out in the future?

Dick Sickels
via email

How do I go about suggesting to companies that older players would like more games that we can play with family members in the same room? There are a number of wonderful games being developed, but they do not allow for two or more players to play together on the same system. My wife and I are looking for any form of two-person games and there are little to choose from. We are not sports fans, so we do not consider those; our interest lies in adventure or fantasy games.

Richard P. Giorgi
via email

Support for couch co-op remains one of the most common requests we hear from readers, and for good reason – many older gamers grew up playing alongside their family and friends, and online multiplayer is a sorry substitute for in-person interactions. If you're looking for fantasy-themed co-op, you should check out Divinity: Original Sin. The turn-based RPG isn't an exact match for Baldur's Gate, but checks many of the same boxes, and can be played together on the same screen. However, not everyone is looking for local co-op...

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"How do you think Sega felt when you left the Shining series off your 100 Top RPGs list?"

Companies don't have feelings.

"I just beat Dark Souls 3. Are you proud or disappointed?"

We're in a good mood, so we'll go with proud.

"Hey can you stop pushing Overwatch so much?"

If by "pushing" you mean covering an extremely popular game that has been continually updated and expanded upon, then no.

Most Cryptic News Tip Of The Month:

"Celebration Cake London."

Question Of The Month:

What game is remembered too fondly, and why?

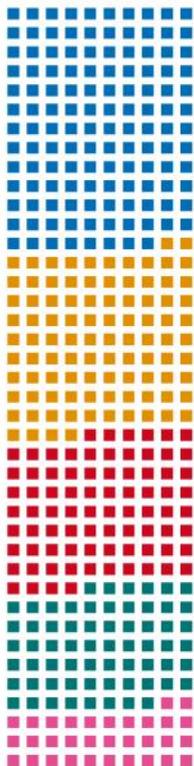
gi spy



(Left) The fine folks at Monolith invited us into their studio this month to give us an in-depth look at Shadow of War and the mo-cap process. It was more intense than we anticipated.

(Right) Our G.I. Spy tour of E3 continues this month with One PR's Kjell Vistad and Square Enix's Casey Lynch.

On Your Mind



- E3 Excitement
- Xbox One X Interest/Concerns
- "More Couch Co-op!"
- Continued Top RPGs Feedback
- Captain Toad Defenders



E3 Aftermath

In issue 293, we asked readers what their favorite game from E3 2017 was. A few big sequels made the grade, along with other surprising newcomers. Here are some of the responses.

My favorite was definitely Star Wars Battlefront II. The last game was good but there just wasn't enough game, and also the season pass was bull dookie! I'm hopeful they learned their lesson.

Calvin Hargis

The new Kingdom Hearts III trailer was exciting and the gameplay looks awesome! Also, the new transformations of the Keyblades are great!

Craig Taylor

I was very impressed by State of Decay 2 and Call of Duty: WWII, but my favorite announcement was Anthem. I love the idea of a shared-world, class-based game like Destiny that I can play with my friends.

J.D. German

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle surprised me the most. This looks like one of those games which had a lot of love and effort put into it, and I appreciate that. Also, I'm a sucker for turn-based strategy games.

Jacob Aycock

Online Odyssey?

While reading the Super Mario Odyssey preview in issue 292, a sudden thought struck me. What if there could possibly be some kind of online mode for Mario's new open-world game? As doubtful as that may be, I would love to see Nintendo offer servers to play with other people. Exploring the open world of New Donk City and all the other areas with a friend would be a blast! The only problem would be telling which Mario you're controlling, but I suppose you could color code them. Like I said, I know this is doubtful, but with the right ideas Mario would be great online!

Gable Coe
via email

We love that your solution to potential co-op confusion would be color-coded Marios instead of one person just playing as Luigi – because really, who wants that? Super Mario 3D World is the only 3D Mario game to offer full-fledged co-op, and that was limited to local play. Super Mario Odyssey, on the other hand, is closer to Galaxy's limited multiplayer, with one player controlling Mario's now-sentient hat – and is also local only. Nintendo is clearly willing to experiment with the Switch, however, so maybe Mario will get an online-enabled adventure in the future – just don't tell the couch co-op fans!



(Left) Epic Games' Wes Phillips and Jeremy Hoffman hang with Fortyseven's Laura Weir. **(Right)** Andy caught up with some old friends at E3: Other Ocean Group's Tom Russo, Respawn's Vince Zampella and Jon Shiring, Cinesite's Nick Glassman, and Nike's Hayden Walling.





WINNER

1 Hannah Lee

Behold the true dangers of gene splicing: squid-tentacle hair.

2 Alyha Rebollo

Dragons? Check! Balls? Check! This picture meets all the requirements of Dragon Ball Z art.

3 Thomas Ingram

Looks like we've got a future Kingdom Hearts designer on our hands.

4 Mike Zdobnikov

If you're striving for the whole emo-horseman-of-the-apocalypse vibe, black and white is the way to go.



Correction: In a previous issue, we featured a Mario fan art that was later found to not be original. We apologize for this error.

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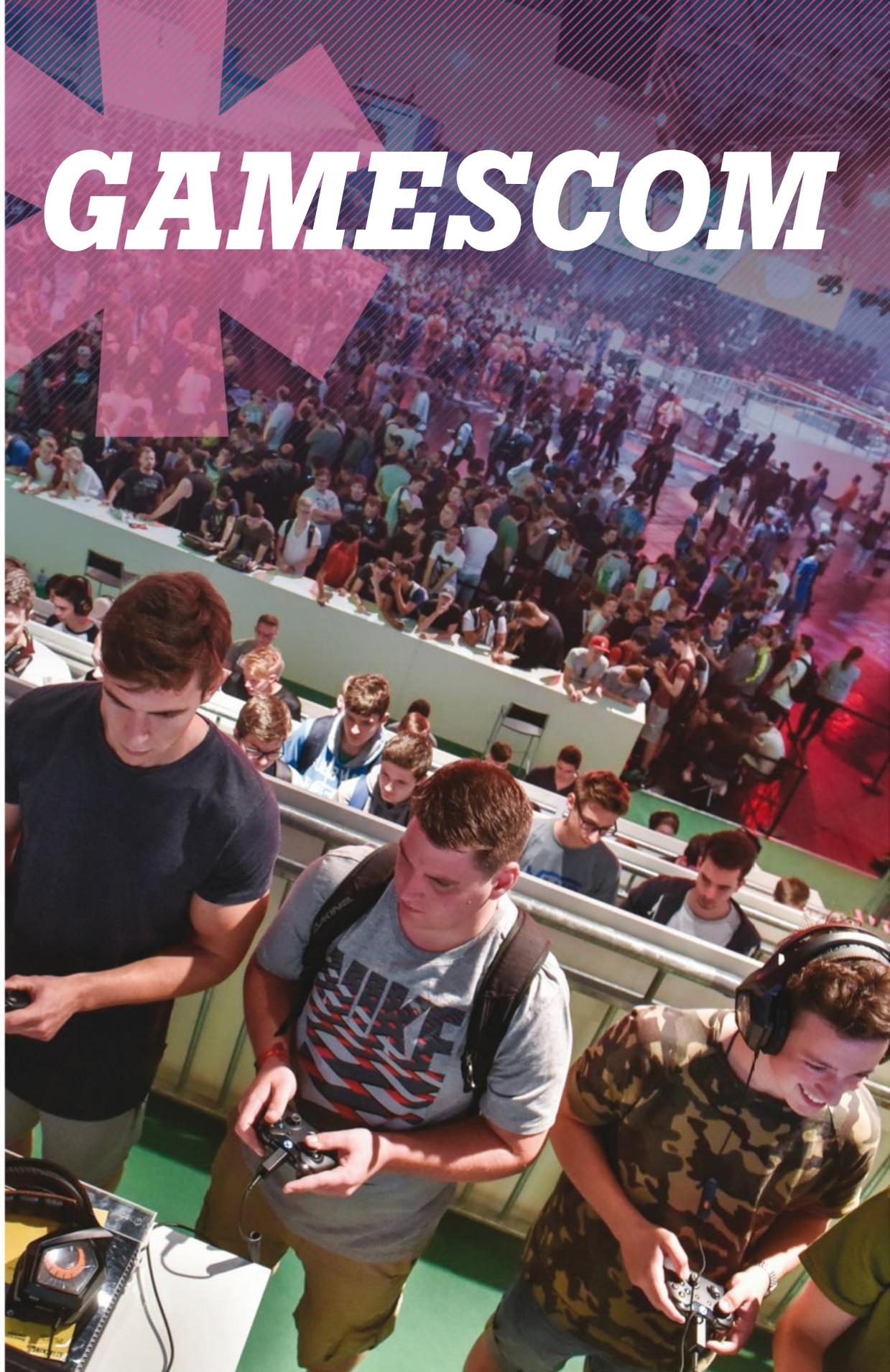


(Left) Meanwhile at this year's Evolution Champion Series, Suriel orchestrated a showdown between Gundam Versus producer Naoya Yasuda and Dragon Ball FighterZ producer Tomoko Hiroki. **(Right)** The G.I. crew grabbed dinner with a special guest this month: Mike, who donated a thousand dollars to our Extra Life marathon. Thanks, Mike!

GAMESCOM

NOTABLES

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- 20 **the science of stuck**
- 26 **the turbulent history of machinegames**



2017 RECAP

The annual event sees few big announcements, but has continued strong attendance



Gamescom, the world's largest computer and video games convention, opened this year to more than 350,000 guests in Cologne, Germany. Although its attendance rate continues to grow, with visitors from 106 different countries, Gamescom has had fewer interesting announcements in the last couple years as publishers move toward platform-specific events like PlayStation Experience for reveals.

by Elise Favis

While major announcements were nearly nonexistent, both EA and Microsoft nonetheless held press events before the show's official opening. EA revealed trailers for *Need for Speed Payback* and *FIFA 18*, among others. DICE showed off *Star Wars Battlefront II*'s space combat for the first time, as well as *Battlefield 1*'s new 5v5 competitive mode. Finally,

EA debuted an expansion pack for *The Sims 4* called *Cats and Dogs* – a long-awaited addition focusing specifically on pets. The crowd perked up for the first time during *The Sims* reveal as other announcements paled in comparison, making for a dull conference.

Microsoft's event proved similarly underwhelming. The Xbox One X

officially opening to pre-order was the big headline, as well as a new "Project Scorpio" edition of the console for the same price as the standard edition. This pre-order only version comes with a unique design and an exclusive vertical stand. Two Xbox One S bundles were also shown off, one themed around *Minecraft* and another that comes with *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*. Microsoft also announced a publishing deal for the Xbox One version of the popular PC game *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, which implies a limited Xbox exclusivity window for the game that currently has 8 million players on PC.

Despite lackluster conferences, the show made headlines thanks to a visit from Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel. She gave a speech to a room of 350 invited guests and more than 150 journalists. In her talk, she acknowledged the importance of Gamescom, digital games, and its positive impact on the country's economy.



Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel opened Gamescom for the first time, played games, and posed with cosplayers



“Computer and video games are of the utmost importance as cultural assets, as a driving force for innovation, and as an economic factor, which is why I was also very pleased to come to Cologne to provide this developing industry with my recommendation,” Merkel said during the speech.

She posed for photos with a group of cosplayers with costumes inspired by games such as Overwatch and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. She even played some games herself, including Farming Simulator and Minecraft.

Although E3 opened its doors to the public for the very first time this year, Gamescom has long been a consumer-based show. Held in the massive Koelnmesse convention center, dozens of exhibition halls were filled with games



for the public to demo, with tons of merchandise available for purchase.

Ubisoft had many popular games that fans eagerly waited for hours in line to play, including Assassin's Creed Origins, Far Cry 5, and Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle. It broadcast Just Dance 2017 on a large screen, and its booming but catchy audio engulfed part of the show floor, making it feel like an upbeat party.

Other big games were present for the public to try out as well, such as Call of Duty: WWII, Forza Motorsport 7, and Metal Gear Survive. Nintendo's large booth had long lines for anticipated games like Super Mario Odyssey, Fire Emblem Warriors, and Metroid: Samus Returns. Middle-earth: Shadow of War also proved a popular demo at the

massive Warner Bros. booth.

PlayStation had a smaller stand with only a couple games available to demo including Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, despite it already having been released. PlayStation's presence was limited, with no press event and no behind-the-scenes presentations for trade visitors and media.

All Gamescom attendees could watch the keynotes, which had notable developers talk. PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds creative director Brendan Greene discussed the game's phenomenal success in early access. Richard Garriott (best known for the Ultima series) talked about how today is the golden age of video games. Three developers from Slightly Mad Studios (Andy Tudor, Nicolas Hamilton, and

Peter Smits) spoke about Project Cars 2 and the series' passionate community.

Gamescom is both a fan-friendly and press-friendly event. With a business area sectioned off for press and industry professionals, and multiple show floors to accommodate large crowds, Gamescom clearly has an edge over E3 when it comes to its dedication to fans. Furthermore, nearly everything shown behind closed doors was also available for the public to try out on the show floor.

Despite a dwindling interest from publishers, who are reserving major announcements for other occasions, Gamescom still has much to offer in terms of getting extended looks at anticipated games and giving the public a chance to give them a test run. ♦



Fright Factor

Rounding up today's best horror games

With Halloween approaching, now is the perfect time to brush up on some horror. Luckily, the past decade delivered a surge of quality spooky games. The genre has gone through ups and downs, but it's also had its share of novelties. We've seen a swelling of combat-free first-person horror experiences, psychological terrors that tackle existential themes, and multiplayer horror influenced by slasher films.

Horror manifests itself in video games in several ways, like limiting players with scarce resources, or frightening them with jump scares. With so many titles to choose from, it can be difficult to know which are worth checking out, so we've made a list of recent scary games you won't regret playing. This roundup will aid you in finding the right game for the perfect occasion, whether you're looking for a good scare, a thrill ride, or an ominous storyline.

by Elise Favis

JUMP SCARES

Jump scares – despite their overuse – can be incredibly effective in making you leap out of your seat. It's one of the oldest horror tropes around, seen in several popular horror game franchises from Resident Evil to Silent Hill. Here are some recent games that use them effectively.



OBSERVER

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 9.0

Taking place in a rundown apartment complex overrun with both monsters and psychological terrors, Observer tasks you with finding your missing son and unraveling a corporate conspiracy. Despite its strong leanings toward science fiction, Observer is nonetheless a horrific experience filled with effective jump scares. You play as a specialized police officer with cybernetic augmentations who enters the minds of others to recreate crime scenes. It's a clever take on cyberpunk, where you directly explore the horrors of the mind and take on the traumas of others in trippy hallucinations. Read our review on page 81.

OUTLAST 2

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 7.75

Set in rural Arizona, Red Barrels' Outlast 2 puts you in the shoes of a journalist looking for his wife who was kidnapped by a vicious cult. A majority of the game unfolds in the dark, as you look through your night vision camera to see. You roam through one isolated town to the next, finding plenty of supernatural forces that sneak behind you at a moment's notice or machete-wielding cultists that pop around corners. Outlast 2 offers one terror after the next, making it an intense experience.



RESIDENT EVIL 7

Platform: PSVR, PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 8.5

As one of the most revered and longstanding horror-game franchises, Resident Evil's newest entry was met with big expectations. While continuing many series traditions, it successfully sets itself apart with a first-person perspective, a Southern setting, and the ability to play in VR. Resident Evil 7 excels in its brooding atmosphere, tense boss fights, and skin-crawling jump scares such as a chainsaw-wielding enemy appearing without warning, or hundreds of tiny spiders falling onto your arms.

SLASHER SHOWDOWN

One of the most memorable scenes from slasher films are when the enemy is on the hunt for a helpless victim. Certain games bring this horror to life, by pitting you against other friends in multiplayer matches as you take turns being the hunter and the hunted.

DEAD BY DAYLIGHT

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC | G.I. Score: 8.25

Behaviour Interactive's Dead By Daylight is an asymmetrical multiplayer game that has one player as the killer and four others who attempt to stay alive. The victims search around the map for generators to power the exits. If they manage to power them all up, they can escape – unless the killer stops them. The disfigured murderer stalking the victims can set bear traps and even become invisible, making them incredibly powerful. Dead By Daylight is largely a game of quick thinking to outsmart your deadly opponent.



FRIDAY THE 13TH

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 6.0

Despite a disastrous launch that left the game nearly unplayable, IllFonic's Friday the 13th nonetheless had a lot of hype leading to its release and has been immensely popular since. Although it still has a host of issues, from bugs to matchmaking, the concept is a winning one. Set in the iconic Camp Crystal Lake from the films, each match has one player as the hockey mask-wearing serial killer Jason, and seven others struggling for survival as camp counsellors. These matches are frighteningly tense as Jason brutally murders whoever he can, and getaway options for counsellors are randomly generated.



STORY-DRIVEN SPOOKS

Horror is a polarizing genre when it comes to storytelling, and finding a well-told narrative can be tough. If you're looking for a choice-driven or movie-like experience, these titles are worth your time.



UNTIL DAWN

Platform: PS4
G.I. Score: 9.0

Taking heavy influence from the '80s slasher-film genre, *Until Dawn* is about a group of teens who face unimaginable terrors while staying at a cabin in the woods. As the kids get split up and killed off, you get to play as each teen in separate sequences, making the experience feel like an interactive horror movie. Your story unfolds uniquely depending on your choices, and certain decisions have a butterfly effect, creating unexpected consequences down the line. Who lives and dies depends on you, making this a thrilling ride best played with a group of friends.

THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 8.0

This adventure game from developer The Astronauts has you explore the rural countryside to unravel a mystery about a young boy, Ethan, who unleashed a supernatural monster from another dimension. Playing as a paranormal investigator, you spend time searching different areas for clues and notes that help you piece together the story of what happened to Ethan. Although slow-paced, the narrative is compelling enough to keep you hooked as you uncover the truth.



WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

Platform: PS4, PC
G.I. Score: 8.75

One of the best adventure games of the year thus far, Giant Sparrow's *What Remains of Edith Finch* tells a morbid, tragic, and at times heartwarming story about a family plagued by a curse. Playing as Edith, the last remaining Finch, you return home to discover what happened to your ancestors who faced untimely deaths. With its intricate attention to detail, vignette storytelling, and characters who feel alive despite their passing, *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a haunting tale that will stick with you long after it's over.

HIDE & SEEK

A game of cat-and-mouse can be riveting – and deadly if you're not careful. This concept is used in numerous horror games, where you are nervously aware that you're being pursued.

ALIEN: ISOLATION

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC
G.I. Score: 7.75

This entry in the *Alien* series, developed by Creative Assembly, takes a different approach. Rather than just shooting and killing enemies, a lot of your time is spent avoiding enemies in a game of hide-and-peek. Playing as Amanda Ripley, who is in search of her mother, you explore a claustrophobic space station while being stalked by an intimidating predator. While the story falls flat, the scares and terrors found on this station make up for it, by creating an immense amount of apprehension.



PERCEPTION

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 8.25

Created by Irrational Games veterans, *Perception* is a horror game told from the perspective of a blind young woman named Cassie, who explores a haunted home after it invaded her dreams. In search for answers, Cassie roams through the house while a supernatural presence stalks her closely. *Perception* uses a novel mechanic where you "see" through echolocation as Cassie taps her cane on the ground to view close-by surroundings. However, each time echolocation is used, it garners the attention of enemies, making this game of hide-and-peek a frightening one.

SLENDER: THE ARRIVAL

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, Wii U, PC
G.I. Score: N/A

Rising to fame through the web, the lanky boogeyman known as Slenderman quickly became an online folklore legend. Soon, his presence stretched out into pop culture, particularly through video games. *Slenderman: The Eight Pages*, a short freeware PC game from 2012, was Slenderman's first video game appearance. Later, developer Blue Isle Studio made a more ambitious title known as *Slender: The Arrival*. Gameplay is similar to the first entry, where your main objective is to stay alive as long as possible despite having the eerie Slenderman on your tail.



PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR

Some of the best scares aren't the flashy effects or unexpected jump scares, but instead the terrors of the mind. Psychological horror can shock you on a deeper level with clever twists or by making you believe in something that isn't there.



DARKEST DUNGEON

Platform: PS4, PC, Vita, iOS, Android
G.I. Score: 9.25

This unforgiving, turn-based roguelike from Red Hook Studios has you dungeon-crawl through claustrophobic hallways to face unimaginable monsters. Similar to Eternal Darkness, Darkest Dungeon has its own take on the sanity meter, where party members receive different afflictions when accumulating stress. As they face horrors, each character responds differently: some may immediately panic, and others may find the resolve to push through and be victorious. Characters can even develop long-term traumas that affect the party beyond the battle. It's a novel and fascinating mechanic that brings not just a sense of realism, but also a new layer of fear.

AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC | G.I. Score: 9.25

Frictional Games' Amnesia: The Dark Descent revived the genre back when it released in 2010 and helped popularize first-person horror experiences. Amnesia tells the story of a young man waking up in a decrepit castle with no memory. Piecing together the past is part of what makes it so compelling, as you roam through the ominous environment with only a lantern to light the way. Unfortunately for you, a monstrous presence is also stalking you closely. Amnesia is relentlessly terrifying when your sanity meter drops too low, and its captivating storyline will continue to pull you back in.



SOMA

Platform: PS4, PC | G.I. Score: 8.5

Five years after Frictional Games revived the horror genre with Amnesia, it released the thought-provoking Soma. Set in an underwater facility hundreds of years in the future, Soma doesn't just make you face grisly terrors, but also has you contemplate intriguing themes such as existentialism, machine sentience, and morality. Featuring stellar voice acting and a gripping psychological tale, this eerie underwater adventure is a fantastic horror experience to play during Halloween.



THE EVIL WITHIN

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC
G.I. Score: 9.0

With renowned Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami at the reins, The Evil Within has a solid foundation based on its director's past works. It reimagines the core elements of what made Resident Evil 4 brilliant. The game retains the satisfying third-person gunplay, leaves players with limited resources to amp up anxiety, and hosts a fantastically haunting atmosphere. Even with its heavy influence from Resident Evil 4, The Evil Within still manages to set itself apart with its increased difficulty. Despite a lackluster story, The Evil Within makes you face one fright after the next with few breathers in-between, and messes with your head by using psychological terrors. It's a harrowing but entertaining thrill ride that you don't want to miss, especially with The Evil Within 2 out this month. You can read more about the sequel in our in-depth feature on page 48.



BLOOD & GORE

Whether you're slicing enemies apart with a chainsaw or being doused in the blood of your foes, gore can bring an unsettling layer of fear and immersion to horror games. Other times, excessive bloodbaths can lean toward humor when they seem more ludicrous than realistic.



DEAD RISING 4

Platform: Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 8.75

Capcom's Dead Rising series has always excelled at balancing humor and horror. The latest entry, Dead Rising 4, is no exception – especially when it comes to gore. Playing as Frank West, you reduce zombies to piles of flesh in creative ways, such as shredding them apart with a motorcycle with chainsaws attached to it, or shooting a fireworks cross-bow to make them explode into a colorful mess. Dead Rising 4 is outrageously gory, which makes for an entertaining experience not for the faint of heart.

DOOM

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 8.75

Id's 2016 Doom reboot saw the rebirth of a beloved shooter franchise, and if you are looking for fantastic gore, this one offers that in abundance. Doom has you face off against unsettling demons who attack relentlessly. To survive these bloody battles, players need to be quick on their feet and tactically thinking on the fly, as they unleash excessively brutal attacks on their hideous enemies.



LET IT DIE

Platform: PS4
G.I. Score: 7.75

Let It Die's visuals may look dated, but its bizarre style and over-the-top gore make up for it. This free-to-play game has you ascending an ever-changing, Babel-like structure called the Tower of Barbs. Each floor is more challenging than the next, and are randomly generated in a roguelike fashion. Let It Die is most memorable for its enticing absurdities, such as regaining health by eating giant frogs. The combat is fun and aggressive, with finishing moves being especially bloody.

CLASSIC FRIGHTS

Brushing up on the classics can help you appreciate their novelty and how they influence today's horror games, or it can satisfy a nostalgic itch. Here are some classic titles that are available on modern consoles.



THE LAST OF US REMASTERED

Platform: PS4 | G.I. Score: 10

Naughty Dog's The Last of Us is one of last generation's best titles, and for good reason. Set in post-apocalypse America, you play as Joel, who guides a young girl named Ellie through the zombie-infested country full of disease and death. What makes The Last of Us stand out is that instead of focusing on the end of civilization, it delves into relationships and overcoming trauma in the face of disaster. With a slew of different zombie mutations that seek you out differently, such as the aggressive clickers and the oversized bloaters, you rarely feel safe during your journey.

RESIDENT EVIL HD REMASTER

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC
G.I. Score: 9.5

The first entry set the tone for one of the most renowned survival-horror video game franchises of all time, but playing the original 1996 version doesn't exactly live up to today's standards. Luckily, this HD remaster largely fixes those issues. With modernized controls and a new easy mode, this version makes it an accessible entry point to the Resident Evil series. As a piece of survival horror history that helped pave the way to popularizing the genre, Resident Evil is a must for horror-game buffs with its ominous mansion setting and effective jump scares.



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CREEPY PLATFORMERS

Horror doesn't always come in the form of first-person adventure games and survival horror. Recent platformers show that an ominous atmosphere and a minimalist story can make for terrifying experiences as well.

INSIDE

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 9.75

This follow-up to Playdead's *Limbo* takes place in a grim-looking, Orwellian world. *Inside* is a puzzle platformer, so you must use your wits to overcome its clever obstacles through each desolate environment. It has some of the best atmospherics we've experienced in a long time, with a brooding soundtrack and lighting that makes shadows come to life. The story is minimalistic but tackles interesting themes such as control and freedom in a totalitarian society.



LITTLE NIGHTMARES

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC | G.I. Score: 9.0

Tarsier Studios' *Little Nightmares* has similar tones to *Inside* when it comes to minimalism and aesthetics, but its horrors are more up close and personal. You play as a young girl in a yellow rain coat who lives in an oversized world filled with unnerving sights. This puzzle/platformer makes you encounter grotesque horrors such as a large, demonic creature vehemently cooking up a stew, whom you sneak past by hiding behind giant furniture.

KILLER CO-OP

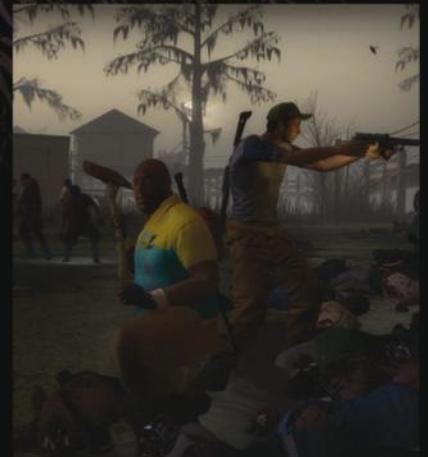
Unlike slasher showdowns, these games require cooperation between teammates to defeat waves of enemies. Sometimes, grabbing a few friends to help you kill relentless monsters is the best way to spend an evening.



KILLING FLOOR 2

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 7.75

Killing Floor 2 is all about defeating dozens of zombies alongside your friends. While the game can be played solo, it's most engaging when you have a group of about six to help you take on the hordes of undead. If you last through a final wave, you then go face-to-face with a boss zombie – a giant beast that takes effort and patience to beat. Zombie waves are nearly relentless, with one wave after the next offering little respite in-between.



DYING LIGHT

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
G.I. Score: 8.5

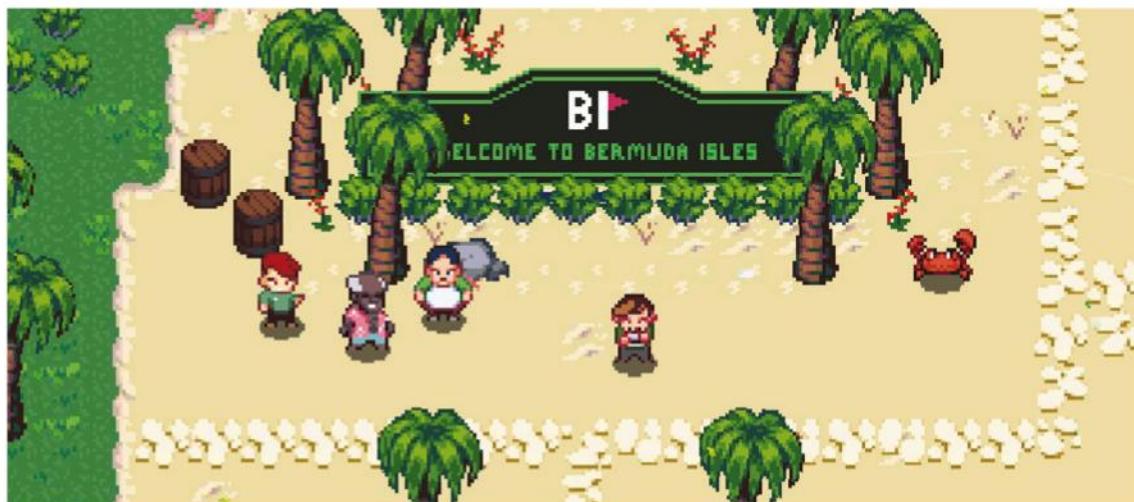
This open-world zombie game from Techland combines parkour, combat, and an immersive story as you run across rooftops to escape the undead. While *Dying Light* is a thrilling single-player experience, it's even more fun with friends. You can complete both campaign and side missions together, all the while attempting to survive the night. In *Dying Light*, strength is found in numbers, and some difficult areas can become more approachable or conquerable in a group.



LEFT 4 DEAD SERIES

Platform: Xbox One, 360, PC
G.I. Score: 9.25 (*Left 4 Dead*), 9.5 (*Left 4 Dead 2*)

If there's one co-op zombie series to play with friends, it's Valve's *Left 4 Dead* franchise. This cooperative shooter went on to inspire many other zombie-filled co-op games, and it's riveting gameplay will make you want to revisit the apocalypse over and over again. Just watch out for the witch. ♦



Golf Story Melds RPGs And Sports On Nintendo Switch

by Matt Miller and Andrew Reiner

The indie game scene never ceases to find novel ways to approach a subject, and Sidebar Games' **Golf Story** is yet another potent example of the creative approaches developers are taking to long-established genres. Coming exclusively to Switch, the unusual game melds the familiar trappings of arcade golf with the drama, characters, and upgrade systems of the role-playing world.

"We call it a golf drama," says **Golf Story** designer Andrew Newey. "It combines the fun and excitement that everybody associates with golf with a serious story that plays out over eight different courses." Each of the environments is more than just greens and fairways, featuring distinct towns, characters, and hidden secrets. "One of the main features is the ability to drop the ball at any time and hit it," Newey says. "The towns turn into a sort of golfing wonderland, with various practice greens and challenges crossing over

each other and secrets being hidden near and far. But you will also get to play traditional games of golf on full courses and compete in tournaments."

Your golfer is on a quest to go pro, and he needs to level up and improve both his stats and his equipment along the way. In this case his equipment is his golf clubs; different clubs offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. "Blades will make your distances more consistent but are also more punishing of inaccurate hits," Newey says. "And then there are clubs such as the digging wedge, which can be used to dig up all manner of things from treasures to old golf clubs."

Sidebar integrates the storytelling and challenges you undertake off the course into your success on the links. For instance, you might have to rescue some turtles in one story thread, but then they show up during a match, letting you skim the ball across their backs to cross a tough water hazard. Players can also expect a broad array of additional features that further flesh out the progression and gameplay, including puzzle solving, drone flights, geocaching, mini golf, and even mowing. "The lawn mowing is one part

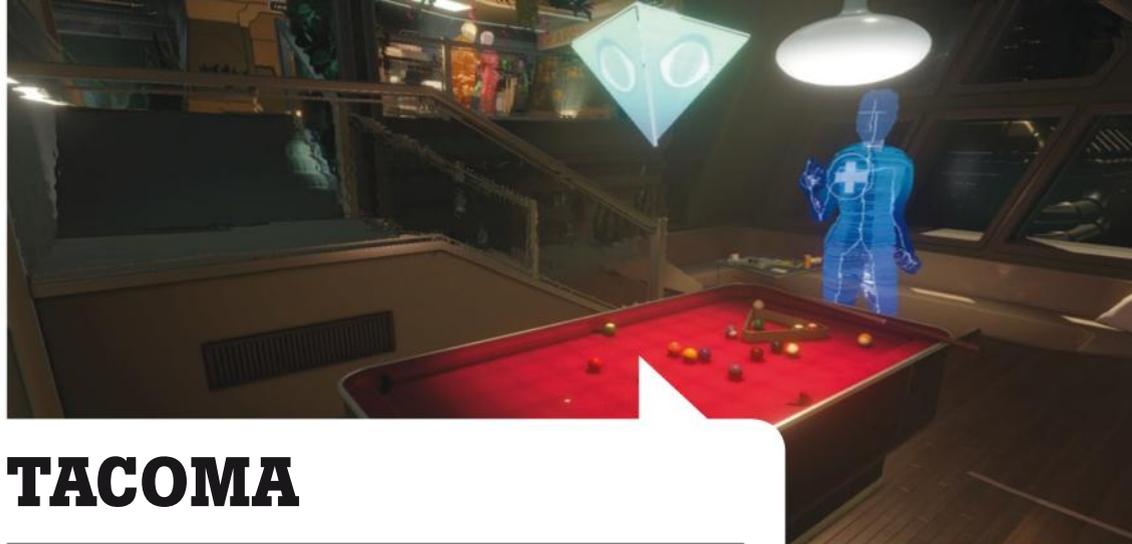
of fixing up an old course to get it tournament ready," Newey says. "This is what the first chapter of the game revolves around, and includes other tasks like researching course maintenance, dealing with vermin which might be possessed, and attracting interest by convincing a celebrity golfer to compete."

Golf Story clearly isn't going for a realistic setting. One sequence is all about specters haunting the greens. "You strike up a deal with the ghost that sees you trying to complete his golf course," Newey says. "It plays as a free roaming section where you have to find each tee to be able to play the hole. Meanwhile, malevolent spirits on the course try to use your golfing abilities to do their bidding." In other situations, alligators may snatch your ball on a wayward drive, or you might need to light your golf ball on fire to melt ice blocks concealing the hole.

We haven't seen many indie games heading exclusively to Switch, but Sidebar seems excited by the console's potential. "It was our first choice for the game," Newey says. "Something about having TV and handheld mode makes every game on it seem more exciting." Newey also cites the console's HD rumble functionality, which the team uses to accentuate elements of the game both on and off the course.

Golf Story looks like it taps into some of the same quirky fun that makes games like *Stardew Valley* so entertaining, relying on a whimsical tone and fun characters to deepen the experience. If Sidebar's new Switch game sounds like it might be for you, there won't be a long wait. **Golf Story** is headed for release in just a few weeks. 🍀





TACOMA

Four years after the indie hit *Gone Home* made a splash in the industry, Fullbright released a follow-up with a different setting, but a similar approach to gameplay. This adventure game puts you in the shoes of specialist Amy Ferrier, who goes aboard the Tacoma space station to unravel a mystery surrounding its missing crew. With a unique take on branching narrative and fascinating characters, *Tacoma* is impressive. We sat down with Fullbright co-founder Karla Zimonja to speak about its development process. *by Elise Favis*

Tacoma's setting is different from *Gone Home*. Why did you decide to tell a story in space?

Originally, when we were thinking about making another game, we were like, 'well what if we made it happen in a different house, in a different location, and with different people in it?' That was our first thought, but eventually we realized that it wouldn't be distinct enough, for us or for the players. We wanted to branch out; we wanted to keep ourselves and the players interested.

[Co-founder Steve Gaynor] and his wife thought of the space station idea while they were out hiking on Wizard Island, which is in the middle of Crater Lake. Steve was just like, 'I don't know – what's another place where you can have an isolated, small population of people? Like an oil rig, or an arctic base, or space station. Oh, space station sounds cool!' So he called me up and pitched it to me and I was like, 'Man, how am I going to be able to get reference for a space station?' But it ended up being a lot of fun to work on. It was weirdly satisfying to go to space.

Did you always envision the Tacoma station as a cargo transfer station, or were there other ideas to begin with?

We had a big reboot in the middle or so [of development] after we had built a certain amount of the game. Originally, it was a fancy stopover for space resort guests. A part of the station was this Vegas lobby, where guests would stop briefly before

heading to a resort. We eventually just worked out that it suited our purposes better to not make it a public space, because one of things about public spaces is it's really hard to personalize them. And it's also really hard to feel at home in them.

Originally, the station didn't have any gravity at all. It was all zero gravity and you would stick to floors and sometimes ceilings with magnetic boots. So you wouldn't have to navigate, because navigating in full 3D – like swimming through the air – is not easy for everyone. We wanted to keep the game accessible, so we thought, what if we can just stick you to surfaces? But what we didn't realize is that it's actually very hard to make recognizable living spaces in zero gravity. You can't just have items sitting on a desk anymore.

You've mentioned *Sleep No More*, the immersive theater production, as a major influence for Tacoma. Did you want Tacoma to have a similar theatrical feel to it?

We absolutely did have *Sleep No More* in mind, but it wasn't right from the beginning. It was super influential. I wish more people could see it because it's so great. We've gone to see it a few times over a bunch of years, and when I first went it was absolutely the most video-game-like experience I've ever had in real life. You can't really affect things that much, but you can snoop around. You get to explore, dig around, put pieces together, follow individual people, and the whole timeline loops. It was super

inspirational for us for sure.

Have you ever envisioned Tacoma as a theater production?

That would be really cool. I'm not sure how we would do the effects, but it would be really fun to have an actual elevator that you'd take up and down to the wings. Except we would need to suspend people with wires to simulate zero gravity which could be terrible [laughs]. It would be a lot of sets to build, but it would be interesting.

Tacoma's approach to branching narrative, where you follow characters to see different stories play out, is fascinating. Do you think that narrative mechanic is unique to Tacoma, or do you think Fullbright would use it again in future games?

I'm not sure. In some ways, thinking about that reminds me of how I've felt when *Tacoma* was going to be a similar set up with a different house and a different person in it. To me, that sounds like we would get partway through and ask ourselves, 'are we really doing the same thing again?' You don't want to throw out what you've learned, and you want to be able to build on it, but find a way to keep it fresh. It's a weird balancing act. We haven't discussed it. If there's a use for it and if there's a good pitch for it, then yeah we'd consider it.

Because you're more of an observer than an active participant in Tacoma's scenes, were you ever concerned that players would not feel connected enough with Amy?

With the concerns and necessities that we had, we felt that someone like Amy was the best choice. Seven characters is a lot to keep track of. We did in some cases worry that if we fleshed out Amy, then players would be juggling too much. It would just be overloading the player because it's not that long and you don't really have forever to pick up all the details and nuances. 💎



The Science Of Stuck

We look at why players get hung up in games, and what you can do about it

Anyone who plays video games has at least one “duh” moment to their name. We beat our heads against bosses for half an hour before realizing we’re supposed to lose the fight. We search every nook and cranny of a dungeon for a key to an unlocked door. Because of their interactive nature, even the most linear games are prone to grinding halts whenever a player misses a crucial cue, a developer sends conflicting signals about what to do, or both.

This common problem highlights how closely game design intersects with psychology. Psychologists have been studying games, problem-solving, and cognition for years to more firmly grasp what’s going on in our brains when we get stuck.

by *Suriel Vazquez*

Overlooking The Obvious

When we can’t get through a puzzle, it often seems like we’ve exhausted every path and occasionally invent a “solution” that will ultimately prove fruitless (such as trying to make a difficult jump that looks possible but actually requires us to activate a moving platform). When this happens,

it can feel like a game has completely fallen off of the rails.

Though these mistakes may sound like aberrations, they’re actually common psychological concepts, according to president of media consulting firm Immersyve, Scott Rigby. At Immersyve, Rigby helps developers find points of frustration and

smooth them out, and has found that getting stuck tends to come from one of two psychological concepts: functional fixedness and schema.

Functional fixedness is a way of thinking that prevents us from imagining new uses for certain objects. It’s used to describe how, as we get older, we don’t “play

pretend” with everyday objects as often. “A young kid, you can hand them a pen and they’ll pretend it’s a magic wand, a spear, a sword, a gun, and a few other things,” Rigby says. “They’re not locked into functional fixedness.” Adults, on the other hand, tend to think of a pen only as a tool for writing, which can impair creative thinking. If, for example, we’ve only been using the fire spell we acquire in the early levels of a game to melt ice blocks, it might not occur to us to use it to light a candle later on.

Schema, on the other hand, are how we map plans and ideas into workable solutions, and they’re how game developers guide players through their worlds. As we become familiar with a game and its controls, players often attempt to push the game’s boundaries. “You’ll see them hit the wall, try to click on things, move them up and down, throw chairs,” Rigby says. “They’re trying to build a schema for what they can interact with, what the rules of the game are.”



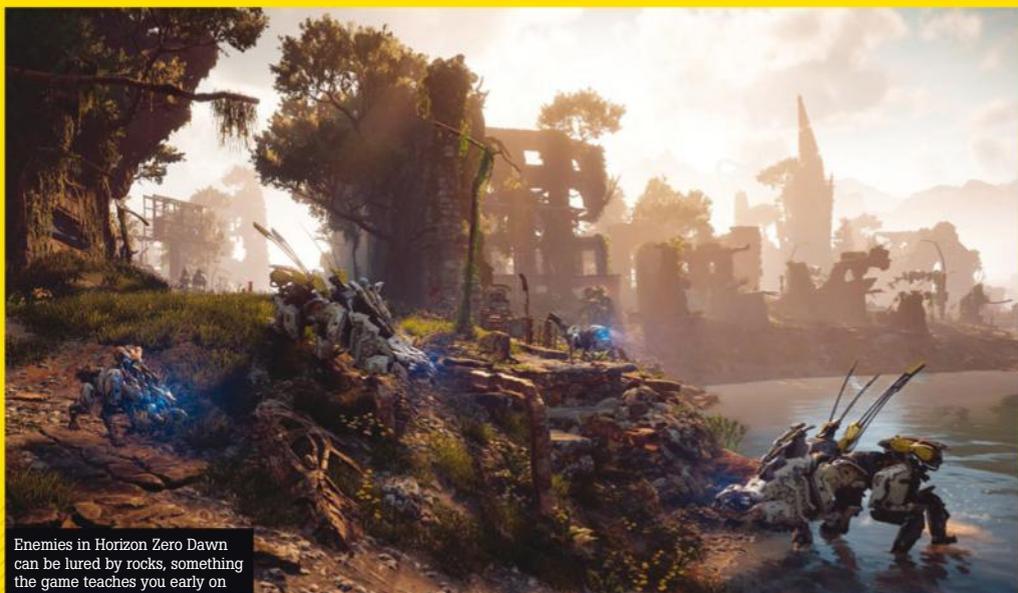
Bloodborne features a steep challenge curve early in the game that can be hard for players to push past



The Legend of Zelda series frequently puts different puzzles and enemies together

Developers help players create schemas to let them know what their options are. They might block the door out of the room in which you find the fire spell with an ice block, for example, to force you to figure out the fire spell before proceeding. But if a schema becomes too rigid, it can be hard to add concepts outside of it effectively. "If you haven't taught me you can pick up rocks and throw them to distract a monster in order to get past something, the fact that there are rocks lying around isn't really going to help me very much," Rigby says. "I haven't learned that rocks are meaningful in the schema in the game."

Because functional fixedness is a natural human trait and schema is largely a product of conditioning, it can be easy for players who can't figure out how to progress to pin the blame on the game. However, one aspect of getting stuck that has more to do with players than anything else is perhaps our greatest enemy when it comes to problem-solving: frustration.



Enemies in Horizon Zero Dawn can be lured by rocks, something the game teaches you early on

Fighting With Frustration

While many games aim to immerse us in their worlds, most still consist of using a set of skills (whether that's reading comprehension or double-jump timing) to overcome challenges. When we accomplish the task before us, we feel good about ourselves. "We all have that need for competency, for mastery," Rigby says. "We want to feel successful. We also want to feel growth. That's a basic need." Those feelings of learning and mastery are why many people play games.

The difference between a challenge that tests all our skills to their fullest and one that's simply too much can be razor-thin, and it can determine whether players press on in the face of adversity or give up. As we fumble around with a puzzle searching for the solution that might be right in front of us or fight a boss whose attacks are proving too difficult to dodge, we get irritated, whether it's at the developers or ourselves (usually the former).

When we get annoyed, our ability to think outside the box plummets, according to Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center and professor at Fielding Graduate University. "The ability to think in new ways is largely driven by a level of psychological comfort, or positive emotion," Rutledge says. Frustration activates our natural fight-or-flight response, which inhibits our ability to solve puzzles.



Bloodborne's bosses often involve finding tells and capitalizing on them

One of the best ways to deal with aggravation in the moment isn't to try to play around it, but rather to examine why we're feeling that way, according to Dr. Andrew Przybylski, an experimental psychologist and senior research fellow at the Oxford University department of experimental psychology. Whether we feel like we're not competent or simply think the controls aren't letting us do what we want, figuring out how to better approach the obstacle can help calm us down. Games aren't perfect, but Przybylski notes that blaming them won't help you progress. "For me it's like when you're walking around at night and

you stub your toe on the refrigerator," he says. "You get angry at the refrigerator, but it can't possibly be the refrigerator's fault."

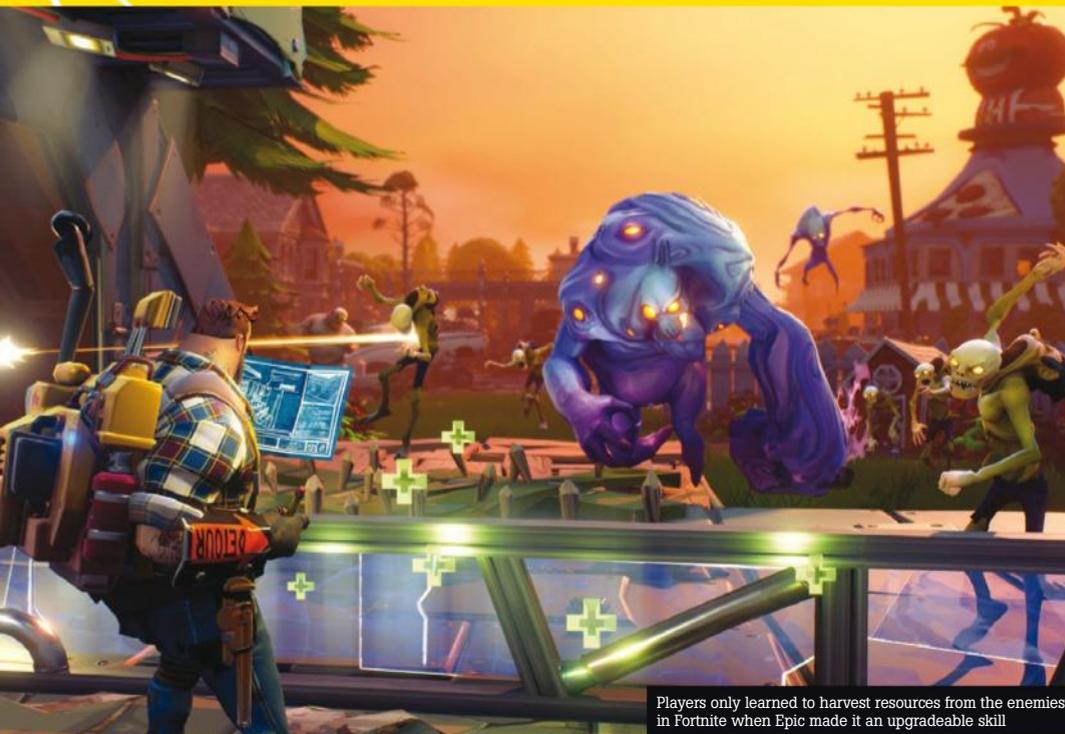
Waiting For A Breakthrough

One of the most common remedies for hitting a wall in a game is taking a break. For every story we have of getting stuck, we also have tales of times when we couldn't progress through a game, only to come back days (or hours) later and solve it immediately. All of the people I spoke to for this story confirmed that taking a break indeed helps you solve problems, but the reasons for it vary and intersect.

The first, as we've covered, is that the longer you sit and stare at a problem, the worse you get at solving it. Not only do you get frustrated, but your brain gets tired, too, according to Rutledge. "The point of a break isn't just that you need a cookie. It's because your brain is exhausted, the same way it is any time your brain does hard mental work," he says. "And when you're in a problem-solving game rather than a manual skill game, it tires your brain."

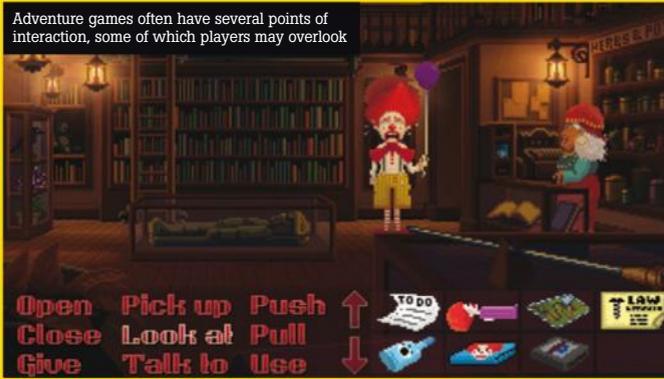
Second, functional fixedness can lead to a cognitive rut, where we ruminate on a single path or solution. "[Say] I'm in a boss battle and I'm able to knock the thing down to 25 percent health, so I'm almost there, but I've died eight times," Rigby says. "The problem at that point is that I'm probably not questioning the approach because it got me 75 percent of the way there. So the first eight or so steps are locked in." But those steps may never lead to victory, whether it's because there's a simpler solution or because the strategy itself isn't feasible. Walking away can help our brains reset and climb out of those ruts to figure out new approaches.

Sleeping on a problem can also further help us work through it. Dr. Jayne Gackenbach, a professor of psychology at MacEwan University who has studied the ways video games can help people psychologically, says dreaming can help players figure out solutions more easily. "One of the primary functions of dreaming is memory consolidation and problem solving," she says. "You don't even have to remember the dream. If you get a whole night's sleep, if you get R.E.M. sleep, just that process will help you solve problems."



Players only learned to harvest resources from the enemies in Fortnite when Epic made it an upgradeable skill

Adventure games often have several points of interaction, some of which players may overlook



Thimbleweed Park uses a scaling difficulty system in order to avoid frustrating players



How Paragon's heroes were meant to attack towers initially wasn't clearly communicated, according to Epic

Smoothing Out The Edges

While an individual player's skill, patience, or even mood can result in roadblocks, issues can arise from a developer's familiarity with their own game. By being blind to how new players interact with games, developers may create obtuse or unclear challenges. To help see their games from a different perspective, publishers and developers have started using "user experience" (UX) groups, which provide them with feedback about how players see their games. UX has become a major part of the games industry in recent years, with companies like Riot, Microsoft, Epic, and more all employing in-house departments.

As a UX researcher at Epic Games with a PhD in psychology, Ben Lewis-Evans sees players make all kinds of mistakes, and many of them are due to developer oversight. "It's often small things that you thought would be obvious,"

Lewis-Evans says. For example, an early version of Paragon had towers players deactivated by destroying the nearby crystal that powered them. But since they were taking damage from the shots the tower itself fired at them, players would shoot the tower instead. Epic fixed the issue by making the tower the weak point. "These things sort of slip by because [developers] know how it all works," he says.

Lewis-Evans also has to contend with how different games approach difficulty and player feedback. Games that want to draw a player in as quickly as possible (like mobile or free-to-play games) tend to keep their systems simple, but still need to provide the player with everything they need to know. "Players who are used to that kind of game, in my experience, get very uncomfortable and upset and lost if you don't provide them with a lot of advice," Lewis-Evans says.

Many popular games are difficult or obtuse on purpose, however. Games like Dark Souls often provide little direction upfront, and leave the players to discover much of the game on their own. Still, what little information those games do provide is still important, and deciding how much to reveal to the player requires a deft hand. In these cases, players need to know enough so they can explore the game and figure out its intricacies, but not so much that it ruins the fun of discovery. "What's important is whether the player feels like they're in control of whether they're lost or not," Lewis-Evans says.

Not everyone can afford a UX department, however. Smaller developers are increasingly turning to early access programs like those on Steam or Xbox One to iron out rough spots, solicit player feedback, and fix areas or puzzles that might be too frustrating or not clearly communicated.

No Final Solution

Despite the abundance of psychological research developers have at their disposal, it's impossible for a game to provide each player with an experience where every puzzle feels challenging but not frustrating. Everyone I spoke to for this article says they still fall prey to the same thoughts, ruts, and frustrations they study. "I'm just as much of a victim to these things, except I'm probably a little bit faster to recognize them and pull away," Rigby says.

No matter the scenario, some players will find the solution to a challenge immediately, while others will bang their head against it for much longer. That doesn't mean we're helpless in the face of a daunting obstacle, however. Knowing how the brain works when it gets stuck is valuable in itself. It may not always lead you to the answer, but it will hopefully provide the best way to find it without ripping too much of your hair out. ♦

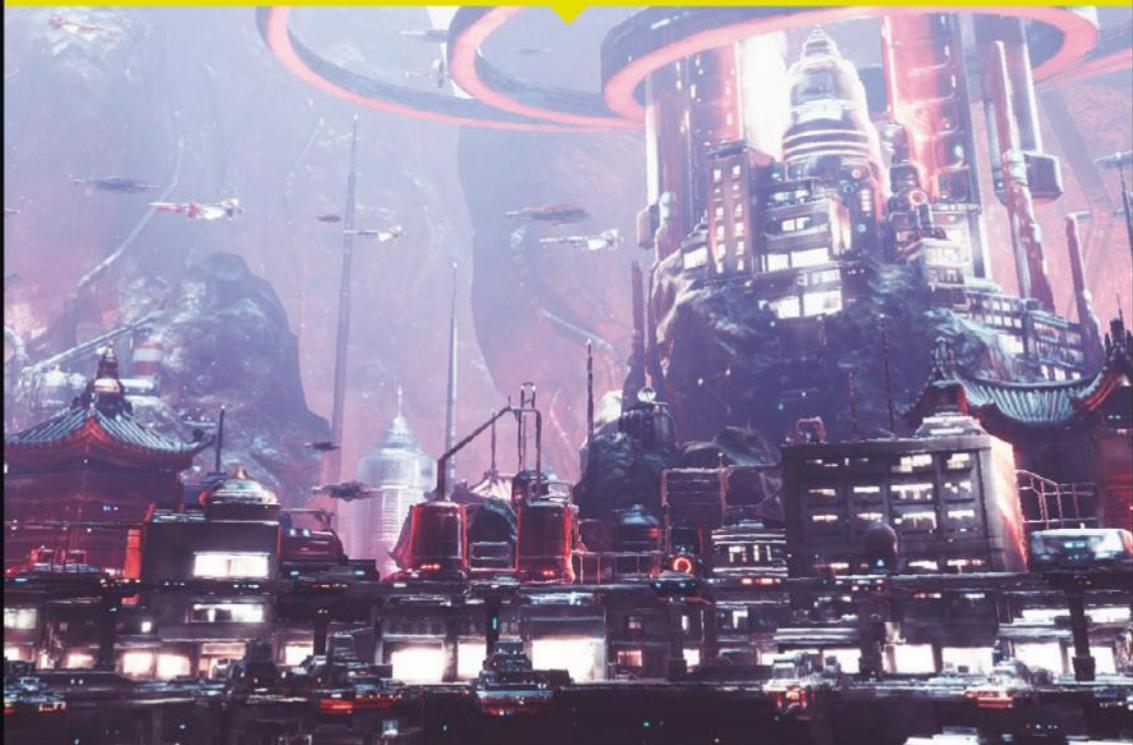
Quotable

"We are working towards a bigger, more meaningful change about somebody's gaming accomplishments in history, as a gamer on Xbox. We can do a lot more to reflect and let people show their gaming history and their status."



Mike Ybarra, Xbox platform corporate vice president in an interview with *Windows Central*.

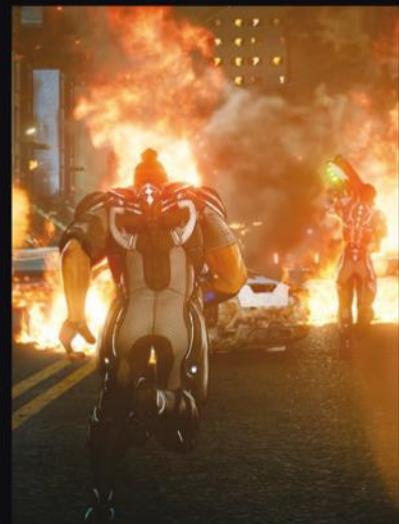
The Good



Borderlands developer **GEARBOX** is working on a 1v1 competitive first-person shooter appropriately codenamed Project 1v1. The PC game is in closed beta this summer, offering ranked, challenge, and arena modes.

The Bad

BATTLE CHASERS: NIGHTWAR'S STATUS on the Switch keeps getting the shaft. Initially a Nintendo Direct gave the impression the game was a timed exclusive for Switch, but this was later debunked. Now the RPG's Switch release is coming after it hits the other consoles in October. No specific release date has been announced at this time for the Switch version.

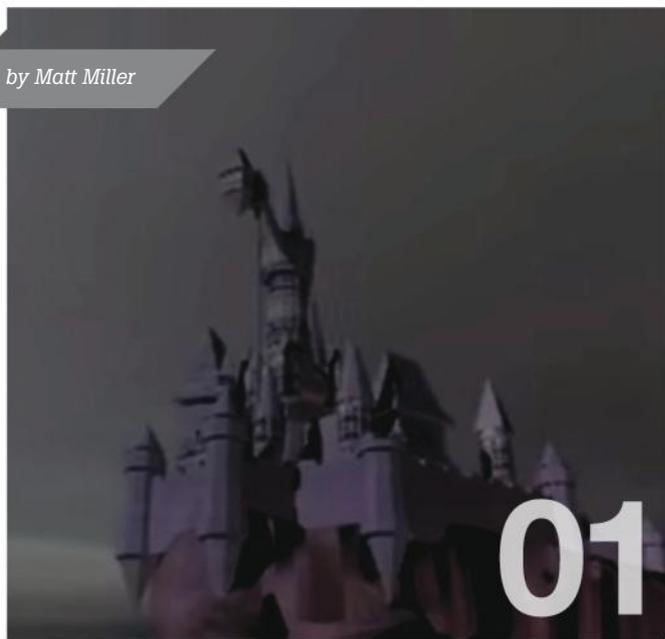


Microsoft delayed **CRACKDOWN 3** into spring of next year, which means the only major first-party title coming out for holiday season – and the launch of Xbox One X – is Forza Motorsport 7. Earlier in the year the company also delayed first-party games Sea of Thieves and State of Decay 2 into 2018. 💎

The Ugly

STRONGHOLDS

by Matt Miller



Dracula's Castle

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

A dark silhouette rises on the horizon, with jutting parapets and shadowy towers. Within lies a host of demons and undead, roaming endlessly through hidden passages and underground barrows. Even after facing the worst dangers of the fortress, an entire warped and inverted castle still awaits exploration in one of the most memorable and well-protected strongholds in games.



The Castle

Ico

In a unique twist, the desolate castle in the mist does a better job keeping you in than out. Strange mechanisms, dizzying drops, and pathways fallen into ruin characterize this puzzling space. The loneliness of the Castle's echoing chambers is only eased through the companionship between a young boy and girl.



Iccrown Citadel

World of Warcraft

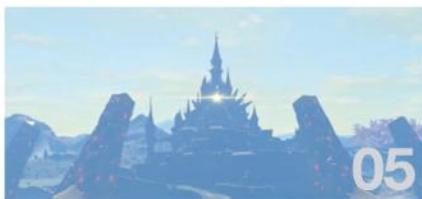
The tragedy of Prince Arthas is writ large upon the blighted landscape of Northrend in the form of the massive Iccrown Citadel. The looming fortress of sharply pointed walls looms over the north, and an unearthly glow welcomes visitors to a tomb of regret and undead nightmares.



Shadow Moses

Metal Gear Solid

Solid Snake infiltrates a facility that should be a nuclear disposal site, but in truth hides the creation of a massive walking weapon of mass destruction. Whether you're fighting a psycho telepath or sneaking across a dangerous sniper's snowfield, Shadow Moses is a foxhole only one soldier could breach.



Hyrule Castle

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

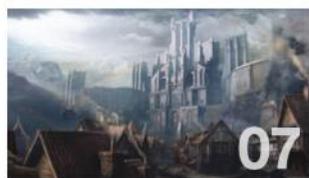
What was once a beacon of light and benevolent rule for Hyrule has been overrun by evil. A cloud of swirling energy and ancient guardian machines reveal Ganon's control of the edifice. Whether with the aid of the Divine Beasts or alone, Link must brave Hyrule Castle's walls and face a world-ending threat.



Anor Londo

Dark Souls

The breathtaking city-castle of the gods is a maze of twisted passageways and overwhelming medieval architecture. Breaching its interior is a triumph on its own, but the visitor's reward is the lethal greeting of brass-encased sentinels, and an unforgettable encounter against two guardians of the inner sanctum.



Castle Wolfenstein

Wolfenstein: The Old Blood

Hiding in disguise can only take you so far on yet another return to Castle Wolfenstein. B.J. must fight through Nazi soldiers and cyborg dogs to learn the location of his arch-nemesis. Tiny clues are scattered within its stone walls, hinting at the history of the stronghold and its storied tale of conflict.



Masyaf

Assassin's Creed

Masyaf was our introduction to the enigmatic Assassins and their secretive hideouts. Across multiple sieges, and later as the hiding place of an Apple of Eden, Masyaf acts as a bastion for the great secrets of the Brotherhood, and the site of some of its most momentous victories and defeats.



The Black Gate

Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor

Talion and the Rangers of the Black Gate protected Middle-earth for generations, keeping Mordor at bay. Sauron's minions murdered Talion's family and retook the fort, sending the warrior on a mission of vengeance that would lead to a fateful encounter at the site of his wife and son's tragic deaths.



Shinra Building

Final Fantasy VII

Dominating the skyline over Midgar, the Shinra headquarters leaves no doubt that this is more than just an electric company. The corrupt corporation hides many secrets behind its walls, from the severed head of a powerful alien to the twisted breeding experiments of a mad scientist. ♦

top ten



The Turbulent History Of MachineGames

On the eve of launching its highly anticipated *Wolfenstein* sequel, the Swedish developer looks back on its hard-knock upbringing

by Javy Gwaltney



To say MachineGames is doing well would be an understatement. After reviving the classic first-person shooter franchise *Wolfenstein* to critical and commercial success in 2014, the company developed a standalone expansion that also did well. Now MachineGames is on the verge of releasing a hotly anticipated sequel. The Swedish developer is situated comfortably, but this has not always been the case for its founders.

The story of bringing back *Wolfenstein* involves a group of people setting out to rebuild their careers from the ground up. It's a story of broken dreams, chaos, and traveling down hard roads. With *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* just around the corner, we talked with the developer about skating on the fringes of failure for more than a decade, going broke for art, and the trials and tribulations of reviving the world's original first-person shooter.

A TALE OF TWO COMPANIES

To understand MachineGames, it's necessary to understand Starbreeze Studios. Founded in 1998, Starbreeze is best known for developing *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* and *The Darkness*. The seven founding members of MachineGames are all Starbreeze alumni, including Jens Matthies, the creative director of *The New Order* and *The New Colossus*.

"When we left Starbreeze, we had been there 11 or 12 years," Matthies says. "We had invested so much in that company, so much of our time – all of our creative energy had been poured into that company for more than a decade so that was a scary thing to do, leaving all that behind."

These days Starbreeze Studios is a profitable company. This has not always been the case. Personal accounts from Starbreeze's former employees paint a picture of a studio that spent most of its existence in dramatic free-

fall. From the very beginning, Starbreeze's projects suffered cancellations, often due to circumstances beyond its control. The company's first game, a fantasy first-person action/RPG called *Sorcery*, previewed well but was canceled when publisher Gremlin Interactive was acquired by Infogrames. *Enclave II*, the sequel to Starbreeze's first true release, *Enclave*, was also canceled, as well as a *Bourne Ascendancy* tie-in game.

Outside of cancellations, the games that were released were often marred by broken deals with publishers, legal troubles, and chaotic working conditions. In an interview with *1UP*, lead designer on *Chronicles of Riddick* Jens Andersson detailed mass firings at Starbreeze as the remaining team members continued to develop *Butcher Bay*. Despite the game's financial and critical success, with *Butcher Bay* earning accolades from most publications and sites, Starbreeze didn't

receive as much money as it expected from publisher Vivendi.

According to MachineGames executive producer Jerk Gustafsson, the main hardship at Starbreeze "was always the constant financial struggle – the challenges of signing a new project while in full production or in the end phase of production. The solution to that became two parallel teams working on different games toward different publishers. And then you end up in this dangerous loop of ill-defined, bare-minimum deliveries and internal battles over resources where everything is about making sure to deliver milestones to secure payments. All those things that takes focus away from what really matters – making great games."

The cycle of woe continued with the company picking up an adaptation of the popular comic book *The Darkness* shortly after *Butcher Bay*'s release. The acquisition was a promising one, but publisher Majesco Entertainment dropped the game during development due to financial troubles. Luckily, 2K Games came on as a publisher, but insisted that Starbreeze add a multiplayer mode, which is often brought up as the weakest link in an otherwise good game. The game sold well, but the critical reception didn't come close to the fervor kicked up by *Escape From Butcher Bay*, disappointing Starbreeze.

After *The Darkness* shipped, Starbreeze entered yet another period of tumult. "We finished *The Darkness* and had a couple of projects in parallel development," Matthies says. "What ended up happening was that the creative process we had got disrupted, due to both internal and external pressures, and we were in a place where we felt like we couldn't make a game we felt good about. And when you're making triple-A games, you're investing a sizeable portion of your life to each game. At that point, we had to decide: Are we in this for a paycheck or are we in this because we want to do something that is meaningful, that we want the game we're making to be f---ing amazing?"

In 2009, Matthies, Andersson, and a handful of other developers left the company before development of the EA-published reboot of *Syndicate* began. The shooter was tepidly received and Starbreeze developed one last game, the critical darling *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, before reinventing itself as a publisher by acquiring *Overkill*, the developer of *Payday*.

That acquisition led to Starbreeze Studios becoming a profitable company for the first time since its inception.

Meanwhile, Matthies and his fellow alumni were searching for a rebirth of their own.

GOING FOR BROKE

The seven members of Starbreeze who broke away to form what would eventually become MachineGames started the process by borrowing money. "We didn't have any income," Matthies says. "So I got this loan that I had to survive on, and then we were like, just a handful of people. We weren't any kind of studio at that point really. Fortunately, we had a lot of relationships in game development, and so we thought that we'll book a bunch of meetings and pitch a bunch of projects and see if there are any publishers that are willing to take a gamble on us."

The team spent the greater part of a year figuring out both what kind of game they wanted to make as well as the publisher they'd want to work with. In the end, Bethesda was at the top of the list. "We really respected their approach to game development," Matthies remembers. "We ended up in the situation with Bethesda where we thought the worst-case scenario would be that we'd be floating for six to nine months and if nothing comes up, we'll have to find employment elsewhere."

Things weren't that simple.

"We ended up waiting like a year and a half before the deal was done with Bethesda," Matthies says. "It was a very scary time. It was liberating in a way because all we did during that time was make game concepts that we used to pitch. Over this year we had about 10 different games that we spent a lot of time figuring out and were enthusiastic about."

However, as time dragged on with no final word from Bethesda, money started running out. MachineGames, without any titles to its name, seemed already to be living on borrowed time. Luckily for the team, their publisher of choice came through in the end, and Bethesda officially acquired MachineGames. "When the deal was done with Bethesda, I was like a week away from having to sell my apartment. There were just no avenues left to more loans. We had borrowed from our families. There was nothing left to squeeze out. Eventually it all worked out in some kind of fairytale way," Matthies says, chuckling.

MAKING OLD NEW AGAIN

Matthies fell in love with id Software games as a young man, even making mods for Quake. That love was shared among the founding members of MachineGames, so it made sense for the team to pursue an id license after the Bethesda acquisition.

“A lot of that early time with Bethesda is a warm memory,” Matthies says. “We nudged Bethesda and asked, ‘Is anyone working on Wolfenstein?’ They said ‘No, no one is doing that,’ and so we started exploring that option. And to a game nerd...it was just ‘Holy s---!’ It doesn’t get better than that. It’s like if you’re a movie director and at some point in the ‘80s you get invited by George Lucas to work on Star Wars. It’s that amazing.” Bethesda eventually offered MachineGames the chance to work on Wolfenstein.

The team set to work, inheriting the license from Raven Software, who made the weakest entry of the series in 2009. Instead of rebooting, MachineGames embraced the chronology of the series, bringing back characters like Caroline Becker and the Kreisau Circle, but situating them in a different, more somber situation while still striving to contain the series’ over-the-top combat and embrace of pulp fiction.

“We basically did the same process we always do,” Matthies says. “We filter out what we think the core ideas are and the ones we want to support and we start building on that. And it was incredibly important that whatever we did had to have the blessing of id. The last thing we wanted to do was make a game that they didn’t feel like was keeping in what Wolfenstein was. We really tried to nail down what Wolfenstein was, and once we felt like we had a



MachineGames’ Jens Matthies says that the developer still uses the same design process they used to develop games at Starbreeze Studios to make Wolfenstein



Wolfenstein: The New Order

grasp of what that was, we focused on combat and that’s what then became The New Order.”

The proof of concept was a gamble. Rather than build a fully featured shooter with a large multiplayer component, the studio decided to focus purely on a single-player campaign.

FURIOUS, UNRELENTING RESISTANCE

Despite misgivings by both the press and gamers after The New Order’s E3 reveal in 2013, the game became a critical and commercial success thanks to its frenzied combat and surprisingly deep storytelling. The New Order

would end up becoming one of the best-selling games of 2014 in Europe, and it garnered accolades from a variety of publications at year’s end.

A little over four years later, Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus served as the centerpiece of Bethesda’s 2017 E3 showcase. With the game launching in a few months, the team is neck-deep in development crunch and anxieties are running high. Looking at MachineGames’ ambition, this is understandable. The New Colossus’ scope is much wider than The New Order, following B.J. Blazkowicz and company on a road trip through Nazi-infested America as they try to take the country back.

“Anytime you go big, you run a tremendous risk of over-scoping it,” Matthies says. “And you only have so much time and money to make the game. Early on, you have to try to have good metrics of what you want to do and how to stretch that game to that point and not beyond it, and that’s a



The Darkness

The Lineage Of The New Order

The developers behind MachineGames have made a career out of working on triple-A, action-focused experiences with a strong emphasis on narrative and character development. Here are the most notable works that the talent working on *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* have on their collective résumé.



Enclave

- » Platform: Wii, Xbox, PC
- » Release: 2002
- » G.I. Score: 7.5



Starbreeze's first release was a third-person hack-and-slash RPG. While the game isn't as interesting or strong as what came after it, it's interesting to look back on Starbreeze's fascination with fantasy with both its cancelled first project, *Sorcery*, and this game given that the majority of the company's later releases are first-person shooters in realistic or sci-fi settings.



The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

- » Platform: PS3, 360, Xbox, PC
- » Release: 2004
- » G.I. Score: 9.5



A thrilling experience that puts you behind the glow-in-the-dark eyes of the universe's most dangerous convict. *Butcher Bay* wasn't just a great adaptation of its source material, which is rare as diamonds as far as video games are concerned, but was also a fantastic multi-genre adventure that stitched together elements of first-person shooting, fighting games, stealth, and even RPG-lite mechanics.

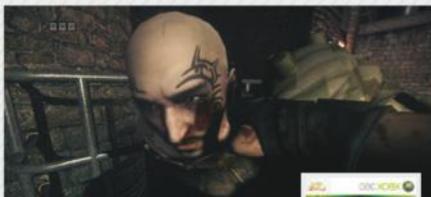


The Darkness

- » Platform: PS3, 360
- » Release: 2007
- » G.I. Score: 8.75



An adaptation of Top Cow's popular series, *The Darkness* centers on mobster Jackie Estacado, cursed with terrible powers of destruction on his 21st birthday. Essentially a fantasy-doused first-person shooter that has Jackie taking on the mobsters who betrayed him, *The Darkness* is notable for taking time to really let us inhabit Jackie's sorrow and regrets, making this pulp story stand out above the rest (even if the controls haven't aged that well).

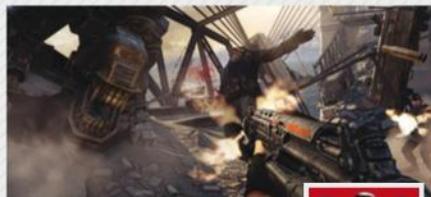


The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena

- » Platform: PS3, 360, PC
- » Release: 2009
- » G.I. Score: 9.5



A great follow-up to *Escape From Butcher Bay* that provided one of the few things that the original game lacked: a compelling villain, *Revas*. A dangerous mercenary in her own right, *Revas* provides the perfect antagonist for *Riddick* and helped craft a compelling adventure that looked and played better than the original game.



Wolfenstein: The New Order

- » Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC
- » Release: 2014
- » G.I. Score: 8.0



MachineGames' debut was strong, enticing players with its mix of old-school, gory violence and emotionally powerful storytelling. *The New Order* isn't a perfect game but its quirks, heartfelt story, and flexible stealth gameplay have made it one of the more interesting first-person shooters of its era.



Wolfenstein: The Old Blood

- » Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC
- » Release: 2015
- » G.I. Score: 7.5



A goofy standalone prequel to *The New Order* that abandoned all of the main game's emotional beats for shlock and pulp, pitting players against Nazis, zombies, and nazi zombies, *The Old Blood* isn't as special as *The New Order* but it's still a fun time.

real science in and of itself. I think we're getting better at it over the years, but it's still incredibly challenging and one of the hardest obstacles when designing a game."

Moreover, MachineGames has come of age in a strange time. Its sophomore game, which any other year would be pulpy as it could be, hits in a year that has seen a number of rallies and protests across the United States featuring men waving Nazi flags about and

espousing white supremacist ideology. The studio suddenly found itself becoming politically relevant as anxieties about the rise of the Reich rears its head in 2017.

With the current political climate, it's hard not to see parallels and wonder if life may be influencing art here in a substantial way. Matthias pushes back against that notion a bit, saying "I think any story you tell is intrinsically a commentary on life. If you're dealing with a very distinct political ideology like

the Nazis, then obviously there are real-world products of that. So there are similarities. I wouldn't say we're really trying [to make a statement], but our philosophy is that we want the game to stand on its own. We want to make something that's timeless."

The world will soon find out if *The New Colossus*, intended to be the second game in a trilogy, can live up to MachineGames' ambitions. As the interview draws to a close, Matthias ponders

whether the prospect of working on *Wolfenstein* for a decade is as intimidating and emotionally draining as it seems. He laughs.

"I think envisioning it as a trilogy was our way of putting a boundary around it. It's not infinite, this thing you can't see the end of it. It's been helpful to conceptualize it that way, and structure our work and lives around it...."

He pauses for a few seconds. "It helps keep the chaos at bay," he says, at last. ♦



A Homegrown Hero

Representing Los Angeles in Overwatch's biggest league

George "Hyped" Maganzini jumped into the competitive Overwatch scene early on, gaining acclaim for his D.Va play as part of team Sodipop, which was eventually signed to esports outfits Immortals. The ultimate goal, however, was clear: Get signed to the Overwatch League, Blizzard's multimillion dollar conference that aims to more closely emulate the regional rivalries of traditional sports. After Immortals owner Noah Whinston signed the team to represent Los Angeles, Maganzini's dream has finally come true.

Name:

George Maganzini

Location:

Los Angeles

Twitter:

@IMTHyped

Occupation:

Offtank/Flex player for the Immortals' Overwatch team

interview by Suriel Vazquez

Did you play any other games competitively before Overwatch?

I actually have very little FPS experience. I played almost exclusively Blizzard games, but I did play a ton of World of Warcraft, StarCraft II, Diablo, and Hearthstone. Other than that, the only games I played were Dota 2 (which is like kind of a Blizzard game in my head), and a little bit of Counter-Strike.

How did you first meet up with the current Immortals team?

I think it was either Competitive or Quick Play, I was just playing and I think four or five of [Team Sodipop] were on the other team, and I was just kind of destroying them. They kind of knew me, and I guess they had an opening on their team, so they asked me to try out.

How did you feel about Overwatch League when you first heard about it? Were you attracted to its format?

Personally no, because early on we weren't sure if there was going to be some sort of combine where you can show your skills and get picked. They did have a scouting report, where there are lots of stats shared, but I don't like the idea of people just picking players out one at a time. [It would suck if] I got picked up and then was just paired

with someone who was an awful team player with great stats, or someone who I didn't mesh with. Fortunately, I'm one of the very few who got picked up as part of a whole team. I don't think many other teams are going to get signed as whole teams, except for maybe EnVyUs and Rogue.

Blizzard also announced players would be receiving a \$50,000 yearly salary and benefits. Did you as a player have much input into determining that?

I did not. I think Blizzard came up with just the baseline requirement kind of on their own, and then from there, as a player, I can negotiate with my employer to adjust those from the baseline. I think Blizzard just kind of wanted a good baseline for everyone.

How do you feel about the Overwatch metagame right now?

People hate the dive meta, but I'm okay with it. It has gotten a tad stale, but that's okay because Doomfist is really strong, and he's going to change the meta on his own.

Is there anyone you'd like to see in the meta?

All the defense heroes are really not played at all – Mei, Junkrat, I like Widow but I do get she can be a bit

oppressive. When you play [competitively], you only think of the 10 heroes that are played, you just forget about the rest. No point in thinking about them, almost.

One of the problems with the dive meta is that it's uncounterable. You just have to counter dive with the exact same team. So I think if defense heroes were buffed such that they were actually good on defense and bad on offense, then you'd see a lot of more variance in teams.

Do you feel like the Overwatch scene is dependent on the Overwatch League right now? If it ends up being a bust, do you think Overwatch could still have a healthy competitive scene?

If we look at games like Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, I guess it was kind of dying for a while, and look at it now. So I think that any game has the potential to recover. Especially a game like this. There's going to be more heroes over time, so say the Overwatch League fails and people don't like the game, a year or two from now there could be double the amount of heroes and it's a completely different game. I think if the league fails, it'll hurt the game in the short term, but [Overwatch] definitely has the potential to bounce back. ♦

THE FRANCHISE CORNERSTONE

In a sports game era dominated by revenue driving-modes like Ultimate Team, Visual Concepts' Erick Boenisch keeps pushing innovation with the longtime fan-favorite franchise mode



by Matt Bertz

Sports fans have always dreamed of taking control of their favorite team and guiding them to a championship through savvy free agency pickups and smart drafting. In the late '80s and early '90s, video games started providing an outlet for this fantasy, and over the next several decades franchise modes became a prerequisite for any sports sim. But in recent years, publishers started focusing intensely on card collection modes that generate additional revenues like EA Sports' Ultimate Team. As a result, many franchise mode fans feel they've been put on waivers this console generation.

The stalling of innovation in franchise modes is glaring. EA's NHL and FIFA series still use player acquisition and scouting systems from a generation ago, MLB The Show hasn't made a meaningful change in the basic way the mode operates for years, and even sports games with decent franchise modes like Madden frequently take a year or more off from introducing significant changes to the minute-to-minute experience.

One series continues to buck this trend of neglect: NBA 2K. Year in and year out, Visual Concepts senior producer Erick Boenisch and his franchise-focused development team continues to challenge convention and explore new ways to empower wannabe general managers.

"I don't want to call out other games, but they are large games – I know how many units they sell – and I don't feel like they're doing a service to their population," Boenisch says. "I know [NBA 2K's] telemetry, I know how many people play each mode, and people play the heck out of our franchise mode. I don't know if it's a matter of Kevin Costner's 'If you build it, they will come' type of a thing or if [other companies] have done so little and their usage numbers continue to decline. It's easy to fall into that trap of, 'not a lot of people are playing it, we probably shouldn't invest a lot of time into it.'"

A multi-sport athlete as a kid, Boenisch grew up playing any video game he could get his hands on, from obscure JPRGs to platform-defining hits like The Legend of Zelda. But no genre left a bigger impression on him than sports games. The first title he became obsessed with was Sports Talk Baseball on the Sega Genesis. Since the game didn't have a season mode, Boenisch created his own box score template, went to a local copy store, and paid \$10 to make 162 copies so he could track his team's stats for an entire season.

"It was one of the best times of my life, but the whole time I'm doing this, I was thinking, 'This is dumb, why do I have to do this?'" Boenisch says. "Why can't this stuff just be there for me?"

Boenisch's passion for video games led him to pursue a computer science degree at Sonoma State University. Upon graduating, friends working at Visual Concepts encouraged him to apply. He got the job, and has been refining the franchise mode experience of NBA 2K ever since.

Throughout his long tenure, Boenisch and the dedicated team of franchise nuts at Visual Concepts continue to push the bar for innovation with needle-moving concepts like player morale affecting locker room chemistry and their willingness to re-sign with a team, franchise relocation/expansion, the best trade finder in sports games, and a conversation system that drives your interaction with your owner, staff, coaches, and players. With NBA 2K18, Boenisch's team plans to incorporate a full narrative into the experience of managing a franchise (read all about the plans on page 56).

"For me, I'm just trying to look at what I would like as a kid, and trying to improve the games for today's youth and make them have a really good time," he says. "That's literally been my only goal for years and years. I don't want to stop driving new features. I would get bored if we stopped trying." ♦

HOMAGE TO HORROR



1 Arkham Horror: The Card Game

You might be going mad, but that shouldn't stop you from saving the world from eldritch evils. In Fantasy Flight's new horror-themed card game, you juggle the unique talents and devastating weaknesses of a fragile human investigator as they join with a partner (or up to three partners with two core sets) to confront nightmare creatures beyond understanding and prevent Cthulhu and his fellow Ancient Ones from entering our world. This card game offers choice-driven cooperative story scenarios of horror and discovery, with expansion packs like *The Dunwich Legacy* and the recent *The Path to Carcosa* that continue the quest – if you survive.

\$39.95 (base game), 29.95 (expansions), \$14.95 (Mythos packs) fantasyflightgames.com

2



2 Bloodborne Hunter Stubbins Plush

Bloodborne's Hunters are stoic warriors known for their skill with blades and their fearless approach to battle. They also make adorable plush dolls. Stubbins creations are crafted with high-quality materials, measure a little more than six inches tall, and weigh about a pound, but they're still more than a match for gothic werewolves.

\$13.00 | gear.playstation.com

4



3 Pixology Horror Prints

If the décor in your house is terrifyingly bad, it's time for a makeover using some of Pixology's simple-yet-stylish art prints. From Resident Evil to Dead Space to Alien, Pixology has something for nearly every horror fan, and its simple pop art designs make a great backdrop for any room.

\$20.00 | etsy.com/shop/pixology

3



4 Wolf Predator Legendary Scale Bust

After facing off against two Xenomorphs, the Predator known as Wolf earned his place as one of the greatest hunters in the galaxy. Now you can add his head to your collection and tell everyone that you finally took him down. Sideshow Collectibles' life-sized Wolf Predator bust weighs over eight pounds and is a mixture of high-quality PVC and resin, which results in a film-quality recreation that makes an amazing addition to any collector's display of creepy artifacts.

\$649 | sideshowtoy.com



GET OUT

His girlfriend's family appears to be the model for progressive society. However, a series of increasingly disturbing discoveries ultimately leads Chris deeper into a sinister plot that threatens his life. Director Jordan Peele's satirical eye crafts a horror film with racial commentary as sharp as its wit.

\$34.98
uphe.com

SCARY STORIES PAPERBACK BOX SET BY ALVIN SCHWARTZ

Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark makes *Goosebumps* look like *The Cat in the Hat*. This collection of history's most bone-chilling folklore has terrified children since the '80s, but a new boxset, featuring macabre illustrations from Stephen Gammell, has the chance to terrify a new generation of readers.

\$20.97
harpercollins.com

THE WORLD OF LORE: MONSTROUS CREATURES BY AARON MAHNKE

From werewolves to wendigos, humanity's fears have allowed us to dream up a wild assortment of fantastic monsters. Based on the award-winning podcast *Lore*, this audio book gives listeners a comprehensive overview of the legends and historical origins of the monsters that lurk in the shadows.

\$19.60
lorepodcast.com



October 2017

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 03

- › Battle Chasers: Nightwar (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Forza Motorsport 7 (Xbox One, PC)

Friday 06

- › Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga + Bowser's Minions (3DS)

Tuesday 10

- › Middle-earth: Shadow of War (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 13

- › The Evil Within 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 17

- › Gran Turismo Sport (PS4)

- › Elex (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › South Park: The Fractured But Whole (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › WWE 2K18 (PS4, Xbox One)

Tuesday 24

- › Destiny 2 (PC)
- › Just Dance 2018 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- › Nights of Azure 2: Bride of the New Moon (PS4, Switch, PC)

Friday 27

- › Assassin's Creed Origins (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ❶
- › Super Mario Odyssey (Switch)
- › Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Sunday 01

- › Bob's Burgers (Fox)
- › Curb Your Enthusiasm (HBO)
- › Family Guy (Fox)
- › Last Man on Earth (Fox)
- › The Simpsons (Fox)

Monday 02

- › The Gifted (Fox)

Friday 06

- › Blade Runner 2049 (Theaters) ❷
- › My Little Pony: The Movie (Theaters)
- › Once Upon a Time (ABC)

Monday 09

- › Supergirl (CW)

Tuesday 10

- › DC Legends of Tomorrow (CW)
- › The Flash (CW)

Thursday 12

- › Arrow (CW)
- › Supernatural (CW)

Friday 13

- › Mindhunter (Netflix)

Friday 20

- › Geostorm (Theaters)

Sunday 22

- › The Walking Dead (AMC)

Tuesday 24

- › The Last O.G. (TBS)

Friday 27

- › Jigsaw (Theaters)
- › Stanger Things Season 2 (Netflix)



GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 04

The Joker Cured

In a new seven-part comic series called *Batman: White Knight*, the Joker is cured of his insanity and wants to make right. Patrolling the city under the name "Jack," he sets his targets on Gotham's greatest foe: Batman.

Friday 06

IndieCade 2017

Over 150 indie games are expected to be playable at this year's IndieCade convention held in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo. This four-day show also offers panels, social events, and tournaments, along with the chance to cast your vote for the best new games at IndieCade.

Wednesday 11

Thor Turns 700 ❸

Last month's issue of *Mighty Thor* was number 23. This month's issue is number 700. No, you didn't miss over 600 issues. Despite loving rebooting series with new number 1 issues, Marvel is returning

all of its comic series their original numbering conventions, marking a historic 700th issue for *Mighty Thor*. Other series to keep an eye on: *Amazing Spider-Man* is at 789, and *Cable* just hit 150.

Tuesday 31

The Witcher Adult Coloring Book

Who says coloring is just for kids? With Dark Horse's *The Witcher Adult Coloring Book*, you can add your stylistic choices to 96-pages of black-and-white illustrations inspired by the video game series.

Friday 27

PAX Australia 2017

Held in Melbourne, this three-day fan fest kicks off with a "story time" keynote with *Red vs. Blue* creator Burnie Burns. The convention floor is filled with game demos, cosplay, tournaments, and a hall filled with the best indie games created in Australia and New Zealand as selected by the AIS. ❹





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» platform

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» style

1-Player Action/Role-Playing

» publisher

Warner Bros. Interactive

» developer

Monolith Productions

» release

October 10





COMPLETING the LEGEND

Monolith concludes its fantasy epic in
Middle-earth: Shadow of War

by Matt Miller



W

With only a few weeks before launch, Middle-earth: Shadow of War is rounding the final corner, racing toward an anticipated finish line. Shadow of War is not only the culmination of the last three years of development work at Monolith Productions, but also the fulfillment of promises established by Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor – a deepening of both gameplay and storytelling on a level that’s hard to grasp until you experience the game in action. With its sequel, this talented team of Tolkien enthusiasts is ready to complete their tale, wrapping up a duology that brazenly builds off the fiction of *The Lord of the Rings*. After multiple days playing the near-final game and talking with its creators, it’s clear just how industrious the team has become.

“We didn’t leave anything on the table this time,” says Monolith’s vice president of creative, Mike de Plater. “Our motto became over-promise and over-deliver. I think we had a little bit of hubris in terms of thinking we knew, now that we had built one, how much our capacity was, and what we could do. In some ways, it was even more overly ambitious than what we’d done with Shadow of Mordor. The difference was, this time we were able to achieve it.”

UNFETTERED STORYTELLING

Shadow of Mordor established an intriguing pair of protagonists into Middle-earth lore; the reincarnated ranger named Talion sought vengeance for his murdered family, while the ancient elven wraith named Celebrimbor literally joined with him in a parallel quest that echoed back to a betrayal centuries earlier by the dark lord, Sauron. The story had a simple hook, but much of that narrative potential was eventually subsumed in the clash of battle against endless orc hordes. Shadow of War reaches much further in its narrative goals, with richer characters and dozens of cinematic sequences. Monolith takes an unrestrained approach to storytelling inspired by Tolkien’s writing and Peter Jackson’s films, but one that is willing to chart its own course and take chances with established lore in the name of the best game experience.

Shadow of War opens nearly a decade after the first game’s conclusion. The unlikely pair of Talion and Celebrimbor have been fulfilling the threat implied by the last lines of Shadow of Mordor, forging a new ring of power, an artifact of immense strength, built to rival Sauron’s One Ring to rule them all. “The New Ring draws a lot of connections between Celebrimbor and Sauron,” de Plater says. “It is much the same way that Sauron invested himself in the One Ring, and it became a representation of his

power. Celebrimbor is attempting to do that with the New Ring, but believing that if he can do that without Sauron’s influence, it will be perfected, and it will be the key to successfully conquering Mordor.”

In that opening cinematic, disaster strikes as Celebrimbor is torn from Talion by the most unlikely of intruders. The mighty spider Shelob wants the power of this New Ring for herself, and uses Talion’s connection to the wraith to demand a dangerous trade – the wraith for the ring. “The starting point when thinking about Shelob was inspired by Galadriel, and what she means to Middle-earth,” de Plater says. “Galadriel represents light, but we’re in Mordor, and we’re looking at the darker side of things.” Taking the form of a bewitching woman, the spider’s machinations deprive the pair of their new creation, and send them hurtling into conflict with Sauron’s forces as they assault the Gondorian city of Minas Ithil.

Our gameplay picks up on a cliff overlooking the stalwart fortress, echoing in more ways than one the walls of another city, Minas Tirith, the setting of the epic battle depicted in *The Return of the King*. Minas Ithil is a massive urban environment – a game region filled with hidden secrets and dedicated missions. In this first act, Talion confronts the armies of Mordor in a vain attempt to halt the city’s capture. In addition to introducing core features of predator-like stealth, combo-driven combat, and

agile traversal, my wanderings through Minas Ithil bring me into contact with several named characters, extensive dialogue, and lengthy cinematic sequences that propel the plot forward.

In my attempted defense of the city, I encounter other discoveries, like the new Haedir Towers. These seeing stones are Sauron’s minor replicas of the mighty Palantir. As a gameplay device, they let Talion look out from a high vantage and identify points of interest; collectibles like Shelob’s web of fate and Gondorian artifacts provide new audio lore entries, as well as additional skill points. Secret Ithilden clues offer a chance to track down forgotten barrows and their riddle doors hidden throughout the world. Within lie the ancient remains of Celebrimbor’s forgotten allies, and the legendary set of equipment that comes with their unearthing.

Tolkien fans already know the grim fate awaiting Minas Ithil. “We see the siege of the city by the armies of Mordor,” de Plater says. “And then, ultimately, we see it taken by the Witch king and the Nazgûl, and its transformation into Minas Morgul, which is the city we see in *The Lord of the Rings*. It becomes the base of operations for the Witch-king.” Jumping ahead in my journey, it’s intriguing to return to the city later in the game after it has been overrun and decimated. Minas Morgul becomes a green-tinted home of sorcery and horror, devoid of human life and overrun by orcs and trolls.



Talion's moveset has many more options in *Shadow of War*, and lots of ways to customize skills

My arrival in Minas Morgul offers a chance to meet one of the game's most important characters – a world-weary but powerful elf who has fought in Mordor far longer than Talion. “Eltariel is the Blade of Galadriel – her agent,” de Plater says. “The particular mission she has had for hundreds, or maybe even thousands of years, is to keep the Nazgûl contained within Mordor. So, she’s repeatedly having to fight to keep them down, even though they keep resurrecting and returning.”

As Eltariel fights by Talion's side in numerous missions throughout the game, she acts as a storytelling foil to both Talion and Celebrimbor, questioning motives and voicing doubts about the wisdom of introducing a new ring of power into the ongoing struggle. As a stealthy elf

assassin, she's also a potent ally, especially when wielding a defensive mystical shield gifted to her by Galadriel, offering protection from Mordor's most punishing attacks.

That protection and combat skill is often essential in the boss battles that unfold in the coming hours against the Nazgûl, one of the most iconic threats from *The Lord of the Rings*. These black-clad ringwraiths take center stage in the story, and I played and witnessed three of the conflicts first-hand.

In the movies and books (which unfold years later in the timeline), the ringwraiths are anonymous shells fully overwritten by the mind of Sauron. But *Monolith* is playing with the idea that in these earlier days, vestiges of the Nazgûls' original identities remain,

representing the semblances of the kings they once were before being subverted by the dark lord of Mordor. “The big thing that we’re doing is revealing the history and identity of some of them,” de Plater says. In some cases, that means *Monolith* is creating new fixtures within Middle-earth history, while others dip into established named characters from Tolkien's text and reveal their identities as one of the ringwraiths.

Suladân is one of the former, a new character who is the first Nazgûl I confront in open battle. I fight him near the peak of the newly renamed Minas Morgul. As he whisks about the battlefield, he flings out devastating curses that demand I retreat behind Eltariel's shield of light, even as he dominates orc minions to send into



Envisioning The Nazgûl

John Howe was one of the principal artists who helped to shape the look of *The Lord of the Rings* movies, and *Monolith* enlisted his aid in shaping the individual appearances of the ringwraiths in *Shadow of War*. During the timeframe of the game, the Nazgûl still maintain some remnant of their original identities as human kings, before they were gifted with the nine rings that subverted them to Sauron's will. As imagined by Howe, their armor and weapons hint at the tragic tales of their past lives and eventual downfalls.



A City Transformed

The opening act of *Shadow of Mordor* finds Talion joining in the defense of the human city of Minas Ithil. Later beats of the story see a return to the strikingly transformed Minas Morgul.



Eltariel is Galadriel's agent in Mordor, tasked with confronting the Nazgûl

my path. The battle has a structured form that stands in contrast to the rest of the game's big procedural combat scenarios, feeling more like a true crafted boss battle than anything I played in *Shadow of Mordor*.

Two other Nazgûl encounters show off equally varied experiences, and draw in named characters that should be familiar to fans. Helm Hammerhand was once a king of Rohan, and the namesake of Helm's Deep, but he's met a grim fate as one of Sauron's nine greatest minions. In a blistering fight, he calls forth drakes and ghûls to harry me, even as he batters down my defenses with his notorious hammer. It's one of the most challenging fights I've confronted in the franchise. In another battle, we learn that one of the Nazgûl is actually Isildur, the famed king who once cut the One Ring from Sauron's hand and stole it. In keeping with his textual connection to the Oathbreaker Army of the Dead in *The Return of the King*, Isildur confronts players with resurrected forms of once-valiant Gondorian soldiers. Of all the Nazgûl, Isildur fights the most like Talion, as they are both part of the same heritage of soldiers.

No matter which of these figures you fight, battles conclude with the banishment of your foe, and the reward of a cinematic that fleshes out the dark tale of their fall from grace. From harsh betrayals, rage-fueled mistakes, or bitter revenge wrought by Sauron, these sequences give context around the ringwraiths that we've never had before within the fiction.





AN EVER-CHANGING WEB

While *Shadow of War* aims to dramatically expand its storytelling, that doesn't mean it backs off from the focus on big open worlds and systemic gameplay loops. Put simply, *Shadow of War* is a massive sandbox filled with opportunities for adventure and battle.

Shadow of Mordor received its highest praise for its innovative Nemesis system, a procedural web of individually named foes that changed over time in response to your actions, victories, and defeats. *Shadow of War* drastically expands this system, offering more distinct individuals and new opportunities for dominated allies.

As I wander through an open world, I'm struck by the visual distinctiveness of the enemies I meet and how well Monolith has built up the fantasy of memorable encounters. Whether it's an orc whose manic ramblings are all about the "tasty" things he wants to devour, or a hulking Olog troll that betrays me in the heat of a big battle because I killed his blood brother, the sense of individuality is hard to overlook.

The Nemesis system also has several new tricks up its sleeve. "One of the things that is new is the ambusher system," de Plater says. "The game is keeping track of what you're doing moment to moment, and how you're playing. Your playstyle will determine when a particular enemy or follower appears in the world, in response to your actions." Always hunting lost Gondorian artifacts? Your foes begin to notice, and show up to taunt your nerdiness in being obsessed with irrelevant history. Fly around on an allied drake all the time? Expect drake-hunting parties to begin congregating. "They appear in the world in more relevant contexts," de Plater says. "And they earn titles in response to things they achieve in the world, whether it's the ranger killer, the drake slayer, or the conqueror if they take a fortress."

That final option represents one of the most exciting additions to play: the fortress assaults.



Like in the last game, defeat is not the end; orcs that kill you remain in the game and grow stronger by your next encounter

After investigating through connected missions, gathering allies, and designating which of your forces will aid in the battle, the different regions of the game each have a massive fortress to overtake. In one assault I confronted, the intricacies of the Nemesis system really shined. Hundreds of orcs, trolls, drakes, and more clashed around and above the fortress, even as I navigated Talion from one control point to the next. I climbed aboard a rampaging giant graug and trampled foes. I pulled allied injured orcs back to their feet so they could help me turn the tide. I then confronted the orc overlord in his inner keep, and after his defeat, installed one of my dominated allies to claim the fortress and region.

Beyond names and weapons, the overturning of fortress control also illustrates another way the bad guys of *Shadow of War* stand out – their tribal affiliations. Across *Mordor*, numerous distinct tribes each have their own goals, environmental trappings, and approach to battle, and the controlling force in a region dictates what you'll find there. Whether it's the industrious Machine tribe with their explosives, the beast-hunting Feral tribe, or the necromantic Mystics, every group feels distinct. "Part of the

inspiration was the idea that when one of these guys becomes an overlord, we want them to seem like super villains, and have their identity expressed in the environment," de Plater says. "If you're in Arkham, and you go to an area controlled by the Joker, you see that everywhere, with clown faces, and unique thugs. We wanted that same sense. It influences the character of the orcs that live there, and some of the ambient life."

Including the eventual DLC, you can also expect to find roguish Marauders, Sauron-worshipping Dark tribe members, Viking-esque Warmongers, fear-obsessed Terror tribesmen, the blood and cleavers of the Slaughter tribe, and the almost Mad Max-style maniacs of the Outlaw tribe. Any one of these discrete tribe members can also boast a broader type or class that delineates its style of combat – like assassin or trickster – adding up to a vast array of different enemy personnel.

The improved Nemesis system feels deep and interwoven into the adventure at every level. Even in a few hours of play, I could sense the way that my choice of missions, the enemies I fought, and places I visited led to concrete changes in the environment.



Players can dominate an enemy soldier, and then summon that individual to fight on their side

EXPLORING MORDOR

While the Nemesis system provides a wealth of missions and adventures all by itself, it would fall apart without an equally rich world to inhabit. The last game left a lot of Mordor undiscovered, and *Shadow of War* stretches comfortably into all those nooks and crannies, with open regions of exploration that add up to a world multiple times the size of *Monolith's* previous game.

Over what is expected to be dozens of hours of play, *Shadow of War* takes players to five regions, each with its own visual character, missions, and hidden secrets. The game opens in the massive urban sprawl of Minas Ithil, and later takes on an entirely different tone as Minas Morgul. Cirith Ungol strikes an entirely different chord. "It is this huge cave complex that leads into Shelob's caves," de Plater says. "It's

crawling with spiders and mines, and the fortress is positioned out on this promontory, overlooking this huge valley and facing out across the rest of Mordor." Later on, players visit Núrn, a lush island where you meet an ancient forest spirit named Carnán. She's an entity like Treebeard or Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*, but suffering with the misfortune of dwelling under the eye of Sauron. Seregost is craggy mountain wilderness overtaken by snow and ice. The last region, Gorgoroth, is the heart of Mordor – a blasted hellscape, where among other things, Sauron's minions are summoning a Balrog that Talion must find a way to halt.

How much larger is the game than *Shadow of Mordor*? "It's hard to put a number on it because it's so much bigger in multiple dimensions, but every region is significantly bigger than either of the regions we had in the first

game," de Plater says. "And much more diverse. We have a lot more verticality and a lot more detail in the environment and topography. We have caves, mountains, pits, and all sorts of things. And we have the fortresses."

Beyond expanding the breadth of landmass, *Shadow of War* also aims to increase the density of meaningful activities within those spaces. New Nemesis missions offer a more customized set of encounters specific to your most notorious foes. Fighting pits offer a chance to pit orcs against one another. Collectibles are hidden everywhere. And *Shadows of the Past* missions are challenge scenarios in which you jump back in time to Celebrimbor's first war against Sauron centuries earlier, with specific combat, defense, or assault goals. I played one in which I rode a drake and breathed fire on charging waves of attackers.



After defeating a ringwraith in battle, crafted cutscenes reveal the history of their tragic downfall



Most significantly, side-mission chains are far more robust than they've been before, acting more like optional story-mission threads that cross over between different regions and deepen your connection to the game's most important characters. "Side missions were more of a template last time," de Plater says. "Now we've given them the same sort of attention we've given to all of our story missions. They all have cinematics. Each of our side mission arcs is around one of our main side characters like Carnán or Eltariel. They have much stronger stories running through them and they're also much more crafted in terms of

the objectives and gameplay."

With such a large play space, *Monolith* has gone to great pains to ensure players have the tools they need to explore with speed and variety. "Because the environments are so much bigger and have so much more verticality, getting around faster and more effectively is important," de Plater says. A fast-travel system returns for the longest distances, while other adaptations help more terrestrial navigation. Traversal is fleshed out with several new options, many enabled by the same Focus rechargeable resource that slows down time when aiming a ranged weapon. Using that

same meter, you can now accelerate your run to a supernaturally quick wraith sprint for short durations. While climbing a wall or cliff, tapping the bottom face button sends you zipping up far faster than a conventional scramble. And for distant perches, elven agility allows for double jumps mid-air.

New mounted options further expand travel flexibility. Caragors and giant graug can climb walls. Dominating a drake leads to the most potent power fantasy – surveying Mordor from atop a fire-breathing beast, winging over well-protected walls and plunging down on unsuspecting patrols.

The Land Of Shadow

Shadow of Mordor primarily unfolded within the bounds of Udûn, and the seaside coastline of Núrn. *Shadow of War* features a far broader and more varied selection of locales, including beleaguered Minas Ithil, the spider-infested caves of Cirith Ungol, the overgrown island of Núrn beyond that original shoreline, the snowy mountains of Seregost, and the volcanic devastation of Gorgoroth. To the east, other lands beckon as DLC locations.



A GROWING POWER

Celebrimbor literally pours his essence into the creation of the New Ring, offering a convenient in-fiction excuse for why players must once again build Talion and Celebrimbor's power. Like with virtually every other facet of the game, players should expect a much bigger and more flexible upgrade system of skills and equipment than what has come before.

Whether fighting Nazgûl atop a snowy mountain or weaving between dozens of orc combatants, a powered-up Talion has more tools at his disposal. "I like that there is now so much variety to combat," de Plater says. "One of my favorites is stunning the Olog-hai and shanking them as they go charging through other guys. Or that you can shadow strike into fires, and make them explode right in the middle of your enemies. I also love the way you can chain together your executions and combat moves in new ways."

Over the course of several hours of combat, I constantly uncovered novel ways to achieve victory. I leapt onto a downed enemy, and bashed him into submission. I called on Celebrimbor's wraith abilities to yank a distant foe hundreds of yards from his station, so I could duel him alone on a desolate tower's top. Like in the last game, the pure number of foes in any given battle is often overwhelming, but during play I felt like I had greater facility to keep a handle on the chaos.

Beyond distinct combat moves, Monolith added new core weapons to the arsenal. Early on, players gain access to the glaive of an ancient elven warrior named Gil-galad. This spear, called Aeglos, translated from elven as Icicle, lets players sweep entire ranks of enemies out of the way as a heavy attack, and is particularly valuable as a mounted weapon. Celebrimbor's hammer also takes on enhanced potential, creating elemental shockwave effects, or being flung at a distant enemy, such as a

drake swooping past overhead.

I also uncovered a lot of fun inherent to the new summon mechanics, which let you designate both a mount and a follower that can be called in at any time. "Summoning in your own bodyguard is awesome," de Plater says. "Especially when you have some towering Olog, and you bring him in and he starts wreaking havoc and laying waste to everyone." I found the same to be true with a gigantic graug, or even calling in my drake. "I really like that you can use these in different situations," de Plater says. "You can use them in combat, and they'll come in to help you out. But if you're in stealth, not only can you summon them in, but you can give them orders. If you've got a marksman, you can use him to snipe at guys without revealing your position. If you've got a drake, you can have him fly out of the skies, pick someone up, and carry them off."

With so many options shaping the combat experience, Monolith hopes to cater gameplay to a broader array of potential players, and the team has built Shadow of War with three difficulty settings to fit different levels of experience. "We learned that for some really skilled players, they would never die, so they wouldn't get a great experience of the Nemesis system," de Plater says. "Other players would die too much, and they'd have a bad experience because they just got slaughtered." While many gamers may scoff at the option, Monolith and Warner Bros. are offering further ways to advance Talion through optional microtransactions that boost XP, provide access to loot, and aid leveling with XP boosts. It's a system I was disappointed to hear about, if only because the natural progression I played in-game seems balanced and rewarding. But at least these rewards can still be acquired through in-game currency instead of real money purchases.

Behind challenge settings and all the new ability and combat options sits a substantial

RPG-style upgrade system for both character skills and equipment. "We have many more skills than we had last time, and we also have the ability to upgrade each of those skills," de Plater says. Each of your many skills can be upgraded with two or three different options, but only one upgrade can be active at a time. Every time you gain a level, you acquire a skill point that can be distributed across these skills and upgrades, and Talion has 60 levels to acquire over the course of the game. Another approximately 60 skill points are attained through side and challenge missions, like Shadows of the Past. Yet other skills unlock through story and other progression moments scattered throughout the game.

Equipment options are equally complex. Every one of Talion's equipment slots can be adjusted to fit a chosen playstyle, and each offers independent cosmetic styles as well. Swords for open combat, daggers for stealth, and a ranged weapon slot determine your offensive capability, while a choice of armor, cloak, and runes applied to the New Ring further shape Talion's defenses and abilities. The most powerful equipment even offers mini-missions to unlock their true potential, such as stealth killing an enemy under a designated circumstance, which in turn leads to even greater weapon capabilities for that dagger. In addition to an incredible array of different perks and tiers of quality, equipment pieces can also be slotted with stones that further accentuate their power. Players can even customize and pursue the playstyle they want by hunting targets that will drop related gear; for instance, an orc who is weak against frost attacks might drop a weapon that inflicts increased cold damage.

Taken together, the combined skill tree and equipment upgrades appear to be the equal of any role-playing upgrade system I can name, with tremendous potential for shaping Talion into the warrior and hunter you want him to be.

Players can customize their hero with dozens of skills, each of which has two or three upgrade options

Skills
Talion Lvl 32
0 XP
28440 XP
2 Skill Points

Combat 7/23

Predator 6/19

Ranged 10/19

Wraith 5/20

Mounted 4/16

Story 12/23

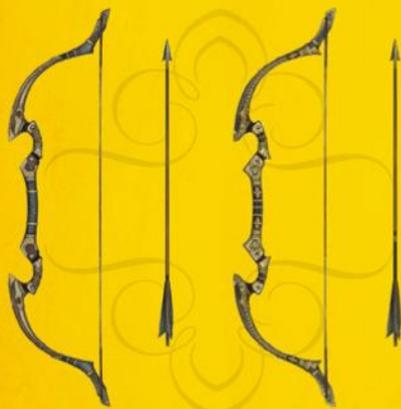
○ Activate Upgrade ○ Back

Upgrade: Deadly Striker
○ Activate Upgrade
Double-charge your Glaive for more follow-up attacks. (Tap ○ repeatedly after charging.)



For Any Occasion.

Talion gathers resources, power, and runes to forge new weapons and armor throughout his journey; after all, Celebrimbor is one of Middle-earth's most legendary smiths. Equipment sets can be worn in their entirety, or you can pick and choose your favorite pieces. No matter your decision, everything changes your hero's appearance and perks.





Eltariel can be a potent ally in major fights

BRIDGING THE GAP

Shadow of War completes the story that began in Shadow of Mordor. In a classic three-act narrative structure, we meet our characters and learn the stakes of the conflict, venture forth to conquer Mordor, and finally confront the Witchking and Sauron in what Monolith promises to be an epic final showdown. “We’re not holding anything back,” de Plater says. “It’s intended to have closure and have a satisfying ending, and really complete the story.”

However, all along we’ve known that Talion’s battles in Mordor are only one part of a broader tale that culminates in the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. In keeping with that connection, and as an excuse to let players continue their adventures beyond that final battle, Monolith

is introducing a fourth act – the Shadow Wars. “Act IV is this extended epilogue,” de Plater says. “What happens after this epic finale? And what segues into the next story, which is *The Lord of the Rings*?” The battle over Mordor continues in the years that follow Talion and Celebrimbor’s confrontation with Sauron, keeping the orc hordes busy, and giving the world of men more time to rally. While de Plater is reticent to spoil the ending, he promises that this post-story content isn’t just more of the same, but instead introduces new elements to gameplay, and has story elements all its own.

That’s not the only way that Shadow of War looks to broaden beyond its core campaign. An online conquest mode allows for interaction with both friends and a broader community of players. This mode lets you

invade the conquered forts of other players, and see how well you fare against their best laid defenses. “You can’t lose anything,” de Plater says. “Even if you’re just playing, by default, you’re creating fortresses for other people to be able to attack. It’s sort of like a level editor, but people are creating levels through naturally playing the game, instead of abstracting it out and going out to an editor.”

Beyond online play, players can also expect two story-driven expansions that further develop characters introduced in the base campaign, and also let you play with two new heroes – the elven assassin Eltariel and a captain of Minas Ithil named Baranor. “Both of these are standalone, where you’re playing as these other characters in a way that sheds some more light on Talion and Celebrimbor’s story,” de Plater says.

After spending several hours playing Shadow of War, the sheer scope of the game is hard to wrap one’s head around. Shadow of War’s predecessor introduced one of the most innovative approaches to systemic gameplay and enemies that anyone has ever seen in video games, but faced criticism for other missteps. In all the ways that matter, Shadow of War seems to be responding to those perceived flaws. Monolith embraces the intricacies of one of the most beloved fictional universes in any medium, but is also unafraid to take liberties with that universe in the name of producing the most engaging game. Bigger may not always be better, but with its overwhelming army of features, Shadow of War certainly looks ready to knock down some gates. ♦

The fire-breathing drakes are some of the most dramatic enemies in Mordor



For more on Middle-earth: Shadow of War, check out gameinformer.com/shadowofwar throughout the month. We have a closer look at the elven warrior Eltariel, an in-depth narrative roundtable, and a deep dive into the many regions of Mordor, among several other interviews and features



» **PLATFORM**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Bethesda Softworks

» **DEVELOPER**
Tango Gameworks

» **RELEASE**
October 13

Fear

What Happens Next

40 MINUTES OF TERROR WITH THE EVIL WITHIN 2

If you thought the mind of a deranged killer was terrifying to enter, wait until you see what kind of horrors a frightened child can manifest. We played through two chapters of this twisted sequel and found it far more disturbing than the first game.

by Andrew Reiner



Famed game creator Shinji Mikami, known as the “father of survival horror” for his work on the Resident Evil series, is not returning to the director’s chair for The Evil Within 2. After successfully launching this new horror series, he stepped back to let his young team at Tango Gameworks take the reins. While Mikami remains a key player in overseeing the progress of this sequel, he handed the bloody directorial baton to John Johanas, who served as a visual effects designer on The Evil Within, but also got his feet wet as the director of the game’s two DLC add-ons, The Assignment and The Consequence.

The shakeup in direction doesn’t mean a new start for the series. Unlike the first few Resident Evil games, which introduced new protagonists and threats, The Evil Within 2 once again inflicts pain and suffering upon Sebastian Castellanos, a detective for the Krimson City Police Department who lost his family, sobriety, and everything but his sanity.

At the beginning of The Evil Within, Castellanos was dispatched to investigate multiple homicides at Krimson City’s Beacon Mental Hospital, but soon found himself the pawn in a sinister game

created by a mysterious organization called Mobius, as well as a sick individual named Ruben Victoriano (known more commonly as Ruvik).

After losing his sister in a barn fire, Ruvik created a device called STEM that unites multiple users’ minds into one, allowing them to physically live within one central user’s memories. Ruvik created this machine with the hope of seeing his sister again. He was sloppy in his experimentation, and the technology soon became the desire of Mobius. They killed Ruvik and stole his creation, but soon realized that they needed his brain to operate it. They reanimated his brain to use it as the central operating system of STEM, which was activated again when Castellanos entered the hospital.

Castellanos was trapped in a world of horror where he experienced Ruvik’s torment and anger firsthand. After a hellish journey, he ended Ruvik’s psychological threat by detaching his brain from STEM, but it may not have stopped him completely. The game’s conclusion is left ambiguous, perhaps implying Ruvik returned to the real world and is now controlling the body of a patient named Leslie Winters.

Three years have passed since the incident at Beacon Mental Hospital, and Castellanos has been searching for answers that may link Mobius to the death of his family. As The Evil Within 2 begins, he receives a message from his former partner Juli Kidman, who was secretly working for Mobius the entire time.

“Sebastian, for three years since Beacon happened, you’ve been searching for answers,” she said in a recording. “You didn’t find what you were looking for because they didn’t want you to. Mobius knows you’ve been following us. They’ve been watching you for a long time. You trained and trusted me, and in return I betrayed you. Long before we met, you lost your daughter Lily. She’s still alive. This is your chance to save her; to get back what you lost. Lily needs you. You’re going to need to go back into STEM. Again.”

As reluctant as Castellanos is to return to a world that nearly killed him a hundred times over, he learns that the central brain being used for this new iteration of STEM is his daughter’s. He must enter her mind to locate her, and hopefully save her. He also hopes to destroy Mobius in the process.

STEM is now controlled by Lily, Sebastian Castellanos’ daughter



An Old Threat Reborn

Our demo begins in the game's second chapter, called "Something Not Quite Right." We don't know what events precede this playthrough, but the dialogue leads us to believe Sebastian just entered STEM again.

Kidman is back as a guiding voice, but an untrusted one now that Castellanos knows her true intentions. She tells him that he should begin by looking for the members of Mobius' lost Search Party Team, who disappeared in a town called Union. She suggests they may have a lead on Lily. The town, which is created by Lily, is supposed to be quaint and peaceful, showing how STEM should really work.

We meet Castellanos in a deteriorating elevator, but he already looks like he's been through hell. His right hand is bandaged, he looks disheveled, and although he's wearing a tactical shoulder holster, he appears to have already lost his weapons.

When the elevator doors open, the environment around him is shrouded in darkness. A lone florescent light illuminates a small section of a regal black and white checkered floor. A fenced in area can faintly be seen to the left. Castellanos approaches the light, and ducks down to squeeze through a hole in the fence that appears to have been munched on by something large. Again, we see nothing but an unnerving black. Castellanos activates his flashlight, which provides a little comfort, but not nearly enough. A quick scan of the area reveals nothing of importance – more fencing to the left, torn white drapes to the right, and the makings of machinery and equipment for a factory. Looking dead ahead, Castellanos sees dozens of corpses wearing white robes dangling from ropes. They all appear to have been hanged, but the blood on their bodies shows something sinister happened to them before this.

The only way forward is through the corpses. Castellanos moves slowly, but accidentally runs into a couple of them. They remain dead, swaying gently from his touch. The sea of bodies gives way to a metal wall with a red eye painted on it. He can't interact with it, but a loud swooshing sound rings out, and he spins to see a camera on a tripod across the room. He examines it, and again hears a swoosh. The dangling bodies have moved, and now are lined in straight rows, revealing a clear path to a metal door. Castellanos cautiously inches forward, and opens it. A well-dressed man stands directly behind the door holding a camera. Before Castellanos can do anything, the camera flashes brightly, and then we see nothing but darkness.

Awakening on the floor of a new room, Castellanos sees a wall-sized mirror holding the photograph that was just taken of him. Frustration begins to sink in. He angrily grabs the photo, and then sees something out of the corner of his eye – a woman dressed in red reflected in the mirror. A quick spin reveals nothing, just more white drapes covering age-old items. Castellanos turns back toward the mirror, which now holds the sinister smile of a demon that looks like Laura, the spider-like demon that stalked him throughout the first game.

The mirror shatters loudly, and this new version of Laura now caled "Guardian" stands in his world. As a manifestation of Lily's mind, she's different now, standing somewhat normally on two legs, but is at least 12-feet tall. Her hair is still a hypnotic mess of black, but it's no longer her defining feature; her right arm is replaced by a gigantic, spinning saw blade. A deeper look at Guardian's body reveals her flesh is sewn together with black wire, and every once in a while you can see smaller arms reaching out from her limbs. She's a monstrosity, and once again incredibly violent.

Castellanos spins and runs, turning every which way, but the room is relatively small, offering no escape route. Guardian laughs hysterically, but has trouble keeping tabs on her prey's location. This allots Castellanos time to sprint past her into the opening where the mirror once sat. Guardian's wild laughter keeps up with Castellanos' descent into a lengthy hallway, his stamina draining with each step.

Castellanos looks back to see where Guardian is, only to see her burst through a wall. The pursuit continues, and panic is clearly setting in on our unlucky protagonist. He keeps looking behind him, but should keep his gaze directly ahead to a glowing white door that has silently opened to reveal the man with the camera again. He's done taking photos, and now wields a sizable hunting knife.

JOHN JOHANAS ON THE WHITE THEME

The Evil Within 2's marketing hints at a milky white substance having importance. The game's director John Hojanas weighs in.

"That milky substance is a bit high concept. There is definitely an in-game connection as you've seen with some of the enemies and will show up in some places we haven't shown yet. Its initial concept, however, comes from entering STEM itself. The image of the characters entering this psychological world is being submerged within this white liquid, and that's where the core concept behind the imagery came from.

"One of the early concepts in the game that we jumped on was that the whole world is built upon the building blocks of that white liquid, coming to form by those who create from it. In the end, it's more of a setting than a plot detail."



The man throws the blade forward and it slides easily into Castellanos' shoulder, sending him to the ground. The man turns around and vanishes in a puff of smoke. Guardian's pursuit intensifies. She lunges forward and grabs Castellanos off of the floor with what appears to be three separate hands that make up her left arm. As he's being strangled to death, Castellanos pulls the knife from his arm and jams it into his attacker. She drops him and screams in pain, creating a window for escape. After entering the doorway of light, Castellanos falls to the ground, and the door behind vanishes in a flash. He's now in a quaint, abandoned house.

This is how our hero obtains his first weapon: the hunting knife. This dramatic moment also signals a shift away from unrelenting action to Castellanos becoming the hunter through slower-paced exploration.

Fighting Back

Electricity still pumps through the home, and many of the rooms have working lights that show it's been lived in recently. The windows are broken and trash bags are everywhere, but everything else is pristine, such as the nicely arranged vases on the mantel and modern furniture. The home holds healing items, the first of 40 hidden documents, and a handgun. Castellanos almost misses the firearm when leaving the house through the front door, but grabs it from an end table with one foot out of the household.

Standing outside on the front porch, his surroundings are darkened woods with a tall tree canopy blocking out most of the moonlight, but not the light rain. A concrete path begs him to venture into the woodlands, and he wastes no time finding out where it leads. He assures himself, "Don't worry. It's just a small, quiet town," but takes it back seconds later, "Yeah... Too quiet."

A good way down the path, he sees a woman sprint into another home. He calls for her, but she doesn't break stride. He tries to knock on the door, but it slides open when his hand touches it. Again, darkness, but this time with a voice saying "Skin and bones... Eat. Gotta eat..." We then see plastic bags filled with unrecognizable meat, and a woman at a table feeding a boy. He looks near dead, but his gargles say otherwise. She slaps him when he struggles to swallow whatever she spooned him. "Don't cry. I'm doing what's best for you," she says, as she slams his head against the table.

It's a disturbing moment, and for the sake of spoilers I won't detail what happens next, but Castellanos learns humans are more than they seem. Their heads are made up of white tentacles that squirm wildly, but almost appear to be made of milk or glue.

So far in this demo, one of the big things jumping out is Castellanos' animations. He may vocalize his thoughts to a thing he is seeing, but you'll sometimes seem little animations that go along

with his state of thought. When he approaches the boy at the kitchen table, he puts his left hand up to his face to cover his nose, and then his right as he draws in closer. If the player didn't approach the table, this little sequence wouldn't be seen. A thorough inspection of the house reveals the crafting component gunpowder.

Castellanos once again enters the wooded area. The rain has ceased and nightfall appears to be setting in. A short run down the stone path leads to a road with abandoned cars obscured in light fog. The sounds of gunshots and yelling ring out. Castellanos tracks the sounds to what appears to be the heart of the city, with several small two- to three-story buildings and a church.

Just when it seems the coast is clear, several rotting zombies sprint across the road in hot pursuit of a Union security detail. Although the detail is decked out in flak jackets and equipped with heavy artillery, there are too many zombies to deal with. A few panicked shots hit their marks, but the zombie hunger wins out. One Union member enters a house and slams the door.

Castellanos uses stealth to navigate the swarm, sliding along the side of cars and emerging at the right times to silently take down lone zombies with a knife through the top of their skulls. Enemies have three stages of alertness: a sound wave indicating they hear you, a partially open eye for thinking they saw something, and an open eye for full awareness. Although timing is everything, and Castellanos won't want to remain exposed for too long, he wants to recover the Green Gel enemies drop, which can be used later to upgrade his abilities.

Most of the zombies are feeding on their new meals, and Castellanos has no problem making short work of them. A close look at one of their corpses again reveals the milky substance on specific body parts. After entering the same home that the Union person fled to, Castellanos moves a bookcase in front of the door to block it, just like Leon could in Resident Evil 4.

The frightened Union worker has barricaded himself in the basement. He reveals himself as Liam O'Neal, and appears wary of a non-Union member talking to him. Castellanos says he's here to "restore the Core," which likely means he's trying to remove his daughter from it.

The game then indicates that the player has located O'Neal's Safe House, a location that can be revisited. The first Evil Within game was linear in design, but the sequel now features areas you can return to. Union is somewhat of an open space that can be freely explored. O'Neal won't venture out of the house with Castellanos, but does have information on the Core, and tells him Castellanos' "communicator" can be tuned to detect its activity. The goal now is to track the girl's voice to its origin.

Before leaving the safe house, Castellanos drinks a cup of coffee, which restores him to full health. He must brew another pot if he wants to use it again, but this action will take some time to complete. He also grabs ammo, weapon parts, and more gun powder, which he combines at the workbench to craft more handgun bullets. He also uses this station to upgrade his handgun's ammo capacity. The other upgrade options are firepower, fire rate, and reload time. All options feed from the same weapon parts pool, and each field can be upgraded numerous times, leading to the weapon gaining levels. Castellanos can also craft items in the field, but at the expense of more resources.

JOHANASON ON THE FREEDOM TO EXPLORE

"Union isn't filled with survivors and there aren't a lot of official missions to take on number-wise, but some survivors you find will give you hints or small tasks to do which will, in the end, make your chances of survival a bit higher.

"A lot of the optional tasks you find are actually more freeform. Sebastian has a communication device which picks up resonances left within the world. As you explore, you'll suddenly get a burst signal, which may lead you to something worth checking out. However, not all of these resonances are "good things." For every one that may lead to you discovering an underground stash of ammunition, there's one that may lead you into a dark corner of Sebastian's subconscious."



Union is supposed to be a peaceful town, but as you can see, it's anything but



Resonances

The hallway in the safe house produces a familiar sight: a specter of a nurse walking into a mirror. Castellanos shouldn't be confused by this vision, as they were one of the few beacons of safety in Ruvik's mind, but he immediately questions it. "What the...who was that?"

He peers into the mirror and is teleported to what appears to be a police station. At the end of a hallway sits a wheelchair under a spotlight. When Castellanos approaches it, static appears on screen and he's teleported to another reality, one that cannot be made out for a split second, before returning to the chair. Reality shifts to a darker place again, and we see the chair consume Castellanos, fastening his arms and placing a device over his head.

The nurse approaches him, and he finally recognizes her as Tatiana. From this chair, the player can once again exchange Green Gel for upgrades in health, combat, athleticism, stealth, and recovery.

These fields should allow players to sculpt skills to their preferred play style. Upgrading stealth can lead to small bonuses like increased movement speed, and bigger perks down the skill tree like the ability to perform a stealth kill from around a corner. The combat tree increases damage of melee attacks, and can decrease the kickback of a shotgun. Athleticism can be upgraded to enable an auto-avoid for specific attacks, and recovery has a perk that makes Castellanos automatically use a medical syringe when taking a fatal blow.

The police station is a haven for Castellanos. Here, he finds the first of a new collectible, one of 11 photographic slides that can be viewed through a projector on his desk. This particular slide shows us a moment from Castellanos' family life. He comments on it.

After returning to Union via another mirror, Castellanos ventures to the city square to track down a girl's voice using his communicator. By holding it in front of him, he can scan for resonance, indicated by a frequency fuzz that intensifies when he points the communicator in the right direction. Once a strong signal is found, he can lock onto it.

Heading onto the street again triggers an event. Part of the world suddenly collapses, creating what appears to be a bottomless canyon. Another part of it jets upward to create a mountain-like structure with a portion of the city still perched precariously atop it. The search for the girl requires just as much stealth as before, but now with the added effort of bringing up the communicator to keep going in the right direction. At one point, Castellanos picks up chatter from a fallen Mobius operative and uses the frequency to find his location, leading to the bounty five handgun bullets.

The world is open for him to freely explore, should he chose to do so. He can also track "unknown resonance" to perhaps find other people in need. In this playthrough, he scavenges the exterior of homes for a bit, but continues following the girl's voice.

His journey leads to a beautiful white home, where he finds a journal on the kitchen table. When he touches it, the room temperature drops, and a chair shakes violently. Lights flicker as he retreats to the living room. Before he can get there, a ghost-like apparition of a woman appears behind him. She hums a melody, as she slowly floats forward.

I'll again refrain from spoiling what happens next. This sequence shows just how terrifying *The Evil Within 2* can be for encounter design, pacing, and keeping players off kilter. The gameplay hasn't changed much since the original entry, but this second stage shows the player has more freedom in exploration.

It'll be interesting to see just how far Tango takes this element when *The Evil Within 2* launches on October 13 (Friday the 13th). Our first taste of this dark adventure was filled with jump scares, gore, and monsters galore, but the big hook is once again Castellanos' journey for answers, which is far more personal this time with his daughter being dangled in front of him. 





Monster Hunter World

Dancing with dinosaurs

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
Early 2018

The Monster Hunter franchise is poised to reach a wider audience on console and PC early next year, and after getting a substantial hands-on experience with the latest title, I'm incredibly excited. Longtime franchise fans should be pleased with Monster Hunter World's adherence to systems, mechanics, and the spirit of the traditional dinosaur hunting jaunts. Newcomers should be even more excited – this is the most accessible title in the franchise, and it doesn't sacrifice any of its adrenaline-infused adventure to get there.

Selecting one of my old weapon favorites, the heavy bowgun, I glance at my available accessories before

the first mission. My options include a variety of defensive upgrades, from stealth enhancements to additional protection. The most interesting choice is a cloak that lets you glide, allowing you to turn jumps into blissful, slow-falling dips perfect for landing directly on top of enemies. If you're a fan of the "rodeo" style of hopping on these huge creatures and smashing them up on their backs until they fall, this is a perfect choice for your play style. You can also move from posterior to head while you're on their back, picking your section to score attacks on weak spots or to better hang on while the monster tries to shake you off.

Back to the bowgun. While I've been a fan of this clunky-but-powerful cannon over the course of the Monster Hunter games, setup and shooting has never felt so fluid. The heavy crossbow is still a lumbering piece of equipment, but I no longer feel like a semi-turret that must be planted down to get solid shots on a far-away foe. Now it's much faster, while still retaining the sense that I need to pick my firing locations. Instead of being locked into taking a hit if I'm not ready, I can zip away in a flash and dodge a dangerous attack. I have access to a variety of different kinds of ammunition, including an "ultimate" ability that lets me

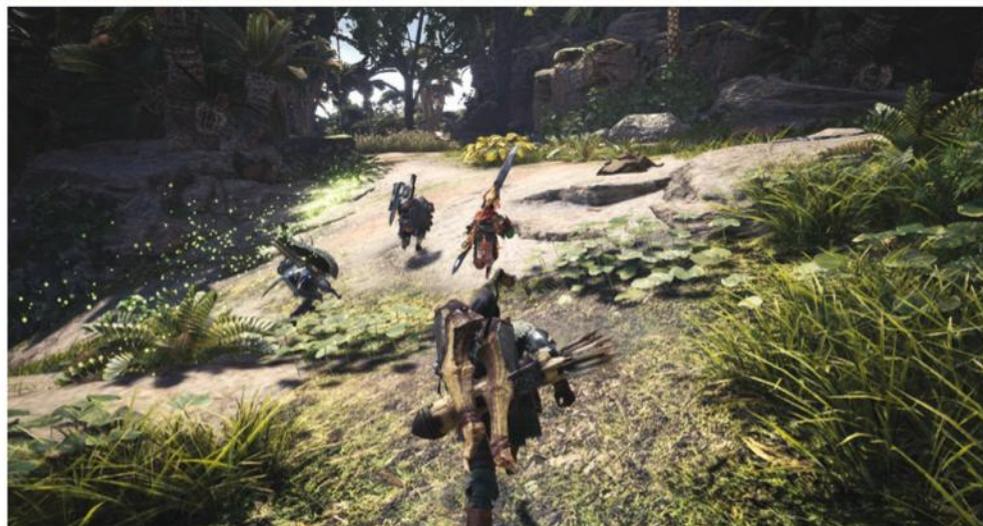


go Gatling-gun-style and tear off a barrage of shots. The end result is extremely satisfying – still one of my favorite weapons, but it doesn't feel like a chore to carry around.

Finding the enemy no longer involves running around the map and slinging paintballs. Like a dino-detective, I use the environment around me to search for clues to the location of the massive beast I'm hunting, which in this case is an early-game dino called the Great Jagras. Footprints and other markings fill up a meter that gives me a bright swarm of insects that show me a trail – like “quest trails” in MMORPGs – that lead me to the beast.

I'm also pleased by how collection of common materials in the open-world island is streamlined. No more bending over to collect seeds; I can just grab them as I walk by. In fact, I can set up crafting rules to auto-create items when I have the required materials, so kiss those long sessions of making bullets or other essentials goodbye. Eventually, my swarm of luminescent bugs leads me to my mark.

As a veteran to the series, this entry-level opponent doesn't offer much challenge, but it does a solid job at hammering home franchise mechanics – dodging around, unleashing hell on the enemy, and tossing a Palico pal into the mix to distract it. However, the combat introduces one new tool in capturing beasts – environmental traps. We've all set down our own traps for the giant creatures playing older Monster Hunter games, but now you can use things like downed logs, trees, and other areas of the map to help corral and defeat these wild,



flailing creatures.

After my rousing single-player session got the blood flowing, I hopped into a multiplayer encounter with other *Game Informer* editors to take on a saucier beast, the Anjanath. Selecting a paralysis hammer as my weapon and a defensive accessory, I frontlined the encounter, wailing on its head to keep it locked down, and even landing a few monster-riding rodeos by sliding around on the environments.

The battle got interesting as our enemy's health got low. During its retreat it wandered around the map until it upset a Rathalos – a much more dangerous enemy. We could have engaged the Rathalos, but we let them fight it out for a bit. This weakened the Anjanath to its last legs, and we set to finishing off the beast and slicing off bits for our future crafting endeavors. Wandering around the continuous environments as opposed to those

load screens for each section feels amazing from a freedom perspective, and watching the monsters defend their territory and battle each other is a nice touch.

Multiplayer features pop-in, pop-out gameplay, so if one of your team bails on you, someone else can jump in to finish the mission. You're also free to explore the various areas at will, without picking up a defined quest, to hunt for any monster that lives there.

To say my short time with *Monster Hunter World* impressed me is a vast understatement. This could be a defining moment for the franchise, as it takes things to bold new levels of fluid combat combined with accessibility. I don't think I can go back to clawing and pawing at a 3DS after getting a chance to experience this modern take on the series on a full-fledged console. I cannot wait to play the full game early next year. » **Daniel Tack**



NBA 2K18

You come at the king, you best not miss

- » **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC
- » **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(10-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
2K Sports
- » **Developer**
Visual Concepts
- » **Release**
September 19

With two years of development under its belt, EA Sports is hoping this is the year NBA Live provides a viable alternative to NBA 2K. But the fact remains that Visual Concepts' hoops series not only continually raises the bar for basketball games, but for the entire sports video game genre. NBA 2K18 looks slated to continue that dominance with several intriguing new features.

Since its debut last generation, the MyCareer mode has been a destination experience for players. Combining on-the-court action with a

deep progression system and a story about the rise of a professional athlete proved extremely alluring, which is why games like FIFA and Madden are following suit. With 2K18, Visual Concepts is bringing the narrative approach to MyGM mode as well.

Playing as a former NBA star whose career was cut short by injuries, you earn your way into the front office of your favorite NBA team. The basics of MyGM mode stay the same – you are still free to draft, sign, trade, or waive any player you wish at any time. But between your regular general manager workload, you must now

deal with behind-the-scenes drama that can break out with owners, front office staff, coaches, players, and the press. Unlike MyCareer, which uses voiced cutscenes to generate the drama, most of these discussions happen via. This gives the mode much more flexibility instead of being limited to interacting with the few roles the developers could afford to cast if it went that route.

When you transition from the front office to the court, the first thing you're going to notice is enhanced player accuracy. Player facial scans look more authentic than ever, and a



Making Coaches Matter

Over the last several years, Visual Concepts has gotten better at making sure virtual players make the same kinds of decisions and actions as their real-world counterparts. Now the studio has turned its attention to making coaches feel more authentic as well.

A new menu called System Proficiency gives you the breakdown of what system each coach prefers to run. Each of the many systems (like defense, triangle, perimeter centric, etc.) comes with its own set of bonuses and negative effects based on how well the coach runs the system and how well the players fit into that scheme. You can quickly understand how good a coach is with a particular scheme via the five-star rating he has, and players have a colored rating that ranges from red to green that informs you how well they fit into that system.

To make sure the systems fit the real-world NBA schemes, Visual Concepts polled coaches, players, and managers around the league. This new system will play a key role in team building both in the MyGM and MyTeam modes.



wider variety of body types and hair styles give you more tools than ever to create a unique MyPlayer. PS4 Pro and Xbox One X owners can also enjoy 4K visuals running 60 frames per second.

The biggest change coming to gameplay is a redesigned player motion system that better considers a player's size, speed, and acceleration. "We've been accused of being animation heavy at times, and this year we've done a good job of making the game feel like you are in complete control," says NBA 2K18 gameplay director Mike

Wang. The new motion system feels more sudden than the previous one, with players breaking out quickly during fastbreaks and bursting off pick and rolls. The fidelity of control also helps stay on your man while playing defense.

Last year's skill-based shooting system worked for some but frustrated others, leading to an endless stream of post-release updates as Visual Concepts tried to find a solution that made everyone happy. For NBA 2K18, the studio went back to basics. "This year it's more about the context, about your player attributes,

your badges, taking the right shots at the right moments," Wang says. "Timing's a huge factor, but it's not everything."

As of press time, Visual Concepts still hadn't shared its plans for MyCareer, but we again anticipate a heavy investment in NBA 2K's most popular mode. We hope that also comes with a renewed commitment to stabilizing online servers, a continual issue plaguing the franchise. Should Visual Concepts deliver on these shortcomings, we expect NBA 2K18 to box out the competition once again. » **Matt Bertz**



Assassin's Creed Origins

An attempt to modernize the series

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft

» **Release**
October 27

Assassin's Creed fans who have been with the series from Altair through the Frye siblings are eagerly anticipating Bayek's formation of the brotherhood in Assassin's Creed Origins. After playing the latest build of the game, it seems Origins is charting a middle path between shaking things up without losing some of the signature traits that define the series.

The demo I played started as Bayek meets up with Aya, his no-nonsense wife who has sworn fealty to Cleopatra. The two argue about the never-ending battle they have undertaken and whether they will ever

be able to settle down. The task? Discovering why a sacred animal has fallen ill, a job that involves a forensic sixth sense, a kidnapping, and a meeting with Cleopatra herself.

The first and most impressive change to the Assassin's Creed formula is how Origins handles fighting. While the previous game from the same development team, 2013's Black Flag, focused combat on parrying and chaining kills, Origins requires being aggressive to win the day. When I tried to sit back and wait for my opportunity in battle, I found the enemies to be just as cautious as me, leading to me getting overwhelmed

by incoming reinforcements.

These skills serve you well when your stealth fails, but ultimately Bayek works best from the shadows. The assassination methods of sneaking around, getting headshots with arrows, and using your hidden blade (now back in a period where assassins had to sacrifice a finger to use it) are still the best way for players to defeat a large number of enemies. With the different kinds of loot and weapons, you must bring a loadout for any situation if you want to survive.

Lots of side activities dot Egypt, including scrolls with riddles that take



Viewpoints are still in Assassin's Creed: Origins, though they do more than just show every point of interest on the map now

you to different cities and people on the street who need Bayek's help.

One side-quest involves chasing down a child pickpocket who runs afoul of some bandits. Bayek, ever the do-gooder, intervenes in the thief's troubles and discovers that his family has been sold to bandits for Oliver Twist-style thievery. Bayek investigates the area where the family is being kept only to discover it has been burned down and witnesses are unwilling to help. The quest takes some twists and turns after that, but it is not the simple one-and-done quest the series traditionally dabbles in.

Ubisoft has promised multiple characters are involved in Bayek's story, but none of them share an equal part of the spotlight. Some of those characters even get their own playable sections, but it is still firmly Bayek's story even if he occasionally cedes control.

The Assassin's Creed franchise has had stellar blockbusters and lackluster disappointments, and it remains to be seen where Origins falls on this spectrum. So far, the game shows a willingness to challenge the series' conventions and create a title willing to modernize the series rather than stay beholden to the past, which Assassin's Creed desperately needs.

» **Imran Khan**



Riverboating is a fast method of travel for when you don't need to get into the heart of the city

Need For Speed Payback

The House may not win this time around

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Ghost Games

» **Release**
November 10



If you've seen any of the game's trailers, you know that the cast of *Need for Speed Payback* is guilty of any number of moving violations. Grand larceny, destruction of property, and – if we're being honest – vehicular manslaughter. After watching several story missions in action during Gamescom, you can probably add a charge of operating without a license – specifically one for the popular *Fast and Furious* movies. The combination of criminal intrigue and over-the-top set pieces seem to work so well that we're willing to let it go with a warning, however.

The latest entry in the popular racing series is set in the Las Vegas-inspired Fortune Valley. This appropriately seedy setting is operated by a cartel known as The House. This organization controls the casinos, criminal

activity, and cops. Unfortunately for them, your group of three speed freaks is in a position to take The House down.

Your group includes Tyler, a street racer; Jess, a wheelman; and Mac, a thrill-seeking maniac. In one of the story missions, the group's plan to make smarmy tycoon Marcus Weir one exotic car lighter is thwarted. The team nearly steals Weir's Koenigsegg Regera megacar during a sanctioned street race but is the victim of another double-cross from The House. The thrilling sequence highlights mid-race character swaps timed to dramatic moments. When Tyler is swarmed by the police, control switches to Jess and her BMW M5, which is built to ram other cars off the road. Ultimately, Weir offers a choice that's really not a choice at all: go to prison, or join him

to get revenge on The House one race at a time. It may not be the most plausible scenario, but it's a great setup for an action game.

The action isn't about following a strict path. Sometimes you need to do a little exploring. As with other entries in the series, loads of side races and activities are available to keep you busy when you need a break from The House. One of the new additions is centered around objects called bait crates. These contain valuable parts for your garage, but you're going to have to earn them, first. Once you accept these missions, the trap is set and the police will swarm your position. Your job is to evade them.

The mode highlights the game's chase A.I., which is nicely tuned between being challenging without appearing overly cheap. The squad cars attempt to box you in if there are enough of them, so I have to weave in and around civilian vehicles to prevent that from happening. I run a few off the road, but they're persistent. One of the game's producers tells me you don't know the level of police activity that a particular bait crate will stir up, which adds to the challenge. It seems the police were especially invested in this particular one, but I make a clean break after outmaneuvering a dozen or so squad cars on and off the road. Knowing that the Fortune Valley police have armored trucks, helicopters, and spike strips at their disposal, I was fairly lucky. The House didn't win this time. » **Jeff Cork**



Police A.I. is solid, and pursuers will do their best to box you in

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

Same frantic battle, brand new audience

Since its Early Access launch in March on PC, PlayerUnknown's Battleground (PUBG) has captivated audiences around the world thanks to its set-up: 100 players in a deadly game of battle royale square off against each other until the last person standing emerges victorious. PUBG has proven to be an underdog's game despite its unwieldy name and status as an Early Access title, which is fitting given that anyone can emerge victorious in PlayerUnknown's gruesome and hilarious free-for-all under the right conditions. Despite the game's enormous popularity, selling over 8 million copies already, it has remained closed off to console audiences until now.

At Gamescom 2017 I played a full match of PUBG's Xbox One version, complete with an Xbox One controller and modified visuals. The result? Mostly the same, pulse-pounding game where you can bash someone's head in with a frying pan just for the heck of it.

The controller works well for PUBG, whether you are managing your inventory, camera perspective, or various fire modes for your weapons. The functions are broken down in straightforward ways, with the shoulder buttons changing your camera perspective while the face buttons are all tied to actions, like crouching, shooting, or reloading. Despite having played many hours of the game on PC,



I didn't miss the mouse and keyboard setup at all.

This version of PUBG also runs well, with frames per second always falling between 30-40, even when multiple foes are on screen. The action remains just as tight and exciting as it is in the PC version of the game, with bullets kicking up dust around your enemies as you engage in deadly encounters filled with terror and uncertainty. My experience was unmarred by glitches, choppiness, crashes, or sluggish performance.

The biggest slight that the Xbox One version of PUBG has against it is the minor visual downgrade. While graphical fidelity has never been this shooter's main hook or strength, it's hard

not to notice how ugly and muddy houses and fields look in the distance in this version, especially when you're parachuting or looking through your rifle's scope. Still, this is ultimately a small price to pay given just how well the console version runs.

The Xbox One version of PlayerUnknown's ambitious survival game is shaping up to be a great way to experience one of this year's most fascinating phenomena in gaming. Given Microsoft's new publishing deal with Bluehole, which appears to be a limited exclusivity window before PUBG eventually migrates to PS4 as well, this may be the most anticipated Xbox One game on the immediate horizon. » **Javy Gwaltney**

- » **Platform**
Xbox One
- » **Style**
Online Shooter
- » **Publisher**
Microsoft Game Studios
- » **Developer**
Bluehole Studios
- » **Release**
TBA





State Of Decay 2

Refining the zombie apocalypse

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft

» **Developer**
Undead Labs

» **Release**
Spring

Despite emerging in an era crowded to the rotting brim with games about the undead, State of Decay stood out thanks to its focus on simulating community survival and permadeath. Undead Labs touts itself as a company that knows if something's not broken, you don't fix it; that philosophy was evident at Gamescom, where State of Decay 2 demonstrated its polished and expanded take on the formula that made the original a surprise hit.

Our demo showcased many of the same features we saw at E3, including cooperative multiplayer, base-building, and characters with a variety of traits. Undead Labs also introduced us to the blood plague, a new element that can wreak havoc in your community. One of your most valuable characters might get bitten by a blood-plague carrying undead and become infected with the illness. When that happens, you only have a small window of time to find (or create) a cure. If you fail, then you need to eliminate the infected individual to save everyone else.

The blood plague is just one of many things to consider as you fight for survival in State of Decay 2. We spoke to Undead Labs' co-founder Jeff Strain to get more insight on the new and familiar features of this sequel.

Traits help determine characters' aptitudes and weaknesses. How many different possible traits does the game have?

There are over 1,000 character traits in the game, with dozens of



specialties that are mixed into the traits to make each and every character you run into different than others. This is part of what makes the game so interesting and unique, as each person's experience will be different.

When playing in co-op, you risk the permanent death of your characters. Is there any material incentive to help other players in co-op?

While we are not discussing those specifics, there will be rewards that players can take into their game.

The original game received criticism for being padded with repetitive missions. Are the missions in State of Decay 2 more varied?

The missions in State of Decay 2 are widely varied compared to State of Decay. We had an incredible reaction to State of Decay, and as we move into State of Decay 2, we are bigger, badder, bolder, and preparing a full triple-A experience for

our fans to enjoy. This means three times the area to explore and more in-depth missions.

Are any characters from the original game returning?

While State of Decay 2 does have a story and campaign, we are not discussing the full details of that right now. You have to play to find out.

What's it like working with a team that's three times the original size of the team that worked on the first game?

There is always joy in working with a small team, but ultimately it is about what you can accomplish and bring to the fans. We could not create a game the scale of State of Decay 2 with our smaller team. Ultimately, we are driven by what we create for fans to enjoy and a bigger team drives us to create a better experience for our fans to enjoy. That is what gets us out of bed in the morning. » **Javy Gwaltney**

The Crew 2

Get your kicks on any route you want

When The Crew released in 2014, Ubisoft faced criticism for the game's self-serious premise and the racing equivalent of its traditional open-world towers. After listening to feedback for The Crew 2, Ubisoft is trying to make good on the promise of racing across the United States via planes, automobiles, and water vehicles.

While playing the latest build of The Crew 2, I explored what the game is doing different from its predecessor. Ubisoft has massively expanded the map, claiming it could take about four hours by car "depending on speed" to cross its territory. Players not only take on the wide-open road, but also travel through more city streets and backwoods tracks set up for races

and challenges.

The story has the player trying to earn a reputation with various racing organizations and the world at large. While the developer wouldn't confirm that you could create your own character at the time, it heavily hinted this would be the case. The player character endears themselves to street racing families, Drift Kings, water racers, and even flying groups to increase their influence with fans and rivals alike.

Since The Crew 2 allows you to take to the road, the sky, and the water, the developers added a quick-switch to the controls. Players set favorite vehicles of each type and then click in the analog stick, similar to bringing up a weapon wheel in Assassin's

Creed, to choose between land, sea, and air. You can be driving down the street at one hundred miles per hour, take a ramp leading to a river, and quickly change to a boat to land in water safely.

When you fly a plane to the highest altitude and then switch into a car, you merely get placed back on the road, which is a disappointment. If players accidentally get stuck somewhere, they can hold both shoulder buttons to be placed back on the road, reinforcing how quick and snappy the developers want the game to be.

Quickly opening the map, zooming out, and choosing anywhere to fast-travel to is simple and easy, letting players who are getting bored flying a plane quickly transition to a motocross race or a speedboat time trial. While the demo was limited to the New York area, I found lots of different events and vehicles, including drifting through Central Park's cobblestone roads.

How The Crew 2 turns out depends on how the rest of the country feels to drive through and whether cruisin' the USA has as much to do as New York City. The act of switching between the various kinds of vehicles is surprisingly fun, and I hope the game strings them together in creative ways. The Crew 2 has the toolset to do interesting and fantastic things, but the mission design and story must lend players a helping hand to make good on that promise. » **Imran Khan**

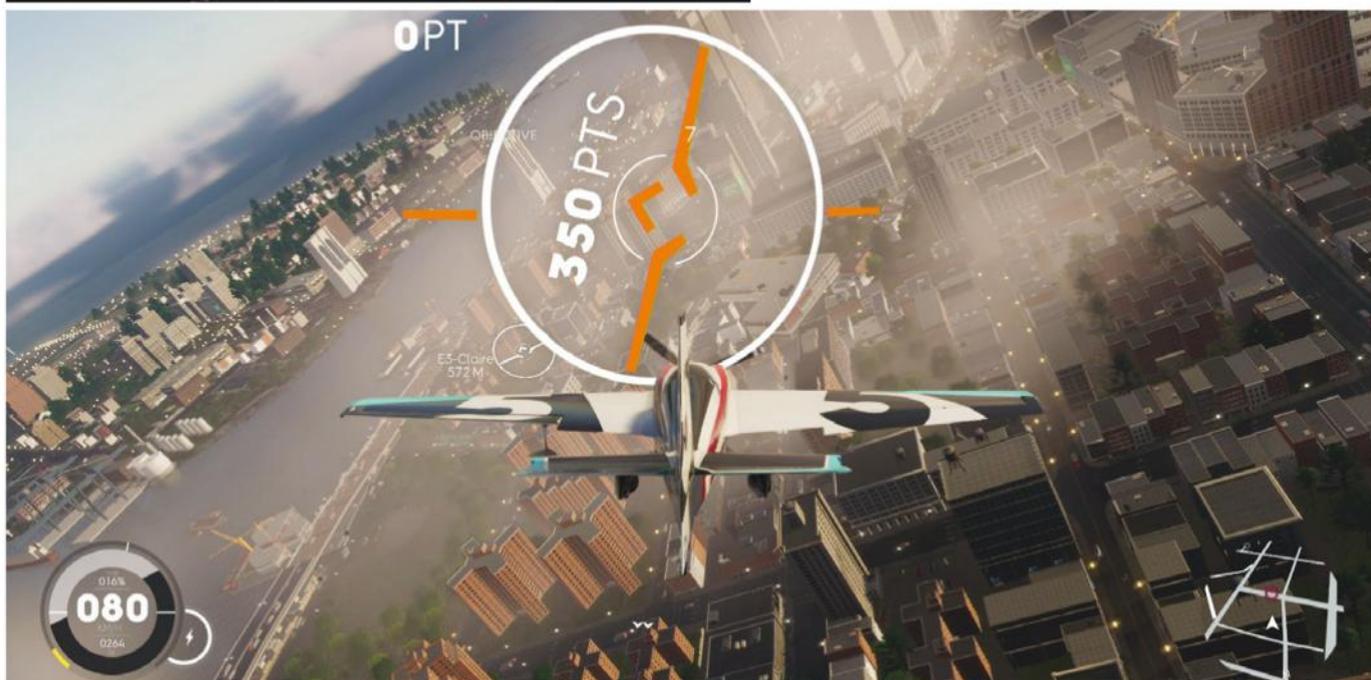
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online Racing

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ivory Tower

» **Release**
March 16



Star Wars Battlefront II

An explosive first look at the Starfighter Assault mode



» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(24-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release**
November 17

Star Wars Battlefront II is about selling the fantasy that you're a participant in Lucasfilm's iconic world. The last entry did a solid job on the ground, but space combat wasn't a priority. Considering how important those ship-to-ship battles have been in the films, it was disappointing that the reboot didn't launch with any representative gameplay. DICE later added it in via DLC, but it didn't feel as though it had been thoughtfully incorporated into the experience. Star Wars Battlefront II is charting a different course. EA revealed the new Starfighter Assault mode to the world during Gamescom 2017, and it was worth the wait.

The hands-on demo took place high above the planet Fondor, around its orbital shipyards. An Imperial Star Destroyer is a huge centerpiece of the playfield, immobilized in dry dock. Two teams of 12 approach the scenario with naturally opposing goals, with A.I. ships flying for both sides as well to increase the magnitude of each space battle. Imperial fighters have to work to defend the Star Destroyer and prevent it from being destroyed. You can guess what the Rebels' job is, though completing their mission requires careful planning and coordination. There's

a reason why Imperial Star Destroyers are so feared, after all. Since this one isn't operational, this task is well within reach.

I throw my lot in with the rest of the rebel scum, and hop into the cockpit of a T-65 X-wing. I'm immediately thrust into the space battle, and from my position I can see several intense dogfights in progress. I turn on my thrusters and head toward a pair of TIE fighters chasing after one of my rebel buddies. The first one explodes after a well-aimed salvo of laser fire, and I immediately get cocky. I turn back, hoping to take out the second, but it's clear that pilot isn't having any of my nonsense. TIE fighter pilots have a reputation for being disposable in the eyes of the Empire, and it appears that the player in control of this one was an expert role-player. We head toward each other, and he doesn't seem the slightest bit concerned that my laser cannons are tearing his hull apart. Before I can get a torpedo lock on him, he slams his ship into mine, taking us both out.

I learn from that encounter, and do my best to maintain distance between myself and the maniac TIE fighter pilots. It seems to work, and I get off a nice string of kills thanks to my

torpedoes and life-extending repair droid. All the while, we're taking out the imperial star destroyer's defenses. Eventually I respawn as one of the two hero ships available in the demo, the *Millennium Falcon*. Han Solo's iconic vessel is a joy to pilot, though it does paint a big target on my back. Fortunately, it's quite tanky. I outmaneuver incoming missiles and whittle away at enemy ships with shows of bravado I wouldn't dare try in the comparatively fragile X-wings. I even run into Boba Fett's *Slave 1*, and we fight for a while, swooping low and around the dry-dock structure with stomach-churning precision before I eventually break away.

I like to think I was contributing to our success by distracting enemy pilots long enough for the rest of my team to complete the objectives. By the time I shake off Boba Fett, I'm witness to the Star Destroyer's last moments. The rebels took out its defensive-shield generators and cannons, and blasted apart the locks that covered its reactor core. I take a few opportunistic shots at its exposed underbelly, but I'm no hero. I'm just a guy who happened to have been there in time to see the word "Victory" appear on my screen. I'll take it. » **Jeff Cork**

Cuphead

Brutal, cartoonish fun

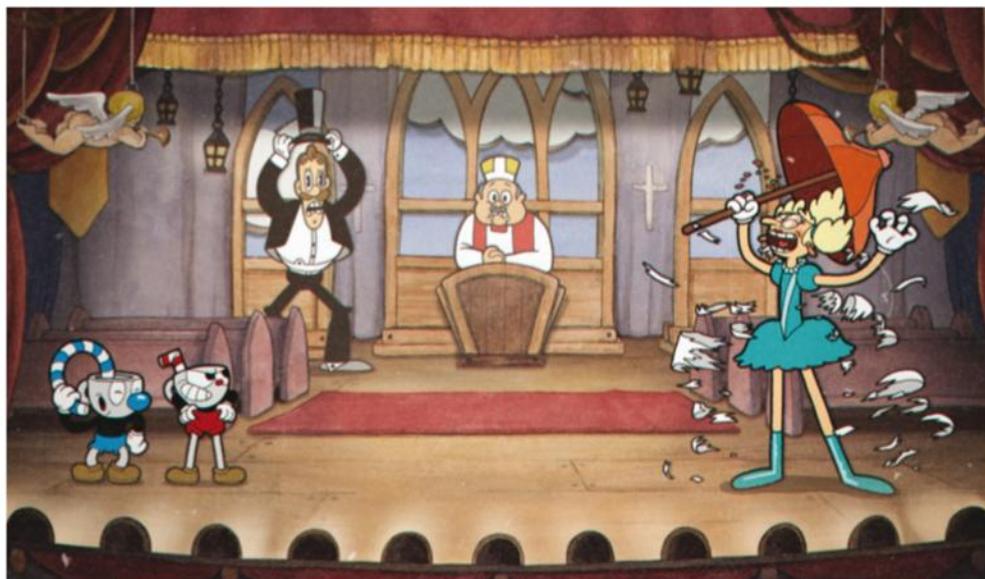
With a stylish aesthetic inspired by 1930s cartoons, Cuphead stands out immediately.

Luckily, this run-and-gun platformer isn't just visually impressive – it's also fun thanks to its fast-paced gameplay.

Cuphead is unforgivingly difficult, but in a satisfying way. The levels are reminiscent of *Contra*, where foes attack you in large numbers without restraint. I struggled to survive even the opening level, but once I succeeded a wave of joy came over me. My tiny Cuphead character waved his arms in the air while he jumped up and down, as if he were as happy as I was for the success.

Though the action is relentless and its learning curve is steep, I eventually established a rhythm and play style to better defeat my enemies. For example, you can swap between two attacks at a time. In the demo, these included both blue and red projectiles. Swapping is essential since the blue attack is more effective at long distance, and the red attack has a large area of effect that can hit multiple enemies if you aim correctly.

Much of Cuphead is centered on boss battles. These bosses are full of character, often being both monstrous and wacky. These include a crying onion with deadly tears that rain down, an oversized psychic carrot that shoots tiny carrot missiles, and giant frogs that enter a boxing match with you. Succeeding against these enemies no easy feat. As I played in



co-op alongside one of the developers, we had to coordinate while learning our foe's attack patterns, which required lots of quick thinking and dodging.

Making my way through Cuphead's world never ceased to entertain thanks to its hand-drawn, cartoonish delights. Defeated enemies disappeared into a cloud of animated smoke and Cuphead's hand would motion like a finger gun to shoot enemies. The soundtrack, based off old jazz recordings, amps up the action with fast-paced tunes and suits the

world well.

At the end of each battle or level, you are graded on your performance. This is influenced by how fast you beat the level, whether you filled up your super meter (which can unleash a strong attack), and whether you used special moves.

From what I've played so far, Cuphead's gameplay is solid and its unique world is captivating. I haven't seen any other game with a visual style quite like it, and I look forward to playing it in full when it releases this September. » **Elise Favis**

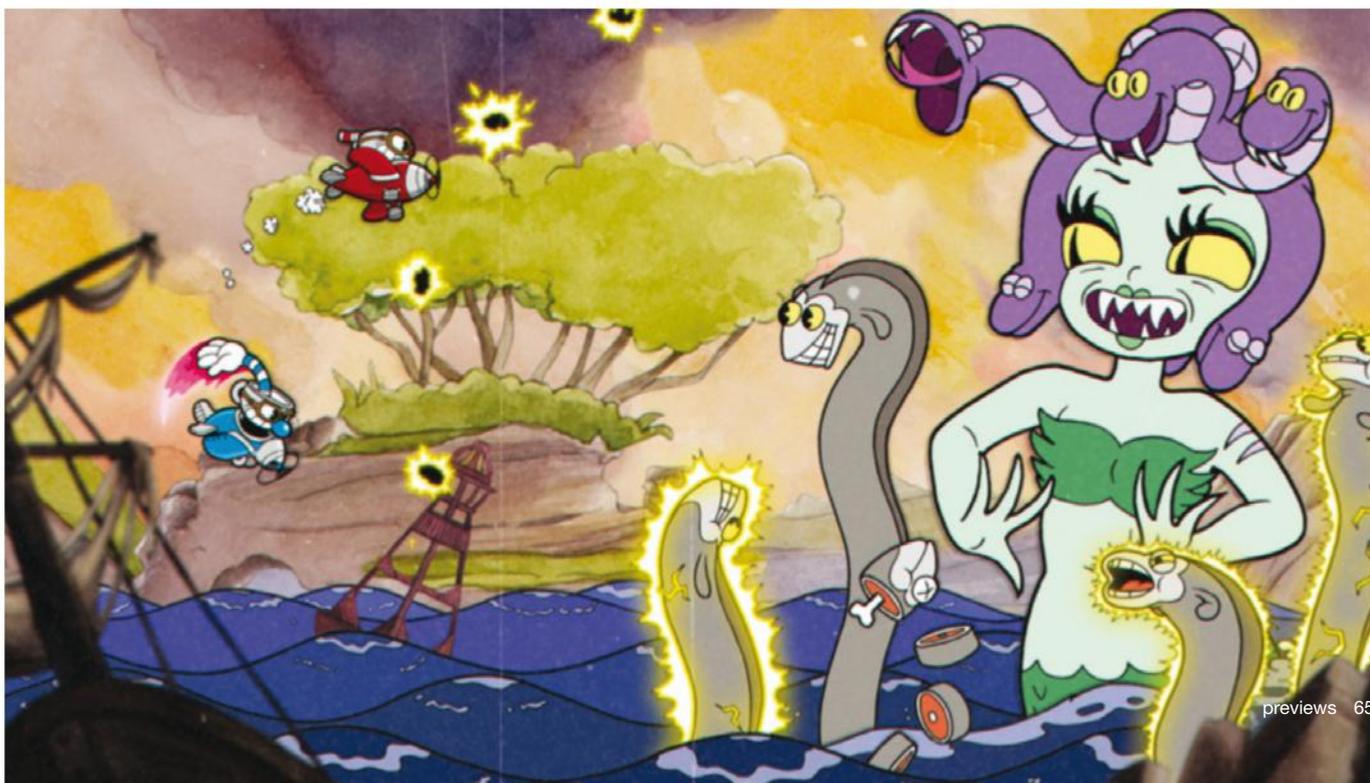
» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
StudioMDHR

» **Developer**
StudioMDHR

» **Release**
September 29



Worlds Adrift

Airships exploring new frontiers



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMO

» **Publisher**
Bossa Studios

» **Developer**
Bossa Studios

» **Release**
TBA

The PC scene is inundated with open-world exploration experiences where players must craft, survive, build, and thrive alone or with friends. Bossa Studios' upcoming sandbox blends the worlds of fantasy and sci-fi with a giant world in which players must assemble massive airships to traverse.

Starting with a grappling hook and your wits, players can freely explore giant sky islands nearby, collecting resources to make weapons, tools, and eventually their ship. Swinging around to the underbelly of islands to find hidden caves and treasures is

exhilarating, but be careful, as there's quite a drop should your swinging miss the mark. Creation of a ship allows fast travel through the skies and access to new areas, but you must be cautious – huge, dangerous things could appear in the airy mists, and other risks like storms or weather problems could knock you off your vessel into the cloudy void.

You can build a good deal of protection into your aircraft alongside upgrades, from spawn point generators, new engines, weapons, wing layouts, and more. The shipbuilding aspect gives Worlds Adrift some fresh

elements even in a congested genre, as you band up with buddies to sail the skies on increasingly more majestic rigs. There's somewhat of a progression system as you acquire new technology and ship tech that can take you through to increasingly more risky and wild biomes.

Bossa is using Improbable's SpatialOS physics engine to create Worlds Adrift's huge, persistent play space. Ripples from other player's actions and existence, such as wreckage from fallen ships or farmed-out clusters of peaceful animals, can have echoes forever. It's possible to completely alter the ecology of a biome through extermination, or stumble upon a long-lost player-created craft far from civilization.

Naturally, every encounter in these lands isn't friendly. Open player vs. player ensures that you'll be dealing with plenty of real conflict in addition to the monster NPCs, and most of what you carry is fair game for looting should another player best you.

Bossa Studios' airship-foray into the MMO world is an ambitious one, and we're eager to see more. Currently available on the Early Access program on Steam, the title is still searching the skies for a hard release date.

» **Daniel Tack**





Total War: Warhammer II

New races join the epic battle

Total War: Warhammer released to critical acclaim last year, and the sequel is following hot on its tails. With a new campaign, a basket of iconic races and factions, and more spell-slinging, real-time-strategy action set in the framework of Creative Assembly's (usually) historically based war epics, Total War: Warhammer II offers a huge chunk of content for battle fans and Warhammer enthusiasts alike.

The campaign is more focused in scope than its predecessor, as you choose to either save or disrupt the Great Vortex. Players explore the continents of Ulthuan, Naggaroth, Southlands, and Lustria. You can play as one of four races new to the series – High Elves, Dark Elves, Lizardmen, or Skaven. That's right, you can lead your conquest with rats at last. The other races are cool and all, but nothing beats Skaven. In addition to the new races, if you have Total War: Warhammer, you can play with any of the races you own.

Gameplay is again a mix of two classic PC genres. First you engage in traditional strategy and city-building as you raise forces, purchase upgrades,

and put together armies of units, jockeying for position and power on the world map. As you fight other armies and settlements, you are thrust into the chair of a real-time strategy commander, taking direct control of your units and powers.

While hardcore history fans may balk at the series delving into fantasy and magic, the battles are strategy

gems that include flying beasts and magic spells, unique wrinkles that add a little more zing than simple hordes of axe-wielding soldiers lumbering toward walls with a trebuchet.

While it's only a year after Creative Assembly's original foray of taking its wargames to the realm of high fantasy, expectations for Total War: Warhammer II are high. » **Daniel Tack**

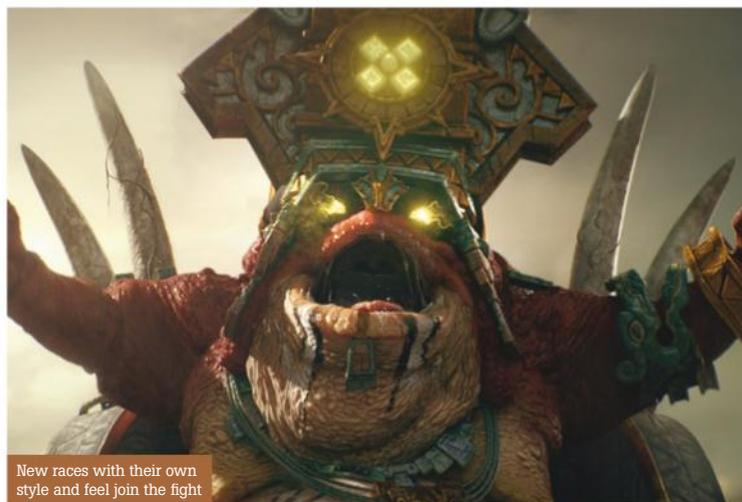
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(8-player online)

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Creative Assembly

» **Release**
September 28



New races with their own style and feel join the fight

Rend

Survive against inevitable destruction



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMO

» **Publisher**
Frostkeep Studios

» **Developer**
Frostkeep Studios

» **Release**
TBA

Three factions battle for supremacy in a fantasy/RPG world where you must craft, gain new skills, and build up a base to survive. This concept may sound commonplace on the PC scene, but *Rend* has a catch: You're not only fighting against the other two factions, but a hellish force of demons gets progressively stronger and aims to destroy everyone at the same time. The last faction standing wins, and your job is to build up your defenses against the conquering horde and cripple your opponents so that the demonic tide washes over them first.

Each server plays out as a game of survival, from humble beginnings hunting for scraps out in the wilderness to defending mammoth bases against player and monster alike. The demons continue to grow stronger the longer the game goes on.

You interact directly and indirectly with opposing factions for a better chance at success, including engaging in risky romps out to highly unstable, dangerous territory where special artifacts are located. If secured, these relics can give your team a serious edge, but they are also vulnerable during acquisition and transit, so

prepare for triple-faction wars over these essential boons as they are stripped from ancient tombs.

Through the course of a game, players research new weapons, armor, abilities, magic, and even mounts by taking on NPCs, like a RPG. Your base is secured and safe during the majority of gameplay, allowing players

time to go out and develop, but during the "Time of Reckoning" bases are fair game for both demons and players, so preparing for these assaults is essential.

Survival experiences are a dime a dozen on Steam at this point, but *Rend* is looking to spice things up with this different take. » **Daniel Tack**



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Biomutant

A strange (and promising) hybrid

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
THQ Nordic

» **Developer**
Experiment 101

» **Release**
2018

We've seen open-world games with the heart of a stylish-action romp and an action/RPG skeleton, but not many starring a furry creature who can manipulate his genetic composition to barf out enemy-distracting moths and summon bouncy mushrooms. Even stranger, the disparate parts seem to fit together effectively in Biomutant, though the result is not a beast you're going to confuse with anything else out there. Developer Stefan Ljungqvist sums up the game beautifully: "It's

weird, in a good way."

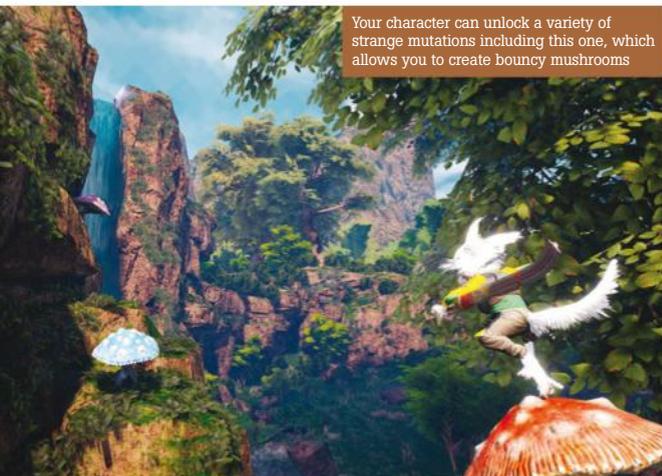
Biomutant stars a raccoon-like creature, whose name is one of the game's central mysteries. Ljungqvist walks me through the opening of the game, starting with the character creator. Players can choose between a male or female critter, change its body shape, and tweak the fur – including its style, pattern, and colors. Regardless of how you shape your character, you're going to be adept with both blade and bullet. In the demo, the creature is a treat to watch. It's fast and agile, whether using its sword to juggle enemies into the air or jumping up itself to rain down lead-tinged destruction from above. Weapons can be modified and crafted, and there's plenty of loot with stat boosts and fun effects to discover. For example, electric bullets incapacitate foes while showing off their skeleton in classic cartoon form.

The creature can also incorporate a variety of different mutations and psi abilities, which can be mapped to the face buttons and accessed by pressing the left trigger. These include those previously mentioned moths and mushrooms, and other powers such as the ability to shoot lightning from your fingertips or use telekinesis. The goal is to let players experiment,

such as using telekinesis to hurl an explosive barrel at a large enemy to destroy his car-door shield. Abilities can be used in combos, too. Instead of simply picking up a mutated spider and telekinetically slamming it against a wall, why not throw it into a bouncy mushroom and watch as it's launched helplessly into a pool of toxic sludge?

That toxic sludge is probably the greatest threat in Biomutant, even if it isn't actively trying to hunt you down. The world, as beautiful as it may appear, is dying thanks to a poisonous oily substance that's started pooling up. The tree of life, a plant of great importance in the game, is being destroyed as well. Players can help restore its root system – and the tree itself – or not. Ljungqvist says the choice is up to the player, and they'll have to face the consequences. Similarly, the game features six different warring tribes, and players have the freedom to choose a faction and defeat its enemies, find ways to unite them, or simply destroy all of them. Ljungqvist says these actions will affect the game's ending, and in ways that are more meaningful and surprising than just showing off a few different cutscenes. Based on what we've seen of the game so far, we wouldn't expect anything less. » **Jeff Cork**

Your character can unlock a variety of strange mutations including this one, which allows you to create bouncy mushrooms



Fantasy Strike

Same strategy, simpler fighting

Between special moves that require specific joystick motions and intricate combos to memorize, the line between having casual fun in a fighting game and building your skills competitively can be difficult to cross. With Fantasy Strike, veteran fighting game player and designer David Sirlin (who previously led the HD Remix of Super Street Fighter II Turbo in 2009) and his team at Sirlin Games hope to make it a little easier. After playing a few rounds of a pre-alpha build, we're hopeful about its chances as an introduction to a tough genre.

Fantasy Strike retains many of the verbs from fighting games, but simplifies the way you express them. Rather than using six attack buttons to pull off special moves, throws, and supers, you have one attack button (with no highs or lows to worry about), two buttons for special moves, plus solo buttons for jumping, throwing, and a super. This lets you focus on how to implement each of these moves in combat rather than how to actually perform them.

While the setup sounds simplistic, it still allows for interesting strategies

and character diversity. Setsuki, for example, can teleport to either attack or throw her opponent, as well as dodge incoming attacks. While airborne, she can throw a kunai or dive across the top of the screen like a flying squirrel. Rook, on the other hand, can't move around as well, but has powerful throws and a special punch that can't be interrupted by a single attack. In just a couple of matches, I felt the huge difference between these two characters without having to pour over a move list.

That doesn't mean you should skip the game's practice mode altogether,

though. Combos still exist, and with characters having a maximum of eight health, even a three or four-hit combo can be devastating. It doesn't take long to find and learn these combos, however, which should cut down on time spent building muscle memory.

While hardcore fighting game fans often scoff at their favorite genre being simplified, Fantasy Strike could offer an appealing inroad for those who like the thrill of competition but don't want to spend hours finding and memorizing options and combos before heading into battle.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

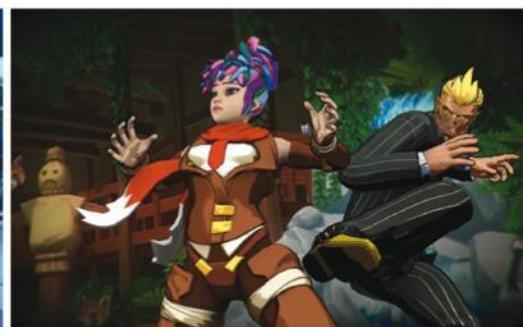
» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting

» **Publisher**
Sirlin Games

» **Developer**
Sirlin Games

» **Release**
2018



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Gundam Versus

Lock-on, shot-up robots



» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco

» **Release**
September 29

The Gundam Versus series has maintained a cult following in several countries after releasing in arcades and PSP in Japan. Its high-speed, arcade-style combat values strong two-on-two competition and fan service in equal measure, making it a fit for *Gundam* and multiplayer fans alike. With *Gundam Versus*, Bandai Namco is finally bringing the series over to the West.

For those not in the know, this is a good point to jump in. The PlayStation 4 entry makes a couple of changes, but the *Versus* series' tenets remain intact. First, you select one of over 90 mobile suits spanning from the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* to the more recent *Thunderbolt* series. (The most notable omission I noticed was *G Gundam*.) After selecting a mobile suit, you can choose one assist

character, which you can call in during combat to lob one attack then leave.

Combat is simple. Each mobile suit has two different kinds of attacks mapped to the square and triangle buttons. Most mobile suits' arsenals are limited, making movement (comprised of short and long-range dashes, as well as a few flight options) a huge factor. You are nearly always locked-on to a nearby enemy unit (you can swap targets any time), which means you don't need much camera control to play. In fact, the game can be played entirely on a fighting game-style arcade stick. I played with a regular PS4 controller and found it more than adequate for zipping around the battlefield, however.

Each mobile suit has its own strengths and weaknesses. As a Gouf Custom, I had access to an arm-mounted Gatling gun and metal sword, which gave me a good mix of close and mid-range attacks. As a Guntank, I had no close-range weapon but had a mid-range arm machine gun and two long-range shoulder-mounted cannons, which were immensely powerful but hard to aim. As a Deathscythe Hell, my head-mounted vulcan machine guns were weak, but my dual beam scythe combo was devastating when I could land it.

Although each mobile suit's options

are limited, tracking down and hitting a human opponent kept me tense throughout most matches. Dashes lead to attacks and more dashes fluidly, and landing the first hit of a simple combo means eyeing my locked-on target and waiting for an opening. You only have a few respawns in multiplayer, and a single death can immediately put you on the defensive. The ability to activate one of two gear special abilities that offer acute or longer-lasting bumps in power gives each player a shot at a comeback.

Players earn points to unlock more playable and assist mobile suits by playing any game mode. This includes a short, fighting-game style arcade mode, a wave-based survival mode, and multiplayer, which has a casual and ranked mode. I didn't find playing against computer-controlled opponents nearly as thrilling, however, though you can tweak the bot difficulty to your liking.

The limited modes and lack of stimulating computer opponents are a little concerning, but the real test when *Gundam Versus* hits in late September will be how the online multiplayer holds up, both on a technical and long-term competitive level. As a longtime-but-lapsed *Gundam* fan, I'm eager to see the final result.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Lost Sphear

Keeping that old-school '90s RPG feel

Square Enix subsidiary Tokyo RPG Factory, a studio heavily influenced by classic RPGs from the '90s, made its debut last year with *I Am Setsuna*. The game was a nice homage to popular RPGs of yesteryear, especially *Chrono Trigger*, but struggled to find its own identity or bring much aside from nostalgia. Even so, the studio's first game showed potential, with entertaining combat and moving music. Now Tokyo RPG Factory is trying again with a new game called *Lost Sphear*, which borrows heavily from *I Am Setsuna*. Hopefully Tokyo RPG Factory can build upon what it has learned and add some fresh ideas.

In *Lost Sphear*, the main character awakens to his hometown disappearing, and must go on a journey to rebuild the world to save it from being lost forever. I recently played the game to see how it is shaping up. The demo showed off combat positioning, vibrant locales (a nice change of pace from *I Am Setsuna*'s dreary snow), and fantastic music. It also featured our first look at inns, which were absent from its predecessor.



Now you can restore your health at these, instead of just at tents and save points. You still explore towns, discover loot, and engage in side activities like cooking during your trek to restore the world.

Lost Sphear's active time battle system seems similar to its predecessor, bringing back the momentum system, which grants you additional damage if you press the square button when a blue light flashes across the screen. You can now manually move your character across the battlefield, making your positioning play a bigger role. You no longer have to worry about your target

being off by millimeters, which was a frustrating portion of *I Am Setsuna*. Sadly, because the demo takes place early in the game, I didn't get to see any combo attacks.

Tokyo RPG Factory says it's also improving the skill acquisition system, which lets you exchange spoils from battle for new abilities. It should be friendlier at tracking down the ones you need for your desired skill. Clearly a lot of work has gone into listening to feedback for improvements, but Square assures us *Lost Sphear* also has new features, which we'll hear more about at a later date. » **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
PS4 • Switch • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-playing
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Tokyo RPG Factory
- » **Release**
January 23



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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

80 XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen

Firaxis once again proves its prowess with this ambitious expansion that builds off the successes of XCOM 2 while integrating new features into the pre-existing framework. War of the Chosen is a must-play for strategy fans.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The number of SNES Classic Editions you were able to pre-order + 1.

AWARDS

 gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
 gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
 gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
 gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Batman: The Enemy Within – Episode One: The Enigma

A disturbing return

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Batman faces off against a crazed Riddler, who favors decapitations just as much as mind-bending puzzles. The dark tone overshadows an otherwise fascinating Bruce Wayne story

» Graphics

Animations are rough, but most of the shots are nicely framed. The “brooding hoodie look” for Riddler also works

» Sound

As demented as Riddler’s actions are, his character is portrayed as articulate and intelligent – a mix that works well. The mistrust in Amanda Waller’s voice is also captured beautifully

» Playability

Welcome to Quick-Time Event City! Combat sequences are littered with them, even a couple that push the player to hit all four face buttons at once

» Entertainment

Some of the brief teases point toward a more meaningful story, but this episode mostly hangs its hat on an underwhelming and surprisingly violent Riddler tale

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Telltale Games Developer Telltale Games Release August 8 Rating M

Telltale’s unique take on Batman’s lore was mostly successful in the first season. Villains transformed into allies, and everyday nobodies emerged as unexpected threats, all as Bruce Wayne’s sanity was tested. From Lady Arkham to Two-Face, a key theme in the story was duality. Almost every prominent figure had an alternate persona or hidden agenda – we even learned Bruce Wayne’s parents were deserving of a cell in Arkham Asylum.

In *The Enigma*, the premiere episode of a new five-part season, Telltale clearly liked its first taste of bat blood, and may have gone a little wild from it. This new story is aggressively dark and gruesome, flighty in its character building, and more about shocking moments than establishing the foundation of a cohesive narrative.

This episode focuses mostly on The Riddler, who looks like the character comic fans have known for decades at first glance. He wears green, his calling card is a question mark, and he gives you a chance to escape or catch him if you solve his elaborate riddles. Despite the familiar antics, this Riddler is darker than any version I’ve seen before; Telltale turns him into Jigsaw from the *Saw* movies. His riddle machines slice off fingers and heads, and cook you if you don’t move fast enough. When backed into a corner, he lashes out and tries to murder as many people as possible. The duality Telltale achieved with Penguin, Two-Face, and Catwoman is nowhere to be found in this villain. He’s just a one-note killing machine, and a pawn for a larger story arc that we



only briefly get a whiff of at the end of the episode.

The most interesting moments in this episode are the interstitial moments showing Bruce Wayne develop a relationship with John Doe, who we all know eventually becomes The Joker. Telltale is taking its time with this powder keg of a friendship, perhaps even letting players entertain the belief they can save him from becoming Batman’s greatest villain. This relationship is wonderfully cryptic at this point, and I hope Telltale continues to evolve it slowly.

The introduction of Amanda Waller is also an interesting curveball, but depending on how you play your cards, it leads to an odd skip in the narrative where a rift is immediately formed between James Gordon and Batman. Mere minutes before this moment, everything is fine between the two – they are chummy and work well together. What happens next is a moment where Telltale goes too far in drumming up contention for a key “player choice” moment. The fracturing of this relationship is shoehorned in, but does give way to nice mystery that begs the questions why Waller is in Gotham, and what form her Agency will take.

The narrative in this episode is a mess, weighed down by too much Riddler mayhem, with a few bright spots hopefully sowing the seeds for a better second act.

Gameplay mostly revolves around extensive quick-time events, with each button press unleashing a powerful

choreographed Batman combat sequence. Telltale tries to up the difficulty with how many buttons the player must push at once. Often you are required to press a direction along with a face button. You are even required to press all four face buttons at once in two battles – moments that show the apex of how silly quick-time events can be. I’ve said this before, but these actions don’t feel like player input; they do little more than slow down what would otherwise be a fun movie sequence to watch.

The only gameplay deviation that legitimately feels like the player has agency is a “do or die” Riddler puzzle with multiple choices, fail states, and just one solution. If you really think about what the puzzle is, the solution is easy, but Telltale does a nice job ramping up the tension in this point. I guessed wildly my first time, died, and was hit with a “oh duh” realization on my second attempt. Telltale needs more sequences like this, where you feel like you are doing detective work with a gun pointed at the back of your head.

The *Enigma* lives up to its name of being difficult to understand from start to finish. Telltale is all over the place in this episode, but the desire to be gritty and different is exposed too much and the story suffers from it, feeling more like an odd one shot than the first part of something larger. Mysteries abound, however, and enough engaging narrative threads are left dangling to potentially right this second season’s direction. » **Andrew Reiner**





Yakuza Kiwami

A blast from the past



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sega Developer Sega Release August 29 Rating M

8.5

Sega started the year off with a wonderful surprise in the form of *Yakuza 0*. The series has been around for a decade, but that prequel entry held the door open for new players who hadn't yet been admitted to the club. I was among those new players and, like many, I was excited to continue following the adventures of Kazuma Kiryu and company. *Yakuza Kiwami* makes it simple. It's a PS4 remake of the PS2 original, and a direct successor to *Yakuza 0* – both in presentation and narrative. It's mostly more of the same great game, though it's noticeably stifled by being bound to a 10-year-old release.

The series has been compared to *Grand Theft Auto*, but it's more like an open-world RPG/brawler. Rather than focus on driving around and causing mayhem, your character wanders the streets of a fictionalized Tokyo district, battling thugs and enhancing his arcade-inspired fighting abilities.

Yakuza Kiwami's story begins several years after the events of *Yakuza 0*, with Kiryu now a respected player in Japan's criminal underworld. He gets caught up in a murder and ends up serving 10 years in prison. After his release (and a merciful time skip), he has to unravel a mystery involving murder and the theft of 10 billion yen. It's melodramatic stuff that teeters on the edge of being needlessly complicated, but the cast of menacing thugs and honorable criminals kept me from being tempted to skip the lengthy cutscenes.

While the campaign veers toward being self-serious, it's a hard turn from the side missions. These optional diver-

sions make up the bulk of the long running time, and they primarily focus on helping citizens by giving them items or offering some form of protection. Most of these feel like relics of the original release, and they don't often expand the formula in any interesting ways like some of *Yakuza 0*'s did with weird trivia or one-off stealth sequences. I understand this is a remake of a decade-old game, but that doesn't make the repetitive side missions any easier to stomach. Minigames including darts, pool, and skill-crane challenges are back, and they're a nice break from all the fetching and fighting.

Sega added some new activities that weren't in the original release, including the return of *Yakuza 0*'s pocket racers and a bug-battling arcade game, each of which includes a multi-stage quest chain. I enjoyed catching up with *Pocket Circuit Fighter* and the crew of kid racers, and even though they're clearly getting older, they still enjoy racing the customizable toys. I wish I could be as enthusiastic about *MesuKing: Battle Bug Beauties*. This card game is a dead-simple rock-paper-scissors challenge, with the main attraction being that you watch women in skimpy insect-inspired costumes grapple and writhe around. It's creepier than a bucket of centipedes, and absolutely no fun at all.

The biggest addition is the inclusion of the new Majima Everywhere system. You can't play as Goro Majima in *Yakuza Kiwami*, but he does play a newly elevated role. Kiryu got a little soft during his time in prison, according to Majima, and the character wants to help Kiryu get his mojo back. He helps

by challenging Kiryu to random battles in the world. These encounters can be as simple as running into Majima, or getting jumped in the middle of another battle. He also pops out from under manhole covers and a variety of strange disguises. Each battle rewards you with experience to upgrade your abilities, as well as a chance to unlock moves in your special dragon style of combat. Combat is simple and satisfying, with over-the-top animations that add weight to the brawling action.

Majima's transformation from *Yakuza 0*'s stoic nightclub manager to the so-called Mad Dog of Shimano is jarring, and there isn't any connective tissue that explains it in any satisfying way. That's largely a criticism of *Yakuza 0*, but a new explanatory cutscene or two would have gone a long way. I learned to tolerate his oddball Joker-meets-Jar Jar persona, however, possibly because most of our encounters ended up with me smashing a bicycle over his back.

I had a lot of fun with *Yakuza Kiwami*, but it occupies a strange place. I commend Sega for the extra lengths it took with the remake – including replacing the Western actors from the original release with all-new dialogue from the Japanese actors – but feels like a relic at times. The game's overall scale is still impressively large, but there's only one main area to explore. Visiting the first entry, enhanced as it is, certainly gave me a greater appreciation for the strides that the series made later. That's probably not what Sega was hoping for here, but it's unavoidable considering the close proximity to *Yakuza 0*'s release. » **Jeff Cork**

PS4

» Concept

Remake the first entry in the *Yakuza* series in the style of *Yakuza 0*, adding new activities and restoring the Japanese voiceovers

» Graphics

Though the overall quality is inconsistent, the visuals are undeniably easier on the eyes than its PS2 counterpart

» Sound

It may lack the star power of the original release, but the cast sells the story well enough that longtime fans probably won't miss Michael Madsen or Mark Hamill, who lent their talents to the original release

» Playability

Returning players will be right at home, and they'll enjoy the quality-of-life improvements added since its original release

» Entertainment

Yakuza Kiwami is a sprawling adventure, but – as enhanced as it is – it's clearly a foundational entry in the series

» Replay Value

Moderately high



Madden NFL 18

A tale of two halves

8.25

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 25 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

Madden 18's additions mainly skew to the hardcore/competitive crowd, but the Longshot story mode is also worth a look

» Graphics

The new Frostbite engine makes everything look great without negatively impacting gameplay

» Sound

Commentary has more context around what's going on in the game as well as historic stats

» Playability

Target passing for QBs is easy to perform, but hard to master in the heat of the moment. However, it's a useful tool that pays dividends. The controls feel good overall, and stick skills are rewarded

» Entertainment

Madden 18's benefits don't immediately jump out at you, but they are worth exploring

» Replay Value

High

Fans are sometimes confused by the players NFL teams draft. Players are taken at positions the team is already strong at, while weaknesses are seemingly ignored. Fans deem some players a reach, and don't understand why their favorites weren't drafted. Madden NFL 18 produces a similar reaction. It plays to its competitive/hardcore side seemingly at the expense of its career-focused Connected Franchise mode (CFM), and its Longshot story mode is an entirely different kind of experience. But Madden 18 can't easily be characterized by what's on the back of the box. Underneath what seems like a collection of thrown-together or even uninteresting features is a good game whose rewards are less readily apparent.

The Longshot story exemplifies this situation. This four-hour mode follows college dropout Devin Wade's attempt to get into the NFL. The story is more about provoking feelings about Devin and the Texas football environment he grew up in than it is about player freedom and seeing if all your choices are precisely reflected in a particular ending. Gameplay mainly consists of quick-time events, dialogue choices, Devin playing QB, and some minigames. However, the excitement comes not from the gameplay, but from understanding Devin's mindset and making decisions that feel true in tense situations. By that measure, it's a success.

While Longshot is an experience everyone can relate to, Madden 18's overall bent toward competitive players

and Ultimate Team mode lurches the game hard in the opposite direction. The grind for cards that is Ultimate Team gets even more onion layers through a leveling system, player upgrades, and team tokens. Earning more stuff to apply may sound appealing for diehard MUT players, but these additions are just more gates that contribute to the mode's already brutal grind.

Ultimate Team gets even more competitive through 3v3 co-op MUT Squads. Its team-based play requires the coordination of seasoned players who can run a pass route and stay focused on their roles. The mode has its moments when everyone contributes, but even on a good play, you're often isolated on the field or arriving late to the action (although the player switching is good), limiting its appeal.

MUT Squads may not always be engrossing, but you can still reap the benefits of one of its features: the new wide receiver vs. defensive back chess match mechanics where WRs and DBs use the right analog stick to get better positioning on each other. Similarly, competitive players will love playing with the target-passing QB mechanic to place the ball where only the receiver can catch it. The latter isn't easy to use in the thick of battle, but the value of these features isn't measured in the total time you use them. Instead, it's in the enjoyment you get from them and their usefulness.

Another thing that both hardcore and casual players can savor is the feel of the running game. It controls smoothly

with just the left analog stick, and from there you can add jukes and spins, which have extra importance. Overall the game has more big runs and crushing hits than last year, particularly in the optional competitive play style.

Madden 18 exhibits a split nature in other ways. The Frostbite engine adds great detail and a color warmth, but the framerate stutters. The offensive line does a great job getting to the second level and opening up more visible running lanes, but magnet tackles still rule behind the line of scrimmage. More incompletions occur, but some beggar belief, such as when your QB plants his feet and misses a wide-open receiver by a mile just because a defender was closing your pocket.

As for CFM, it has its own contradiction. The mode is largely the same, but its stasis feels different because with more short and mid-length injuries, team depth is paramount. This puts a renewed importance on your scouting, drafting (which now lets you create a custom draft board), and free agency even though these areas need overhauls to import more NFL drama, user options like more complex contracts, and an expanded coaching staff to reflect the importance of a good team structure.

Madden 18 is missing a host of fixes, wish-list staples, and improvements. However, it captures the joy that I find in playing video game football even after all these years through the continuing refinement of gameplay and modes that still have the ability to surprise and excite. » **Matthew Kato**

Agents Of Mayhem

Explosive, absurd fun

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Deep Silver Developer Volition Release August 15 Rating M

8

PS4 • Xbox One

In many ways, Agents of Mayhem feels like a child smashing action figures together and making explosion sound effects. On one hand (the one holding the bad guy), the game is a shallow rumination on good versus evil. On the other hand (the one holding the hero), it's silly in all the right ways that make it entertaining and fun to play. The imprint of developer Volition's previous series, Saint's Row, is impossible to ignore. Both are open-world games with over-the-top characters and explosive action, but despite that heritage, Agents of Mayhem finds an identity of its own thanks to the memorable characters, even if the action is familiar.

Agents of Mayhem is an open-world game with all the familiar trappings of the genre. You can steal cars and drive them around with reckless abandon, tackle sidequests littered across the map, and shoot your way into and out of trouble on your mission to disrupt the bad guys' plans. It sets itself apart from other open-world games in a few ways, however. Seoul is small, meaning you never have to drive far to get in trouble, and the car you can instantly call in at any time is always far superior than anything you can find in the wild. You also switch among a cast of unlockable playable characters each with distinct abilities and playstyles.

Volition once described Agents of Mayhem as being similar to a Saturday-morning cartoon like G.I. Joe, and the comparison is apt. Each of the 12 playable characters and all the villains are completely different. They look like they were designed to be action figures from the start, except they have no qualms with profanity and cheer when a particularly troublesome bad guy gets his head violently blown off. The characters are juvenile, and they are participating in an immature story, but they're well-realized and I like them for different reasons – like Daisy's drunken disdain for authority, or Rama's mission to save her homeland from a seemingly unstoppable disease.

Beyond their unique personalities, each playable character feels different and uses different weapons. I quickly gravitated toward Fortune with her fast movement and awesome jumping animations, but you can also forgo guns entirely and use a character like the melee-focused Scheherazade, or use both. You take three Agents with you to most missions, which lets you experiment while still keeping your favorites in

rotation. The shooting (explosive barrels are everywhere), driving (ramps are easy to find), and jumping feel great, making each agent a superhero in their own way, but I did run into physics hiccups occasionally. Some actions feel too slow, like switching between your three characters or using a special ability, leading to the occasional unfair death.

The futuristic version of Seoul that serves as the setting for all the action is bland, with few memorable locations. It hampers the experience as an open-world game, but its variety of missions makes up for it. Agents of Mayhem is an underwhelming open-world game, but it's a great action game.

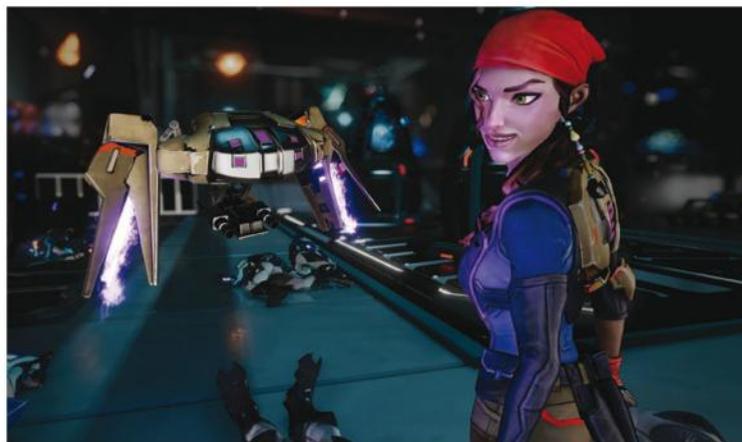
The story is stupid, but I mean that in a complimentary way. Agents of Mayhem thinks it's funnier than it is, but its lighthearted atmosphere and goofy characters make the hundred jokes that flop forgivable when you do run into one that hits and makes you chuckle. I wasn't so much engaged in trying to uncover everyone's motivation and stop the bad guys as much as I was eager to see the new character

interactions and perform the next bizarre task. One boss fight, for example, has you trying to hack the autotune software of an evil popstar between bouts of gunfire so his fans hear his true voice and turn on him.

Every character, even the ones you aren't using, level up at a steady clip, earning new abilities you can apply any time you want. You can also send unused agents out on missions to earn money and rewards in the background and level up broader abilities affecting everyone, like faster cooldowns and experience multipliers. The result is an excellent pace of rewards for nearly every action that make the characters stronger and offer more options to customize them to your personal playstyle.

Agents of Mayhem is cheesy, rarely funny, and generally ridiculous, but I was eager to play for long periods of time. The action is frenetic and fun, with room for strategy using all the characters' assorted abilities. Even if Seoul ends up being a bland backdrop, I enjoyed being in the world and causing explosions at every opportunity.

» Kyle Hilliard



» Concept

A cast of characters that wouldn't be out of place in an '80s Saturday-morning cartoon take their battle of good versus evil to the streets of future sci-fi Seoul

» Graphics

Character designs are distinct and memorable, but the city of Seoul looks the same throughout. The same can be said of its repeated rooftop and underground environments

» Sound

The licensed music of Volition's Saint's Row games is sorely missed, but the enjoyable, over-the-top voice acting of each character makes it worth avoiding the mute button

» Playability

The driving, shooting, and triple-jump platforming feel great, but switching characters and pulling off special moves sometimes feels needlessly delayed

» Entertainment

Agents of Mayhem is absurd, but it leans into its own insanity in a charming way and backs it all up with fun, explosive action

» Replay Value

Moderate

XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen

The pièce de alien résistance

9.25

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games
Developer Firaxis **Release** August 29 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Take Firaxis' robust sci-fi strategy game and pack in an impressive amount of new content until you have a strategy experience that is nigh-infinite replayable

» Graphics

These procedurally generated levels feel even more robust than before, and the list of customization features for your player-created characters allows you to create nearly any rag-tag team of freedom fighters you can dream up

» Sound

XCOM's creepy digital score is a great soundtrack for kicking alien butt, but it feels too repetitive by the end of the game

» Playability

Controller support is welcome, but the mouse/keyboard interface is still the most intuitive

» Entertainment

Overpowered aliens and a run of bad luck can test your resolve, but there is almost always a way out of every jam thanks to XCOM's layered strategy

» Replay Value

High

Firaxis' alien-blasting strategy game is so finely balanced that if the developer pushed too hard on any of its systems the whole game could completely break. This existing complexity makes XCOM 2's War of the Chosen expansion feel like a magic trick, because Firaxis adds nearly a game's worth of new content into the existing framework without compromising any of its mechanics. XCOM's strategy has never been richer.

Like Firaxis' previous expansions, War of the Chosen weaves an extensive number of fresh ideas into the base game. With no new campaign, players must start a new game that features all of XCOM 2's content up to this point. However, given XCOM's procedurally generated nature, I never felt like I was replaying the same missions from last year's release. On the contrary, within the first hour of War of the Chosen, I had already encountered new environments, faced off against a variety of unique aliens, and eagerly deployed new combat units onto the battlefield.

One of the most noticeable additions to War of the Chosen are the titular Chosen. These three new individual aliens have unique personalities and powers. You encounter these Chosen at random several times throughout your journey, but each encounter plays out differently because the Chosen learn from your encounters and gain new skills over time. XCOM's aliens have always been imposing, but the Chosen are so overpowered that you need to pull out all the stops to take them down. I developed a special hatred for each Chosen, and my journey to end their tyranny felt personal in a way that I've never experienced playing XCOM before.

The Chosen aren't the only new aliens in War of the Chosen. This expansion

introduces a new class of enemy called the Lost. These stumbling corpses are basically zombies, and they attack indiscriminately in hordes. Every time you kill a Lost you gain a free action, so you can attack multiple times, and I had a lot of fun picking them off in packs. It's also easy to burn through ammo when fighting these leaderless masses, which means you can get overwhelmed if your clip runs dry. Ultimately, I loved the extra element of chaos the Lost brought to each encounter. Since the Lost also attack other enemies, sometimes it's beneficial to keep them alive on the chance that they help you cut through more menacing aliens.

The new aliens add a few wrinkles to XCOM's combat. Fortunately, War of the Chosen gives you access to several new soldier classes that expand your strategic options to compensate for these new threats. These new classes come from three new resistance groups you can befriend and share resources with. Each class has its own strengths and weaknesses. Reapers are incredibly stealthy marksman who have a

chance to attack without revealing themselves to enemies, Templars are psionic powerhouses who grow stronger after each kill, and Skirmishers are alien/human hybrids who specialize in close-quarters combat. All three units are wildly different from XCOM's other classes, and each is so useful that I wanted to bring them on every mission. Unfortunately, you can only recruit new units by running missions with their faction leader, which makes them hard to replace if you lose one in battle.

War of the Chosen contains so much new content that it could almost have been called XCOM 3. Every mission dishes out a new enemy, mission type, or environment, which allows the game to remain fresh for several dozen hours. War of the Chosen's wealth of interwoven systems might overwhelm newcomers, but strategy nerds willing to master the nuances will be treated to one of the most rewarding strategy games in years. I don't know how Firaxis could make a more complex yet gratifying strategy game, but I can't wait to see them try. » **Ben Reeves**





Observer

Pure horror from the far-flung future



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Aspyr Developer Bloober Team Release August 15 Rating M

9

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Observer begins like many classic mystery stories: with a phone call. Detective Daniel Lazarski is in his patrol car when he receives a distress call from his estranged son, Adam. Tracking down the signal, Lazarski races through the futuristic and corporate-controlled Fifth Polish Republic to find the call coming from a run-down apartment complex in the poor part of the city. The grizzled protagonist steps out of his car and into the building, entering a hellish labyrinth where both the sins of his past and the horrors of humanity's technological future await him.

Observer makes the most of its fusion of cyberpunk sci-fi and terror. Where stories like *Blade Runner*, *Snatcher*, and *Shadowrun* usually have the urban sprawl of a futuristic city to work with, Observer trades that in for the narrow halls of a broken-down apartment complex filled with tenants cowering in fear. This creates an experience where the most interesting aspects of the genre are all funneled into a concise and terrifying experience.

Observer is about as pure horror as you can get, despite its grimy sci-fi wrapper. Along with a high number of effective jump scares, there's a sense of dread that hangs over this five-hour odyssey thanks to its cyberpunk elements, like its twisted take on hacking. Lazarski is one of the eponymous Observers, which are special police units, half-human and half-machine, who can jack into the mental implants of individuals and

explore their minds to recreate crimes and obtain secrets stored far away in the subject's memories.

Memories are tricky things, especially under stressful situations, and many of the minds that Lazarski explores are traumatized. Several levels are trippy hallucinations; walls break away, and characters or settings change entirely as you jump from memory to memory. I loved these intense, terrifying sections because they make the most of the mind-jacking concept. I would be exploring a prison cell, reliving my victim's memories from when he was a convict, and then suddenly be in his apartment years later, watching him and his wife having a violent argument—then a figure leaped out of nowhere to maul me. I never felt safe during these sections, and was always interested in what came next.

In the sections where you're actually in the real world as Lazarski, you're investigating crime scenes with the detective's augmented visions, all of which are visually pleasing and useful. These vision settings also help you solve puzzles, like scanning a corpse to read their various wounds and putting together how they died with your biosensor, or tracing a locked door to its security keypad via your electronic magnetic detector and then hacking it. The fine balance struck with these puzzles' difficulty makes them interesting but keeps them from being frustrating.

The story is exceptional. As Lazarski becomes more desperate to find his son, he takes greater risks with his

augmentations and his mind, soon experiencing hallucinations in the real world so that everything starts to blend together in a horrifying way, like rooms that were once wood and metal transform into bleeding organs. Our detective's story is a hellish one, and can be one of redemption or despair depending on your choices during certain moments. These choices shape where the story goes in the end. Regardless of the outcome, Observer ends up being not only a horrifying tale, but also an emotionally resonant one.

Observer is such a compact and satisfying experience that the few things that bothered me are niggles that didn't tarnish my enjoyment. Lazarski is voice-acted by accomplished actor Rutger Hauer, but a number of his lines are poorly delivered and occasionally distracting. A few "avoid the monster" segments that show up are not as special as the rest of Observer's offerings and can feel like a chore, but they are all brief. The enjoyment that I derived from playing the game so far outweighed my annoyance with the flaws that I immediately dove back in after finishing to further explore the apartment complex.

Bloober Team's latest is one of the scariest horror experiences I've played in a long time, and its strong sense of place, story, and action put it above the majority of other games in the genre. Observer is simply the best of both worlds and is a must-play for anyone who considers themselves a fan of either sci-fi or horror. » **Javy Gwaltney**

» Concept

Investigate a creepy, dilapidated apartment complex in the distant future to search for your missing son and take on a corporate conspiracy

» Graphics

Character models are a bit dodgy, but the futuristic environments and the interface are beautiful

» Sound

Creepy sound design is brilliantly married to an evocative electronic soundtrack

» Playability

Observer is easy to play. You only need to walk around environments, switch between your augmented visions, and interact with objects

» Entertainment

Observer is a tense combination of sci-fi and horror, and one of the best cyberpunk games in years

» Replay Value

Moderate

LawBreakers

A passionless prison for great gameplay

7.75

PS4 • PC

» Concept

Slaughter other players in fast-paced, objective-oriented area battles

» Graphics

The environments and characters alike blur into samey-feeling mush

» Sound

While important gameplay-centric sound cues carry things, repetitive and sometimes cringe-worthy dialogue is a damper

» Playability

Clearly targeting the hardcore player, the skill ceiling is significantly high – but the barrier to entry is surprisingly low

» Entertainment

Excellent gameplay and mechanics are bogged down with lifeless characters, forgettable maps, and game modes that lack distinction from one another

» Replay Value

Moderate

LawBreakers is a smart arena-shooter that harkens back to the early age of digital slaying, where mobility is essential, battles are decided in split seconds, and skill determines who thrives and who dies. Despite putting critical pieces together to deliver tight action and unique play styles, LawBreakers lacks a sense of identity outside of the assortment of various weapon and ability templates. The maps, modes, and characters just blend together to form a lackluster wrapping to the adrenaline-laced kill counts.

Like many of the hero shooters in the FPS scene, each LawBreakers character offers distinct skills to master. From zipping around with a grappling chain and landing lethal blows with blades to spinning up your chaingun for increased accuracy, each weapon feels unique and special. Unlike other hero-based arena games, there's no need to form a well-balanced group with complementary skill. Everyone's goal is dishing out damage, so you don't need to worry about having tanks, supports, or healing. Everything is designed to kill. You can't just mash buttons; aiming precisely and taking advantage of your weapon skills is critical.

Mobility is equally important. The game introduces zero gravity spaces in each arena where you can show off your skills, propelling yourself forward and back to dodge fire and snag objectives. These sections make you think differently about how your abilities affect your movement, and add an additional layer of precision and mobility skill required to play at the higher levels. While zero-gravity areas may

not be the massive game-identifying changer that makes LawBreakers stand out from other shooters, they are an interesting and worthwhile addition to the classic arena-shooter core.

Each kit also contains a super ability that often has a significant cooldown. These supers can turn the tide of battle, but don't feel tremendously overpowered. You still need careful timing and true aim to reap the rewards from a channeled laser or slamming drop. On a mechanical level, gameplay is precise, incredibly fast, and fun.

However, that fun core ultimately suffers from a lack of personality and differentiation. Even after almost 15 hours of gameplay, I can't really tell the difference between many of the classes at distance (and you're never in close range for more than a second in most circumstances). The dialogue never sparks a reaction beyond a "meh" with witty quips like "worse than jetlag" and randomly barked swear words that carry zero weight. It's unfortunate that the character with the most distinct identity is the Blitzball. Voiced by Justin Roiland of *Rick and Morty* fame, the talking objective is mind-numbingly annoying with its constant cries of "It's time for Blitzballllllllllll!" but at least it has defining characteristics. The rest of the cast are soulless husks only as interesting as their loadouts.

The same can be said about the selection of game modes, which feel way too alike. Whether you're charging up a battery, waiting for an uplink to download, or simply trying to hold a location, almost all the modes focus on defending or attacking a spot. While there's nothing inherently wrong with

that, having similar modes takes its toll even just after a few hours of play. Repetition isn't always a bad thing, but combined with maps that lack depth and flavor and the aforementioned character issues, the game ends up feeling like one never-ending chain of the same, same, same.

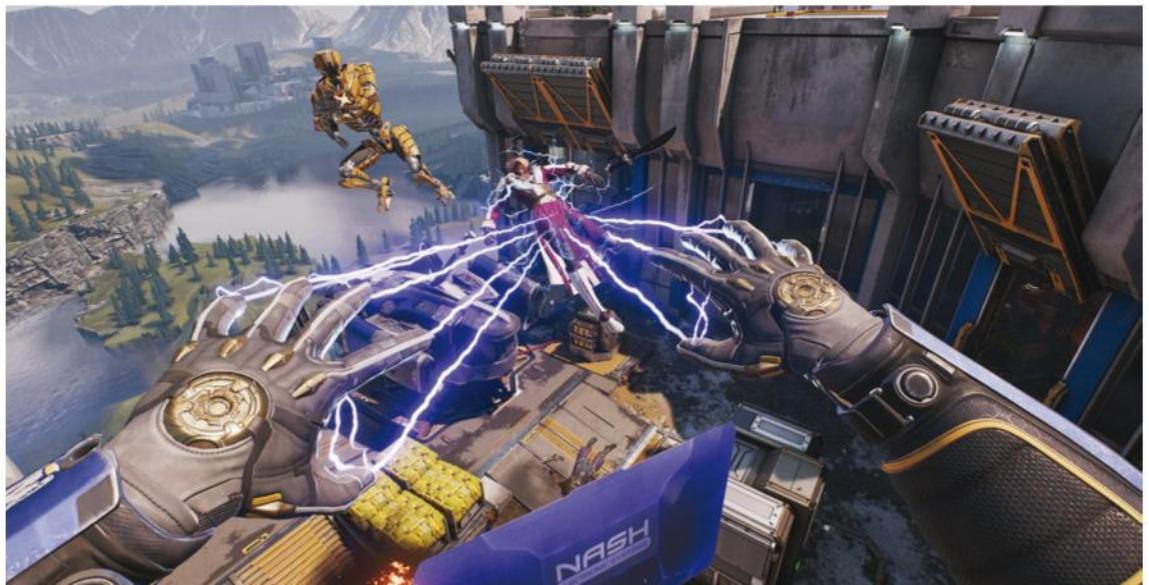
You can check out your stats with each character and your overall career between matches, and you can also use that time to unlock loot stashes provided as you level up. The progression is purely cosmetic, allowing you to give your characters with new outfits, gun decals, and more. These customizations are nice, but as the only real form of current progression, players may want a ladder or ranking system to show off their prowess.

As of launch, servers are stable and matchmaking doesn't take long at all, getting into games is painless and easy.

LawBreakers delivers in terms of neat weapons, lightning-fast kills, and aspirational skills. You'll look back in awe at performing feats like landing a triple kill while blasting yourself backwards into a zero-g environment. Despite the adrenaline-fueled highs, the title falls back to earth due to uninteresting environments, generic characters, and a lack of variety. Even with an admirable effort to capture the spirit of the core arena-shooter and offer players a chance to show off their skills, the hero-shooter space is inundated with choices, and LawBreakers doesn't offer much to stand out amongst the rest of the pack.

» **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the PC version of LawBreakers. The game is also available on PS4





Nidhogg 2

A bloodthirsty rematch

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Messhoff **Developer** Messhoff **Release** August 15 **Rating** T

8

The original Nidhogg found a creative, fun take on the fighting genre. Its acrobatic combat and aesthetic simplicity were part of its charm, which makes adding complexity without souring the experience a difficult task. Nidhogg 2 handles it well, adding substantive new ways to engage your opponent without losing what made the original a fantastic fighter. It fails to expand the scope of the series the way you'd expect a sequel to, but the array of new combat options make it hard to go back to the original.

Nidhogg 2 retains the back-and-forth, nimble action of the original. Two opponents fight to death for the honor of being sacrificed to the Níðhöggr, a godlike serpent of Norse mythology. Whoever strikes first makes a mad dash to their end of one of several, multi-screen arenas as their opponent tries to stop them. Momentum is fierce – a single kill can lead to successive victories as the loser scrambles to build a proper defense, but a single swipe of a sword can reverse the flow of a match in an instant. This makes for tense matches as evenly-matched players trade kills near a doorway, conveyor belt, or lava pit until one player finally manages to break through and advance to the next screen.

Along with the tried-and-true fencing foil, jumping dive kicks, and rolls, Nidhogg 2 adds a few new tools to shake things up. Claymores don't have the forward range of the fencing foil, but their swipes are perfect for countering jump-happy opponents. Knives strike faster than any other weapon, making them perfect for close encounters.

Bows are oppressive at long range, but hard to manage up close, and their arrows can be reflected. Finally, new melee attacks and slides lead to hectic exchanges as both players discard their weapons and try to kick each other to death at close range. Though knives are a bit weak, every other new weapon and trick feels strong enough that I never felt like I couldn't land a blow on my opponent somehow, even if I didn't have a weapon handy.

You can also fight on several new stages, and those with names veterans might remember (like "Clouds" or "Castle") are substantially different. The cartoony, expressive art style is a far cry from the original's eclectic skies and minimalist tones, but the more matches I played, the more I embraced how colorfully dense and diverse each stage was. One stage has you fighting through a series of cramped jail cells, while another has several bobbing icebergs to contend with.

The new options make combat much more interesting; after mercilessly skewering an opponent, you need to think about not only how you'll approach them during your next bout, but also how you plan to counter whatever weapon they'll randomly be given. This adds a degree of chance, but because it's in service of defense, it serves as a way to quell the momentum the winning player maintains with every won encounter. And since each match takes place over the course of several short bouts, one lucky weapon spawn won't win you the match.

If you or group of friends find any weapon or tactic particularly annoying, you can opt to remove it entirely.

You can also tweak other settings, such as making weapon throws your only option, disabling slides, or having each round be a single sudden-death bout. These options are a smart way to extend the life of a game; if you get bored of regular matches (or if someone abuses a particular tactic), you can play with low gravity, or with both players constantly crouching. Playing with friends or in groups is a blast, as every group develops tricks, counters, and builds on their own specific strategies over longer sessions.

You won't find much to do outside that group setting, however. The arcade mode doesn't even serve as good practice; computer-controlled opponents don't capitalize on kills, stand still for seconds at a time, and often wait for you to kill them. You can't modify the difficulty, either, which means if you can beat the arcade mode once (and you should have no problem doing so), there's little reason to tackle it again. You can also test your mettle online, though your mileage will vary. While we had matches that went smoothly, we also experienced severe slowdown on occasion on certain stages.

Though it doesn't add much for players looking to play around with its improvements solo, Nidhogg 2 adds layers of depth to a simple formula without breaking what made it so appealing in the first place. The new weapons and maneuvers blend seamlessly into fights, making them more dynamic and tense. Its single-player offerings may be paper-thin, but for anyone looking to test themselves against their friends, Nidhogg 2 is hard to beat. » **Suriel Vazquez**

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**

Build on the absurd fun of Nidhogg with new weapons and an overhauled look

» **Graphics**

Characters and animations are more cartoonish and gory this time around, and the new stages feel simultaneously cheerful and grotesque

» **Sound**

The mellow synth tones establish a low-key backdrop for your skirmishes, though you won't find too many of them stuck in your head

» **Playability**

The new weapon and movement options make this more than a facelift, and tweaking combat options creates some fun house rules

» **Entertainment**

Though a ton of fun with friends locally, the new single-player and online modes may not offer much to those hoping to play long-term

» **Replay Value**

Very high

Slime Rancher

Fun on the range

8.5



Style 1-Player Action/Simulation Publisher Monomi Park Developer Monomi Park Release August 1 Rating E

Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Raise slimes for fun and profit while constructing an efficient operation

» Graphics

Colorful, simple visuals create a stylish world with a cartoony feel

» Sound

Peaceful music and cute sound effects do their job without being intrusive

» Playability

Navigating the world and manipulating items is easy, though you have to spend a fair bit of time referencing the "Slimepedia" to figure out advanced mechanics

» Entertainment

Optimizing your ranch and collecting new slimes is engaging, and the steady stream of valuable upgrades ensures you always have a goal to reach for

» Replay Value

Moderately high

You are alone on a faraway planet, and a strange piece of technology is your only way to survive an alien frontier teeming with unfamiliar creatures. Slime Rancher's set-up may sound like a tense sci-fi shooter, but the reality is far more relaxing. This easygoing simulation from developer Monomi Park is all about exploration and optimization, with plenty of depth and tantalizing upgrades to make your life on the range entertaining.

Equipped with a vacpack that can suck up, store, and shoot various items, your job is to turn a desolate patch of land into a thriving ranch. At the center of this pursuit are slimes – cute, bouncy lifeforms that act as your livestock and primary source of income. You collect them as you venture beyond your homestead, place them in corrals, feed them to produce "plorts," then harvest the plorts to sell. The loop is simple in concept, but with new areas to explore and additional layers of complexity gradually folding into ranch maintenance, Slime Rancher hits a sweet spot; it makes you feel successful, but also keeps you planning for the future.

Despite their vacant smiles, slimes require a surprising amount of thought to manage. An in-game Slimepedia explains the basics of tending to your herd, but the best lessons come from experience. Early on, I just kept normal slimes in basic pens, but then they bounced out and I had to chase them around and suck them up again. After

upgrading the corrals, I started cross-breeding slimes. That went well until I moved two different cross-breeds into the same enclosure, which resulted in the creation of evil slimes that almost wiped out my entire collection. And don't even get me started on the teleporting quantum slimes. In addition to making for funny stories, these minor and major disasters deftly nudge you toward the best approach to running your ranch, building a knowledge base that comes in handy as the game expands.

Taking care of your slimes is a consistently rewarding background activity that gives you money at a decent pace, and your ability to create and handle new situations improves by purchasing an array of upgrades for your character and the ranch. Whether you're increasing your carrying capacity, installing a jetpack, or unlocking access to a different part of the ranch, you never have a shortage of useful things to spend your hard-earned money on. This results in a gratifying stream of improvements that always has you anticipating what you're going to buy next. I often had trouble deciding because the options seemed so useful (though the jetpack should be a high priority).

Building a thriving ranch requires going far afield to gather new slimes and resources. You advance through interesting areas, like the quarry and ancient ruins, and the cartoony visual style suits Slime Rancher well. Exploring is fun, and I couldn't wait to

see what unique slimes and vegetation were waiting to be gathered. For example, each slime has a favorite food that makes them produce double the plorts, so bringing that back to the ranch and cultivating it yourself guarantees a big payday. While chasing that payday, sometimes you're a long way from home, a little lost, and holding on to a treasure trove of rare goodies. Slime Rancher nails the thrill of that situation, creating memorable moments of tension and discovery without being too punishing.

On your journey, you find mysterious beasts and objects that are bound to raise questions. What do I do with those gigantic slimes that won't move? How do I unlock these doors? I like how Slime Rancher lets you find and engage with these things on your own terms, but I would have appreciated an indication of how important they are. Once you realize these things are your only way to progress, remembering where they are can be a challenge; though Monomi Park says a map is planned for a future update, its current absence is frustrating given the size of the world – especially the final area. The relative rarity of teleporters is another issue. Though you can craft them late in the game, until then you must traverse zones that don't have much to offer you anymore. At worst, these problems result in mild tedium and a bit of wasted time, which isn't enough to dull Slime Rancher's overall charm.

My time on the range periodically reminded me of many other gaming experiences I've enjoyed over the years. The low-stress farming element feels like Viva Piñata, the routine scratches the same itch as Stardew Valley, and exploring the unknown has a Minecraft vibe. Slime Rancher captures the essence of what makes those things fun, but it's more than an assemblage of familiar parts. Everything comes together in a carefully crafted whole with surprising depth that provides incentives to collect every slime and buy every upgrade (not to mention lots of resource-intensive, late-game rewards for the especially dedicated). Slime Rancher has the ability to keep you hooked for hours; I often looked out over my ranch, felt pride at my accomplishments, and eagerly ventured back into the wilderness to see what other strange things I could find. » Joe Juba



Sonic Mania

A joyous leap back in time



Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Christian Whitehead, PagodaWest Games, Headcannon **Release** August 15 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch), August 29 (PC) **Rating** E

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

Following Sonic the Hedgehog's meteoric rise to prominence in the early '90s, Sega tarnished the franchise's once-sterling reputation with a long string of mostly disappointing entries. With Sonic Mania, Sega wants to wipe away the last couple of decades and give fans a true successor to the beloved Genesis titles. The effort largely succeeds. Sonic Mania is a beautifully made love letter to the classic days of the franchise, and the best entry in more than two decades.

Sonic Mania preserves the pleasure and thrill of speeding through a stage, grabbing every ring you can while bashing enemies along the way and discovering new routes. The team of independent developers behind the game paid attention to so many facets that fans of the original games remember. Critical elements like the way Sonic builds momentum and smaller details like how the camera lags slightly behind when he reaches full-speed are handled with care and precision.

The moves accessible to Sonic, Knuckles, and Tails feel true to the early games. Sonic has a new drop dash ability that lets him stop on a dime and transition from a jump straight into a spin dash. Though it took me a while to stop using this ability accidentally, once I retrained my muscle memory, I used it regularly to escape tight spaces in boss battles.

You'd be forgiven for thinking Sonic Mania is a Genesis game at first glance; the sprites, stage elements, and backdrops all look authentic to those early titles. The developers remade numerous classic levels. However, though you may recognize Green Hill Zone from Sonic 1 or Hydrocity Zone from Sonic 3, myriad changes breathe new life into these familiar settings. For example, in Chemical Plant Zone, the second act introduces new gels that let you bounce higher and stick to walls, as well as ways to transform hazardous gels to helpful ones. Changes like these are exciting intersections of nostalgia and discovery as you witness these stages in new ways.

Though it's a blast to see which classic stage Sonic Mania resurrects and reworks next, I wish Sega placed a heavier emphasis on all-new zones. The new zones successfully capture the spirit of what made the early Sonic stages so great during the franchise's glory days, and they seamlessly join the collection of retro zones.



With so many fun branching paths to speed through as three distinct characters, each with their own special abilities, it's possible to approach the stages differently each time over the course of multiple playthroughs. For example, in Chemical Plant Zone, I stuck to the simplest route as Sonic, following the helix-shaped paths that lead straight into the infamous rising purple liquid from Sonic 2. When I played through as Knuckles, I wanted to minimize the amount of time spent underwater, so I glided to a wall Sonic had difficulty reaching, then used Knuckles' climb ability to ascend to a separate path that kept Knuckles dry for longer.

At the end of each act, you face off against a boss. Whether you're taking on Sonic's mustachioed nemesis, one of the themed Hard-Boiled Heavy robots, or a modified version of a classic boss-robot battle, these encounters are creative, challenging, and often intense. I don't want to spoil any of the surprises, but many of them feature cameos you don't expect, as well as fun nods to both Sonic and Sega's past.

Bonus stages were a major part of the early Sonic games, and Sonic

Mania includes two distinct versions.

The first bonus stage is a faithful recreation of the blue-sphere stages from Sonic 3 and Sonic & Knuckles.

Though the concept and gameplay for these stages have aged over the past 20 years, it's nice to be able to play through 32 new blue-sphere stages.

Though I have great affection and fond memories of the blue-sphere stages, I prefer the UFO chase bonus stages where you race for a Chaos Emerald in a polygonal 3D environment. Rather than the sharp 90-degree turns of the blue-sphere stages, your character controls more like a vehicle in a cart-racing game as you avoid obstacles, collect rings, and rack up as many spheres as you can to prolong the timer and increase your velocity enough to catch the UFO.

A return to the series' roots in every sense, Sonic Mania is a joyful reminder why the franchise became such a hit in the first place. Though it's content with reliving past glories, it does so exceptionally well. Exciting level design, a stellar soundtrack, and cool expansions on the original formula work in one accord to deliver the Sonic game fans have been waiting for.

» **Brian Shea**

» Concept

Take the Sonic the Hedgehog series back to its classic roots with 2D gameplay and graphics

» Graphics

A cursory glance may lead you to believe you're playing a Genesis game, but new animations and a smooth framerate update the experience while preserving the retro look

» Sound

While new songs capture the classic Sonic feel, the remixed classic tunes are the highlight

» Playability

Sonic Mania is nearly indistinguishable from its Genesis predecessors, but with added moves and extra polish

» Entertainment

Sonic Mania succeeds in paying homage to the classic '90s entries that so many fans remember fondly, and in the process delivers the best Sonic game in decades

» Replay Value

Moderate

Time Attack And Multiplayer

Outside of the traditional single-player mode, Sonic Mania features Time Attack and Competition multiplayer. Time attack is an easy way to jump to a stage and see how fast you can get to the goal without having to worry about boss battles impeding your progress, while Competition lets you race a friend in a competitive splitscreen experience. Though I like the idea of Competition, even as a nod to the splitscreen in Sonic 3, the stretched graphics are an eyesore and the stages are best experienced in the main mode, making the Competition mode little more than an adequate diversion.

Matterfall

Challenging and elegant action

8

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Interactive Entertainment Developer Housemarque Release August 15 Rating E10+

PS4

» **Concept**

Retake a planet back from an alien infestation as a sci-fi warrior in this action-packed fusion of twin-stick shooters and platforming

» **Graphics**

The world and the enemies that occupy it are generic looking; however, the environments are sleek and pleasant to look at regardless

» **Sound**

A pumping electronic soundtrack provides many earworm tunes that help drive home the intensity of every battle

» **Playability**

Matterfall has a surprisingly complicated control scheme but once you get used to it, it's easy to play

» **Entertainment**

Matterfall is an enjoyable, arcadey action game with a few twists even though difficulty spikes mar the endgame

» **Replay Value**

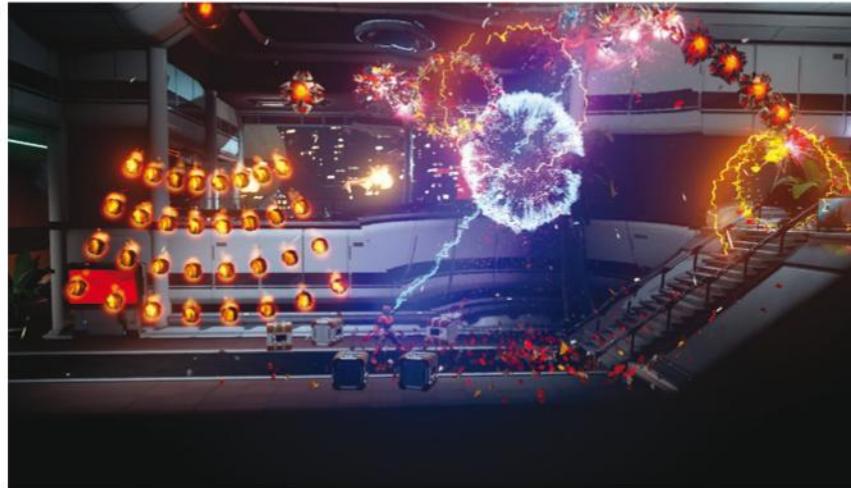
Moderate

Housemarque has made its name developing fast-paced arcade shooters like *Super Stardust*, *Resogun*, and *Nex Machina*. These games delight in colorful explosions, velocity, and thumping soundtracks. The developer's latest, *Matterfall*, has all those qualities, but also stands apart from the pack with its interesting combination of twin-stick shooting and platforming.

Matterfall's story barely exists. You play an exosuit wearing, jump-jet using freelancer tasked with clearing a planet of a hostile alien presence and rescuing civilians. The straightforward levels have you moving from one end to the next, blasting enemies while dashing through checkpoints and jumping across moving platforms. You have a variety of abilities at your disposal, including an arm cannon, a dash attack that lets you phase through bullets and stun enemies, and augmentation slots that let you equip secondary weapons and mutators. The game controls well, giving you a lot of mobility when it comes to dodging enemies and threading the needle during platforming sections, though occasionally I noticed that my freelancer would shoot upward when I meant for them to dash right. This was rare enough that it wasn't ever a huge issue.

The augmentation slots are *Matterfall*'s greatest strength. Rescuing civilians lets you access more augmentations, and you can have three of them going at any time. Some of them are weapons with a small cooldown, such as a shotgun or railgun, while others give you buffs, like increasing the chance of a powerful bomb you can use against enemies appearing or making your dash attack damage. The ability to swap augmentations on the fly is useful; while a grenade launcher might not save you as swarms of enemies encircle you, a blast from your shotgun could eliminate enough of them to give you an opening to dash through and escape. Every kill you get and civilian you rescue contributes to a score tracker. The longer you stay undamaged, the more your combo multiplier builds. You don't earn any unlockables with a higher score, but a strong sense of satisfaction comes from seeing your score climb as you deftly move throughout the world like some ballerina of death – if you've got the skill.

Matterfall is one of the hardest action



games I've played this year. Later stages border on being cruelly unfair, but the arsenal of tools at your disposal gives you enough tactical options to survive. At its best, *Matterfall* is great at making you feel a surprising amount of tension as you fend off countless enemies surging toward you with speed and elegant maneuvers. You never have much time to strategize so every encounter is about your intuition and the rapidness of your physical response to plans you're making on the spot. I often felt like I had gotten away with some great, exhilarating crime by just surviving an encounter. However, the flip side of this is that the game devolves into cheap death after cheap death in rough sections toward the end due to the demand that you master both platforming and stick shooting at the same time. I was more thrilled than annoyed by the challenge, but the

difficulty spikes can prove tiresome in the last hour.

The campaign is on the short side, but enough secrets are scattered throughout every level that it's worth replaying, especially if you're someone who loves pursuing the top spot on an online scoreboard. Even if you're not into competition, it's unlikely you'll unlock all your augmentations on your first run, so it's fun to dive back in and hunt down the rest of them and mix and match them with your subweapons.

Matterfall's brand of action is simple but refined, producing many doses of adrenaline as you survive overwhelming odds again and again. The shooting is satisfying, and zipping across stages while blasting foes is a great, dumb time. For those who like their action simple but visually pleasing and challenging, *Matterfall* is an easy recommendation. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

The heart of adventure is bigger than one hero



Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Naughty Dog **Release** August 22 **Rating** M

9

PS4

» **Concept**

Chloe Frazer shines in the leading role with a story that is equally as personal as it is about the hunt for a mysterious artifact

» **Graphics**

Every bit as jaw-dropping as Uncharted 4. The scenic landscapes are ridiculously detailed and beautiful

» **Sound**

Claudia Black and Laura Bailey are wonderful together, but too much focus is placed on jokes. The two shine brightest in one of the series' slowest moments

» **Playability**

Scaling perilous cliffs is just as much fun as ever, but don't expect any new wrinkles in the adventuring outside of a few puzzles

» **Entertainment**

Shorter than any other Uncharted game, yet just as powerful and memorable

» **Replay Value**

Moderately high

Multiplayer Worth Your Time

The Lost Legacy comes packaged with all of Uncharted 4's multiplayer content, along with a fun cooperative Survival mode for up to three players. People jumping into The Lost Legacy's multiplayer join the existing base of Uncharted 4's players. The release of Lost Legacy brings a few additions, including a new Survival Arena mode, featuring 10 waves of combat, some ending with warlord boss fights. You'll also find Asav as a playable character. New skins are included for Lost Legacy's notable players. I enjoyed Uncharted 4's multiplayer thoroughly for its combination of run-and-gun and traversal mechanics.



Nathan Drake's days of adventuring are over. As we watched him hang up his holster and rope to begin a new chapter in his life, Naughty Dog's scribes doubled down on the message of "it's over." Video game protagonists rarely walk off into the sunset, but Drake's farewell is as definitive as they come. Naughty Dog wrote Uncharted 4: A Thief's End as a conclusion to Drake's story, and it ended on a poetic and satisfying note. To bring him back in starring role would be foolish. It really is over. Is Drake's name synonymous with Uncharted? He's wonderfully charismatic and endearing, but we now know he isn't the lifeblood of it.

The Lost Legacy is every bit as riveting and accomplished as any Uncharted title. We learn that the heart of the adventure trumps everything else, and can extend to any character.

Chloe Frazer fits into the starring role admirably, but never once is written in a way where you feel she is replacing or replicating Drake. She's just as playful, but she's wired differently; she's more than the untrustworthy hustler we briefly got acquainted with in Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. Figuring out who she is takes time in The Lost Legacy, partially because she's incredibly guarded, but also because you are getting to know her in the midst of an adventure.

Chloe is nearing the end of a heist she organized with Nadine Ross, the former paramilitary boss turned treasure seeker from Uncharted 4, who is in many ways the polar opposite of Chloe, pragmatic and fixated on results. We are left wondering why they are together for a little too long, but satisfying answers eventually arrive. As the confusion melts away,

Chloe and Nadine settle into a nice (yet somewhat turbulent) groove, and end up being a fascinating duo to track. They're funny, terse, and wonderfully unpredictable in both their actions and words – their chemistry works even as they frequently butt heads.

Chloe and Nadine are in hot pursuit of the Golden Tusk of Ganesh, which they believe is located in the long-lost ruins of the Hoysala Empire located in India's Western Ghats, another part of the world Naughty Dog turns into a scenic work of art for players to explore. The duo are soon at odds with an insurgent rebel leader named Asav, who initially appears to be just another madman who loves treasure, but is later revealed to be far more dangerous and cunning than anticipated. Asav moves the narrative needle just as much as the heroes, and the story soars from the uncertainty of his actions.

I just wish Naughty Dog wouldn't have felt the need to reference the Drakes so often – a distraction that frequently entertains and can be interesting, but is placed more in the spotlight than is needed and diminishes Chloe and Nadine's ownership of the adventure.

The Lost Legacy was originally intended to be a bonus episode for Uncharted 4, but ends up being a legitimate sequel that is every bit as fully featured as any of Drake's adventures – it's just a little shorter. I would never say any of the Uncharted games are too long – they always leave me wanting more – but this new entry demonstrates brevity works just as well, as the journey feels more urgent and streamlined.

The Lost Legacy's gameplay is a

direct continuation of Uncharted 4, hanging its hat firmly on the same grapple hook, stealth, and open-world exploration Drake used. Outside of a lock-pick mechanic – which can deliver high intensity when used in areas where enemies are on patrol – Naughty Dog doesn't introduce much that can be classified as "new." As I worked my way across India's lost ruins and gorgeous jungles, I never felt the gameplay needed a shot of something different. The spectacle is always so huge, and the next discovery is always so enticing that I didn't think about the actions that got me there – other than they are fun and reliable.

Although the gameplay mechanics fit like a well-worn glove, Naughty Dog still has a few tricks up its sleeves. The puzzle contraptions that were invented to hide the Golden Tusk of Ganesh are challenging, clever, and again all about spectacle. Two of these puzzles rank among my favorites in the series – one dealing with platforms and swinging axes, and another that uses silhouettes in a fascinating way. I'd even say these slower gameplay moments are more impressive than the series' signature setpieces, where everything explodes and collapses. Yes, Lost Legacy has plenty of that, but it's nothing you haven't seen before.

Given just how fully featured this adventure is, Lost Legacy could have easily been Uncharted 5. Where Naughty Dog goes next is anyone's guess, but I would love to see Chloe and Nadine return for another hunt, as they're every bit as engaging as the Drake family. They make a hell of a team. » **Andrew Reiner**



Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle

A delightful new take on Mario

8.5

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Strategy Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft Milan Release August 29 Rating E10+

Switch

» Concept

Combine Team Mario with Ubisoft's own demented Rabbids for a lighthearted but challenging take on the turn-based tactical strategy genre

» Graphics

Ubisoft adopts Nintendo's style of crisp, cartoony visuals while throwing in its own underpants-laden twists to the world design

» Sound

The mash-up cast offers up all the grunts and exclamations you'd expect. Grant Kirkhope's musical score perfectly punctuates the action

» Playability

The controls can be finicky during some timed block-pushing puzzles, but mapping out your strategic offense maneuvers works great

» Entertainment

While Kingdom Battle's puzzles won't win any awards, the robust selection of challenging tactical battles entertains from beginning to end

» Replay Value

Moderate

Ubisoft surprised gamers when it announced not only was it working on a Mario title for the Nintendo Switch, but that it would be transporting the mustachioed plumber and friends to the turn-based battlegrounds of the tactical strategy genre. While that may sound like an ill fit for gaming's biggest kid-friendly mascot, Kingdom Battle succeeds by not only what it cribbs from the genre's leaders, but also by what it adds to the mix.

Kingdom Battle mashes up the Mario and Rabbids universes with the flimsiest of storylines. A material-merging VR headset falls into the hands of the time-traveling rabbids, who waste no time in accidentally transporting themselves to the Mushroom Kingdom, jumbling up the two worlds in the process. The onus falls on Mario to clean up the mess, along with some of his old friends, a few helpful rabbids, and a Roomba-esque robot named Beep-0, which you use to plot your moves during battle.

The madcap adventure plays out across four uniquely themed worlds, each of which offers 15-plus tactical battles against "corrupted" rabbit forces. Kingdom Battle draws no shortage of inspiration from the genre-leading XCOM series, from the navigational aids and overlays that make planning your moves a breeze to some character abilities like Hero Sight, which allows Mario to snipe a moving enemy on their turn (why they didn't call it Marioverwatch is beyond me).

But Kingdom Battle is more than a kid-friendly XCOM clone. Your squad of heroes is more mobile than in most tactics games, and can perform dash

attacks and head stomps while on the move to supplement their weapon attacks. Characters also have their own special abilities (including the aforementioned Hero Sight or enemy-attracting Magnet Dance), giving each of your three characters a trio of maneuvers to perform every turn. As such, each battle plays out like an intriguing optimization puzzle, as you swap back and forth between characters' movements, weapon attacks, and abilities to set up the best team combos and maximize the damage you inflict on enemies. Additional Mario-themed elements like sewer pipes that transport you around the battlefield and chain chomps that take a bite out of the nearest character offer more wrinkles to the gameplay, and reinforce Kingdom Battle's unique identity.

Kingdom Battle offers strategy fans another attribute that XCOM can't match: a wacky and light-hearted tone that eschews the genre's penchant for gut-wrenching decisions, oppressive tones, and squad-wiping permadeath. This opens the door to more experimentation and risk-taking. If one of your characters gets knocked out (say, from having their butt lit on fire), you can restart the battle with no long-term repercussions. There's plenty to experiment with – each character has a long list of weapons to unlock, as well as skill trees that you can (and will) respect before any battle.

Ubisoft breaks up the endless series of tactical skirmishes with some light exploration and environmental puzzle-solving. While I enjoyed the world themes and silly predicaments you

find the rabbids in, the Sokoban-style block-pushing puzzles go from too simple to simply tedious. Collecting a big string of coins and snagging a new weapon or pile of ability orbs (i.e. skill points) from a treasure chest is satisfying, but concept art, music tracks, and 3D models make up the bulk of the underwhelming rewards. While I appreciate the brief respite from combat, Kingdom Battle's puzzles feel like filler, as does the need to backtrack through the lengthy worlds to complete the unlockable bonus missions.

Kingdom Battle's entertaining and demanding tactical combat more than makes up for the downtime. I was frequently switching up my party and trying new character builds, and I relished the added challenge of the numerous boss battles, from the banana-chucking Rabbid Kong to the aria-crooning Phantom. The gradual build-up in difficulty only hits a few minor bumps along the way, culminating in a satisfying final showdown and some post-game ultimate challenges that prove just how fun and flexible the combat system is. A two-player co-op mode rounds out the impressive package, offering up an enjoyable but minor diversion from the main campaign.

I was as skeptical as anyone when I heard the words "Mario" and "XCOM" uttered in the same sentence, but Kingdom Battle didn't just prove me wrong – it ended up being my favorite Mario game in recent years. Nintendo and Ubisoft took a big risk working together outside their comfort zones, and that risk paid off.

» Jeff Marchiafava



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7.75 Kingsway

Platform PC Release July 18 Rating NR

What separates *Kingsway* from the rest of the role-playing pack is its adherence to an age-old, Windows-based aesthetic, with the gimmick that you're battling with your own window management and interactions fly across the screen demanding your immediate attention.

— Daniel Tack

7.5 Minecraft: Story Mode — Season Two: Giant Consequences

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android Release August 15 Rating E10+

With a breakneck pace and action-packed events, the sophomore episode of season two has me hoping the series can carry this momentum forward. Though I'm anticipating the typical Telltale pattern where all your choices end up not making much of a difference at the season's conclusion, I'm at least enjoying the ride to that point.

— Brian Shea

6.75 Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle And The Millionaires' Conspiracy

Platform iOS, Android Release July 20 Rating 4+

None of the cases stand out as noteworthy, with the possible exception of the final one. An underwhelming first outing certainly doesn't spell doom for the new *Layton Detective Agency*, but I was hoping for more from this series' reboot.

— Kyle Hilliard



7.25 The Long Dark

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC Release August 1 Rating T

With its stellar survival mechanics, *The Long Dark* makes for a brutal experience that requires patience and micromanaging to fully appreciate. However, it's brought down by some bugs and a story mode that leaves much to be desired.

— Elise Favis

6.5 Gigantic

Platform Xbox One, PC Release July 20 Rating T

Though *Gigantic* ticks off many of the boxes players might want from a MOBA, it also removes many of the nuances to make itself more accessible.

— Suriel Vazquez

7.75 Sundered

Platform PS4, PC Release July 28 Rating T

With its smooth combat, rewarding exploration, and pulse-pounding battles, *Sundered* is worth a look from fans of *Metroid* and *Castlevania*.

— Brian Shea

7 The Escapists 2

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC Release August 22 Rating T

When you find the right offbeat item, or barely squeak by a guard in *Escapists 2*, it's incredibly refreshing. However, the monotony of gathering items and playing errand runner for other inmates sours the experience, and the awkward controls don't help.

— Kimberley Wallace

7.5 Dream Daddy

Platform PC Release July 20 Rating M

Dream Daddy is a surprisingly wholesome game about fatherhood, and about finding love again after loss. The well-written dialogue surprised me, and so did the fact that it is an incredibly heartwarming game.

— Elise Favis

7.5 Miitopia

Platform 3DS Release July 28 Rating E

Miitopia shines another light on the Miis, taking the goofy characters on a lengthy RPG adventure. The silly presentation masks a number of surprisingly deep and satisfying systems, even though it ultimately wears out its welcome several hours before it ends.

— Jeff Cork

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The Lost Tale From Middle-earth

Electronic Arts' unreleased The Lord of the Rings: The White Council

by Matthew Kato

In July 2006, Electronic Arts announced it was working on its second Lord of the Rings RPG – The Lord of the Rings: The White Council. Whereas the company's previous RPG effort, The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age (2004), was a relatively run-of-the-mill RPG experience based on EA's rights to Peter Jackson's film trilogy, this new project would be an open-world RPG on the Xbox 360 and as-yet-unreleased PS3 following in the wake of Bethesda's smash hit The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. It would also be a major foray into the lore established by J.R.R. Tolkien's books, which EA had acquired the rights to adapt just the previous year.

With some intriguing pieces in place, Game Informer negotiated an exclusive cover story for our January 2007 issue, traveling to developer EA Redwood Shores to get the full rundown on the game. However, shortly before we went to print, EA abruptly informed us that The White Council was being shelved, closing a chapter on what could have been an exciting adventure and signaling the beginning of the end of EA's time with the licenses. The game was never released, but for the first time we are detailing the Tolkien adventure that never came to pass.

The White Council took place before The Hobbit, when Sauron was disguised as The Necromancer in Mirkwood. The Ring had not been found yet, but The White Council convened to address the growing evil. The council members, including Gandalf, Saruman, Galadriel, Elrond, and Radagast the Brown, enlisted the player to investigate the situation and help counter the threat. Players could choose their character's race (human, elf, hobbit, or dwarf) and design their appearance.

The first third of the game contained a unique storyline as players built up their

stature as a hero for their people, thus drawing the attention of the council. Players would come into contact with the main heroes Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas (EA was still working on getting the voice acting together), but the game would steer clear of being too derivative of existing stories – a pitfall of The Third Age. The White Council included material and characters not in the movies that were only referenced in the books. EA cleared everything through New Line Cinema and the Tolkien estate – including material such as Ice Balrogs and characters presented

outside of their traditional timeline in the sources. The game wanted to ride that fine line between shepherding players to the essential story beats while not being too linear or restricting players' choices. Of course, The White Council also aimed to feel true to the universe Tolkien created, so it was more of a large RPG full of content than a true open-world game.

Apart from the story quests, players could pick up tasks from other characters and those related to the game's eight professions: Craftsman, Burglar, Courier, Outrider, Ranger, Sage, Sheriff, and Minstrel. Players could switch between these at any time, and each had a skill tree of eight to twelve associated skills (which grew through usage) as well as other passive skills. Furthermore, there were abilities for each skill as you progressed.

Customization was a big component of the play experience. There were 600,000 spells you could craft in seven different styles; the spells were enumerated by the specific placement of runes and the addition of particle effects through the ink color used to craft the spell's scroll. Recipes in the world allowed you to put an emblem on your shield and color it with paint you made. Skills such as mining, herbalism, and fishing supported this crafting, and successfully performing minigames provided an added bonus to your efforts.

The game mainly took place in Eriador in the western/north-western part of Middle-earth, including familiar locations like the Grey Havens and relatively unfamiliar ones like the ice bay of



title – Conquest (2009), developed by Pandemic, but this was poorly received and, according to movie industry paper *Variety*, rushed to market just as EA's rights to the Peter Jackson movie license ran out. *Polygon* has reported that EA executives asked how long it would take to complete *The White Council*, and pulled the plug when they were told that not only would the game not come out in holiday 2007 as announced, but it needed three years to finish the project. Since EA knew its license was about to revert back to movie studio Warner Bros. – who was putting out its own games via its interactive division – perhaps EA decided there was no use in releasing *The White Council* if there was no future with the license.

While we'll never know how *The White Council* would have performed upon release, the failure to realize the project was a missed opportunity to take the company in an ambitious direction that was unlike the majority of EA's catalog both then and now.

"It's not anything secret; EA doesn't really have that great a reputation when it comes to these sort of things," admitted *The White Council* creative director Chris Tremmel, referring to the company's performance with RPGs up to that point. "The teams are really passionate and work really hard on this stuff, and I wish that stigma would go away, but we can only do that by making better games." While EA would go on to create distinction for itself with BioWare-developed RPGs such as in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, *The White Council* would not contribute to this history. ❖

Forochel to the north, but skipping the far east, Rohan, and Osgiliath. Areas were gated from the player based on their level and affinity with the local population. For example, you wouldn't be able to access dwarven lands or related quests as an elf until your affinity with the dwarves was high enough. Affinity also mattered in recruiting NPCs such as mercs or like-minded companions who joined up with you in your adventures.

Each area had its own natural eco-systems, from native wildlife to orc and troll populations (orcs also had their own clans), and emergent side quests could present themselves as you explored. Clearing out a goblin den you stumbled across, for instance, could have also influenced what happened in the area in the future. Set a troll free from its captivity, and it wouldn't attack you later on. The game world was also fleshed out with books you'd find that would explain more of the backstory and a set of appendixes that filled in when you went to a town or met a character.

Combat in *The White Council* was not combo-based like previous Electronic Arts action-orientated titles *The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*. Instead, EA chose a real-time and menu-based system (the dev team specifically called out *Final Fantasy XII*, which had come out earlier that year) containing special abilities and charge meters limiting the usage of some abilities. Weapons containing slots for increased stats could be crafted from component pieces, and all weapons and equipment scaled to your race so everyone could collect and use the same loot.

Players could not bring their combat skills to bare against other players online, but the game contained four- to six-player co-op online multiplayer. This aspect of the title contained quests ranging in duration up from quick solos to series of linked quests that spanned several days. We saw a brief demo of the game's co-op containing two online players accompanied by a dwarven follower, but the title

was still in an early form. Other aspects of the mode were still being ironed out, such as a clan structure, bonuses for mentoring lower-level characters, and transferring equipment.

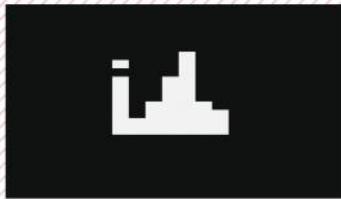
As tantalizing as the game sounded a year from its holiday 2007 launch, *The White Council*'s end would occur much sooner. In November 2006, my writing very close to being completed, Electronic Arts called and told us the cover story was off, with the company giving no indication regarding the game's future. In January a rumor surfaced on website *Shacknews* that the game had been canceled due to management issues, including that some of its developers had left EA altogether. It wasn't until the following month during an investors call that EA confirmed that *The White Council* was postponed indefinitely.

Electronic Arts would go on to put out one more *Lord of the Rings*



Gandalf's Journey Through Games

Gandalf is a critical member of The Lord of the Rings cast. He's powerful, magical, bearded, and tells people they aren't allowed to pass at just the right moments. The wise wizard has appeared in nearly every video game based on the Lord of the Rings franchise, but the visual differences in his representations go beyond the color of his cloak. Take a look at how he's evolved over the years. *by Kyle Hilliard*



Lord of the Rings: Journey to Rivendell (Unreleased)
Atari 2600



War in Middle Earth (1988)
PC • C64 • ZX Spectrum • Amiga



The Lord of the Rings Volume 1 (1990, 1994)
PC • SNES



The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2002)
PS2 • Xbox • PC



The Hobbit (2003)
PS2 • Xbox • GameCube



The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003)
PS2 • Xbox • GameCube • PC



The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth (2004)
PC



The Lord of the Rings Online (2007)
PC



The Lord of the Rings: War in the North (2011)
PS3 • 360 • PC



Lego The Hobbit (2014)
PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360
Wii U • 3DS Vita • PC • Mac

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