

REVIEWED: TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II

PC GAMER

THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

EMPIRE AT WAR

STAR WARS
vs
STAR TREK

USING MODS TO HOST THE ULTIMATE SCI-FI BATTLE



EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUND

HANDS-ON WITH THE PC GAMING SENSATION'S NEW DESERT MAP

PLUS

THE FUTURE OF ADVENTURE GAMES

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

FORGED BATTALION

Issue 311
December 2017



HARDWARE

CONTROLLERS

SEVEN GAMEPADS COMPARED INSIDE

Infinity Xtreme Titanium



Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i7-7820X Processor

MSI® X299 Raider Mainboard
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Corsair RMX 650W Power Supply
Corsair H100i with 2x SP120 Cooling System
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Mouse and keyboard are not included but optional



HD 7.1



Optional



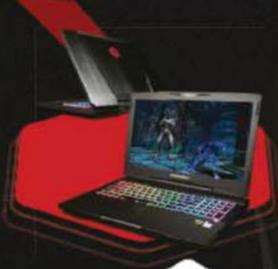
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Tracer II-MK



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Tracer II-MK VR GT



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Infinity X55 Pro



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One in ten million

I probably don't need to introduce *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*. Chances are you're one of over ten million people who already own it. If you're not, head to page 36 to find out what all the fuss is about. If you are, also head to page 36 to get our exclusive hands-on report on the battle royale shooter's new map and upcoming features.

Also this month, we welcome our new deputy editor, Philippa Warr. Pip's one of my favourite writers, and I'm excited to have her knowledge, enthusiasm and ideas helping to shape the magazine's future.

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This month
Became one of the first people in the world to play PUBG's new map. Once more: page 36.



ANDY KELLY
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This month
Pointed at a bunch of adventure game developers and clicked the talk option.



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This month
Wasn't happy when we found this headshot in our archives. We'll take new photos next month, Pip.

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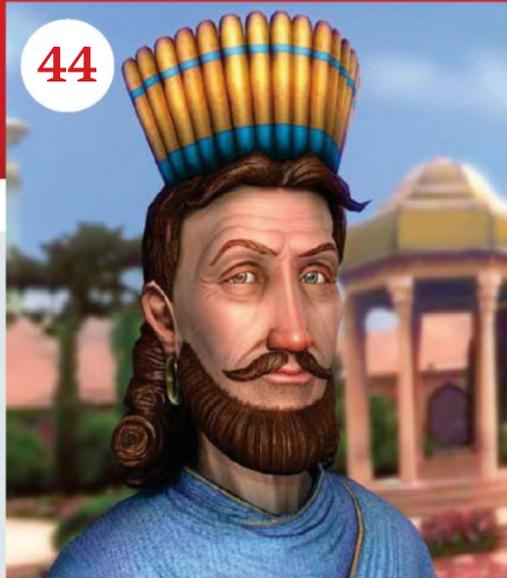
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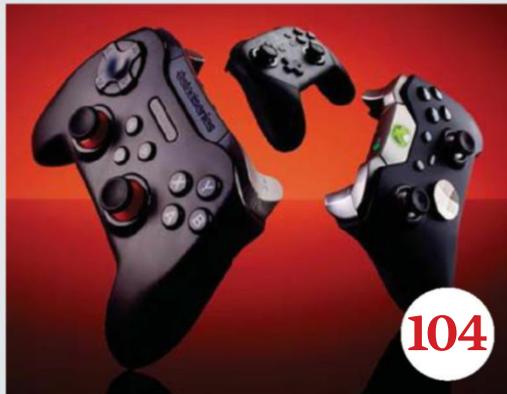
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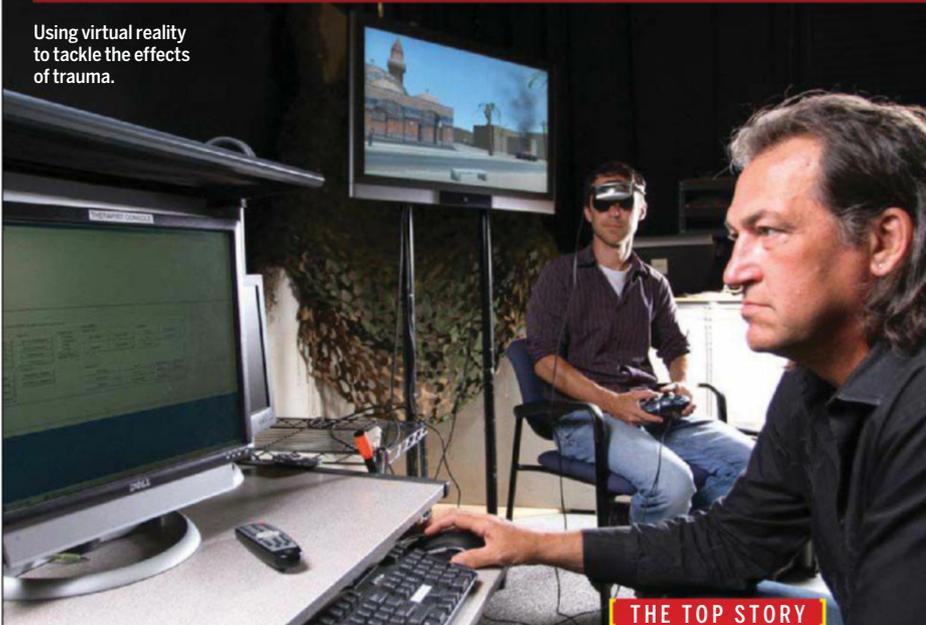


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MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Using virtual reality to tackle the effects of trauma.



VIRTUAL ENCOUNTERS

Ideas in the world of VR development

VRDC Fall 2017 – the virtual reality developers’ conference – took place in San Francisco in mid-September. Aside from prompting the thought that the event would sound more zingy if they were to rebrand as “Cybergoggles NOW!” the VR shindig provides a fascinating look at the priorities and projects of its practitioners.

Generally I’ve thought that the best and most interesting work in the field of virtual reality would probably happen outside gaming. That’s not to say that great VR games won’t be made, but for me it’s in the same position as Microsoft’s Kinect. There were some brilliant (and some brilliantly broken) gaming projects which used that tech, but there was also research into ideas like using the Kinect to control the movement of cockroaches with the ultimate goal of potentially exploring and mapping disaster sites, for example.

This crop of talks included discussion of the wider applications of VR tools. One tantalising summary I read was of a talk by Director of R&D Integration, USC Institute for Creative Technologies, Arno Hartholt, which mentioned how VR is being used in exposure therapy.

Exposure therapy is used to help people deal with phobias or to help treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It involves

exposing the patient to the stimulus which triggers the anxiety or the stress response but in a controlled setting and under the guidance of a therapist.

Bravemind was one example here. It’s a tool developed at the Institute for Creative Technologies for helping people deal with post-traumatic stress disorder. As well as images, Bravemind can incorporate directional audio, vibrations and even smells into the simulation to help give military

THIS CROP OF TALKS INCLUDED DISCUSSION OF THE WIDER APPLICATIONS OF VR TOOLS

personnel an immersive but safe space in which to address elements of PTSD.

Another talk mentioned VR exposure therapy, but this time flagged up its flexibility. Arachnophobes could be exposed to different species of spider... I’m assuming these tools involve a spider slider.

The ICT also has a prototype for a project called SimSensei. This one’s about using technology to identify signs of distress, anxiety and depression. The intention isn’t to replace humans, but to make use of

additional tools to help with healthcare. One of the strengths of virtual characters in these programs is that patients with mental health problems might feel less self-conscious broaching the subject as it may remove the fear of judgement by another human.

...AND IN THE GAME

On the gaming front there were two elements which have caught my eye so far. One is the importance of asymmetric design in helping maintain VR communities. Games which can be played with some players on desktop and maybe one with a VR headset not only open up interesting scenarios to explore (I remember I climbed into a coffin wearing a headset in order to play *Taphobos* – a project where you guide a non-entombed player on the desktop PC nearby to your location), but they also mean that developing for a small audience of VR-ready players is less of an issue.

The other was the idea of what tools we may need to combat potential abuse in VR spaces. Suddenly, it’s not just about verbal harassment, there’s now the capacity for players to get into each other’s personal space, to use gestures and so on. These aren’t problems with clear solutions, but it’s positive to note that they’re on developers’ radars. It’s also good to see people using platforms like this to get creators thinking about them sooner rather than later. ■

Philippa Warr

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WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

**T
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P
Y**



The Spy has downloaded all of your Snapchats.

T

he Spy is very here for a transhumanist future of cool, cyberpunk augmentations and uploading software directly into your brain. Already, The Spy can detect your objections. “Oh, but what about the moral implications?” you cry. “Oh, but what about individuality and privacy and the dystopian nature of every work of related fiction?” you wail. “Oh, but what about when I install an arm-mounted toaster in order to enjoy the toast that I crave, but then my friends – toasterless waifs to a man – flock to me so they can warm their pathetic bread scraps, and my life is naught but a production line of toasting and small talk?” you shriek.

But no, stop. Consider the advantages, especially the advantages if you’re The Spy. Which you’re not. The Spy could brain-hack the third-quarter earning report right out of a CEO’s hard drive via the Wi-Fi signal being broadcast from The Spy’s left ear lobe. The Spy could upload a virus into the water cooler of an intelligence agency that forced anyone who drank it to tell their most classified secrets to an android

squirrel. The Spy could finally find some time to play **Divinity: Original Sin II**, using eye-mounted projectors while hiding up a tree for two days, waiting for the brief gap in the patrol of a heavily guarded military outpost.

Fine, The Spy can tell you’re not convinced. The Spy blames **NieR: Automata**, which made a world filled with hot fetish androids somehow seem like a bad place to live. And unfortunately – at least for The Spy’s dream of ascending from this flesh prison – *NieR*’s brand of melancholy gothbots is set to continue. Square Enix’s Business Division 6, which definitely doesn’t sound like a terrifying reeducation camp, is recruiting for “*NieR*-related

look silly too. And yet some people still want to make new games in the series. “I would certainly love to work on a *Fallout* game again,” **New Vegas** director Josh Sawyer said on an episode of IGN video series Expert Mode. “I know there are tons of people at Obsidian who would love to work on a *Fallout* game again.”

AN UNREAL DEVELOPMENT

While Obsidian isn’t working on a new *Fallout*, an upcoming game may take some inspiration from *New Vegas*. Appearing on USGamer’s *Axe of the Blood God* podcast, Obsidian’s Feargus Urquhart mentioned he’d been replaying the RPG for a new game that’s unrelated to the *Fallout* series.

That project could be related to Obsidian’s recent job listings for a UI artist to work on its “next great multiplatform RPG”. Requirements for the position include having shipped a triple-A game, and experience using Unreal Engine. And while those requirements could

NIE R’S BRAND OF MELANCHOLY GOTHBOTS IS SET TO CONTINUE

product scenario creation, as well as planning work”. It’s not clear if Square is planning for a sequel, or more DLC, but, given the success of *Automata*, both are possible. Also not clear: series director Yoko Taro’s statements, as translated by Gematsu, that, “we will be carrying out various developments in regard to *NieR*”, and, “lick-lick”.

NieR isn’t the only perpetrator of anti-cybernetic sentiment. The **Fallout** series is arguably worse in that its robots aren’t just evil; they

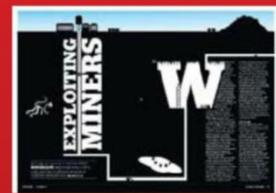
mean anything from something to nothing, it does match up with what Urquhart revealed last year: that Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky – who both worked on the original *Fallout* – are now collaborating on a new Unreal Engine project for Obsidian. The Spy can’t wait to play *Dropaway: Contemporary Gambleville*.

For now, it seems, the digitisation of mankind will have to wait. Until then, The Spy will make do with gloves made out of tin foil. Spy out. ■ *The Spy*

This month in... 2007



ISSUE
233, December 2012
ON THE COVER
PlanetSide 2
IN THE CHARTS
Psy – Gangnam Style



- 1 Our magazine retrospectives tend to be from 2007 – anything earlier than that and we’d need to find the keys to the archive room. Still, though, that was a depressingly sparse year for PC gaming, so let’s jump forward to a time of endless promise. Case in point: *PlanetSide 2*. Arguably it failed to live up to expectations, but it did suggest an exciting renaissance for online warfare.

- 2 Upstart freelancer Phil Savage secures his second commission: a Reinstall on *Uplink*. Distressingly, it appears present-day Phil is wearing the same shirt.

- 3 Matt Lees writes about his days as a *RuneScape* coal baron in a candid six-page confessional. “In my defence, I didn’t intend for it to end up this way,” he admits. “I don’t think anyone living in rural Cheshire ever really *intends* to get into child exploitation.” And so a seemingly-simple story of one man’s love for item crafting quickly takes a dark turn into something more sinister.



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MAKING GAMES IS HARD

ABOVE:
2000:1: A Space Felony combines a strong visual aesthetic with dry comedy.

RIGHT:
Hypnospace Outlaw hides secrets in plain sight with its '90s-tinged take on a futuristic OS.

FAR RIGHT:
Frog Fractions pioneered a modern approach to playful, viral games.

THE RISE OF SURPRISE

Making games about discovery in the age of spoilers



In a 2016 documentary by YouTube channel toco toco tv, *NieR: Automata* director Yoko Taro said, “Looking at AAA titles, of course I find them beautiful and interesting, but after 20 minutes of gameplay, I wonder whether it is going to be the same for the following 20 hours. I am a bit tired of this. If possible, I would like to make games that are unexpected, games that keep changing form.” The spirit behind this statement drove *NieR: Automata* to incorporate a mind-bending, emotionally fraught recursive narrative, and it brought the game incredible success. If this example is anything to go by, titles relying upon a sense of surprise and discovery have more of an audience than ever before – even in the age of social media and internet spoilers.

According to Jim Crawford, developer of constantly-shifting browser game *Frog Fractions*, this environment actually contributes to a desire for such media. “I grew up with mystery-heavy games – back then, every game was mysterious by default, just by the nature of how games were made, played and marketed,” Crawford says. “Now, any mystery that’s not truly industrial strength is eaten up by marketing, wikis and data mining. Persisting mystery is a rarity that you have to work hard to achieve, so it’s something that people sit up and pay attention to.”

Invoking a sense of mystery is easier said than done. Gary Kings creates murder mystery games with a team under the name of National Insecurities, and elaborates on the complications of the genre thusly: “The hardest thing while making a murder mystery game is working out how the game and player communicate with each other. We’re asking the player to work out the story from the pieces, and tell the story back to the game. You can’t design the story before the mechanics, they both had to spark into existence at the same time.” Once a game is released, developers must also take steps to preserve the mystery driving it. “If your game is successful,” Crawford says, “people will be talking about it and digging into the executable to look for secrets.” In Crawford’s case, fans solved multiple ARGs over several years to unlock the release of *Frog Fractions 2* in December of 2016.

Once you’ve determined the type of game you want to make and how you want to imbue it with mystery, you still have to market it. “The bits you do reveal have to be compelling enough to move copies of the game before it becomes known for its hidden content,” *Dropsy* and *Hypnospace Outlaw* creator Jay Tholen says. For Crawford, the ‘bottled lightning’ success of *Frog Fractions* and the Kickstarter for *Frog Fractions 2* leads him to believe that, “The best option is to make a game that’s marketable in the traditional sense, even if you leave out the mystery.” Which brings me to *West of Loathing*.

Kingdom of Loathing is a free browser-based MMO that’s knocked around the internet for over 14 years. However, despite the longevity of *KOL*, the studio making it was in trouble. Creative designer Zack Johnson recalled a meeting with *Gone Home* designer Steve Gaynor, where the latter suggested making a singleplayer title in the *Kingdom of Loathing* universe. Soon after, the first prototype of *West of Loathing* was born. “The important elements of escapism to me,” Johnson begins, “are more distraction than convincing me that I’m ‘important.’” So,

West of Loathing developer, Asymmetric, went in the opposite direction. Using its limited budget to create a thin main quest, it stuffed every inch of the monochromatic Western world with visual gags, soup mines, weird one-off items, and tomes of knowledge that could leave players a walking skeleton – haunted by secrets no stick figure was meant to discover.

SELLING HONESTY

If they could convince a percentage of lapsed *Kingdom of Loathing* players to buy *West of Loathing* at full price, Zack and company believed they could continue to pursue game development for just a bit longer. *West of Loathing* became a bona fide Steam hit, recouping the development costs of the game in just ten days. While he credits their success to a number of factors (including the expertise of narrative game marketer Emily Morganti), Johnson believes part of the reason players came to love *West of*

Loathing was its meta honesty and freedom of choice.

“The game is, in a lot of ways, a conversation between the narrator – which is just me and Riff [Conner, cowriter of the game] – and the player,” Johnson says. “It’s sort of like a goofy D&D game that’s being played with us as the DMs and the player as the player.”

Gaming could use a little more surprise – and these developers are just a few of the people braving the difficulties necessary to deliver it. ■

By *Xalavier Nelson Jr*

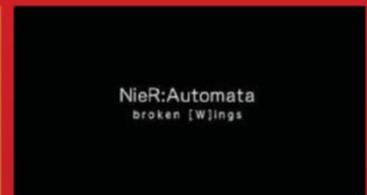
“MYSTERY THAT’S NOT INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH IS EATEN UP BY MARKETING, WIKIS AND DATA MINING”

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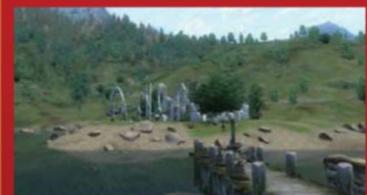
1 UNDERTALE’S MEMORY
It might seem natural to reload *Undertale* after murdering the first boss and feeling horribly guilty, but doing so would quickly teach that you such sins aren’t easily erased. Unlike many games, *Undertale* remembers.



2 NIER: AUTOMATA’S ‘FIRST’ ENDING
Dying during the first hour of *Automata* won’t just give you a Game Over screen – it also unlocks a small text ‘ending’. One of 26. A glimpse of the many surprises to come.



3 DR LANGESKOV’S EVERYTHING
Dr. Langeskov, The Tiger, and The Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist isn’t about a heist at all. Betraying this premise sets up a 20-minute adventure that is by turns intriguing, hilarious and horrifying.



4 OBLIVION’S INTRODUCTION
Emerging from the sewers in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, it’s easy to see why this enticing introduction to Bethesda’s world became an industry standard – and is taken for granted over time.

DISCLAIMER: As a professional developer, I am not freely and/or working terms with parties mentioned in this piece.

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PCG17



Forged Battalion



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Petroglyph Games

PUBLISHER
Team 17

LINK
www.petroglyphgames.com

FORGED BATTALION

A nuts-and-bolts RTS from the makers of *Command & Conquer*

If *Forged Battalion* does its job, you should be able to tell a lot about how someone likes to play games based on the armies they create. Do they have a min-maxed RTS army? Are they focusing on swarm units? Me? I took all the unit mods that sounded fun and named the resulting fodder dumb things like 'Angry Freddy' or 'Dhumpus'.

Such was my time with the Faction Creator – the central hook of *Forged Battalion* – where players can customise their units to create unique factions, all *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts*-style. It feels like a more approachable version of *Command & Conquer*, which makes sense. *Forged Battalion* is the newest project from Petroglyph Games, a studio formed by ex-Westwood developers, best known for their work on games like – you guessed it – *Command & Conquer*. At some as yet indeterminate point in the future, *Forged Battalion* will release as an Early Access game, but I got some hands-on time with an early build at Petroglyph's Las Vegas office.

In *Forged Battalion*, rather than playing with a faction or race designed around a certain set of ideas, players craft their own armies – categorised by infantry, light vehicles, heavy vehicles and aircraft. Each category supports four unit types, and how powerful they are can define your strategy. Your aircraft, for instance, could all use deadly late-game tech, catapulting you to air superiority in the closing minutes of a skirmish. Alternatively, you could stack your barracks full of cheap, low-tier units, and try to catch your opponent off-guard with an early rush.

Unit customisation is limited to weapons, armour, and (in some cases) mobility. So you could make a tank that would be recognisable in a modern-day

army base, or a hover tank that fires globs of glue. Petroglyph says that there is a crazy amount of possible army configurations, which reminds me of the way *Borderlands*'s gun system was first pitched to the media. There are technically more possibilities than stars in the sky, but I suspect a proportion of that value comes from identical armies with one variation. The team plans to let players share configurations, but only if they can figure out a profanity filter that makes sense.

It's a sci-fi game, set in a "lighthearted post-apocalypse", so every infantry unit rocks an exoskeleton suit, the aircraft units are drones and the world has gone to the darkly comic dogs. The battle economy focuses on harvester units, which run loops between resource nodes and foundry buildings. You'll want to build foundries near resources so harvesters can make faster loops, and you'll need power plants to keep everything running, but building management never goes far beyond those basic points.

Unit options are locked behind a tech tree, which (along with most of the game) was still at a very early stage. Nodes in the tech tree are unlocked through research points earned through battles, even ones you lose, which makes every battle a learning experience. Since we were operating on limited time, the dev team unlocked the whole tree for me, although I found myself splitting the difference between real-world and sci-fi weapons. It's not like you directly wield any of these tools in an RTS but there's still something comforting about old-fashioned machine guns and rocket launchers.

I don't know how battles will actually play out in the full game. I took my new army into two AI matches: one on easy, to get a feel for the game, and one on normal once I had a better grip on combat. In both, the AI tried to rout me on the same thoroughfare, so I responded by forming a wall of early-game units between the road and my base. Call me Patton, because that strategy was unbeatable. ➤

FIRST LOOK

THERE ARE TECHNICALLY MORE POSSIBILITIES THAN STARS IN THE SKY

Forged Battalion

➤ Eventually, I built enough heavy vehicles to crush the enemy base, so I pointed my comically large army in the right direction and let them do what they were born to do. It was a joy to watch my units swarm over the paltry enemy forces like so many ants on a misplaced dollop of potato salad. Laser blasts were popping off in every direction – before I knew it, victory was in my grasp. Marring the victory only slightly was the fact that my success was less due to flawless manoeuvring and more the fact that the AI hasn't been fully programmed yet.

FIRST DRAFT

In the final game, AI that you fight in the one-off skirmishes will be able to pull behaviour data from characters you'll encounter in the campaign mode. So if you want to relive a fight against a memorable enemy without any of the story trappings, you're able to create a custom AI match and play against that same character on different maps.

As my time in Vegas winds down, Petroglyph president and cofounder Michael Legg told me the team was nervous about this appointment. They told publishing partners Team17 that *Forged Battalion* wasn't ready, and that it needed more time before Petroglyph could show it off to press. I think Legg was correct in his assessment. I don't think *Forged Battalion* looks bad, especially for a pre-alpha build, but it's too early for me to say whether it looks good, either. There's a gulf of difference between your standard polished vertical slice and what I was shown at the Petroglyph offices, to the point where it's hard to form any kind of value judgement as a result. Yes, the bones of the Faction Creator are there, but the UI isn't finished, the last third of the tech tree is missing, and the battles feel more like a proof of concept.

The Faction Creator is still one hell of an idea, though. It's what makes *Forged Battalion* unique, theoretically turning the game into an RTS where the moment-to-moment combat hinges entirely on what the player likes doing. Do you want an army full of high-damage glass cannons that you can spawn almost as soon as the game begins? How about some tough

early-game infantry that will hold the line until you can start production on the late-game tanks that you've chosen to round out the rest of your army? It can be done, my friend. The game encourages unorthodox play and out-of-the-box thinking, which is incredibly my thing.

There's still the question of balance, which is why *Forged Battalion* will launch in Early Access: so the team can develop alongside their community. "We've had situations in the past where players will say, 'This is an unbeatable combination,' and then a week later, somebody will go, 'No it isn't,' and prove them wrong," *Forged Battalion* senior game designer Patrick Pannulo says. "But in the cases where there is an unbeatable combo, we'll go in and tweak those upgrades. We have lots of ways to do that: we can push it up a tier so it becomes a late-game upgrade, decrease the damage, change the costs, etc. There's always a flavour of the month in every game, but sometimes that's driven by the perception of the players and not by the numbers."

"I'd definitely second that," says producer Ted Morris. "[In previous games.] I've seen our fans come up with this one-size-fits-all playstyle, but when someone says that..."

"Someone takes that as a challenge!" Legg interjects.

"Yeah, they'll all work to debunk the other guy," Morris says.

WESTWOOD'S GHOST

The entire Petroglyph executive team are expats from Westwood Studios. The team is so committed to its Westwood origins that, when it came time to form Petroglyph, Legg convinced Kroegel to register the old Westwood phone number. "You could take my old business card from 1997 and still call me," Legg says.

I suspect that long-term dedication to the RTS is what drives *Forged Battalion* and its unique hook. "People think older developers can get very set in their ways or not trying to advance the genre, but we're always thinking of ways to get more people to play [RTS games]," Legg says.

If that was the impetus behind Faction Creator, it worked. I want to mess around with that system more. It's too early to tell how battles will feel in the full game, but Petroglyph has made a strong pitch for the Faction Creator. Any system that gives players room for improvisation should be heartily encouraged, regardless of how the rest of the game might turn out.

Mike Cosimano

I named all of these tanks after wrestlers.



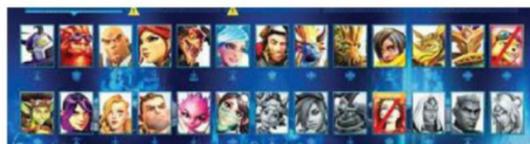
THE GAME ENCOURAGES UNORTHODOX PLAY AND OUT-OF-THE-BOX THINKING



PREVIEW

Paladins: Champions of the Realm





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Early Access

DEVELOPER
Hi-Rez Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.paladins.com

PALADINS: CHAMPIONS OF THE REALM

Checking in with the champs

Hi-Rez really needs to patch out the near-gamebreaking bug in *Paladins* where I'm in a tense match and both teams are one single capture point away from victory, when a man comes to the front door and needs me to tell him if the current electoral register details for the residence are correct.

Relatedly, the electoral register needs to fix its own bug which is that its stupid form doesn't have a checkbox for, 'Yes I do still live at this address, but in shame and defeat thanks to the timing of your visit.'

Paladins is Hi-Rez's entry into the team-based cartoony FPS genre. You pick a character from the rambunctious cast then ride them into battle, scuffling over control points and pushing a payload back and forth like siblings fighting for elbow space on the back seat during a long car journey.

The obvious comparison is *Overwatch*, but as soon as you start digging down you find differences. *Overwatch* has characters with fixed abilities which you can switch between to adapt to the demands of the game. *Paladins* prefers a MOBA-type approach. You stick with one character but use a card-themed interface to tweak their skills and attributes.

There are premade decks for each character and you can add your own and tailor them for different situations. Additionally, there are Legendary Cards for each champion – those are stronger than normal cards and you pick one at the start of a match to suit how you want to

play. Within the match you can also earn credits by accomplishing objectives and spend them on item cards which give you room to adapt moment to moment.

A lot of this can be automated while you find your bearings. If you use a prebuilt deck and switch the in-match store to autobuy those item cards, then all you need to do is select the Legendary Card you fancy and play. After that it's more about tactical thinking – how do you keep the other team off a capture point, when do you deploy your ultimate ability for maximum effect and so on.

Because you're playing as a team you will encounter familiar team-based challenges. The short match duration of 10-15 minutes-ish helps mitigate some of the frustrations (eg, players running into a kill-zone repeatedly and wondering why the point remains uncaptured).

The most obvious irritant I encountered was that players tend to instalock characters with a high kill capacity. As such, I am very familiar with the warning that the team has no support and no frontliner. It's a good thing that I, a slow picker, like playing the beefy support tree champion, Grover.

A related issue is that you see a match highlight at the end of the game and, as with other games, it's often a relatively dull killstreak

because that's something the game recognises as 'good play'.

PLAYED
IT

FORWARD MARCH

As a free-to-play game you can expect the usual flow of cosmetics and the promoting of loot boxes along with a rotating cast of free champions. That said, Hi-Rez does something I really like with its free-to-play games where you pay a one-time fee and unlock all current and future champions. That doesn't cover cosmetics, but it gives you a way to bypass the grind for characters and isn't too expensive.

I've played *Paladins* on and off since the closed beta in 2015 and it has come a long way, especially in terms of finding its own identity. There are some chafing points – I don't find the art style engaging and the mounts you get as you ride out from base feel insubstantial and silly – but broadly *Paladins* now feels like a beta nudging towards release.

Philippa Warr

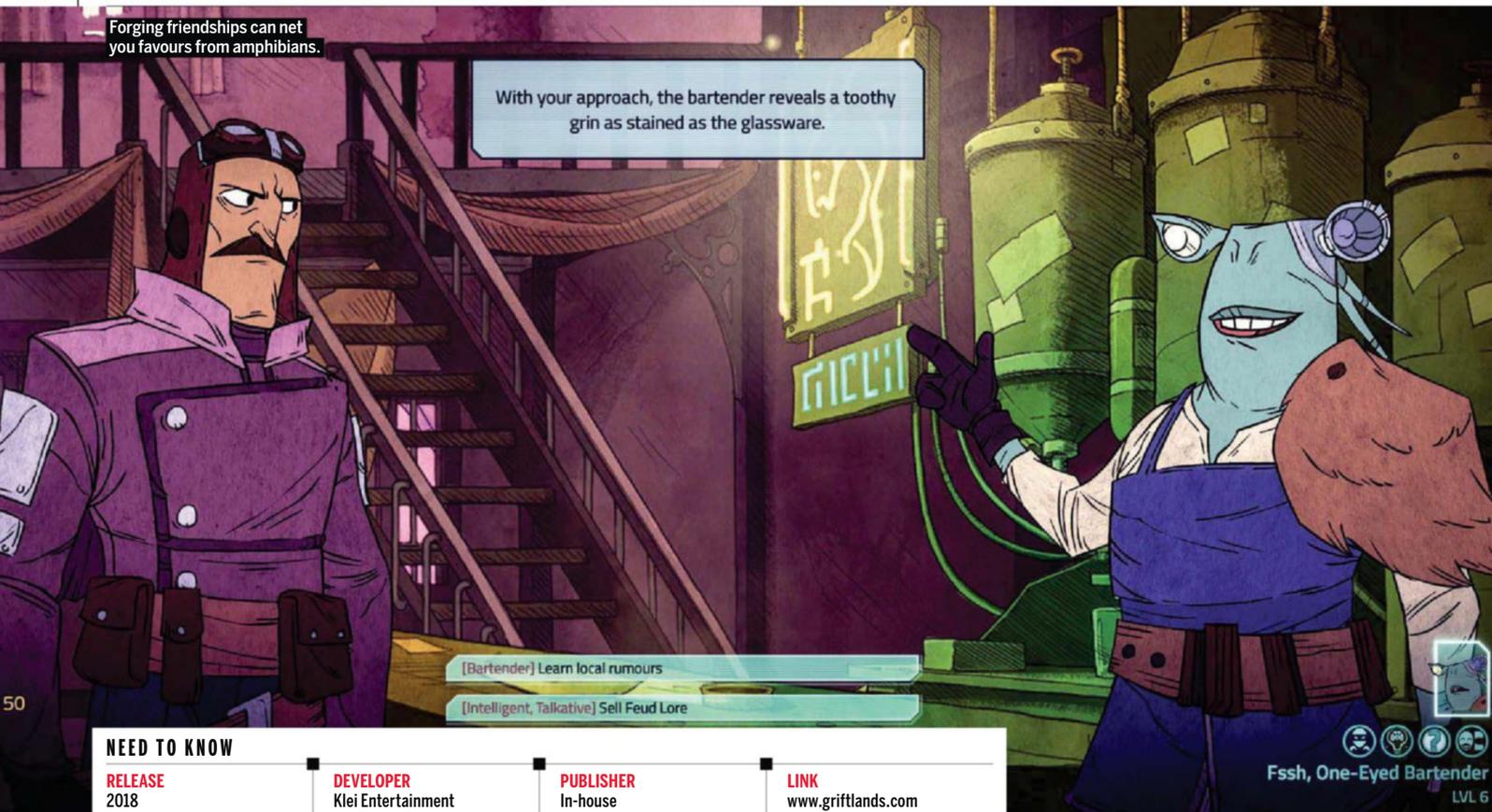
**PLAYERS TEND TO INSTALOCK
CHARACTERS WITH A HIGH
KILL CAPACITY**

The power of nature.



Grifflands

Forging friendships can net you favours from amphibians.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2018

DEVELOPER
Klei Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.grifflands.com

GRIFTLANDS

Find your fortune in an RPG about negotiation

Grifflands offers your basic RPG standards: loot, crafting and combat. But, as with all of Klei's games, there's a twist. It's a roleplaying game about grifting – about talking your way out of (and sometimes into) sticky situations, and pursuing potentially lucrative opportunities. Also, it's set in a land. Hence the name.

FIRST LOOK

I see an example of this when Smith, one of three characters you can play as, takes the low road after he stumbles upon a dispute between some bandits and merchants. Siding with the bandits, he battles the merchants, taking their coin, but ultimately decides to spare their lives. The merchants don't like being robbed, but they do now owe Smith a favour. This isn't just an abstract thing. Favours are listed on your contacts page, and can be called in at a later time.

In a second playthrough, I'm shown Sal, a new arrival to the



Grifflands. While each protagonist is a named person with their own backstory, you're able to define their build. Sal, for instance, can be talkative, observant or a technophile – traits that each come with bonuses and debuffs, and let you tailor towards a specific way to play.

This Sal is talkative, which comes in handy when she encounters a drunken guard on the lookout for stowaways to shake down for coin. Here, Sal can try to talk her way out, threaten, offer a bribe, or simply attack. Beside each option is an indication of your likely success. Sal isn't very threatening, for instance, and so that option warns of a high chance of failure.

Instead, Sal chooses the silver tongue approach, pointing out that there's far easier prey the guard could be pursuing.

GRIFTLANDS USES A JRPG-STYLE BATTLE SYSTEM, BUT ISN'T STRICTLY TURN-BASED

He wanders off, and Sal sets out on a search for her forged ID papers, which were stolen from her contact in the pleasantly named Murder Bay. After some sleuthing, she finds the papers in a cave filled with bounty hunters who presumed, accurately, it seems, that whoever came to retrieve them would be a criminal they could turn in. A fight breaks out.

BATTLE OF WITS

Grifflands uses a JRPG-style battle system, but isn't strictly turn-based. A bar on the left of the screen shows the turn order, which shifts based on the strength of your attacks, and any stun effects used. By limiting their ability to attack, Sal wins the fight, retrieves the papers, and gains a favour by sparing the life of her attackers.

Now Sal has a choice: take the papers to have them finalised, or sell them for a pile of cash. While I only get to see a short playthrough, already Grifflands stands out for its broad selection of opportunities and outcomes. It's shaping up to be another intriguingly designed Klei classic, and I look forward to seeing more.

Phil Savage



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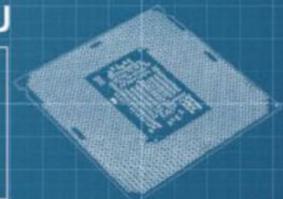


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Cache: 12MB



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Planet of the Apes: Last Frontier



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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Winter 2017

DEVELOPER
Imaginati Studio

PUBLISHER
FoxNext

LINK
www.bit.ly/apeslastfrontier

PLANET OF THE APES: LAST FRONTIER

Pick a side in the war between humans and apes

Somewhere in the Midwestern United States, apes overlook a ranch in a moonlit valley. I'm hunting for food and the cattle grazing below look tasty. But there's a catch: they belong to a group of armed humans. My father told me not to hunt in this part of the valley, but my brash older brother is convinced this is the best way to feed the tribe. I protest, but it's no good. The apes descend into the valley and all hell breaks loose. I spot a human and, without thinking, shoot him. Another tries to escape on horseback, and my brother shoots him too. We won't go hungry tonight, but we've just triggered a war between humans and apes – the foundation of the story in *Last Frontier*.

Developed by London-based Imaginati Studios, in association with Andy Serkis' production company Imaginarium (I know, it's confusing), *Planet of the Apes: Last Frontier* is an interactive story that's set between the events of the Dawn of and War for the Planet of the Apes movies. It's a standalone game with a branching storyline and eight endings, and Imaginati CEO, Martin Alltimes, tells me that most, if not all, of the main characters can die, which should make for some tense moments. He cites David Cage's preposterous serial killer yarn *Heavy Rain* as the studio's biggest inspiration – although hopefully the writing is better. And it's a game that has been designed with accessibility firmly in mind, meaning

IT'S A GAME THAT HAS BEEN DESIGNED WITH ACCESSIBILITY FIRMLY IN MIND

pretty much anyone can play it and enjoy the story.

In another scene, this time told from a human perspective, an ape is tied up and is being savagely beaten in a barn. Retaliation, perhaps, for the attack on the ranch. You can choose to intervene and stop the beating, but your allies' opinion of you will drop if you do. Alternatively, you can sit back and watch the poor guy get smacked around in the hope he might spill some intel about where his friends are. Managing reputations is an important part of the game, and every choice is given added weight by how the people around you will react to it – positively and negatively. I choose to stop the interrogation, because I'm Team Ape, but it doesn't go down well. I'm sure that'll bite me in the ass later.

THOUGHT PROCESS

When it's time to make a decision – like, say, aggressively attacking the ranch or trying to take the cattle quietly – the game pauses. This gives *Last Frontier* a very different rhythm to something like a Telltale game, where you rarely get a chance to think about the ramifications of a choice before you actually make it. I wonder if this'll strip the urgency from *Last Frontier*, as spontaneous decision-making is one

of the main reasons games like *The Walking Dead* are so compelling. But Imaginati has made a conscious decision to step away from that formula, even going so far as to remove any kind of exploration or navigation.

There's no walking around looking for items or talking to characters here. Instead, you're ferried automatically from one scene to the next, which is a fairly bold move. In other narrative games these are the only moments where you feel like you have some direct control over your character. Without them I wonder how *Last Frontier* will manage to feel like more than just a procession of cutscenes. There are action scenes with quick time events to mix things up, but the timing will be more forgiving than in a lot of other games. Ultimately, story is everything in *Last Frontier*, and Imaginati is promising a variety of paths to take on the journey towards a selection of endings.

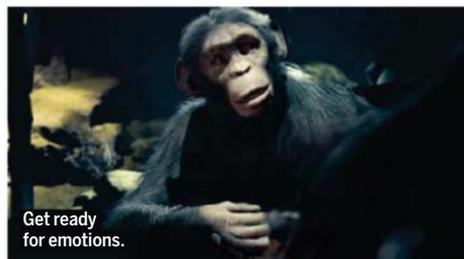
Andy Kelly

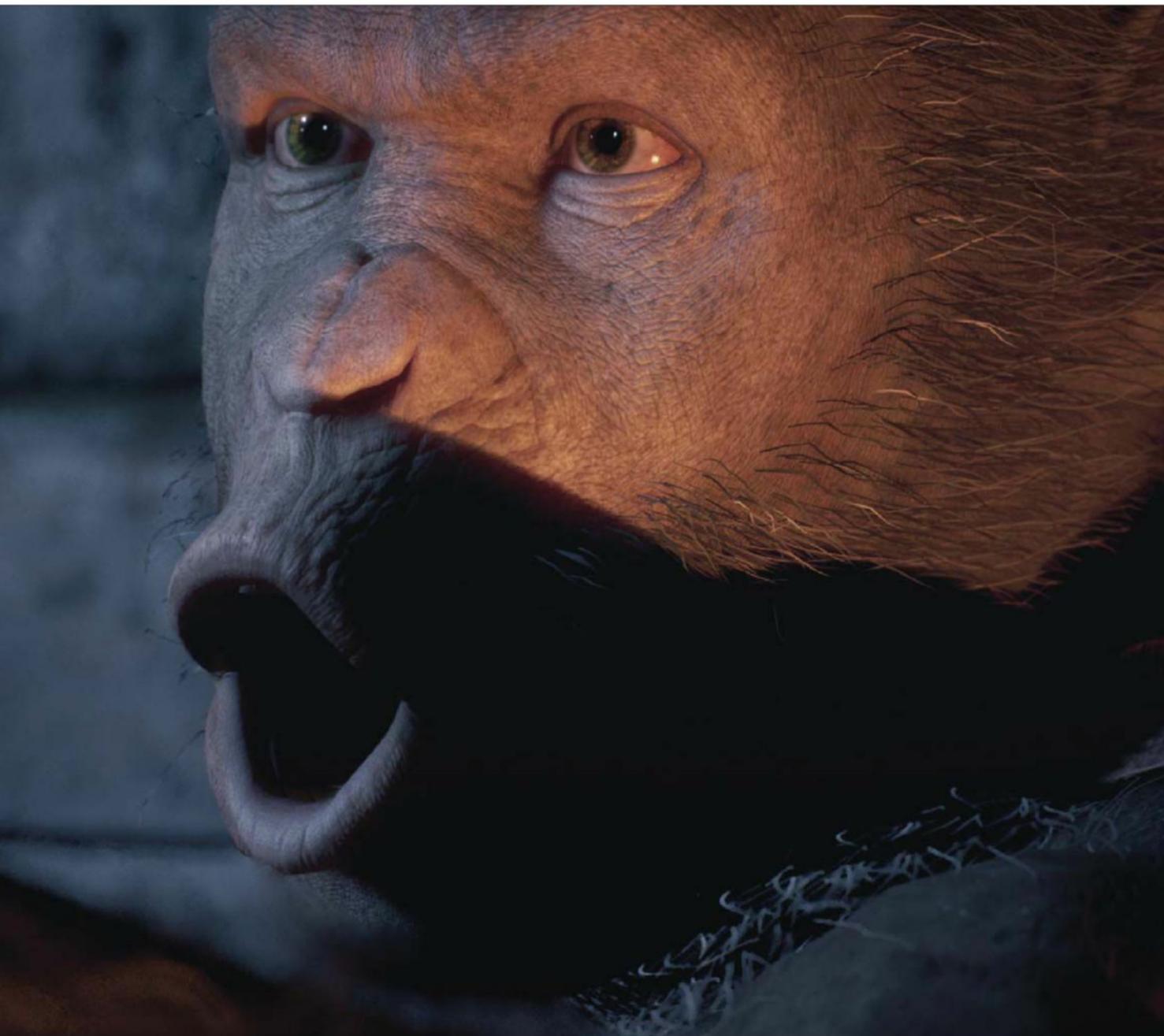
PLAYED IT

You can choose to intervene.



Get ready for emotions.





Fugl

Swoop near other birds to borrow their look.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Early Access

DEVELOPER
Team Fugl

PUBLISHER
Kotori Studios Ltd

LINK
www.fuglgame.com

FUGL

Finding birds of a feather

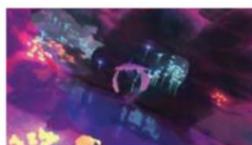
The thing which always surprises and delights me when I pick up the meditative flying game, *Fugl*, is how the blocky avatar and the colourful voxel landscapes come together to create a fluid, swooping sensation.

PLAYED IT

Fugl is an Early Access project which has popped up at a handful of games expos, so perhaps you've tried it out for yourself. If not, the prospect is a simple one. You drop into the world as a bird already in flight and flap and swoop your way through various biomes.

On the way you encounter different creatures, and if you get close enough you can morph into them – some are birds so the morphing is straightforward, but others are land animals so you might end up as the bird version of a crab or a deer, perhaps even a brown bear.

In the early biomes I often gravitate towards flamingos because their languid



wing beats make the flying feel relaxed: the sensation is of a slower, heavier glide. If I fancy a change, I'll skim the water near a flock of seagulls.

The seagulls have a faster and lighter feel, but my favourite thing about them is how their white colouring contrasts with the bright blue water. I try to do the opposite in snowscapes, taking on a black or dark brown colour scheme by coasting past a condor.

But for all the mention of graceful swooping, if you do crash (and I do crash) you'll be rewarded with those land animals I mentioned earlier. I dinged a palm tree with a wing and span into a troop of monkeys. A misjudged cave exploration attempt is how I turned into a goat. Oh, and most recently, admiring myself from

A MISJUDGED CAVE EXPLORATION ATTEMPT IS HOW I TURNED INTO A GOAT

the front instead of using the normal third-person camera angle is how I landed on a bear.

TAKING FLIGHT

Early Access covers such a massive spectrum of content and polish so I'll point out that *Fugl* is a very Early Access prospect at the moment. At points I've run into the limits of the world or become stuck on the water surface. I also had a strange animal-free experience in one outing which was eerie and a graphics card issue currently won't let me try out the level editor that's been added.

I keep coming back for more because the feeling of movement is so lovely. One of the dev team, Johan Gjestland, notes that the choice to use voxels is because the uniformity of the blocks allows you to easily infer things like scale which, in turn, lets you get that sense of speed. Becoming more familiar with the controls also means I don't feel the limitations as much because I mentally compensate, steering away from edges without thinking about it and off into the sky.

Philippa Warr

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#DOMINATETHEGAME



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ICONOCLASTS

PLAYED
IT

Become a wrench-toting
freedom fighter

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
December 2017

DEVELOPER
Joakim Sandberg

PUBLISHER
Bifrost Entertainment

LINK
www.bifrostent.com

Our hero, Robin, finds herself on the wrong side of One Concern, a sinister religious group looking to ban the repair of machines. Which wouldn't be a problem if Robin wasn't a mechanic. Cue a fight for freedom as Robin teams up with a group of like-minded allies to put an end to these creepy zealots. Development on this gorgeous puzzle-platformer started back in 2010, and the release is finally near. In it you'll fight huge robotic bosses, solve brain-teasing puzzles, and enjoy a lot of bouncy, colourful platforming fun. I played an early build of the game, which taught me the basics of using Robin's wrench, and here are some of the things that impressed me most.

Andy Kelly

GRAND SLAM

This shell-protected enemy can't be killed with the wrench or the pistol, but luckily Robin has a Super Mario-style butt slam ability. Leap your way into the air above the enemy, hold down, and then press jump again to unleash the fury, flipping these little guys on their backs.

PIXEL PERFECT

The game's vivid, colourful pixel art is stunning, and it is complemented by some impressively lively, intricate animation. But *Iconoclasts* is more than just a pretty face: the running, gunning and jumping feel beautifully smooth and responsive.

TOOL'S GOLD

Use Robin's golden wrench on these nuts to open doors, move platforms, and solve some cleverly constructed environmental puzzles. You can also spin it around like a Wild West gunslinger and use it to batter enemies around the head.

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

Robin's a bit more athletic than your average side-scrolling hero, able to clamber up ledges and swing around with her wrench. It's not all platforming, though: occasionally you get to visit vibrant towns and talk to the eccentric locals.

PREVIEW

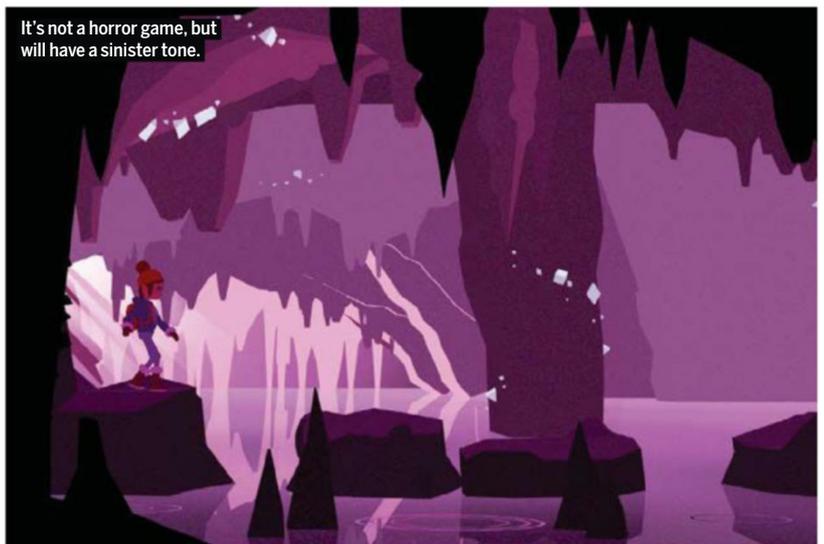
Röki

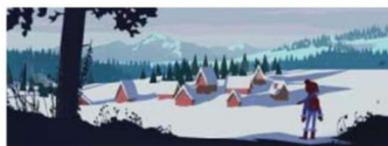
Every epic adventure needs a giant wolf.



The art style is gorgeous.

It's not a horror game, but will have a sinister tone.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2018

DEVELOPER
Polygon Treehouse

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.polygon-treehouse.com

RÖKI

One girl against a perilous wintry world

Striking out on your own can be scary. But for Tom Jones and Alex Kanaris-Sotiriou, it meant having the freedom to tell their own stories. Two art directors from Guerrilla Cambridge, they were forced to reassess their careers after the studio closed down in January. Undeterred, they founded Polygon Treehouse to make games on a more intimate level.

Their first game is *Röki*, a point-and-click adventure inspired by the wintry landscapes and strange creatures of Scandinavian folklore. It follows a young girl called Tove (which in Norse mythology means female Thor), who leaves her family's cabin on the edge of town to venture into the wilderness and face the dark entities that lurk there.

"We're definitely trying to tap into the childhood versions of ourselves," says Jones. "It's a time in your life where monsters and magic are very much real, where imagination is king, adventure is everywhere and you live completely in the moment. With *Röki* we wanted to capture that time, that sense of the unknown."

Through regular diaries posted on the Polygon Treehouse website, the devs have shared their love of folklore, in particular Swedish fairytales. These include stories of spirited young children who embark on adventures and meet supernatural beings, from trolls to woodland witches. It isn't just the fantasy that attracts Polygon Treehouse, however, but the underlying violence. These were tales, after all, used to keep children from misbehaving.

DESPITE THE ANCIENT INFLUENCES, RÖKI EXPLORES MODERN THEMES

"There's something rather ghoulish about folklore, in that it doesn't [pull] any punches," explains Jones. "Some of the tales are pretty grisly. While we're not making a horror game, we do want to capture a certain amount of the sinister tone that folklore offers."

Despite the ancient influences, *Röki* is also a game that explores modern themes. The devs explain that Tove is the sole carer for her younger brother and is a victim of the world she's born into. "Tove is forced to face some of her darkest fears," says Kanaris-Sotiriou. "The collision of fantasy and reality is something we found really interesting. How would a present-day child react to being plunged into a dark and surreal adventure?"

With a mixture of puzzles and exploration, the team describes *Röki* as a traditional adventure, though this will be its first point-and-click game after years of creating stories for PlayStation. "Point-and-click is a genre we both love and were keen to work in and evolve," says Kanaris-Sotiriou. "Where it differs is in the scope of the world. We want *Röki* to feel like an epic adventure, so the range and scale of locations reflect this."

FIRST LOOK

WINTER WONDERLAND

Despite being early in development, *Röki* already looks breathtaking. With its tightly-knit trees, snow-capped cliffs and frozen lakes, it looks just like a page torn from a storybook. Made from a combination of flat-shaded 3D objects and 2D images, the devs are attracted to an art style that is clean but impressionistic. For Tove's character design, they also looked to Laika's stop-motion animations *ParaNorman* and *Kubo and the Two Strings* for inspiration. The result is a protagonist who looks like Anne of Green Gables crossed with an Arctic explorer.

It's hard not to compare *Röki* to other games where children have to survive menacing environments, such as *Inside* and *Little Nightmares*. Hopefully Polygon Treehouse will bring players a new experience, from the plight of its young heroine to the monsters that shift beyond the trees. "The prospect of making a game that felt unique and a little odd was massively appealing," Jones says. "We can't wait to show off more soon."

Kimberley Ballard

The game is inspired by Swedish folklore.

Bend nations to your will.

Asia

This nation is a democracy (11 turns to election)
 Tax rate: 45% Revenue before tax: \$0.00 After tax: \$0.00

Individualism

Security

Spirituality

Privacy

Quality

Tradition

Xenophobia

Prosperity

Collectivism

Freedom

Material wealth

Publicity

Convenience

Novelty

Multiculturalism

Chaos

	Income this turn	Launch success
Social media		
Posting tips		
Autoposter	🔒 Social	
Metafriendship		
Social optimiser		
Profile chatbot	🔒 Social	
Smalltalk chip	🔒 Social	
SimuFriends	🔒 Social	
Sentient profile	🔒 Social	

Espionage

Intel research	40/20	70/20	80/20
Blackmail	40/20	70/20	80/20
Assassinate	40/20	70/20	80/20
Rig elections	40/20	70/20	80/20
Inspire soldier	40/20	70/20	80/20
Hard journal find	40/20	70/20	80/20
Influence media	40/20	70/20	80/20
Fake news	40/20	70/20	80/20

Espionage history:
 Hard journal find: 100% (200%)

Spent 1 connection point to reduce discovery chance by 50%

Sometimes you gotta play dirty.

Europe

The nation is a democracy (11 turns to election)
 Tax rate: 45% Revenue before tax: \$0.00 After tax: \$0.00

Individualism

Security

Spirituality

Privacy

Quality

Tradition

Xenophobia

Prosperity

Collectivism

Freedom

Material wealth

Publicity

Convenience

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Multiculturalism

Chaos

	Income this turn	Launch success
Social media		
Posting tips		
Autoposter	🔒 Social	
Metafriendship		
Social optimiser		
Profile chatbot	🔒 Social	
Smalltalk chip	🔒 Social	
SimuFriends	🔒 Social	
Sentient profile	🔒 Social	

Exploit culture for profit.

Research

I hope you like tech trees.

Gene splicing (GameScore 47%)

- Designer organ (10/45)
- Project Frankenstein (35)
- AI v1.0 (40)
- AI v2.0
- AI v3.0
- AI v4.0
- AI v5.0
- Brain transfer

Artificial Intelligence

Business efficiency (Business tracking 16)

- Task efficiency
- Employee nanny
- CV writer
- Self-regulating corps
- Spyware
- Human-free business
- Human-free cloud

Other: Birthstone, Death production, Spyware, MedicBot, CreatorShop

Designer organs

By better understanding human genetics, we can design and grow organs tailored to each individual customer.

Careers: 1, 2, 1

Can be monetised: **Yes**

Time until completion: **10**

Income (est.): \$54.0bn

Other effects: Extends your lifespan by 5 years.

2/3 4/6 0/1



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2018

DEVELOPER
James Patton

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.spinnortality.com

SPINNORTALITY

Run your own evil corporation in a dystopian future

I've just launched a social media network in Europe that, based on your personality and posting habits, buys things before you even know you need or want them. But it's a disaster. The angle is all wrong, the market hates it and I've lost millions. But while this may have ruined a lesser company, the PC Gamer evil megacorporation has a plan to dig itself out of this hole. I decide to siphon cash from my pension fund, yielding up to \$20 million for each worker I currently have employed.

Of course, there's a chance I'll get caught and exposed, ruining my reputation. But it's worth it. A few turns later and my bank is full of dirty money, which I'll use to launch my social media platform in a nation that'll be more willing to let me invade its privacy. That's just how PCG Corp rolls.

Spinnortality is a game about managing the kind of evil corporation that's usually the antagonist in a cyberpunk story. Those monolithic, faceless multinationals that heroes like Adam Jensen risk their lives to try and stop. It's a delicious premise and executed well – especially when you consider that the game is being made by one person.

Developer James Patton describes his game as, "A cyberpunk strategy/management game where you run a giant, insidious megacorporation." He explains that, to make your dubious business a success, you'll have to spin products, influence the media, manipulate politicians and take over the world.

MANIPULATING THE WORLD MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A JAMES BOND VILLAIN

The world is yours.

But rising to the top won't be easy. Each turn represents three months (or one fiscal quarter), and it's possible to die of old age unless you research and develop the ability to transfer your consciousness into another body. But even when you've dealt with the inconvenience of mortality, there are a dozen other things to cause you problems: espionage, corruption, inefficiency.

So as well as developing new technology and trying to make a profit, you have to deal with all these factors as well. It's like spinning plates, and it has given me a newfound respect for all those sinister cyberpunk corporations in fiction. A lot of work goes into being evil, and I can only imagine the headaches Bob Page had getting VersaLife off the ground.

Developing and launching products is the key to fiscal stability, but you have to carefully study your market. If you try and launch an invasive social media network in a nation that deeply cherishes privacy, it's probably gonna bomb. But launch the same network in a country that leans more towards publicity and you'll almost certainly make a tidy profit.

Other dystopian products you can develop include a hormone cloud used to control workers, a sentient social media profile that posts for you and retina-implanted cameras to make sure employees aren't slacking off. Development requires money, time, and staff, but making a big investment, while costly in the short term, will earn you a lot more money later.

CULTURE CULTURE

But here's the cool part. If your brand has a strong enough presence in a particular nation, you'll be able to influence its culture to better suit your products. So a xenophobic nation could become multicultural, or a spiritual nation may become obsessed with material wealth.

Manipulating the world, pulling the strings from the shadows, makes you feel like a Bond villain. It's intoxicating, and I love how being evil is intrinsically linked to the game's systems. The more underhanded, manipulative and corrupt you are, the more money, power, and influence you'll have. Which makes me wonder if this is set in the future at all.

Andy Kelly

PLAYED
IT



THE GIFT

THIS MONTH'S FREE DOWNLOAD

EXCLUSIVE
GIFT FROM
PC GAMER



Where to find your code

PRINT EDITION

There should be a red card opposite this page with your codes on it. If it's missing or looks like it's been tampered with, tell your newsagent! If you have any problems at all, contact us via the address below.

ANY PROBLEMS?

Send us an email at gift.pcgamer@futurenet.com with proof of purchase – a photograph of the magazine showing the code page will do it, and we'll send you a replacement code.



Free Fernando Onslaught Body and Accessory skin for Paladins

Brighten up your day by bedazzling your knight

This month's freebie furnishes fan favourite, Fernando, from – drat, *Paladins* doesn't start with an 'F' does it? Anyway, this code lets you dress *Paladins'* flamethrowing frontliner in the fabulous Onslaught skin (body and helm), saving you a mighty 200 Crystals. *Paladins* is Hi-Rez's free-to-play first-person shooter built around teamwork, and Fernando's formidable health pool and ginormous shield make him an ideal candidate for shoving your way onto control points. Oh, and his ultimate ability grants him immortality. Reward his usefulness with this swish outfit!

HOW DO I REDEEM MY CODE?

Codes are redeemable through *Paladins'* in-game account page, accessed via the store.



This is where medieval knights went wrong: no flamethrowers.

TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.



PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT

To find out more about Press Pause, visit:
pauseyourday.co.uk



WINNER

WINNER

We step into the offices,
and the upcoming map, of
PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS.

By Christopher Livingston

EVERY SINGLE SECOND IN ASIA, A NEW SOLO MATCH OF PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS BEGINS. AT PEAK TIMES, THAT NUMBER RISES TO **TEN** NEW GAMES PER SECOND. WITH A CONCURRENT PLAYER COUNT THAT HAS RECENTLY SWOLLEN TO OVER **1.5 MILLION**, AN UNANTICIPATED PROBLEM HAS ARISEN FOR THE UNANTICIPATED SMASH HIT. *PUBG*'S CLOUD SERVER SERVICE SIMPLY DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH **SERVERS** TO ACCOMMODATE THE EARLY ACCESS BATTLE ROYALE SHOOTER'S MASSIVE AND **STILL-GROWING** PLAYERBASE.

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds



'm given this information during a visit to the offices of Bluehole, *PUBG*'s developer, in

South Korea. Over the two days I've been here, I've twice tried to interview platform team lead Seungwoo Shin, who is in charge of *PUBG*'s servers. Whenever we've attempted to talk, he's been simply (and understandably) too busy. We finally get to speak for about 15 minutes on my second day, and throughout the interview I feel mildly guilty for cornering him in a conference room: while soft-spoken and incredibly polite, Shin has the restless body language of a man who

knows that he is desperately needed elsewhere.

Shin tells me through interpreter Sammie Kang (*PUBG*'s marketing and events manager) that he only came into the office once every few days as a consultant when he began working on *PUBG*. As Bluehole's last-person-standing shooter quickly grew to become one of the most-played games in the world, Shin's somewhat casual job became, shall we say, a bit more demanding.

"So, now our team has to come into the office every weekend and manually monitor all the servers," Shin says. "It would be done automatically, usually, but we have to monitor server capacity very closely and make sure the servers are available for certain regions if there's a great increase in certain areas."

Shin also tells me briefly about his history in the tech industry. He attended KAIST, the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (basically, Korea's equivalent to MIT). Early in his career, he founded an IT

company, then took a long break. He returned to work to become an engineer for Bluehole Ginno Games' MMORPG *Devilian*, then he took an even longer break, for two years, which he spent living in Australia.

"How long of a break will you need after *Battlegrounds*?" I ask.

Shin doesn't wait for Kang to translate, and he answers in English, laughing softly, "Forever."

FIRST MAN STANDING

Shin isn't the only one at Bluehole who attended KAIST. Chang Han Kim, CEO of the newly formed *PUBG* Corp, also attended, acquiring a PhD in computer science (Kim is also the one who invited Shin to work on both *Devilian* and *PUBG*). Kim, more commonly called CH, has been in the gaming industry for over 16 years. "I'm not someone who started this because I was in love with games," he says, with Kang interpreting. "I'm more like a startup entrepreneur, that's how I started my career, I was a founder of different

BELOW: A crashed plane will provide extra cover while looting this town.



FLASH IN THE PAN

Accidents happen



Two incidents led to *PUBG*'s iconic bulletproof frying pan. Brendan Greene wanted to add the pan to the game as a melee weapon, a homage to the frying pan in the 2000 Japanese film *Battle Royale*, the inspiration for the game mode. The only issue? The film didn't feature a frying pan: Greene had misremembered.

As for the bulletproof nature of the pan: that, too, was something of an accident. Programmer Marek Krasowski set it up as a test one day just for fun. A few weeks later, the bulletproof pan was mistakenly included in an update that made it into the game. Fans discovered this and began posting videos of it. Krasowski read about it on PC Gamer's website.

companies in the past." Those 16 years, as he describes them, were not successful. "I kept failing," he says. "And I was desperate and miserable after failing for 16 years and I was, like, maybe I should stop making games. I really should give up."

While CH was preparing to launch MMO *Devilian* in North America with publisher Trion, he discovered Steam and Twitch. At the time, he says, everyone in Korea was focused on mobile games. But CH saw how many users were on Steam's platform, and examined its Early Access programs, as well as other crowdfunding tools like Kickstarter. He decided to try again. "I don't mind failing again, so what about we try something new?"

"No one was making a serious PC game here, and no one in America knew about us. We were just a small Asian company that's based in Korea, and I thought if we had this can-do attitude and not be afraid of failing, we will learn something valuable."

The puzzle pieces began to come together: the popularity of Steam and Twitch, and the rise of survival games in Early Access following *DayZ*. Plus, Brendan Greene, creator of battle royale mods for *Arma 2* and *Arma 3*, had finished working on *H1Z1: King of the Kill* and returned to Ireland.

"I looked deeper into it and came to realise [*H1Z1*] wasn't really [Brendan's] project," CH says. "He helped bring *King of the Kill* to *H1Z1*, but he was a consultant for [about] a month or so. They had this base game which is a zombie survival, and *King of the Kill* was just a mode on top of it, so it wasn't [Brendan's] kind of battle royale. And he still wanted to do something more that could help him create the battle royale he wanted, and I wanted to create a true standalone battle royale that [was] made from scratch, and was solely focused on creating that battle royale experience from start to end."

THE NUMBERS GAME

The rest is – and continues to make – gaming history, as *PUBG* keeps shattering records and racking up milestones seemingly every few weeks. With over 13.5 million copies sold, and *PUBG* climbing the Steam charts to overtake every other game's player counts (including *Dota 2*'s). Greene sums up *Battlegrounds*' rise: "It's been a crazy year.

"When I first had my interview here with the management," Greene says, "my job interview, essentially, they said to me, 'How many copies do you expect to sell?' and I kind of just said, 'Oh, a million, month one.' And that was my own confidence in the game mode. I thought it would do well. But I didn't expect the success we've seen. I don't think anyone in here expected it. And it's been a hell of a ride."

"We never had numbers as our goal, and success wasn't our goal at all when we first started," CH says. "I told the team, if we achieve the goals, ➤"

PUBG KEEPS SHATTERING RECORDS

the numbers will follow us, the success will follow afterwards, and our goal was to make the best battle royale – our vision when we first started this.

“Our goal was to deliver PC 1.0, fully release it by the end of this year and deliver it to our customers. That was our goal. And I keep telling it to our team, and I think that’s what keeps them motivated and that’s why they don’t really care about numbers and they can still be hard at work trying to meet that goal.”

DRY HEAT

Part of that vision for *PUBG*’s exit from Early Access is the arrival of a new desert map, the second planned arena for *Battlegrounds*. The map is a work in progress, with some textures, features and even entire locations missing: a large city has been removed from the build I’m touring until it’s better optimised, and the zone marked for a military base is currently barren. What is available, however, feels like a natural fit for *PUBG*’s looting and shooting. Far from the barren sandscape I’m half-expecting as I become (I’m told) the first person outside Bluehole to set virtual foot inside it, I instead find a sprawling battle arena dotted with desert trees, cacti and a surprising number of buildings. It’s immediately noticeable how much more variation there is to the terrain than in Erangel, *PUBG*’s current map. There are hills, rises and ditches in the landscape, which create lots of opportunities for cover from sniper fire or, alternatively, convenient places to stage an ambush. I’m told by art director Tae-Seok Jang, who I chat



with over Skype – it’s a little odd that I have flown from California to South Korea and wound up talking via video with Bluehole’s new office in Madison, Wisconsin – that the varied terrain will make a difference not just for those running around in *PUBG*, but also those driving.

“It should feel different and difficult when you’re driving your vehicles on different parts of the world,” Jang tells me, with Kang

ABOVE: Driving off-road will feel distinctly different than paved streets.

BELOW: Fog has been added to *PUBG*, but the desert map may feature new weather.



WEIRD WINNERS

To win a round of *PUBG*, you don’t need to rack up kills. You just need to be the last person standing. Here are some weird ways people have won.



1 A two-player team spend the match fleeing and hiding, and they end up winning with no kills or shots fired.

2 Called to dinner, a player parks himself in a bathroom tub and goes AFK. He returns to discover that he’s outlasted everyone else.

3 Streamer Disguised Toast somehow glitches into a rock and can’t move. With enough bandages to heal himself, he still comes out on top.

4 A player falls off a cliff. Though badly injured, he lands directly in front of the only other player left, and manages to swiftly shoot them.

5 An audience of Twitch viewers controlling a *PUBG* character comes in third. Not a win, but pretty darn close.



interpreting. "So, we really want to create a unique experience on our new map, so when you're actually driving off-road it feels like it's realistic and different, so we want to really pursue that.

"On top of that, when you use a clean paved road you'd be able to move faster, but you should be exposed more to your enemies, so we really want to take that into account. And when you're in bumpy environments, you should be able to find cover pretty easily, but you're taking a shortcut to get somewhere, so it should be difficult to drive."

It does feel, in my limited time on the new map, like there is a real difference: going off-road feels like a bumpier experience, with less solid control over the vehicles than while driving on terrain in the original map.

"But it really depends on which vehicle you have, so you should be able to make a choice, which vehicle you prefer for your strategy. Like, some vehicles will be more optimised for clean roads, some will be more optimised for off-road driving."

I'm not playing a match on the desert map (which at this point has

not even been named), I'm just exploring, and with developer tools enabled I can also enable flying (complete with my character extending a single arm in front of him, like Superman) to quickly speed to distant locations – especially useful since, even with the map not yet complete, there is still the blue circle of death closing around me.

DAYG

With Mexico serving as a source of inspiration for the map, it makes sense that I eventually find a colourful wrestling arena, sure to draw a number of fistfights and melee engagements when players get their hands on it. I also come across a prison, though the land it's situated on may be removed in favour of water: the river, currently snaking around the edges of the desert, may be replaced with ocean to the eastern and southern sides of the map, reminiscent of Chernarus from Bohemia's *Arma* and *DayZ*. Either way, despite the desert environment, boats will be in play.

My favourite spots to stop flying and begin running again are three



**GOING OFF-ROAD
FEELS LIKE A
BUMPIER EXPERIENCE**

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

ancient meteor impact craters with small towns inside them, abandoned shops and homes built right on the sunken crater floor. One such town, with more echoes of *DayZ*, sports the still-burning wreck of a crashed plane. Even with no opponents on the map with me, I can anticipate the tension of looting the buildings in these craters, eyes constantly scanning the high ridge that circles the town for the movement of opportunistic snipers. Even better, I imagine, will be when the blue circle happens to close on one of the crater towns at the end of a match, giving the advantage not to the players peering down from the ridge but to those already hunkered somewhere inside one of the buildings.

"When I first started making battle royale back in *Arma 2*," Greene says, "I had four maps that sort of randomly rotated, and you never really knew which map you were playing on. The idea was that the more maps you have, the more you're testing the player because they can't remember every detail about the map." I point out that players of *CS:GO*, for example, are often happier sticking with one map, like *de_dust2*, playing it for years on end until

FIRST MAN STANDING *The history of the battle royale mode*

1 Brendan Greene's multiplayer last person standing game mode was based on the dystopian Japanese film *Battle Royale*, in which teenage schoolchildren are forced to fight one another to the death on an island.



2 Greene creates a battle royale mod for another mod: the zombie-filled *DayZ* for *Arma 2*.

3 When *DayZ* becomes a standalone game, Greene recreates his mod for *Arma 3*, calling it *PlayerUnknown's Battle Royale*.



4 Sony licenses the mode from Greene and hires him as a consultant for *Daybreak's H1Z1: King of the Kill*.

5 Bluehole hires Greene as creative director for *PUBG*.



they've memorised the layout, the geometry, every route and feature and quirk, until they can play it essentially on autopilot.

"That's why I created battle royale in the first place," says Greene. "Because what I thought was like, with *CS:GO*, you know every pixel on the map. And for me, battle royale was set up to test a player in the moment. And it wasn't reliant on their knowledge of every pixel on the map. You have to be the better player.

"Yes, players like to be kept in a comfort zone. 'I love this map because I know it backwards.' And

the whole idea behind the battle royale game mode is to take them out of their comfort zone, and kind of make them think, and make a game hard, basically, for them, which I think we've shown [with *PUBG*] that players like hard games."

DESERT STORM

I ask both Greene and Jang about possibilities for the future of the desert map. While *PUBG* has had foggy weather added recently, sandstorms would feel much more appropriate here. The dusty setting dotted with cacti also gives the map a

BELOW: With loads of trees and buildings, this desert is anything but barren.



real cowboy feel. Might we see six-shooters instead of AK-47s? Instead of travelling the map in cars, how about on horses?

“So our [action and gunplay lead] Pawel [Smolewski] really wants to do that,” Jang says in regard to horses. “And there are a lot of Western movies that are based on desert areas, so we would love to see places where you think, ‘Oh, you could make a western movie in this area,’ so the sky’s the limit. We’d love to see that and that is something players would love to see. So, who knows?” There’s a laugh. “Pawel wants to do it.”

And, while the Erangel map features matches set during different times of the day, *PUBG* players may get to see something a bit more extreme in the desert: nighttime.

“Another thing we’re testing is when it’s dark, it’s not really dark-dark, it’s not like in the middle of the night or midnight, but it’s dark enough so it feels a bit different, so we’re going to test it. We don’t know if we’re going to roll it out, but we’re seeing how things are with lighting.”

PUBG CRAWL

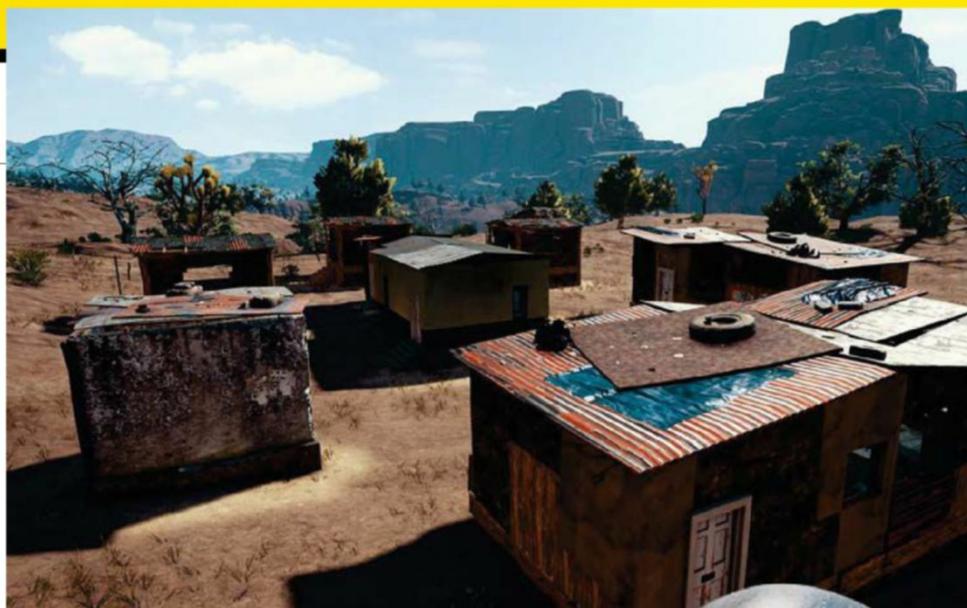
I’m also the first outsider to try out *PUBG*’s vaulting and climbing system, first teased during this year’s E3. Like the map, vaulting is still unfinished, but after just a few attempts at clambering, it begins feeling smooth and kinetic. Running into a church through the front door, I give the back door a miss and instead clamber onto the window ledge and hop out to the ground. Then I climb back in, and repeat the move a few more times. In a small town, consisting of a few crumbling shops, I mantle out of one building through a window, vault over a fence and leap into the window of another building, all while sprinting at top speed. Then I run back the same way, retracing my steps and leaps until I manage to

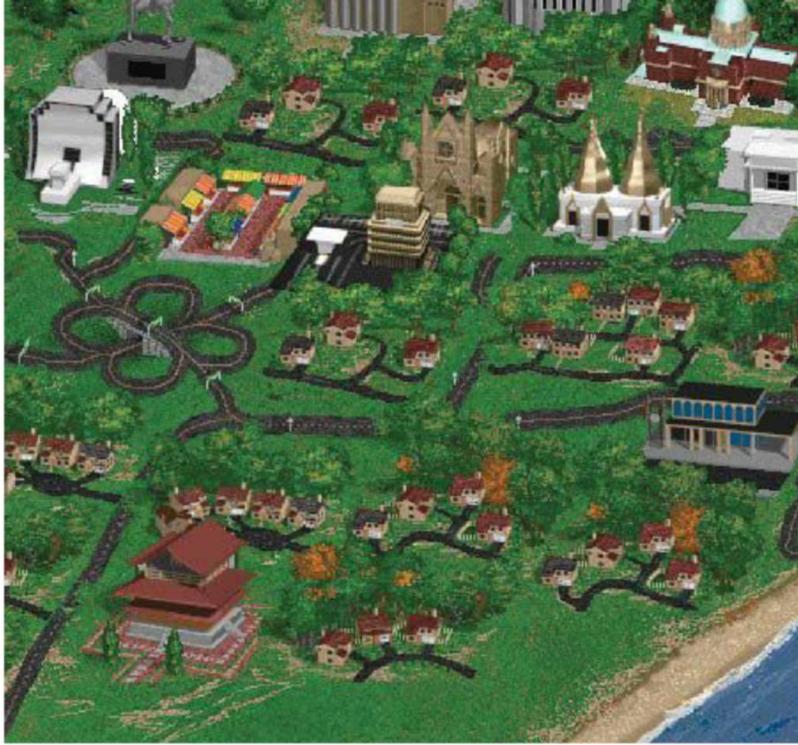
make the entire route feel natural and physical. It’s easy to imagine frenzied chases through buildings and alleys, quick and athletic dashes through towns and villages, and hasty escapes from ambushes or thrown grenades using this new movement system.

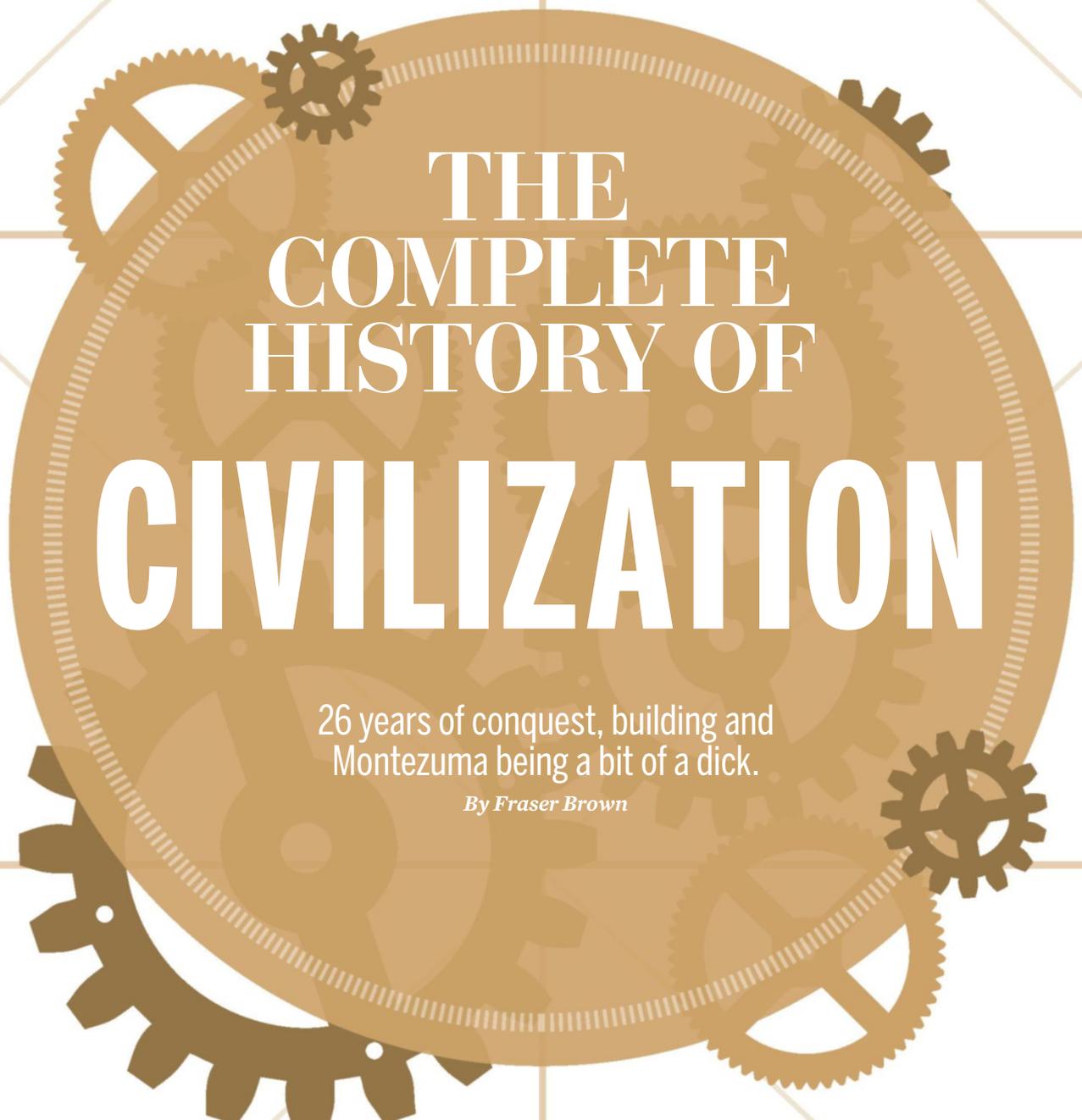
With the new map and vaulting in *PUBG*’s near future, Bluehole is also looking further down the line for features like mod support (which won’t arrive until “next year, at this stage”, according to Greene), and of course the formation of the new Bluehole subsidiary to manage “development and global business opportunities” for *Battlegrounds*. I ask about the new company, though I’m not told much about what it might mean for the future of *Battlegrounds*. In fact, during my visit, it sounds like they haven’t settled on a name yet – all CH will say is that ‘*PUBG*’ will probably be in the title (the day after I leave South Korea, it’s announced as *PUBG Corp*).

Greene doesn’t have a lot to say about the subsidiary, either. “That’s all bizdev,” he tells me, though a moment later he grows more excited. “Like, I’ve heard that we’re the *PUBG* company. And that’s awesome. It’s like, you know, my fucking name’s in a company, like, what the fuck?” ■

ABOVE: Climbing and vaulting will provide new ways to zip through towns.







THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION

26 years of conquest, building and
Montezuma being a bit of a dick.

By Fraser Brown

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CIVILIZATION I



“We were young, and we had no fear”

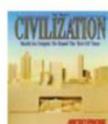
In 1991, MicroProse launched *Sid Meier's Civilization*, a game that would define turn-based strategy for over two decades, and give birth to a genre that eventually became known as 4X: eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXterminate. You probably know someone who has been struck down by One More Turn Syndrome, shackled to their

PC at 3am. Maybe it's you. Meier had no idea what he was starting.

Meier and Bruce Shelley had finished *Railroad Tycoon* and were looking for another project. They wanted to expand on some of the ideas behind their last game, and Meier had been intrigued by the exploration system found in *Empire*, the turn-based wargame. It started by giving players a limited view of the world, but that



NEED TO KNOW



DEVELOPER
MicroProse

PUBLISHER
In-house

RELEASED
September 1991

OUR SCORE
PCG 24: 88%
(reissue review)

viewpoint gradually unfurled as the world was explored.

“*Railroad Tycoon* had this sense of being a large-scale game,” Meier recalls. “But we were bold and wondered what’s a bigger, more epic thing we can do? Well, how about the history of civilisation? We were young, and we had no fear.”

It was easier to be fearless then. “The expectations in terms of graphics and team size were different in those days. We did the first half of the work on *Civ* with just Bruce and I, so we could try things with less risk. It was definitely not something we knew was going to work, but it looked like it would be fun to try.”

While other strategy games were offering up cities or companies as playgrounds, Meier did worry that what they were creating was going to be too much. Too daunting. How do you make a game that spans human history? To start with, they said no to hexes, which wouldn’t make it into the series until *Civilization V*.

“One of the reasons we used squares for mapping was we thought hexes were too geeky. We went with squares to make things accessible.”



LEFT: Despite being smaller and more abstract, *Civilization's* maps aren't worlds apart from those found in the recent games.

AGE OF CIVILIZATIONS

Making *Civilization* turn-based was an accessibility decision, too. Meier considered creating an RTS, but after testing it, he realised that it didn't give players enough time to get to grips with its myriad systems. “Development is a journey in itself, and it could have easily gone in different directions. There were a number of things we considered that we didn't end up doing. Real-time is one of them. I think it's great to look at *Age of Empires*, for example, because that's how the game would have probably progressed if we'd continued down that route.”

Despite being a game of conquest, there's always been a thread of



IT WASN'T ALL MURDER AND LAND-GRABBING

optimism running through the series, and it's not an accident. It was part of MicroProse's philosophy. It wasn't all murder and land-grabbing. "It revolved around what's the most fun. We were criticised for not including slavery in both *Civ* and *Pirates*, for instance, but those were decisions based on what makes a satisfying and pleasant experience for the players."

Everyone who's played *Civ* knows that Montezuma's a dick, and for each leader, there are personality traits attributed to them. But while later iterations emphasised that, those AI personalities were basic in the first game. "Players would read more into the game than what was there in some cases," Meier laughs.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Some leaders might be more aggressive than others, and they were affected by player interactions, but it wasn't quite as elaborate as the stories told by players implied. It helps, Meier thinks, that each leader and civilisation was recognisable. Players knew what to expect.

ABOVE: Carthage, famous for Hannibal, Dido and Danish bacon. *Civ* doesn't really create alternate histories, but it does create ahistorical battle royales.

RIGHT: Though their differences were only cosmetic, *Civilization* put players in the shoes of 15 historical leaders.

"One of the reasons *Civ* was successful was it tapped into things you already knew. You can enter into this world which you already know. You might know Napoleon, and Gandhi has a clear personality; these are leaders who you've probably heard of and already associate a personality or feeling with."

That success wasn't a given, though, and Meier only realised quite how special *Civilization* was after

seeing other people playing it. "As other people played it in the company, we'd hear, 'Just one more turn,' and, 'I can't stop playing.' Whether the world was ready for it or not, we weren't sure, but as the game launched and we started to get feedback, it gained momentum. We sensed that something unique was happening.

"Good thing we left room for five more iterations." ■

MEET THE DEV



Sid Meier

Meier cofounded both MicroProse and Firaxis and has been a part of every *Civilization* since he designed the first.



CIVILIZATION II



An empire built on word of mouth

Brian Reynolds remembers when Sid Meier gave him a copy of *Civilization*. “I played until 2am,” he admits. “It combined the city, units and ‘one more turn’ of *Empire* with the experience of *Civilization* the board game. Avalon Hill games were the gold standard, and I didn’t realise computer games could do that.” He was hooked.

He’d been working on adventure games, trying to compete with Sierra, but it wasn’t working out and everyone was worried about their jobs. So he started developing a prototype – a game about discovery and exploration. He showed it to Meier, and a week later he’d been moved to a new department to commence work on what would become known as *Colonization*.

Then *SimCity 2000* came out. Its predecessor had been one of *Civilization*’s influences, but *SimCity 2000* offered up proof that iterative sequels could work, inspiring MicroProse once again. At

the same time, Reynolds was moving across the Atlantic with his wife. “I moved to North Yorkshire with a PC and a mandate to make a new game: *Civilization 2000*.” The three zeroes would eventually be sliced off.

EXPANDING HISTORY

In a new country, left to his own devices, Reynolds found himself tasked with an intimidating job. “Nobody had ever done a sequel to *Civilization* or even another MicroProse game before. How do you make a sequel to a game that covered all of human history?” Luckily, he had a long list of desired features from players, who had taken to Usenet groups to tell MicroProse what they wanted to see. These ideas, coupled with Reynolds’ own, ran the gamut from alliances to handy notifications that your enemy had started work on one of the Wonders of the World. There was the all-new tech tree, as well, which had to be built from the ground up.

“It all started to feel really fresh, but for reasons you couldn’t always put your finger on. They were subtle.

NEED TO KNOW



DEVELOPER
MicroProse

PUBLISHER
In-house

RELEASED
February 1996

OUR SCORE
PCG 28: 96%

But the executives didn’t understand. They just thought it was *Civ*, but for Windows.” That didn’t mean the fact that it was being designed to run on Windows 95 wasn’t important. “We were perfectly placed with the launch of Windows 95 to be successful. It was probably the first triple-A game that could run on the operating system, and we really leaned into it.” This allowed Reynolds to play around with different screens, making the UI modular, taking advantage of the OS’s strengths.

The original *Civilization* made it so that there was more than one way to win the game, but with *Civ II*, Reynolds wanted to double down on peaceful solutions. So there was the aforementioned alliance system, while peace treaties would force the other civilisation to remove its units from your areas.

“We did a lot of work on diplomatic AI in *Civilization II*,” Reynolds stresses. “It actually quadrupled the amount of code we had to write.” These changes to diplomacy also served as the beginning of the national border system that would see use in future *Civs*, as well as *Alpha Centauri*, which Reynolds also designed.

ENTER TACTICS

Despite this focus, conquest wasn’t forgotten. Indeed, it was dramatically enhanced, thanks to unit hit points. The result was considerably more tactical when compared to *Civilization*’s basic combat. It also made the era units were from matter more. Reynolds wanted to get rid of those moments where a phalanx could stand up to a battleship.

“It was a long journey, making it more tactical,” Reynolds recalls. *Master of Magic* was a source of inspiration, but he still didn’t find the combat to be much fun. “There was talk of Sid working on that side of the



LEFT: With *Civilization II*, cities started to look distinct, reflecting the cultural differences and the technological era.



“WE DID A LOT OF WORK ON DIPLOMATIC AI IN CIVILIZATION II”

game, but it didn't happen. I'd already coded the idea of hit points, getting ready for what I thought was coming, and Sid was like, 'Yeah, my prototype isn't as fun as that,' so I carried on."

In 1993, MicroProse was sold to Spectrum Holobyte. There'd always been issues with the business side of MicroProse not understanding *Civilization II*. It was more invested in the multiplayer remake of the first game. This wasn't helped by the fact that multiplayer wasn't on the cards for the sequel. "I put a good amount of time into multiplayer logic for *Civilisation II*, but by 1995, there was no way we were going to get it in." After the acquisition, things seemed to get worse.

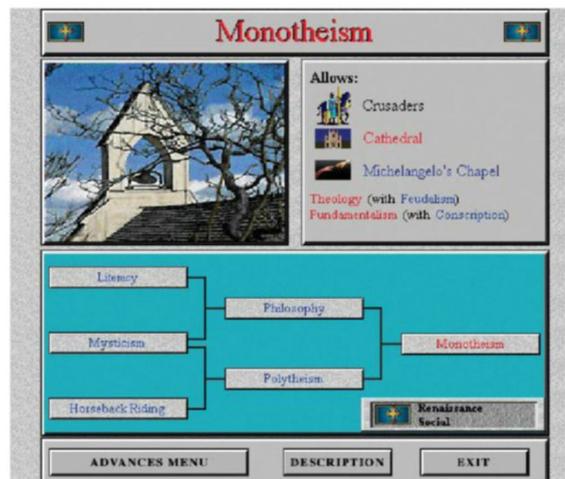
"When they took over, they didn't have confidence in the game, so they did very little marketing for it. In the end, word of mouth saved it." The publisher estimated poor sales. By the time Reynolds left the company, it had sold 2.5 million. "It established that *Civ* was the type of game that could support sequels. *Civ III* was definitely going to happen." ■

MEET THE DEV



Brian Reynolds

After *Civ II*, Reynolds went on to design *Alpha Centauri*, as well as *Rise of Nations*.



ABOVE: Seeing them displayed in the city screen was the best reason to build wonders.

LEFT: Stop trying to figure out why discovering monotheism unlocks knights. Just start recruiting them.

BELOW: The world always begins as terra incognita until units explore the unknown.



CIVILIZATION III



The series returns home to its creators

With the unexpected success of *Civilization II*, another sequel was inevitable, though not before some litigation over naming rights and the launch of Activision's *Civilization: Call to Power* series. After suits and countersuits, the licence eventually ended up with Hasbro, and by 2001 the company had been acquired by Infogrames. Firaxis, which was founded by Sid Meier, Brian Reynolds and Jeff Briggs in 1996, could finally work on the next game.

And, once again, the question became: what could possibly be added to such a huge thing? "Sid and I used to joke with each other that after designing *Civilization*, what else could you do?" Jeff Briggs recalls. "The scope of the game spans all of human history from the agricultural revolution to the present, so we already had everything that any other game could have."

Luckily, Briggs had been thinking about a new version of *Civilization* ever since *Civilization II* had been released in 1996. A lot of the experimentation had already taken place in his head. It was also around that time that he started thinking in terms of thirds. One third the same, one third new and one third improved. This, he says, helped guide them through the experimentation.

BIG HUGE CHANGE

Civilization has a tradition of having a different lead designer for each entry in the series, but this started out as a coincidence. With the original *Civilization*, Meier felt he had poured everything into that game, so Brian Reynolds took over. The idea was for him to lead development on *Civilization III*, as well.

"We originally planned for Brian to lead the development and design of *Civ III*, but he decided to start Big Huge Games instead and left Firaxis before development really got started. So I was left as the default designer

– exciting and intimidating. Luckily, I had a list of features that I wanted to integrate into the game already."

One of those features was civilisations that had unique hooks which went beyond aesthetics. In *Colonization*, which Briggs worked on with Reynolds, Meier and Doug Kaufman, each faction had a sort of starting 'power', and he wanted to tap into that. "I looked at the time in history that each of the civs had achieved some level of dominance and tried to identify units and capabilities that would signify that moment in their history. This meant that a civ would have a slight advantage during their historical prime time and shape the player's strategy to some extent."

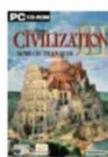
Briggs wanted to expand the game to include elements that weren't 4X concerns. He considered civilisation as not just domination on a military and control basis. Thus, culture was introduced, making border expansion a function of shared cultural experiences. Systems for 'Great People' were also designed, along with works of art, music and architecture, but many of them would be dropped before development concluded due to resource and time constraints. What didn't make it, however, found life in later games.

MULTIPLAYER COULD WAIT

The constraints did mean that the multiplayer side of things wasn't ready for launch, unfortunately. If they'd waited, the game would have been delayed by a year. But Briggs doesn't recall any serious issues or obstacles that impeded development, and with the hiring of eventual *Civilization IV* designer Soren Johnson, more work could be done.

He does wish he'd removed the corruption system, however, which created an obstacle when it came to making large empires with cities

NEED TO KNOW

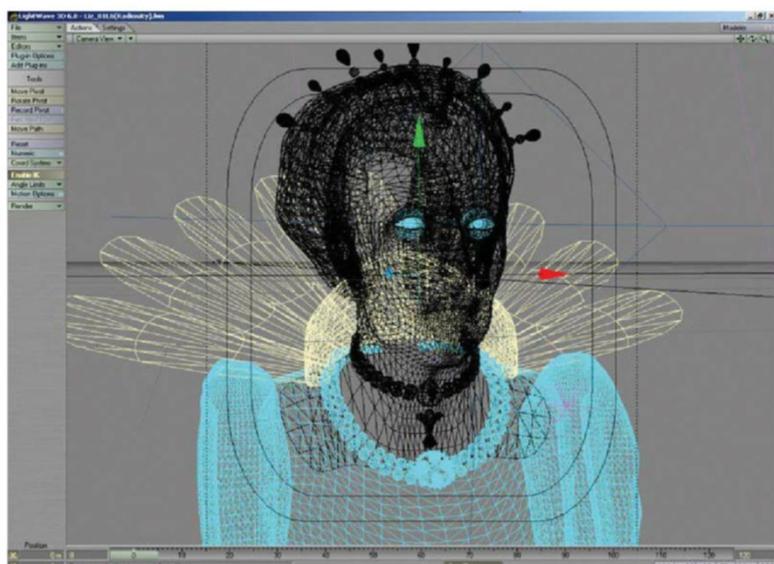


DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
Infogrames

RELEASED
October 2001

OUR SCORE
PCG 104: 92%



LEFT: Elizabeth's chilling neon-blue stare didn't make it into the final game.



“THE SCOPE OF THE GAME SPANS ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY”

spread out across great distances. “Corruption and waste had been factors in *Civ* and in *Civ II* as well. I wish I had removed it from *Civ III* altogether. To be honest, I don’t recall it ever coming up during development as a problem. I think we all just accepted it as a part of the system and we were a little afraid to mess with it. Oops.”

While *Civilization III* proved to be one of the more divisive games among veteran players, it was another success for the series. Briggs thinks that there’s something fundamental about the franchise that keeps people coming back.

“It is the go-to game for history-of-the-world games. Several others have tried to steal this mantle but they’ve usually tried to ‘improve it’ in ways that go against the simple elegance of Sid’s original turn-based seeding of future events system. Improving graphics, adding new systems, expanding the definition of the game to include more and more elements of human history – all of this has kept it fresh.”

MEET THE DEV



Jeff Briggs
As well as designing *Civilization III*, Briggs cofounded Firaxis and is also a composer.



ABOVE: The ability to upgrade your palace from a cave to something more, well, palatial is sorely missed in the later *Civilizations*.

LEFT: The introduction of national borders means that these tanks know exactly what they’re doing. Bad Tanks. Go home.



CIVILIZATION IV



The Next Generation of Civilization

After cutting his teeth on *Civilization III*, Soren Johnson became the next torchbearer. It was the first in a new generation of *Civilizations*, built with a new 3D engine, accessible modding and multiplayer. And when it came to deciding what shape it would take, Johnson wasn't going to give any feature a free pass.

"One thing I had a strong conviction about was that we weren't going to

do anything by default," Johnson explains. "We weren't going to adopt anything from the previous games by default. It's not necessarily the most high-minded concept, but it meant that I was going to start from scratch and re-evaluate everything."

He wanted to place the focus on the big picture, not the tiny details, removing things like corruption and introducing religion. From other games came ideas like unit upgrades. Johnson had played *Alpha Centauri*, and was inspired by the armoury system. The *Civilization IV* version is

NEED TO KNOW



DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
2K Games

RELEASED
October 2005

OUR SCORE
PCG 155: 94%

simpler, but keeps the essence, the important decisions and different paths. This philosophy is also echoed in how Johnson approached the development of civilisations.

"I felt like the previous games didn't offer a lot of interesting choices about how you could develop terrain and manage citizens. In previous games it was pretty sparse, basically mines and farms. I wanted people – I think this has become a theme for the way I make games, and you can see it in *Offworld Trading Company* – to have a reason to play differently each time they started a new game."

BIG PICTURE

The map became littered with resources that ranged from cotton to iron, luxury and strategic goods that could be harvested by placing the appropriate building on them. But many of these resources were locked behind era-specific technologies, meaning when and if the player got access was largely up to them.

For all the new features, *Civilization IV*'s most dramatic changes were broader in scope. "There were a lot of things that were really development and production-style innovations or priorities," Johnson recalls. And that included multiplayer. "It's no secret that *Civ* has had a problematic history with multiplayer. One of the defining features of *Civ IV* is we also built it, initially, as a multiplayer game, not as a singleplayer game. So we knew that every system worked in multiplayer.

"We were playing multiplayer games during the first two or three months of development," Johnson continues. "They were rudimentary, but you don't really need a lot of mechanics to have a fun experience with other people. We actually made a lot of progress just by being able to base it off these play sessions we had every week. It was a revelation."



LEFT: With *Civilization IV* came a new engine and a bold redesign, and even the leaders weren't immune to the big makeover.





There was a 3D engine to play with as well – a first for the series. It represented a huge graphical leap, but while the upgrade was a welcome one, it was the enhanced legibility that made all the difference when it came to navigating the map. It was easier to understand what you were looking at, be it a city or a piece of terrain, and what was happening there. Accompanying this was a slight change in perspective, too.

“It was actually a big fight between me and the artists for how the grid system would work. The 3D

system in *Civ IV* is like a chessboard. It’s straight ahead. Artists hated that. Even though it was 3D, they still wanted that diagonal board, and I’ve always felt that it makes the distance between tiles confusing. If you move two tiles east to west versus two tiles north to south, you literally move twice as far, so it really obfuscates how close things are on the map.”

SQUARED AWAY

The changes to the map weren’t kept in its successor, *Civilization V*, which made the move to hexes. Johnson’s a

ABOVE: Cities started to grow outwards, swallowing up the terrain with farms, cottages and eventually towns.

LEFT: There’s something gauche about putting the Pyramids, the Colosseum and the Great Lighthouse all in one city.

“I WANTED PEOPLE TO HAVE A REASON TO PLAY DIFFERENTLY”

bit wistful about that. “We were a bit afraid of hexes at the time.” But many features developed or established in *Civilization IV* have continued through the last two games.

“If none of this had happened, *Civilization* would still be a landmark title. If *Civ II* had flopped, *Civ I* would still be important. But I feel like the franchise begins with *Civ IV* because the blueprint for how to keep iterating sort of starts there. There’s a path that’s been followed by *Civ V* and *Civ VI*, in terms of the amount of stuff you add to the game, how you manage things and the expansion format.”

Halfway through development, the game was dropped by its publisher and sold to Take-Two. Yet Johnson remained confident. “I saw so many things that I thought needed to be improved from *Civ III*.” That confidence paid off for the team, and *Civilization IV* went on to become a series favourite. It even managed to be the first game to win a Grammy, thanks to Christopher Tin’s stirring Baba Yetu theme. ■

MEET THE DEV



Soren Johnson

Johnson’s first designer job was on *Civilization III*, and he now runs Mohawk Games.

CIVILIZATION V



Squares are dead! Long live hexes!

A storm was brewing at Firaxis, and it was undeniably hex-shaped. Since 1991, the series had used square grids, while more and more 4X and wargames gravitated towards the sexy angles of the hexagon. As a fan of games like *Panzer General*, new lead designer Jon Shafer decided to introduce *Civilization* and its many adherents to the joy of hex.

Development started in early 2007. Shafer was 21, and he wanted to do something different. “*Civilization IV* was such a good game, so we wanted to put a different spin on things. We acknowledged that it was going to be controversial, not everyone was going to like what we did, but we made a conscious effort to push things in a different direction.”

What could be more controversial than killing squares? A lot of other things, it turns out. Surprising to Shafer, getting people to be open to it wasn’t all that difficult. He’d had the idea, and remembers suggesting it off the cuff, but never meant it seriously. Then, in a design meeting, someone else threw the idea out there. Sid Meier was there, and his opinion about hexes had changed over the years. He thought it was a good idea. So did the artists. And the engineers.

BREAKING THE MOULD

It was easier to do since, like *Civilization IV*, the fifth iteration also used a new engine, built from scratch. It also allowed the art team to elevate the series’ aesthetic. “It broke a lot of boundaries in a lot of ways. It certainly had higher system requirements than some people were accustomed to with *Civilization*, but

NEED TO KNOW



DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
2K Games

RELEASED
September 2010

OUR SCORE
PCG 218: 93%

overall it was something that worked out in the end.”

In any other *Civilization*, the hexes might have been the headline attraction, but Shafer wasn’t joking about wanting to make big, potentially controversial changes. Stacks of doom were gone. No more could conquerors cram armies into a single tile. Instead, each unit needed its own tile, pushing things like unit placement and logistics to the forefront. It was one of the biggest changes to combat in the series’ long history. Shafer is unexpectedly ambivalent about it now.

“The idea was to add more depth to the combat system. Lots of different systems had been tried, and none of them worked very well. But I don’t think the one-unit-per-tile system works very well, either, though it’s probably funny hearing me say that. It was an experiment, and it’s something that’s changed the series. A stack model is probably better, however; it’s more suited to a game of *Civilization*’s scope.”

Despite this, the unstacking has continued in *Civilization VI*, and though he doesn’t think it works as well as it could, Shafer still believes that *Civilization V*’s combat is more interesting than it was in previous games. It gives more prominence to the map. You want to put archers on hills, hide warriors behind forests and generally pay more attention to the environment. And maps, I have learned, are one of Shafer’s passions.

“There are very few designers who love maps as much as me. I want to put as much as I can on the map, utilise that map, utilise random maps, procedural generation,” Shafer starts to lose himself in a list of the map’s potential. He wants to use it to steer the game and highlight things that players might want to do, or explore, and in *Civilization V*, the result is a world that’s full of detail.

LEFT: Fun fact: Napoleon was average height, but his horse, Marengo, was quite small. This fact was omitted from paintings.





ABOVE: Not pictured: the World War 2-era battleships chasing these poor longboats. Should have upgraded when they had the chance.

LEFT: Unstacking armies meant that there was a much stricter limit to the number of units that could besiege a city.



“WE WANTED TO PUT A DIFFERENT SPIN ON THINGS”

“This was something that was heavily emphasised and contributed by the art team. Our art lead, Dorian Newcomb, one of his bullet points on the art was ‘a living world’. That also fed into the design side because he was one of the first members of the team, and he said, ‘These are the pillars that we’re looking at on the art side.’ It made sense, so I thought maybe we could try to do more here.”

NO REGRETS

In hindsight, Shafer admits that there are some things he would do differently, and he has new ideas about how to bring strategy maps to life more, and what can be done with unit stacking. But he doesn’t dwell, and he certainly doesn’t regret the experiments and changes.

“The only way I know how to do things is say, ‘What’s the craziest thing we can pull off here?’ Not everybody is going to like that approach. But there are plenty of *Civ* games, and there will be more in the future I’m sure, so people will have a chance to see many iterations.”

MEET THE DEV



Jon Shafer
Shafer left Firaxis after *Civ V*, founding Conifer Games. He’s working on a project with Paradox Interactive.

CIVILIZATION VI



Letting it all hang out

As soon as work wrapped up on *Civilization V*'s final expansion, *Brave New World*, the design team had already moved onto *Civilization VI*. And with Ed Beach leading development on both, it's not surprising that the pair share a lot of similarities, with the latter fleshing ideas introduced in the expansion and *Civilization V*'s other pieces of DLC.

Ever since it appeared in the third game, culture has evolved into one of the key pillars of the *Civilization* series, and for Beach it was a priority in *Brave New World*, which saw the introduction of the tourism system. It became a priority once again in *Civilization VI*, culminating in a new progression system that put culture on the same level as science, complete with its own tree, but for civics rather than technology.

"I'm a huge fan of world travel and spending time in other cultures," Beach explains. "Every time I go to major European capitals, for example, all those opportunities to see the art

that's been collected, the museums, it's a really interesting insight into what civilisations value and want to preserve. So I like to think about what that tells me about how civilisations should interact with each other, especially in the late game, when it's not all about conquest."

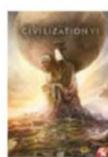
CULTURE CLUB

This culture focus, and particularly the civics tree, greatly expanded how much you could do in the game without cracking skulls and smashing down city walls, but it also continued the philosophy of optimism and positive forward momentum that Meier espoused all the way back in the very first game. And as Beach notes, along with several of his fellow lead designers, you can still trace a lot back to the original *Civilization*, decades later.

Civilization VI was unusual in that, before development had even started, the team not only had a clear idea of several systems that they wanted to implement, they even knew that they worked. A great deal of the experimentation happened earlier in the process. You can see the



NEED TO KNOW



DEVELOPER
Firaxis Games

PUBLISHER
2K Games

RELEASED
October 2016

OUR SCORE
PCG 299: 93%

origins of the district system, for instance, in 2010 with *Civilization V*'s *Spain and Inca* scenario pack, but placing buildings outside of cities was suggested as far back as the beginnings of the core game.

"The earliest notion of unstacking cities was before the *Civ V* base game even shipped. We were wondering how the wonders were going to be visualised, and there was a push internally from a team to move them outside cities, making them seem powerful and magnificent. There were a number of people that tried to get Jon Shafer to do it, but I think he made the right call then. We had a lot on our plate already for *Civ V*, with the tactical combat and moving to one unit per tile."

It was an idea that wormed its way into the minds of Beach and his team, however, inspiring the occasional special building like the Incan terrace farms and the Polynesian statues, which needed to be constructed on specific tiles, such as mountains and coastlines, respectively. When Beach started work on *Civilization VI*, it was the first thing that the team got working. He now considers it the game's groundbreaking achievement, transforming cities into these sprawling metropolises that expand across the land through specialised districts.

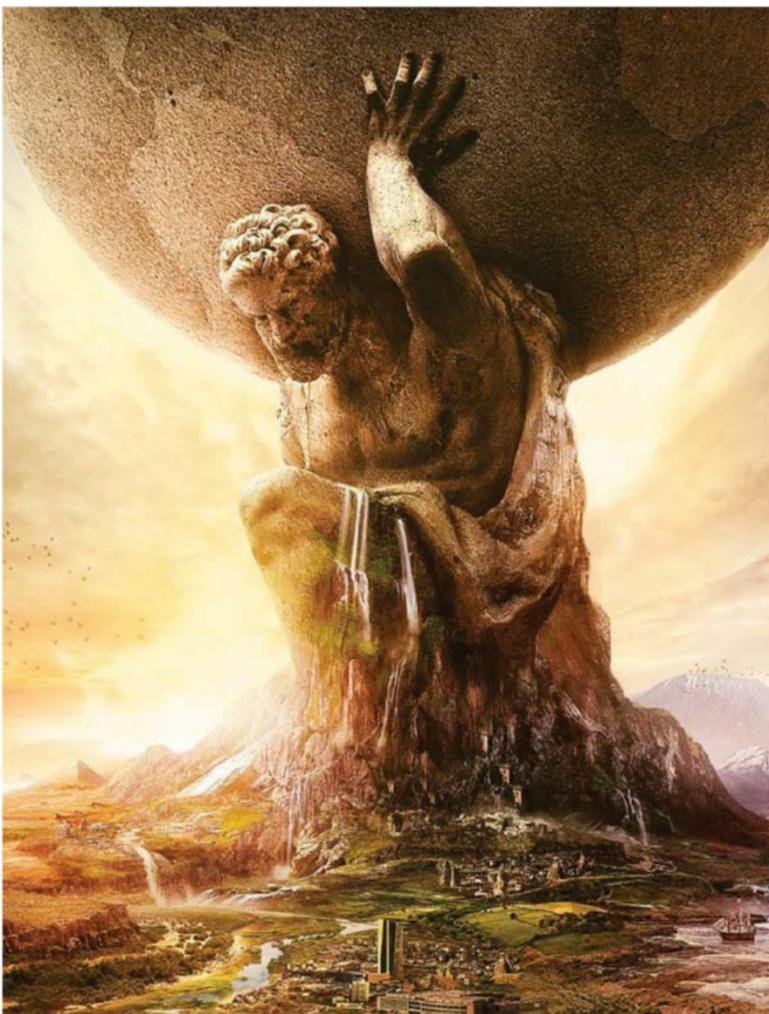
"I'm a board game designer on the side," Beach explains, "and there are a lot of board games that I like that are very focused on positional play and using or creating the map as you're playing through it. That was the big stamp that we put on *Civilisation VI*, trying to make sure that you take advantage of the map, not just as this place you have to explore early in the game, but by putting your mark on the map, tile by tile. That's why we unstacked the cities and included adjacency bonuses and districts."

LEFT: *Civilization VI*'s bright, minimalist aesthetic has proved to be a divisive one, but it's greatly improved how legible the game is.



ABOVE:The unstacked cities can grow to be gargantuan, but each district is also vulnerable to attack, making defence an even greater concern.

LEFT: The ultimate goal is to grow powerful enough to fight the game's boss, Atlas, in a bowling match for the ages.



MEET THE DEV



Ed Beach

Beach developed *Brave New World* and *Gods and Kings* before designing *Civilization VI*. He also makes board games.

CULTURE HAS EVOLVED INTO A KEY PILLARS OF CIVILIZATION

HISTORY CONTINUES

Unlike the other entries in this history of the series, *Civilization VI* isn't finished yet. The game launched in 2016, and new civilisations and systemic changes are still being planned by Beach and his team. Religion, diplomacy and espionage will all be getting a new look before he's done.

"There are six of us who are working actively in either game design or AI development, and I remind the team all the time that this is a marathon and not a sprint," Beach says. "I've only run one marathon myself, so I only have a little bit of an idea of what miles 15 or 16 of a marathon are like, but that's where I feel we are now. We've still got quite a way to go."

But then *Civilization* is never really finished. Since the first game appeared way back in 1991, hardly any time has gone by where a new entry wasn't being developed, or at the very least a prototype or piece of DLC. As familiar as it is, *Civilization* is always moving forward. ■

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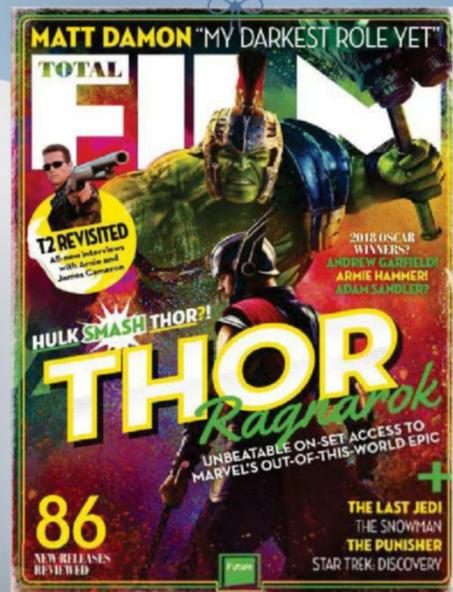
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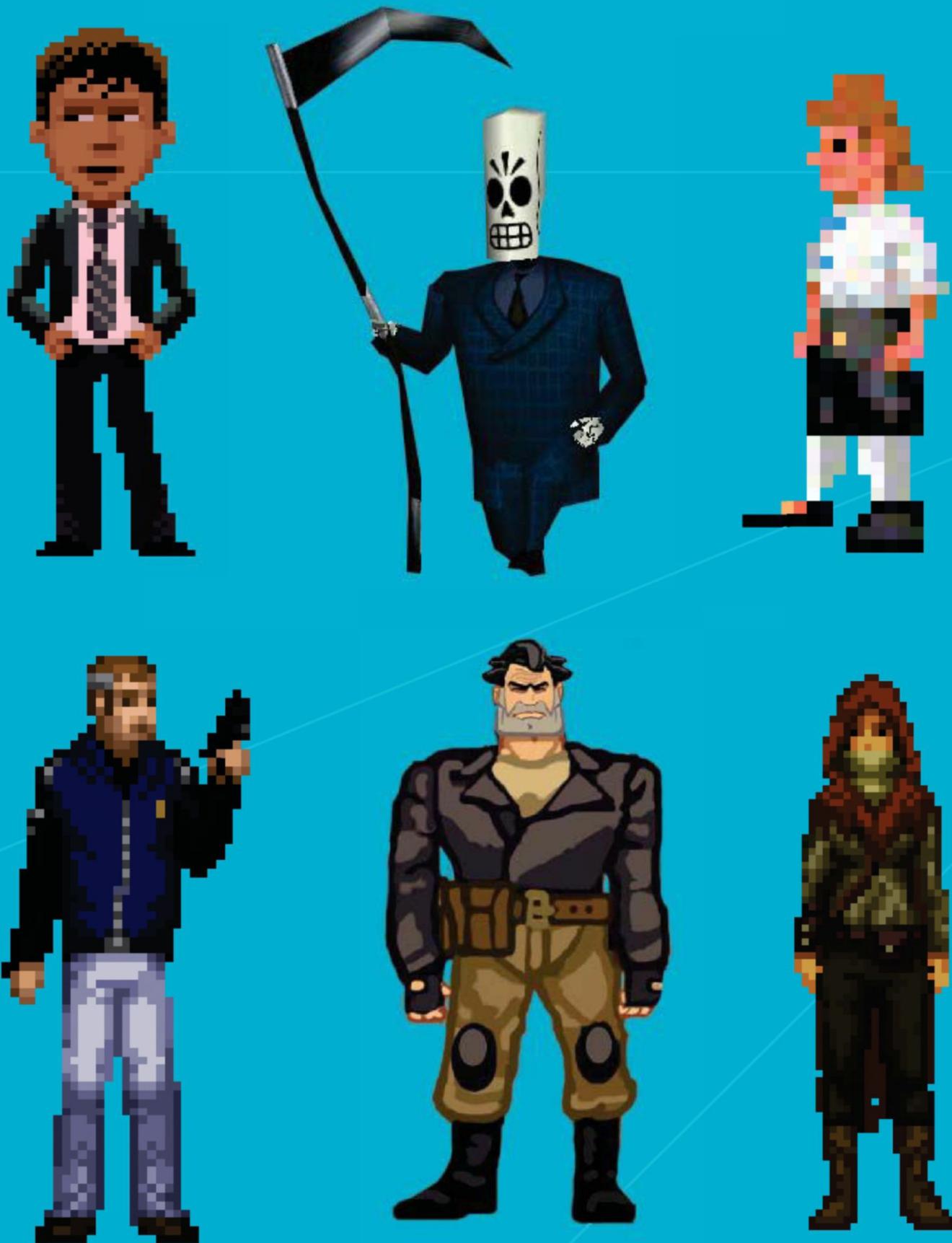


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THE FUTURE OF ADVENTURE GAMES

Adventure game developers discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and future of their favourite genre.

By Andy Kelly

Every few years, someone claims that adventure games are dead. But adventure games never died: they just changed. “I think what they really mean is the death of point-and-click adventure games,” says Ron Gilbert, creator of *Monkey Island* and, more recently, *Thimbleweed Park*. “Games like

Gone Home, *Firewatch*, and everything Telltale makes are adventure games, and they can sell millions of copies. But if we limit the description to point-and-click games, I don’t know that I fully disagree. These games are a niche market now, but if you make them cheaply and efficiently, they can still do well. Dave Gilbert [no relation] has carved out a nice fanbase.” »



Firewatch is one of a new breed of story-focused games breaking free from genre conventions.

“What’s interesting is that those articles usually come out after a high-profile adventure game is released that’s less than stellar,” says Dave Gilbert, founder of point-and-click revivalist Wadjet Eye. “Suddenly a game speaks for *all* adventure games, and the whole genre is dead. This is a narrative that only seems to apply to adventure games. Roguelikes ‘died’ then came back. So did the platformer and the RTS. But people love talking about how adventure games died, or are dying. Even developers themselves! But I’ve been making them for 11 years and they continue to sell and support my family, so it’s hard to take that kind of thing seriously.”

“When people declare things dead in the moment, the odds of them turning out to be wrong are usually close to 100%, so it’s easy to brush this kind of thing off,” says Sam Barlow, creator of experimental mystery game *Her Story*. “I think part of it comes from a certain self-consciousness and a certain desire for the medium to hurry up and grow up. Adventure games often feel like an awkward middle ground between the proper narrative games we aspire to and our cruder earlier attempts.”

CONTROL FREAK

Barlow explains that one of the adventure genre’s greatest struggles is the idea of the player controlling the story’s protagonist. “They become stuck in the weeds of the plot,” he says. “I kinda like the fact that a lot of modern games have reduced the emphasis on the specifics of the

ADVENTURE TIME *Innovative takes on the genre*



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A bold narrative experiment, telling a freeform crime story through a fragmented database of video clips.



ELSE HEART. BREAK()
Clever hacking puzzles and an intricate world colour this tale of youth and hacktivism.



STORIES UNTOLD
A unique and atmospheric horror anthology focusing on that most modern of monsters under the bed: technology.



THE WITNESS
An exploratory puzzler with a complex, hidden story. Or a pretentious one-trick pony, depending on who you ask.

actions, and focused more on dialogue and higher-level character choice. I’m interested in finding ways for players to be a part of the experience of a story without having to throw them into the busywork of ‘being’ a character.”

Francisco Gonzalez, founder of indie adventure studio Grundislav, thinks that adventure game designers often stubbornly cling to older design tropes. Mazes, illogical puzzles, excessive in-jokes and too much fourth wall-breaking are just a few of the elements that bother him. “If your game absolutely needs a maze, keep it brief,” he says. “Add some sort of puzzle element that allows you to navigate it without having to map it yourself.”

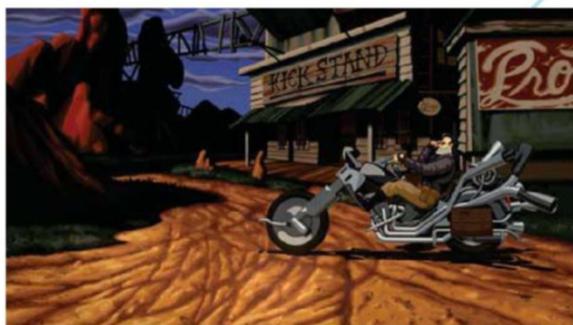
“So many point-and-click games these days seem to have random puzzles that don’t help move the narrative forward,” says Ron Gilbert. “A good adventure game should also be about exploring a world, and in many games you’re just teleporting



from location to location. *Firewatch* and *Gone Home* are about exploring a space, and more point-and-click games need to do a better job of this. Build me a world I want to live in.”

He continues, “I don’t know that I’ve played a point-and-click adventure made in the last few years that thoroughly engaged me. I’m a point-and-click snob. I think two things that have hurt the genre are illogical puzzles and puzzles that don’t intertwine with the narrative. I still see these issues today. However games like *Firewatch* get around this by not having deep puzzles. Most adventure games are all about story. In a lot of ways they’ve thrown the baby out with the bathwater, and that is depressing.”

Olivia White of Owl Cave Games thinks too many adventure games still fall into the archaic traps of horrible logic and self-referential humour. “All the people working in the field today who do excellent work are the ones who are actively slicing



away the old, rubbish parts of the genre and improving the good parts with surgical focus," she says. "Not all adventure games use moon logic, but plenty of designers are still stuck in the past."

"This is actually one of the freer genres to work within," says Sam Barlow. "There are enough limitations that it kind of encourages people to play around the edges, and I think that's important. The adventure game fan is often of a certain type, and there's been a lot of intense, fairly academic discussion and analysis of the genre. It has a lot of fans and creators who are passionate about keeping things moving forward."

NO LIMIT

I ask Ron Gilbert if the seemingly limited framework of the adventure genre naturally limits innovation. "For pure point-and-click games, it does," he says. "But people, including me, have a very rigid definition of a point-and-click game and resist change. After building *Thimbleweed Park*, I do think there's a stigma attached to the genre. People are often predisposed to think they won't like them, and that these games are full of illogical puzzles and bad narrative. As a creator you have a huge hump to overcome. We felt that every day making *Thimbleweed*."

"There have been a lot of really innovative things done in adventure games recently," says Francisco Gonzalez. "I think the main problem is that if an adventure game tries to innovate too much, then people no

ABOVE: Wadjet Eye has an incredibly varied catalogue of great point-and-click adventures in a classic mould.

RIGHT: We've come a long way from *Monkey Island*, but it is still one of the best examples of the adventure genre.



longer consider it an adventure game. There's a notion that you need absurd inventory puzzles to be part of the genre, but I consider games like *The Cave*, which has platforming elements, and the heavily story-led *Oxenfree* to be great examples of modern adventures."

"What adventure games do well is tell more intimate, more focused stories," says Dave Gilbert. "You wouldn't make an adventure game about a soldier fighting in a warzone. Nor would you

make a beat-'em-up about a detective trying to solve a case. So can adventure games limit you? Sure. But for

telling the stories I want to tell, the sky's the limit."

So what does the future hold for adventure games? "We're going to see a lot more games that shed the point-and-click mould," says Olivia White. "I think we'll see a bunch of developers adopting the Telltale style, but I'd like to see more games doing interesting things with interactive narrative like *Stories Untold* and *Edith Finch*."

"I think things are going to continue as they have for the past 20 years," says Francisco Gonzalez.

"There'll always be a market for adventure games, and new generations of gamers will get into the genre through modern narrative games or the classics. But I hope adventure games will continue to evolve and not be afraid to go beyond the traditional genre trappings, embracing the move away from illogical, archaic design."

"We're seeing more games with lighter mechanics and a greater emphasis on story and character,"

says Sam Barlow.

"I think that's something that helps the genre, because it brings in audiences who are hungry for what makes adventure games tick, and also draws in new creators who are

ready to mix things up. My vision of the future is one where the adventure game creators step into the world of streaming TV, where they figure out how to use performance and video as a way of telling stories."

"More people are making adventure games than ever," says Dave Gilbert. "So we'll continue to see a lot of new and interesting games coming out."

"If only I knew," says Ron Gilbert. ■

"PLENTY OF DESIGNERS ARE STILL STUCK IN THE PAST"



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

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

ALPHAS & BETAS

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

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

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

THEY'RE BACK

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

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

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

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

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

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

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

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

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

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

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

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

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

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

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

Examples *Life is Strange, Planet Coaster*

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

Examples *Overwatch, Mass Effect: Andromeda*

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

Examples *Forza Horizon 3, Dishonored 2*

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

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

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



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

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

You wait all year..

Hopefully you've noticed a recent trend of 90+ scores being harder to come by. That's not a reflection of the quality of games in 2017, but of a renewed attempt by us to use our scoring system to its fullest potential. We want a 90+ score to feel like a big deal. This month, we find out if it does, because both *Total War: Warhammer II* and *Divinity: Original Sin II* score 92%. These are two of the best games on PC right now.

Also, this month, we review *Heat Signature*, the latest game from former PCG UK section editor Tom Francis. We didn't review his last game, *Gunpoint*, but we're a larger, global team now. Our *Heat Signature* reviewer, Steven Messner, doesn't know Tom, and nobody who does was consulted on the review or its score.

Phil Savage

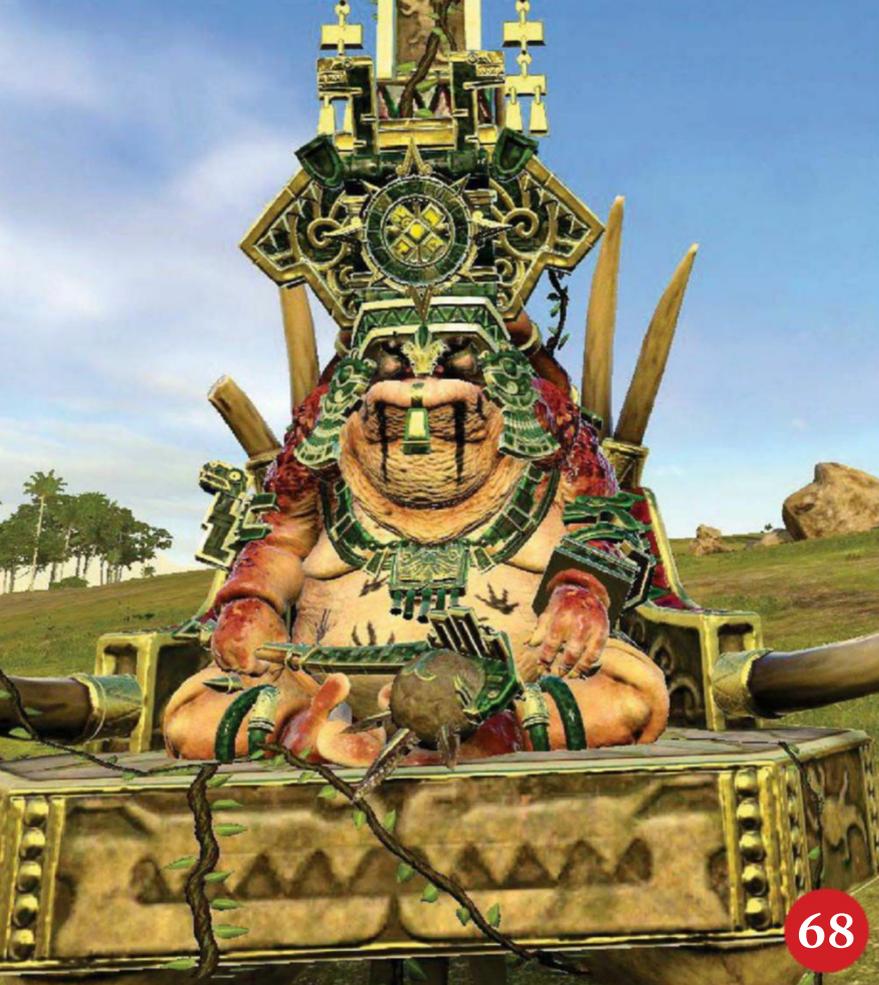
PHIL SAVAGE

EDITOR

phil.savage@futurenet.com

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101 Kingdom of Loathing

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101 Mysterium

101 Waves

This month's nefarious rodents...



**JODY
MACGREGOR**

Specialist in
Strategy, vermin

Currently playing

Total War:
Warhammer II

This month
Pretty much just rats.
Lots and lots of rats.



ANDY KELLY

Specialist in
Platformers, surprise

Currently playing

Sonic Mania

This month

Experienced the rarest
of all things: a good
Sonic game released in
the 21st Century.



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in
RPGs, timesinks

Currently playing

Divinity: Original Sin II

This month

Celebrated finishing
his massive Civ feature
by reviewing the
enormous D:OSII.



TOM HATFIELD

Specialist in
Sports, rivalries

Currently playing

PES 2018

This month

Wondered whether
it's PES or FIFA who'll
be going home in an,
ahem, ambulance.



PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
FPS, assassination

Currently playing

Dishonored: Death of
the Outsider

This month

Set out to kill a god.
Mostly just stole
people's apples.



**STEVEN
MESSNER**

Specialist in
Indie, stealth

Currently playing

Heat Signature

This month

Spent all month
hiding from the UK
team because ethics.



CHRIS THURSTEN

Specialist in
Retro, turning

Currently playing

Hitman: Codename 47

This month

Visited an alternate
universe where people
could be bald tanks in
a suit and tie.

MORE WAR

It's like somebody fed the first game glowing green magic rocks and it grew into a monster called **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II**. By Jody Macgregor

I don't remember the name of the desert. It was somewhere near the Black Pyramid of Nagash, split down the middle by a crevasse. A band of dirt connected the two sides. The undead, lacking missile troops, scurried across the sand towards this bridge. My High Elves moved to block them with a line of spears, but I'd forgotten that my general's last upgrade was a warhorse. Instead of moving up with the line, he raced ahead unnoticed and was now alone, facing down sprinting ghouls, shambling zombies and the Vampire Countess leading them.

Rather than retreat, I ordered the Silver Helm knights to rush in (I'd been keeping them in reserve to flank-charge anyone who broke through the spear line and pushed toward my archers), and instead of a strategic defence, the Battle of Nameless Crevasse turned into a massed and messy cavalry charge. In war, they say no plan survives contact with the enemy. In *Total War: Warhammer II* no plan survives my ability to get distracted by how nice the unit animations are.

THE NEW WORLD

It's typical for each *Total War* game to be followed by a smaller sibling, a high-quality standalone expansion, as *Attila* was to *Rome II* or *Fall of the Samurai* was to *Shogun 2*. *Warhammer* has gone in the opposite direction. We had one large-scale strategy game of turn-based

campaigning and real-time battles in the fantasy setting of the Old World, and now a year later we get another, bigger one – with the promise of a third still to come.

Where the first game gave us a fantasy take on continental Europe, *Total War: Warhammer II* includes Warhammer's analogues of Britain, Africa and the Americas, as well as a horseshoe-shaped continent in the mythological mid-Atlantic called Ulthuan – home of the High Elves. It breaks up the ocean nicely so you're not staring at a ship for

50 turns to get anywhere, although there are also plenty of sunken treasure galleons, lost islands and dead behemoths to encounter along the way as well. Every time you set sail a little story plays out, which is a nice way of livening things up without having to add naval combat.

You can win by old-fashioned domination or by meeting the objectives

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The *Total War* series' real-time tactics and turn-based strategy, with even more Warhammer theming.

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER

Sega

RELEASE DATE

28 September

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7, GeForce GTX 960, 8GB RAM, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

Up to eight players, online and local

LINK

www.totalwar.com/total_war_warhammer_2



As well as being the centre of the ocean, Ulthuan is the centre of the campaign. In *Warhammer II* you can win by old-fashioned domination or by meeting the objectives required to take control of the Great Vortex, a cyclone of magical energy hovering over an island in the middle of Ulthuan that the four playable factions all want to control by performing a sequence of rituals. It provides more structure to the game, and since everybody's after the same thing, it feels more like a race.

MEET NEW PEOPLE

In the historical *Total War* games the factions are usually pretty similar, which helps make them balanced. *Total War: Warhammer* emphasised the differences between its fantasy armies. Vampire Counts had no missile troops, Dwarfs had no spellcasters and Greenskins had no trousers. The contrasts made for differences in strategy that gave the game more life, and replaying the campaign became a much more enjoyable prospect than it was when I was choosing between slightly different Japanese clans in *Shogun 2*. I racked up over 200 hours in the first *Total War: Warhammer* thanks to this variety of styles, although the many DLC additions helped extend that longevity.

At first glance, the four factions of *Warhammer II* seem less distinct from one another. There are two flavours of Elves, High and Dark; and two kinds of animal-people, the dinosaur-riding Lizardmen and the mad science rats called Skaven. All are good at magic, all have a mix of melee and ranged specialists. But despite these similarities, they're more different than expected. Like the armies added to the first game as DLC, extra care has been made to make them mechanically distinct in both battles and the campaign.

The Skaven, for instance, spread corruption like the Vampire Counts, but this corruption affects their own troops as well as enemies. Instead of

BATTLE BESTIARY, VOLUME 2

Eagles and dragons, fine. What on earth is a Hell-Pit Abomination?



STEGADON

Keeping with their theme, the Lizardmen craft DIY artillery by strapping howdahs onto the backs of dinosaurs and shooting from them.



WAR HYDRA

Your classic multiheaded snake creature isn't good enough for the Dark Elves, they breed them over generations into squat draconic killing machines.



HELL-PIT ABOMINATION

A Skaven experiment made by swirling rats and giant worms and random machinery together in a big radioactive bowl.



FLAMESPYRE PHOENIX

The mythical phoenix is a fiery symbol of rebirth. The phoenix of the High Elves is a bird that drops firebombs. Warhammer!



This is how the velociraptors get off the island.



Dark Elves. They're into leather.



Nobody's told the Skaven steampunk isn't a thing anymore.



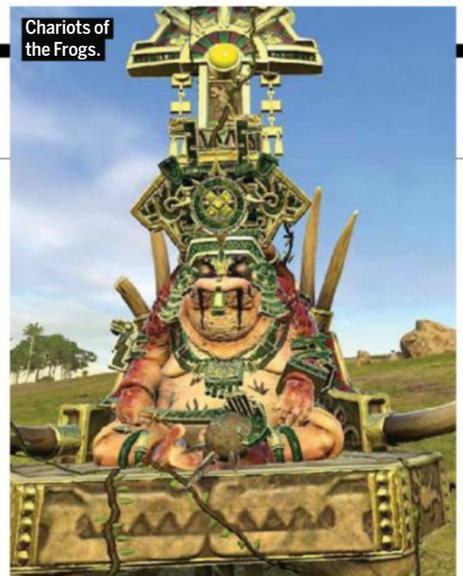
We should have fought in the shade.



Siege battles - still fun.



The Great Vortex spins the other way in the southern hemisphere.



Chariots of the Frogs.



The Land Before Time remake got dark.



You're in deep when you start using the building browser for fun.



Quest battles usually have the most interesting maps.



The Skaven do like to attack from behind.

✦ squatting in a castle brooding while the surrounding lands turn dark and then finally slouching across the border, the Skaven are constantly moving, ruining each province – literally, their settlements appear as ruins to casual inspection – and moving on. They struggle with hunger as well, as their food supplies run low if they stop raiding. When playing as the Skaven, you're discouraged from settling down.

Compare that to the courtly High Elves, who instead only have to worry about a secondary currency called Influence that they can spend to engage in intrigue, altering how much other countries like one another. The High Elves can, with patience, win over distrustful and distant nations and turn them into allies, while breaking up any alliances formed between their opponents. Their spies can also see any port they have a trade agreement with, lighting up distant parts of the map. You can manipulate foreign affairs from the comfort of your defensible island home, creating an entirely different pace of play to the roaming Skaven.

Distinctions on the battlefield matter, too. The Skaven's Menace

Below ability is a game-changer, letting them summon units from beneath the ground to block charges or harass archers. The Lizardmen go into an uncontrollable rampage when they're hurt,

while the Dark Elves can call in bombardments from their floating Black Arks if fighting on the coast. Magical units and giant monsters all still play their part. You get to enjoy the spectacle of the Skaven's Screaming Bell, the Lizardmen's Carnosaur and the Elven dragons, but it's these new abilities that stand out. They feel like an essential part of the game, so much so that, going back to the original *Total War: Warhammer*, it feels like something is missing.

The ratmen are, of course, the most distinctive of the setting's creatures, and its most beloved. So, yes, if you play as the ratmen you get to throw glass balls full of poison at people, roll around in a giant electric wheel like a hamster, blast flamethrowers with abandon and hear everyone talk in high-pitched squeaky voices. You get Rat Ogres who knuckle the ground like gorillas.

CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER *A sampling of the legendary lords on offer*



TECLIS

A pale, sickly Elven mage kept in fighting condition by potions and magic, like protein shakes for wizards. Basically Elic from Michael Moorcock's books, only not a Goth.



LORD MAZDAMUNDI

One of the toad-like Slann who rule the Lizardmen, and travelled to the world on a spaceship before engineering Elves, Dwarfs and whatnot into existence. Really.



MORATHI

First of the Hag Queens, mother of Malekith, bearer of Heartrender and The Darksword. Generally likes scheming and manipulating others. Not a nice lady.



QUEEK HEADTAKER

The greatest warlord of the Skaven not only carries a trophy rack of skulls around with him everywhere, but turns to them for advice on the regular.

You live in ruins, and when rivals try to explore them looking for treasure, you swarm up and overwhelm them. They're silly and they're great.

THE LITTLE THINGS

There are so many tiny improvements in *Warhammer II* it's hard to list them all, but each nudges the quality of life upwards. The notifications when you press end turn without doing something the computer expects you to do aren't as obnoxious. Heroes are less essential and the AI relies on them less. The map seamlessly zooms up into the tactical level (though I'll have to wait for an equivalent of the mod that let me zoom in for close-ups in the first

game). Rogue Armies made of mixes of different factions roam around to add variety to battles, and instead of constructing buildings that unlock another building's ability to produce a specific elite troop, you're often constructing buildings that unlock parts of the tech tree. These are individually small tweaks, but in combination they mean *Warhammer II* feels more polished.

That does rather highlight something that hasn't been improved, which is the bizarre side of diplomacy. People will still scream 'Traitor!' if they have any reason to dislike you (no matter how slight), and neighbours will greet neighbours as if meeting travellers from distant lands. Once you get used to the maths behind it, the diplomacy starts to make a kind of sense, but the disconnect between what's being said and what's meant is still distracting.



So is the endless repetition of the same demands being made every turn, no matter how many times you refuse to sue for peace or declare war on a trade partner's enemy.

One new flaw is that the growing scale has resulted in a map with more obvious gaps in it. The Southlands are a patchwork mishmash of new factions and old, and presumably the pseudo-Egyptian Tomb Kings will be added to it as DLC. It would be great if the army of Araby (which last appeared in a tabletop game called *Warmaster* in 2009) showed up as well, since their home is currently full of zombies and white guys. Over in the Lustrian jungle, home of the Lizardmen, the Amazons (who still have a team in *Warhammer's* weird football spin-off *Blood Bowl*) are another obvious omission.

Though the first game's aggressive DLC schedule upset some players, it was clearly a success or its developers wouldn't have kept making them. And the free offerings alongside each one seemed generous enough to me – in fact, the Bretonnians were better than any of the paid DLC factions. Among the additions coming for free this time is the ability to combine both games into something called the 'Mortal Empires Campaign', making this ridiculous map even bigger. *Total War: Warhammer* was a great game at launch that became even better as it grew, and *Warhammer II* feels like it's starting from the point where it left off. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

It's just like the original *Total War: Warhammer*, only somehow this time it's even more maximalist.

92

KICKPUNCHER

Become a drunken master in multiplayer brawler **ABSOLVER**. *By Tyler Wilde*

There are only two good movies in my mind: 1978 Jackie Chan film *Drunken Master*, and 1994 Jackie Chan film *The Legend of Drunken Master*. And so when I met Jinn Mesca, a lonely NPC who guards a meaningless staircase in multiplayer fighting RPG *Absolver*, I immediately dedicated myself to mastering his drunken, stumbling fighting style. To do that, I let him beat the crap out of me for three hours.

Learning Mesca's moves by blocking them, slowly filling a meter and winning the fight, then waiting for him to respawn wasn't fun, per se, but I was motivated. I was eager to show every player who'd chased me around and knocked me down that I had been practicing. I farmed him for hours, slowly acquiring his set of Zui Quan moves. For everything that's unfun about *Absolver*, its core idea is so compelling I've hardly been able to pull myself away from it. The impulse to collect and experiment (as with building *Hearthstone* decks) combined with the fantasy of ascending from student to master in a martial arts movie is too powerful.

Each time I learned a new move I spent five minutes (at least) editing my moveset to slot it in. Fighting in *Absolver* is unlike fighting in most 'fighting games' in that basic blocking doesn't require predicting high or low attacks, and there are no complex

inputs. But that doesn't mean it's a simple brawler.

Each fighting style has a special countering ability. In the case of mine - Windfall - I can duck, leap over or sidestep attacks, which does require predicting high, low and charging attacks. Every action depletes stamina, which must be refilled through tactical retreats to avoid having your block broken or running out of martial arts juice. Attacks can be cancelled and every

move ends in one of four stances, each of which has its own customisable main attack sequence and alternate attack.

After collecting moves by fighting NPCs and other players, you can slot them into a 'fight deck' to set up combos for your stances. There are so many possible combos that it's easy to build nonviable decks, but that means the opposite is also true. The brilliant thing is that after every loss I feel like I can do something about it:

Fighting in *Absolver* is unlike fighting in most 'fighting games'

STAGGER STYLE *Master Zui Quan*

Here's a look at my drunken combat deck, the default for the Stagger School, not including the four alternate attacks I can perform in each of these stances.



NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A multiplayer action RPG fighting game with a sparse story and a complex, customisable fighting system.

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Sloclap

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

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

MULTIPLAYER
Three players cooperatively, plus one-on-one matchmaking

LINK
www.absolvergame.com

if I just tweak my move deck, or get better at timing my combos, or observe my opponent better, I can win. By adding progression and customisation to a fighting game's high skill ceiling, *Absolver* lets us scrubs exercise our brains from the safety of a practice menu.

ROUGH AND READY

This compelling system is sadly surrounded by a dour world. *Absolver* is more gloomy than mysterious. There are dead ends, empty areas with no enemies and confusing circular routes. Moves are learned slowly, so it can be a grind. The gamble is that through automatic peer-to-peer matchmaking (which can be turned off, or set to invite-only) experienced players will silently help newcomers, communicating only with emotes. It works brilliantly sometimes - one player managed to understand a complex request I mimed out and helped me find a hidden passageway - but if left alone early on against multiple AI enemies without any help, *Absolver* is a bleak game with a thin story.

It's also buggy, and the servers haven't been stable during launch week. I've fallen through the map and it's crashed multiple times. There's one-on-one matchmaking, but no proper competitive mode or leaderboard yet. There's no way to respect your character to fix early mistakes. There's a lot to improve. Yet *Absolver* is the most fun I've had in a fighting game since the now-defunct *Rising Thunder*, and combined with the moreish attack collecting and deck-building, it is an intoxicating concoction. The strange mix of RPG levelling, *Journey*-like community and competitive fighting is a definite success, however rough it is. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

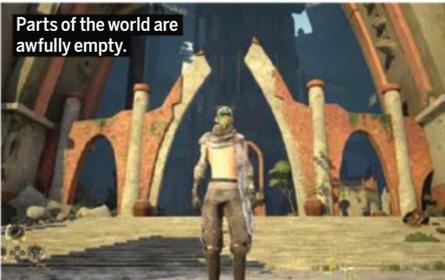
A great customisable fighting system and a cooperative spirit fill the empty spaces in a bleak open world.

78

The Marked Ones are tough fights, but they go by fast with a couple of friends.



Parts of the world are awfully empty.



I have, of course, equipped the stupidest-looking mask.



Combat trials are the real meat of *Absolver*.



Knocking an enemy off a ledge can be tough.



BLUE STREAK

SONIC MANIA is the best Sonic game in years. *By Andy Kelly*

After countless attempts by Sega to refresh *Sonic*, it's a straightforward side-scrolling platformer that ends up being the best one in decades. But while *Sonic Mania* is a love letter to the Blue Blur's '90s heyday, it manages to feel fresh thanks to clever remixes of classic levels and imaginative boss battles. Sonic has always thrived in two dimensions, and this is the purest expression of his fast-paced rollercoaster platforming prowess.

There are 13 zones in *Sonic Mania*: five brand-new ones, and eight remixes of familiar locations. Chemical Plant Zone begins in much the same way as it did in *Sonic 2*, but in the second act you find yourself bouncing around on pools of springy gel. In the same vein, the first act of Green Hill Zone is largely untouched, but in the second half there are ziplines to slide down and pools of water hiding hungry robotic fish. Other returning zones include *Sonic & Knuckles's* Flying Battery, *Sonic CD's* Stardust Speedway, and *Sonic 3's* Hydrocity – all of which have been similarly remixed and reimagined.

As for the new zones, they feel like they could have been plucked directly from classic *Sonic* games, too. In Studiopolis, my personal favourite, Sonic dashes through a TV studio and gets teleported around the level by satellite dishes. And in Press Garden, another highlight, you sprint from a propaganda printing facility with an Art Deco flavour through to a snowy forest filled with cherry

blossoms. It's remarkable how well the artists have replicated the distinctive look and feel of the old games, while also taking advantage of modern hardware to increase the level of detail and complexity.

If you're unfamiliar with how *Sonic* works, imagine a side-scrolling platformer got trapped in that machine from *The Fly* with a pinball machine. It's essentially a game about getting from one end of the level to the other, but

along the way you'll encounter a mix of traditional platforming elements – moving platforms, enemies, bottomless pits – and sections where you're catapulted at dizzying speeds through a series of twisting loops. This is when the game is at its most intense, and it's always disappointing when you suddenly skid to a halt and have to pick up speed again.

There are some tricky sections, but for the most part *Sonic Mania* is more about rhythm, pace and momentum than precise platforming. You can play it safe and carefully make your way through each act, but

It's a game that fizzes with colour, passion, and personality

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A fast-paced side-scrolling platformer.

EXPECT TO PAY

£15

DEVELOPER

PagodaWest/
Headcannon

PUBLISHER

Sega

REVIEWED ON

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

MULTIPLAYER

Local two-player

LINK

www.sega.com

it's a lot more fun speeding through as fast as you can and reacting to obstacles as they're thrown at you. And at the end of a level you have a treat waiting for you in the form of a boss. Some are reminiscent of the old games, with a pattern you have to learn and exploit. But others make use of creative one-shot gimmicks, including a hilarious callback to a famous *Sonic* spin-off game.

SAVE TRAVELS

But while I'd consider *Sonic 2* to be an almost-perfect game, *Sonic Mania* does have some notable dips in quality. A few of the bosses are just plain frustrating, and in certain zones the flow of the level feels off. But in light of how perfectly it captures the spirit of *Sonic's* golden years, these inconsistencies are easy to forgive. Some have complained about the archaic save system, which forces you start a zone from scratch if you lose all your lives. But for me this brings an enjoyable tension to those moments when I'm down to my last life and fighting a boss. And anyway, it's such a relentlessly fast-paced game that getting back to where you were takes no time at all.

I never thought I'd write a positive review of a *Sonic* game again, but here we are. *Sonic Mania* feeds off nostalgia, but crucially, it isn't owned by it. The developers have taken the best bits of the vintage *Sonic* games and created something that's more than just a cynical throwback. It's a game that fizzes with colour, passion and personality, and it's clear it was made by people who love the series. You couldn't make this without a fundamental understanding of what makes *Sonic* great, and I'm glad Sega took this gamble. It's actually true: *Sonic* is good again. ■

SONIC TEAM *Three ways to play*



SONIC

The Blue Blur has a new move called Drop Dash that lets you transition into a Spin Dash after landing.



TAILS

Rapidly tap the jump button and Sonic's right-hand fox will hover in midair for a bit like a little furry helicopter.



KNUCKLES

You can use Knuckles's spiky gloves to climb up walls, and he can also glide through the air for a bit.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A breakneck platformer that uses classic Sonic as a foundation for something that's fresh and exciting.

82



DIVINE

Make friends, eat corpses and become a god in **DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II**. By Fraser Brown

Playing *Divinity: Original Sin II* is uncannily like playing a tabletop RPG. The way that Larian's sequel embraces player creativity immediately conjures up memories of days spent sitting around a table, asking the Dungeon Master if I can attempt the last stupid idea that floated into my head. And, like a good DM, *Original Sin II* usually answers that question with, "Yes, you can attempt it."

My plans don't always succeed, but failures, like the time I froze my party during a fight with some demons, can be just as entertaining. That freedom to experiment is present right from the get-go, when you first create your would-be hero. Or villain.

You can play everything from an undead Dwarf who loves nothing more than swinging his axe and throwing rocks, to a sneaky Elven wizard who can talk to animals and get visions by chewing on corpses. There are premade classes and characters with rich backgrounds and personal quests, but it's also possible to create something entirely your own, constructing a persona and custom class out of a series of origin tags, attributes and skills.

I do recommend picking a premade origin character, though. You can still customise their appearance and skills, but it's their quests that are important. Each is blessed with a long mission that runs

parallel to the main quest. They also tend to get the best lines, especially the undead Eternal, Fane, whose biting sarcasm keeps me warm at night. The origin characters you don't pick, however, become companions, letting you still experience their unique stories.

With so many different potential paths, it's handy to have a party that covers all the bases. Conveniently, companions – you can

bring three along with you – can be customised the moment you meet them, and any mistakes made can be undone by respeccing characters via a mirror you'll get access to around 15-20 hours in.

When there are limitations, they're always hidden well, and Larian has done a phenomenal job at anticipating what players might want to do, even how they might try to break the game. Take the teleport skill. You can get your hands on this early on, and it essentially provides a

Companions can be customised the moment you meet them

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A huge, liberating RPG to play with friends or on your lonesome.

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

RELEASE DATE
Out now

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

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op, up to four players

BUY IT
Steam, GOG

LINK
www.divinity.game



shortcut through a lot of obstacles and quests. It almost feels like cheating, using it, but not only does *Original Sin II* support it, it offers up the idea in the first place.

These tricks don't mean the quests are simple affairs. Larian loves headscratchers, populating Rivellon with riddles, moral conundrums and mysteries. They're great – fat with unexpected turns and rewarding character moments – but keeping track of them is hard work. The journal quickly becomes impossible to parse and instructions from NPCs can be vague.

Still, the connected nature of the world is a welcome feature that really complicates things. Many of the NPCs you'll meet have relationships and allegiances that affect more than one quest, and seemingly unrelated events can collide, cutting adventures short. These ripples of consequence result in a world that feels more alive, and even give NPCs agency, but they also inspire hesitation when decisiveness is required, out of the fear that one or more of these choices will kill another quest. It's daunting, but it's also a fair price to pay for the weight it gives to decisions.

One of the first places I hit up in any new RPG village is the local watering hole, so when I arrived in Driftwood during the game's third chapter, I immediately headed to the Black Bull. Its owner was an affable, ➤

COMPANION TRYOUTS *Get to know them before you reject them*

You can pick three out of the six companions to take with you, but that means you'll need to leave three behind.

BEAST

I'm a Dwarf, but I'm also a pirate, and I've got this cool little eye patch and a grudge against a powerful Queen that you're inevitably going to have to help me with.

LOHSE

I'm a playful musician who likes to crack wise and flirt, but oh, watch out, I'm also the vessel for a terrifying evil that threatens to take over my body.

THE RED PRINCE

I'm a big red lizard, and I'm going to treat you pretty poorly, but you'll still help me on my quest to reclaim my empire because, ultimately, I'm probably a good guy.

IFAN BEN-MEZD

I'm a likable assassin, like John Cusack in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, and I belong to a mercenary organisation known as the Lone Wolves, and yes, it's not a great name for a group.

SEBILLE:

I eat dead people.

FANE:

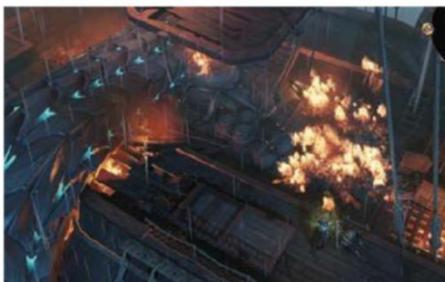
I am a dead person.



The bucket helmet is both practical and fetching.

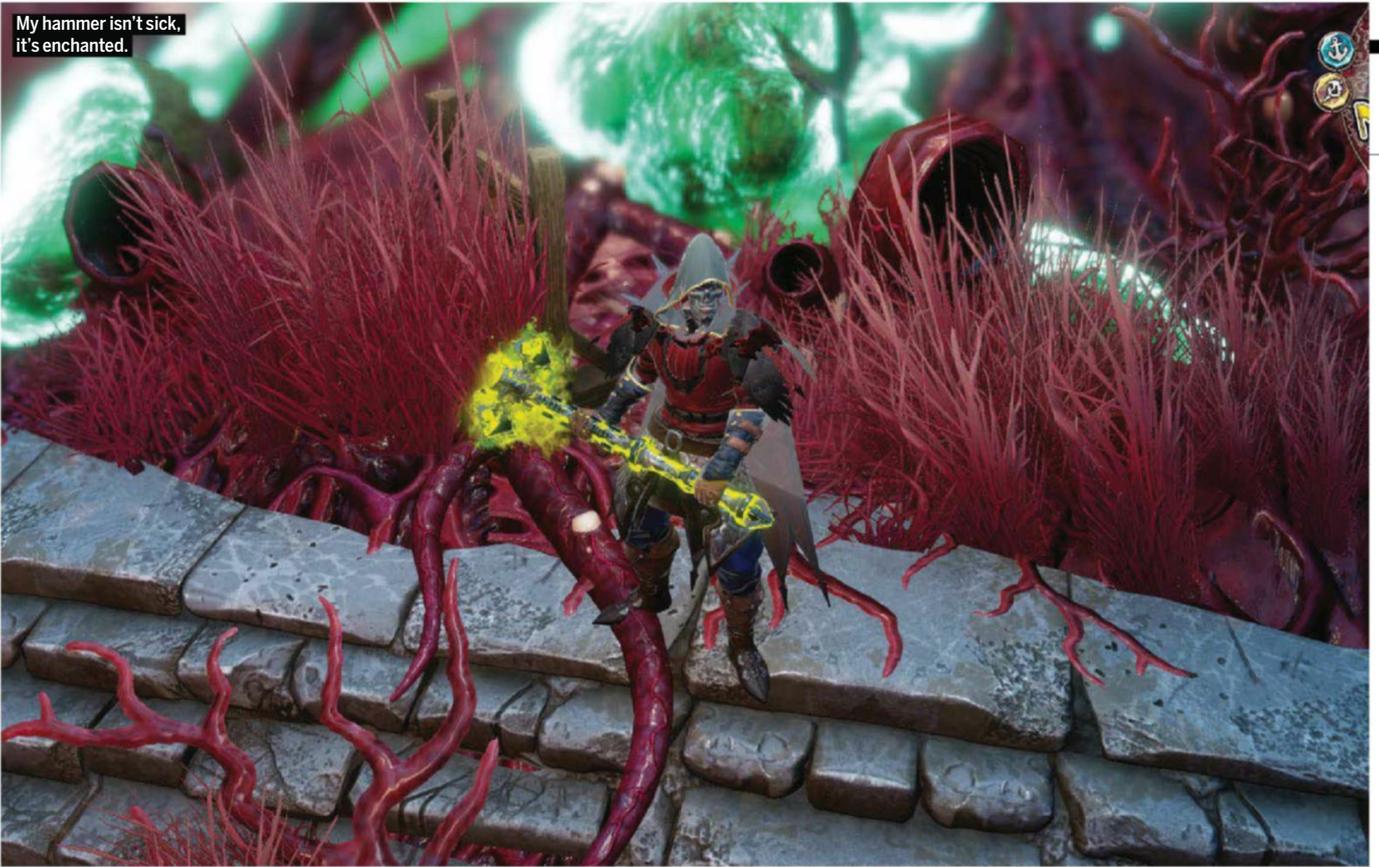


Travel is made considerably easier thanks to Wayshrines.



When regular fire is too passé, there's holy fire.

My hammer isn't sick, it's enchanted.



There's always time for a quick pint.



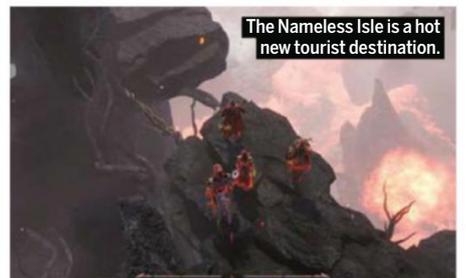
Everything is fine.



I promise to clean my inventory after the next fight. Honest.



The Nameless Isle is a hot new tourist destination.



chatty woman and proud mother. As she gushed about her son, it dawned on me, I knew this guy. I'd met him hours ago. He was a monster of a man and I had killed him. And there was his mother, boasting about how good he is, how clever he is and how much she loves him. I never told her, though I could have, and nothing came of the conversation, but it did matter, making the fight retroactively more memorable. And there are more of these moments than I could reasonably count.

Original Sin II's main quest calls to mind *Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal*, both being races to godhood. The world's a mess, you see, with beasties rampaging wherever there's Source magic. And you just so happen to be a Sorcerer with a divine calling, born with the ability to wield this powerful magic, talk to the dead and feast on souls. So, of course you've been hauled off to jail by the corrupt Magisters – the game's fanatical villains – ostensibly to stop you from ruining the world. What starts off as a mission to escape prison spirals into a quest involving gods competing for survival and an evil poised to swallow up the world.

What could have been your typical, high-stakes fantasy quest is elevated by strong writing and voice acting that effortlessly jumps between whimsical and brutally grim. It can be touching, too. As tempting as it can be to play the evil arsehole in a game that offers this much freedom, there are a lot of heartfelt moments that you'll only see if you're not a douche.

Larian has also subverted the party dynamic quite a bit. Companions not only assist you while undertaking their own quests, they are ultimately your competition, each the chosen hero for their respective divine sponsor. This has an even greater impact in co-op, with each player capable of screwing over their three allies. While you're shopping or fighting, they might be growing in power, waiting to betray you.

In my own co-op campaign, I've been content with blowing stuff up. Literally and figuratively. My pal wants to chat to an NPC? I throw a massive boulder at them. He wants to avoid what will clearly be a fatal fight with some teleporting crocodiles? I

A SOURCERER'S HANDBOOK *Master Source magic*

You'll unlock a lot of skills in your journey across Rivellon, but the most powerful come from using Source, a special kind of magic that's got everyone up in arms.



SOURCE SKILLS

As a Sorcerer, you'll learn abilities that let you see beyond death, allowing you to talk to ghosts, among other things.



REGULAR SKILLS

High-tier skills also require Source. If you want to summon a titanic electrical storm, for instance, you'll need two Source points.



SOURCE POINTS

You'll need to find raw Source to replenish your points, leech it off enemies or consume the spirits of the dead to get more.



COMBOS

Skills can be combined with the environment. Use Bless on a pool of water, and anyone standing on it will be buffed, for example.

run up to them and set them on fire. Obviously you should never play with me, but I'm having a blast.

Beyond the co-op, there's a Game Master mode, letting you use the game's assets (or your own) to craft tabletop-style adventures. The tools are simple enough to use, but flexible enough so that you can create brief campaigns or massive quests that will take your group days to finish.

When you want to blow off some steam, there's also the Arena mode, pitting players against one another in structured PVP. What might have been a simple diversion is instead a really great reason to keep playing once you've finished the campaign, and one that's been in development for almost as long as the game itself. The deep and often chaotic tactical combat is a high point, and the opportunity to get into more scraps is very welcome.

Battlefields are really laboratories primed for experiments

VIOLENT DELIGHTS

Rivellon is a violent world, and while many of the turn-based fights can be avoided, you're still going to spend a lot of time brawling. These battles consistently take place in tactically interesting places, filled with choke points, explosive barrels and multiple levels, which is especially impressive considering you can start a fight with any NPC. But like the rest of the game, it's the vast number of choices you can make in each encounter that make them so compelling.

A classless system means that you can create a mind-boggling array of weird heroes, from warriors who can sprout wings, horns and spider legs,

to preternaturally gifted archers who can command the weather. Some skills confer flight. Others make enemies bleed fire. Battlefields are really laboratories primed for madcap experiments, where magical and martial skills can be combined with the environment to create anything from a wall of fire that heals to imps made out of pools of blood.

They're tough, though. Fights are brutal and the broad range of skills makes it hard to create plans until after you've already lost once. They're puzzles that you need to work at, attempting to come at them from different angles, learning enemy patterns, pinpointing the major threats. You can lose yourself in these blood-soaked arenas. It's easily one of the best RPG combat systems, but there's no denying it requires more patience and practice than most.

That's true of the game in general. Its scope can be intimidating, but not overwhelming, and there's usually a way to fix a mistake. If you murder someone you need to talk to for a quest, for instance, there's a good chance that looting their corpse will send you in the right direction.

And it's that ambitious scope, that dedication to freedom, that makes *Original Sin II* so impressive. There isn't another RPG that lets you do so much. Larian promised a lot, and has followed through, crafting a singular game that juggles a bounty of complex, immersive systems, and never drops them. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Divinity: Original Sin II is a sprawling, inventive, and sometimes intimidating, adventure and one of the best RPGs ever made.

92

MUGGED OFF

Gorgeous run-and-gun shooter **CUPHEAD** feels amazing, but makes you work for it. *By Chris Schilling*

The results screen may say C-, but the feeling when you beat a stage in *Cuphead* is A+. Studio MDHR's debut pits you against some of the toughest enemies you'll face in a videogame, and the process of beating them can be painful. But when you do, the euphoria is undeniable. Its difficulty hasn't been understated, then, but crucially, it's hardly ever the game's fault if you get hit. You'll swear, but you'll know it's your own failing.

Within seconds of a battle kicking off, you often find yourself fending off threats on multiple fronts, simultaneously tracking Cuphead's position but also keeping an eye on something hovering ominously above, another threat incoming on ground level, and another projectile or five floating somewhere in between. With just three hit points, you've little margin for error. As such, once you've begun to acclimatise to a particular attack pattern, you'll find yourself restarting if you take damage during that phase. That's the first sign that *Cuphead*'s got its hooks into you. And then suddenly you'll deliver the killing blow and the wave of relief and satisfaction is overwhelming.

That feeling might not be worth persevering for if the controls weren't immaculate. Equipped with a reliable jump and dash, Cuphead is nimble and responsive, his handling so expertly calibrated that an analogue stick never feels like a handicap. A

parry move that lets you avoid any pink projectiles by hitting jump again in midair can seem a little fussy in its timing. Still, it's used intelligently, letting you build your special meter – which can be spent in increments or saved for a huge blowout – and doubling as a method of traversal.

The wave of relief and satisfaction is overwhelming

These are simple ingredients, but Studio MDHR builds a series of thrillingly diverse encounters around them. Bosses don't just limit themselves to a host of different attack patterns, but adopt several distinct forms. Some play out like pursuits, while others are confined to a single, claustrophobic space. In one stage you'll use the parry to nudge a handcar forward or back as you race alongside a train; in another you'll slap springboards to clear a tall enemy. Meanwhile, random elements keep things fresh, meaning you can't simply learn patterns by rote.

I'm skimming on specifics, but that's because a huge part of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A nails-hard 2D shooter where you fight outlandish bosses, interspersed with palate-cleansing run-and-gun sections.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Studio MDHR

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-4440,
8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Two-player local co-op

LINK
www.cupheadgame.com

Cuphead's appeal is seeing what bizarre monstrosity awaits you next. Not that you'll have much time to marvel at the astonishing hand-drawn animation, because you'll be so laser-focused on surviving as soon as the announcer's dispensed with the formalities. It's only after the fact that you can really appreciate the ingenuity of the animation and design of these encounters. And it's not just a pretty face either, with a big band soundtrack that comes close to matching the visuals, one highlight of which is an uptempo jazz number that segues into Ride of the Valkyries.

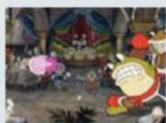
Cuphead's bosses can be tackled on two difficulty settings: Simple (which is a barefaced lie) and Regular (hard). Beat them on Simple and you're allowed to progress, but doing so locks out the finale. To see everything, you're going to have to do it the hard way.

FAIR PLAY

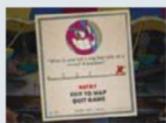
Difficulty is subjective, but most will find *Cuphead* a tough nut to crack. Whether it's fair is a more important consideration. And the answer is: mostly. On occasion it isn't, and it's often those variables that spoil things, with platforms and enemies positioned in such a way that you take an unavoidable hit through no real fault of your own. Such incidents are rare, but in a game as demanding as this, it's frustrating that you may need a hint of luck to get by.

Still, 95% firm-but-fair to 5% bullshit is an acceptable ratio for what has clearly been a labour of love. There's not a whiff of cynicism about *Cuphead*: from its aesthetic to its systems, it's wilfully off-trend, and utterly its own thing. As tough as it gets, ultimately that's what's really worth shouting about. ■

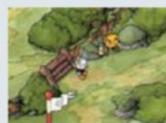
PG TIPS *Five ways to s-cuppa the devil's plans*



1 PARRY ON
Mastering the parry is crucial. As a general rule you want to jump as the object approaches and tap A just before you touch it.



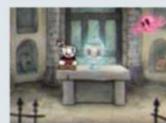
2 FAIL UPWARDS
Don't go into a stage expecting to beat it first time. You'll likely die numerous times; pay attention to your mistakes.



3 TEA BREAK
Sometimes you just need to take a step away. Head back to the hub for a breather, or tackle a run-and-gun level instead.



4 UNLOCK 'N' LOAD
If your current loadout isn't working, try another combination. Mixing things up can work to your benefit.



5 GHOST TRICK
There's a Mausoleum on each island. It's worth working through these to unlock the super abilities.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Cuphead is a demanding, but supremely rewarding, modern 2D shooter that looks and sounds fantastic.

86

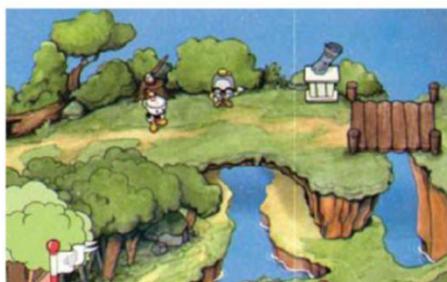
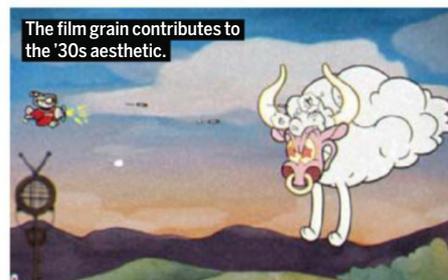
You can hold the dash button to shrink in flying stages.



Your basic shooter is one of the most effective weapons.



The film grain contributes to the '30s aesthetic.



You can grab coins in the side-scrolling levels.



Objects can be obscured by foreground scenery.

BEAUTIFUL GAME

Finally, the best version of *PES* has arrived on PC with
PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2018. *By Tom Hatfield*

Moving from *PES* to *FIFA* is like switching from PC to Mac, or from an Xbox controller to a PlayStation DualShock. The experience isn't better or worse, but it is *different* in a hundred tiny ways. Long passes are more accurate, slide tackles are riskier, crosses are deadlier and keepers parry the ball just a little more often. It's been a couple of years since I last tried Konami's interpretation of the beautiful game, and my *FIFA*-ised muscle memory meant I spent the first couple of hours continually dropping passes too short and belting free kicks into the stands.

These differences aren't just idiosyncrasies, though – when added together they dictate how you play. In last year's *FIFA* I favoured short, quick passes, but the longer I spent with *PES*, the more ambitious my passing became. *PES 2018* nails the joy of an expertly lofted long pass, and that feeling inevitably influenced my decisions. Soon, my game became more and more reliant on the risky killer ball or the whipped-in cross, less Champions League and more FA Cup.

On the defensive side, things were almost the opposite. The slide tackles are difficult to pull off, and usually result in a card. So I adopted a more conservative style, jockeying the player on the ball rather than stepping in to take it away. It's a good system, but I can't help but miss the satisfaction of a well-timed tackle.

Slide tackles are difficult to pull off, and usually result in a card

But let's talk about the elephant in the room: the PC port. While it's safe to say that *PES* still regards the personal computing machine as a strange and alien concept (I had to go into the game folder and hunt for a settings executable just to change my resolution) this is no longer a 'last-gen port'. Unlike last year, *PES 2018* looks every bit as good on PC as it does on the PS4 and Xbox, possibly even better on the highest settings.

Any football game in this day and age comes with a bewildering amount of ways to play, more than I could possibly cover in detail. Among the best remains *PES*'s signature Master Team mode. It's been jazzed up this year with new cinematics, which don't really add anything to the experience, but the formula of building a team of nobodies up from the bottom will never not be fun.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
One of the two big-name yearly football franchises

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
PES Productions

PUBLISHER
Konami

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

MULTIPLAYER
One-on-one

LINK
www.konami.com/wpes/2018/

There's also the surprise delight that is Random Selection mode, returning from over a decade of absence. The premise is simple: both players get a randomly selected pool of footballers, then there are a series of trading rounds where they attempt to poach each other's stars while protecting their own. It's perfect for playing head-to-head matches with a friend, offering a roughly level playing field while also giving you the opportunity to screw each other over by swiping Luis Suarez at the last minute.

LUDICROUS DISPLAY

Online, unfortunately, is much weaker. Every time I tried to get an online match I was kept waiting for several minutes as the game desperately searched for someone to play with. Often I was kept waiting so long I would have quit out and played against the computer if I wasn't testing for review. Yet when I did finally find an opponent, I found them surprisingly well matched to my meagre skill level, experiencing close 2-1 thrillers instead of the 5-0 drubbings one would expect in a game with a small, dedicated group of online players. Nevertheless, if PvP is your preference, you're probably going to be better off with *FIFA*'s wider pool of talent.

I've mentioned *FIFA* a lot during this review – the two games seem doomed to chase one another forever after all, and most of us will choose one or the other each year. In a sense, this means that this review isn't going to be complete until I get my hands on *PES*'s nemesis next issue. But one thing I can say for certain is that this is the best *PES* has ever been on PC and, so long as you're not here for online play, you should consider it a serious contender for your cash. ■

DO YOU KNOW YOUR MAN BLUE FROM YOUR LONDON FC?

Guess the real-world versions of these PES teams



1
LANCASHIRE
CLARET



2
PM BLACK
WHITE



3
SOUTH
NORWOOD



4
MD
WHITE



5
WEST MIDLANDS
VILLAGE

Answers: 1: Burnley 2: Juventus 3: Crystal Palace 4: Real Madrid 5: Aston Villa

PC GAMER VERDICT

Pro Evolution Soccer 2018 is now the definitive *PES* on PC. At least, it is if you're able to play a game online.

78



Replay

If you've gotten a cross like this in, you've probably already scored.



Landing a pass like this is an absolute delight.



Never do this. You will get sent off.

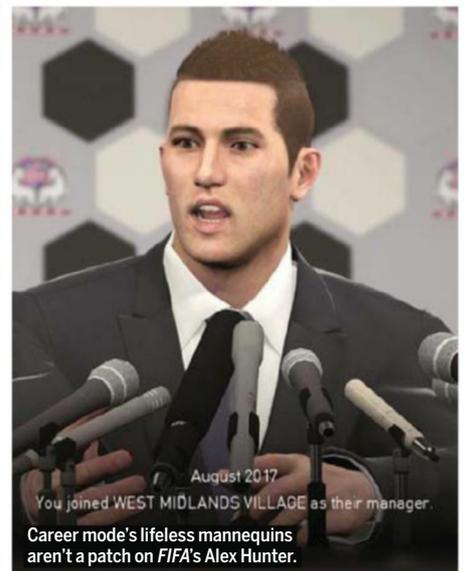


Replay

Unlike in FIFA, I can actually score from corners in PES.

ARSENAL FC					LIVERPOOL FC						
HOME					AWAY						
SS 90 A. GRIEZMANN	CMF 87 I. NIESTA	CF 78 J. SAND	CB 77 A. BARBOZA	CF 90 Z. IBRAHIMOVIC	CMF 87 R. NAINGGOLAN	LB 86 F. FILIPE LUIS	CB 84 S. LIMTITI	CF 80 S. RUFFIER	CMF 80 L. SCHÖNE	RWF 80 E. LAMELA	AMF 80 M. VALBUENA
LMF 77 J. DURMAZ	GK 74 A. MCCARTHY	GK 74 S. TORRICO	AMF 74 G. SADR ALDIN	AMF 79 DIEGO SOUZA	GK 76 K. WESTWOOD	DMF 76 D. GUIDILEYE	CB 75 N. BURDISSO	LB 71 A. AGOLLI	AMF 71 S. TALLER	CMF 70 M. OYOLA	RB 70 C. PALICIO
CB 73 W. MOKE ABERO	LB 73 Y. DORADO	RWF 73 MARCÓ MATÍAS	RMF 72 D. BATALLINI	LWF 74 GIL DIAS	SS 74 H. PEQUEGNOT	RB 73 L. VIDAL	AMF 72 M. BILLABONA	CB 69 N. BRIGHENTI	RB 69 K. ABDULLAH	SS 69 C. ALMADA	LMF 67 C. O'DOWDA
CF 67 MANUCHO G.	DMF 66 M. ALI	RB 64 NACHO VIDAL	CMF 63 M. BATTISTONI	CF 70 J. MADENNIS	RB 69 BRUNO SARTOS	LMF 69 R. APONZA	CB 67 J. CBRADOS	CF 67 M. MANUCHO G.	DMF 66 M. ALI	RB 64 NACHO VIDAL	CMF 63 M. BATTISTONI

Random Selection mode is a surprising pleasure.



August 2017
You joined WEST MIDLANDS VILLAGE as their manager.

Career mode's lifeless mannequins aren't a patch on FIFA's Alex Hunter.

OUTSIDER INTERFERENCE

Assassinate a god in
DISHONORED: DEATH OF THE OUTSIDER. By Phil Savage

I'm in a bank vault, up to my waist in water. This is still, technically, a 'ghost' run. No alarms have been sounded. But the hole in the roof above suggests a different story – one of planning, mild carnage, and, 'Oh, what happens if I do this?' *Death of the Outsider's* third mission is a standout heist that shows *Dishonored's* semi-directed design at its best. It's not my favourite thing about this standalone expansion – we'll get to that – but the dense network of possibilities and routes is as good as anything found in *Dishonored 2*.

Breaking into Karnaca's most secure bank is just another step in protagonist Billie Lurk's plan to kill the Outsider. Lurk, having cast off her assumed identity as the captain of the Dreadful Wale, reunites with her former mentor and frenemy Daud. The aging assassin enlists Billie's help for one last job: bumping off the black-eyed emo god-being at the heart of the Void. As in *Dishonored's* DLCs, *The Knife of Dunwall* and *Brigmore Witches*, *Death of the Outsider* isn't about Corvo's or Emily's plight, (at least beyond the fact that, to Daud's mind, they too were mere pawns in the Outsider's game). But it is important to the world at large. This is an epilogue.

The nature of Billie's task, and the nature of Billie herself, means that *Death of the Outsider* diverges from the standard template of a typical *Dishonored* campaign. To be clear,

much here is familiar – it's an expansion after all. But Billie's road to the ultimate assassination doesn't involve a hitlist of rich jerks. It can – you're free to kill pretty much everyone you meet, and with no Chaos system to punish you for it. But for the most part, your targets are information and items.

Billie's powers are different, too, in that they aren't granted through one of the Outsider's offers. Rather, they're drawn directly from the Void. In practical terms, it means they recharge over time, with no need to scour for vials of magical blue juice. Your

range of powers are more limited than in previous games, but interesting nonetheless. Displace is the Blink variant, with the notable difference that you can place a marker and then – as long as you have line of sight – choose when to teleport to it.

For the most part, your targets are information and items

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Standalone expansion to 2016's best immersive sim.

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

RELEASE DATE:
Out now

REVIEWED ON
i5-6600k, 16GB RAM,
GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
dishonored.
bethesda.net

This has a number of uses, not least as an easy method of escape if a fight goes bad. For instance, it combos with Foresight, which enables Billie to stop time and scan the nearby area. While looking around with Foresight, you can place a Displace marker, potentially letting you teleport through grates and fences. But these specific instances aside, Displace is most frequently used to move between high ledges and reach other hard-to-access areas. I'm actually a little underwhelmed by how it feels. It's a small thing, but the extra mouse click required to accurately warp to a place makes supernatural movement feel less snappy and satisfying.

FACE/OFF

Billie's best power is Semblance, which lets you steal the face of an unconscious NPC. It's particularly useful because Billie is a wanted woman, and guards will attack her on sight – even out on the street. Walking confidently through a courtyard full of guards is a different kind of empowerment to that offered by *Dishonored's* typically more direct and murderous abilities. Semblance enables some specific interactions, too, like an auction you can only participate in if you're wearing the face of a civilian. It's not perfect, however – there are so many characters that inevitably some permutations aren't accounted for. At one point, I used Semblance on a shop owner who had a captive locked up in her basement – just to see what would happen. Unfortunately, nothing. The captive just reacted as if I was Billie.

Crucially, these powers aren't direct attacks (not unless you Displace into an enemy, leading to their gruesomely messy demise). Instead, Billie is more reliant on her tools – including the entertaining new hook mines, which can grab enemies and fling them into walls, floors or even other people. In order to balance this out, there are no runes ➤

VAGUE CARRIER *What do the rats say?*

follow **delicious**
 garbage **gnaw**
 scurry **tap**
 soon **teeth**
 burning **smell**
 fat soft **flesh** mouth watch



"Wait, did I leave the stove on?"



An alarming turn of events, accurately expressed.



The rats are sometimes useful, but mostly weird.



Always get a good eight hours sleep before killing a god.



Stabbed by a blasphemous knife. The ultimate insult.



"Wait, did he leave the stove on?"



Billie gets her powers (and hand) from the Void.

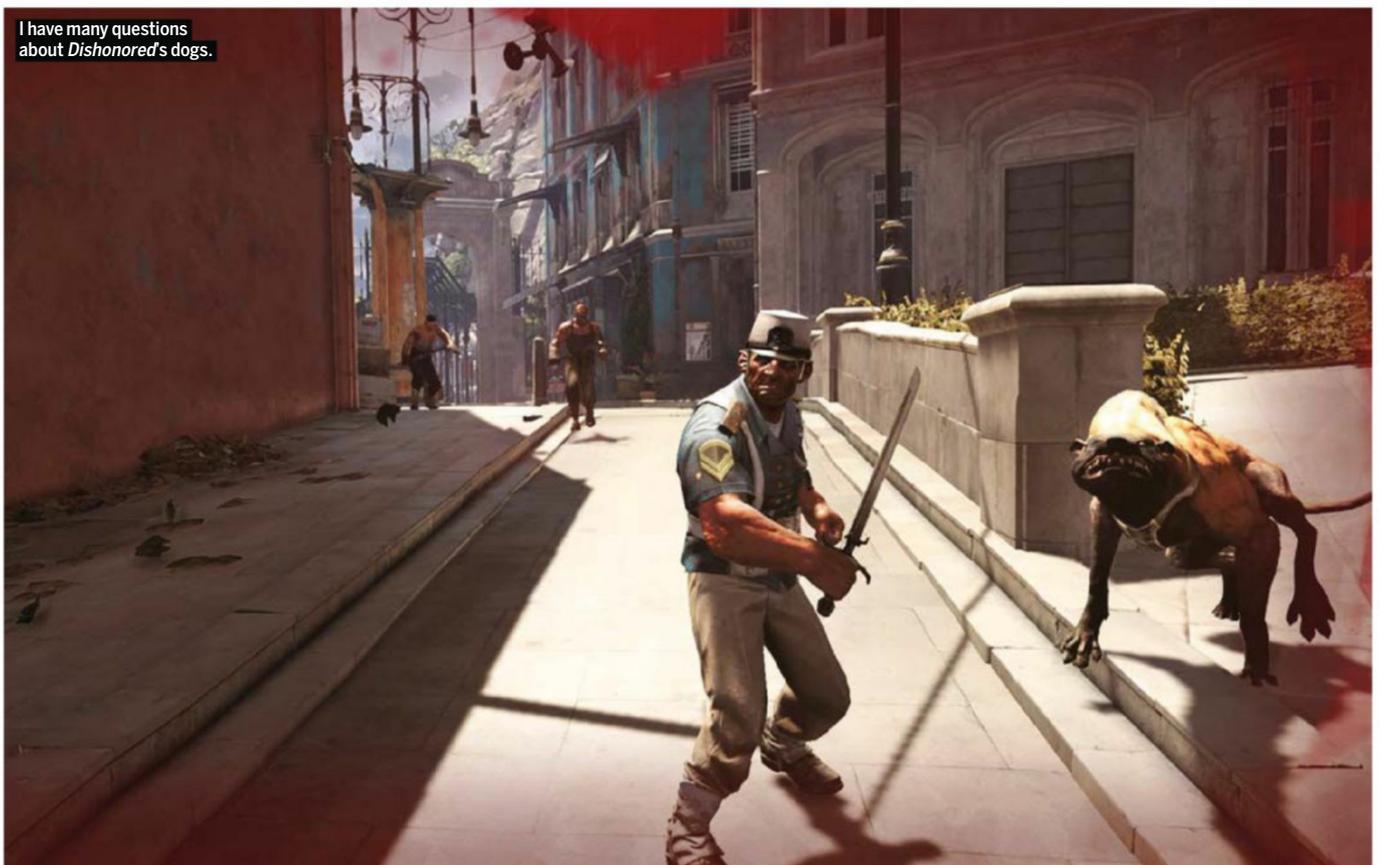


Nice face. Mind if I borrow it?

It was me. It was I. I was interested with Bloodfy Jarvae. I'd



I have many questions about Dishonored's dogs.



to collect. Your powers work just as well at the start of the game as they do at the end. Instead, your money is spent on new bone charms and gear upgrades, both of which enable some powerful playstyles. In a longer game, the reduced toolset offered here might end up feeling stale. But, across the ten hours *Death of the Outsider* took me to complete, I never felt short of options.

CONTRACT KILLER

These new powers, tools and small tweaks sit well in environments that are more directly comparable to *Dishonored 2*. Once again, you'll be exploring densely packed areas, full of detail, side stories, and money to pilfer. New for *Death of the Outsider* is a contracts system, which lets you pick up optional objectives from the black market. Some will take you to areas off the critical path. Others will challenge you to play the game in a specific way – make it through an area without alerting a soul, or murder all but one specific person.

It's a fun extra that makes the most of Arkane's distinctive level design.

Some will no doubt balk at how two of this expansion's five missions take place in the same district.

Personally, though, I welcomed the opportunity to return to the scene of the crime. Upper Cyria, the area in question, feels large and full of things to do on your first visit. While my return was far shorter having learned the layout, it was gratifying to see, for instance, how the black market responded to my earlier break-in. Also, the second visit ends in that bank heist, so it's hard to feel hard done by.

A crucial theme running throughout *Death of the Outsider* is of return and reevaluation. My favourite thing wasn't a mission or an individual section but the chance to see the world react to the events of *Dishonored 2*, and from a new perspective. It frequently shines new light on characters from throughout the series. Billie, obviously, and the Outsider, of course. But also the groups that you, as various protagonists, have previously encountered. The first few missions offer hints that the witches – powerful, late-game enemies featured in *Dishonored 2* – are now desperate

TWO BIRDS, ONE ZONE *You'll be spending a lot of time in Upper Cyria*

BLACK MARKET

Head here early to pick up your contracts, and also maybe rob the place.

COLIBRON PLAZA

Go here during your return trip to visit an auction selling a useful item.

DOLORES MICHAELS' BANK

Stay calm, you're going to break into Karnaca's most secure bank. Exciting!

THE SPECTOR CLUB

This cultist hideout promises rescue, kidnapping and interesting murders.



and vulnerable, and that they are scrabbling to regain a scrap of the power they once held.

Later on, Billie visits the Royal Conservatory. Once a witch stronghold, it's now held by the Abbey of the Everyman. The Abbey is a religious faction and has always been antagonistic to each *Dishonored* character's Outsider-blessed adventures, but here, in the basement where the remaining witches are held captive, their malice is brought into focus. The combination of their wanton cruelty, Billie's personal connection to

the witches, and *Death of the Outsider's* relaxation of the Chaos system culminated in reckless bloodshed, as I abandoned a strictly non-lethal approach that had persisted over two games. It was a convergence of story and systems to create a meaningful and justifiable switch in the way I was playing.

Death of the Outsider's story works best when it's toying with the morality of its factions and characters, and offering a different context for their actions. That strikes at the heart of the central objective: killing the Outsider. Daud's obsession with his death comes from a place of righteousness – of railing against his acceptance of what he now views as a Faustian pact. But *Death of the Outsider* also challenges that assumption. There are no heroes here, and everyone's reasons – even if they're ostensibly selfless – are put under a spotlight. Even the rats are recontextualised. Once the source of *Dishonored's* plague, now they appear as a cryptic ally that Billie can consult

for advice, and who like to offer scattered musings on topics such as chewing and biting.

MISSION CRITICAL

Nonetheless, there's a lot to pack in. By focusing on Daud and Billie's personal goals, the ultimate truth of the Eyeless – the cult that Billie goes up against in her search for the Outsider – feels rushed. The final revelations are crammed into the confines of the final mission. There's a lot to unpack here, and it results in a dense delivery of cryptic clues that feel better suited for multiple missions – especially when key lines of dialogue are in danger of being missed, or wiped out by an errant sticky grenade. While I'm griping, that final mission also introduces a new enemy type – an irritatingly tough new foe that doesn't follow the general rules of killing a *Dishonored* enemy, while also being more mobile and more numerous than the Clockwork Soldiers.

Such small grievances add up, and do take some of the shine off an otherwise accomplished slice of freeform stealth action. When *Death of the Outsider* is at its best, though, it's a worthy accompaniment to the *Dishonored* series at large. It's full of enjoyable new encounters and scenarios, and it offers new perspectives on characters and events, and, through its audacious central goal, caps off the series' existing storyline in style. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Not as consistently intricate or surprising as *Dishonored 2*, but still a worthy epilogue to the series' world.

82

FOR REAL

PROJECT CARS 2 is the apex of apex-hitting sims, but leaves casuals behind. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

When was the last time you were truly immersed and engaged in an activity? Mindfulness types call this state 'flow', and positive psychologists say this situation of total involvement is what we really mean when we talk about happiness. So, with that in mind, *Project Cars 2* is the most demanding simulation racer I have ever played, and it is a positive psychologist's dream.

With all the assists off and a decent racing wheel plugged in, it requires so much sustained attention, so many adjustments in response to whispers of feedback from the car, that there's simply no brainpower left to think about anything other than getting your Audi R18 around the last turn at Zolder. And the rallycross? No space to think about death when you're doing that, let me tell you. This unprecedented level of simulation is, as you'd expect, really, *Project Cars 2*'s crown jewel. Driving is its own intrinsic joy, more so than in its 2015 ancestor and, to these hands, it's better than rivals *rFactor 2* and *iRacing* (don't @ me).

However, you can go ahead and add your own personal disclaimer to that statement if a) you drive with assists, and/or b) you race with a pad rather than a wheel. Both were occasionally true of me in the original *Project Cars*, where I was able to tweak my controller settings and find a balance of assists that made the racing responsive but not overly demanding. Such settings might exist within *Project Cars 2*'s menus, but I haven't found them yet. Instead, I

find pad handling too twitchy to ever save a spin when I lose the back end.

In other words, it doesn't seem to worry about the casual racer as much as its predecessor, so the only way to really enjoy what *Project Cars 2* offers is to lean into it, turn all the assists off, and use a wheel. Presumably that's no biggie to most of its intended audience, but it's a strange development from the first game nonetheless. Luckily, the sheer joy of driving

comes in several more flavours.

The fact that Slightly Mad's sequel drills deep into several distinct disciplines of driving is more than just a carrot to dangle before you in career mode. Spend a while with the licensed Indycars, learning their foibles, perfecting drafting, visiting the Indianapolis Speedway and recognising when tracks rubber in to offer more grip, and the jump to loose surface racing in a rallycross car feels like a different game.

With that said, open-wheel, touring, endurance, rallycross, and GT racing are better distinguished in career mode than the narrower handful of disciplines were in the last

The original still has a thing going for it: the bugs have been stamped out

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Capital S Sim racing, with Indycar licensing and esports dreams.

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Slightly Mad Studios

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, i7 2600k, 16GB RAM, GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 32 players

LINK
www.projectcarsgame.com

game, offering clearer and more distinct paths from season to season. Invitational events can now be entered after you unlock them, so progress through seasons isn't congested by one-day cups anymore. The structure of career mode is a definite improvement, then.

ON THE PACE

Also improved is the engine's consideration for your framerate. Sure, you can still push the supersampling AA slider up to max and tank all but the mightiest systems but, leaving high-end AA out of the equation, this is well optimised. Even without the inevitable game-ready driver, a GTX 1070 can handle everything turned all the way up at 1600p. That's a marked improvement on the last game, although the step forward in vehicular handsomeness isn't as profound.

For all the ways this sequel builds on that foundation, though, the original still has a thing going for it: the bugs have been stamped out. At the time of writing, *Project Cars 2* freezes with will-sapping regularity, and less frequently seems to change wheel configuration properties at will. Horrendous understeer might pop in midway through an opening lap on fresh tires, or force feedback might disappear. Elsewhere, hitting 'skip to end' during a practice or qualifying session will see all AI drivers find four seconds of pace as they log a new lap. Controller issues cropped up only a handful of times during 20 hours of play, but you could set your watch by that quali glitch. Assuming these glitches get stitches, *Project Cars 2* nonetheless sets a sim racing benchmark for those brave enough to go assist-free and play on the game's own terms. ■

RIDE ON *Racing's scariest cockpits*



FORMULA X CAR
What if F1 threw the rulebook out? This monstrosity, that's what.



1959 ASTON MARTIN DBR1/300
So... no head protection at all, then? 40mph it is.



2013 LABORGHINI VENENO
Physical proof that there's such a thing as 'too fast'.



1969 FERRARI 365 GTB/4
Built before 'handling' was really a concept.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A serious racing sim for serious racers. Extraordinarily convincing at each of the disciplines on offer.

89

Very fuel hungry, no boot space. 1/10.



Your dreams of becoming the next Alonso start here.



Open wheelers are twitchy and take a lot of practice.



Ahead of us? No way. We're lapping them, honest.



The most fun you'll ever have turning exclusively left.

SMOOTH CRIMINAL

Pulling off interstellar heists is a blast in **HEAT SIGNATURE**. By Steven Messner

I smashed an unsuspecting guard so hard with a Concussion Hammer that his body went sliding down the corridor, comically coming to a stop at the feet of four of his friends. Oops. As the guards began shouting and attacking, the spaceship's captain changed course for an enemy station just 30 seconds away. I hadn't gone more than four rooms without bungling the mission, and now I had just half a minute to salvage it before my character was captured. *Heat Signature* is a procedurally generated playground for those who love to experiment, fail and adapt.

Though it kind of looks like *Hotline Miami*, *Heat Signature* has the spirit of *Dishonored 2*, except it's set in a space-themed sandbox. There are

four big empires that rule the galaxy and you're part of a group of revolutionaries trying to overthrow them. To do this, you infiltrate their spaceships to assassinate, kidnap and steal. But the real fun is

found in unlocking new gadgets that make the skullduggery more exciting.

For example, I love using Subverters to turn my enemies' shields against them so that bullets are deflected on the inside instead of the outside. Seeing a guard killed by his own shotgun blast as it ricochets inside his shield is hilarious.

Instead of playing as a single character, I play a revolving door of mercenaries. When one dies or is captured, I'm forced to pick a new recruit, but their collective efforts

also help convince nearby stations to abandon their empire and join my cause, unlocking new gadgets to be bought with my earnings from completing missions.

Heat Signature's challenge is frequently daunting. Guards come equipped with shields and armour, and they tend to cluster together in groups. Some guards will explode upon death. Others will

immediately teleport to the location of a suspicious noise.

It's when *Heat Signature* is the most difficult that it often spawns the best anecdotes. One time a grenade I threw caused a guard's gun to ricochet off a wall and discharge. The bullet struck a fuel cell. I didn't have enough time to run from the impending explosion, so I turned on my Emergency Shield to survive the blast but promptly found myself sucked out into space as the whole room was obliterated.

Heat Signature is quite forgiving and that keeps it fun

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A 2D stealth game about sneaking around ships using fun gadgets.

EXPECT TO PAY

£11

DEVELOPER

Suspicious Developments

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

i5 3570K, 16GB RAM, GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.heatsig.com

Fortunately, *Heat Signature* is quite forgiving and that keeps it fun. Getting hit once knocks me unconscious, and guards always toss me out of the airlock rather than finish me off, giving me a moment to remote control my spaceship and scoop my body back up to try again.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

In the heat of action, I can always pause and plan my next step. This staccato focus is very satisfying. I'll stab a guard with a sword, pause, switch to a gun, shoot another, pause, teleport behind a third guard, pause, and lay a Glitch Trap at his feet that will teleport him into space. Despite that, I do wish the enemy AI was more challenging. They move predictably and it's easy to undermine a difficult mission just by picking them off one by one while on patrol.

And once I unlocked the most powerful gadgets, the threat that some missions posed eroded. Each liberated station offers Defector Missions which add a fun challenge by restricting what gadgets I can use, but they feel like a distraction from a core campaign that struggles to entice after 15 hours.

Heat Signature obviously pushes the limits of GameMaker, too. Slowdowns are frequent and I experienced several crashes. Because missions are usually only a few minutes long, I never felt like I lost too much progress. It's still frustrating, though.

Still, *Heat Signature* inspires creativity like any great immersive sim. I can't stop regaling friends with my stories of heists gone bad or boasting about my flashes of brilliance. *Heat Signature* is brilliant at teasing these anecdotal threads out of a procedural universe. ■

TOOLS OF THE TRADE *Bring the right gear for the job*



VISITING TELEPORTER

Teleports you for a few seconds and then pulls you back. Ideal for those awkward social situations that you promised to make an appearance at.



SLIPSTREAM

Need breathing room? The Slipstream slows time while you still move at regular speed. Great for when you're faced with five guards and only have a wrench handy.



KEY CLONERS

Unlocking doors without being noticed can be a pain, so instead of risking your neck trying to nick a key off a patrolling guard, just use this tool to clone one from a distance.



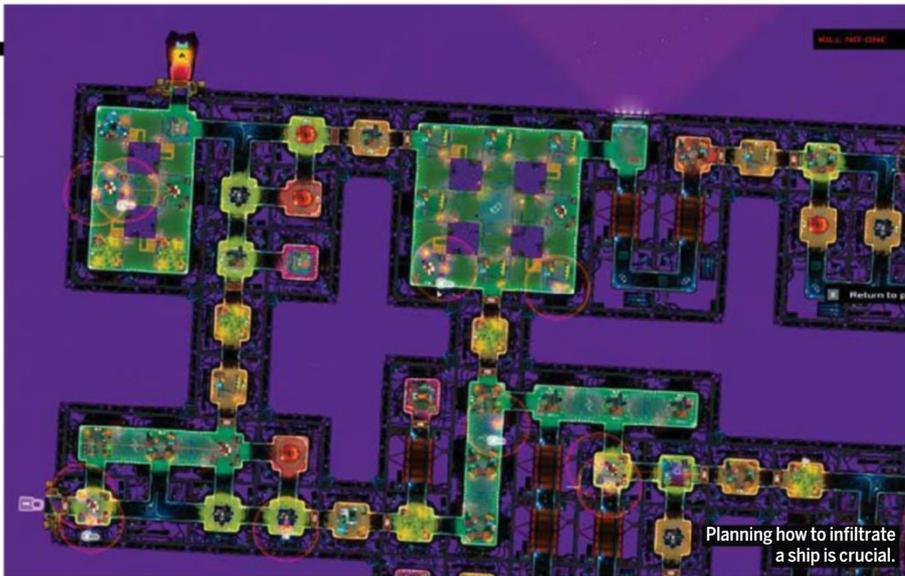
THE FOUNDRY BRICK

Being quiet isn't always useful. This craft lets you ram a ship, destroying an entire room at the expense of a little damage. But that's your insurance company's problem.

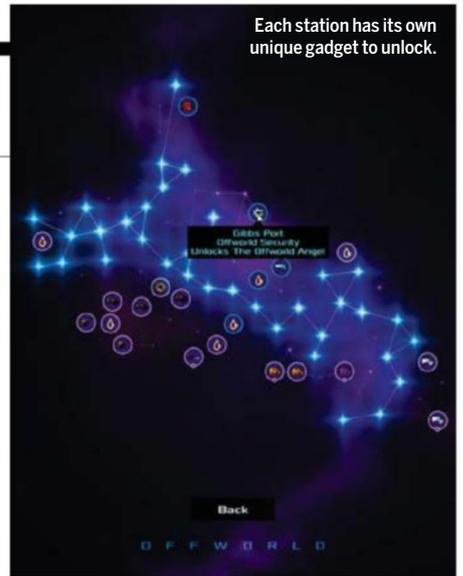
PC GAMER VERDICT

By making great use of its procedural world and wacky gadgets, *Heat Signature* is a mission worth taking.

85



Planning how to infiltrate a ship is crucial.



Each station has its own unique gadget to unlock.



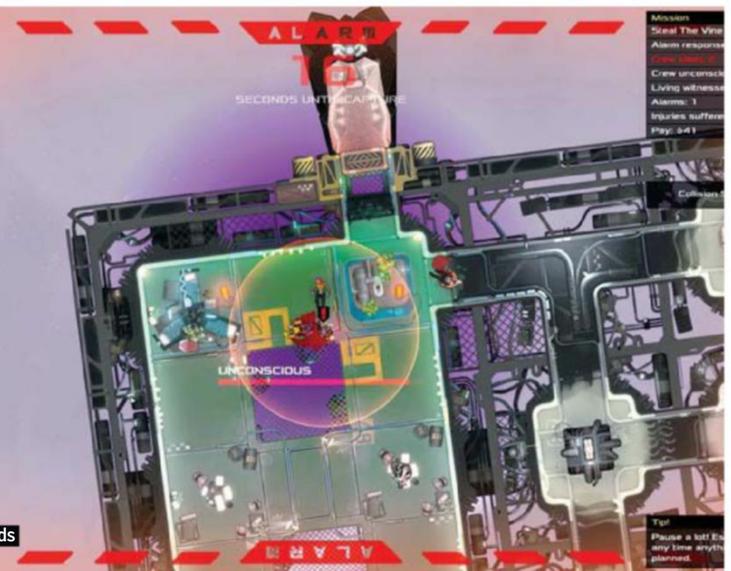
Heat Signature isn't as punishing as *Hotline Miami*.



Most weapons aren't very quiet.



Watch out, some guards have heat sensors.



FIST OF FURY

Puzzling, platforming and punching in **HOB**. By Andy Kelly

The oversized left arm of *Hob's* silent protagonist is mechanical, gifted to them by a friendly robot early in the game. This magnificent appendage has multiple uses, from charged punches that make enemies explode and walls crumble, to activating arcane machinery and changing the layout of levels.

You also have a sword, letting you cut foes down in a stylish flurry, but it's that great metal fist and its upgrades which really stand out. When you charge and unleash it you can almost feel its immense, crushing power rippling through your controller – which, incidentally, I strongly recommend you play with.

Hob is a mysterious little game, telling a wordless, enigmatic story that you have to piece together yourself. It's not as abstractly cryptic as *Hyper Light*

Drifter but you still have to work to make sense of it. It does this so well, in fact, that when I found an upgrade bench to unlock new abilities, I was disappointed to see them described with text. I would have liked to see Runic rely entirely on suggestion and icons, but that's a minor complaint. Upgrades include a shield, faster dodge rolling, and longer, more powerful sword combos – all of which you'll need when it's time to battle the game's oddball bestiary.

The fast-paced combat is simple, fun and disarmingly challenging at

times. Some enemies, including a towering, spindly creature swinging an enormous club, can catch you off-guard by wiping your health bar out in one brutal hit.

Other enemies, all of which are imaginatively designed, have interesting patterns to learn and exploit, and are usually accompanied by low-level minions who helpfully spew out health-restoring red globs when killed. But, honestly, fighting is the least interesting thing

The combat is simple, fun and disarmingly challenging at times

you'll do in *Hob*. It's in the environmental puzzles, which thankfully make up the majority of the game, where it shines.

Hob's world is gorgeous, with crisp, colourful art and the sense that you're exploring the ruins of some ancient, fallen civilisation. The remains of dormant machines can be seen all around you, overgrown and crumbling, some of which you'll reawaken with your robo-arm.

Puzzles involve navigating maze-like dungeons, locating batteries to power up dead machines,

pushing blocks, and making use of weird technology. And a solution will often cause a level to dramatically change shape, opening up areas that were previously inaccessible.

FAR CRY

Hob's camera is mostly fixed in a top-down perspective, but occasionally it'll dip behind your character and give you a tantalising glimpse of the world stretching into the distance. It teases you with far-off locations you won't visit until much later, giving the game a remarkable feeling of scale.

Below the vibrant overworld you'll find cavernous dungeons full of puzzles and upgrades for your arm, including one that lets you use pads to teleport. It's a place that yearns to be explored, and there are secrets – usually in the form of XP orbs or costumes with unique properties – that make doing so worth it.

The weak link in *Hob* is the platforming. The fixed perspective can make it difficult to gauge the distance between platforms, and jumping feels a little too floaty. Most of the deaths I suffered were not at the hands of club-wielding baddies, but falling down bottomless pits or being zapped by electrified floors.

Respawn points are, mercifully, generous, but dying because you weren't sure where a jump was going to land never stops being frustrating. Thankfully, the platforming bits are never that complex or punishing.

Hob is an invitation to a world full of secrets, mysteries, and puzzles to be solved, and in that sense it's fantastic. The combat offers a reasonable challenge and improves as you upgrade your hero, but it isn't nearly as compelling as simply exploring the open world. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A mysterious, atmospheric puzzle platformer.

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Runic Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

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

MULTIPLAYER
None
LINK
www.runicgames.com

POWER UP *Useful upgrades*



AGILITY

Roll away from danger more quickly. Essential for those enemies who can kill you in one hit.



SPRITE CLOAK

Allows you to sprint, jump, and roll faster, but lowers your health and defence. An interesting trade-off.



SHIELD

Turn your gauntlet into a chunky metal shield and deflect enemy attacks. A nice alternative to rolling.



SWORD COMBO

Add a third attack to your basic sword combo, letting you keep the pressure on enemies a little longer.

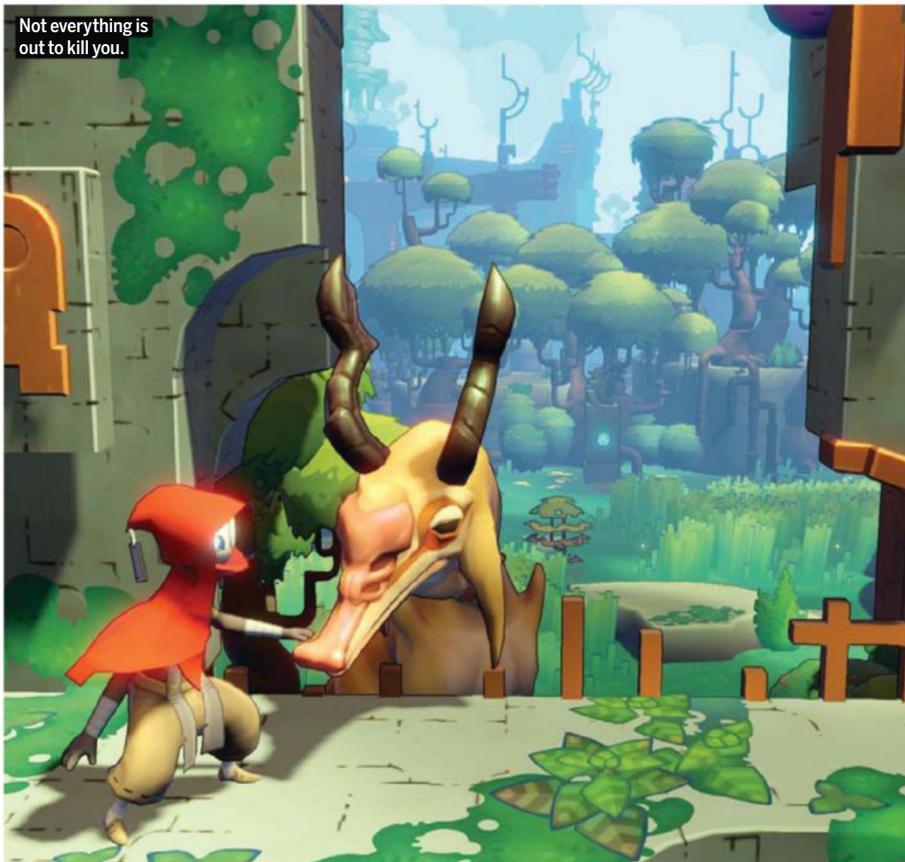
PC GAMER VERDICT

A gorgeous world eager to be explored, with satisfying puzzles and fun, if occasionally clumsy, action.

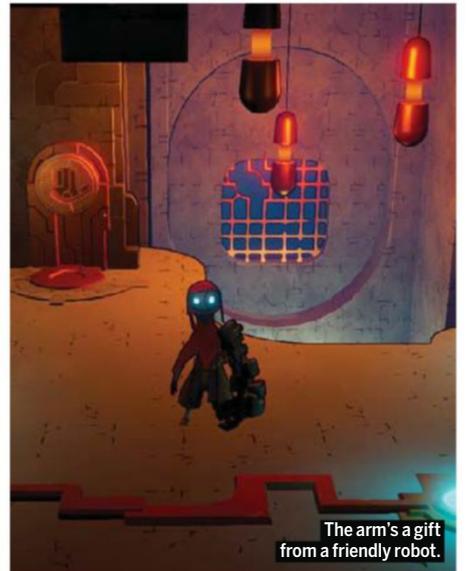
77



Some of the views are stunning.



Not everything is out to kill you.



The arm's a gift from a friendly robot.



The world changes shape around you.

ENDANGERED

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED stacks too much fluff on top of weak design. *By Ian Birnbaum*

Lost and naked, players open their eyes on the shore of an island teeming with dinosaurs. *Ark* is an open world in the truest sense: there's nowhere I need to go, nowhere I'm supposed to be. But I can't just starve to death on that beach, so I set off. I tear a branch off a tree, tie it to a rock, and then I have a stone axe. Unlike other survival games, *Ark*'s tech goes all the way. That stone axe eventually leads to rocket-propelled grenades, forges and forcefields.

Whether I'm wearing a hat made out of grass or steel, my goals in *Ark* are essentially unlimited. Like many of the best PC games, *Ark* asks me to set goals for myself and be the author of my own stories. I can climb the biggest mountains, I can become a big game hunter, or I can tame my very own pterodactyl and take to the skies.

For me, I decided I wanted a nice little house on a cliff overlooking a waterfall, so I set up camp, built some storage containers and started stripping the hills of wood and stone. I laid foundations and raised walls until, hours later, I stepped back and admired my little slice of the world. Feeling a sense of agency in the world sent me into *Ark* with the same obsessive abandon that drew me to other survival games, such as *Minecraft* or *The Long Dark*.

But the dark side of this freedom is *Ark*'s environment itself. It is incredibly stingy with resources, and death lurks around every corner.

More than upgrading tech and building homes and riding dinosaurs, this is the dark, angry core of *Ark*: everything takes resources; gathering stuff takes time; at any moment, death will destroy everything. It took me around 30 hours before I had enough resources to make backups of my most essential items.

In those first 30 hours, there were a few times where I lost everything. Once, I was out hunting with a tamed raptor when a wild, high-level carnivore killed us both, then it camped out and chewed on our corpses. I spawned at my home nearby, with no weapons or tools and only a few minutes before my body disappeared and all of my best gear was gone forever. No matter what I tried, I couldn't get past that raptor. Finally I saw my first corpse fade away and I died again, respawning naked at my base. My pet raptor was dead and I was without so much as a sharpened stick to my name. When so much of *Ark* is grinding drudgery,

It is stingy with resources, and death lurks around every corner

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Open world, online survival game – with dinosaurs!

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

RELEASE DATE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Studio Wildcard, Instinct Games, Efecto Studios, Virtual Basement

PUBLISHER
Studio Wildcard

REVIEWED ON
i5 4690k, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
70 players

LINK
www.playark.com

the consequences of its unforgiving design are hard to enjoy.

TYRANNOSAURUS WRECKS

Between the grind and the death penalties, *Ark* just doesn't respect your time. Taming dinosaurs, one of the game's most enjoyable activities, is perhaps the most offensive insult to players' time. To tame a dinosaur, you knock it unconscious and give it food to nurse it back to health – I guess dinosaurs have a short memory. Taming your first pet is a really cool experience. Though it's a little boring to stand around and watch a sleeping dinosaur wake up, it only takes a few minutes. Having a pet is really awesome in *Ark*, and it's amazing how quickly I bonded with my dinopals. I tamed my first raptor, named him after my dog (naturally), and then the raptor and I went hunting. Wounding my quarry with an arrow and watching my raptor chase it down and kill it came with a joyous sense of friendship and power.

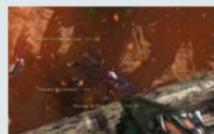
At higher levels, though, taming animals becomes a sick joke. Animals can take hours or even days to tame. According to one online animal-taming calculator, some high-level animals could take you over a hundred real-life hours: start taming that beast on a Tuesday, and it might be ready to ride into battle by the weekend. That kind of round-the-clock commitment is clearly impossible without help. I suspect the game's worst grinding elements are designed to push players into playing in tribes online. Though abundant, these servers can be really hit or miss. On PVE servers, the biggest problem I had was that the spawn areas are really built out, full of fenced-in compounds, stripped forests, and megastructures created by established tribes. It was pretty hard to find somewhere I could start punching rocks.

The dark side of the online experience is the PVP servers, where the brutal grind and the fear of losing hundreds of hours of work brings out

WILD WORKSHOP *Make the game better with these mods*



1 PRIMITIVE+
Adds a ton of stuff, but everything is limited to basic technology levels. No more digital cameras, just cavemen.



2 CALL OF THE WILD
What good is a castle without invaders? Use this to send waves of dinos against your defences.

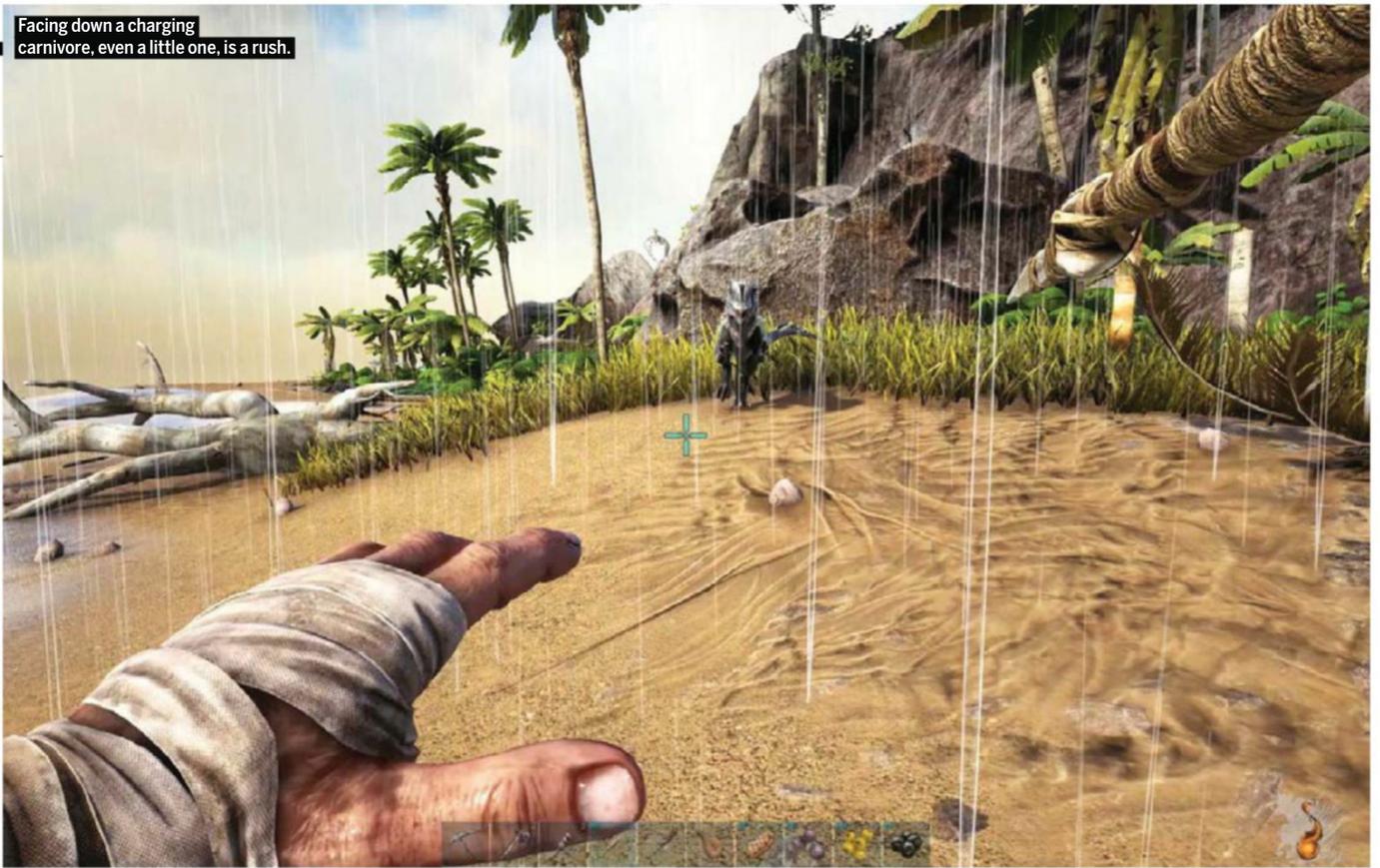


3 STRUCTURES PLUS S+
Discover triangles and other advanced tech that makes crafting and building much less fiddly.

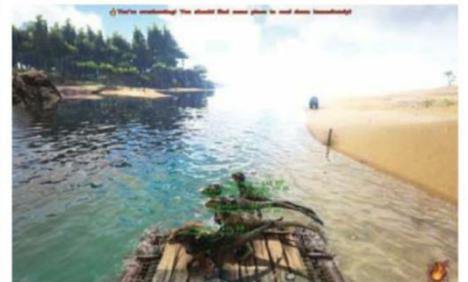


4 PLAY AS DINO!
The next time something bigger than you swallows you up whole, load up this mod and eat them back.

Facing down a charging carnivore, even a little one, is a rush.



The primitive wilderness of the island is beautiful, but deadly.



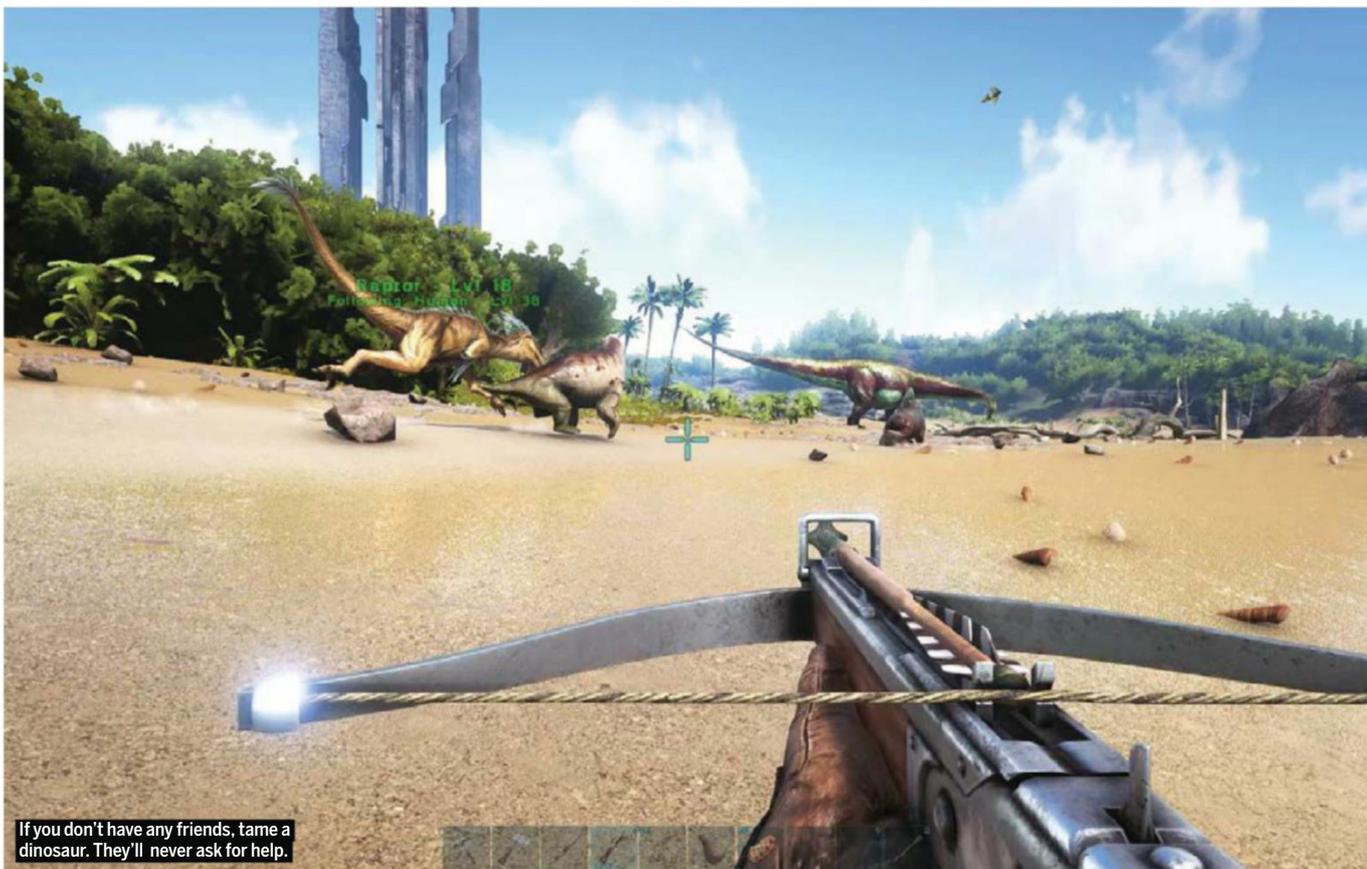
Don't gawk at the obelisks for too long, or something big will eat you..



Many of the dinos are peaceful, but they'll mess you up if you provoke them.



Damn, has anyone seen my car keys?



If you don't have any friends, tame a dinosaur. They'll never ask for help.



Look, lens flare. [JJ Abrams joke here].

the worst in online behaviour. Anyone who has ever played a survival game knows how frustrating it can be to get ganked by higher-level players. In *DayZ*, for example, it's common for a new player to die in battle against an established squad outfitted with rifles. While getting murdered by a high-level jerk sucks, it's what I would call 'normal' for these kinds of games. Surviving to become more powerful yourself is part of the fun, and the stories generated by these power disparities are partially what made the genre so interesting and popular. But at least in *DayZ*, both sides of the conflict have invented gunpowder.

The huge tech disparity makes the PVP environment in *Ark* so much worse. Imagine this: you and your friends build a Stone Age village with thatch huts and campfires. One night, you all get murdered and your village destroyed by a team of commandos wearing night vision goggles and wielding assault rifles equipped with silencers and laser sights. That's not how I want to spend hundreds of hours of my life.

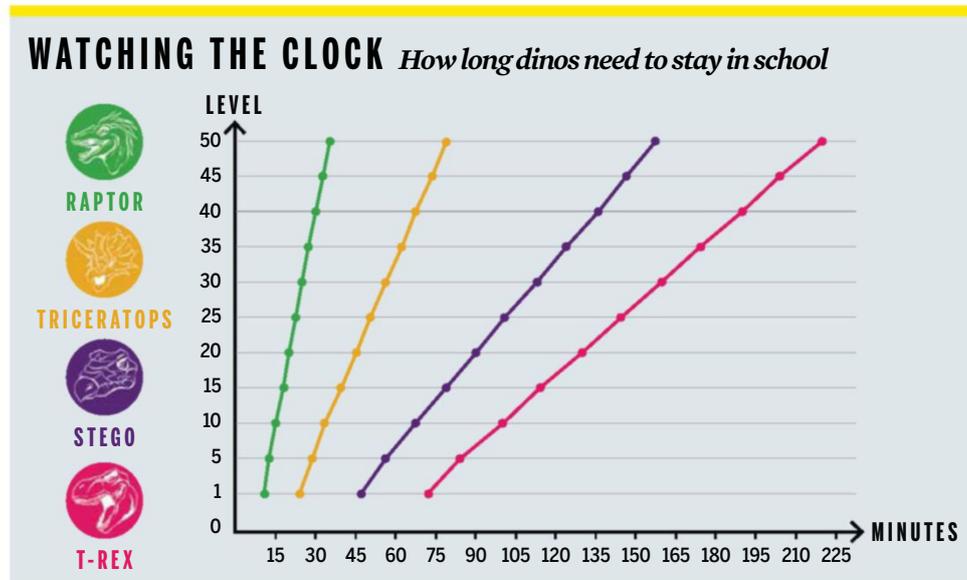
JURASSIC PORK

The really frustrating thing about this state of affairs is that *Ark* began with a pretty simple pitch: it's an open world survival game, but you're stuck in Jurassic Park. It's a straightforward idea that, after more than two years of development with a hungry playerbase, ended up being bloated and top-heavy with weird, irrelevant features at the expense of sorting out the game's core design.

Here's my favourite example of feature bloat in *Ark*: a camera. After you craft one, you can snap pictures, print them and hang the canvas on your wall to showcase a nice sunset vista, for example. That's a cool idea, but it's far, far away from the essence of what makes a survival game fun. Survival games are about perseverance in the face of scarcity, but in *Ark* it takes more refined metals to make a camera than to invent the *concept* of firearms.

And, for a game that's spent more than two years in Early Access, it still has a lot of bugs and is missing basic features. Pathfinding for dinosaurs, both wild and domesticated, is really

Pathfinding for dinosaurs, both wild and domesticated, is really poor



poor. The easiest way to take down a predator, in fact, is to run through some trees and watch it get stuck.

Ark's performance also suffers, though I don't know if that's due to feature bloat or just a lack of optimisation. Running a singleplayer game locally, textures can be slow to load and dinosaurs will pop into existence right in front of me. Online performance varies wildly depending on the server, but even on those with a good connection, I noticed long lag times between moving an item and actually seeing it change in my inventory, and dinosaurs that take several seconds to

notice that I'm attacking them.

OM-NOM-NOMIVORE

It's easier for me to understand *Ark* less as a game than as a platform that hosts anything players can think of. As a game, *Ark* is more frustrating than great. But as a platform, it's really ambitious. *Ark* supports a huge community of modders that make the game more focused and more refined.

Ark games also run on a deep menu of options. Most people won't run their own servers, but if you do, you can change almost everything about the game. Taming animals can be instant, resources can be plentiful, and the grind can be eliminated. You can even restrict certain technologies.

For *Ark*, the ability to mod and customise everything about the game



– and the way that freedom has been embraced by the community – are the biggest strengths. Right now, there are *Ark* servers running *Primitive Plus*, an officially supported mod that keeps technology firmly limited to the premetal age. Huge tribes ride high-level dinosaurs into battle with stone-tipped spears. Fighters dressed in leather and fur follow a charging triceratops as it charges through a wall, and a band of raptor-riding marauders raid deep into enemy territory.

For me, refined, large-scale prehistoric warfare is the perfect expression of what *Ark* should be, not the janky version full of bugs that includes tyrannosaurs with laser beams attached to their heads. But thanks to *Ark*'s community, I get to have both. Primitive tech-only servers, a *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*-style battle royale mode and a boisterous roleplaying community are just three examples of the way *Ark*'s players are using the game as a base for more interesting things. The long community-involved development cycle might have produced a bloated game full of mismatched features, but it has also built a population of players ready to take it upon themselves to make *Ark* into something better. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A bloated, grindy mess, but it is so packed with options that a better game is hidden deep inside it.

72

SIDEKICKS

MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE
brings big changes to the series. *By Michael Johnson*

At first glance you can boil *Marvel vs Capcom: Infinite* down to one question: do you want to see erstwhile *Dead Rising* photojournalist Frank West throw a shopping trolley at Thanos? Frank is a man with a camera, a penchant for slapstick comedy and a fighting style that relies on picking up random bits of tat to assault his foe. Thanos is about two steps away from being an actual god, with a host of powers that would probably take up half of this review if I listed them.

It's these 'what if' match-ups that make up part of *MvC*'s wider appeal. Its 30-character strong roster runs the gamut from bruisers like Hulk and Mike Haggar to agile speed merchants like Gamora and little men-with-lances, like *Ghosts 'n Goblins* hero, Arthur. It's a great roster that introduces welcome additions like Captain Marvel and *Darkstalkers'* Jedah Dohma.

Infinite is Capcom's attempt to make the series more accessible. That means no partner moves from off-screen this time. One-button combos are back and you can execute Hyper Combos with a double-button press. If you go into the game with no prior knowledge of the series it doesn't take long to get into the groove. *Infinite* is a button masher's dream with simple combos that chain in and out of one another in a free-form fashion.

The easily-executed Hyper Combos give newcomers a

spectacular way to use their meter, though specials and normal Hyper Combos are easy to execute anyway. The skill lies in using your partner well, whether you're tagging them into combos, or upsetting the flow of a fight – if Iron Man is getting second-guessed at every turn, try bringing out Dante and mix things up.

***Infinite* is
Capcom's
attempt to
make the series
more accessible**

Infinity stones add further depth by adding unique attacks and effects along with an ability you can trigger with a full meter. Some let you play a safety game, like the Soul stone, which leeches back health and revives a dead ally, allowing both your characters to fight at once. Others allow you to close gaps, or control your opponent's movement.

Playing online exacerbates some of the series' long-term issues. While the Infinity Stones prove their worth in terms of allowing you to be flexible in the way you approach each match, they also contribute towards the game's busy visuals. In a game where

failing to block a single attack can turn into a bar-busting combo, a lack of visual clarity is problematic.

A lack of balance is quickly demonstrated when played online, with Captain Marvel dominating play thanks to a suffocating playstyle, while the likes of Chris Redfield and Frank West feel limp and useless against strong players. With a heavy focus on upcoming DLC that will see the likes of Black Panther and Sigma joining the fray, it's a concern whether Capcom will be able to fix these issues in the short term.

DREAM TEAMS

The other headline addition to *Infinite* is the series' first cinematic story mode. The story is bunk – a thin 'two universes collide' excuse to get these characters together. It's generic stuff, but executed with just about the right amount of bombast and momentum to carry it through.

The story does fan service well. Almost every character on the roster gets their moment to shine and there are awesome team-ups; Ryu and the Hulk are apparently best buddies in this universe, while Spider-Man and Frank West make for an engagingly goofy team. The flipside is that the actual fights in the story mode can be uninspiring, overusing non-roster clone characters that present no serious challenge.

Infinite is superficially a highly entertaining brawler – one where you can go from picking up a pad to performing spectacular combos in mere moments. Delving deeper and heading online demonstrates that the game can be unforgiving. Learning to comprehend complex cues offers either a long-term challenge or a significant barrier to progress depending on your outlook. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Capcom's latest crossover brawler that pits Marvel's finest against their own roster of heroes and villains.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 7600k, 16GB RAM, GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
One-on-one

LINK
www.marvelvs.com/infinite.com

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK *Newcomers to the series*



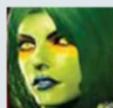
JEDAH DOHMA
A favourite of *Darkstalkers* fans, with a big role in the story.



MEGA MAN X
A Capcom classic, how has it taken this long for X to get here!?



CAPTAIN MARVEL
Carol Danvers's particular brand of flaming bruiser has been long overdue.



GAMORA
Flashy attacks abound for the agile assassin with her Godkiller blade.



ULTRON
An evil all-powerful robot with a god complex and no friends.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A likeable game hiding a brutal edge. Balance is concerning, but partially mitigated by an extensive roster.

74

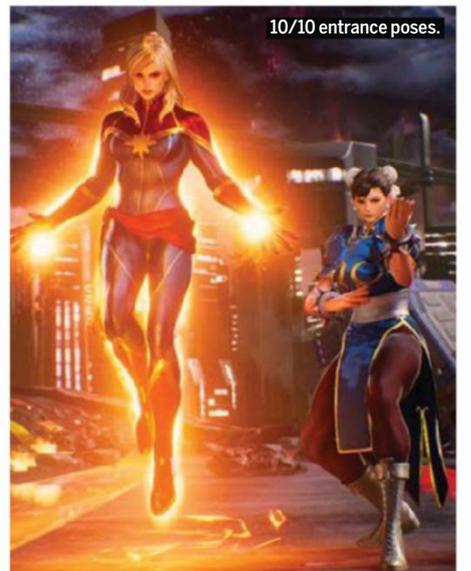
Arthur remains adorable, Iron Man remains a dick.



MvC is still the most colourful of all the fighters.



Gamora is just a blast to play.



10/10 entrance poses.



Try not to think too hard about kissing skeletons.



Who wouldn't watch a Ryu and Hulk buddy comedy spin-off?



Act natural and they'll never know you're a tank.

NUMB PAD

Trying to hit men in **HITMAN: CODENAME 47**

It's been years now – decades, even – since developers learned how to make a videogame person move about in a way that approximately maps to the intent of the person controlling them. Revisiting the era before modern conventions set in is worthwhile if only to appreciate how far things have come – to understand that games became better when somebody took a look at a keyboard and decided that their game didn't need to use every single key all of the time.

The original *Hitman* is kind of amazing in that regard. It's hugely ambitious – it wants to be a game of sprawling, simulated fortified places that you break apart in order to get at the juicy target at the centre – but it trips over itself spectacularly when it comes to putting you in control.

Dated tech plays a role here, but so does design. Steering Agent 47 around is a nightmare. He floats about levels like a bald tank, tie flapping in an unseen breeze (a nice bit of '00s-era detail) as you attempt to fling him into the narrow hitbox for a stealth takedown or the narrower window of interaction with, well, almost anything in the environment. You have to manage context-sensitive mouse wheel menus for things in front of you as well as whatever's in your hands, and

often these two play against one another. For some reason, stealth mode is bound to the 4 key.

It's like being drunk enough that you can't really function, but sober enough that you desperately want to appear like you're fine. Every movement takes meticulous planning. Not screwing up something as simple as remembering to put your gun away before you open a door takes constant vigilance. You try to drag a dead

bellboy into a hotel bathroom but drop him every time you move. Then you remember that going backwards means pressing the X key, for some reason. You make some progress, then realise that you can't drag a bellboy and open a bathroom door at the same time, so you drop the bellboy, try to open the door but accidentally draw your gun, open the

He floats about levels like a bald tank, tie flapping in an unseen breeze

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Io's first stab at open-plan murder adventure.

EXPECT TO PAY
\$5

DEVELOPER
IO Interactive

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

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

MULTIPLAYER
Nope

LINK
www.hitman.com

door, conceal the bellboy, leave the room and get shot to death because you forgot that you were still holding your gun.

BALD AMBITION

That said, *Codename 47* is charming in its own way. It's powerfully clumsy: even the writing manages to tumble down every flight of stairs available to it. "Hong Kong. Full of mystery, laughs and excitement," muses 47 at the beginning of mission one. "Not really my scene," he continues, sitting topless at his computer in the dark. You can see shades of the international crime adventure that IO want this to be, but what you get is a portrait of an extremely awkward man who doesn't have any friends and for whom each new doorknob is its own adventure. This isn't a good reason to play it over *Blood Money* or last year's reboot, but it would be nice to go back in time and tell *Codename 47* that everything's going to be okay. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An enchanted shopping trolley gets to experience a single violent day in the life of action star Jason Statham.

47

SELF LOATHING

Making **KINGDOM OF LOATHING** all about me

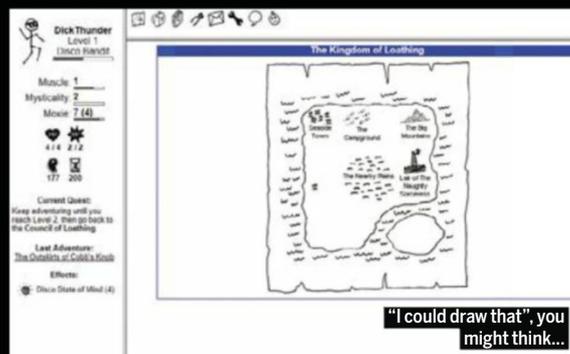
I turned 30 this month and I've been thinking about change. I know! I've just pissed off every reader who isn't also exactly 30. If you're older than me, you're grumbling something about how it's not that big of a deal and I have no idea how bad things are really going to get and so on. If you're younger, I've just joined the growing set of adults who, at any given time, might feel compelled to impart some unwanted life advice. Enjoy your YouTubers and fidget spinners while you've got them, kids, that's all I'll say.

Anyway, I want to tell you about change. I thought I'd revisit *Kingdom of Loathing* because *West of Loathing* just came out. It's brilliant. Asymmetric is a funny studio, inheritor of the get-a-joke-into-every-screen tradition that made people like point-and-click adventures.

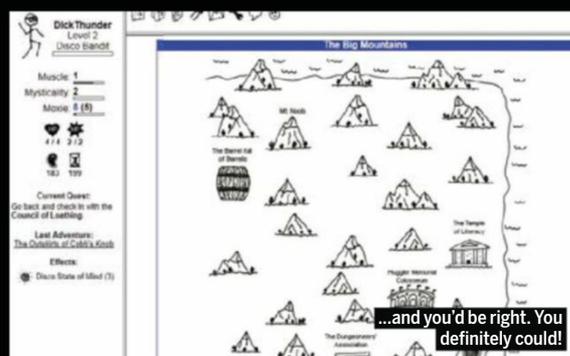
My *West of Loathing* character is called 'Christmas Dickett'; I made myself laugh, as an idiot might. I find both dicks and Christmas very funny. In any case, it was a shock to visit *Kingdom of Loathing* – a browser MMO I haven't played for close to five years – to find that Google has, in all of its invasive beneficence, chosen to remember my login details. And there it is, in bright yellow in the login box: *DickThunder*.

'DickThunder, Disco Bandit'. Five years ago I was in the middle of doing something or other in this daft MMO about nothing, and the name that I picked for myself demonstrates that I was basically the same idiot then that I am now. *Kingdom of Loathing* is lightweight and free, and you should give it a go. But, importantly, it has taught me that people don't really change, and that I should not be expected to. ■

87



"I could draw that", you might think...



...and you'd be right. You definitely could!

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Not a lot

DEVELOPER
Asymmetric Publications

PUBLISHER
In-house



Pro tip: don't accidentally mortar your own snipers.

ATOM ZOMBIE SMASHER

Don't tell anybody, but I'm quietly trying to sneak a re-review of all of Brendon Chung's games into this corner of the page because it's been long enough that I think people might have forgotten how great his early stuff is. *Atom Zombie Smasher* is set in the same surf guitar/banana republic/spy caper universe as his other games, except it's sort of a tower defence board game where you manage a zombie apocalypse by liberating zones. That means planning evac zones and setting up mercs to cover lines of retreat, setting dynamite and shelling your own people so they don't get infected. It's ace! Pretend you haven't noticed a pattern when *Gravity Bone* shows up. ■

85



It's always 1982 somewhere in the world.

MYSTERIUM

This is a co-op game where a small team of people try to solve a murder mystery using 'visions' sent to them by an additional player, who is a ghost (in the game). These visions are cards with pieces of lovely, bizarre art on them, and the ghost only has a limited hand to deal from. You've got to figure out, individually and as a team, what the ghost is trying to tell you: it's about divining useful information from somebody else's highly subjective response to art. If you've ever read or written a review of a videogame, you will know how angry this makes everybody involved. For this reason, *Mysterium* deftly makes the transition from the tabletop to the PC. ■

80



All the fun of failing to liaise with other humans.

WAVES

It's me again with my *Robotrons*. *Waves* is a *Robotron* in the manner of *Geometry Wars*. It looks exciting and feels nice, but what sets *Waves* apart is the number of variant modes it offers. You can engage in traditional *Robotron*ery, but you can also play a mode where your ball can't shoot but can blow up enemies by delivering a bomb from one part of the arena to the other: a sort of twin-stick solo capture the flag, which would be a fabulous euphemism if I could figure out what it was a euphemism for. ■

70

Easy Build Your Own PC Option - Large Range Of Components
 Q-Jump Quick Delivery - Finance Available 0% interest



i5 Titanium (KAB3)

INTEL Kaby Lake i5 7400 3.5Ghz
 ASUS PRIME B250M-A
 CRUCIAL DDR4 8GB 2133Mhz
 ASUS DVDRW 24x
 HYNIX 250GB Sata3 SSD
 WD/SEAGATE 1TB HDD
 FRACTAL DESIGN CORE 1100
 500W PSU
 INTEL Integrated HD630 Graphics
 WINDOWS 10 64Bit

IS TITANIUM

£499.99



INFANTRY Brigadier (INF2)

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

OVERALL SCORE
90



INFANTRY

£1999.99



INTEL X299

Build Your Own
 FROM £749.99

RYZEN

AMD RYZEN

BUILD YOUR OWN
 FROM £399.99



INTEL KABY LAKE

Build Your Own
 FROM £279.99

AMD Ryzen 1000 Gamer (AMD5)

AMD RYZEN 5 1400 3.20GHz (3.4Ghz Turbo)
 ASUS Prime B350M-A
 CRUCIAL DDR4 16GB 2133Mhz
 SAMSUNG DVDRW 24x*
 CRUCIAL 480GB SSD Sata3
 SEAGATE 3TB HDD Sata3
 Dragon Gaming Case - Red LED
 750W FSP PSU Silver
 NVIDIA GTX1070 8GB
 WINDOWS 10 64Bit



RYZEN £1099.99



CPU-MOTHERBOARD-RAM
 BUILD YOUR OWN
 BUNDLE



MULTI-MONITOR
 RANGE AVAILABLE



RGB Range
 Custom RGB Range

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

Speedlink is a good budget choice, but really this is a battle between the PS4 and Xbox One's controllers.



104

GROUP TEST

Ed Chester gets his mitts on the best controllers around.



110

REVIEWS

Intel's audaciously priced £1,800 CPU is put through its paces.

[UPGRADE]

GROUP TEST

By Ed Chester



CONTROLLERS

Get to grips with a new gamepad

Q&A

Wired or wireless?

While wireless rules for console gaming, for PC use it's less of an issue as you tend to sit much closer to the screen. This makes it more of a bonus feature and going wired-only can be a great way to save money. Alternatively, most wireless controllers also include a wired option – but not all.

How many controller buttons do I need?

It doesn't seem that long ago that there was still a fair bit of debate about the best design for gamepads. Now, though, the core features are all the same – two analogue sticks, one d-pad, four main buttons, two triggers and two bumpers. It's only in the rarest of instances you get more than this. For most users it's all you need. However, some controllers do have a few extras that set them apart.

Dictionary

DirectInput/XInput

These are both application programming interfaces (APIs) that Microsoft provides for game controllers to interact with Windows apps. If a controller supports these then it will work with Windows games. DirectInput is a legacy API but is still used on some older games and devices.

Digital inputs

A gamepad has two main inputs types: digital and analogue. Digital inputs are those that correspond to a simple on/off button. They include the d-pad and ABXY buttons, as well as the bumper buttons. Essentially, they provide a comfortable alternative to hitting a combination of keyboard keys. Generally, the crisper the response the better.

Analogue inputs

As for analogue inputs, these are arguably the more important and consist of the analogue sticks and triggers. They provide a variable signal to your PC depending on how hard they're pressed or their position. Quality analogue controls are crucial for accurate command of things such as direction and acceleration.

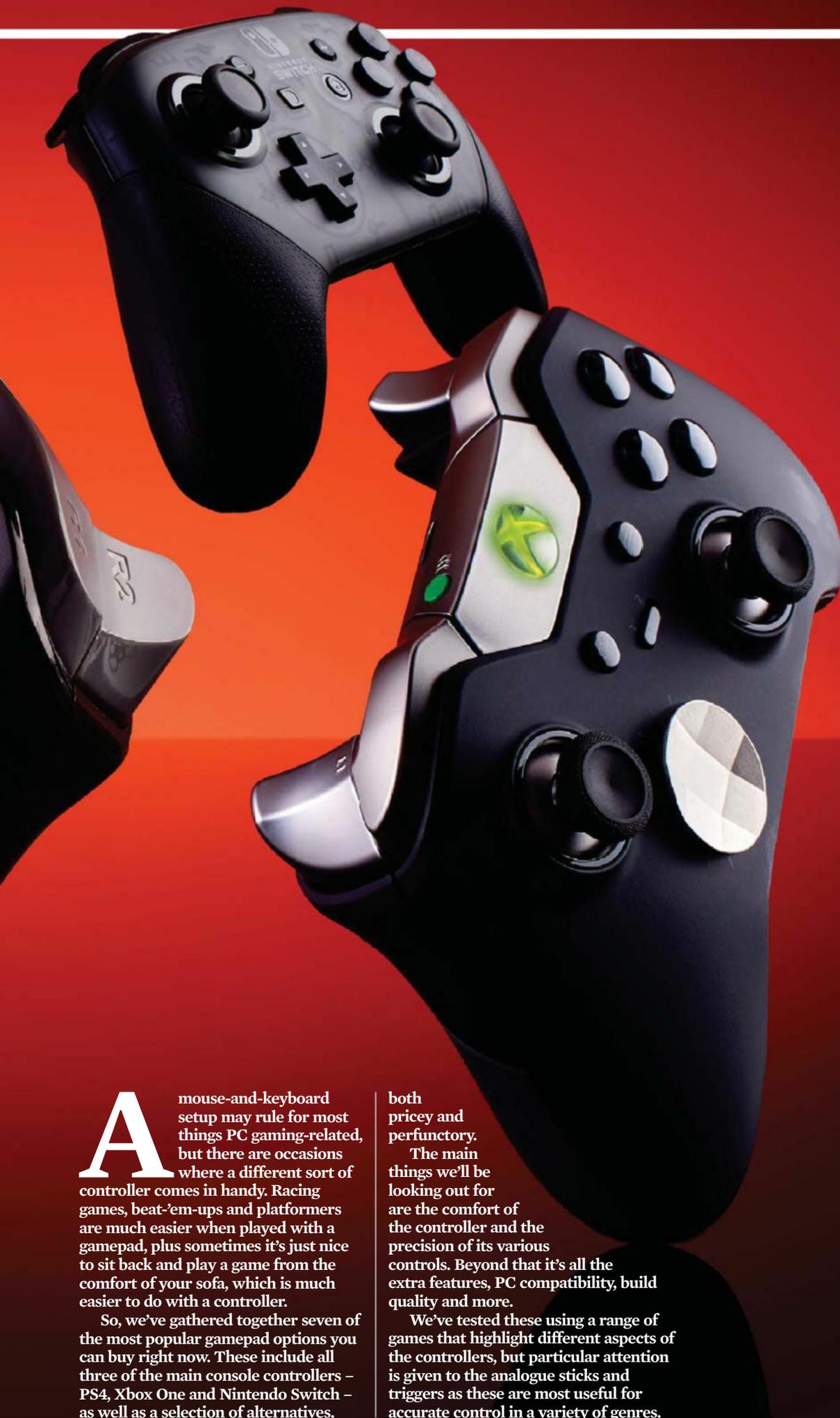
A mouse-and-keyboard setup may rule for most things PC gaming-related, but there are occasions where a different sort of controller comes in handy. Racing games, beat-'em-ups and platformers are much easier when played with a gamepad, plus sometimes it's just nice to sit back and play a game from the comfort of your sofa, which is much easier to do with a controller.

So, we've gathered together seven of the most popular gamepad options you can buy right now. These include all three of the main console controllers – PS4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch – as well as a selection of alternatives,

both pricey and perfunctory.

The main things we'll be looking out for are the comfort of the controller and the precision of its various controls. Beyond that it's all the extra features, PC compatibility, build quality and more.

We've tested these using a range of games that highlight different aspects of the controllers, but particular attention is given to the analogue sticks and triggers as these are most useful for accurate control in a variety of genres.





DUALSHOCK 4

www.playstation.com **£45**

→ The single biggest thing to note about Sony's official PS4 controller is its lack of full native Windows support. This is the main factor in why many gamers pass it by. However, jump through a few hoops and PC gaming nirvana awaits.

1

Hook the DualShock 4 controller up to your PC via a Micro USB cable and it will work, but only to a degree. Many games won't have an option for it and several features, such as rumble, don't work. However, with the help of a little app called DS4Windows, you can trick your PC into treating the DualShock as an Xbox 360 controller. This also brings full Bluetooth support and you can even use the controller's trackpad as a mouse.

It's a really nice controller to use. The larger, more angled d-pad is easier to feel your way around. And the analogue sticks are larger and have a slightly stiffer action, but still have a smooth transition towards the centre. This makes them great for small, accurate movements.

The only caveat is the battery. It's great that you get a rechargeable battery, but if it ever fails you'll need to dismantle the device. Still, despite this, and the extra effort required for full PC compatibility, the DualShock is my favourite controller for PC gaming.

90%



XBOX ONE ELITE

www.xbox.com **£120**

→ If you were to design a premium Xbox One controller, there's little else you could ask for that hasn't been included in the Elite. This is the ultimate premium gamepad, but it comes at a premium price.

2

The top surface is a soft touch plastic, while the underside of the grips is given a textured rubber coating that greatly aids your grip. You also get several metal additions in the form of the d-pad and additional back paddles.

The d-pad and analogue stick caps can both be removed and swapped for alternatives: you get a regular d-pad and omnidirectional version as well as a variety of analogue stick thumbpads. The paddles offer four extra buttons that can be actuated by your middle and ring fingers. And if you find they get in the way they can simply be removed.

Finishing things off are a headphone jack, a profile switch and hair-trigger switches for each trigger. These shorten the throw of the trigger, making it easier to fire rapidly.

The upshot is a controller that feels like a really nice upgrade. The ergonomics of the DualShock 4 still swing it for me, but in almost every other regard the Elite is the ultimate PC gaming controller.

75%



XBOX ONE CONTROLLER

www.xbox.com **£50**

→ Microsoft's Xbox One controller is the de facto choice for a PC gaming controller, thanks to extensive support across the entire Windows gaming ecosystem. Luckily, it's a great pad.

3

Offering both wired (via Micro USB) and wireless (via Bluetooth) connectivity and with the option to use both AA batteries and a rechargeable battery pack, one of its main virtues is its versatility. The latest version also now includes a headphone jack.

It's also really comfortable in the hand, with its gently-sloped and generously proportioned grips, allowing you to adopt a loose, yet secure, grip.

The buttons all respond crisply, while the analogue sticks have a nice smooth action. The general build quality of the pad is great, too. However, not all is perfect. It's awkward to reach the bumper buttons using a normal grip, which is something I don't find with the DualShock 4. I also prefer the stiffer analogue sticks and more pronounced d-pad buttons of Sony's alternative.

Nonetheless, the Xbox One controller is still by far the easiest to get up and running, and it works with just about every game. If you're console-neutral this is still a great option for PC gaming.

85%

NINTENDO SWITCH PRO

www.nintendo.com **£60**

→ Out of the three main console pads out today, by far the least obvious choice for PC gaming is the Nintendo Switch Pro, and for good reason. Mainly because the Pro doesn't actually come bundled with the Switch.

4

Plus, Nintendo's hardly been known for PC support with its controllers before. However, with a few caveats, the Pro can indeed pull doubly duty as a console and PC controller.

The first issue is that despite having a USB Type C connection, the Pro can't be used while it's plugged in. You're limited to a Bluetooth connection. Even once you're connected up, support is still patchy and you'll have to download software like x360ce to remap the controller's DirectInput commands to XInput commands.

More important than any of that, though, is the fact that the Switch Pro doesn't have analogue triggers, making it useless for fine control. All of which is a shame as the build quality is top notch and overall ergonomics are great – it feels somewhere between Microsoft's Xbox One controller and Sony's DualShock 4.

When all is said and done, though, the Switch Pro controller just isn't suited to PC gaming.

60%



5

SPEEDLINK XEOX

www.speedlink.com **£20**

→ The Speedlink XEOX is the cheapest controller on this test, and in many ways it shows, but you shouldn't let that deter you: it is still well worth a look for any cash-strapped PC gamers.

5

Despite being modelled unashamedly after the Xbox 360 controller, Speedlink has added some extra finger grooves on the rear of the grips to make for an even more secure and comfortable grip – assuming it fits your finger pattern. The d-pad has also been raised up a bit, which isn't a move I particularly appreciated. I found it the least-accessible d-pad of all the controllers on test.

Otherwise, build quality is decent, with a nice soft touch finish given to the whole of the outside, and a substantial and precise feel to all the controls. The analogue sticks suffer a little from the same problem as the Logitech F310, whereby they snap to the middle a little too readily while having less resistance towards the edges, but it's still usable.

Like with the Logitech F310, there's a switch on the back that lets you swap between DirectInput and XInput modes for even greater compatibility. All told, good ergonomics and the lowest price on test means this has to be our pick of budget controllers.

80%

LOGITECH F310

www.logitech.com **£25**

→ You could easily be mistaken for thinking the Logitech F310 is the cheapest of the bunch. Its stubby handles, and wired-only operation give off that budget vibe. However, it's more expensive than the Speedlink XEOX.

6

Nonetheless, this is still a budget controller that's available for around £25. For that price you get a full complement of digital and analogue controls, just with no extras. Plug it into your PC and it functions just like an Xbox controller making it widely compatible and easy to setup.

It feels sturdily put together, with no give from either the body nor any of the controls. However, it is lightweight, so if you like your controllers to have a bit of heft then it may not be for you.

Moreover, the ergonomics are not great. It's more akin to a PS3 controller than the Xbox-alikes and it has a cramped quality to it. The grips are too short and steeply angled, and they require you to hold it in a way that restricts finger movement.

The analogue sticks also have a more pronounced step than we'd like as you move from the centre, and there's a drop off in resistance towards the edges. All in all, you're better off saving yourself some money by going for the Speedlink XEOX.

70%



6



7

STEELSERIES XL

www.steelseries.com **£30**

→ It's surprising just how few manufacturers have dabbled in gamepads. Razer has made a few, and has just announced a new one – sadly it wasn't available for this group test – but other than that, it's slim pickings.

7

As such, SteelSeries gets some credit for being one of the few to give it a go. Additionally, it has created an impressively capable product. The Stratus XL feels like a cross between an Xbox One controller and a DualShock 4. It has the two central analogue sticks of the latter, but the overall shape is more akin to the former.

The result works well. It's comfortable to hold and all the main thumb controls are accessible. The triggers are also good for accurate analogue input as they have a far stiffer action than most.

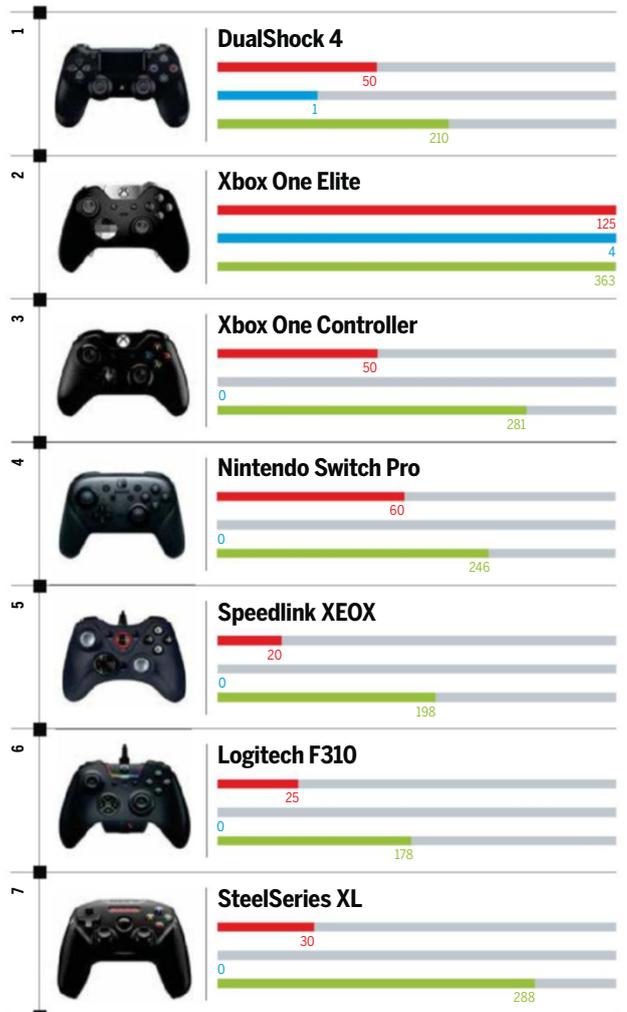
Still, the d-pad feels both too large and not contoured enough, so it's not great for performing complex manoeuvres like those used in fighting games. Also, the bumpers feel inaccessible when the controller is held with a conventional grip.

The real oddity with this controller, though, is that it's Bluetooth-only. The end result is a gamepad that gets a lot of things right, but just doesn't feel like a natural choice over the more obvious options.

70%

STACKED UP

■ PRICE (£) ■ EXTRA BUTTONS ■ WEIGHT (GRAMS)



ESSENTIALS

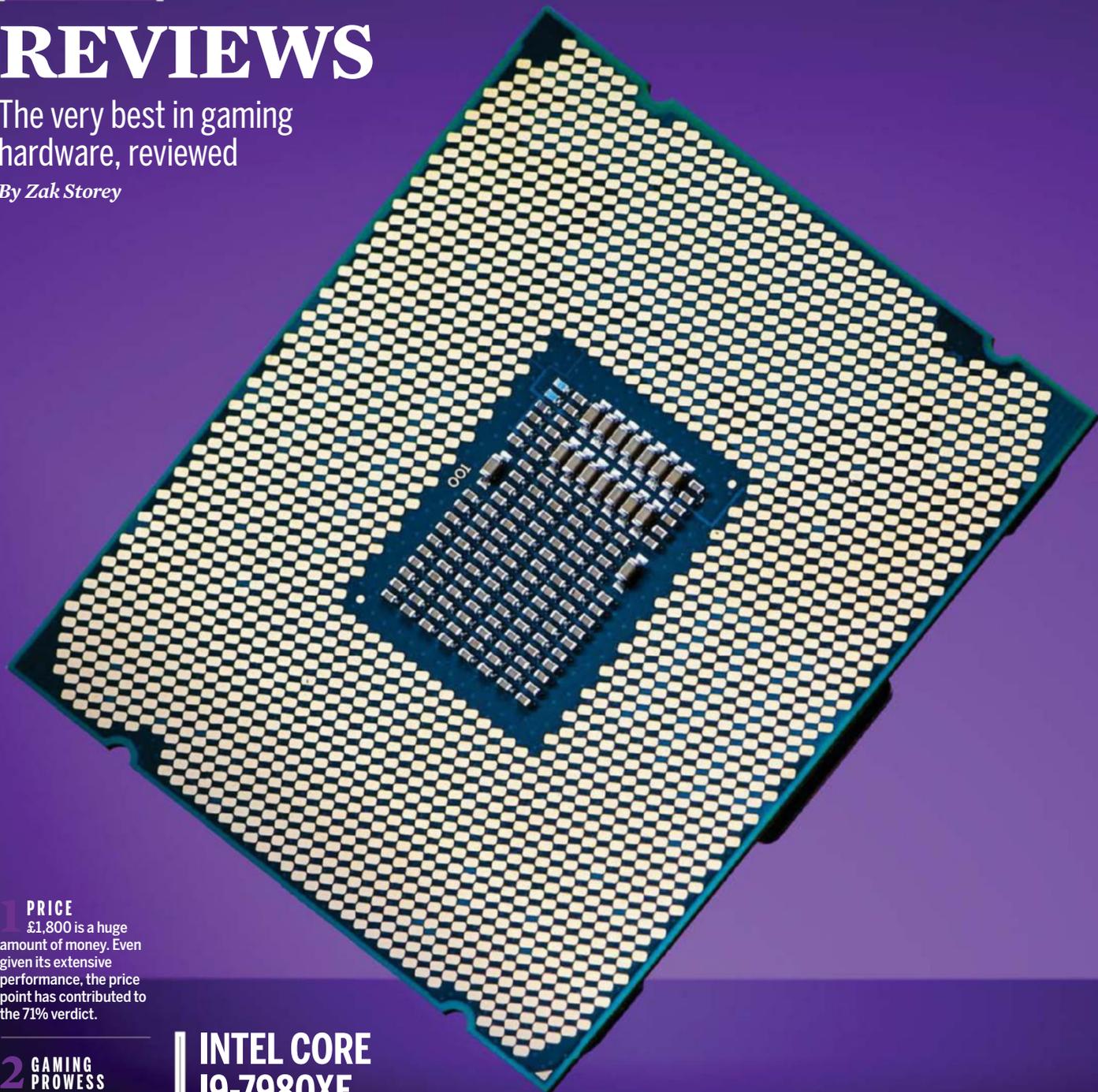
	Bluetooth	Wired connection	Batteries
1	Yes	Yes	Rechargeable, built-in
2	Yes	Yes	AA included / rechargeable battery pack, sold separately
3	Yes	Yes	AA included / rechargeable battery pack, sold separately
4	Yes	No	Rechargeable, built-in
5	No	Yes	N/A
6	No	Yes	N/A
7	Yes	No	AA only – included

[UPGRADE]

REVIEWS

The very best in gaming hardware, reviewed

By Zak Storey



1 PRICE
£1,800 is a huge amount of money. Even given its extensive performance, the price point has contributed to the 71% verdict.

2 GAMING PROWESS
The i9-7980XE is one of the highest scoring processors we've ever reviewed for gaming.

3 POWER DRAW
At stock, power draw is concrete at 258W under load. However if you start cranking it higher, you can easily see 500W under load.

4 OVERCLOCK SUPERIORITY
We saw scores of 4,289 points in CineBench R15 at 4.4 GHz, only limited by the integrity of the board's VRM.

INTEL CORE I9-7980XE

www.intel.com £1,800



→ Last issue we took a look at the highest echelon of AMD's Ryzen architecture, the Threadripper 1950X. It's a beast, although certainly not designed for gaming. What it did do, however, is demand a response from Intel, and, oh boy, a response is what we got.

This is not a cheap processor; you could build two competitive 1080p systems for the price of this CPU. However, it's a part designed for those who profit from more cores in a working environment.

That said, it's impressive at gaming. It's hard to deny just how good Intel's core Skylake-X architecture is. Its single-core prowess is second only to the latest Coffee Lake parts coming out in October. In-game it dominates all. There's no gaming mode, just pure brute force powering all of those cores.

As far as rendering goes, it's only 300 points off of AMD's Threadripper part in CineBench, despite the excessive price difference. However, unlike TR, it's only after you overclock it that the 7980XE becomes unhinged. Power draw may sail through the roof, but we saw a 15% boost in CineBench going from 3.4 GHz to 4.4 GHz. That's the equivalent of adding six cores to the part.

71%

BASE/TURBO CLOCK: 2.7 GHz/3.4 GHz / CORES/THREADS: 18/36 /
LITHOGRAPHY: 14NM / CACHE: 24.75MB /
MEMORY SUPPORT: 128GB DDR4 @ 2666 MHz / MAX PCIe LANES: 44



MSI Z370 GODLIKE GAMING

www.msi.com **£530**

MOBO

→ Intel has broken away from its 'four cores' ideology with Coffee Lake, and implanted an extra two into its mainstream offerings.

And a new chip means new mobos, which may sound sucky, but if you're buying a new system, it does mean you get the latest gear.

The Godlike Gaming is the pinnacle of MSI's mobo arsenal. It may be pricey, but its features sell it: triple Ethernet, wireless A/C, support for three M.2 PCIe

SSDs, and four GPUs. Incredible. The real joy lies in the audio, though: if you're not willing to invest in a DAC, but still want the best sound you can get, this is the board for you.

CHIPSET/SOCKET: Z370 / LGA1151 / FORM FACTOR: E-ATX /

MEMORY SUPPORT: 64GB DDR4 @ 4133 MT/S /

M.2 / U.2 SUPPORT: 3X M.2, 1X U.2 /

ATA SUPPORT: 6X SATA 6GB/S

91%

AMD RADEON RX VEGA 56

www.msi.com **£500**

GPU

→ AMD's GPU offerings have been a little lacklustre, to say the least. Even with all the hype in the world, they fell far flat of what we hoped.

Priced out of the stratosphere due to cryptocurrency mining, and coupled with nasty power draw and little room for extra performance, Vega 64 was nothing more than a disappointment.

The 56, on the other hand, somewhat redeems the series. Priced at a reasonable £450, it fortunately provides some very

competitive performance with the GTX 1070. However, right now, you're still forking out an extra £80 for it, and with no aftermarket cards scheduled for team red, it's not looking good at all for Radeon going forward.

GPU: VEGA / LITHOGRAPHY: 14NM FINFET /

CORES: 3584 / MEMORY: 8GB HBM 2.0 /

MEMORY BUS: 2048-BIT

64%

ROUND-UP

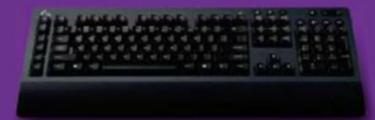


STEELSERIES RIVAL 310

www.steelseries.com **£60**

→ I've long been a fan of the Rival series from SteelSeries, and the 310 doesn't disappoint. For the price, it's a lightweight, FPS-oriented, intuitive gaming mouse, with pixel-perfect 1:1 tracking, perpetuated by its custom Pixart TrueMove3 optical sensor. It's comfortable, sleek, effective and comes highly recommended.

92%



LOGITECH G613 WIRELESS

www.gaming.logitech.com **£130**

→ Why, oh why, has it taken this long for us to get a wireless mechanical keyboard? Logitech's G613 has finally arrived to fill that gap. Offering an impressive 18-months of battery life, it's powered by only two AA batteries. Sure, it may not feature any of the fancy LEDs that we're used to, but the inclusion of that wireless switch is enough for me.

91%



RAZER TIAMAT 2.2 V2

www.razerzone.com **£125**

→ Razer's Tiamat 2.2 V2, is an impressively designed, dual-driver-per-earcup headset. The latter is what drew my attention to them. The headset sounds crisp, with no muddiness in the treble or upper end, making it actually fairly well balanced. Still a touch pricey, but not bad.

84%

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

A dark secret is lurking here.



“Why does a taxidermist need an elaborate security system?”

Righting a wrong with irony in **DISHONORED: DEATH OF THE OUTSIDER**

While exploring Karnaca's Upper Cyria district, I find a taxidermy shop hidden down a side street. The owner is pleasant enough, but because *Dishonored* games turn me into a raging kleptomaniac, I investigate the locked door in the back. I wait for her to turn away, snatch the key from her belt and descend into a dingy basement. Then, suddenly, I'm on fire, having just triggered a tripwire. Why does a taxidermist need an elaborate security system? Something is going on here, and I intend to find out what it is.

At the bottom of the stairs it becomes clear why she was so keen to keep

▶ ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Served up a slice of poetic justice.

ALSO PLAYED
Divinity: Original Sin 2

people out of her basement. On a table I see the ravaged corpse of a Bloodfly victim. And in a nearby cell, there's a nest of the vile insects and a terrified man begging to be set free. A nearby crank handle, which operates the gate, reveals the grim truth: this woman has been kidnapping people, subjecting them to Bloodfly attacks, then harvesting the amber, which can be sold for a pretty price. A twisted business, and a dangerous one too. If

those Bloodflies escape, Karnaca could get infested. Didn't she play *Dishonored 2*?

I spring her would-be victim from his cell and he thanks me, sharing the location of the key to a room where the woman keeps her ill-gotten blood amber. I'll be taking that for myself. But first thing's first: dealing with the shopkeeper. I go upstairs and find her cowering in the corner, clearly aware that the jig is up. She begs me to forget about it and let her go, and offers to stuff any animal I want for

THE BLOODFLIES ARE WHIPPED UP INTO A FRENZY AS THEY SENSE A MEAL

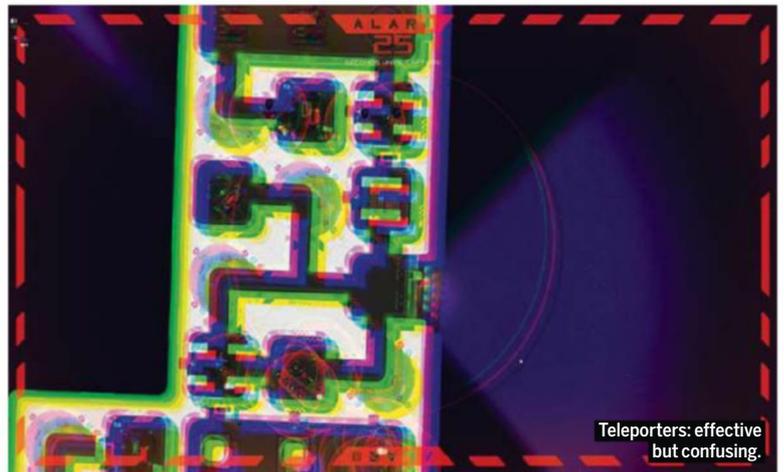


free. But Billie Lurk is not so easily swayed, at least not by the offer of a free stuffed animal. I choke the woman out, sling her over my shoulder and head underground.

A FEAST FOR FLIES

I tote the woman over to the cell and sling her in. She snoozes in a crumpled heap, oblivious to the fact that I'm turning the squeaking crank handle, lifting the metal gate. The Bloodflies are whipped up into a frenzy as they sense a meal, and when the gate slides away they swarm into the cell, feasting on the hapless taxidermist. Now, by doing this I'm probably just increasing the chances of infestation, but it's worth it for a moment of deliciously ironic justice. I go back upstairs and find the key the guy told me about, unlocking a treasure trove of blood amber. I swipe it, but before I leave, I decide to finish the Bloodflies off.

A well-placed incendiary bolt is all it takes to engulf everything in cleansing flame. I feel like I've done the city a favour, and the detective investigating the remains of what just happened will have a nice puzzle to solve. I also throw the corpse on the table in a furnace. Better safe than sorry. I leave the shop and slink back out into the streets of Upper Cyria to continue my mission. And this is why I love *Dishonored*: these little stories you can stumble into as you explore the world, and the opportunities you get to tell your own. ■



“He’s a killer space magician”

Teleporting into danger in **HEAT SIGNATURE**

▶ PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Performed amazing magic tricks badly.

ALSO PLAYED
Dishonored: Death of the Outsider

I’m playing *Heat Signature*, a game made by former PC Gamer section editor Tom Francis. As Tom’s friend, I’m not going to offer a critical evaluation of the game. But I am going to tell you the story of Magnificent Vietzen.

Each of *Heat Signature*’s procedurally generated characters has a personal mission. Magnificent’s is to rescue his friend, Hamal Smilla, from a ship deep in Glitcher territory. Hamal was my previous character, and, if I rescue her, I can play as her again. This is desirable: her arsenal of non-lethal toys offers options for almost any situation.

Magnificent doesn’t offer options. He offers teleporters. A lot of them. He’s basically a killer space magician. That’s cool, but his hyperspecific toolkit can make things difficult.

I board the ship where Hamal is imprisoned. A guard enters the room, and I strike him with my shortblade. Nothing happens. He shoots me. Ah, the guards are armoured. I’d have known that if I’d paid attention

during the briefing. Being seen set off an alarm, prompting the prison ship to set course for the nearest Glitcher station. I now have only 40 seconds to rescue Hamal before it docks. Can I do this? I probably can’t do this.

I hit pause, and weigh up my options. One of the benefits of having a lot of teleporters is that I can avoid the guards, but each type of teleporter has a specific quirk. Swappers, for instance, switch the position of me and a guard. I use one, meaning there are now two agitated guards standing in front of my ship. That’s fine. I’m not planning to leave through the front door.

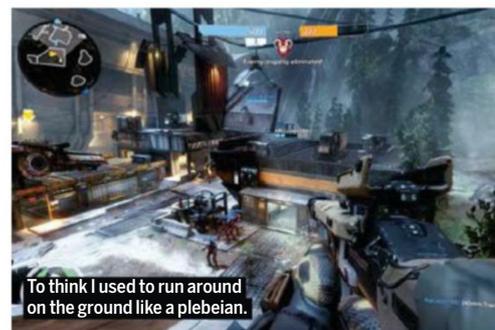
MAGNIFICENT FAILURE

Next, I select a Visitor. This lets me teleport anywhere, but only for a few seconds before I’m returned to my original location. I do so, hit pause, select a second Visitor, and teleport again. I’ve covered a lot of distance, and quickly. I’m near Hamal. I can do this! A second Swapper puts me in walking distance of Hamal. But I’m not quick enough. A Visitor return beam hits me, and everything gets confusing. I materialise back at my original position. The second Visitor beam hits and I’m propelled into a room where I’d sent an unkillable guard. I’m shot again, and captured.

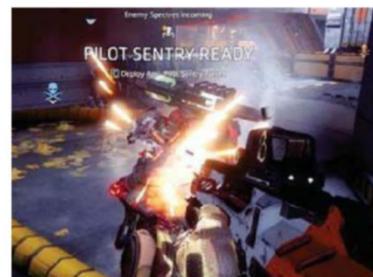
I’m not annoyed that I failed. I’m more impressed that I came so close, despite having the most ineffective loadout in the history of killer space magicians. ■



As a sniper, half of the game is about finding a good perch.



To think I used to run around on the ground like a plebeian.



“Sometimes, when I have a perfect shot, I tense up completely”

Dishonour among robot men in **TITANFALL 2**

Do you love to snipe in multiplayer shooters? You're a jerk. What's more, I think deep down *you know it*. I say this with confidence because I have joined your club of murderous voyeurs. I have camped in the shadows and ruined others' fun with each click of the left mouse button. I have punished players for having the temerity to wander around outside, and I've shot a few inside, too. People in videogame war zones don't tend to board up windows for some reason.

Titanfall 2 is my war zone of choice at the moment, and the Double Take rifle is my weapon of choice. Its double-barrelled laser shots are wide enough to help my poor aim, and lasers don't suffer from bullet drop. After years of *Battlefield*, it's a relief to use a gun that shoots where I point it. The drawback is that it takes two shots to kill a foe, but the Double Take fires quickly and has a forgiving clip size. Essentially, it's a sniper rifle for players who don't think of themselves as snipers. It's a gateway drug. It is the path to the dark side.

It's great, it turns out. Once I used *Titanfall 2*'s splendid wallrunning to

▶ TOM SENIOR



THIS MONTH
Discovered dark arts on the battlefields of *Titanfall 2*.

ALSO PLAYED
XCOM 2: War of the Chosen

strafe enemies with a roaring submachine gun, and I used its jet-powered double jumps to mount titans and rip their power cores out with my bare hands. Now, I scale sheer walls to find hidden spots with good sight lines. I used to play as a spindly droid with a speed boost power; now I'm a chunky ghillied-up chucklefuck with an invisibility cloak. If someone figures out where I am I press a button and Keyser Soze the hell out of there.

I'm used to frantic close-range scuffles with scrappily thrown grenades and the occasional hopeful knife swing. The sniper's game is very different. I'm now familiar with

a variety of common victim behaviours. There's the one who zigzags and bounces when they realise sniper fire is coming; the one who spins around on the spot looking for me, which makes things very easy; and the one who scans the rooftops and starts shooting back as I take aim. I wouldn't say *Titanfall 2* is a calmer game played this way. I am my own worst enemy most of the time. Sometimes, when I have a perfect shot, I tense up completely. Just when my cowering is supposed to pay off I choke and put shot after shot wide, high and low.

LIVE AND LURK

I can't deny the thrill, though. At first I tried to justify it to myself – 'the developers designed it this way, this is how these guns are supposed to be used' and so on. But I have come to enjoy the power imbalance between shooter and victim. There's the sense of superiority that comes with it. I don't even know why I should feel superior, it's less of a fair fight than a scrap with an SMG, but there's a certain loftiness to taking aim from half a mile away. It's a cool way to score points. It's the ungentlemanly way to kill a player. But that's what I am now: An gentleman. A jerk. ■

NOW I'M A CHUNKY GHILLIED-UP CHUCKLEFUCK WITH AN INVISIBILITY CLOAK

“At the heart of it, it is a game about being cool”

Reliving hormone-and-vodka-fuelled teenage years in **LIFE IS STRANGE**

Life is Strange is about time travel. It is about saving the world, in some small way. It is about disaster, death and drugs. But, at the heart of it, it is a game about being cool.

Coolness is such a huge part of being a teen that *Life is Strange* – a game which looks at life through a teen lens, that follows Max Caulfield around attempting to empathise with her adolescent worries – can hardly shy away from making it a major theme. So many of Max's time travel mishaps are based on going back and saying the ‘right thing’ to gain social points. When your responsibilities are limited to school and family-related matters, and your teen brain is telling you that your familial home is just a nicer version of prison, your peers become your judge and jury. Learning becomes secondary to social survival within a group of people that are all scrambling for the top. That's why *Life is Strange* barely touches on what Max does at school, focusing instead on her interactions with the school's various characters.

At the top of that food chain is Victoria Chase, cool in that effortless

KATE GRAY



THIS MONTH
Tried to figure out teen slang – it's hella confusing.

ALSO PLAYED
The Pillars of the Earth,
Danganronpa 2

way that involves wearing pearls and somehow managing to not look like an Edwardian governess. She is the Queen Bee of Blackwell Academy, the sort of girl that you'd tell yourself would end up peaking at 18, only to marry some sweetheart and live out the rest of her days less than a mile from the school. You'd tell yourself that as a comfort. That your time was yet to come, that she was a pretty flower here and now but would wither and die later on. People aren't flowers, but it made you feel better.

Then there was Chloe Price, Max's best friend, a girl so unconcerned with being cool that it

circled back around to a paradoxical cool stitched together from ennui and a reckless disregard for authority. The exact kind of cool that entranced me as a teenager. The girl who graffitied her own bedroom walls! The girl who went around smelling of weed! The girl who talked back to teachers! It was as if she had learned exactly where the imaginary line was drawn between people caring and not caring, the line that dictated whether or not anyone would or even could stop you. You miss a day of school, nothing happens, so you miss more and more and soon, you're wondering what the point in all of it is, anyway.

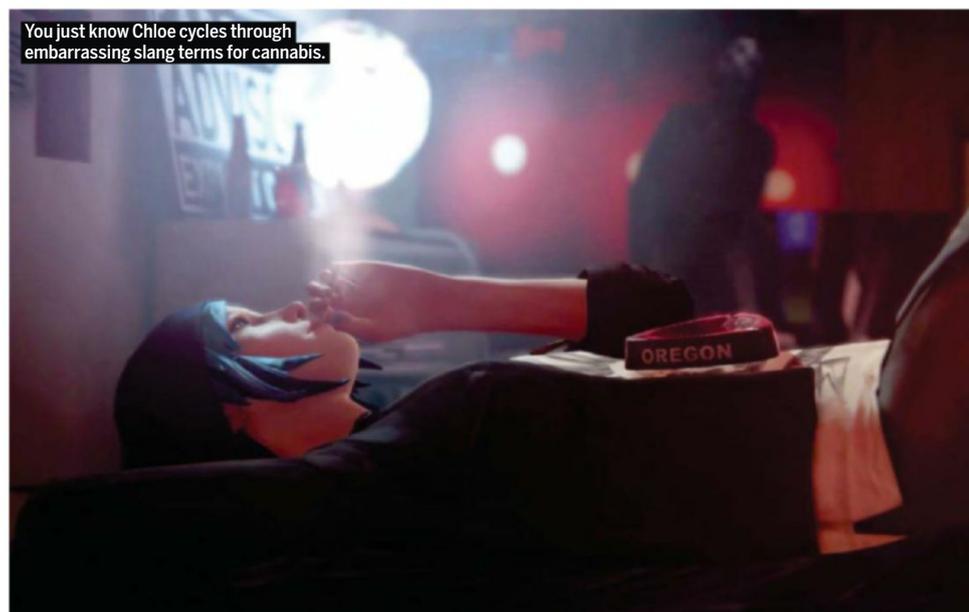
TEENAGE KICKS

I can look back at that kind of cool girl and realise that she is a product, not the result, of people not caring, and then I feel sad. I envied girls like that, but *Life is Strange* gave me an insight into the ingredients that went into their particular kind of cool, and I realised that more than anything, Chloe probably wanted to be noticed. Her response to the death of her father and the loss of her best friends was to say, “Fuck the world!” – not because she didn't care, but because she did. She really, really did. ■

MORE THAN ANYTHING, CHLOE PROBABLY WANTED TO BE NOTICED



Victoria Chase is the product of too much money and way too much self-confidence.



You just know Chloe cycles through embarrassing slang terms for cannabis.

More content will be added to the Pit in future updates.



1 THE DEVIL'S PIT

MOD Carving out a new home for our gruff hero

I hope Phil isn't looking, because I'm going to use this space to recommend two *Witcher 3* mods: one far bigger, and one much more bodacious than the other. The headline download is *The Devil's Pit*, which bungs in a new area in the form of the, er, Devil's Pit, a previously unused part of the identically named quarry. Interestingly, you won't find any new quests here, but you will find a bunch of additional NPCs, one of whom can be recruited as a follower/mule to hold your stuff.

The dank, dingy crevice is a new base of sorts for Geralt, so you'll find an extra stash, along with a summoning stone to do battle with your shadow self (in the

real world, we call that device 'a mirror', by the way). It's also the first homestead that will enable you to cook up a decent meal, thanks to the introduction of the region's very first working cooking pot. The cooking system is a bit basic, but still useful – you can chuck in chicken to make roast chicken, fish to make fried fish, pork to make grilled pork – and, before you ask, no, none of those things make any sense coming from a pot of boiling water.

I promised a second mod, so when you've finished spelunking the Pit, turn Geralt into an extreme sports legend with the *Pro Witcher 3* mod. This multifaceted download turns the G-man into the Birdman, by giving the White Wolf a rad-as-heck skateboard. Who needs *Skate 4*?

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DevilsPit

2

GALCIV 3 FACTIONS

MODS Extra civs drawn from your favourite sci-fi epics

Not that the factions in *Galactic Civilizations 3* are lacking at all, but obviously you want to play as some of the more iconic space races in the multiverse. As ever, modders have risen to the occasion to deliver on that experience, so here are the best sci-fi societies that can be had from the Steam Workshop.



A FIRST GALACTIC EMPIRE

This is your chance to run the Empire from Star Wars. Your subjects won't be happy, but at least your research skills are top-notch.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/GalCivMod1



B FEDERATION OF PLANETS

Assume control of the Picard-era United Federation of Planets: a time of hope, Whoopi Goldberg, and tea – Earl Grey, hot.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/GalCivMod2



C ASARI REPUBLICS

The Asari seem to have the most fun of the *Mass Effect* races. They're wealthy and influential, but not that militarily adept.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/GalCivMod3

3 DRAW – A DUELLING MOD

MOD All this is missing is a white duelling glove



When you've downed a foe, you can loot their stuff, of course.

One of the good things about the *Risen* games is that you can duel pretty much anyone, by running up and smacking them right in the chops. Thanks to this vital mod, you can finally do the same in *Skyrim*: first by annoying NPCs so much that your reputation plummets, before following that up with a new dragon shout roughly translated as, "Oi, fancy a scrap?" The major difference between duelling and regular fighting is that the entire town won't suddenly turn on you when you challenge someone to an honourable dust-up – it's a matter between you and your opponent, as it should be. Duels won't end in death, unless you succumb to bloodlust, and yes, you can even duel with NPCs essential to the plot (also, bizarrely, animals). I'd go on, but you're making a list of everyone in *Skyrim* you'd like to sock it to right now, and good on you.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/SkyrimDuel

4 PET THE PUP AT THE PARTY

FREEWARE Beat stress with adorable dogs

You've probably been in the following situation: you're at a party, you don't know anyone, and you can only pretend to text for so long. *Pet the Pup at the Party* imagines an outcome where you don't have to pluck up the courage to talk to anyone, by gamifying your miserable life into a noble quest to find dogs. That's easier said than done,

given the strict time limits and the frankly eerie partygoers, whose eyes will follow you from room to room. As the time dwindles, the house's layout only seems more and more confusing, until you're exploring the sort of bafflingly labyrinthine property that only the cast of *Made in Chelsea* can afford in 2017.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/PetThePup



A PUP ALL NIGHT
Here's one of the cute pups that are hidden in the house.

B DOG DAYS
There's only one dog around at a time. Find it and you gain a bonus.

C NOT ALONE
The game does a great job of portraying social anxiety.



5 LIKE ROOTS IN THE SOIL

FREEWARE The past dictates the future

We're offered a window into two separate, yet mysteriously connected worlds in *Like Roots in the Soil*: a freebie that won't take up much of your time. Two figures stroll towards a point in the distance, one in a ruined, post-apocalyptic city, and the other in a gleaming, intact metropolis. Rather than controlling either of the chaps directly, you play as a sort of observer here, whipping the camera around to view more of one world, or more of the other: an action that causes the soundtrack to shift in a subtle way. You're given a few minutes to examine each setting for clues – minutes accompanied by the occasional splash of enigmatic text – before the story reaches its satisfying conclusion.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/LikeRoots



6 VTO REDUX

MOD Giving new meaning to the words 'mobile home'

It can't fly, but it's nice to find a home not made of junk.



The *VTO Redux* mod lets you build a snug home containing everything you could possibly need in *Fallout 4*: a workbench, storage space, a bed (obviously), a giant intercom to summon your followers, and even turrets to keep enemies away/dead. I was a little disappointed to learn that it doesn't take the form of a trailer or caravan, but that dismay was short-lived as it's a ruddy great Vertibird instead – Vertibirds being those helicopter-looking things that military types use to tour *Fallout 4*'s world.

You can build your Vertibird home once you've discovered a blueprint and gathered the necessary bits and bobs. Unfortunately, you can't fly it, as Bethesda didn't build the game with aerial travel in mind. But you can construct landing pads in any known settlement, and then relocate your mobile base with just a few menu clicks. You can also, and this is nifty, call your Vertibird to you with the aid of a remote control – however, be sure to keep an eye on your coolant reserves. In a game with fast travel, a mobile home is not strictly necessary, but it does provide a neat justification for your ability to hop around the irradiated post-apocalyptic world at will. It's also, and this is much more important, *extremely cool*.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/VTORedux



7 THE LOW ROAD

DEMO I'll be in Scotland afore ye

Adventure games don't get much more stylish than *The Low Road*, a '70s-based point-and-click set in the world of corporate espionage. You play as Noomi Kovacs, a recent graduate from the brilliantly named LeCarre Institute for Exceptional Spies, who starts a new job at an intelligence agency, only to discover that spying mostly occurs in drab, brown offices, and from the comfort of a desk. (Surely the whole 'LeCarre' thing would have tipped you off?) In this demo for XGen Studios' comedic adventure, you'll have to connive yourself out of such a dull situation, in order to achieve your dream of becoming a more daredevil secret agent. This involves quite a bit of chatting and puzzling, in case you hadn't guessed.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/LowRoadDemo



The game was terrifying enough without VR.

8 MOTHERVR

MOD Ripley's believe it or not

You might remember Sega showing off a prototype VR mode for *Alien: Isolation* a few years ago – a demo that sadly never went anywhere. Various bits of related code were left in the final game, however, and after a long time working on it, a modder by the name of Zack 'Nibre' Fannon has re-enabled Oculus Rift support for the game.

Thanks to Fannon's sterling efforts you can finally immerse yourself in the

masterfully constructed Sevastopol station, which would be a lovely place to visit if not for the acid-blooded residents. It's early days yet and, yes, a Vive version is planned, but if you have the kit – and if you're brave enough – then get downloading. Just mind Fannon's suggestion that you should play the mode while seated, to avoid motion sickness.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/MotherVR



BIG THINGS

Come in very small packages



A **7 DEEDS**
Keep ten-year-old Stan alive in this survival horror, while keeping an eye on his hunger, fear and, um, toilet meters.
DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/LowRezJam1



B **LEGEND OF XENIA 2**
This sequel once again takes the form of a traditional *Zelda* adventure – and a well-realised one at that.
DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/LowRezJam2



C **URDL**
A sci-fi rhythm game that asks you to input button sequences in a time limit – keep an eye out for rogue instructions.
DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/LowRezJam3

9 LOW REZ JAM

FREEWARE Tiny windows, but with grand ideas

Last year's Low Rez Jam gave us the terrific *Norman's Sky*: a pared-down version of Hello Games' sci-fi epic, which, despite its 64x64 resolution, managed to include real-time planetary landings and take-offs. There's nothing quite so audacious in this year's lineup, but there are plenty of great games with pixels so large you could stub your toe on them. *Don't Let Them In* is my

favourite, a third-person survival horror that plays a little like *Resident Evil 4* (you know, if *Resi 4* was made for the ZX Spectrum). Okay, so that's only partially true: the player character and enemies might consist of monochromatic blobs of pixels, but the realistic, crunchy sound design tells your brain that you're playing a big-budget, HD release. This is a satisfying survival shooter as a result, and it's joined by three great games across a variety of genres.



10 EARTHLING PRIORITIES

FREEWARE Take me to your leader

Of all the things to be stymied by in an adventure game, it's a little humiliating to be blockaded by your own front door. It's convinced that you're worthless, so inessential to your workplace that you may as well not be there – it has a point, you know. That's the first puzzle in this fun point-and-click set in a dystopia, and while I won't spoil

the solution, it's indicative of the satirical spirit that bubbles beneath *Earthling Priorities'* surface. It's rare to find a game that goes out of its way to belittle its hero, and it's done with great humour here. Meanwhile, the well-drawn art conjures a vivid vision of the future, and the score sells its oppressive atmosphere.

DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/EarthlingPriorities



DIARY

STAGING THE
ULTIMATE SCI-FI
BATTLE IN

STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR

Star Wars and Star Trek
battle for supremacy.

By Andy Kelly

THE RULES

1 Use a mod to insert Star Trek ships into *Empire at War*.

2 Stage canon-defying battles between factions.

3 Decide once and for all which sci-fi series is best.

Trek Wars: *Revival* is a mod by Captain Kavok that lets you add Star Trek factions to *Empire at War*, Petroglyph's excellent Star Wars RTS. So if you've ever wondered if a fleet of Galaxy-class Federation starships could take down a Star Destroyer – and, honestly, who hasn't – you can play that scenario out in the game's fast-paced skirmish mode. The perfect opportunity, I thought, to pit a selection of iconic Star Wars and Star Trek factions against each other in a series of epic space battles.

UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS
VERSUS REBEL ALLIANCE

Our first battle takes place above the desert planet of Tatooine. I begin by sending my shuttles to capture two nearby asteroids so I can generate credits. Doing so as early as possible is key to victory in *Empire at War*'s skirmish mode. The Rebels send a small team of X-wing scouts into my territory, but my station's automated defences chase them away. When I have enough credits, I build a couple of Miranda-class starships to protect my asteroids. The USS *Reliant*, one of the first Federation starships Jean-Luc Picard served on, was a Miranda-class. Growing bolder, the Rebels send in more X-wings, but I swat them away easily.

I spend a chunk of my income on upgrading my base, which unlocks my first hero unit: Captain Kathryn Janeway, commanding the Intrepid-class USS *Voyager*. This was, of course, the first Federation starship to successfully explore the Delta Quadrant. The Rebels send in an assault frigate to attack one of my asteroid mines and I send Janeway to intercept. Then another handful of frigates appear near my base. The Rebels have mobilised

an impressive strike force, and I'm lagging behind. A huge battle breaks out and I upgrade my base as it rages, bringing in Captain Benjamin Sisko of the USS *Defiant* – the ship the Federation designed to fight the Borg.

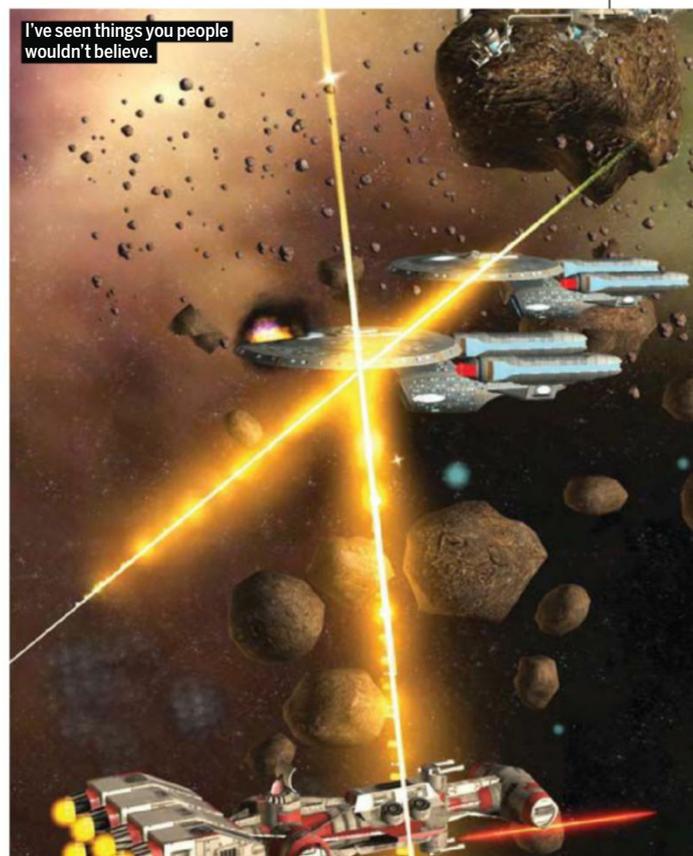
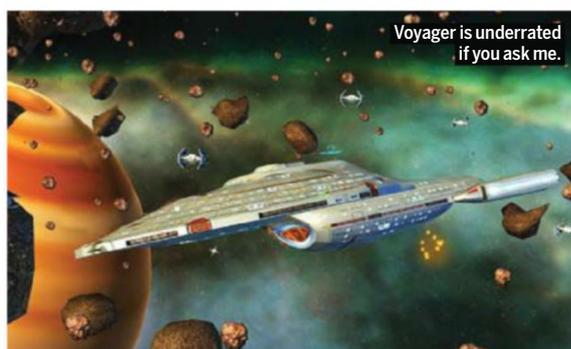
It's here where I make my biggest mistake. I build three Galaxy-class starships and try and sneak them through the battle to attack the Rebel base directly. But it's surrounded by laser defence satellites and they obliterate my ships before I can get close. A costly error. Then the Rebels send in their own hero unit: Han Solo and the Millennium Falcon. Sisko and Solo engage in a dramatic dogfight, but the *Defiant* is beaten. Then the *Voyager* is scuttled by the mass of Mon Calamari cruisers looming near my base. Things really couldn't have gone worse. I accept defeat and watch helplessly as the cruisers pummel my HQ with laser fire. An embarrassing loss.

SISKO AND SOLO
ENGAGE IN A
DOGFIGHT, BUT THE
DEFIANT IS BEATENGALACTIC EMPIRE
VERSUS KLINGON
EMPIRE

The ice planet Hoth provides the setting for this battle. Immediately, it's clear that luck is not on my side. There's one asteroid beside my base, but the next nearest is in the lower corner of the map. This

makes it harder to defend. I kick things off by hiring the legendary bounty hunter Boba Fett and his ship, *Slave I*, to protect my station while my TIE fighters make sure no one tries to sabotage my mining operations. The Klingons, bizarrely, are not as aggressive as the Rebels. They haven't attacked once. I utilise this quiet time to upgrade my base and build a fleet of three Acclamator-class assault ships. I also research reinforced armour to give them a defensive boost, which I'll probably need later.

Then things kick off. The Klingons send in a swarm of D7-class warships to hassle me, but Fett and an accompanying wing of TIE fighters make short work of



MOD SQUAD *Four other great Empire at War mods*



1 THRAWN'S REVENGE
This shifts the game's setting to the post-Endor civil war age and adds hundreds of new units.



2 REPUBLIC AT WAR
Set during the events of the prequels, this mod adds units and heroes relevant to that era.



3 PEGASUS CHRONICLES
An impressive total conversion that replaces Star Wars assets with Stargate ones.



4 COVENANT AT WAR
Another total conversion, this time giving *Empire at War* a *Halo*-themed makeover.

» them. More Klingon ships arrive, including a mighty Bird-of-Prey. I build a dozen wings of TIE interceptors to deal with them, while I sneak my Acclamators behind enemy lines. Yes, it's the same tactic I tried previously, but it'll work this time. The Klingons send a few B'rel-class ships to stop me, but they're no match for my armoured frigates. I reach the heavily defended Klingon base and begin my attack. I make a significant dent, but my Acclamators are being pulverised in the process.

Time to bring out the big guns. I spend the bulk of my remaining credits to call in Grand Admiral Thrawn and his flagship, a colossal Star Destroyer called the Admonitor. My Acclamators are beaten, but before the Klingons can catch a breath Thrawn comes roaring in accompanied by Darth Vader and a wing of TIE interceptors. My own base is taking heavy damage, but I'm certain I can destroy the enemy first. I send every available unit, including Boba Fett and the rest of my home defence force, to attack the Klingon HQ and soon the station falls. A great victory for the Empire.

ROMULAN STAR EMPIRE VERSUS REBEL ALLIANCE

Above the planet Naboo the next battle begins. I send my Talon-class scout ships to scope out nearby asteroids, one of which is already contested. A brief skirmish breaks out

between my ships and a squadron of X-wings, but I win and claim the rock as my own. I spend my first trickle of credits on a couple of Hawk-class cruisers, the kind the Romulans use to patrol the Neutral Zone back in their own universe. As usual, the Rebels send in a few X-wings to scout my territory, but they're easily dealt with.

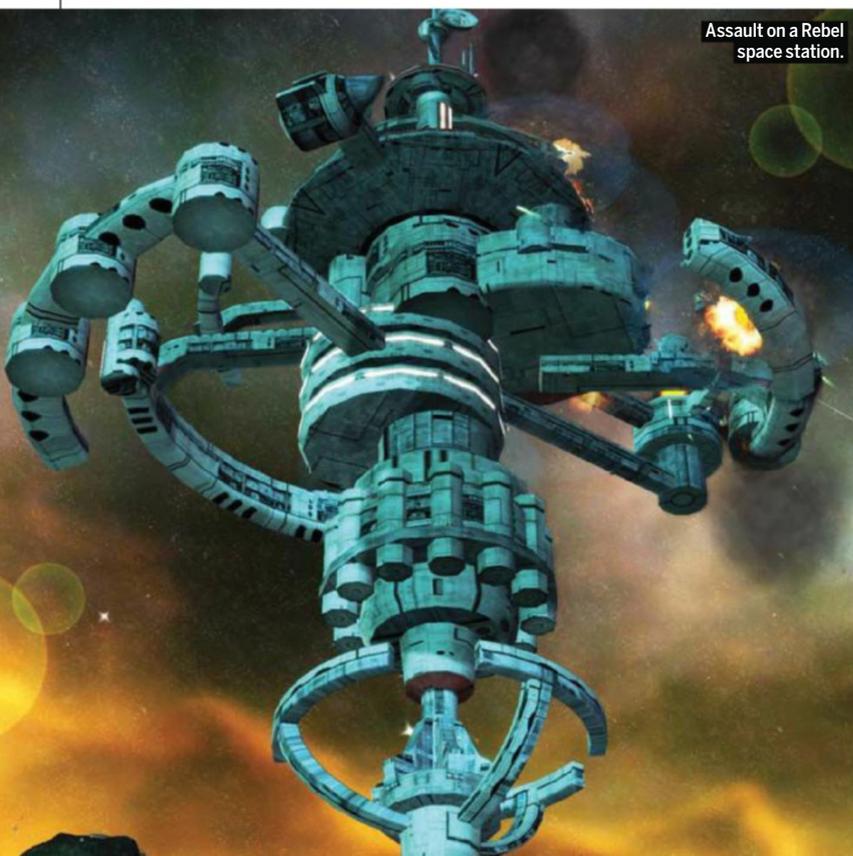
I recruit Romulan hero Tomalak, commander of the Deranas, a D'deridex-class battlecruiser. This thing is enormous, and suddenly I feel unbeatable. The Rebels begin to throw frigates at me, but my upgraded base's defences and Buzzard-class cruisers are doing a good job of keeping them at bay. While they're distracted there I collect the rest of my fleet together. I recruit another hero, Sela, who TNG fans will know is the daughter of an alternate universe Tasha Yar. She commands another huge Warbird, making my fleet look nicely intimidating. It's time for an assault.

I send scout ships ahead to locate the Rebel base. While I do so, Han Solo and a squadron of X-wings attack my fleet. Solo puts up a good fight, and manages to drop the shield of Sela's ship, but the sheer power of my armada is too much. The Falcon explodes dramatically as my scouts reveal the enemy base, setting the stage for the final assault. I move every ship I have towards the Rebel station. It puts up a fight, but it hasn't been upgraded much and in minutes it's falling apart and spewing flames. I watch as my Warbirds tear the base apart and earn a glorious victory for the Romulans.

UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS VERSUS GALACTIC EMPIRE

Coruscant, capital of the galaxy, is where the final skirmish will take place. I kick off as usual by sending shuttle scouts out to set up mining facilities on asteroids. I grab a few on the edges of the map, but in the centre I see a tantalising trio of rocks in close proximity. I send a Miranda-class ship in to investigate, but the Empire already has firm control of it. That's serious cashflow for them, and bad news for me. So I decide to switch up my tactics and try something new. I focus entirely on base upgrades until I'm able to build Galaxy-class ships, then I begin creating my armada.

I don't bother with upgrades or anything else. I just keep building Galaxy-class starships. Every time I reach 4,000 credits I build one, and repeat. After about ten minutes I'm commanding seven of the beasts, each of which has its own squadron of shuttle fighters. And now it's time for a bit of shock and awe. I recruit Federation hero Jean-Luc Picard of the Enterprise-E who leads my fleet of Galaxies towards the enemy base. The Galactic Empire sends a cluster of Star Destroyers after me, and a thrilling conflict breaks out. Lasers crisscross the battlefield as the Destroyers and Galaxies trade blows and swarms of smaller fighters dogfight around them. It's terribly exciting.



Assault on a Rebel space station.

Janeway takes on some TIE fighters.



Two of my Galaxies sacrifice themselves for the cause, bursting into flames and exploding against the stars. Picard survives the ambush and takes the lead once again. I push forward through the front line towards the Imperial base. Laser defence satellites cause me some problems and drop a few of my ships' shields, but I reach the station and begin an all-out assault. The sight of my ships circling the Empire's base and pummeling it with photon torpedoes is a beautiful one, and eventually it begins to break apart. I can just picture Picard on the bridge, calmly asking for a damage report, secretly celebrating a successful mission. A solid win for the Federation.

THE RESULTS

Well, I was going to use the results of these battles to determine if Star Wars or Star Trek was the better

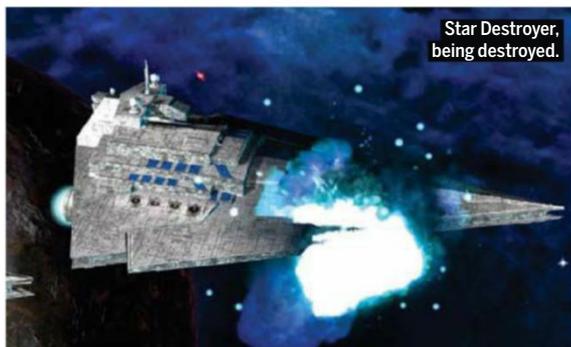
space-faring franchise. But in the end it was a draw: two wins for Star Wars, two wins for Star Trek. And there's something beautiful about that. I'm not sure what exactly drives *Empire at War's* fairly unpredictable skirmish AI, but it was a lot more aggressive in the first fight, utterly mauling

me with a huge armada – and this was only on medium difficulty.

This is a fantastic mod with an impressive attention to detail. I love how it changes the HUD to look like Star Trek's LCARS computer interface. And the sound effects, especially the Federation's lasers and

photon torpedoes, are spot on. If you want to give it a go yourself, search for *Trek Wars: Revival* on Mod DB. There's just something fundamentally entertaining about watching iconic ships from these two series fight each other, trading blows in the infinite vacuum of space. ■

LASERS CRISSCROSS AS THE DESTROYERS AND GALAXIES TRADE BLOWS



Star Destroyer, being destroyed.

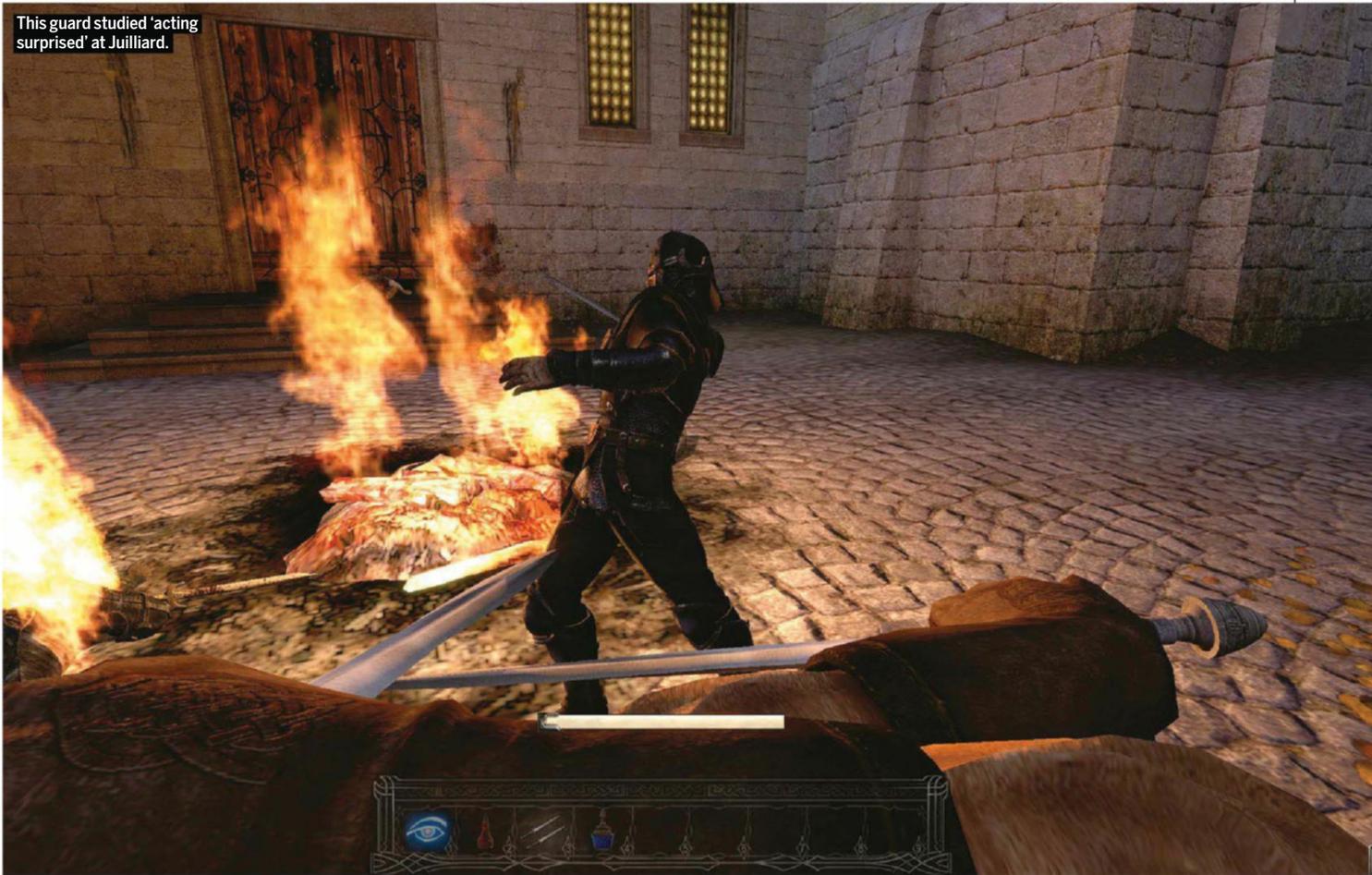


She cannae take any more, captain.



“Dark Messiah echoes Dishonored in the small details”

This guard studied 'acting surprised' at Juilliard.



DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

Arkane let loose and made a murder sim. *By Chris Thursten*

Dark Messiah of Might and Magic feels like it comes from Arkane's adolescence. *Dishonored* and *Prey* are the more mature output of the same creative mind. Here is a fantasy action game with not a whole lot to say but an infectious enthusiasm for freewheeling violence. Intricate physics, AI and combat systems converge to create a world that is spectacularly lethal for everybody, except you. As adventuring wizard's apprentice Sareth, you kick men and orcs with bone-shattering force into spike traps and off rope bridges. You

combine directional movement and mouse swings to lop limbs with your sword *just so*. You emit fireballs from your palm and watch as enemies, stumbling over the flaming corpses of their comrades, catch fire too and flail and fall.

Conceived as a sequel to Arkane's debut game, the ruminative dungeon RPG *Arx Fatalis*, Ubisoft's money brought with it the *Might and Magic* licence. Yet being tied to a relatively sedentary roleplaying series doesn't appear to have dampened *Dark Messiah's* spirit at all. You get the impression that this is a journey that Arkane was on regardless, its

adventure craft evolving as it meandered from *Arx Fatalis's* buried ruins to *Dishonored's* blood-slick ballrooms via this strange holiday in the D&D-ish kingdoms of Ashan. It is spectacular fun; exuberantly brutal to the point of subverting the vanilla fantasy setting it occupies. It is to videogame high fantasy what John Cleese's Lancelot was to that wedding party in Monty Python and the Holy Grail: they share an idiom.

DEEP CUTS

Dark Messiah echoes *Dishonored* in the small details. Sareth and Corvo climb chains in the same way, hauling themselves upwards with a gratifying *clunk-clunk-clunk* that sells the physicality and athleticism of their adventures. They chop pieces off people in the same way, too: someone at Arkane sat down one day and outlined the specific way in which swords should connect with necks, »

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
October 2006

DEVELOPER
Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

LINK
www.darkmessiahgame.com



His pay just got... docked. (He's dead now.)



It's like they say: Menelag, meneproblems.



Guess who just drew the short sword.

the drop to slow motion that should occur at the precise point of impact, the whoosh and pained shout as first air then flesh splits as an opponent's head comes free. They're grim things, sometimes, these games.

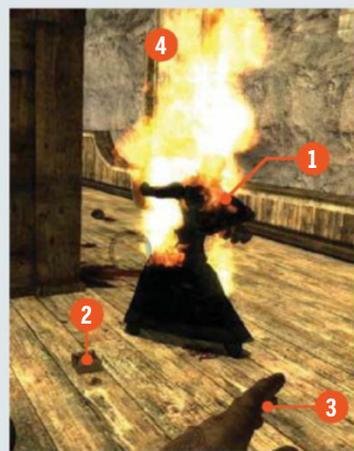
Yet *Dishonored* has something to say with and about violence that *Dark Messiah* does not. *Dishonored* is a revenger's tragedy: it's about the ways in which violent conditions reproduce themselves, and it stretches to give players the freedom to subvert that pattern if they choose. Its violence is a poisoned chalice left on a table for players to consider, consume or ignore.

Dark Messiah's violence is a less heady vintage. It's a thick-bottomed flagon of whatever it was that Conan the Barbarian was drinking, intended to be knocked back, smashed over somebody's head, and replaced. This game loves murder. As soon as the tutorial finishes, it deposits you in an arena where anonymous swordsmen rush you from the shadows forever. 'Kick this one down the stairs!' the game insists. 'Push his mate into those spikes!' 'Throw a box at that guy! Now hold down left mouse button and release to jam your sword

through his sternum!' Once you've met each of these demands the door to the next area opens and you can move on – or you can stay, you're told, if you'd prefer to "continue your training". You might as well leave, because every other room in the world is like this. Every castle and

A MAGIC MOMENT

The anatomy of a terrible accident



1 This is a wizard. He's on fire.

2 Here are some rations. They used to be in a crate.

3 I smashed the crate, causing wooden shards to fly up into the air.

4 A piece of wood collided with a fireball as it flew from the wizard's hand. Catching light, the flaming debris fell onto the wizard's robes. The wizard is now on fire.

Orc nest is a playground of foes and invitingly sharp decor.

STYLE IT OUT

No matter how expert you become in *Dark Messiah's* systems, it is terrified that you might forget to use them. Tooltips follow you several missions deep into the campaign: don't forget to kick people off high ledges. Don't forget that oil catches fire. Don't forget that a stunned foe can be disarmed. Don't forget to cut ropes to activate environmental traps. These messages imply the experience of the playtester who aimlessly hacked and slashed from encounter to encounter, and the horrified developers who watched them ignore all of the systems that they'd so meticulously put in place. 'Don't get bored' is one of *Dark Messiah's* key messages. 'Don't be boring' is another.

Like *Dishonored* and *Prey*, *Dark Messiah* lets you invest points in new skills as you progress. Unlike those games, *Dark Messiah's* narrower focus and combat-centric sandbox mean that this system is less concerned with giving you freedom to set your own objectives and more about giving you lots of different

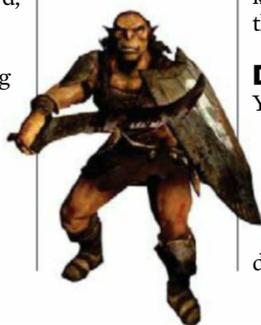


We get it, guy on the left.
You're a wizard.

EVERY CASTLE IS A PLAYGROUND OF FOES AND INVITINGLY SHARP DECOR

ways to achieve the same goal. Its branching endings, while asking you to decide which broad side of 'Dark' and 'Messiah' you come down on, are not really there to test your morality. They're there to steer you into multiple playthroughs, and from there into an understanding that each step of Sareth's quest amounts to a different course in Tony Hawk's Pro Beheader. You're being judged on style, here, so don't just play it as Swordsman Who is Ultimately a Decent Guy. Go back as Archer That's a Prick, or Ambivalent Wizard, or Guy Who Carries a Spade and Throws it at People.

Dark Messiah is also more willing to bash out the epic fantasy hits than its descendants. Castles crumbling under siege, brawls with hulking cyclopes and dragon encounters have retained their impact, and there's something comforting about the way a fortress



of Orcs communicates the notion that this is a place of adventure.

It has real weaknesses too, however. While *Dark Messiah's* wonderful combat has survived the aging process, its writing and art have not. The absence of *Dishonored's* sense of style, and of art directors like Sébastien Mitton or Viktor Antonov, is keenly felt: *Dark Messiah's* technology is no longer impressive and the world of *Might and Magic* is not interesting enough to account for the loss. Worse are its character designs, which support a plot that is as derivative as it is faintly embarrassing to re-encounter ten years on. As Sareth you're a Chosen, somebody running errands for louche wizards, performed with the intensity of actors who don't quite know how to feel about the fact that they could be doing panto instead.

DORK MESSIAH

Your loyalties are subsequently torn between Xana, a mostly-naked demon lady who lives in your head (but still tries to seduce you) and Leanna, devoted wizard's niece and miniskirt-wearing crush next door who is very impressed with you

if you rescue her from a pit full of snakes and lethally unimpressed with you if you don't. This is the sticky and embarrassing end of *Dark Messiah's* adolescent exuberance – it was the norm a decade ago but games are better than this now. A couple more years might unlock the camp potential in *Dark Messiah's* insistence on repeating the words "The Wizard Menelag", but it's not quite there yet.

Also, the fantasy-medieval folk you encounter are variously American or from Bristol for no discernible reason save 'nobody made a creative call either way'.

If anything, these problems highlight just how successful *Dark Messiah* is at evoking a different kind of fantasy through its combat systems. If the fighting and adventuring were anything less than exceptional, then it would vanish into the ocean of games with '*Might and Magic*' in the title. That hasn't happened because no other game has come this close to letting you be Errol Flynn in a world full of Orcs. That *Dark Messiah* now also has value as a milestone in the growth of one of the industry's most exceptional studios is a bonus, but not an accident. ■

PHILIPPA WARR



Can I use this bio for a secret ninth game? I'm going to do that. *Subnautica*. TAKE THAT, FORMATTING!



SWIM OUT

www.swim-out.com

→ This pool puzzler challenges you to swim to freedom, avoiding other bathers. A '20s-inspired aesthetic is married to a turn-based headscratcher. Everyone else in the pool seems to have right of way (rude) but you can offset your irritation by throwing beach balls at swimmers' heads to disrupt their fun.



THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH

www.the-pillars-of-the-earth-game.com

→ The opening act of this point-and-click, based on Ken Follett's bestselling novel, follows the intertwining lives of a monk, a master builder and a child from the forest. There's a strong story, not to mention my knowledge of English cathedral-building in the 12th century is *finally* paying off.



LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

www.leagueoflegends.com

→ Riot's gaming juggernaut peaks in the autumn with the League of Legends World Championship. Reinvigorated by watching incredibly skilled professionals, I stride back onto Summoner's Rift and try to execute all manner of nonsense with my favourite wizards. 99% of skill is confidence, right?



SLIME RANCHER

www.slimerancher.com

→ Adorable slimes must be corralled into pens as you build a poop farm. The slimes channel the personalities of dogs who have just exited a bathtub and are now full of mischief and bounce. Your reward for controlling them? Eventually finding and making the googly eye dispenser for your cute charges.



TACOMA

www.tacoma.game

→ Perhaps best described as a sci-fi thriller in interactive theatre clothing, *Tacoma* lets you explore a deserted space station. Follow ghostly recordings, read personal emails and rifle through drawers to figure out what happened. The product design is also out of this world – those melon mochi bites...



WALDEN

www.waldengame.com

→ If you like the book of the same name, this is a recreation of Walden Pond where you can explore Henry David Thoreau's musings in relation to the actual space. If you don't like the book or Thoreau you can play minigames badly on purpose to repeatedly injure him then go on a nature walk. Win-win.



SKY

www.bearwarp.itch.io

→ Bearwarp's contemplative, swoopy constellation explorer is an excellent option for a day when you just need something soothing to play around with. *Sky* will not demand anything beyond some lovely meandering through space, collecting colourful sprites to add to your rainbow trail.



ROGUE ISLANDS

www.rogueislands.com

→ It's a roguelike for people who don't really like roguelikes. *Rogue Islands* lets you pootle on procedurally generated islands, building up skills and spells to take on bigger challenges. If permadeath scares you, just turn the difficulty down and use the crafting respawn system to build a death buffer.

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Hands-on with CS: GO's new battle royale mode

By Evan Lahti a day ago

Valve: "Even we didn't think that people would spend \$500 on a virtual bandana."



Hands-on with Call of Duty's new battle royale mode

By Tyler Wilde 2 days ago

Boots on the ground, and on other peoples' boots, as you can't fit 100 people in these maps.



Hands-on with Gone Home's new battle royale mode

By Andy Kelly 2 days ago

Last prodigal child standing wins a TV dinner, a VHS of the X-Files and a heartfelt coming-of-age story.



Hands-on with Destruction Derby's new battle royale mode

By Phil Savage 2 days ago

Update: "It's not new, idiot, it's just the game." says Psygnosis. "We made it in 1995."



Hands-on with Game of Thrones: A Telltale Games Series' new battle royale mode

By Philippa Warr 3 days ago

Wait, how is this different to the main plot?



You can never have too many battle royale modes

By Delay Thompson 3 days ago

What an amazing new genre! I can't imagine ever becoming tired of it!

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