

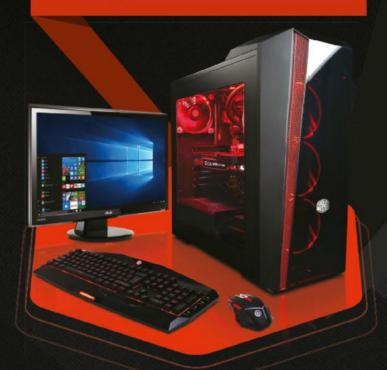
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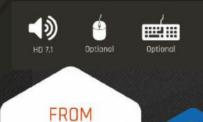
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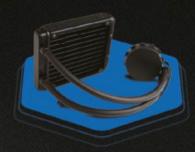
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## **Moment of Xen**

Black Mesa isn't the biggest upcoming release on the PC gaming calendar. But it's still notable – a testament both to the openness of the PC as a gaming platform, and to the spirit and passion of modders. It's a fascinating project, and I'm glad I get to put it on this issue's cover.

Coincidentally, this month is also the ten-year anniversary of The Orange Box, and thus of Half-Life 2: Episode Two. Whether we'll ever play a sequel remains an open question, but this issue we're celebrating Half-Life 2's legacy with a five-part retrospective of analysis, stories and jokes.



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scientists Twitter @ultrabrilliant

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Returned to Black Mesa for this month's cover feature, on p36.



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G-Mod, G-Man **Twitter** @screencuisine

#### This month

The creator of the Half-Life 2 webcomic Concerned returns for one last Garry's Modjob.



#### TOM SENIOR

Specialist in Heroism, sacrifices

#### This month

Saved the world for his XCOM 2: War of the Chosen review. Find out at what cost on p72.

## Contents #310 NOVEMBER 2017

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SEE p54



#### **Monitor**

#### **08 THE TOP STORY**

Marc Laidlaw reveals how Episode Three might have ended.

#### 10 THE SPY

All the PC gaming rumours that are fitto print, (ie, not many).

### 12 INSIDE DEVELOPMENT

Can developers avoid crunch and still release on time?

#### **Previews**

- 16 MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries
- 22 Final Fantasy XV
- 26 The Crew 2
- 28 Biomutant
- 30 Anno 1800

#### **Features**

#### 36 Black Mesa

Andy talks to the team trying to remake a shooter classic.

#### 42 Half-Life 2

A five-part feature celebrating one of the best PC games ever.

### 56 The History of the FPS: Part II

The final part of our comprehensive history of guns 'n games.



## MECHWARRIOR THE HALF-LIFE 5: MERCENARIES ISSUE

Steven Messner goes hands-on with the first MechWarrior campaign in 15 years.

## 36

Andy talks to the makers of *Black* Mesa, and we celebrate Half-Life 2 in a five-part retrospective.

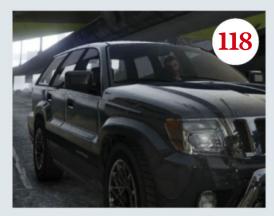
## THE HISTORY OF THE FPS: PART II

The second half of our massive feature charts shooter design from Call of Dutyonwards.











## **72**XCOM 2: WAR OF THE CHOSEN

Tom recreates the PCG team for his review of XCOM 2's expansion. Can we save humanity?

### 96 CPU COOLERS RATED

Ed Chester puts on a warm coat and sets out to find the best way to keep your CPU cool.

### 118 GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE

The team discovers what it's like to be the bad guys when they attempt to grief a *GTA Online* server.

#### **Reviews**

- 72 XCOM 2: War of the Chosen
- **76** Slime Rancher
- **78** Rez Infinite
- 80 Nidhogg 2
- 81 The Darkside Detective
- 82 West of Loathing
- 83 The Shrouded Isle
- 84 LawBreakers
- 88 F12017
- 90 Agents of Mayhem

#### THEY'REBACK

- 92 Beyond Good And Evil
- 93 Lugaru HD
- 93 Deathmatch Classic
- 93 Shatter
- 93 Puzzle Quest

#### Hardware

#### **96 GROUP TEST**

CPU coolers feel the heat in our hardware supertest.

#### **102 REVIEWS**

Zak Storey rounds up the latest and greatest tech.

#### **104 BUYER'S GUIDE**

The best components for your budget.

#### **Extra Life**

#### **108 NOW PLAYING**

Phil fights a horde of trouserless men.

#### 112 TOP 10 DOWNLOADS

The best free games and mods.

#### **116 UPDATE**

How do *Overwatch*'s new heroes change the game?

### 118 AFTER ACTION REPORT

Being a jerk in GTA Online.

#### **122 REINSTALL**

Andy returns to *New Vegas*. Is it the best modern *Fallout*?

#### 126 WHYILOVE

Tom Hatfield explains why FIFA 17's story is better than you think.

#### 128 MUSTPLAY

Andy's picks of the best PC games you can play right now.

OPINION | TECH | GAMES

## MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD



#### Half-Life writer leaks plot for the doomed third episode

alf-Life writer Marc Laidlaw, who left Valve in 2016, posted an article on his personal website that is almost certainly the story outline for Episode Three. Titled Epistle 3', the story concerns a certain 'Gertrude Fremont' who travels to Antarctica with 'Alex Vaunt' to look for a missing ship called the 'Hyperborea'. You don't have to be an expert in Half-Life lore to know what he's talking about there. What exactly inspired Laidlaw to release this information, and whether Valve approves, is a mystery. But the fact he did suggests this is a story that will never be told elsewhere.

After the funeral of Eli Vance, who died at the end of *Episode Two*, Gordon and Alyx fly to Antarctica to find the research vessel Borealis, only to discover that the Combine has built a base around it. This is how Episode Three would have begun had it ever been made. After that, far too much happens to summarise here, but the story ends with Gordon trying to destroy the Combine homeworld, only to catch a glimpse of its advanced technology and realise his mission is futile. Gordon is rescued by the Vortigaunts, the G-Man whisks Alyx away, and we end on another cliffhanger.

Wallace Breen, who sold humanity out to the Combine, was set to return – albeit with his consciousness transferred into a giant slug. The Borealis, which is apparently phasing in and out of existence, would take

IT SOUNDS LIKE IT WOULD HAVE MADE FOR A FANTASTICALLY DRAMATIC EPISODE Gordon and his companions to alien worlds and let them witness past events, including the Seven Hour War. And Alyx would get her revenge on Judith Mossman, killing her before setting the Borealis to self-destruct in order to destroy the Combine homeworld. It sounds like it would have made for a fantastically dramatic *Episode Three*, which makes Laidlaw's reveal bittersweet.

On Twitter, Laidlaw said his website post was "an emotional release, not a tactical one". He adds, "It was related to my own internal creative process, retirement, wanting to put things aside so I can move forward." If Valve ever does return to Half-Life, it'll likely start fresh, which might leave a bad taste in the mouth of anyone who's been waiting for a resolution to that cliffhanger. But Laidlaw's outline provides some kind of closure. I can't blame Laidlaw for wanting to put the series behind him, and if this helps him move on, so be it. 

\*\*Andy Kelly\*\*



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#### WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

he Spy doesn't believe in predeterminism; the idea that free will is an illusion, and that every action is not only preordained, but unavoidable. Nobody – not man, beast or some cosmic formula created in the heat of the Big Bang – knows what word The Spy is going to write after this sentence

but scripted.
Just last weekend, The
Spy spent a full day
escaping from a maze filled
with bloodthirsty, hyper
intelligent emus, after the
maze's owner caught The
Spy trying to steal the
contact details of his
architect on behalf The Spy's client

has finished. Sawdust.

The Spy's life is anything

 a rival emu farmer with a similar enthusiasm for labyrinthine traps.
 Written down, that sequence of events is as barely coherent as when The Spy was living through

it. Trust The Spy: none of this is planned. It's all just a series of things that happen with no great thought or reason.

And yet, still the idea of destiny persists. As does the idea of **Destiny**, which is a videogame that – as far as anyone can tell based off its

meandering, ancillary story – is only tangentially related to concepts of fate, and mostly about shooting aliens in order to earn magical guns with which to shoot more aliens and so on. **Destiny 2** is coming to PC in late October, nearly two months after the console release. But, delayed or not, it will follow the same DLC plans as the console version. And those plans may have been leaked.

Sources for Kotaku claim that *Destiny 2*'s first DLC will focus on Osiris, a Guardian who became blasphemously obsessed with the time-travelling robot race, the Vex. Despite being Exiled by the Speaker, who – actually, The Spy doesn't have time to explain why The Spy doesn't

stuff, the DLC is supposed to add a new patrol zone on the Vex-colonised Mercury, and a new social space in the Lighthouse – a place on Mercury that, in the first *Destiny*, was only available to players who won nine Trials of Osiris matches without taking a single loss.

If our actions are predetermined, publishers sure are keen to hide that fact. The dance of teases and speculation around whether any particular game is or isn't coming to a specific platform hint at a more chaotic, media trained world. Take, for instance, the **Ni no Kuni** series of JRPGs. The upcoming sequel, **Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom**, is due out on PC early next year.

But what of its predecessor, the PlayStation 3 exclusive Wrath of the White Witch? According to Akihiro Hino, Level 5's CEO, it's a possibility. Asked by PC Gamer about the chance of a port, Hino replied, "I'll leave that up to your imagination for now, but stay tuned for

more announcements. I'll leave it at that." The Spy would advise Hino never to leave anything up to The Spy's imagination, especially since it's preoccupied with emus right now.

Was your reading these words inevitable, or a chaotic whim? Was the regret you're now feeling at how you've spent these last few minutes decided at the beginning of creation? Whatever the answer, The Spy will see you next month. That, at least, will never change. Spy out. 

The Spy

#### A SERIES OF THINGS THAT HAPPEN WITH NO GREAT THOUGHT OR REASON

have time to explain this nonsense. Just know that Osiris is potentially insane, and also that his disciples are putting players through trials that take the form of an elimination PVP mode. And that he's back. Maybe.

The DLC is reportedly called **The Curse of Osiris**, and will, according to Kotaku's sources, be about saving Osiris from the Vex. This is good: the Vex are responsible for some of *Destiny*'s most enjoyable raid mechanics, and some of its most impenetrable story beats. In terms of

#### The Spy is always where The Spy should be, unless The Spy is late.

### This month in... 2007





It's Valve's *The Orange Box* collection on the cover, and it's *The Orange Box* that dominates this issue's massive review section. *Team Fortress 2* is judged the star of the bundle, receiving 94% for its unique class-based antics. *Episode Two* isn't far behind, at 93%. "Bring on the third," writes reviewer Tom Francis. Er, yeah, we have got some bad news for you, Tom-from-the-past.

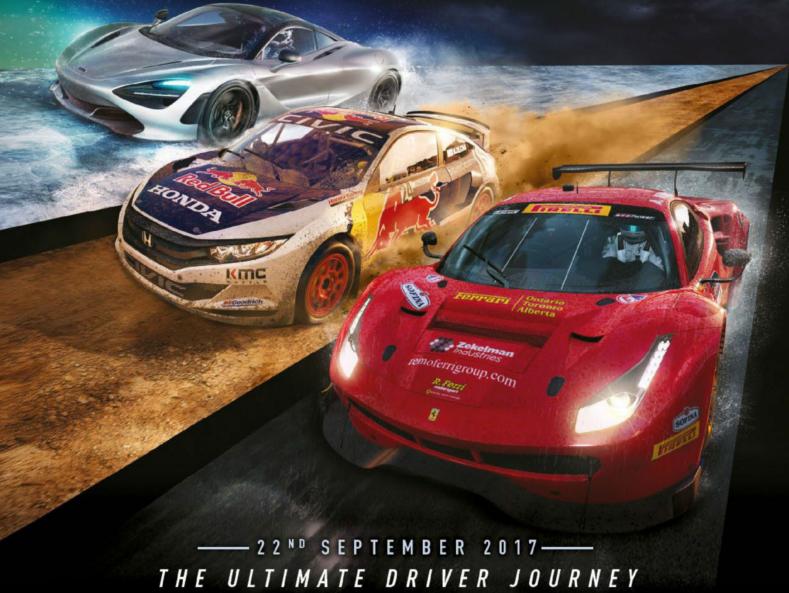
ISSUE 180, November 2007 ON THE COVER The Orange Box IN THE CHARTS Sugababes – About You Now

2 It's not all classics. Also reviewed is You Are Empty, described as a "crass, banal, unchallenging belch of a first-person shooter" by writer Duncan Harris.



Staggeringly, issue 180 has no features – which, having just finished proofing the current issue's 32-page feature section, sounds like a right jolly. Still, it's not all reviews and previews. Extra Life's D-I-Y column – remember that? – teaches you how to build a secret Cold War-style briefcase PC. Presumably The Spy was looking for some extra freelance work that month.

# CARSIII





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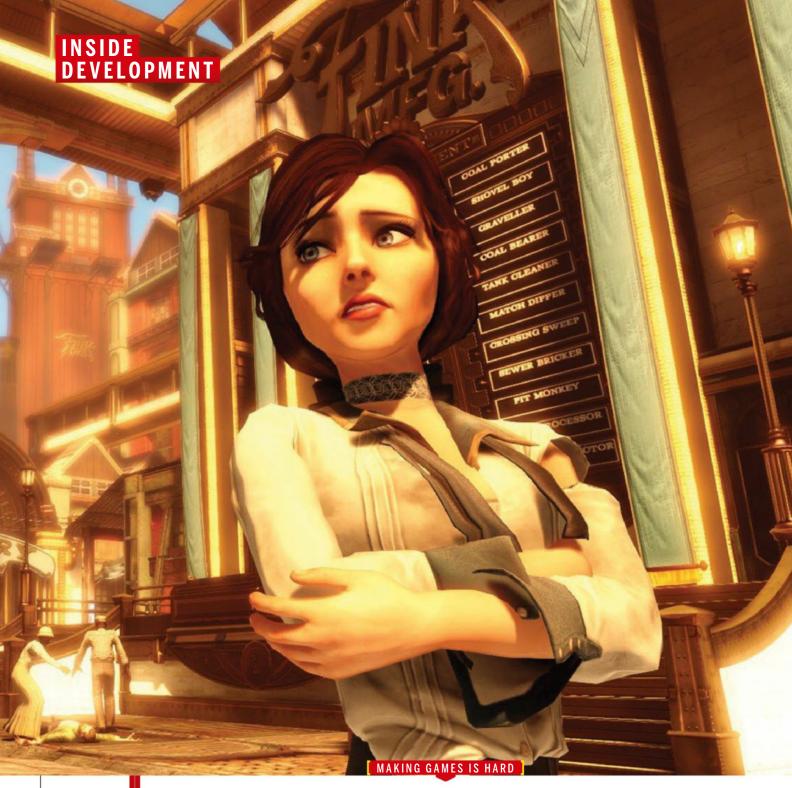












ABOVE: Over a five-year dev cycle, BioShock Infinite was delayed two times publicly.

RIGHT: This Is The Police was delayed by a week because the publisher forgot to press a button.

#### **FAR RIGHT:**

Dream Daddy's launch was pushed back by six days after driving its developers to exhaustion.

## **SCHEDULING SANELY**

How much of a say do developers have in their schedules?





'm talking to Jake Birkett of Grey Alien Games, developer of Regency Solitaire and upcoming card-based RPG Shadowhand. "It occurred the day after I had done some kind of crunch until 5 am," he says. "I got up in the morning and crawled under my desk to switch the plugs on, and my back went out. I'm just in my early 40s now."

In a blog post from 2015, creative director Clint Hocking said the 80-hour weeks he worked during the development of Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory "gave me brain damage". Whether or not crunch time is necessary to release a game 'on time' is a

perennial topic in game development circles. The web connecting contractors, publishers, platform holders and developers that determines how release dates are decided upon, and whether they actually get met, is obscured behind a cloud of non-disclosure agreements. When you throw the possibility of community-enraging

delays into this potent mix, it quickly becomes apparent how developing a schedule that allows you to make an excellent game, while taking care of yourself and launching in a reasonable period of time, is far more complicated than it might initially appear.

Since release dates are usually set far in advance of a game's completion, developers are always trying to find more efficient ways to account for hurdles that pop up along the way. In the case of Dream Daddy, director Tyler Hutchison developed a compiler that, no matter what changes were made during the game's dev cycle, would automatically plug all of the elements of the visual novel in their proper places upon its completion. However, despite this tool, the team still worked 14-16 hour days leading up to launch. "It was a team of all indie developer people so everyone was just like, 'Nah, this is fine! We'll just make some more coffee and keep going!" Hutchison says. "Everyone was really gung-ho, and, of course, that completely exhausted us." Dream Daddy ended up being delayed by six days, but after the resulting exhaustion, the team still worked overtime. "All of us were so aware of it," says Hutchison. "To be like, 'Okay, we're not gonna do this again!' And then we'd send a build to QA at 4 am and just be like, 'Fuck! We did it again!'

Tanya X Short, cofounder of *Moon Hunters* developer Kitfox Games, explained the phenomenon of consistent overwork thusly: "Crunching can feel amazing. You feel more productive, even when you're not!

"Every dev dreads disappointing their players, but, honestly, if you have to choose between disappointing them with a delay or disappointing them with a buggy sub-par game experience, I'll pick the delay every time."

Regardless of developer size, it seems the conversation of how to mitigate crunch when it feels necessary regularly occupies the industry. Bill Gardner, lead designer on BioShock, and cofounder of Perception developer The Deep End Games, recalls Irrational Games occasionally forcing people to leave the building so that they could get some much-needed rest. "The sad reality is every place I've ever been to, every project I've ever worked on, I've never spoken to anyone who knows how to avoid it," he says. "In an ideal industry, that wouldn't be a thing, but games are incredibly complex. No amount of planning, or foresight, or arcane ritual is going to allow

developers to anticipate the increasing complexity of the things we make."

#### **BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE**

As demoralising as a delay can be for both developers and their audiences, that extra time could mean yet another developer won't get burned out of the industry they love. In the case of BioShock Infinite, executive VP of development Rod Fergusson felt even a month-long delay could be the difference between releasing a good title, or a great one. The risk of a delay isn't trivial, either. "A delay can be completely devastating," Paul Kilduff-Taylor

cofounder of Frozen Synapse developer Mode 7 Games, tells me. "You can lose money you've already committed to advertising: you can lose a promotional slot with a platform holder; you can get into cashflow difficulties because you have to wait to release the game: delays can potentially sink a company if it isn't healthy to begin with."

Which again brings me to crunch: the labour practice everyone bemoans, but few manage to eliminate. When a schedule looks inadequate, and a milestone is looming large, crunch often seems like the only option left.

"It can be very hard just to keep your normal everyday life going," Helen Carmichael of Grey Alien Games says, "But to be productive, effective worker, you still need to eat, sleep and wash. All of those things are really positive and important, and it's easy to let them slide." By Xalavier Nelson Jr

#### "I'VE NEVER SPOKEN TO ANYONE WHO **KNOWS HOW TO AVOID [CRUNCH]"**



#### SOME POSTPONED TITLES ARE AMONG THE BEST IN GAMING



Despite fan outcry following news that the game was being split in half, MGSV surmounted further delays to become PC Gamer's 2015 Game of the Year.



3 SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH A rocky dev cycle that included several delays and the collapse of its publisher, THQ, didn't stop South Park: The Stick of Truth from launching to acclaim in March of 2014.



#### RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

Debuting as the multiplayer mode of a new series entry titled Rainbow 6: Patriots Siege eventually spun off into its own title. After overcoming a rocky launch, Siege is now one of the most popular shooters on PC



#### TEAM FORTRESS 2

A whopping nine-year development cycle, as well as a visual overhaul, somehow coalesced into one of the most influential games of all time. *Team Fortress 2* continues to evolve and grow post-release.



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#### MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries







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www.mw5mercs.com

## MECHWARRIOR 5: MERCENARIES

Piranha Games is taking MechWarrior back to its roots



kilometre from the harbour in Vancouver, on the second floor of a small shopping centre is the last bastion of the MechWarrior franchise. For six years.

Piranha Games' president Russ Bullock has kept the series alive with *MechWarrior Online*. But with *MechWarrior* 5: *Mercenaries*, he's ushering in the dawning of a new era of mech warfare.

"There's a huge contingent of fans that have been wanting a singleplayer *MechWarrior 5* for years," Bullock tells me as we walk through the Piranha Games office. "Of course we wanted to make one, but being a smaller developer we had say, 'Okay first things first, we need to succeed with *MechWarrior Online* and that will allow us to make a singleplayer game.' And it took a while — a lot longer than we thought — but we're doing it."

As we pass by the main hub that connects Piranha Games' various workspaces, I spy a map of the Inner Sphere, the cluster of some 3,000 star systems that make up *MechWarrior*'s universe. Each one has a name and a history etched into the stone tablets of BattleTech lore. And for those who have grown up living in that universe, it's these little details that matter. Fortunately, Russ Bullock is all about the little details.

When I first saw *MechWarrior 5* announced at MechCon 2016, the trailer sent the fans roaring. But when a dropship descended from the sky they lost their damn minds. At the time, I was a little confused. Then Bullock explained how so much of *MechWarrior* was caged inside the imaginations of players. They freaked out because that was the first time they had seen a dropship landing in-game and not just in their imagination.

Bullock is hoping to make MechWarrior 5 the catalyst that sets



those two decades of *MechWarrior* fantasy free.

#### **MERCENARY CULTURE**

MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries isn't just a sequel to MechWarrior 4. It's a chance to re-establish the series and give its hordes of hardcore fans something that they've always wanted. "A significant part of our design philosophy is asking, 'What have players always wanted to do in a MechWarrior game?" Bullock tells me.

That's why Piranha Games is starting with Mercenaries first rather than a straight numbered sequel. "Traditionally, you'd make MechWarrior and then you'd make the Mercenaries offshoot," he explains. "The first one is a linear, story-heavy campaign and then Mercenaries is more like a sandbox. But players want to live out the BattleTech lore, and the best way to do that is to own your own mercenary unit, so we're going with Mercenaries first."

Instead of a series of linear missions, *MechWarrior* 5 puts you in command of a mercenary unit and gives you the freedom to either rise to mythic status or crash and burn along the way. Around 300 planets of the Inner Sphere will be open for business, letting you travel between the Great Houses while taking increasingly demanding contracts and building reputation with each faction as you also manage your lances of warriors and supporting technicians.

It's one part *MechWarrior* and one part *Football Manager*, Russ tells me. Every bullet you fire and every mech you lose will have a cost, and it'll be up to you to make sure you're bringing in enough dough to keep your mercs on the payroll and their mechs in fighting condition. As you progress in prestige, the timeline also moves forward. Great Houses rise and fall according to the lore, new technologies are invented and sold, and eventually the ominous Clans come rampaging through the Inner Sphere like Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde.

## EVERY BULLET YOU FIRE AND EVERY MECH YOU LOSE WILL HAVE A COST





#### MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries







Leveraging an ambitious dynamic free market economy, stunning destructibility, and the kind of freedom and scale that hasn't been seen since the first *MechWarrior* in 1989, Bullock is working to make *MechWarrior* 5 the ultimate realisation of BattleTech lore.

#### THE INVISIBLE HAND

When you begin a new campaign, your mercenary company is in a sorry state. With only a weak mech at your disposal, you'll be scraping by and taking low-level missions from the periphery states of the Great Houses to keep money coming in. Little by little your business will grow, but it will be up to you to decide how.

"The free market is probably one of the biggest components of MechWarrior 5," Bullock tells me. Mechs, pilots, technicians, weapon systems everything you need to form a mercenary unit will have to be purchased from MechWarrior 5's market. "The market is totally dynamic based on what year it is. In the year 3015, for example, they didn't have any pulse lasers or Ferro-Fibrous armour as all of that technology comes in later. And it's also going to depend where you are in the Inner Sphere. If you are in one Great House's space, you'll see mechs common among that house. That's going to provide a whole level of flavour to your play experience each time you start a new campaign."

Unlike MechWarrior Online, where players can customise their mech chassis in a variety of ways, MechWarrior 5 will stick to the lore and force players to choose between strictly defined roles. "It's great for a PVP game because the level of customisation is huge," Bullock tells me. "But if we allowed that in MechWarrior 5, you essentially negate the free market. There's no need to keep your eyes peeled for that Jenner JR7-F that has Ferro-Fibrous armour if you take your JR7-D and just put Ferro-Fibrous armour on it."

To that end, MechWarrior 5 will feature an unprecedented number of mechs to choose from. "Most Mechwarrior games have had maybe 12 to 15 different mech chassis," Bullock explains. "We're looking at having upwards of 60 chassis with 300

MECHWARRIOR 5 WILL FEATURE AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER OF MECHS TO CHOOSE FROM to 400 variants. You could probably play the game multiple times within just one Great House's space and see different combinations on the free market."

But mechs are only as good as the warriors piloting them. Players will also need to be mindful of their mercs and technicians, who each have their own skills and specialties. Likewise, different manufacturers will make variations of weapon systems, giving players granular control over every aspect of their mechs. Profits made from mercenary contracts will be quickly eaten away by repairs, resupply, and the ever-present cost of replacing slain comrades. It's a huge amount of freedom but also an equally large responsibility if you're reckless on the field of battle.

#### **MECH ON MECH**

During my visit, I played an early build of *MechWarrior 5*. None of the overarching strategy of managing a mercenary outfit was available, but my demo did make it easy to see how the various systems will complement each other. Equally as important, I also got an intimate look at the technology Piranha Games is using to generate the hundreds of battlefields players will fight on.

From the very first blast of my torso-mounted lasers, it was clear that *MechWarrior 5* benefits from Piranha Games' extensive work on *MechWarrior Online*. I could immediately feel the heft as my 30-odd ton mech stomped through a forest, knocking trees down left and right like some mechanical Godzilla. Everything from the rhythmic thud of PPC cannons to the highly-specific location-based damage modelling feels fantastically heavy. But this isn't just singleplayer *MechWarrior Online*, either. With the Unreal 4 engine under the hood, *MechWarrior 5* has plenty more horsepower to put to work.

One thing MechWarrior fans will love is that damage modelling has been taken to a whole new level over MechWarrior Online. Each component now has multiple stages of disrepair, making brawls even more visceral as armour peels back after barrages to reveal the delicate mechanical skeletons underneath.

"Mechs aren't just these paper tigers," Bullock says. "You don't just one-shot things. It's all about a battle of attrition, of using the hills, rocks, and trees for cover and making sure that when you get your chance to shoot, you make it count. You manage your heat, your ammo, and your positioning and you win that battle."



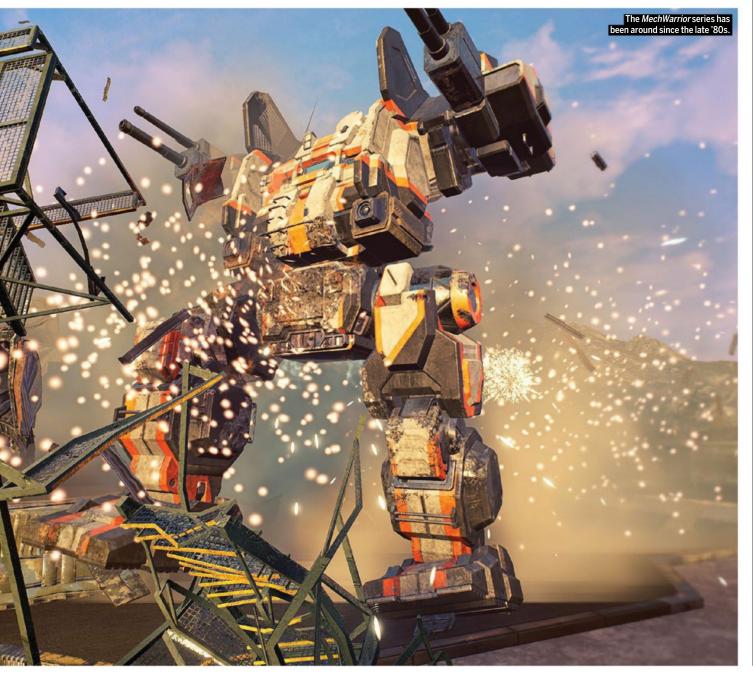


#### MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries









Mechwarrior 5: Mercenaries



#### Mechwarrior 5: Mercenaries









Enemy mechs won't be the only thing melting under your alpha-strikes either. MechWarrior 5's battles will feature combined arms of infantry, artillery, and both land and air vehicles. During my demo, flyers swarmed above me, whittling away my armour while I focused down the more dangerous mechs. Meanwhile stationary turrets tracked me as I trudged through a copse of trees, their shots quickly obliterating my cover with each salvo. When you consider that your own lance of mechs will accompany you into battle, I'm excited to see how MechWarrior 5's missions will turn into frenetic firefights as both sides whittle away the other.

#### **LAND GRAB**

Any veteran *MechWarrior* player knows that it isn't just about how well you're able to shoot, but also how you use the terrain to your advantage. And with 300 planets, each needing their own battlefield that feels distinct, Bullock says finding a way to generate fun but unique terrain was easily one of Piranha Games' biggest challenges. "We needed to create a level generator system that wouldn't be overly complex," Bullock explains, adding that since *MW5*'s announcement the team has dedicated much of its time to solving this one complex riddle.

What they devised is an elegant system that takes ingredients, like different military bases, and places them together with various groupings of terrain. It's like playing an instrument: you have several notes to work with, but how you arrange them can create vastly different songs. After my demo, Piranha Games' senior game designer David Forsey give me an opportunity to peek behind the curtain at the development back end of *MechWarrior 5* to toy around with making different kinds of maps.

Similar to creating a new map in *Civilization, MechWarrior 5*'s map tool lets you dictate the density of foliage, terrain patterns, weather, time of day and more. Now, all of these might not sound like they matter, but in the brutally strategic world of *MechWarrior*, they absolutely do. Wind storms on a Mars-like planet might blind you, forcing you to rely purely on thermal

#### PLAYERS CAN STOMP FULL SPEED INTO BUILDINGS AND TEAR THEM DOWN

vision to see enemy mechs through the tempest. Likewise, dense forests can now cover the battlefield since Piranha Games doesn't have to account for all the challenges of syncing up 24 different players over the internet like in *MechWarrior Online*.

Another big feature that Bullock can't wait for players to experience is the destructible environment. "Of course. plenty of games have had destructible environments," he says. "But this is the first time it'll be in a MechWarrior game, and that's going to be awesome." Players can stomp full speed into buildings and tear them down with all the force of a 35-ton walking tank. During my demo, it was so satisfying to cleave through walls and airplane hangars like they were butter. "We really wanted players to walk anywhere they want," Bullock elaborates, adding that destructible environments will also present new strategic options. "You can imagine plenty of scenarios where an enemy mech is hiding behind a building and you just take it down to get rid of their cover."

#### **BACK TO THE BEGINNING**

With such an emphasis on freedom, *MechWarrior 5* is harkening back to the first *MechWarrior*, before the series became entrenched in the linear stories of Great Houses and their political games. But 15 years is a long time, and *MechWarrior 5* will undoubtedly be many players' first robot rodeo. "It's important for us to try and be as mindful as we can about a new generation of PC gamers," Bullock says. "But we understand who our community is and who we're making the game for."

Bullock says his hope is that by digging deeper into the series roots than ever before, newcomers will begin to understand why so many care so deeply for this universe — why the names of those 300 planets of the Inner Sphere matter. "This isn't going to be some watered-down *MechAssault* made partially for consoles," Bullock says. "It's going to be the same kind of action simulator that people have been wanting for 15 years."

That's not just because Bullock thinks it's what *MechWarrior* fans want, but because it's what they deserve. "We're dedicated to the core *MechWarrior* fanbase. They're the ones that supported us with *MechWarrior Online* and now we're making a game for them."

Steven Messner





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#### The Crew 2









The Crew 2









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RELEASE 16 March 2018 **DEVELOPER** Ivory Tower PUBLISHER Ubisoft

LINK

www.bit.ly/Crew2PC

### THE CREW 2

Ubisoft's vehicle-switching racer might not go far enough

he open world arcade racer is reaching a crisis point, thanks in part to the quality of Forza Horizon 3. If not for that game, The Crew 2 might not have to be as strange and all-encompassing as it is. In the first game, you could team up with friends to race or freely explore a miniaturised USA. In The Crew 2, you can still do that, but also instantly switch between a car, a boat and a plane with the press of a button. It's extremely excessive and I condone it with my entire heart.

During a hands-on preview event. I got to play the PC version of The Crew 2 and freely explore the open environment surrounding New York City. Much like the first game, the scale of The Crew 2 is immediate, emphasised by the slick map interface that simply zooms the camera out, without slowing things down by cutting to an arbitrary menu, positioning the 3D world below you from a very talented bird's eye perspective. I could see the NYC skyline fade into smaller buildings, and then into rolling hills of pine, all scribbled through with roads, rivers and racetracks, It's seriously impressive, but I hope the track design keeps up with all of the space that The Crew 2 has to cover.

It's possible to teleport to any event unlocked on the map, but my preferred method of travel was driving off a ramp (and there are a lot in NYC, a civic hazard) then transforming into a plane at the peak of my arc and barrel rolling to wherever my heart took me. Often, my heart took

me to hundreds of feet above a body of water, where I transformed into a boat and plummeted into the drink at terminal velocity. It's absurd fun, and I can imagine it'll be better with friends.

But it all stood in stark contrast to the events I tried out. Between steering a nimble boat through a swamp and drifting a streetcar through a park in NYC, there's a ton of diversity in vehicle types and handling, but none of the ones I played took advantage of the instant vehicleswitching system. I raced a dirt bike on a dirt bike track, steered a biplane in an obstacle course set between tall city buildings and tore through the trees in an off-road truck in a freeform race to reach a point in the distance – but The Crew 2's version of these events could have been from any open world racer from the last five years.

#### **TRADING PAINT**

The vanilla vehicle events are diverse and competent enough to sit comfortably among the rest of the genre, but with so much potential for vehicle switching cross country races and surreal stunt

challenges right at your fingertips, it's hard to muster much enthusiasm for PLAYED hitting every routine rally car race across an abridged USA. I'd much rather Ubisoft went all in on its wild ideas and built a world that took clear advantage of the vehicle switching. The novelty of such a huge play space with areas clearly divided by event types cities are for street races, mountains for off-roading, water for boat stuff - makes far less sense to me than a smaller space or curated tracks that highlight the fun aspects of driving each vehicle and the somewhat improvisational thrill of switching between them.

Without a playful enough approach, I fear *The Crew 2* will be reduced to an arcade racer variety show with an entertaining way to get around. Either way, it's still strange enough to keep me interested. By trading in brand name vehicles for the fantasies they provide, and by favouring scale and variety over careful track curation, *The Crew 2* will definitely be different from the rest of the racers on the market today. Though that does not necessarily make it better.

James Davenport





IT'S ABSURD FUN, AND I CAN IMAGINE IT'LL BE BETTER WITH FRIENDS

#### **Biomutant**







**NEED TO KNOW** 

RELEASE 2018

DEVELOPER Experiment 101 PUBLISHER THQ Nordic

LINK

www.biomutant.com

## BIOMUTANT

Let the fur fly in this gorgeous open world RPG

iomutant is a post-apocalyptic kung-fu action RPG, and the exciting debut of Experiment 101 - a studio headed up by Stefan Ljungqvist, whose credits include

Avalanche's Mad Max and Just Cause. Despite not being able to play the Gamescom demo, it's easily the most intriguing game I saw at the show.

Set in a dying world, you play an anthropomorphic critter – a kind of cross between a raccoon and a fox. Your actions will have a huge impact on this world, including whether you choose to save the Tree of Life at its centre. At this early point in the game, though, the main character is more worried about not being a snack for the Meat Eater – the world's last carnivore, and a major antagonist throughout Biomutant.

The ensuing fight demonstrates Biomutant's smooth mix of ranged, melee and Max Payne-style bullet time. Too weak to defeat the aggressor, the nimble hero instead takes cover in a cave. Inside, we find a cluster of Morks - biocontaminated creatures that spawn from the oily ooze that is the source of the world's sickness.

Biocreeps are the gateway to mutations - abilities that can be mixed and matched to better deal with baddies. The first I'm shown is 'moth mouth', which lets you spit out a swarm of bugs. Telekinesis and fungi follow – the latter of which lays mushrooms that can bounce you to otherwise inaccessible areas, or fling hostile pursuers skyward. The flipside of pursuing these mutagens, though, is



#### **AIRSHIPS, GLIDERS, MECHS** AND EVEN AN OVERSIZED **MECHANICAL HAND**

that Biocreeps release infection upon death, which can cripple both players and their teammates. If an NPC dies as a result of said infection, he or she is gone for good - forcing players to weigh up the value of hunting specific skill-altering toxins against the threat of losing comrades.

Biomutant's world is also littered with weapon upgrades, and a comprehensive looting and crafting system will expand the range of possible builds. "I think we're up to 500,000 combos of ranged weapons and a similar amount of melee weapons," says Experiment 101. "Again, we'll have more in the final game.'

Towards the demo's end, the plucky protagonist joins forces with a wise old man who knows about the Tree of Life and how to save it. We're tasked with healing the roots of the tree, of which there are five scattered around the world – each with numerous smaller segments.

Expriment 101 explains that much of what I'm shown is on rails, so as to best portray the systems and structures of the game. But before we wrap up, the devs take the protagonist out into open territory. It's a 16-square kilometre world, I'm told. "Some parts require some special gear or special vehicles, but otherwise you can just go nuts." Airships, gliders, mechs and even an oversized mechanical hand akin to The Addams Family's Thing are but some of the modes of transport you'll use to get around.

#### **BIOSHOCKED**

"We also have fast travel. They're animals, so they mark their territory," Experiment 101 adds, as the furry hero drops his drawers and unlocks a fast travel marker post by peeing against it. As for sidequests, Experiment 101 stresses they'll be dynamic and won't require players to "collect 1,000 feathers", or fulfil other similarly tedious retrieval tasks common for the genre.

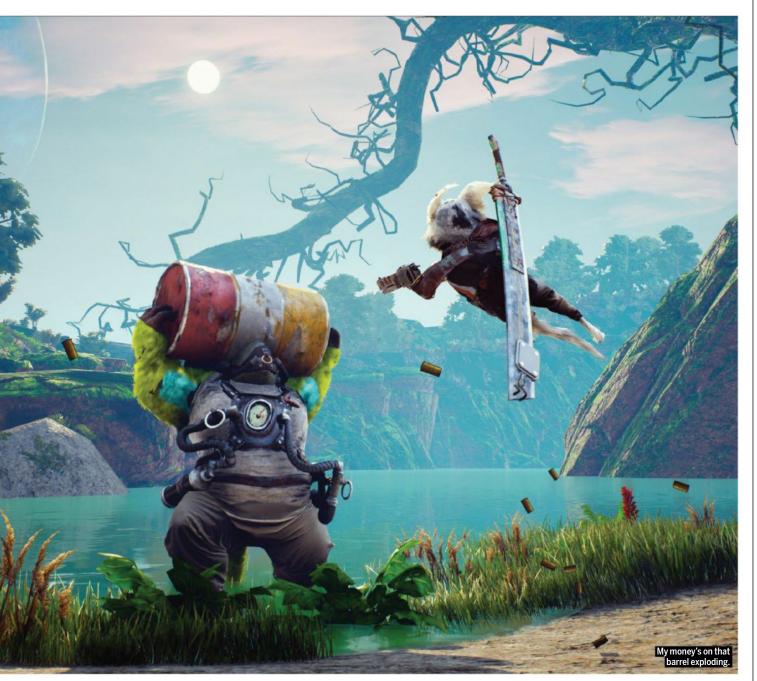
Even at this early stage, Biomutant looks incredibly polished. If it can live up to its promise, it will be one of the best games of 2018. Very rarely do I come away from a hands-off demonstration quite so excited, but this is testament to the ambition and promise Biomutant shows. Experiment 101 is onto something here and I'm now desperate to see more. Joe Donnelly







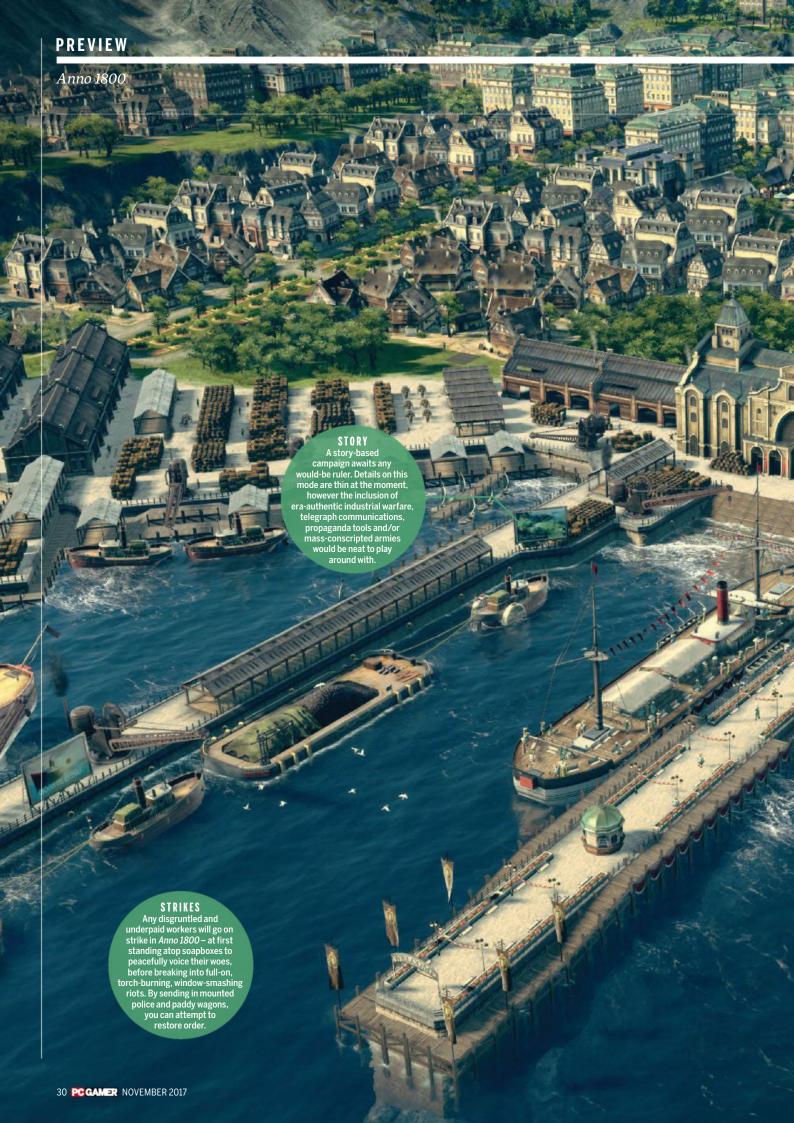
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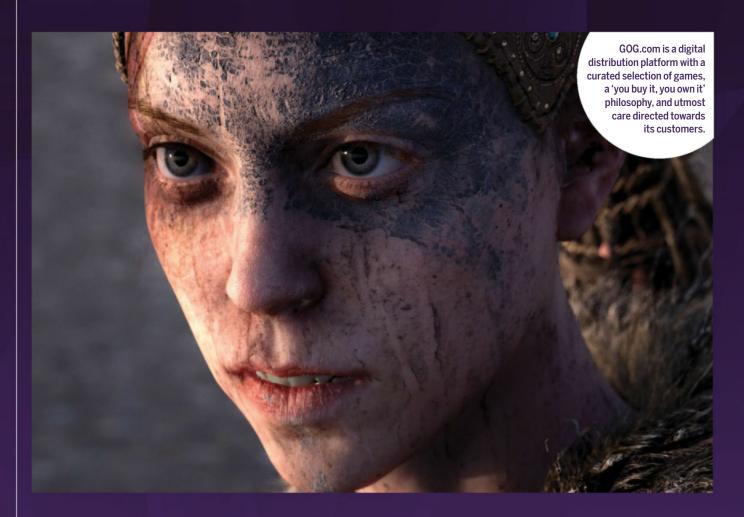






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## **HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE**

inja Theory has a reputation for beautiful worlds and enjoyable encounters, and you'll find both in the intriguing and atmospheric Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. You play as the titular Senua, a Celtic warrior who embarks on a journey into the Norse underworld. Her mission is to reclaim the lost soul of her lover from the grasp of Hela, the goddess of death. That means you'll be fighting against an army of undead Vikings as you get to

grips with the satisfyingly fluid combat system. But *Hellblade* is more than just a mindless hack-and-slasher. Senua is suffering from 'the darkness' – a psychosis that causes that causes hallucinations, including the constant chattering of women who mock her, argue, and occasionally offer advice.

Senua's condition is such that it's not even clear if the realm of Helheim is real. Whatever the truth, though, it's still gorgeous – a true triumph for an indie team with a meticulous eye for craft.





#### **ABSOLVER**

ut up your dukes, because you're entering a world of relentless combat. Part-RPG, part-fighting game, Absolver offers incredible customisation and a deep and satisfying combat system.

Successfully block an enemy's attacks and you can learn their moves. Once learned, you can slot these new skills into a combat editor – letting you build devastating custom combos with which to dominate your foes.

It's a system that means every fight is valuable, both for the experience it provides and the opportunities to grow your character. Will you become a heavyweight bruiser, an evasive striker or a drunken master? Seamless multiplayer integration means there's always someone to test yourself against.



#### **CUPHEAD**

nspired by '30s cartoons, the gorgeous Cuphead oozes style and substance. It's a sidescrolling platformer about running and finger gunning your way through levels filled with weird and wonderfully animated enemies, as Cuphead and his pal Mughead travel through their strange world, seeking out new

weapons and moves on a journey to pay back their debt to the devil.

But Cuphead's raison d'être is its boss battles – each an imaginative bullet-hell battle against a zany cast of characters. You'll battle a weeping onion, a psychic carrot and a pair of boxing frogs, to name just a few. They're fantastically surreal, and offer plenty of challenge.



#### **NEX MACHINA**

f you prefer your peril child-free, and with a whole lightshow of lasers, Nex Machina is the answer. Housemarque's twin-stick shooter is a frenetic bullet hell ballet, as your futuristic biker does battle against hordes of deadly machines.

Housemarque has teamed up with Eugene Jarvis – the arcade

shooter veteran, responsible for games such as *Defender*, *Robotron: 2084* and *Smash TV. Nex Machina* brings that legacy to bear with frantic, exhilarating action in meticulously crafted environments that constantly challenge you to be aware of your surroundings in a fight against seemingly impossible odds. It's beautiful chaos.



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## Exclusive **Sudden Strike 4 demo**

Get your hands on a massive chunk of this old-school style RTS

he first of this issue's two free gifts gives you the chance to try out the latest in the Sudden Strike series of real-time strategy games. Sudden

Strike 4 is a massive, old-school RTS that offers three extensive campaigns set across the battlefields of World War 2. This demo is a PC Gamer exclusive, available to you now weeks before its public release.

It's a meaty chunk of stuff to try, with two missions each from the Allied, Soviet and

German campaigns – letting you test yourself on the battlefields of Leningrad, Stalingrad and the Ardennes, and also take part in Operation Overlord. Don't worry if you're new to *Sudden Strike*. There's also a tutorial, and the chance to try out skirmish mode.



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Free stuff



# Free code for Warhammer 40K: Chaos Gate

This classic promises turn-based Chaos



ourtesy of GOG.com, here's a free copy of the classic strategy *Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate.* Released in 1998, Chaos Gate

blends strategy, RPG and unit customisation. If you're interested in more classic Warhammer games, visit www.bit.ly/WH40KPCG.

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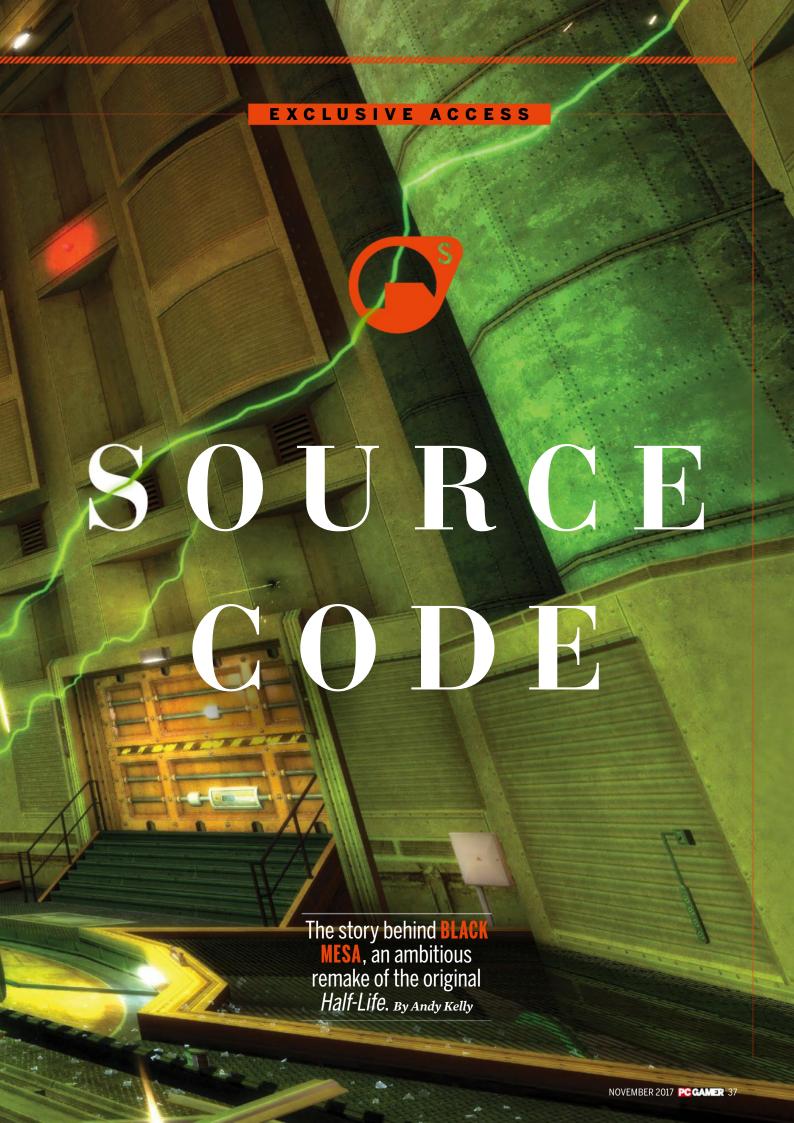
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ight years in the making, *Black Mesa* is finally nearing its release. Initially developed by a passionate team of

hobbyist developers, this remake of the original Half-Life – fully backed by Valve – has bloomed into something more ambitious. With the help of Steam's Early Access platform, the team has found itself with the resources to remake and overhaul the original's controversial Xen chapters, bringing them more in line with the quality of the rest of the game. And when it's done, this will be the best way to relive the Black Mesa incident. I spoke with project leader Adam Engels about the incredible journey so far.

ABOVE: All your favourite classic Half-Life weapons return in Black Mesa. but with massively improved sound and visual effects. "The world of *Half-Life* is a detailed painting, where the more you look, the more you see," says Engels, speaking on behalf of the *Black Mesa* team. "Even though all the events were scripted, it felt like you were affecting the world. You could find hidden paths, make NPCs react to you." It was, he says, the perfect balance of letting the player create their own experiences and "a summer action movie".

"I think a lot of people thought Half-Life: Source was going to be an HD remaster," he says. "In actuality, it was a demonstration of how easy projects could be moved to the new Source engine." As a response to this, two teams – Leakfree and Half-Life: Source Overhaul Project – decided to create their own remakes around 2004. "But once they realised they

were working towards the same goal, they merged and started the adventure that is now simply called *Black Mesa*."

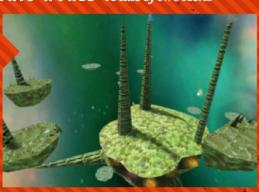
Today, *Black Mesa* is available to buy on Steam, and I ask Engels if the team ran into any legal troubles with Valve. "Nope," he says. "Valve actually came to us to see if we wanted to sell the game and become an official licensee to get access to the full game engine." It was a big decision, he says, but something the team couldn't refuse. "It gave us so much more resources to develop the game with."

In November 2015 the team even visited Valve's HQ in Bellevue, Washington. "A number of past and present developers were able to make it," says Engels. "It's hard to speak for everyone at Valve, but the company must like us a little if it's allowing us

#### OUT OF THIS WORLD A tale of two Xens

#### HALF-LIFE

The original Half-Life's Xen levels are, frankly, hideous. And they aren't much fun to play, either. This is the only part of the game most people agree is rubbish.





#### MESA 2017

Xen has been completely overhauled in Black Mesa. It's prettier, with some dazzling, otherworldly lighting effects, and the maps have been rebuilt completely from scratch.

to do this project." Not many game companies would allow something like *Black Mesa* to exist, let alone be sold on its own distribution platform. But the quality, polish and passion of *Black Mesa* obviously won Valve over.

Black Mesa is currently in Early Access as the team works to complete the Xen chapters, a massive overhaul of arguably the worst bit of the original Half-Life. "This enabled us to actually go out and hire people, and acquire talent we otherwise wouldn't have," says Engels. "We got a huge amount of talent simply by having a project people were excited about, but having a budget let us seek out and hire specific developers."

The Black Mesa team doesn't work in one office, which can make orchestrating such a huge project difficult. "We use chat programs and online forums," says Engels. "We try and use chat to work out specific problems, then use forums to document what we talked about so we can refer to it later." Time zones are one of the biggest hurdles for such a disconnected team, and it's basically impossible to get everyone together at once. "We try to schedule a few meetings or playtests where everyone can get involved. We've been using Google Docs recently and they've been a huge help."

Engels thinks history has been crueller to Xen than it deserves. "I think the dislike of those levels might have grown in our minds as time has gone on," he says. "We see a lot of support for the old Xen on our Steam forums." The consensus in the community, he adds, is that Valve ran out of time and wasn't able to iterate on the alien levels like they did with the rest of the game. "We can tell you from our own experience that taking your game to a new world is more challenging than it looks on paper."

The *Black Mesa* team's main goal for Xen is adding the same level of



#### "THE MAIN CHARACTER IN HALF-LIFE IS BLACK MESA"

worldbuilding seen elsewhere in *Half-Life*, while retaining its alien, otherworldly feel. "Valve does a wonderful job of introducing mechanics, letting you get used to it, then using that mechanic in an unexpected way," says Engels. "We're not looking to reinvent the game with our take on Xen, but it will be much more than just get key, open door."

In the original game, what most refer to simply as 'Xen' is actually five chapters: Xen, Gonarch's Lair, Interloper, Nihilanth and Endgame. They're all being remade and expanded, and some sections Valve had to cut out are being reintroduced.

BOTTOM: Isaac Kleiner from Half-Life 2 shows up, looking a lot younger than when we last met him in City 17. "We made the design with these in mind," says Engels. "In the end we hope to have built a world that is bizarre but contiguous. We want the border world to feel like a place that exists, even if we humans don't have the capacity to understand it."

When Valve created Xen, technical and time limitations had an impact on how it looked. "With the earth-based assets, even if they were super vague due to technical limitations, we at least had an idea of how Valve wanted them to look," says Engels. "But with Xen, we had little to go on. Even if we built a 1:1 replica of the old levels (which we haven't), we still have to ask ourselves: how was this supposed to look?" It's unclear whether the planet was supposed to be as barren as it is, or if Valve had intended it to be much more elaborate and detailed.

"Our biggest challenge has been designing the Xenian technology," says Engels. "It's both mechanical and organic, which is a difficult balance to strike. Our team is talented, but it's vastly different to modernise hallways than to create an alien world completely from scratch."

As for the *Black Mesa* facility itself, the team went above and beyond merely remaking the existing levels. "I think you could argue that the main character in *Half-Life* is Black Mesa itself," says Engels. "We



#### **COVER FEATURE**

Black Mesa

wanted to modernise the game, so we had to really dive into *Half-Life 2* and the episodes to look at how they were designed." The team adopted Valve's philosophy of creating games that are "simple on the surface but complex under the hood".

Some areas, particularly the dam in Surface Tension, have been hugely expanded, feeling a lot more dramatic than in the original. "We used real-world reference to get things looking as realistic as possible, then built the game on top of that," says Engels. "When you make your way through Half-Life, what made it feel real was how the facility existed beyond what you could see. A simple closet or the hint of a sprawling complex through a window was enough to create that illusion. And the Source engine really helped us capitalise on that in Black Mesa.'

But while *Black Mesa* largely remains loyal to the source material in spirit, the team did change quite a few things. "The biggest example of what we changed was the chapter On a Rail," says Engels. "We made the player path much clearer at the expense of having it feel a lot more linear." They also updated the game's archaic crouch-jump function. "The player automatically crouches when they jump now, which makes it feel a bit more modern. Crouch-jumping was cool back in 1998, but these days it feels overly complicated."

When you play *Black Mesa* it's remarkable to think that it's a passion project developed by, at least initially, a small team of volunteers. I ask Engels about the challenges of working on a project like this. "Communication has historically been a big challenge for us," he says. "Developers can feel pretty isolated. If the whole team has their heads

down, working away on their tasks, despite the fact a large amount of work is being done, you have no idea unless they make a post about it or discuss it in the chat." Sharing work takes time, he says, but is ultimately worth it to keep the team motivated.

"And let's be honest," he adds.
"Deadlines are a huge challenge for
the team, too. Transitioning from a
team of volunteers to a team working
on an Early Access project, with a
responsibility to the customers who
spent money on it, is a really big
commitment." Engels also mentions
that, because people with skills
specific to the Source engine are

# "OUR COMMUNITY CONTINUES TO ASTOUND ME"

getting rare these days, it's becoming more of a struggle to recruit people. But the team gets by. "Sometimes we'll go out and find developers we like or post a job opening, but often they'll contact us and their resumes will be so good we can't say no."

Audio is another area *Black Mesa* excels in, with professional sound, music and acting. The voices, particularly that of the scientists and 'Barney' are impressively close to the original game. "We had some auditions in 2006 where we found Mike Hillard for the scientists and Kevin Sisk for the security guards," says Engels. "Audio is often undervalued in projects and we were super thankful to find people who

RIGHT: The Black Mesa facility entrance looks incredible, and is much more dramatic than the sequence in the original.

**BELOW**: Concept art produced by the *Black Mesa* team in order to figure out what Xen would ultimately look like.

BOTTOM: The exterior of the Black Mesa facility has some gorgeous views of the surrounding New Mexico desert.

8









not only sounded like the originals, but really took the audio portion of the project onto their shoulders." Engels singles out composer Joel Nielsen for his music and work on the game's audio. "He deserves a lot of credit for all the work he did on the music and sound effects."

Over the years, *Black Mesa* has attracted a lot of attention, and a large, vocal community has grown around it. Xen has been delayed a few times as the team strives to make it the best it can be, and while some have reacted badly to this, most people have been surprisingly encouraging. "Our community continues to astound me," says Engels. "Through releases and updates we get great feedback. It's a large-scale testing effort that we just wouldn't be able to do otherwise and it is insafely valuable."

12

Engels has been working on *Black Mesa* for close to 11 years now, and it's been a large part of his life. "It's easy to get isolated in development and it can be hard to stay motivated. But comments that say something like, 'I love your work, keep going!' are life-savers. The online world can seem like it wants everyone to fail, and to have a community that wants us to succeed... well, we never take it for granted."

For someone so invested in *Half-Life*, I wonder what Engels feels about the third game. "Personally, I'm

not eager for Half-Life 3, but nor do I want it to fade away," he says. "So much anticipation has been built up that it couldn't come close to living up to it. I'd love to see more games in the Half-Life universe, even if the title doesn't contain the number three. I'd love to see Valve, or another developer, take it on." Black Mesa is due to leave Early Access, complete with the overhauled Xen levels, in December this year. It's been a long road for the team, but the quality of the finished product will hopefully make all that effort worth it.

#### SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST What you will find in Black Mesa



ALIENS
Gruesome, deadly invaders from other worlds. They came pouring through the portal Gordon opened and are causing havoc all around the facility.



MARINES
The Hazardous
Environment
Combat Unit has
been sent in to
'clean up' the
incident, which
means killing
everyone.



SCIENTISTS
The boffins who worked at Black Mesa are mostly seen dying in horrible ways, but they can also help you by opening locked doors.



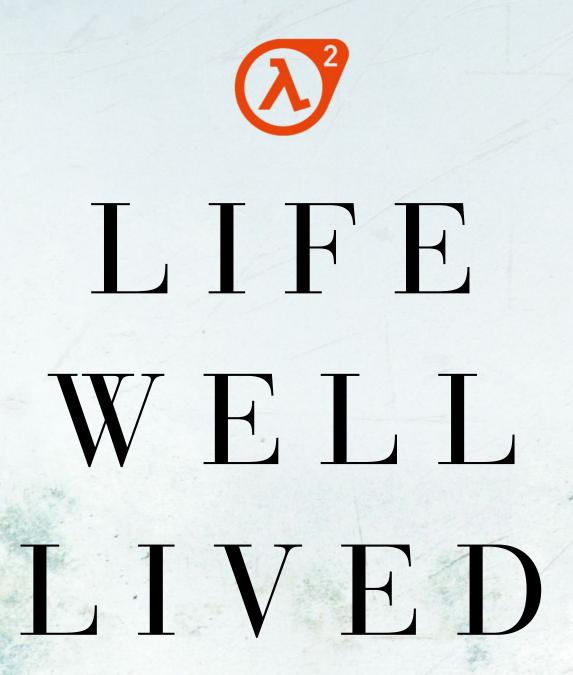
SECURITY
These guys are handy with a pistol and will follow you around, firing at any enemies you encounter. But they're weak, so don't get attached.



ZOMBIES
Former scientists
and security guards,
now transformed
into shambling,
grotesque zombies
by the headcrabs
that latched onto
their faces.

Half-Life 2

FIVE-PART FEATURE



Looking back at HALF-LIFE 2, one of the most important shooters in PC gaming history.



POINT INSERTION by Rick Lane



COAST GUIDE by Robert Yang



BEATDOWN by Steven Messner

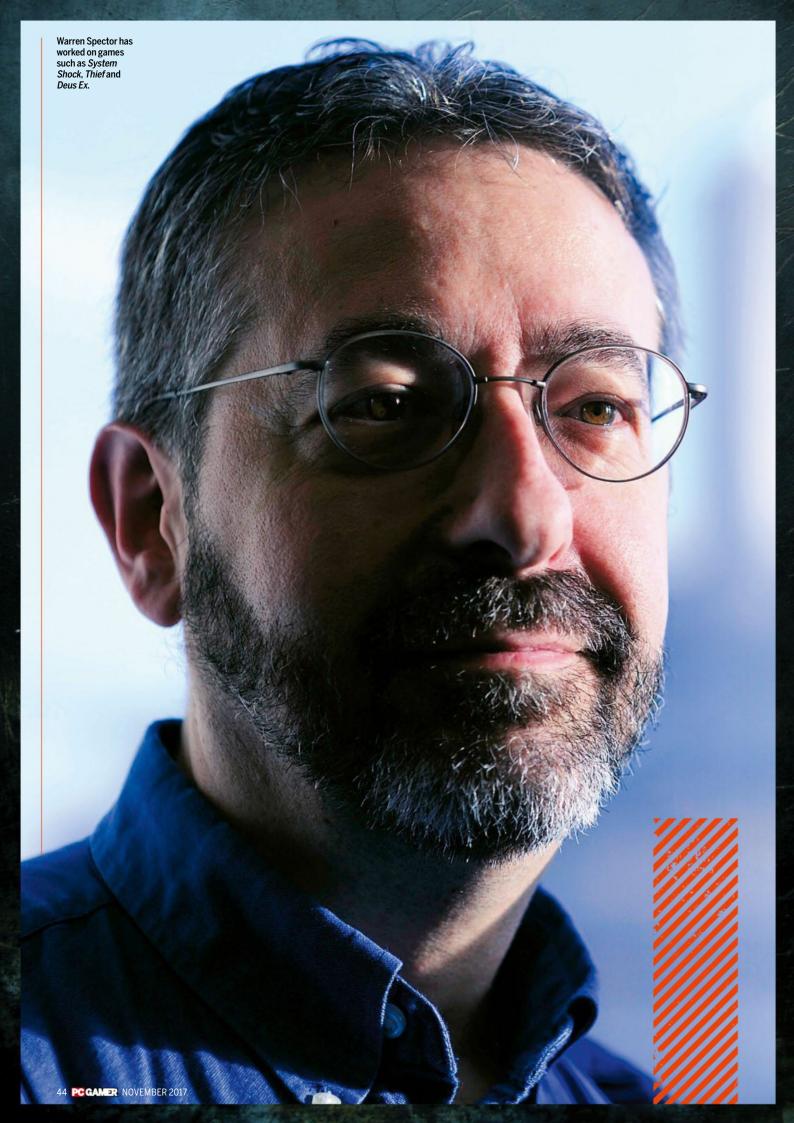


ROAD TO WHITE FOREST by Sam Greer



RISE AND SHINE by Chris Livingston





#### PART

## POINT INSERTION

#### WARREN SPECTOR gives new details about Junction Point's Half-Life 2 Episode. By Rick Lane

unction Point Studios is best known for developing the Wii-exclusive action adventure *Epic Mickey*. But this wasn't the first project for the studio founded by Warren Spector after his departure from Ion Storm Austin. Somewhere between the end of 2005 and mid-2007, Junction Point studios worked on an additional Episode for *Half-Life 2* 

In the interceding years, only a handful of details about the Episode have emerged. The Episode would have introduced a new weapon called the 'magnet gun', although it was never explained how the gun worked. In addition, earlier this year, purported images of the project leaked online, depicting what appeared to be the zombie-infested town of Ravenholm carpeted in snow. But whether these environments formed part of Junction Point's final vision for the project, or to what extent Ravenholm would have appeared in the Episode, was never determined.

that was ultimately cancelled by Valve.

Now, though, PC Gamer can confirm that not only was Ravenholm to feature in Junction Point's Episode, but it was to be the focus of the entire game. "We wanted to tell the story of how Ravenholm became what it was in the *Half-Life* universe. That seemed like an underdeveloped story that fans would really enjoy," says Warren Spector. "In addition to fleshing out the story of Ravenholm, we wanted to see more of Father Grigori and see how he came to be the character he later became in *Half-Life 2*."

Part of the reason little has been revealed about the project is because Spector's memory of that time is hazy at best. Aside from that Father Grigori would have featured prominently, Spector remembers little else about how the story would have unfolded. When the images of the Episode were placed online, the map's content suggested two characters named Duncan and

Scooter would accompany the player, but Spector cannot recall them. Indeed, he isn't even sure whether the player would have assumed the role of Gordon Freeman or played a different character.

What Spector can recall, and in considerable detail, is the magnet gun, and how it would have functioned. "If I remember correctly, it was team lead Matt Baer who came up with the idea for the magnet gun," he says. "It went through several iterations, but the one I remember was one where you'd fire a sticky magnetic ball at a surface and anything made of metal would be forcefully attracted to it."

The magnet gun was Junction Point's twist on the gravity gun idea from the original *Half-Life 2*. Instead of drawing objects into the player's grasp, it would attract metal objects to a remote location designated by the player via firing the magnetic balls at a surface. Spector cites several colourful examples of how this could have been used.

"You could fire it at a wall across an alley from a heavy metal dumpster and wham! The dumpster would fly across the alley and slam into the wall. You can imagine the effect on anything approaching you in the alley – either squashed or blocked. Or you could be fighting two robots and hit one with a magnet ball and they'd slam together making movement or combat impossible for them. Or you could be trying to get across a high-up open space with an I-beam hanging from a cable in the middle.

Stand on the I-beam, fire a magnet ball at the far wall, the beam swings across the gap, walk off it, done."

Although Half-Life has always been a linear shooter, Half-Life 2's Episode Two expansion experimented with a slightly more open-ended structure, especially toward its conclusion. Meanwhile, Spector's own games have always been geared toward letting the player explore and interact with the

environment in numerous ways. Would we have seen an open world version of Ravenholm in Junction Point's Episode? Spector says no. Well, mostly no. "We would have followed the *Half-Life* pattern. *Half-Life* players had expectations and thwarting them would have been crazy. Having said that, introducing the magnet gun would inevitably have opened up new gameplay possibilities players would likely have exploited in unpredictable ways," he says.

This was Junction Point's rough design pitch for its *Half-Life 2*Episode. But how much had Junction Point put into production at the point of cancellation? Spector says it had "put in a solid year" of work into

#### "IT WENT THROUGH SEVERAL ITERATIONS"

development and had a "small area that demonstrated how the game would look when we were done" in place, alongside a "vertical slice" that showed the magnet gun in action.

Spector doesn't know why Valve decided to ultimately cancel the project. But he describes the news as "frustrating". "We had *just* figured out how to really use the Source engine, how to get the most out of it and we had just started building what I thought was amazing stuff. And that's when Valve pulled the plug," he explains.

"To this day, I don't really know why [Valve] decided not to move ahead with the Episode, but they did and, frankly, that worked out okay. If they hadn't we might not have been available to work on *Epic Mickey* for Disney," he concludes. "Everything happens for a reason, I guess."





#### PART III

### **BEATDOWN**

Inside the oppressive world of Half-Life 2 ROLEPLAYING. By Steven Messner



y name is Pritus Jenkins, Citizen #00670. I know this number by heart because in the last few hours I've had to recite it around five times. Such is life as a citizen in City 17, where the alien Combine which patrol the streets

love nothing more than to stop and harass me. I'm playing on a multiplayer *Garry's Mod* server, roleplaying *Half-Life 2*. but the role I play isn't that of a hero. I am no Gordon Freeman. I am Pritus Jenkins, a 55-year-old man with a limp. And I'm hungry.

If Half-Life 2's roleplaying community were a food, it'd be the bland, mushy packet of rations I receive hourly from the dispensary located just off the central square of the dystopian city. This isn't a place for grand adventures and bravery, but a community of hundreds dedicated to experiencing the hopeless oppression of a society crushed under authoritarian alien rule.

Half-Life 2 roleplayers are a hardcore bunch. Even the Combine soldiers, toting weapons and bureaucratic power, are hopelessly chained by their dedication to believable roleplay. When it's my turn to receive my rations, which are handed out by Combine players every hour, I'm asked to 'apply' – to state my name and Citizen ID. The Combine soldier uses emotes to inform me that they're looking up my file in the tablet they're holding. I stand there, silent, for an uncomfortably long number of seconds. Then the Combine soldier turns around, grabs a unit of rations, and shoves them into my character's hands. That player will do this countless times as other citizens, like me, stop by to get their food.

As I walk around and explore the ruined alleys and dilapidated streets of this City 17 district, I can see the other citizens looking at me. Some talk amongst one another in whispers, while others lean against walls using in-game emotes to smoke imaginary cigarettes. It's an almost perfect recreation of the mood of *Half-Life 2*'s opening hour, only with real players instead of computer

actors playing out the mundane minutes of their pointless lives.

After a few minutes, one player approaches me but just as he's about to say something, a Combine soldier comes around the corner. He turns away. When the Combine soldier passes, the man immediately turns back and heads back my way.

"Ugly," he says.

"What did you just call me?" I type back. There is no voice chat, so every exchange is written in a text box on the lower left of my screen.

The man turns and walks away. Hesitant about what I should do, I decide to pursue him at a distance. I don't know these streets, I don't know these people. But maybe if I follow this man to his destination, he'll do something suspicious and I can report him to a Combine soldier and get him arrested.

After a few minutes of stalking him, the man stands before a locked gate. I crouch behind a piece of corrugated steel, watching and hoping he'll do something dumb.

"Citizen, apply!"

I turn around to find a Combine soldier right behind me. Without complaint, I tell him my name and Citizen ID.

"Face the wall," the soldier commands, and I wonder if the few minutes I spent on this server are about to come to a depressing end. "What were you doing?"

"N-nothing, sir," I say. "I thought I dropped something."

# HALF-LIFE 2 ROLEPLAYERS ARE HARDCORE

Without another question, the Combine places a zip tie around my hands, binding them so that I can't attack him – not that I'd be able put up a fight anyway. Out of the corner of my eye I see the citizen I was following scoff at me.

following scoff at me.

"I've been watching you for a
while," the Combine soldier tells me.

"You're acting pretty suspicious. I'm
going to take you in for questioning.
Follow me."

Not sure what to do – or even what I could do – I turn around and begin to follow the soldier.

Toly"

I turn around and see the other citizen staring at me. His character wears a blank expression, but there's a smugness about it too. I've been roleplaying in *Garry's Mod* for maybe 20 minutes now, and already I've come face to face with the cruelty of its world. Somewhere, far from here, Gordon Freeman and the Resistance might be fighting to liberate the people of City 17, I imagine. But as the Combine soldier leads me to the ebony black doors of the Combine headquarters in this area, I fear I won't be one of them.











TOP: Combine soldiers are played by roleplayers, too. They're bound by the world's bureaucracy.

ABOVE: Server mods let players use custom actions, such as arresting problem citizens.

**LEFT**: Could you make a life for youself in the rundown, oppressive dystopia of City 17?









**TOP:** The destination of *Episode Two* looms over you the entire way.

**ABOVE**: Mundane as the locations are throughout this brief trip, they're still memorable.

**LEFT**: The end of the road sure is pretty.

#### PART IV

## ROAD TO WHITE FOREST

Episode Two's RIDING SHOTGUN chapter is Half-Life at its best. By Sam Green

A ftc co br en to, bu

fter hours of tunnels, caves and corridors I now stand on a rickety bridge with the promise of something entirely different. It might be welded together from a dozen different things but this car in front of me has got style

and, more importantly, it's my ticket to freedom. *Episode Two* feels like it has been very carefully building to this. Putting you through the familiar motions all so it can make obtaining this car feel like the big deal it is. *Half-Life 2* had its vehicle sections but they felt stilted, bogged down in endless obstacles. This? This is the start of an epic road trip.

Wounded at the start of the game, it's great to see a recovered Alyx excited about the car. Gordon might be silent but I share her enthusiasm. Heading off means leaving our lovely Vortigaunt companion behind, though. Alyx gives him a peck on the cheek as a show of gratitude and honestly, it's hard to remember these were once the villains of Half-Life. How times change. I put my foot down on that pedal (or press firmly on the W key) and we speed off down the tunnel onto the road beyond. The deep valleys, snowcapped mountains and verdant forest is a breath of fresh air after dozens of hours spent in the streets of City 17.

Alyx spies a radio tower and suggests we use it to send a warning ahead to the resistance base at White Forest, our destination. We take five to get the radio up and running but it's too quiet. Then we're ambushed by the Hunters. These foes took me by surprise at the start of *Episode Two*, wounding Alyx and leaving Gordon helpless. They're meaner than anything Valve's used before. Like that guard right back in City 17, who demands you throw that can in the trash, these Hunters humiliated you. Now it's time for revenge.

Unlike so many foes in Half-Life 2, you're not coached on how to defeat the Hunters. This is the deep end you're thrown in. What matters, though, is Valve has given you an array of tools and weapons to decide how to tackle it. This

moment, like those that follow, is a mini-sandbox. Hunters might be an unknown but they're subject to the same rules as everything else and by this point in *Half-Life*, we know the rules well. Overcoming them feels like an achievement that's more our own than defeating any enemy I've tackled in the series before. That's how you make revenge feel good; you make it feel like it's my idea.

Of course *Episode Two* isn't just defined by wrath. The times when you have to hop back in the car and flee, instead of having to get bogged down in some sort of siege, are a relief. *Episode Two* is about motion, moving forward, no matter what.

Numerous ambushes follow, and they leave me itching for the road. Each ambush is more severe than the last, each one keeping me further and further from my car. I've never hated the Combine more. If *Half-Life 2* started you with no freedom or power then asked you to find it, *Episode Two* takes it away and gives you the means to take it back by force. There's a constant ebb and flow of catharsis, interspersed with the joy of simply being on the move.

We're almost at our destination. A gate bars the way and it looks like we might have to leave the car behind. From the wreckage of a crashed dropship one of the Combine's tripods emerges but before it can tear us up, Alyx' faithful robot companion Dog leaps from the trees and saves us. A reunion more than worth the

#### I'VE NEVER HATED THE COMBINE MORE

long drive. He helps open the gate for us so we can bring the car through. Alyx excitedly suggests a race against Dog to the resistance base.

I don't know what lies ahead. This might be the end of the road and there may be no more adventures for us. Dog charges ahead, Alyx laughs and I hit the gas. Not to worry. It's been one hell of a ride. @



#### PART V

## RISE AND SHINE

COMIC: G-Man's tips for speedrunning Half-Life 2. By Christopher Livingston

START WITH A SPEECH Skipping the lengthy speech on the train is... tempting to shave off a few minutes, but the need for a speedrun shouldn't overshadow good

showmanship. Take your time. Speak... haltingly. WAKEY WAKEY

**USE THE AIRWAVES** You don't always have to spy in person. Show up on a... monitor from time to time. It will net you royalties and you won't need to... wear pants.





**FOCUS ON FREEMAN** 

Don't waste time searching for... wherever you put Adrian Shephard. Face it. You just plain lost him.



**TELEPORT** You can skip that whole... bullshit antlion beach by using teleportation. Don't forget to get there early.



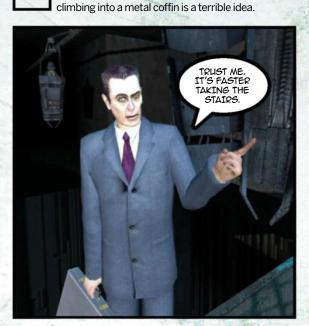








**AVOID TRANSPORT PODS** It doesn't take a theoretical physicist to know that...



**FREEZE TIME** 

This always saves... time. In fact, it saves all of the time. Come to think of it you should have... been doing this from the start. My... bad.



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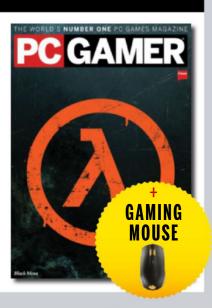
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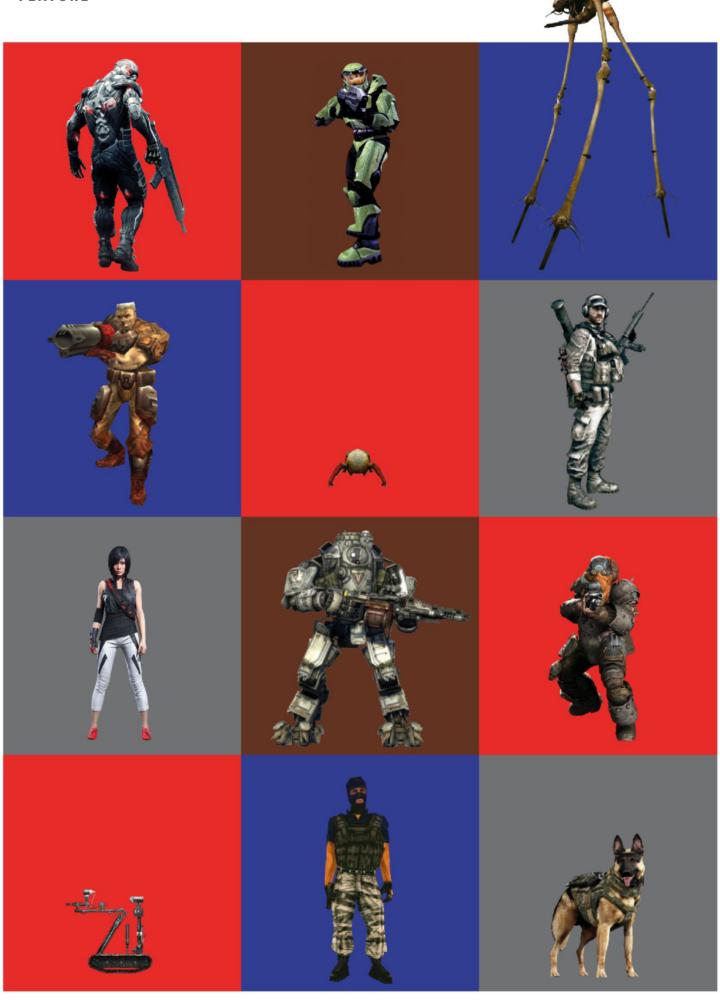
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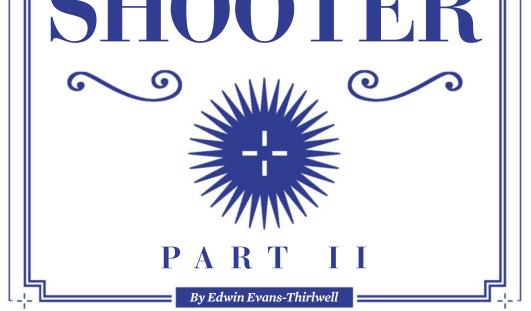
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# FIRST PERSON





ne of the greatest influences on first-person shooters at the turn of the millennium wasn't a game, but a film: Steven Spielberg's World War 2 epic, Saving Private Ryan. The movie's thunderous portrayal of the D-Day landings would find echoes decades later in videogames like *Killzone* and *Titanfall*. Spielberg himself also has a robust association with game development: he co-founded DreamWorks Interactive with Microsoft in 1995 to work on adaptations of movies like Small Soldiers. Seeking a way to teach younger people about the war after wrapping up production on Saving Private Ryan, Spielberg asked DWI to develop a shooter, *Medal of Honor*, for Sony's trendy new PlayStation platform.

Launched in 1999 to strong sales, the game was a watershed moment in several respects. On the one hand, its more earnest, grounded approach opened the genre up to players put off by the lurid sci-fi or pulp comic settings of games like *Doom* and *Wolfenstein*. On the other, it facilitated tense discussions about the right of videogame



developers to depict such events, and the possibility that violent games spark violent behaviour. *Medal of Honor* released a few months after the Columbine massacre in Colorado, an atrocity that gave rise to a moral panic over videogame violence. Fearful of a backlash, DreamWorks Interactive removed all blood from the game before launch. It also attracted a heated reaction from the US Congressional Medal of Honor Society, and its president voiced his concerns to Spielberg in person. The game's release, in spite of all this, created a precedent for other studios to comment openly on history and society.

The close of the '90s also saw the release of the gorgeous Unreal, sparking a decade-long rivalry between creator Epic MegaGames and id Software. Conceived as a sort of 'magic carpet' experience where you fly through caverns dotted with robots, the game evolved into a bona fide Quake killer, running on a proprietary technology capable of 16-bit colour and ambient effects, such as volumetric fog. Like Quake, the game was designed to be modded easily and extensively. Also like Quake, its multiplayer left something to be desired at launch. Epic released a deathmatch-oriented standalone expansion, Unreal Tournament, in 1999, narrowly ahead of the arrival of id's Quake III: Arena. A brace of colourful alternate fire options aside, it was notable for including both more competitive 'hardcore' and relatively playful 'theme' maps, such as levels floating in Earth's orbit. The franchise found a dedicated following online, but the bedrock of Epic's business would prove to be founder Tim Sweeney's Unreal Engine, a highly modular entity designed for continual improvement. It would power games as diverse as Ion Storm's legendary immersive sim *Deus Ex* and EA's adaptations of the Harry Potter movies.

Where *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament* dealt in cartoon bazookas and evaporating torsos, another 1999 release,





Counter-Strike, set its sights on military realism. A Half-Life mod created by attic developers Minh Le and Jess Cliffe, it saw teams of terrorists and counter-terrorists struggling to arm or defuse bombs and rescue or maintain custody of VIPs, customising their loadouts with currency earned at the end of each round. The mod wasn't a landmark success to begin with, but Valve's designers knew a killer formula when they smelled it and scooped up Le and Cliffe along with the intellectual property rights in 2000. Counter-Strike became an enduring phenomenon, buoyed up by thousands of user-created maps (including David Johnston's legendary Middle Eastern levels Dust and Dust 2) and a community as

Medal of Honor: Allied Assault

Unreal Tournament

3 Quake III Arena

4 Counter-Strike



#### VALVE'S DESIGNERS KNEW A KILLER FORMULA WHEN THEY SMELLED IT

resistant to fundamental rule changes as any diehard fan of football. Perhaps the definitive esport shooter, its objective-based modes and tactics-driven design are integral to the DNA of competitive multiplayer today.

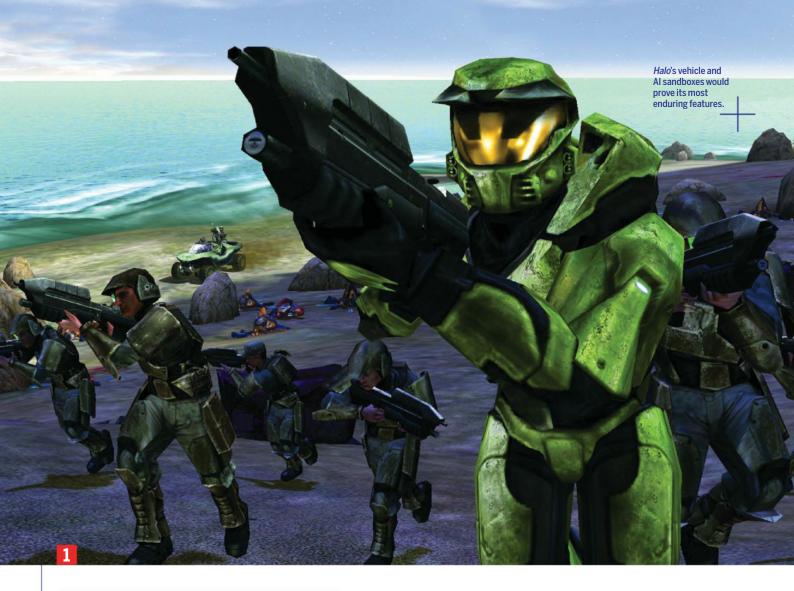
2000 was also the year that Microsoft acquired Bungie, thereby depriving Apple's Mac of one of its more coveted games, a science fiction odyssey called *Halo*. The game had begun life as an open world exploration affair, running on Bungie's Myth engine, and something of that luxuriant scale remains in the completed *Halo*: *Combat Evolved*, which was an enormous hit when it launched on Microsoft's first Xbox console in 2001. *Halo*'s environments were bright, rangy and colourful, where other shooters were claustrophobic and dingy, and they



#### AFTER COLUMBINE

On 20 April 1999, American teenagers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris shot and killed 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School. It was also claimed that Harris had designed first-person shooter maps based on the school itself to train himself for the attack. In May 2001, a suit

was filed against id Software, publisher GT Interactive and others on behalf of some of the victims. The suit was ultimately thrown out, but it gave rise to years of discussion over possible links between videogame violence and violent behaviour.





#### PLAYING WITH PORTALS

A collaboration between DigiPen Institute of Technology students and Valve, 2007's Portal isn't strictly speaking a shooter, but its outlandish physics puzzles and sense of level design and scripting as a form of coercion make it feel like a critique of Half-Life – a parallel the game's wonderfully funny ending sequence plays up to. Based on the DigiPen game Narbacular Drop,

Portal casts you as a human lab rat armed with a gun that creates portals, lost in a shifting mechanical labyrinth run by a malicious, yet utterly inept, Al. The Portal Gun itself is every bit as fun to mess around with as Half-Life 2's Gravity Gun but the game's unquestioned star is your nemesis, GlaDOS, a carnival mirror image of the Al antagonists from System Shock and Marathon.



were lent an intense overarching unity by the silhouette of the *Halo* ringworld itself, stretching up through each skybox. Its crowded encounters were far more openended than in most competitors, woven around delightful AI variables like Grunt footsoldiers kamikaze-rushing the player after you kill their leader. Its weapons retained something of *Quake* and *Unreal*'s excess – overcharging an energy pistol to strip an opponent's shield in one go would become a standard multiplayer tactic – but its blend of finite player health and recharging overshields imposed a more studied, back-and-forth rhythm on firefights. *Halo* also showed off Bungie's knack for worldbuilding: the fascination of its wider universe would help cement its status as Microsoft's flagship series.

Halo would be eclipsed, however, by another World War 2 shooter, created using id Software's Quake III engine by Infinity Ward – a studio founded by veterans of Medal of Honor: Allied Assault with startup money from Activision. Released in 2003, Call of Duty was among the first shooters to let players aim down a weapon's sights - a gambit that created a sense of fearful claustrophobia, narrowing your attention to the gun roaring in your hands, even as the game's sprawling levels and battalions of AI troopers courted comparison with Allied Assault. It was a little overshadowed by Medal of Honor on PC, but Call of Duty's popularity caught the eye of Microsoft, who asked Activision to develop an Xbox 360 port of the sequel. With Halo 3 still a couple of years away, Call of Duty 2 was a bestseller at the console's 2005 launch. Mindful of the risks of hanging an entire series on a single developer, Activision brought on Spider-Man studio Treyarch to design Call of Duty 3 using the second game's engine, giving Infinity Ward an extra year at the coalface. It was the beginning of a yearly alternation that, together with the franchise's all-year-round multiplayer appeal,

would allow *Call of Duty* to bury competitors and exert an out-sized influence on the genre at large.

Among Infinity Ward's more ferocious competitors was a multiplayer-centric WW2 game created by Swedish developer DICE. *Battlefield:* 1942 saw up to 64 players tussling for capture points on enormous, open maps. Where *Call of Duty*'s own multiplayer came to prioritise pace and lone wolf virtuosity, *Battlefield* emphasised squad composition, the canny use of strategic resources such as vehicles, and above all, depth of simulation. The developer's Refractor engine allowed for such crude feats of real-time physics as using TNT to launch a jeep across a bay onto an aircraft carrier's deck. Though never quite a trendsetter in the increasingly lucrative console market, in large part die to its anaemic campaign options, *Battlefield*'s scale and freedom were a tonic for armchair generals weary of vanilla deathmatch.

Crytek's Far Cry had a similar appeal. It began life as a glorified tech demo, the catchily titled X-Isle: Dinosaur

#### FAR CRY ALLOWED YOU TO RUN AMOK IN A VAST TROPICAL PLAYSPACE

Island, but flowered with Ubisoft's backing into the first open world FPS in the current sense of the term. Where other shooters taught players to keep pushing forward, Far Cry allowed you to run amok in a vast tropical environment, using the undergrowth for cover while tracking unsuspecting soldiers through your binoculars. The series would go onto enjoy a symbiotic relationship with Ubisoft's third-person Assassin's Creed games, each

1 Halo: Combat Evolved

2 Call of Duty

Battlefield 1942

4 Far Crv



#### **HATS OFF**

Finally released in 2007 after years of vapourware accusations as part of Valve's celebrated *Orange Box, Team Fortress 2* is memorable for several reasons. Firstly, it's a well-tuned, creative multiplayer shooter, its classes wicked respins of '60s spy and action movie archetypes. Secondly, it is a high watermark for nihilistic (yet misogynistic) humour in videogames.

Thirdly, its cartoon style tacks hard against the games industry's perennial fixation with gloomy photorealistic settings. There is no grit, clutter or excess shadow in *TF2*'s hectic cartoon-style world. And fourthly, it would enjoy enormous longevity, thanks to a barrage of updates and the decision to go free-to-play in 2011. Its greatest descendant is probably *Overwatch*.









1 Half-Life 2

Call of Duty 4

experimenting with new ways to structure and diversify an open world.

If Far Cry was one of 2004's highlights, it and every other game that year was utterly dwarfed by Valve's Half-Life 2. While not as transformative in terms of storytelling craft as its predecessor, the new game's post-alien invasion dystopia was a work of unprecedented delicacy. Where older shooters looked to B-movies for inspiration, Half-Life 2's incompletely terraformed city compares to mid-20th century Communist eastern Europe (the game's art director, Viktor Antonov, hails from Bulgaria) - at once grand and ground down, alternating steely megaliths with trash-strewn riverbeds and grubby prisons. Its principle opponents aren't bug-eyed monsters but masked enforcers wielding batons and carbines, their presence given away by indecipherable radio chatter. It's also, for all its linearity, a celebration of player agency, handing you a Gravity Gun that allows you to pluck and hurl sawblades at enemies, solve slightly goofy seesaw puzzles and pile up objects at whim. The game was widely imitated, within the first-person shooter genre and without, but arguably its greatest legacy is Steam, Valve's now-globe-straddling desktop games store. It's hard to imagine players embracing the clunky 2004 version of Steam quite so readily, were it not required to play Half-Life 2.

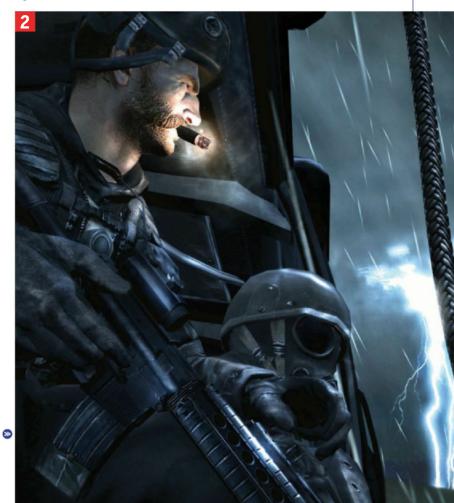
If Valve's offering set the standard for FPS design (in terms of its campaign, at least) it was Call of Duty that swallowed up most of the limelight during the '00s, the critical year being 2007. Weary of World War 2 and conscious of the need to differentiate its offering from Treyarch's, Infinity Ward decided to transport the series to the present day. The result, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, unlocked a brand-new vocabulary for the first-person shooter. It traded the mud and everyman heroics of WW2 experiences for a slick, cheerfully amoral celebration of western military hardware and urban combat tactics - arming the player with laser sights, ghillie suits, Stinger launchers and drones. It also courted topicality where games like Medal of Honor had tried to distance themselves from the headlines - one level sees you living out the final moments of a country's deposed president, while another puts you at the controls of an AC-130 gunship, in scenes familiar from news footage of the Iraq War. But what it is mostly remembered for today is the multiplayer. Infinity Ward's decision to introduce a levelling and unlocks system derived from roleplaying games is the most influential sea change in shooter design during the past decade. Its notion of an online career, whereby players kept plugging away for small rewards rather than just enjoyment, also helped popularise the emerging concept of the game as 'service'.



#### **ACADEMY AWARDS**

LucasArts released a slew of terrific Star Wars games during the early '00s. Possibly the best known today are the original Star Wars: Battlefront games from Mercenaries developer Pandemic – where the Dark Forces captured the feel of a battle down a Death Star corridor, Battlefront sought to represent the larger pitched encounters from The Empire Strikes Back

and Return of the Jedi. Like DICE's Battlefield games, they saw large mixed-class player armies vying for possession of capture points on gigantic maps. Raven Software's Jedi Knight series, meanwhile, thrust you into the boots of an aspiring Jedi, supplementing gunplay with lightsaber combos. Its community remains one of the internet's most formidable cliques.



all of Duty 4 wasn't the only game to do a little genre-splicing in 2007. Irrational's BioShock began life as a spiritual follow-up to the System Shock series - its creative director, the soon-to-be-famous Ken Levine, was a designer on *System Shock 2* – but over time it became more of a shooter than an immersive simulation or RPG. It casts the player as an airplane crash survivor exploring a disintegrating undersea 'utopia' created by a renegade industrialist, in a thinly disguised meditation on the philosophy of Ayn Rand. The game's combat, which married chunky period firearms with pseudo-magical powers or 'Plasmids', would prove its weakest element. More intriguing was the universe of cruelty and hubris it sketched, a labyrinth of leaking glass tunnels and domed Art Deco plazas.

Building on Half-Life 2's example, Irrational left much of Rapture's backstory for players to discover in the form of audio diaries, graffiti and random bric-a-brac. Its environmental storytelling would attract legions of imitators across several genres, from Raven Software's unfairly overlooked 2010 shooter Singularity through body-horror masterpiece Dead Space to so-called 'walking simulators' like Gone Home. It also formed part of an ongoing conversation about games as a means of rousing empathy or exploring moral quandaries. BioShock's signature characters are the Little Sisters, mutated little girls who collect genetic material from corpses under the eye of their powerful guardians, the Big Daddies. Having disposed of the latter, you can either spare Little Sisters or kill them to harvest their 'ADAM', a resource you can use to upgrade your own powers.

The late '00s saw the rise of the open world shooter, with Crytek's fearsome *Crysis* swaddling the player in



2 BioShock

3 Far Cry 2





power armour in order to battle aliens on vet another overgrown island wilderness. The game was sold as an exercise in technological masochism, its detail, lighting and plethora of effects 'melting' all but the most expensive PC hardware. But its real trump card was the ability to enhance your Nanosuit's agility, strength or endurance on the fly by drawing power from a finite reservoir, making it an engaging risk-reward system. It was soon eclipsed, however, by the Far Cry series, which Crytek had by now sold to Ubisoft. That's both in spite of and thanks to Far Cry 2, an astonishing, bruising shooter stretched across 50 kilometres of African brush. Drawing on his experiences with the Splinter Cell games, designer Clint Hocking set out to create a brutal, Heart of Darkness-esque sandbox in which players fought malaria, self-propagating fire and bullets simultaneously. The results were arresting, but also frustrating, thanks to a patchy narrative, alternately dim or eagle-eyed AI and an unfair enemy respawning system.

2012's widely acclaimed Far Cry 3 removed much of the frustration, and a little of the sophistication. It opened out the terrain, fine-tuned the AI to be more predictable, and put capturing enemy outposts – each a potted stealth-combat puzzle, inspired by the Borgia towers in Assassin's Creed II – at the heart of exploring the map. It also created a combo system, with players chaining melee executions into ranged takedowns, reflecting a growing interest across the industry in fluid first-person animations, epitomised by DICE's 2008 parkour game Mirror's Edge. Less positively, it traded the second game's understated, callous portrayal of a perpetual civil war for a farcical story about whiny, kidnapped backpackers wrestling with the definition of insanity.

Players unconvinced by Far Cry or Crysis had a number of rival open world shooters to choose from. One of them was the Stalker series, inaugurated by Ukrainian developer GSC Game World in 2007, in which scavengers pick their way through radioactive ruins while keeping a look out for monstrous creatures and invisible, fatal anomalies. Stalker's supporting systems were remarkable – at one point, the AI was allegedly capable of completing the game by itself – but its punishing survival simulation ethic limited its audience. Gearbox's roleplaying shooter Borderlands took a friendlier, trashier tack. Released in









#### FEAR EFFECT

From *Doom* onwards, the FPS has enjoyed a fruitful rapport with horror games. Most of the biggest names include a level or two that takes inspiration from the likes of *Resident Evil. Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* has its spooky hoverbike trip through a quarantined Detroit, *Half-Life 2* has its legendary Ravenholm level and *Far Cry* includes fever dreams where the designers are free to invoke

the paranormal. A number of studios also work across genres. Monolith's *FEAR* games are a captivating marriage of heavy ordnance and poltergeist activity. 4A's *Metro* games, meanwhile, pack all the narrative texture of the *Stalker* series into a series of half-collapsed tunnels – though light on jump scares, the first instalment is one of the eeriest games you'll play.

2009, it saw you touring an anarchic, comic book-style planet as one of four classes, hoovering up procedurally generated (often borderline-unusable) weapons. Part of *Borderlands*'s success, the novelty of its arsenal aside, was its humour – a rare quality in an often po-faced genre.

The turn of the decade saw a number of long-running FPS series beginning to lose momentum. Most obviously, the Medal of Honor series underwent an abortive attempt at reinvention in 2010, with publisher EA looking to fill gaps in the schedule between Battlefield instalments. In jumping forward from WW2 to present-day Afghanistan, the once-proud series merely left itself open to unflattering comparisons with 2009's Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. id Software's properties were also at low ebb. Though an accomplished horror experience, 2007's Doom 3 lost out to Half-Life 2, while Quake had all but evaporated following Quake 4's muted reception in 2005. Raven Software's 2009 Wolfenstein reboot doubleddown on the paranormal aspects of the series backstory, to mixed effect. Following a similarly lukewarm response to Singularity, parent company Activision retasked the studio to help out with the Call of Duty series. RAGE - id's only new IP during these years save mobile game Orcs & Elves - proved a visual extravaganza and a gratifyingly hefty, Mad Max-ish shooter, but all too often felt like it was playing second fiddle to its own graphics technology. id's old foe Epic, meanwhile, was increasingly dedicated to the third-person Gears of War series and its flourishing Unreal Engine business.

Call of Duty continued to reign supreme, though it attracted increasingly stiff competition from EA's Battlefield – a franchise increasingly (and a little unfairly) pitched as a freeform 'thinking man's shooter', more respectful of player agency than the linear, attrition-driven Call of Duty. After experimenting with a lighter,









buddy-comedy vibe in the *Bad Company* spin-offs, DICE amped up the grandeur with *Battlefield 3*, a multiple perspective tale of abducted nuclear weapons set partly in Iran (the bestselling instalment until DICE's journey into WW1 with *Battlefield 1*). The series had become famous for its Frostbite engine technology, which amongst other things allowed for real-time terrain destruction in multiplayer: participants could do everything from blasting out spyholes in walls to levelling buildings.

Call of Duty's greatest existential threats, however, were a mixture of internal discord and external market pressures. In March 2010, Activision – now by far the industry's largest publisher, following a mega-merger with Vivendi and its subsidiary Blizzard – fired Infinity Ward cofounders Jason West and Vince Zampella over alleged insubordination. A few weeks later, West and Zampella announced the foundation of new studio Respawn Entertainment. A wave of lawsuits and countersuits followed, alongside a mass exodus of staff from Infinity Ward to Respawn. Activision was forced to call upon the recently founded Sledgehammer Games to help the depleted Infinity Ward finish Modern Warfare 3.

While the series weathered this crisis – thanks largely to Treyarch's pop-savvy, hallucinogen-crazed *Black Ops* 

#### CALL OF DUTY CONTINUED TO REIGN SUPREME, THOUGH IT ATTRACTED STIFF COMPETITION

subfranchise – Activision and other publishers also had to manage a problem of budget versus expectation. Scripted corridor campaigns in the *Half-Life* vein were proving increasingly expensive, thanks largely to the cost of HD art assets, and telemetry showed that players spent the bulk of their time in multiplayer. However, attempts to remove singleplayer from the package led to an outcry. Among the teams that struggled with this problem was Respawn. The EA-published debut *Titanfall* pioneered the concept of campaign multiplayer, with narrative elements, such as picture-in-picture cinematics, dropped



1 Borderlands

2 Battlefield 3

3 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

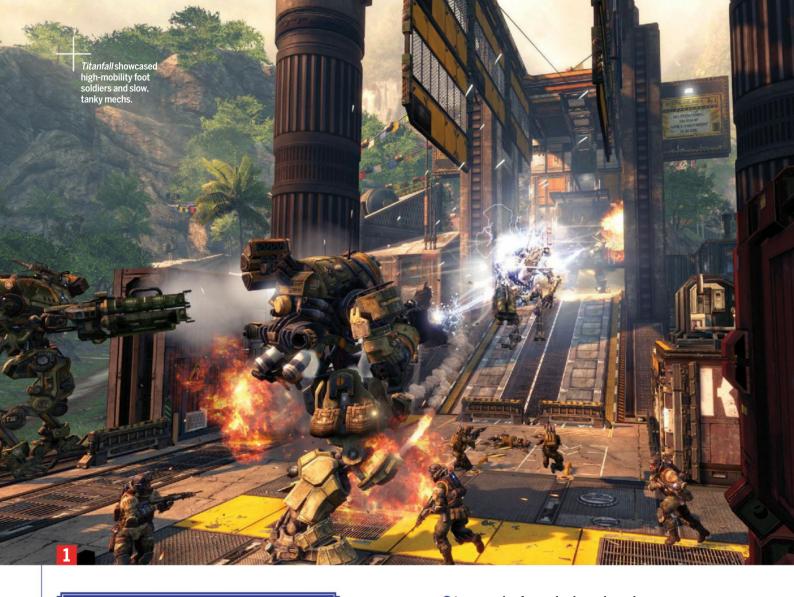
4 Battlefield: Bad Company 2



#### **DEAD GOOD**

Developed by Turtle Rock and fleshed out by Valve, 2008's *Left 4 Dead* is perhaps the finest co-op shooter of its age. It sees four survivors of an undead apocalypse struggling from safehouse to safehouse while a truly pernicious piece of code known as the 'Al Director' changes the odds ad hoc, easing off to stoke suspense only to unleash the horde when it's least convenient. It also

features a number of 'special' infected – the Boomer, for instance, can throw up on you, which attracts zombies, while the Hunter can pin a survivor down. The game's joy is that it captures many of the dramatic twists we see in horror movies: traitorous survivors who leave their friends behind usually meet a sticky, ghoulish end, but you might have to break ranks eventually.





#### TAKING TO THE SKIES

Irrational's 2013 follow-up took *BioShock* to the skies. Its setting, the floating city of Columbia – a work of gaudy vintage American xenophobia built and policed by a self-appointed messiah. *Infinite* deals with much the same theme of free will as the first game, but expands this into a rather tortuous exploration of the concept of multiple universes, helped along by a dash of Tom Stoppard. It

also continues the first game's preoccupation with moral accountability – you spend much of the game working alongside a companion character, Elizabeth, who serves as the game's moral compass. *Infinite* is a fairly brutal, attrition-driven shooter – its fatalistic conclusion perhaps speaks to Irrational's despair at facilitating empathy within such constraints.

into rounds of team deathmatches. The game was enthusiastically received – a mixture of towering mech combat and nimble parkour duelling, it restored something of *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament*'s agility to a genre that had become bogged down in cover combat. Its audience tailed off swiftly, however – many first-person shooter enthusiasts found the mechs-and-pilots premise to be more of a novelty than a game-changing fixture, though the larger problem was perhaps that, on consoles, *Titanfall* was exclusive to the Xbox brand.

Other shooter developers 'rediscovered' mobility during this decade – *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* and

#### OTHER SHOOTER DEVELOPERS 'REDISCOVERED' MOBILITY DURING THIS DECADE

Black Ops III dabbled at length with powered exosuits, while Halo 5: Guardians added boost slides, double-jumps and ground-pounds to Master Chief's moveset. But the game that brought it all together was 2014's Destiny, the work of erstwhile Halo developer Bungie, now free from producing games solely for Microsoft. It's a mixture of

MMO-style looting and *Titanfall*-esque acrobatics, all bundled up in an aesthetic that is reminiscent of the '70s space race and classic sci-fi book cover illustrations.

70s space race and classic sci-fi book cover illustrations Destiny is in some ways quite a soulless game: it's as grindy as Borderlands and far less self-deprecating, but its ruined, yet sumptuous, solar system environments have an irresistible mystique. It also feels tremendous in the hands, with some beautifully judged weapon designs and class abilities.

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With last year's Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare tracking far behind Black Ops III, Destiny has become one of Activision's two flagship shooters. The other is Blizzard's joyful arena shooter Overwatch, released in 2016. Overwatch is a lovely game to end on because it is essentially an interactive genre history, a celebration of its triumphs, foibles and even failures. It doesn't merely reach out to weapons, gadgets and abilities from other shooters, but also their quirks, exploits and the antics of their communities - Quake's rocket jumping, aimbots from Counter-Strike and internet edgelords in general. Its heroes are love letters to 30-odd years of genre history. Pro-gaming celeb turned mech pilot D.Va is both a potted Titanfall and a parody of the noxious 'gamer girl' stereotype, for instance. Soldier 76, meanwhile, is Call of Duty man. Even as it pays tribute, however, Overwatch also points to the future - be it in the effortless way it folds in concepts from fighting games and MOBAs, or in how it extends the FPS cast-list well beyond the muscular, dudebro protagonists beloved of so many rivals. It speaks to the enormous range of concepts that make up the modern FPS, for all its myriad hang-ups - a genre that has always been about so much more than firing a gun.







2 Docting

Destiny

Call of Duty: Black Ops III

4 Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

5 Overwatch



#### **DOOM REBORN**

One of last year's nicest surprises was that the long-overdue *Doom '4'* – announced in 2008 – is utterly terrific. The game's success lies with how it captures the swagger of the original *Doom* without trying to translate its techniques directly. The levels are as receptive to exploration as those of the original, and the gunplay unfolds like a mix of *Quake* and *Unreal* fed through *Far* 

Cry's animation suite. The game also speaks to collective weariness of exposition in action games by roughing up its own narrative – one of the first things Doomguy does is smash a speaker before someone can fill him in on the backstory. Together with MachineGames' rebooted Wolfenstein: The New Order, it suggests that id's licences have plenty of life in them yet.



#### **PC GAMER**

# 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

# Forever and a day

When Tom reviewed *XCOM 2* last year, he concluded that, "We'll play this forever." For Firaxis, it seems, that wasn't long enough. *War of the Chosen* adds enough new systems that it risks bloating an already-sizeable and varied campaign. That heaping of new stuff has a marked effect on the pace of play, but it makes up for it through the sheer quality of the additions. Turn the page to learn how *War of the Chosen* promises to eat up even more of your time.

If forever is too much of a commitment, some more manageable games are also worth your attention. LawBreakers and Nidhogg 2 are great ways to entertain yourself for a few rounds, and The Darkside Detective and West of Loathing both impress as quirky indie comedies.

PHIL SAVAGE
EDITOR
phil.savage@futurenet.com









#### **Contents**

- 72 XCOM 2: War of the Chosen
- **76** Slime Rancher
- **78** Rez Infinite
- 80 Nidhogg 2
- 81 The Darkside Detective
- **82** West of Loathing
- 83 The Shrouded Isle

- 84 LawBreakers
- **88** F1 2017
- 90 Agents of Mayhem

THEY'RE BACK

- 92 Beyond Good and Evil
- 93 Lugaru HD
- 93 Deathmatch Classic
- 93 Shatter
- 93 Puzzle Quest

#### This month's alien occupiers...



TOM SENIOR Specialist in Strategy, grudges Currently playing XCOM 2: War of the Chosen

This month Faced off against a powerful, recurring foe: team meetings.



KATHARINE BYRNE Specialist in Indie, farming Currently playing

Slime Rancher
This month
Learned that even
cutesy farming involves
a lot of poop.



PHIL SAVAGE Specialist in Shooters, nostalgia Currently playing Rez Infinite

This month Had a flashback to the early-'00s. Watched Donnie Darko and listened to Feeder.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON Specialist in RPGs, ghosts

Currently playing
West of Loathing
This month

This month
Ate ghost pickles while riding a ghost horse.
(And in the game.)



ANDY KELLY Specialist in Indie, cults Currently playing The Shrouded Isle

This month Chose human sacrifices based on the greatest crime of all: patter theft.



EVAN LAHTI Specialist in Shooters, traversal

Currently playing LawBreakers

This month
Wished he had rocket
boots instead of San
Francisco's public
transport network.



CHRIS THURSTEN Specialist in Retro, role models

Currently playing Beyond Good and Evil

This month

Discovered just how different the lives of freelance journalists can be. XCOM 2: War of the Chosen

# **BASE INVADERS**

# Prepare to be harassed by three members of the alien blue man group in **XCOM 2: WAR OF THE CHOSEN**. By Tom Senior

ust when you think life in *XCOM* is hard enough, the aliens send superpowered specialists to steal your money, take your soldiers and taunt you while they're doing it. *War of the Chosen* adds three characterful bosses that harass you in missions and on the campaign map until you manage to hunt them down and take the fight to them. You have to deal with them in addition to your normal *XCOM 2* duties – contacting new continents, researching the alien threat and beating back the Avatar project. This is a huge, rich expansion, albeit one for experienced commanders already comfortable with *XCOM 2*'s vanilla campaign.

The Chosen are

a threat, but

are by no

means

invincible

You have some help, fortunately, in the form of three new resistance groups. Earn their trust and they will help you to chase down the Chosen, and give you access to powerful specialist class options: skirmishers,

templars and reapers. These are the most exciting troops in the whole Firaxis *XCOM* series so far. Templars are assassins that can dart out of cover, kill an enemy with their psionic blades and dart back into cover again.

Skirmishers can use a grappling hook and their fast movement speed to zip around the battlefield and drag enemies out of position. Reapers can remain in stealth for an entire skirmish, with luck. They can blow up scenery with a well-placed shot and lob claymores without giving away their own position.

The Chosen and the resistance factions are woven seamlessly into the familiar *XCOM 2* campaign structure. The Chosen have their

own introductory cutscenes and missions, and will turn up in key campaign missions to give you something extra to deal with. Each Chosen sets up in a particular continent on the campaign map, and they are much more

likely to attack you in their area. Their aim is to daze and kidnap soldiers to increase their 'knowledge' bar. As this grows they gain extra strengths and new ways to sap your resources. If it maxes out they can attack your base directly.

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT? A massive expansion to XCOM 2.

> EXPECT TO PAY £35

DEVELOPER Firaxis

PUBLISHER 2K Games

REVIEWED ON 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 970, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Two-player,
turn-based battles

LINK www.xcom.com The Chosen are a threat, but are by no means invincible. They have a randomised set of weaknesses that causes them to take extra damage from certain sources – explosive damage, or massed attacks in a single turn, for example. They also each take additional damage from one of the resistance factions. This encourages you to build squads that can match a Chosen's weaknesses if you are fighting in their domain, and makes the Avenger's positioning on the world map matter more.

#### X-ZOMG

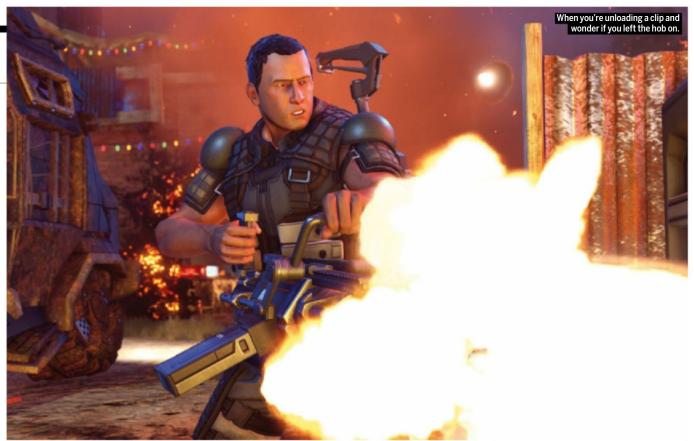
War of the Chosen gives you plenty of soldiers and resources to develop this flexibility. The expansion broadens the game rather than extending it beyond XCOM 2's story arc. I found myself playing a lot more missions and levelling more soldiers than in a typical playthrough. While it is tiresome to move through the same old plot points, the expansion does a good job of refreshing ordinary missions with new terrain and scenarios. The most striking mission change is the addition of lost cities, which are populated by hordes of humans turned feral and mindless by alien toxins (zombies, then). Every successful shot you take against these easily-hit targets generates an extra action. This encourages you to empty every soldier's clip into the hordes each turn as your squad rushes for extraction. These are especially novel when there is a Chosen on the map engaging in a three-way fight with the undead and your XCOM troops.

Most of the new mission types are great with the sole exception of stealth missions, which you use to break allies out of Chosen prison. *XCOM 2* is still unclear about whether a patch of ground is visible to an enemy or not. You can move to a supposedly safe part of the grid, shown in blue, only for the fog of war to peel back and reveal a turret a couple of metres away. When you get used to *XCOM*, you learn to play around these situations with very

### VIOLENT CARTOGRAPHER A guide to the busy campaign map

- This useful part of the screen tells you why you're poor and how to fix it.
- 2 These symbols tell you which Chosen is patrolling that chunk of territory.
- You can now park your base at resistance HQs to heal troops or gain intel.
- 4 Covert Actions live here. You always want one of these on the go.











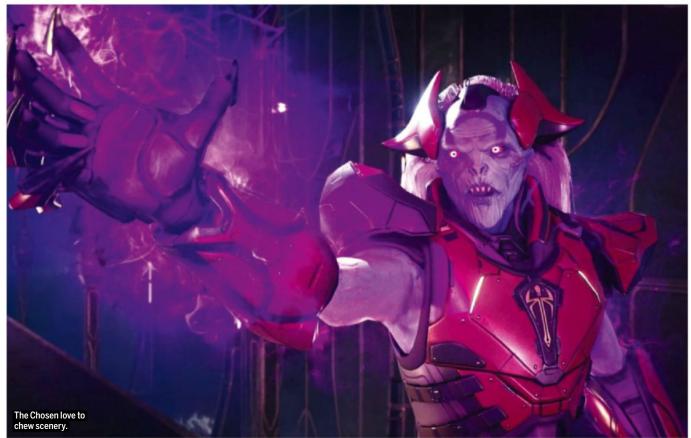


















cautious moves, but the system doesn't quite behave sensibly.

Battles are generally more exciting with the extra toys, the resistance classes and improvements. When you move your mouse over a position, you can see if you will be in a flanking relationship to an enemy, which brings vital clarity to flanking moves. Units earn ability points for successful flanks, high-ground attacks and for defeating the Chosen. Resistance soldiers use these to level up on their special skill trees, but you also build a pool of points for your generic XCOM soldiers. You can build a new training room to spend these points on additional abilities to help bring a handful of your favourite soldiers closer to the power level of a resistance fighter. While the expansion is tailored to seasoned players, the ability point rewards teach good practice in combat. Flanking moves and high-ground attacks give you significant buffs to your hit percentages.

Soldiers also form affinities for squadmates, which can grow into a buddy link. Once per fight, a soldier can give their buddy an extra action in a turn. This might not sound like much, but it has a many tactical uses. It's useful to have a vital reload or extra shot if you need something dead, or you can use it to give your buddied soldier a move to get out of danger. You can 'train' friendships to deepen bonds and access new abilities. In a particularly nice touch, a soldier that loses a buddy in battle goes into a frenzy and starts shooting every alien they can see.

There's more. So much more. You can create propaganda posters of your units to celebrate victories and memorialise losses. This is a fun way to immortalise your favourite characters using a surprisingly well-featured editor. They populate the Avenger and turn up as posters in battles. There are also lots of new resistance-themed cosmetics with a spiky, leathery Mad Max vibe, which contrast nicely with the sleek, high-tech templars and skirmishers.

Advent's roster has expanded. Red Advent soldiers torch zones of the battlefield with their flamethrowers. Psionic Advent troopers freeze your troops with stasis and put protective bubbles around alien units. They add some extra tactical variety to the early game in particular, when you would ordinarily be fighting boring basic troops. Befriending resistance

### **SQUAD GOALS** How team PCG fared in our campaign

#### PHIL SAVAGE



Role Ranger Style Kurt Russell. Death Stats? Killed 19 aliens, died hitting an explosive Advent flame trooper with his sword.

#### SAMUEL ROBERTS



Role Support
Style The SMART gun
marine from Aliens.
Death Stats? Has murdered
dozens of aliens and
cannot be stopped.

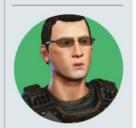
War of the

Chosen simply

piles more on

top of your old problems

ANDY KELLY



Role Sharpshooter Style A harmless civilian recruited by mistake. Death Stats? Has killed only five aliens with the most accurate XCOM weapon.

groups also gives you specialised buffs that can help you on the strategy layer (by instantly letting you clear a room in the Avenger, for example) or in combat, where my troops run faster while stealthed during the opening turns of a fight.

#### THE LONG WAR

War of the Chosen is a comprehensive expansion that touches every aspect of the game. In the battle layer it's a resounding success, but on the strategic layer, where you build rooms and move the Avenger around

the world to pick up resources, the expansion introduces some bloat. A high volume of missions, new rooms to build, new tech to research and covert actions slow down the overall progression.

Covert actions are a good feature, though. They are a vital tool that gives you a quick way to build relationships with resistance groups, hunt down the Chosen and gather extra supplies, scientists and engineers. You have a limited selection of covert actions available and you can only attempt one at a time. To complete one you devote the requisite number of soldiers to the mission for a week or so of in-game time. These are important decisions and, crucially, they only pop up every now and then. Between covert action decisions, expect to be bombarded relentlessly by mission opportunities, Chosen attacks, avatar project notifications and more.

XCOM 2 is all about pushing you onto the back foot and making you fight out of a tough corner, and mandatory missions and Dark Events are part of that. However War of the Chosen simply piles more on top of your old problems, to the point where the push to new technology, five and six-person squads, a built-up Avenger feels like admin rather than the desperate fight-to-fight survival experience of early XCOM 2 playthroughs. Matters improve as you move out of the early game and all the resistance heroes and Chosen

warriors have been introduced – at this point you start chasing the cool new resistance abilities – but the pace of the game has been substantially altered.

This isn't entirely bad. The campaign drags at times, but the

quality of the new resistance super-soldiers and obnoxiously chatty blue supervillains makes it a must-buy for avid *XCOM 2* fans, and the increase in missions gives you more opportunities to play with the new gear. If the rhythms of *XCOM 2* feel stale now, the expansion does enough to shake things up, just expect a slightly slower pace as you systematically pull apart those new alien champions.

### PC GAMER

VERDICT

The new classes and supervillains are excellent, even if the expansion bloats the campaign a little.





Slime Rancher

# **OLD CRAP DONALD**

# Farting about in **SLIME RANCHER** reveals it's all style and no substance. By Katharine Byrne

lime Rancher pulls off a PR coup that fast food corporations would kill for: it's battery farming, but adorable with it. It's about cramming as many blobs as you can into tiny pens, gorging them, then sucking up their plorts (that is, poop) and selling the goods off for the highest rate. It's the kind of horror show that has you hankering for that chlorinated chicken you keep hearing about. On the other hand: ahh, look at their little faces.

Slimes can

only take so

much shit

before they

snap

Getting your slime prison operational is straightforward. Venture out into the wild and you'll find all manner of slimes oozing out of the landscape. They're so abundant and simple to catch, in fact, that you can practically

fill all four of your gun's storage canisters in the first 15 minutes.

Managing your captives proves trickier. Should the dumb blobs devour the turds of a different species, they mutate into a hybrid, potentially causing

havoc and disrupting your operations. While force-feeding slimes their own effluence has its benefits – the

hybrid 'largo' slimes will squeeze out two plorts for the price of one come feeding time – it can't be left unchecked. Throw a third plort into the mix and the largo morphs into a tar monster that won't stop eating until it's devoured your entire ranch, proving that even slimes can only take so much shit before they snap.

The meat of the challenge, then, is breeding your horde in a desired direction without letting them succumb to madness. Compared to a Stardew Valley or Harvest Moon,

where the task is one of time management and efficient routines, *Slime Rancher* captures the anarchic world of livestock; your resource isn't just a number on the spreadsheet, but a thing capable of dicking you over.

There are plenty of provisions to help prevent this, though. You can build higher walls on your corral to keep slimes penned in, add a net to stop them bouncing out the top and even lull them into a stupor with a music

box. You can also unlock extra areas to further segregate different breeds, which is essential once you start raising the exotic quantum slimes that can teleport out of their pens.

Slimes have their own diets, too, so providing enough vegetables, chickens and fruit is vital to keeping stomachs full and your pockets lined. Speed upgrades are available, but I found these accelerated cycles were often at odds with the time I wanted to spend adventuring into new territories. It never got to the point where I'd come home to rotting produce, but efficiency often came at the cost of further exploration.

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cute and colourful farming sim where you rear bouncing slimes instead of cows and cabbage.

EXPECT TO PAY

**DEVELOPER** Monomi Park

PUBLISHER In-house

REVIEWED ON Intel i7-2600, 8GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

> MULTIPLAYER None

LINK www.slimerancher.com Admittedly, you can't go far in the game's early hours, as five of its six main areas are fenced off. To progress, you'll need to find the resident giant 'gordo' slime and stuff its pie-hole with so much food that it bursts to reveal the key. I'm not sure this has a real-life equivalent in my battery farming metaphor.

#### **FEED THE BEASTS**

Once you get there, though, you're just going through the same motions as you were an hour ago, just with different coloured slimes and environments. And that's the main problem I have with *Slime Rancher*. Unlike *Stardew Valley*, where you can personalise your farm or even settle down and start a family, there's nothing to do here except shovel endless poop and make a quick buck. Farming isn't the means to a narrative end here, but a means to more endless farming.

Even the unlockable research lab didn't provide the longevity I'd hoped for. Instead of improving the farming process, the lab simply lets you build extra gadgets to place around the planet. Most, however, like the med station and spring pad, are largely superfluous. My health rarely dipped below 70 even when I came across a herd of exploding radioactive largos, and the early jet pack upgrade is far more practical for general world traversal. The teleporters might have been useful, but the sheer amount of resource gathering involved in crafting them means you'll have rinsed all the environments before they become useful.

Slime Rancher's hands-on approach and lively livestock could have made this the cream of the farming crop. As it is, this is a great idea that feels a little too cooped up.

# KEY AND SLIME PIE Get rich quick with these cash cow combos



1 At the start, focus on **Tabby** and **Rock** slimes. Pink plorts are practically worthless.



2 Build a solar net, and Phosphor Tabbys are also a great source of early income.



3 In the Moss Blanket, make a beeline for **Honey** slimes and cross them with Booms.



4 Over in the Indigo Quarry, Rad and Crystal slimes are an explosive combo.



**5** Quantum plorts can be unstable, so pair them with something safe, like **Crystal**.

### **PC** GAMER

A slight and repetitive farming game, *Slime Rancher* manages to cut the cheese in all the wrong places.

















Rez Infinite

# **FUNK DRIVING**

# Rhythm shooter **REZ INFINITE** offers big ideas and an excellent soundtrack. By Phil Savage

et's start with the basics. *Rez* is an on-rails shooter, originally released in 2002 for Dreamcast and PlayStation 2. You travel along a set path across five wireframe levels, and shoot everything that you see. Sometimes enemies drop one of two types of power-up: one upgrades your form, giving you extra protection against enemy attacks, the other lets you auto-shoot everything on the screen. At the end of each level is a boss.

It's not just

about killing

things but also

about playing

with the music

Are you with me so far? Good. *Rez* is an attempt to break down the sensory barriers – a synaesthetic catalyst that wants you to visualise sound and taste feelings. It's about the art of ancient civilizations, about the

evolution of life, about the emergence of AI, about self and consciousness. It's a metaphor for life, yeah, inspired by 2001: A Space Odyssey and the art of Wassily Kandinsky. You could accuse it of being

pretentious, to which the obvious retort is, 'Yes, and?'

Each level opens to a mostly barren space, with lines scrolling below you. Rather than music, the background is an ambient tone. Soon, basic enemies appear. You can point and click at enemies to shoot them, or hold the left mouse button to lock-on – queueing up to eight shots. Release, and you'll fire at those locked targets. Are you with me so far? Enemies explode into thematic iconography. The Eye of Horus, or the Lion of Babylon – brief bursts of

resplendent colour fading into the darkness. Clear a wave, you move to the next subsystem. The ambient tone gains a beat. The scrolling lines take on contours and definition.

You don't fire instantly. *Rez* is a

rhythm game, and it isn't going to let your desperate bid for survival spoil that. Shots are quantised to the beat of that level's music – firing off in rhythmic patterns that accompany the beat in often playful ways. This

changes the pace and purpose of combat. It's not just about killing things – mouse controls make that fairly trivial – but also about playing with the music. It's about protecting yourself from incoming fire, but also creating riffs through chains of kills. It's part-challenge, part-jam session.

As you move deeper, the lines evolve into roads flanked by complex architecture, and the music builds and gains new layers. My second favourite level, Area 4, starts with a single, driving drum beat, onto which more percussion is added as you

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT? An on-rails shooter about the evolution of life.

EXPECT TO PAY £20

**DEVELOPER** Monstars Inc, Resonair

> PUBLISHER Enhance Games

REVIEWED ON i5-6600K, 16GB RAM, GTX 1070, HTC Vive

MULTIPLAYER

LINK www.rezinfinite.com progress. It builds in intensity up to the seventh layer, when the whole thing shifts and warps into a single synthesised riff. And then it builds again, growing until you're fighting a boss made of cubes in the shape of a running man, set to guitar riffs over its drums, and a synthesised voice screaming "ROCK IS SPONGE".

My favourite level, Area 5, is a poem about evolution set to Adam Freeland's Fear – a beautiful song that shifts from ambient soundscapes, to breakbeat drums, to a perfectly used sample of Marlena Shaw's California Soul. I have thought about *Rez* a lot over the past 15 years.

#### REZURRECTION

This PC release features all of the upgrades and options you'd want of a modern PC port, and also brings VR support. I tested on an HTC Vive, and I'm disappointed to say that VR Rez doesn't do it for me. There's little sense of immersion - of being in this vibrant, sublime experience. Instead, there was a flatness, like I was playing on a room-sized monitor. But Rez Infinite also features a new level, called Area X. This is Rez for VR, with full freedom of movement and a new visual style. Played out of VR, I found the ability to move something of a distraction. But in VR, with head tracking, it felt natural. The real disappointment is that there's only the one new level. As it stands, it's an excellent proof of concept.

If you want to be reductive, *Rez* is a simple shooter with just a handful of levels. But if you want to be reductive, *Rez* probably isn't for you. Accept its big ideas and singular purpose, and it's like nothing else you've played. What *Rez* does still feels remarkable, but only if you're prepared to meet it half way.

### PC GAMER

VERDICT

Like having a drunken conversation with a friend who really loves music, but it's a videogame and good.



# PLAY-CATION More weird PlayStation 2 games on PC, please



GITAROO MAN
A shy boy is actually the
hero of the Planet Gitaroo.
He defeats aliens with
eclectic rock.



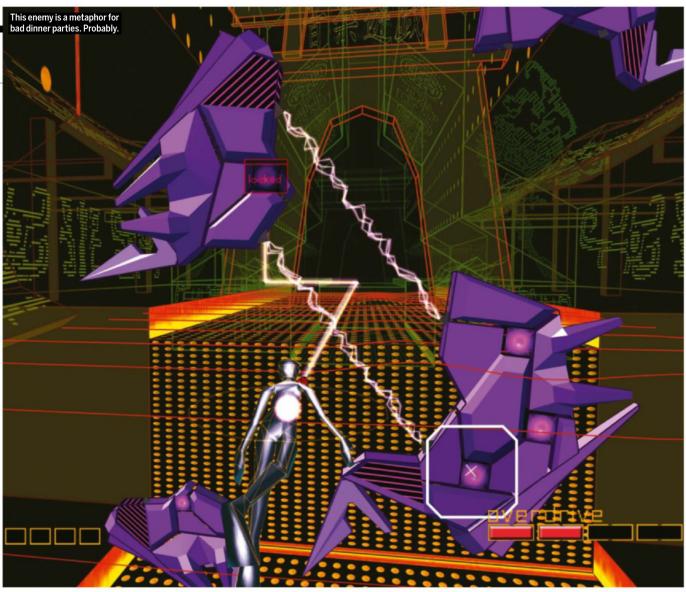
**GOD HAND** You've got a God Hand where your actual hand should be. Better slap some demons.



OKAMI
A dog is a god, and
must use a paintbrush to
make the world less bleak
and crappy.



MISTER MOSQUITO
I never actually played this game about being a mosquito, but I'm glad that it exists.

















# **WORM FEUD**

Faster, messier and more swords: NIDHOGG 2 is a textbook sequel. By Chris Schilling

idhogg 2 is horrible. Which isn't to say that the graceful austerity of the first game has been stamped into mush by this sequel, but that its new art style is memorably grotesque. If you spliced misshapen clay men with Peter Jackson's Bad Taste, you'd get something close to Toby Dixon's squishy, messy, delightfully grisly art – a far cry from the original game's minimalistic visuals.

If Nidhogg 2

was to have a

subtitle. it

would be

'Nidhogger'

The best multiplayer games are those that prompt the most spontaneous exclamations during play and that's still true of *Nidhogg 2*. But now you can add 'eww!' to the list.

Otherwise, not an awful lot has changed. *Nidhogg* 

changed. Nidhogg
worked small miracles
in squeezing depth and
nuance from a
two-button (one to
jump, one to attack)
control scheme. You
could throw your
sword, jump and dive
kick or slide into your
opponent. Tapping up or down

opponent. Tapping up or down changed your stance and your sword's position. That's all still here. Once your opponent is down, you'll still race off towards your destination. They'll still respawn after a few seconds. It still feels like a weird, but fun, hybrid of fencing and tug of war.

If *Nidhogg 2* was to have a subtitle, it would be 'Nidhogger' – it's

Nidhogg, only there's more of it. There's more variety in the weapons, for starters: alongside a rapier, there's a quick, highly throwable dagger, a heavier but rangier broadsword, and a slow-firing bow. Arrows can be

> returned to sender with a well-timed swipe, though you can return the favour in kind, which can lead to the odd silly arrowtennis interlude.

The environments, too, are different, and not simply because

they're much richer and more detailed than the spartan settings of the first. Pyroclastic flow and conveyer belts change your momentum, forcing you to readjust your tactics on the fly, there's high ground and low ground, tunnels that see you fighting in silhouette, and rooms within rooms where doors become a factor. Even if you didn't

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT? A fast-paced one-on-one fencing game with bows and dive kicks.

> EXPECT TO PAY £11

DEVELOPER Messhof

PUBLISHER In-house

REVIEWED ON Intel Core i5-4440 CPU @ 3.1GHz, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER Eight local, two online

LINK nidhogggame.com take to the new aesthetic at first, you might well warm to it as you play. The extra detail sometimes makes the action a little less readable than the original, but it lends a character to the battles that makes them more amusing to watch. Stomping on a grounded opponent until they're nothing more than a puddle of brightly-coloured goop is just the right level of gross to be funny.

#### TO THE POINT

It's such a brilliant local multiplayer game that it almost doesn't matter that its singleplayer component is a bit rubbish, and that its online still suffers from lag. The latter's an improvement on the first game, but it's still annoying for those who don't have a friend or family member available for a scrap. But if you do − god, what a game. You could argue that *Nidhogg 2* is an unnecessary sequel, but if you loved *Nidhogg* − and if you didn't, get in a bin − it's an almost mandatory purchase. ■

### PC GAMER

The question here is: how much more *Nidhogg* could this be? And the answer is none. None more *Nidhogg*.



# **ARCANE AND ABLE**

### Smart, short, and sinister - THE DARKSIDE DETECTIVE is an occult classic. By Matt Elliott

s crumpled detective Francis McQueen, head of the two-man The Darkside Division, you're assigned with investigating Fortean mysteries in the perfect abnormal American town of Twin Lakes. You're assisted in this task by Officer Dooley, hands-down the best character in the game – a flippant, absurd and uninterested comedy sidekick, who still manages to have hidden depth; Odie to McQueen's Garfield.

They feel like

standalone

episodes of a

warmer,

funnier X-Files

This simple point-and-click adventure game features six cases, all dealing with a different supernatural occurrence, crammed with loving nods to every aspect of horror and the occult. I don't want to provide

many examples, because the twists are perfectly pitched and it's better if you discover them yourself, but US readers be warned: although this is set in the States, be prepared for bizarre British obscura. At one point, the ghost of Aleis

point, the ghost of Aleister Crowley quotes Mavis from old brown British soap opera Coronation Street. Thankfully, there are so many allusions to cult classics there's bound to be a reference you understand. The thing I especially love about *The Darkside Detective*, more than the cheerful in-jokes, is the length. It's pitched as a micro adventure, which is reflected in the price, and each of the six cases can be finished in under

40 minutes. They feel self-contained and satisfying rather than short. I came away wanting more, and I appreciate a game being so respectful of my time. None of the cases are extended with needless

busywork. Few outstay their welcome. They feel like standalone episodes of a warmer, funnier X-Files.

It's simple in a clever way. I played the first two cases without noticing that the characters don't move, and

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Point-and-click
adventure
about solving
supernatural crimes.

EXPECT TO PAY £10

**DEVELOPER** Spooky Doorway

> PUBLISHER In-house

REVIEWED ON Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070

> MULTIPLAYER None

LINK www.darkside detective.com the writing is good enough that you get a measured sense of who everyone is and what they're doing. It's proof that with enough imagination, clear characterisation is a fine substitute for high fidelity. Every level has a distinct feel, which makes you feel like you've been on a journey, even if it's only five hours long. The music, by *FTL*'s Ben Prunty, fills the game with a sense of unease and leaves your blood chilled.

#### **WIGHT CHOICE**

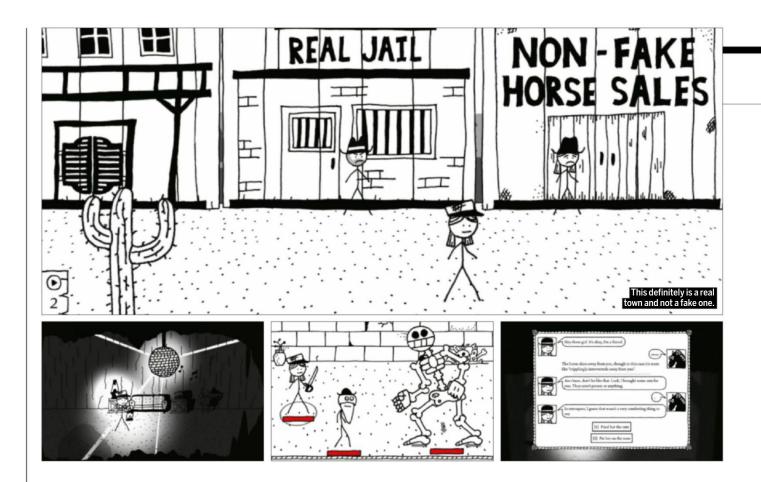
As long you're aware that this is a short trip, you'll get loads out of *The Darkside Detective* – especially if you have an interest in things that go bump in the night. That I came away with such a clear understanding of people and events is a testament to how much is packed into a short game. It's black magic, I tell you.

#### PC GAMER

VERDICT

A smart but simple adventure that's exactly the right kind of spooky. It's short, but superb. More please. 82





# **3:10 TO HUMOUR**

# Great writing and jokes make **WEST OF LOATHING** a hootin' good time. By Chris Livingston

elcome to the Old West, where snakes are used as whips, cattle are demonically evil, and alongside stick-figure cowboys there are goblins, necromancers and a lot of ghosts. There are ghost horses – I ride one myself – and ghost cowboys. There are even ghost pickles, and they're not the strangest food you'll encounter.

This is a funny

game, and

you'll want to

root out every

last joke

A comedy RPG, *West of Loathing* is goofy and wonderfully written. After choosing from one of three classes – the magical Beanslinger, the smooth-talking Snake Oiler, or the rough-and-tumble Cowpuncher – you'll mosey through tiny towns,

gang hideouts, and a
Daveyard (which is like
a graveyard, but only
Daves are buried
there). Some locations
aren't fully accessible at
first – one smells too
foul to investigate until
you have an item that
affords you stench

protection, for example – so you'll be crisscrossing the map and revisiting certain areas repeatedly.

That's fine, though, because there's lots to do and these areas are almost always rewarding. Flush a toilet for an XP gain, search a haystack for a needle or dig through a mine cart for a hunk of meat ore (West of Loathing has a meat-based economy). Insult yourself in a mirror to gain a combat buff because you angered yourself so much. Sticking your nose in every corner of *West of Loathing* isn't just beneficial for improving stats and filling your inventory: this is a funny game, and

you'll want to root out every last joke before you're done.

There are branching text conversations with a cast of oddball characters that are almost always entertaining, and everything from item

descriptions to menu options are fun to read. The writing is sharp and clever. Where *West of Loathing* falters is with its turn-based combat, which is a relatively simple affair and happens too frequently. At every turn you'll meet angry cowboys, hovering skulls, giant snakes, rabid cult members, and, of course, the occasional ghost pickle. Halfway

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world RPG
comedy western
with turn-based
combat, a lot of hats,
and ghost pickles.

EXPECT TO PAY

**DEVELOPER** Asymmetric

PUBLISHER In-house

REVIEWED ON Intel i5-6600K @ 3.50 GHz, 8 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 980

> MULTIPLAYER None

LINK www.westof loathing.com through the game you'll be dealing so much damage that most fights will be over with one or two shots or spells. With little challenge, combat becomes an unwelcome interruption to your enjoyable travels.

### **REACHING FOR THE SKY**

It took me about 12 hours to make it through the main story, but I played another dozen hours just to make sure I'd done everything, to unravel some of the RPG's mysteries and to solve the remaining puzzles, some of which are admirably elaborate. I had to create a spreadsheet with formulas for one and an envelope on my desk is now covered with notes, codes, and the names of about two dozen dead women (which I promise isn't nearly as grim as it sounds).

West of Loathing is a wonderfully written RPG adventure, both fun and funny from its opening to whenever it is you decide you've read every last word in the game and realise, regretfully, that you've finished.

### PC GAMER

VERDICT

The turn-based combat isn't the best, but it's a delightfully written RPG absolutely packed with humour.



# **GOD DAMN**

# Run your own Lovecraftian cult in THE SHROUDED ISLE. By Andy Kelly

n three years a god named Chernobog will emerge from the sea, bringing the apocalypse with it. As a high priest you must select cultists to sacrifice to the deity, while maintaining order and discipline. Sacrifice someone without proof of any misdeeds and the people may turn on you. And even if they are proven sinners, their family won't appreciate it. *The Shouded Isle* is the cult management sim I never knew I wanted, and there's a dark charm in how it encourages you to be as ruthless a zealot as you can. There are no pragmatic solutions to problems, and no getting around the fact that someone has to die.

Your citizens

have hidden

traits, both

positive and

negative

Ignorance, fervour, discipline, penitence and obedience are the five concepts that determine the course each game takes, which lasts about an hour. Represented by meters, if any of

them drop to zero it's game over. So if the people become too smart because you haven't been organising enough book burnings, your ignorance meter will empty and you'll have to start again. Similarly, if they aren't

penitent enough for their sins, you lose. It's a game about balance. The actions you take will either raise or lower these five things, making every decision count. One poor choice can doom your cult and lose you favour with Chernobog.

Games are split into seasons, and your first decision at the beginning of each one is choosing who will

represent your village's families and work for you. But your citizens have hidden traits, both positive and negative, that affect your chances of making it to the end. Vasilisa Efferson, for instance, loudly shamed a couple

holding hands, earning me three extra discipline. But when asked about her own sins, she shrugged and changed the subject, losing me some penitence. And for that, I decided to

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cult simulator with a Lovecraftian vibe.

EXPECT TO PAY

**DEVELOPER** Kitfox Games

PUBLISHER In-house

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

> MULTIPLAYER None

LINK www.kitfoxgames.com sacrifice her to Chernobog. The Effersons weren't too happy about this, but someone had to be devoured by the angry sea god.

#### **SIMPLE THINGS**

The Shrouded Isle is a wonderfully unique game with a stark, striking two-colour art style and superbly atmospheric sound and music. And while there's fun to be found in juggling the needs of your cult, hoping you can last long enough to welcome Chernobog, it's never deep enough to really grab me. However, as an accessible, lightweight strategy game to dip in and out of, it's fantastic. The streamlined interface is nicely designed, and some of the choices you're forced to make are deliciously evil. If you've ever wanted to start your own Lovecraftian cult, your time has come.

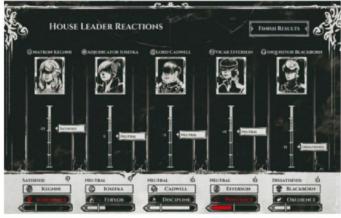
### PC GAMER

VERDICT

A streamlined, easy-to-play strategy game with a uniquely dark premise that's ideal for sporadic sessions.













# **FRICTIONLESS**

**LAWBREAKERS** is a high-speed, high-skill FPS grown in the soil of *Unreal Tournament* and other arena shooters. By Evan Lahti

awBreakers succeeds as an first-person shooter because it embraces and gives a middle finger to the last five years of FPS design. From a distance, Boss Key's first game looks like another five-on-five 'hero shooter', where each of the characters bring unique guns and unique movement, combat, and ultimate abilities (that you trigger by hitting the Q key) into arena maps to contend for objectives. But beneath that basic structure are big, welcome divergences from *Overwatch* and similar games.

Everyone is

expected to fly, fight, and

contribute

damage

One example: *LawBreakers* has no true support characters. The closest thing to a healer, the Battle Medic, employs 'fire and forget' healing, delegating the first-aid work to drones that

automatically fly to teammates when you hit the E key, leaving your hands free to lob grenades. I love the ease of this role, and the challenge of maintaining lines of sight with your

assigning a drone to an Assassin as they swing like Spider-Man into an enemy base, or saving a teammate who's about to die with a single key tap from across the map.

In this way LawBreakers pleasantly bypasses the concept of classes as battlefield jobs. There aren't turrets, teleporters tanks, per se, or other distractions. There aren't even conventional snipers, or guns with any kind of magnification, because LawBreakers doesn't want you losing sight of the importance of movement. Everyone is expected to fly, fight, and contribute damage.

In place of any ordinary class archetypes, *LawBreakers* builds variety through its distinct styles of movement, and it's here that hardcore FPS players will find

delightful nuance. Take the Wraith, which slides along the ground to accelerate, jabbing the air with a knife to swim forward in low gravity. They can also triple jump and wall jump, a moveset that gives the Wraith a

darting, alien locomotion that's enjoyable to master.

Each role has a fun microskill or two to learn, adding depth and steepening the learning curve in most cases. Gunslingers teleport in 15-foot bursts, like Tracer from *Overwatch*, and the first shots from either of their dual pistols are buffed immediately after you blink. If you fly backwards as the Harrier, you shoot lasers from your boots. This is the only FPS I can think of that lets me shoot behind myself, nevermind turns it into a way to physically propel my character.

I found a couple of these movement styles uncomfortable, and

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A competitive FPS that offers skilful, unconventional styles of movement in many of its nine classes.

EXPECT TO PAY

**DEVELOPER**Boss Key Productions

PUBLISHER Nexon

REVIEWED ON Intel Core i7-4770K, Geforce GTX 980 Ti, 16GB RAM, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER Five-on-five online

LINK lawbreakers.nexon.net you probably will too. I felt fragile and clumsy as an Assassin, which uses a grappling hook to swing into stabbing range. But Boss Key could've easily strapped the same jetpack to each character and called it a day. The wide range of motion not only gives *LawBreakers* a clear identity, but these movement styles make characters more identifiable at a distance, making it easier to decide how to engage the enemy. It's a huge asset to the game.

The forms of movement have good relationships with LawBreakers' guns - big, imaginative energy and explosive weapons that are the children of Unreal Tournament. As Harrier, I have to mark a target with a debuffing dart, then grit my teeth as I paint an enemy with my Iron Man-like laser beam. The simplicity of the Battle Medic's grenade launcher is great: left-click throws grenades that detonate on impact, and right-click pops out ones that bounce before exploding. I like the moment-to-moment geometry I'm asked to do to decide which grenade will be more effective.

I also appreciate that the power level of ultimate abilities, which charge up on a flat timer, isn't so high that you're constantly playing your game around their cooldowns, like I often do in *Overwatch*. They're flashy stalemate-breakers, but carving out a triple kill with Harrier's chest beam, or Titan's Palpatine-grade hand lightning, feels earned.

#### **MODE-TIVATION**

Less imaginative is *LawBreakers*' five modes, which don't differ much from one another. Uplink and Overcharge are both about bringing a single, flag-like object back to your base and defending it as you wait for it to fully charge, which scores a point. Turf War and Occupy are capture point modes, the latter makes you chase a single point that changes positions like Headquarters in *Call of Duty*.

But the lack of novelty doesn't bother me because these modes

### CLASS OF ONE'S OWN The classes are weird and original



ASSASSIN Spider-Man + Emily Kaldwin



WRAITH
The Scout +
A slip-and-slide



HARRIER Cyclops + Harrier



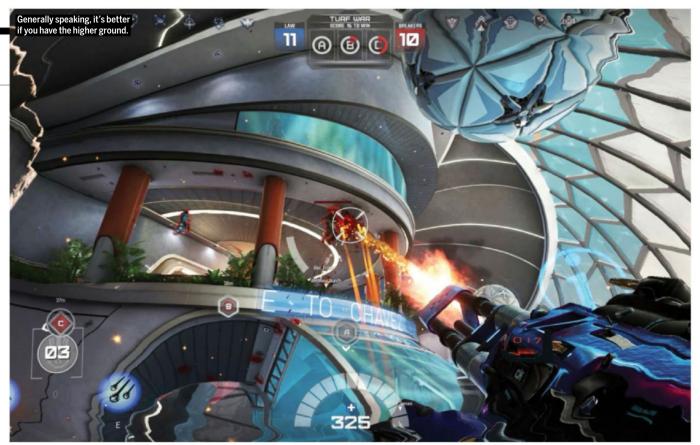
VANGUARD F-16 + The Heavy



TITAN
Emperor Palpatine
+ The Soldier



JUGGERNAUT T-700 + A brick wall







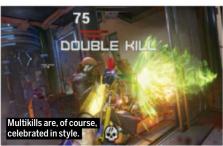


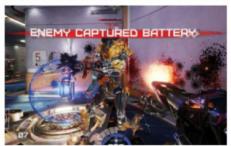
















succeed at stimulating urgency and creative movement, and prompting you to make clever timing plays with ultimate abilities. They make LawBreakers a more interesting game, one about solving physical problems while you're perpetually in motion rather than just fragging.

For example, to snatch the battery away from the enemy's base and run it back to mine, I have to figure out how to fly in at high speed – but not in a straight line, which will probably kill me – and still leave enough jetpack juice to make a getaway.

Different roles excel on different maps and modes, giving LawBreakers' meta a nice texture. Dropping the Battle Medic's ultimate, a bubble that blocks projectiles in both directions and heals allies, on a capture point can seal the deal. In Blitzball – basically LawBreakers rugby – the robotic Juggernauts often come up clutch with their shield ability, putting up a literal wall to for fast-moving, would-be dunkers to slam their faces into.

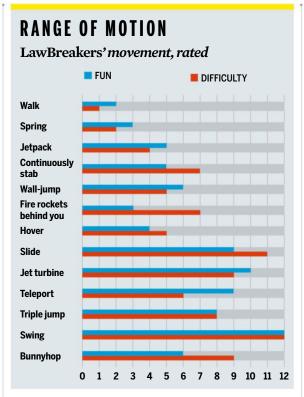
Given all this focus on finesse and skill (*LawBreakers* goes as far as assigning you a letter grade after each match), I don't know why there isn't a separate competitive mode here, or why you can't specify which maps and modes you want to queue into. In the absence of a server browser you can create custom games, or jump into a practice area solo to work on movement skills. At least the netcode is rock-solid, which is frankly necessary for a game that's this latency-intolerant. The set of graphics

and other options are likewise good, erasing the fact that *LawBreakers* is a multiplatform game. I've had excellent, 120-plus fps on my GTX 980 Ti at 1440p, on high settings.

Less in LawBreakers' favour is how vulnerable it is to AFK players and leavers. Unlike other five-on-five games like CS:GO and Rainbow Six Siege, LawBreakers doesn't penalise players for leaving mid-match, an unfortunate omission. In my experience LawBreakers backfills vacant slots somewhat quickly.

### **CATCHPHRASES**

Interesting as they are, LawBreakers' characters don't do enough to create an emotional



attachment. The game doesn't answer the question of what the Law and Breakers are. There needs to be more banter between characters, or stuff that expresses the spirit of these sci-fi gladiators.

LawBreakers could have benefitted from committing more to being silly or being serious. Rick and Morty's Justin Roiland voices the Blitzball in the mode of the same

The maps'

symmetrical layouts are

so fun to

traverse

name, but he doesn't have enough lines to make this cameo more than a gag. The contextual barks that your own characters make during combat range from corny ("You're the LawBreaker, and I'm

the neckbreaker!") to generic ("Your date with destiny is done!") to borrowed catchphrases ("Always be closing!"). I don't need poetry, but I'd settle for substance – I want to know slightly more about these jetpacking weirdos and why they're fighting.

It's not all on their levitating shoulders, though, because the maps also don't carry the thematic weight of the game. Way back in 2015, we heard that *LawBreakers* was set in a world where the moon exploded. But this cataclysmic event doesn't feel

reflected much by the elegant but samey sci-fi facilities you float around in. Most of them look like they're part of the same neighbourhood, cohesive but under-contrasted.

That's ultimately fine, because the maps' symmetrical layouts are so fun to traverse. I like lobbing grenades into the broken-open moon sculpture at the centre of Promenade and watching them rattle around. I love the long leap of faith into the enemy's base you make from the centre of Vertigo, which as a friend described to me, is *LawBreakers*' equivalent of Facing Worlds.

And throughout, I'm impressed that the frequent transitions you make between pockets of low and normal gravity aren't disorienting, but exciting. Hitting low gravity almost always feels like an opportunity to slingshot yourself forward, or something that buys you more time to line up a shot. The resources you're given to manage lift and make aerial adjustments are fun to grapple with, but you have to manage them wisely. The set of tools given to you form a well-designed midpoint that rests somewhere between empowerment and helplessness.

### **BULLET BALLET**

Modest aesthetic sins aside, LawBreakers' low-gravity dance sticks with me. Overused jargon like 'verticality' doesn't capture the moments of flow you feel as you, somehow, tag a teleporting, levitating enemy with back-to-back grenades in mid-air, or kick three different enemies in the face to block a Blitzball touchdown. It feels like rugby played on the moon: brutal, parabolic and nimble.

In this mini-renaissance the first-person shooter genre is in the midst of, *LawBreakers* asserts itself as a complex, physical and deep competitive shooter. It's an uncompromising game that doesn't make apologies for its high skill ceiling, but isn't so exclusionary that only those with pristine reflexes can enjoy it. It's a treat to play an FPS where some of the roles demand more left-hand coordination than they do mouse aim.



### **PC GAMER**

VERDICT

Graceful, and original, LawBreakers' movement sets it apart from other FPS games despite a few aesthetic weaknesses.



F1 2017

# **BUFFS AND MERCS**

# Upgrade trees, a deep career mode and classic cars put **F1 2017** back on track. By Phil Iwaniuk

here are two ways to look at annualised licensed releases like *F1 2017*. One is to compare it to last year's effort and take a stock inventory of all its little iterative improvements. The other way is to compare it to the real thing: everyone's favourite waste of a Sunday afternoon, Formula One. Either one of these methods demonstrates, in *F1 2017*'s case, what a stellar job Codemasters has achieved this year.

Controller

feedback is

leaps and

bounds better

than last year

FIFA's developers can be pretty sure football will be the same cavalcade of tumbling millionaires when they set to work on a new FIFA, but for the ever-changing Formula One it's a different story. The tires are wider

and more durable this year, and the cars manufactured to a completely different set of regulations. As a result, 2017's cars are significantly quicker than last season (so much so that drivers complained of

neckache from all the G-force during preseason testing), and *F1 2017* benefits from that enormously. The cars are simply more fun to drive than in the last game. They suck onto the tarmac through high-speed corners and bite into apexes as you turn in. They're faster than ever, but not skittish like the aero-heavy cars of a decade ago.

They're also being driven by very convincing AI opponents who exploit gaps in braking zones and pounce on your mistakes, but usually leave a fair amount of space while you're battling. This is very much part of the iterative improvement stock take,

since convincing AI has long been a series stronghold, but this year the racing is closer and less liable to have you lambasting other drivers like Screamin' Seb Vettel. Several front wings were damaged during my

season-long feud with Haas's Kevin Magnussen, for example, but the racing was gentlemanly. Well, just about.

With the fundamentals in fine shape, Career Mode returns with a raft of

improvements headlined by classic car events. The roster of Williams, McLaren, Ferrari and Renault championship-winning motors feels great, not to mention frightening, but their inclusion via some token mid-season track days belies the difficulty in having such a small number with which to create events that make sense. They're best enjoyed in time trials, where their individual characteristics can be enjoyed without any overarching objective.

Elsewhere in career mode, an upgrade tree of which *Path of Exile* would be proud awaits you, and your route through it will depend on your

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A licensed racer with racing's smuggest faces on the box.

EXPECT TO PAY £40

**DEVELOPER** Codemasters

PUBLISHER In-house

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

> MULTIPLAYER Up to 20 players

LINK www.formula1game.com team. My Force India's engine seemed to be made of elastic bands and lolly sticks, for example, and thus upgrading ICE and turbo reliability became paramount. In a different career, though, I found myself at Toro Rosso with a resilient engine and gearbox, but struggling for aero grip.

This might not sound exciting, but to the kind of F1 fan who still remembers Juan Pablo Montoya's 'oh deer' joke it's all crucial. In reality, racing is more about car management than hitting blistering lap times, and in every mode bar time trials and quick online races, you'll be instructed by your engineer to lift and coast in order to save fuel, short-shift to save the gearbox, go easy on the tires, and switch engine modes. That kind of experience might not be for everyone, but to those willing to really engage with its level of simulation, it makes a P13 finish at rainy Silverstone with only six gears feel just as gratifying as a win.

#### **PERFORMANCE UPGRADES**

Last year's performance issues have been ironed out, too. Max settings and a locked 60 fps wasn't possible on a GTX 1070 in F1 2016, but in this significantly prettified incarnation it's child's play. Controller feedback is leaps and bounds better than last year, too, and although the F1 series has never excelled with wheels the way Project Cars and Assetto Corsa does, a similar step forwards has been made in that department, too.

F1 2017 is as much as you could hope for from a series with such a Sisyphean release cadence: polished, more authentic than ever, and brings well-optimised visual improvements to PC. Until the real sport signs off on loop-de-loops, this is as good as virtual F1 gets. ■

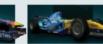
# SECOND-HAND KERS The cream of F1 2017's classic vehicles



MCLAREN MP4/6 Senna's 1991 whip. Surprisingly high downforce for the era.



2010 RED BULL RB6 Or 'Luscious Liz' as Vettel called her during his dominant campaign.



2006 RENAULT R26 Alonso won his second consecutive drivers' title in this stellar beauty.



FERRARI F2002
An unbeatable V12
brute which Schumi
notably put to good
use in his races.



MCIAREN MP4/23 Hamilton has this monstrosity to thank for his 2008 title.

### PC GAMER

F1 2017 is as close as you can get to a Formula 1 driver's life without being cussed at by Sebastian Vettel.



















# **SAINT OR SINNER?**

**AGENTS OF MAYHEM** may just be Volition's Jazz Odyssey. Hope you like the new direction. By Jon Morcom

hile still keeping one foot planted in the *Saints Row* universe, *Agents of Mayhem* is Volition's bold attempt to create something a bit different. Whether or not you think it succeeds depends on how deeply you're willing to immerse yourself in a colourful, yet almost sleepy, city, taking out waves of enemies with the intelligence of Afghan Hounds, in an action game where the shooting is serviceable, but not outstanding.

Seoul has a

seemingly

infinite number

ofunderground

lairs

The backdrop in *Agents Of Mayhem* is a futuristic Seoul where the game's villain, Dr Babylon, rules over an organisation called Legion. His aim? World domination – bwahahaha, and indeed, ha. Working from Mayhem's

Ark high in the sky, controlled by the all-knowing Persephone Brimstone and her prissy assistant Friday, your job is to stop him.

You're launched into *AOM*'s tutorial with Fortune, Hollywood

and Hardtack, three of 12 agents you can play as over the course of the game – the remaining nine are unlocked as you progress. The campaign follows a set pattern with Dr Babylon's lieutenants being introduced in turn, each character's story being fleshed out with a handful of missions. Dr B's roster of underbosses include not only misguided brainboxes from the realm of applied science, but also a Justin Bieber-alike and a girl group from the saccharine world of K-pop.

Unfortunately, a few hours into *AOM*, it hits you that Seoul has a seemingly infinite number of underground lairs and that you will have to spend an awful lot of time in them in order to unlock every agent.

But despite having to clear the same lair every time, I was as much consumed by these missions that revealed the personality, weaponry, skills and unique animations of each new agent as I was with the

main campaign. Even some of the agents' backstory missions eclipse the less-interesting boss episodes.

Squad experimentation is the cornerstone upon which *Agents of Mayhem* has been built, and while you can choose any three unlocked agents for a mission, you're never fighting side by side with them. Rather, you morph between the three by using the mouse scroll wheel. This is useful to help an agent recover when they're low on health. Should an agent die, you can fight on with

### NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Squad-based action
game set in an open,
futuristic Seoul
overrun by deranged
cartoon villains.

EXPECT TO PAY £40

> DEVELOPER Volition

PUBLISHER Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON Intel i7-3770k, GeForce GTX 1070, 16GB RAM, Windows 10

> MULTIPLAYER None

LINK www.aomthegame.com two or even one but if all three perish, its time to start again.

Ten of Mayhem's agents are equipped with guns, while the spiritual Rama has an energy bow and the ninja Scheherazade wields a katana. I spent most of my time with the latter teamed with Fortune and Braddock. Guns are balanced so that, for example, Oni's silenced pistol deals similar damage to Daisy's minigun, so bigger doesn't necessarily mean better. Skill upgrades, character buffs and gadgets come at you swiftly as you progress while character movement is smooth, each agent having a triple jump ability to help them platform and dodge attacks while in combat.

### **SEOUL GOOD**

The Seoul in which you're battling Legion is a city of massive modern edifices, expansive open plazas and ancient temples surrounded by vibrant pink cherry blossom trees. With laneways and cut-throughs abound, it's ideal for massive-scale battles – however, apart from hearing what sounds like the occasional looping of 'Korean Crowd Panic' from the BBC sound effects library, it feels populated rather than 'lived in'.

AOM's appeal lies in the variation of characters and while its campaign chugs along amiably enough, there's also plenty to do in Seoul outside of the story missions. Its systems are generous and with − I kid you not − 15 levels of difficulty, it can be as intense an experience as you care to make it. It is noisy, brash and, despite some carps, fun, but personally I feel as if I've just watched 20 hours straight of Nickelodeon while listening to a random cuss generator. I'm off to lie down in a darkened room for a while. ■

# WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH Five agents to consider



BRADDOCK
A cigar chompin'
one-woman A-Team.
Her burst gun means
more clicking, but
she can call in an air
strike when her
Mayhem meter is full.



RED CARD
He's German and football mad, or maybe just mad. His weapon can switch from assault rifle to a shotgun with the press of a button.



ONI Ex-Yakuza and the coolest-looking of the lot. Has a silenced pistol and a very useful glove/ claw arrangement for melee kills.



FORTUNE
A Lara Croft-alike
with good hacking
skills. Has a drone
called Glory,
presumably because
it makes holes in
Legion troops.



SCHEHERAZADE A beast in close quarters combat. Gracefully animated until she sprints – then she looks like a child pretending to be a jet plane.

### PC GAMER

VERDICT

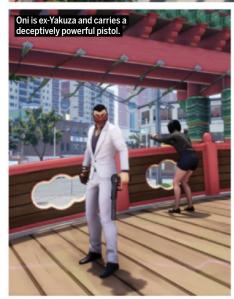
Serves up a generous range of playstyles, but it's hampered by some uninspired design choices.













OLD GAMES REVISITED by Chris Thursten











# NIETZSCHE APPEAL

# I wish the animal people in **BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL** were my friends

eyond Good and Evil has only grown more attractive with time. It was always lovely, the world of Hillys, despite being a dystopia where the threat of war has left a population of animal people to the mercy of a military autocracy. I'd choose to live there if I could. The world could go to shit but you'd be just that little bit happier if your uncle/best friend/hovercraft repairman was an anthropoid pig with fart-powered rocket shoes.

Jade's day job is taking photos of animals for

an appreciative

scientist

The game's worldbuilding really stands up, as it happens. It's both likeable in the way that 3D cartoon adventure games starring animal people tend to be likeable, and it has something to say in the way that games about grim alien

games about grim alien dystopias tend to have something to say about, er, that specific problem. This is the only game to ever consider marrying Half-Life 2 to Banjo-Kazooie, which

isn't necessarily a surprise, but it does go some way to explaining why the 14-year absence of a sequel has made everybody in the world angry.

This is also a profoundly romantic interpretation of what it means to be a freelance journalist. Jade's day job is taking photos of animals for an appreciative scientist, who replies to each submitted image with an

interesting fact, a note of praise, and immediate transfer of payment. Not content to simply exist within the digital ecosystem as a thoughtless generator of #content, Jade uses her money to maintain the electric forcefield that protects

forcefield that protects her lighthouse-turnedorphanage-turned hovercraft hangar from the alien invaders that pound her homeland on the reg.

She's physically fit, a master of backflips and combat with a bo-staff.

She meditates and can sprint indefinitely. She is regularly entrusted with commissions that actively improve the lives of the people around her. She looks good in green. I'm not sure if I hate Jade or if I'd like to be her. The only thing she has in common with every freelance journalist I've ever met is that she subsists entirely on wedges of yellow

### **NEED TO KNOW**

WHAT IS IT? Third-person cartoon adventure with big ideas.

EXPECT TO PAY

DEVELOPER Ubisoft

PUBLISHER In-house

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

> MULTIPLAYER None

> > LINK

www.bgegame.com

cheese, but in Jade's case this actually makes her *less* likely to die.

### SPICE OF LIFE

Beyond Good and Evil is straightforward, as open world-ish adventure games tend to go, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Its photography and vehicle combat systems are good examples of how to include variety in a game without giving in to feature creep, and they never get in the way of the story or characters – everybody would probably clap if Ubisoft went back to this model for the next Assassin's Creed, which they absolutely definitely won't.

Instead, they fit seamlessly into a breezy, pleasant, and consistently imaginative romp with a good story. I should have probably picked a better word to describe *Beyond Good and Evil* than 'romp', to be honest with you, but I know what a real journalist looks like now and it's entirely beyond me so I give up.

### PC GAMER

VERDICT

A dystopia that you would rather live in, starring a person you'd rather be, and also rhino people.



# **FISTS OF FURRY**

# Rabbits murder one another in LUGARU HD

If you hate animals and you don't want them to be happy then you're probably not interested in something as colourful and optimistic-despite-the-odds as Beyond Good and Evil. You want this, Lugaru, or its sequel/remake, Overgrowth, games where topless rabbits in trousers (they can only be topless if they're wearing trousers) kick each other to death. This is Watership Down vs. Tekken, an idea that Bandai Namco can have for free if it feels like it's struggling against Capcom this year.

Lugaru has been so roundly succeeded by Overgrowth that it's hard to recommend on its own merits, but it remains a curiosity: the rough-as-hell realisation of a very specific, really fucking weird vision. A high skill cap, fast, floaty 3D and physics-driven combat system forms the basis of the entire game, with

each level in the campaign just an excuse to usher you into a big field full of people to beat to death. Except the people are rabbits, and these rabbits murdered and stripped everybody you know, and they need to die. That's right! You return to your homeland to find blood-soaked naked rabbit bodies everywhere, and you only know that they're naked because *you're wearing trousers*.

It's established that you yourself are some kind of sociopath whose campaign of vengeance is accompanied by an ever-mounting high score and slow-mo whenever one of your bunny kicks cracks a foe's skull *just so.* I'm glad that this mad game was successful enough to warrant a proper second go: that there were people out there not only waiting to *make* a game where you can bunny hop at full pelt into somebody, but also people to *buy* it.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY

**DEVELOPER** Wolfire Games PUBLISHER



### DEATHMATCH CLASSIC

find it comforting that at any given time of day between three and 11 people are still playing Deathmatch Classic on a server somewhere, probably Germany. You're more likely to get deposited into a custom map than a chunk of vintage Quake nowadays, but Quake it remains. It's like discovering that the best night out of your life is still happening somewhere, much as you remember it. The only thing stopping you returning heart and soul to the mid-'90s greatest online multiplayer experience is your desire to seek it out, and the only thing stopping you from fragging 'em like you used to are your terribly frayed nerves and time-wasted synapses. A happy place.



#### SHATTER

lso known as Sexy Breakout or  $oldsymbol{A}$  The Little Arkanoid That Could, Shatter is a game about a sentient paddle that escapes the confines of its digital prison to bounce laserballs at exploding bricks for points. It's basically the best version of Breakout that it is possible to make: it looks nice, it sounds nice, it has boss fights, inventive puzzle stages and meaningful power-ups. Shatter benefits from the addition of a single new key addition – sucking the ball towards your paddle like a hoover – that is primarily beneficial to the game's feel and you'll miss it should you ever go paddlin' without it. This is the Geometry Wars of paddle games, is what I am trying to say.



### **PUZZLE QUEST**

uzzle Quest was ahead of its time, for better and for worse. The notion of marrying Bejeweled to RPG-style progression and a quest system was (and is) clever, making match-three RPG combat with spells and items and stuff actually work even more so. Cheap and free from microtransactions, Puzzle Quest is content to discretely kill as many hours of your life as you would like to give it. It ostensibly has an ending, but I have never seen it and hopefully I never will. 75 Life, that is.

GT Omega RACING GT OMEGA LAPTOP BACKPACKS





# HARDWARE





Group Test

### O&A

#### What is an all-in-one liquid cooler?

properties of liquid cooling but in a self-contained unit. A CPU/water block mounts to the CPU while a pair of pipes feed water to and from a radiator where the heat is

# Which CPUs do liquid

coolers support?
All of the coolers on test support all AMD Ryzen and

need to keep it cool. Water cooling

Intel socket 1151 CPUs. They're also compatible with all Intel 2066/2011 CPUs, but some wouldn't be recommended for use with the most powerful processors in those lineups as they simply don't have the cooling power.

**Do they need filling?** These coolers ship prefilled and most are never means of emptying and refilling the coolers.

How much better are they? For reference, we also tested our 1800X with AMD's Wraith Max cooler and it hit in standard mode.

### **Dictionary**

120mm, 240mm etc - These coolers are generally categorised by how large their radiators are. The smallest use a radiator 120mm case fan - it's these

ones that generally don't have the cooling power for Threadripper and Socket 2066/2011 processors.

Then there are double-length 240mm radiators and even larger 280mm radiators that use 140mm fans. The bigger the cooler, the greater the overall cooling ability and the slower the fans can spin to keep things quiet.

**TDP - Thermal Design Power** (TDP) is the maximum amount of heat generated by a chip. It's a good rough way

of telling how powerful a cooler you'll need for any given processor.

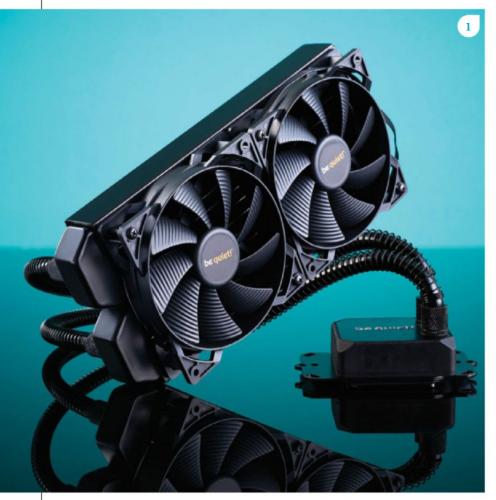
**Decibels** - We've measured the noise created by each of these coolers, and this is measured in decibels (dB).
This is a logarithmic unit so if something is 10dB louder it's actually 10 times as loud. Therefore just a couple of dB difference in our coolers is significant. Ambient noise in our test labs was 30dB and noise levels were measured 30cm from the cooler.

NOVEMBER 2017 PC GAMER 97



more uniform standard mode.

**Group Test** 







# **BE QUIET! SILENT LOOP 240**

www.bequiet.com £120

→ While the inclusion of a second fan in the 120mm version of be quiet!'s cooler means it is priced a little high, the 240mm Silent Loop is more competitively positioned. This is still a premium option, though.



This means you still get the nickel-plated base to the water block, a solid metal block itself and the coil-wrapped flexible tubing.

You miss out on having software control of the whole system. The Silent Loop 240mm relies on your motherboard having three fan headers – one for the pump, and one each for the fans.

One of the nicest things about this cooler is the flexibility of the water hoses. It's a cinch to slot it all into place and the metal coils surrounding the tubes help to ensure they don't get bent.

As for performance, this cooler delivers some of the best temperatures both in silent and standard modes, and it's among the quietest, too. In silent mode it claims top spot outputting just 31.5dB while in standard mode it sits a little more mid-table, but with a still decent 41dB.

As such, the be quiet! Silent Loop 240 is a great option if you're after a premium 240mm cooler and aren't particularly fussed about software control.

# **BE QUIET! SILENT LOOP 120**

www.bequiet.com £95

The be quiet! Silent Loop 120mm is, by some distance, the most expensive 120mm liquid cooler that's featured in our group test, but it immediately justifies much of this cost in several ways.



This one has a CPU block with a polished base. The theory goes that the flatter and more polished the surface of your cooler and the top of your CPU, the greater the contact and the less reliance on less thermally-efficient thermal paste to fill the gap.

This is also the only 120mm model to come with two fans. This is great for performance, though it does make the radiator section rather bulky. This cooler is also refillable, something that be quiet! recommends you do every two years.

With the fans set to the motherboard's silent mode, this cooler was one of the hottest. However, with the fans cranked up, it improved considerably, coming in comfortably mid-table and ahead of the other two 120mm models. However, this generated a fair amount of noise.

All told, there's a lot about this cooler that justifies its high price but its performance means it sits in an awkward position between single-fan 120mm options and two-fan 240mm options.



### **CORSAIR H60i V2**

www.corsair.com £70

→ While the Corsair H100i is all about its software control and RGB lighting, the H60i keeps things simple. This 120mm cooler runs straight off your motherboard's fan headers and lacks lighting of any kind.

3

Compatible with everything but Threadripper CPUs, the mounting system used here is simple. It uses a choice of two top mounting pieces that are magnetically attached to the block. The AMD one, then, just uses the AMD mount on the motherboard so there's no need to fit a base plate on the back. Meanwhile, the Intel one does require fitting a back plate but it's simple enough to do and doesn't require any brute force or an extra hand.

The H60 V2 is pretty much middle of the pack for 120mm coolers. It's ahead of the CoolerMaster MasterLiquid Lite 120 but a couple of Celsius behind the be quiet! Silent Loop 120, which is to be expected given this is a single-fan design.

That's true of noise levels too, with it being a little louder than the CoolerMaster but quieter than the Silent Loop, at least in standard mode. In silent mode it's a touch louder, but still stays below 34dB.

As such, the H60i doesn't quite stand out as a bargain, but it is a fairly good option for the reasonable price.

### **CORSAIR H100i V2**

www.corsair.com £105

→ The H100i V2 has a mid-range feel in terms of features and build. You get a copper base plate and an RGB logo set into the top piece of the CPU block, but you don't get the fancier quality of some of the other coolers.



One of the crucial selling points of this cooler, though, is its software control. Using the Mini-USB port on the side of the CPU block and the supplied cable that can fit directly to a motherboard USB header, the cooler can talk to Corsair's Link software. This enables you to control fan and pump speed, either via presets or by customising how the cooler responds to different CPU temperatures.

Oddly, despite this control, the H100i defaults to being surprisingly loud. The H100i silent option had the fans spinning at 1200rpm and at 1800rpm in standard mode. As such, this was the loudest cooler on test in silent mode.

The upside to this is better cooling, and sure enough the H100i ran away with it. It's likely there's an ideal compromise between noise and performance to be found by customising profiles.

The H100i can't claim to be the cheapest or the fanciest cooler here, but it sits in a nice middle ground, making it a good option, especially for software control.



# **COOLERMASTER MASTERLIQUID 240** www.coolermaster.com £65

The MasterLiquid 240 is astonishingly good value. It's nearly half the price of most other 240mm coolers, and while similar cost-cutting measures have been applied here as to the Lite 120, the end result is more impressive.



It's got an illuminated logo and the hose mounts rotate, which is useful, but there's none of the fancy materials or clever infinity mirror lighting of the more premium models on test.

However, you get a chunky radiator, quieter rubber-tipped fans and the convenient thumbscrews for mounting them. CoolerMaster has also upgraded the tubing from the Lite 120. Here, it's much thicker and braided. This makes it more difficult to move around, but it's a lot tougher.

When it comes to performance, the MasterLiquid 240 is surprisingly good. At no point does it take the crown in either silent or standard modes, however it holds its own and is relatively quiet in standard mode when under load - hitting just 40dB compared the Silent Loop 120's 44dB.

Just as with its 120mm sibling, the MasterLiquid 240 can't help but impress. For raw performance you can't really go wrong for the price, especially if this is your 90% first time buying an all-in-one cooler.

# **COOLERMASTER MASTERLIQUID** LITE 120 www.coolermaster.com £40

The CoolerMaster MasterLiquid Lite 120 is by far the cheapest cooler on this group test, and in some ways it shows, but fundamentally this cooler still delivers in the areas where it counts.



You do get a few nice extras, too. While plastic, the pump/block is topped by an illuminated CoolerMaster logo. The radiator is also well made, though it is a touch bigger than others.

The fan also comes with integrated rubber pads on its corners to help reduce transfer of vibrations and reduce noise. Plus, the screws for mounting the fan are thumbscrews, which means there's one less reason to grab a screwdriver when installing it.

The mounting system of this cooler is also good, particularly for AM4 motherboards. It uses the standard AM4 motherboard bracket, so there's no need to fit a base plate.

In terms of performance, it came dead last for overall cooling, both in silent and standard mode. It was also the joint loudest in silent mode – due to the pump making noticeable burbling noises - though it was the quietest in standard mode.

The end result is that this is a perfectly decent budget cooler. It's not perfect, but for the price it more than delivers.

**Group Test** 





### **NZXT KRAKEN X52**

www.nzxt.com £135

→ As the most expensive cooler on our test the NZXT Kraken X52 has a burden of expectation resting heavily on its shoulders, and thankfully it largely justifies its asking price.

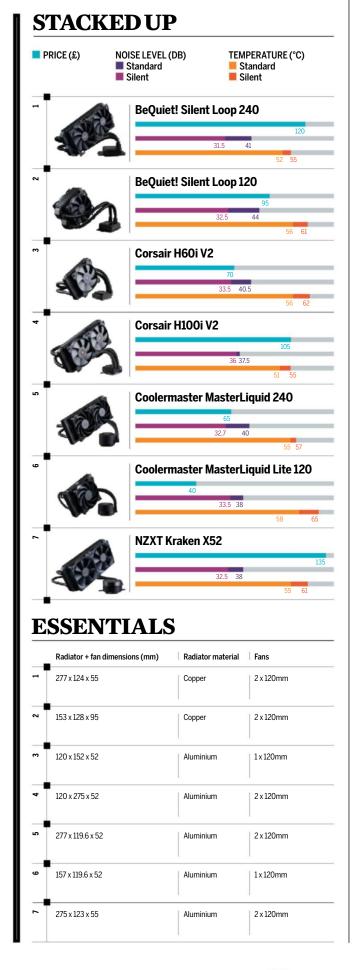


The top of the CPU block uses a piece of mirrored plastic and clever lighting to create an illusion of depth as the ring of light around the outside appears to continue deeper into the block.

Less impressive is the mass of cables that is needed to get this thing fully hooked up. It requires a proprietary connection from the block to the USB header, plus a SATA power connection. But the end result is a cooler that can be controlled by NZXT's excellent software that offers various default fan presets and the ability to customise the profiles.

The default silent and standard modes had the fans spinning very slowly, which meant the cooler didn't excel when it came to cooling, but also meant it was among the quietest – although not by much.

As such, in terms of performance it's basically on par – spin the fans up more and it would be in line with the other 240mm coolers on our test. Instead, the appeal of this cooler comes down to that snazzy but ultimately superfluous infinity mirror effect.





This houses 64 PCle lanes, meaning you can run up to four GPUs at x16 without degradation or throttling.

### 2 SINGLE-CORE PERFORMANCE

This behemoth is still a Ryzen part, and you can expect performance similar to a i5-6600K.

By default, AMD includes a gaming mode to ensure single-core performance doesn't hold back titles that tend to favour higher clocks.

# 4 OVERCLOCKING HEADROOM

You can clock this up to around 4 GHz across all the cores, adding an extra 160 points in Cinebench tests.

# **AMD THREADRIPPER 1950X**

www.amd.com £990



Let's get this out of the way right now: this is not a gaming part, but that doesn't stop it from being an incredible piece of engineering. AMD's Threadripper series is aimed solely at the professionals, the folk who make money out of rendering content on a day-to-day basis.

And, my god, is it awesome. Packing a total of 16 cores and 32 threads, this kills the competition, when it comes to price and performance in more computational-oriented tasks. We saw scores of over 3,000 points in CineBench at stock, a benchmark of software traditionally used in the industry for CGI and rendering cinematic content.

To put that into perspective, a Core i5-7600K scores around 663 points, a Core i7-7700K 970 points, a Ryzen 7 1800X 1,612, and even Intel's top dog right now, the Core i9-7900X,

coming in at the same price of this part, only manages 2,184 points at stock. That's just an astronomical performance increase.

The biggy is overclocking. By default, it performs identically to its Ryzen cousins, making it easy to overclock it to 4 GHz on all cores. Increasing single and multi-core performance by 15%. If you profit from computational work, this part is a no-brainer.

BASE/TURBO CLOCK: 3.4 GHZ / 4.0 GHZ / CORES/THREADS: 16/32 / LITHOGRAPHY: 14NM / CACHE: 40MB /

90%

MEMORY SUPPORT: 128GB DDR4 @ 2666 MHZ / MAX PCIE LANES: 64

Reviews



GPU

→ What, no Vega? That rant is coming soon enough, but this month I decided to take a look at PNY's latest GTX 1080 Ti rework instead.

After all, if Vega has shown us anything, it's that it's just not quite up to GTX 1080 levels of performance. The GTX 1080 Ti is still king of the hill.

PNY's aftermarket XLR8 GPU capitalises on that 1080 Ti GPU by pushing up the boost clock by a solid 70 MHz at stock, taking advantage of a tri-cooler fan

design, and packing a hell of a wallop to overclock potential. We managed to push the clock up to 2025 MHz, and the memory clock up to 12 Gbps, pushing both minimum framerates and averages up by 15%, making this an ideal 4K card.

LITHOGRAPHY: 16NM FINFET / CORES: 3540 / MEMORY: 11GB GDDR5X / MEMORY BUS: 352-BIT





→£140 for a mouse? You've got to be kidding right? Well maybe not, Razer's newest mouse more than makes up for the hefty tag.

Mice are one of, if not the, most subjective peripheral you'll ever find – we all hold mice in different ways. That said, the Lancehead is nothing if not spectacular. Its svelte design, combining a gunmetal matte finish, smooth curves, rubber grips and subtle RGB lighting, makes it a standout product.

Combine that with an easy plug-and-play setup and a 24-hour battery life and we're well on to a winner. I hope Razer makes one of those continually charging pads that Logitech has for this bad boy.

SENSOR: 5G LASER SENSOR / MAX DPI: 16,000 / CABLE LENGTH: 2M / LIGHTING: 16.8 MILLION COLOURS / BUTTONS: 9 / WEIGHT: 111 GRAMS

### **ROUND-UP**



### GIGABYTE AX370 GAMING K7 www.gigabyte.com £200

This is, by far, Gigabyte's best offering when it comes to Ryzen mobos, featuring a sleek satin black design, classy RGB LED lighting, and impressive memory support (I've got it running 64GB of 3200 MT/s right now), it's a solid contender for any high-end Ryzen system. If only the BIOS were a little stronger.



# EKWB A240G LIQUID COOLING KIT

www.ekwb.com **€240** 

Ever fancied your own custom loop? EK's latest aluminium liquid cooling kits are super cheap, easy to setup, and can cool your GPU and CPU off a single dual radiator unit. Performance is incredible, and after testing these extensively I can't recommend them enough to anyone interested in dabbling in liquid cooling.



### ASUS ROG STRIX X370-F GAMING

www.asus.com £120

Here's another contender for your Ryzen build. This has incredible memory support, solid performance and comes in at an affordable price. So what's the downside? Well, the RGB strip isn't the prettiest, backed into the Rear I/O cover, and it could do with a bit of extra spice in overclocking performance.

### YOUR NEXT PC

# **BUYER'S GUIDE**

Build the best PC for your budget



### **Budget** build

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

### Mid-range build

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

### Advanced build

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

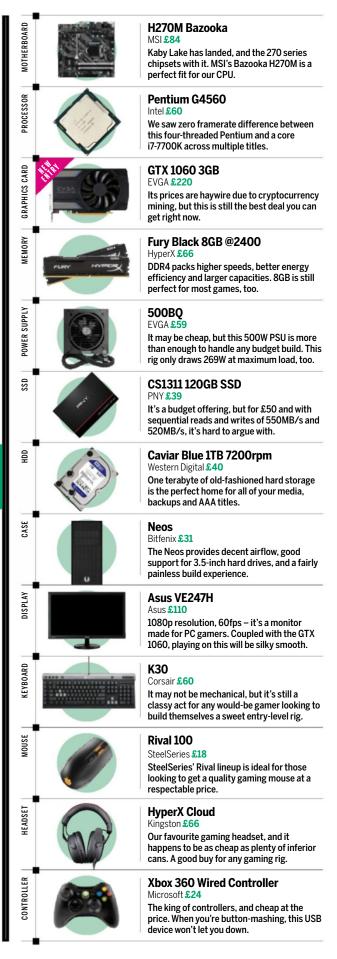
### Buyer's Guide



# BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank





Buyer's Guide



# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL £1,589



### Buyer's Guide



# ADVANCED BUILD

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

10TAL £3,366



## EXTRADLIFE

**CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING** 



## "When I wake up, I'm surrounded by angry men in cloth nappies"

Getting everything I bargained for in WAY OF THE SAMURAI 4



y name's Phil, and I have a confession: I love janky games. It's why I've spent days in the buggy sandboxes

of Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* series. It's why I once spent an afternoon hunting flying jaguars in an unpatched version of *Boiling Point*. It's why I'll always have a fondness for a particular type of Japanese game that combines quirky writing and a heap of systemic jank to create something entertaining.

The best of these is Sega's excellent *Yakuza* series, but they're not on PC, so I'm playing *Way of the Samurai 4* instead. I'm not expecting it to be good – Andy's review of the PC port, released in 2015, warns that it's

#### PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH Immediately turned to a life of stupid crime.

ALSO PLAYED
Rez Infinite. Pvre

"fundamentally a bit rubbish". But as long as it's entertainingly rubbish, I'll consider my evening a success.

Set in 19th century Japan, the story opens with an attempted trade deal between the British and the port town of Amihama. A faction of traditionalists arrives to oppose the foreigners and fighting breaks out on the streets. My nameless samurai, a new arrival in Amihama, is dragged into the conflict. For a second I worry

that *Way of the Samurai 4* might be playing things straight.

.....

And then I'm introduced to the commander of the British forces. She's a competent warrior, undermined only by the fact that her name is Melinda Megamelons. Ian Fleming would be proud.

Eventually I'm let loose on the town. I find a thief casing a nearby house, and he offers me a job stealing from a geisha by bumping into her when she's not looking. This is the sort of bullshit minigame that I was

#### I BUY SOME NOODLES, AND AM DELIGHTED BY THE OPTION TO REFUSE PAYMENT







hoping for, and I eagerly accept. I find the geisha, and wonder how the game will telegraph the moment to steal her stash. It answers with some pop-up text, reading, "Hint: Now."

I abscond with the treasure and return to the thief. He sets me a more difficult task: stealing from sumo wrestlers. I arrive at the location late at night. The wrestlers are nowhere to be seen. Finding a bed roll nearby, I sleep until the next day.

#### THE CHEEK OF IT

When I wake up, I'm surrounded by angry men in cloth nappies. Bingo. I grab their stash and run, but they give chase – preventing me from leaving the area. I turn to face them. It's a difficult fight. I have few restorative items, and no spare weapons. My blade breaks. I slash at a couple of guys with the hilt of my sword, but they beat me to death.

I reload and explore the town instead. I buy some noodles, and am delighted by the option to refuse payment. I do, just to see what will happen. Predictably, I'm attacked. I'm more confident in a one-on-one fight, but the security guy is the toughest opponent I've yet faced. He connects with a massive combo of attacks that wipes out my health bar. I die, again. A ratings screen declares me 'Good For Nothing'. I can't help but agree.

Despite my failures, I'm happy.

WOTS 4 is just as bizarre, shoddy and surprising as I'd hoped. It may not be good, but it is good for something.



## "I turn all the streetlights blue"

Cheating the system in else **HEART.BREAK()** 

#### NDY KELLY



THIS MONTH Hacked the planet, literally.

ALSO PLAYED The Sexy Brutale



n the world of else Heart.Break(), atoms have been replaced by bits. This means you can hack

the very fabric of reality and bend it to your will, providing you have the right tools. Modifiers are devices used by hackers to pull up the code for an object, whether it's a cup of coffee or a door, then edit it.

If you're tired, you can hack the coffee to boost its caffeine content by 200% instead of sleeping. Or if a key won't open a certain door, you can inject a piece of code that will make it brute force the lock.

But it takes a while to become powerful. This is a slow game, and you don't find high-level modifiers – which have no restrictions on hacking – until near the end. I've decided to replay the game, but I want to get straight into the hacking.

So I decide to play dirty and upgrade a modifier to the highest level, hours before I'm supposed to. The first step is finding a room with a modifier in it, and teleporting there by hacking a fuse box with a piece of

code that someone helpfully posted on a forum.

I teleport successfully and use my current low-level modifier to hack another one I find lying on a desk. I bring up the code and edit it so that there's no level restriction, and suddenly I have the ability to hack absolutely anything I want.

I can instantly bypass a locked door by finding its ID number in the code, then making a nearby unlocked door lead there. I hack the city's central financial computer to give myself \$10,000. I turn all the streetlights blue. I've gone mad.

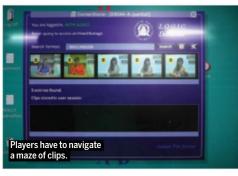
#### **POWER TRIP**

This is cheating, sure. But *else Heart*. *Break()* is a game about pushing boundaries and breaking systems. That's what hackers do. I wouldn't have done this on my first playthrough, of course, because it severely breaks the flow of the game, but for a second playthrough it's a lot of fun. Almost everything I can see can be hacked and manipulated, and I can go pretty much anywhere in Dorisburg unchallenged.

It's amazing how powerful the in-game language, Språk, is. People much smarter than me have created software in it, and even simple arcade games. But the beauty of *else Heart*. *Break()* is that you can dabble in hacking without knowing a line of code. There really is no other game like it on PC, and I'd hack my arm off for a sequel. ■

THE GAMES WE LOVE RIGHT NOW







## "With her pale skin and dark hair, she's a portrait of Snow White"

How **HER STORY** unravels as a dark contemporary fairytale



re the fairytales of our youth so long forgotten? In *Her Story*, they shimmer just below the surface,

their evil queens and changeling children reflected in our monitors.

I didn't play *Her Story* when it was released in 2015. Actually, I don't even think I knew about it. Too busy reading Lord Byron, maybe, or still lamenting the imprisonment of French princess Margot of Valois. It was only when my boyfriend gifted the game to me that I decided to press play, bookmarking my place in a tome of French folktales.

Although the game has just one outcome, *Her Story* unravels differently for each person who plays it. And that's because its narrative is defined by your approach. Frequently labelled a police procedural and murder mystery, no wonder so many people searched for words like 'WEAPON', 'BODY' and 'BLOOD' to find out if the icy, enigmatic Hannah killed her husband.

The first thing I did, however, was tentatively search for the husband's name, 'PETER' and a couple of the clips piqued my interest. The first, about a mirror that Peter had made

#### KIMBERLEY BALLARD



THIS MONTH Roamed a thicket looking for deadly nightshade.

ALSO PLAYED

Dream Daddy, Tacoma

for Hannah's birthday, and the second, Hannah's admission that Peter liked playing games. "You know, climb the tower, save the princess, that kind of thing."

"Hannah does look like a princess," I thought. With pale skin and dark hair, she's a portrait of Snow White. I also remembered that mirrors are frequent images in fairytales. They can represent narcissism – the quest for beauty is one steeped in blood – and duality – is the person who stares into a mirror the same as the one who looks back?

I didn't want to know about murder weapons or motives. I only wanted to know about Hannah's

#### I DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT MURDER WEAPONS OR MOTIVES

obsession with fairytales. As I got deeper, strands of fairytale begin to emerge, as light and intricate as angel hair. I searched for 'PRINCESS', 'FAIRYTALE', 'MIRROR', 'DOLLHOUSE', 'ATTIC', 'BEAUTY', the resulting story telling me little of murder, but about a childhood steeped in enchantment.

#### **TWIN FLAMES**

A girl looks out her window to see her mirror image across the street. In mythology, twins represent two halves of a whole, or a darker aspect of one self. Eve is a shadow, an envious child raised by an imposter. Once they meet, the girls fuse. While Hannah lives out an ordinary life, Eve grows up in the attic, surrounding herself with books of fairytales. The girls' bond is broken, however, by the arrival of prince Peter. And, as in the cruellest fairytales, jealousy ends in a ruptured bond between sisters and the shards of a broken mirror gleaming across the floor.

"We were obsessed with fairytales," Hannah says in her final video. "Not just the pretty ones, but the traditional ones. They were dark and real, bizarre and violent." My own obsession with fairytales turned *Her Story* into a tale of my own.

## "I'm forcing a squirrel into a pipe using a statue of Ron Jeremy as Pan"

#### Selling soap and stuffing ostrich arses in THE ADVENTURES OF BERTRAM FIDDLE EPISODE 2



hen I played the first Bertram Fiddle episode for this column, I got horribly drunk on sherry and

port, chosen tipples of the elderly, festive or desperate. Now that the sequel is here, things are going to be different. The fact you can play adventure games while tipsy doesn't mean you *should*.

It's a pleasantly dull, adventure-free start. Bertram is working in a factory making 'adequate soap'. Before I can do anything else, I need to finish his work for the day by selling three shipments of soap. It's going to take at least five minutes, but I can last that without a drink.

By the time I've sold my third order I've made a big dent in the accidentally-huge whisky I poured. The bleak, cobwebbed Victoriana is too much fun to play without a drink, and it's certain to improve my puzzle-solving skills – not because alcohol sharpens the mind, but because the puzzles in *Bertram Fiddle* are so odd that anything which encourages me to think laterally is a bonus. I make a few prank calls before leaving and the adventure truly begins.

#### MATTHEW ELLIOTT



THIS MONTH
Tried to drill through a wall
using an ice cream cone.

ALSO PLAYED The Darkside Detective, Baldur's Gate

Playing *Bertram Fiddle* is like a watching a sinister animation, but in a good way. I enjoy soaking up the absurdities. One moment I'm forcing a squirrel into a pipe using a statue of Ron Jeremy as Pan – there's a lot to unpack there – the next I'm mixing paint made out of sink slime and crushed beetles. I often don't know *why* I'm doing the things I'm doing, but the weirdness encourages me to experiment. It forces me to think differently. I just try everything and hope nobody is watching.

Bertram is framed for murder, and it's left to his cyclopean manservant Gavin to rescue him. This is where I

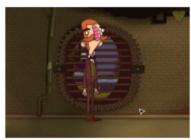
## PLAYING BERTRAM FIDDLE IS LIKE A WATCHING A SINISTER ANIMATION

get slightly stuck. At one point I'm trying to use an ice cream cone to drill Bertam out of prison, which strikes me as a perfectly reasonable and not illogical at all. The strange thing is I'm closer than I realise.

#### **GET STUFFED**

The solution is wonderfully convoluted. First, I steal a ladder from a man cleaning obscene graffiti from a statue of Queen Victoria - one of the game's many pop culture references, actually based on the work of Daily Mail-baiting artist Vaj Graff. I retire to an adventure club, and notice a unicorn horn which would work well as a drill. To get it, I have to knock a guard into the gaping arsehole of a stuffed ostrich by forcing a man to fly off his steampunk treadmill. Then, using the ladder, I climb onto a bar to steal the horn, which I replace with the ice cream cone. My tool is complete, Bertram is liberated, my whisky is finished. We escape into the sewers, and that seems like the perfect place to stop. There's loads of adventure to come hopefully with more booze and rectum-based conundrums - but I need to go to bed and I'm expecting a hangover. Thanks, Bertram.







FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB by Tom Sykes



# THE FORGOTTEN SEPULCHER

MAP Explore a massive, medieval Quake map

here's something about *Quake*'s Gothic-meets-industrial architecture that makes it a joy to explore its angular environments, even decades after its release.

It's partly the aesthetic, but it's also down to the exquisite level design. id Software's talented developers used every trick in their bountiful arsenal to make the most of the engine's strengths and limitations. Well, it's been 20 years since *Quake* and modders have been gradually eliminating those restrictions, shoring up the ancient engine to take advantage of exponentially faster modern PCs. *The Forgotten Sepulcher* is the culmination of all that work: it's surely the largest *Quake* map ever made, encompassing several environments, home to around 300

enemies and multiple bosses waiting to test your mettle.

Its the sort of thing you'd expect to find in an RPG: an interconnected space that exceeds anything found in the original game, in both technical scope and ambition. You'll frag your way around cathedrals, catacombs, and a sprawling swamp, in this secret-stuffed environment, based loosely on the E1M3 map from the original game. The Forgotten Sepulcher is so huge that you can't play it in the original engine: you need a specially modified version of Quakespasm, along with the latest build of Arcane Dimensions, the scenario in which the level now finds itself. That's worth a look in any case, as it's a magnificent fan campaign built by some of the best modders in the world.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Sepulcher

2

#### UNTURNED

MODS Embiggen the blocky survival game with this lot



andbox survival sim Unturned launched out of Early Access recently, and if you've been

waiting to take the plunge into the blocky zombie game, you'll find yourself in one of the most supported survival games on Steam. Its Workshop is particularly healthy, offering over 12,000 maps, plus loads more items and skins.



A CANISTON CREEK

Here's a rainy map that looks a little like the setting of Friday the 13th or Dawson's Creek. Except it's full of zombies rather than loquacious teens. DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/UnturnedMod1



B CAR SADDLEBAGS
Vehicles tend to have plenty of luggage space, but they could always do with more. Stick some bags all over your car with this strange mod.
DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/UnturnedMod2



This adds over 60 objects to the game, from cinema screens to gun stores: it's a random list of items that fleshes out the world's interactivity.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/UnturnedMod3

### 3 PRIMAL NEEDS

#### **MOD** Turn an RPG into a survival sim



eralt has needs in the non-modded Witcher 3, of course; needs that tend to be met by either a lusty sorceress or a mug of Kaedwenian Stout. But if you want to turn the White Wolf into a

proper person who needs to eat, drink and sleep now and again, the *Primal Needs* mod is the download for you. There's finally a proper point to all that lovely food and drink you'll find in every castle, inn and hovel. A famished, thirsty, or knackered Geralt will face a tough time in combat, as his ability to run, roll, block or regenerate stamina may be diminished, depending on how needy he is.

Survival added quite a bit to the later Fallout games (via their optional Survival modes), so it's great to see similar systems being added to *The Witcher 3*'s world – and you can tweak *Primal Needs* as you see fit.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/PrimalNeeds



### **4** AIR MAIL

#### **FREEWARE** Satisfying flight elevates this freebie



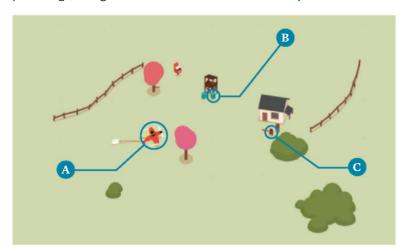
ir Mail takes place in what I'm assuming is an alternate universe: a world where letters are delivered, one at

a time, by a lone pilot. You are that pilot and to get those missives into the hands of their recipients you have to attach them to the rear of your aircraft, before flying from house to house. That last part is tough, but flight is so tactile and

so well animated in *Air Mail* that it's a thrill just exploring the world.

There's a knack to the process of lifting off and landing, but it's worth taking the time to get the hang of the controls, as it's a game that lets you seamlessly transition from the ground to the air and back again.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/AirMailGame



PLANE SAILING Once you've delivered a letter, another will be waiting for you. FUEL'S GOLD
You'll need to refuel
by getting out and lugging
cans back to your craft.





### LOST MEMORIES DOT NET

**WEBGAME** Return to a Facebookless internet



ou might know Nina Freeman for her adventure game *Cibele*: a game about love, sex,

and the internet. She explores similar territory with *Lost Memories*, a collaboration with Aaron Freedman. Like *Cibele*, it's set inside a sort of fake operating system – in this case a pretend internet browser that allows you to 'chat' with some of teenage Nina's friends, to tinker with her website design and to visit a variety of fan sites. There's a love triangle at the centre of the story but even if you're not interested in that, *Lost Memories* is worth a look for how it recaptures a memorable period in the internet's history.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/LostMemoriesNet

FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB by Tom Sykes

## 6 DARK SOULS GUN GAME

MOD No, it doesn't add guns

f you've played CS:GO at all, then you'll know Gun Game: a mod-turned-full-mode that turns progression on its head. In Gun Game, you're rewarded after each kill with a better weapon,

the mode demanding not just skill but *persistent* skill. Dark Souls' version takes the rewards a step further, while offering punishments when you inevitably end your winning streak. Starting out at Level 1, with no armour and a rubbish weapon, you'll level up and acquire better loot by successfully smacking enemies. However, if you take a hit in return, that gear will gradually be taken away.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/DarkSoulsGun





#### **CAVEMAN HARRY**

FREEWARE You're a caveman, Harry



ans of *Jet Set Willy* will feel right at home with *Cavernan Harry*, a similarly Spectrum-style

platformer full of critters and traps that will kill you in a single hit. Playing as the titular Neanderthal, vou'll set off on a quest to acquire food for your tribe, edibles that are tucked away in obscure parts of the world. There's a lot to like about this retro platformer, from the cute pixel art to the devious level design, which really makes you work for the (thankfully frequent) checkpoints. As with Jet Set Willy, and the similarly retro-inspired VVVVV, each screen is accompanied by a deliciously punny title, and it's worth charting this prehistoric world just for those linguistic titbits.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/CavemanHarry



### HERO BLAST

#### MOD We could be heroes, for the whole damn game

suspect that part of the reason Star Wars
Battlefront wasn't a smash hit is that it was caught between two worlds: between the skirmishes of modern Battlefield games and the knockabout fun of the first two Battlefront games. Hero Blast swings the pendulum towards the latter, implementing a mode that allows you to play as one of the series' iconic characters 100% of the time.

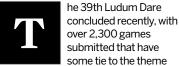
Rather than throwing heaps of players against one another, as in many of the other modes, the invite-only *Hero Blast* is a strict six-on-six team deathmatch, pitting a group of Rebels against the Imperials. You don't have to play as some weedy soldier part of the time, either: you just pick an iconic hero or villain, and then run around walloping one another until the match is over.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/HeroBlastMod



## 9 LUDUM DARE

#### **FREEWARE** Power is dwindling, but the games aren't



some tie to the theme 'running out of power'. You'll find three of the best to the right, but I'm going to

use this space to highlight another: the clever and gorgeous Ministry of Synthesis. In this puzzle-platformer, you have just an hour to think your way through an ancient reactor, which has

only a smidge of backup power remaining after it suffered a serious meltdown. To open the thick bulkhead door in each room, you have to drag cables from one sound device to another, using your portable oscilloscope to ensure that the waveforms match and aural harmony is achieved. It's a fairly tough system to get to grips with, but you'll have an advantage if you've ever messed about in a music creation program.

#### **TRIPLE DARE**

More power to you



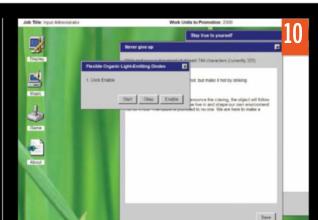
LIGHT CITY OF KAROLA In this particle-happy platformer, you have to grab coins to restore your dwindling power levels. DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/TheLightCity



**EXHAUSTED DAY** After going to bed, you hear a knock on your door - unfortunately, you're so knackered you can't stand up. DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/ExhaustedDay



SATURNALIA This puzzler has you gazing up at the stars. You'll tinker with the patterns in order to restore light to a darkened world. DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/SaturnaliaJam



#### IT IS AS IF YOU WERE DOING WORK

**FREEWARE** Unwind from a day's work by doing some work

t Is As If You Were Doing Work imagines a future in which robots do all the labouring, leaving

humanity free for a life of idleness. Turns out that's boring, and so this accurate work sim was unleashed onto a grateful world. As with real office work, it's a simple matter of randomly hammering the keyboard until you're finally allowed to stop.

There's been a glut of games recently set on fake computer desktops, and Doing Work certainly delivers with its authentically crappy aesthetics. Increasingly bizarre messages pop up as you attempt to meet your typing quota, injecting an element of surreal humour to this deliberately not-fun simulation.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/DoingWork



## **OVERWATCH**

#### Tracer's right: the world could always use more heroes. By Jen Simpkins



hat character select screen is starting to look mighty cosy. Blizzard's team shooter has sailed past

its first anniversary bigger and brighter than ever, its roster swelling from 21 to 25 playable heroes thanks to a number of free updates. First came support sniper Ana. Her long-range healing abilities and powerful Ultimate changed both the casual and competitive meta. The common cold was instantly cured. Shares in grandmas went up 300%. Then came problem child Sombra, who hated Christmas and kicked puppies for fun.

Okay, so it was just that the new hack-attacker didn't comfortably fit into the game at first. Her ability-disrupting kit was never quite enough to sustain her or her team, so picking her always guaranteed me an earful of abuse. It certainly had a few players concerned: was Blizzard out of viable ideas for useful new heroes? Fortunately, two new additions have rounded things out nicely.

The new anchor tank is a strangely adorable robo-quadruped. Orisa is her name, and aggressively enforcing safety at all times is her game. Although her relatively small

NEED TO KNOW	
RELEASE 24 May 2016	<b>DEVELOPER</b> Blizzard
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK www.playoverwatch.com

health pool, low-impact gun and planet-sized head mean she's too squishy to truly rival Reinhardt, her abilities are significant enough that her inclusion in a team composition can still knock opponents for a loop. Her E-key is Protective Barrier. It's on a short cooldown and can be fired out in various positions to provide a 900-point shield of coverage to teammates. Left-shift, meanwhile, activates Fortify. Boosting her damage resistance by 50% for four seconds, it's easy to dismiss as inconsequential, until you realise it counters mobility-slowing attacks.

With careful shield placement and attached to a good healer, she is a menace at choke points or on payload-pushing maps. And god forbid you meet an enemy Orisa around any convenient chasms (looking at you, Ilios well). Her right-click is a mini version of Zarya's Graviton Surge. If it's fired over an edge and you're anywhere near it, not even a resurrection is bringing you back from being unceremoniously yoinked into the abyss.

#### **PUNCH DRUNK**

The reign of the dive comp looks set to continue, because Doomfist is here, and Doomfist can fly right through a Reinhardt shield and punch him square in his ancient armour-clad jaw. While the new offense hero does have a short-range hand cannon to finish off low-health targets, it's mostly all about the fisting (stop it), which, when done correctly, can absolutely decimate enemy squishies (okay, that one was me and I'm sorry). Hold down right-click to charge Rocket Punch: the longer it's held, the further Doomfist will fly forward and the more damage he'll do. It feels great when it connects, knocks an enemy back into a wall and delivers a knuckle sandwich with an extra helping of hurt. And, rather wonderfully for an FPS, Doomfist is all about combos. Chaining Seismic Slam and Rising Uppercut - one pulls

#### GOD FORBID YOU MEET AN ENEMY ORISA AROUND A CHASM

enemies towards you, while the other launches them skyward – into Rocket Punch can be devastating. The downside is that Doomfist is very ability-dependent: once they're all on cooldown, and you're in the thick of it, it's tricky to stay alive. The key is to be very particular about positioning. He's also an excellent flanker, without putting in too much effort. To make the most of a dive comp, however, heading into the fray with a preplanned exit strategy is essential.

But there are ways to increase his survivability, and unsurprisingly, they involve more punching. Doomfist's passive ability gives him +30 to his shields, which decays over time, for every enemy he kills. Being able to stay mobile and dangerous at all times in a fight is true Doomfist mastery - something that, like playing Genji and property ownership, will likely remain a distant dream for me. But there's a silver lining to all of this, for me at least: the addition of Doomfist means a certain ability-hacking hero finally has a reason to be tolerated. I haven't been called a cockwomble for picking Sombra since.

#### ULTIMATE WARRIOR Making use of the newbies' assets



#### ANA NANO BOOST

STRONG Powering up a Reaper for a few extra 'dies'.

WRONG
Accidentally hitting
your braindead
Widowmaker.



#### SOMBRA

STRONG
Waiting for
somebody
stronger to follow
up on the hack.

WRONG
"That tickled" Enemy Team.



#### ORISA SUPERCHARGE

STRONG Letting your team know you're about to set the drum down.

WRONG
Trying to play Phil
Collins songs on it.



#### DOOMFIST METEOR STRIE

STRONG
Dropping it on the fools trying to take cover in a building.

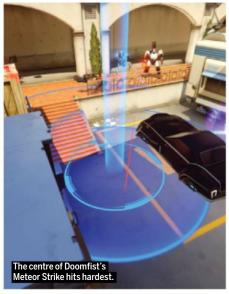
#### WRONG Providing a ha

Providing a handy weather forecast for your opponents.





















RIGHT: The Cargobob is Phil's latest obsession, despite the fact it's not actually useful.





#### **FIRST TARGET**

Phil: We gather near my new bunker, which has little practical purpose, but is at least near the airfield. Tom and Samuel both own helicopters, bought with their heisting riches, but I have made some bad investments, and must steal one from the map. Specifically, I want to steal a Cargobob. It's a transport helicopter, and comes armed not with guns but a winch. I can think of no better tool with which to the layers.

**Tom:** The airfield is popular with other players due to the free helicopters and nearby biker bar. In fact, there's a couple lurking around here right now.

**Samuel:** I fly over in my buzzard, see some guy in a vehicle by the runway and think, why not fire some rockets at this person? I do, and I feel good. Predictably, as soon as they're alive again, they bring me down with a rocket launcher. Then we're both on the runway, hitting each other with sniper fire.

Phil: I had hoped to be in the air before the fighting began, but things seem to be escalating pretty quickly. To make things worse, the airfield hasn't got a Cargobob. That means I've got to go to the airport at the bottom of the map. I jump in a plane, and am immediately blown up by Sam's target. Right, it's on.

Tom: Whenever someone kills you in *GTA Online*, you always respawn a few hundred metres away with no weapon equipped and facing the wrong way. This makes it extremely easy for the person who just killed you to immediately kill you again. So as Sam cuts his target down, I spot his respawn position and line up a sniper shot, taking his life a second time while he's still trying to process the first. No mercy.

Phil: The target bolts, and manages to slip away from Sam and Tom's fire. Unfortunately for him, he's running straight towards my crosshair. Unfortunately for me, I'm gunned down by a minigun. I think our new friend has reinforcements, and they're well armed.

**Tom:** I've never even seen a minigun in *GTA Online* before. I guess this is

#### PHIL SAVAGE



I spent over a million dollars on a gunrunning bunker and I don't know what to do with it.

#### SAMUEL ROBERTS



I spent four nights grinding one mode so I could buy a helicopter with rockets.

#### TOM HATFIELD



I became CEO of a major corporation and mostly use it to pay Sam to be my driver. what we could've spent our ill-gotten gains on rather than progressively larger garages.

**Phil:** Luckily, the minigun isn't very good. It's incredibly deadly, but only if its wielder gets into range and is given enough time to spin it up. As long as I snipe him on approach, he doesn't stand a chance. Unfortunately, I'm not a very good sniper. At this point I'm not griefing anybody. I'm just having a regular deathmatch. **Tom:** There doesn't seem to be any way to actually win one of these impromptu duels. Eventually one of you just gets bored and runs away. I guess that's kinda like griefing, right? **Samuel:** We get bored, and fly away in a helicopter at a low altitude so we're not shot down.

#### SECOND TARGET

**Phil:** The problem, I think, is that we're picking on people who can fight back. That's not what bullies do. We need someone who has no response to our advanced weaponry and desire to annoy. We need a low-level player. I browse the server list and find a fresh-faced level 11 character. Perfect. Let's destroy him. Tom: As we're picking our target, I remember that I have a bunch of cool abilities I haven't been using. Specifically, I can ring Lamar and get him to send a mugger after another player, which I do. Then I call GTA's not-Blackwater private military company and get it to send some mercenaries to kill him. I haven't even met this guy and I've already screwed him over twice.

Phil: I opt for the personal touch, using the map to track him down. When I arrive, he's running down a street, away from the police. Presumably he drew their attention while trying to defend himself from Tom's AI enforcers. I nab a car and charge at him. He goes splat into the wall. He respawns and I do it again. I hate to say it guys, but I'm having a really good time.

**Tom:** Bullying is, as it turns out, tremendous fun. This explains a lot of high school.

**Phil:** Our target finally makes it to the safety of a car just as Sam alerts me of  $^{\circ}$ 



RIGHT: One of many failed attempts to airlift a car, made harder by all the rocket launchers.





### AFTER ACTION REPORT

#### **OUR STORIES FROM MULTIPLAYER GAMES**

a Cargobob that's spawned in the port. This is my chance.
Samuel: Where have I been this whole time, you ask? A bloke in a Hydra jet killed me, so I'm stuck down by the port trying to reach a chopper, and it's taking bloody forever. I've fallen in the water and it's humiliating.

Phil: I return with the coveted Cargobob, salivating over the prospect of a great anecdote about dropping this guy - car and all straight into the sea. Unfortunately when I get back he's gone into passive mode. That's a success of sorts, right? Passive mode renders his car in a translucent mass of intangible matter, immune to winching. I can't let it go, though. I am convinced this will be very funny. I continue to hover directly over him, waiting for him to respond. After a few minutes, Tom arrives and starts pointing at him. We've gone beyond violence and straight to psychological torment. Tom: Weirdly, he was fine with a giant military helicopter hovering over his head. But when I get out of my chopper and stand, pointing directly at his face, it's too much. He immediately logs off. The first ragequit of the night.

#### THIRD TARGET

Phil: Over the last hour or so we've pissed off quite a lot of people. We decide that it's time to start over. We move to a new public server, and once again I immediately head for the airport. This time, though, people are waiting. They're waiting in a magical flying bus.

Tom: We've been seeing hackers the entire time we've been playing, usually ones that summon random artillery strikes from across the map. But this gang is something else. Its limo/bus moves faster than any car I've ever seen, it can fly, and occasionally just teleports to a completely different spot.

Phil: I retrieve the Cargobob again, but there's not much a slow, lumbering helicopter can do against a

completely different spot.

Phil: I retrieve the Cargobob again, but there's not much a slow, lumbering helicopter can do against a supersonic bus. Luckily Tom and Sam are much better armed than I am. Not that I expect them to be able



to do much damage against such obvious cheaters.

**Samuel:** I offload some rockets at these guys, but yes, they're almost impossible to hit.

Tom: Casually I throw a couple of shots towards the hackervan. This thing can move so fast it actually outruns my missiles. It hovers up in the air, taunting me. There's just one problem: those are homing missiles. While they're hotdogging, one of them slams home, instantly killing a

#### THE MORAL OF THE STORY IS: THERE'S ALWAYS A BIGGER BULLY

car full of four hackers. It seems their various vehicle upgrades did not, in fact, include armour. Wisely I decide to quit while I'm ahead and book it across the map, awaiting the inevitable modded retribution.

Samuel: These guys are the worst,

and when called out for hacking, they accuse us of hacking, which pretty much sums up the braindead state of online discourse these days.

**Tom:** Suddenly, and without warning, I'm forced to bail out of my chopper and plummet down to earth.







RIGHT: When running down a player over and over again, it's important to bring a sturdy car.





**Samuel:** They take me down too, of course, because they are hackers and I am not.

Tom: Now grounded, a series of metal cages spring up around me, freezing me in place. They mess up my camera so much I have to summon Phil over to tell me what on earth has just happened to me. Phil: Okay, so this is interesting. On the inside, Tom is being trapped and forced to throw grenades at himself. On the outside, he's been surrounded by a series of overlapping cages. A multidimensional, non-euclidean hellscape of flickering, constantly spawning metal. I'm actually impressed. This is how you grief someone. After Tom escapes, we spend some time trying to ambush the hackers. We even get a couple of kills. If anything, we're heroes. Heroes who have gotten bored of a futile fight and are now logging off. **Tom:** The moral of the story is: there's always a bigger bully. While we got some kicks messing with lower level players, almost every server we visited included a hacker or fighter jet owner who could end our fun in a heartbeat.







RIGHT: We get a few kills on the hackers, but mostly it's an endless cavalcade of misery and pain.











## **FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS**

Revisiting Obsidian's desert wasteland. By Andy Kelly



hot in the head and left for dead, you wake up in the one-horse town of Goodsprings and

begin a quest for vengeance in the Mojave Wasteland. That's the beautifully simple setup for Fallout: New Vegas, which makes the vault sequence in Fallout 3, where you watch your character grow up, seem needlessly long-winded. After a quick chat with a local doctor, voiced by Saul Tigh from Battlestar Galactica, you're set free. And it's up to you whether you want to hunt down the people who tried to kill you, or just drift aimlessly around the desert like Clint Eastwood's Man With No Name.

The Mojave is a far cry from the grim, shattered ruins of the Capital

Wasteland. This part of the United States wasn't bombed quite so heavily, and has retained some colour and life over the centuries. Fallout 3 was a sea of blues and greys, but New Vegas sizzles with oranges and reds. It's a more vibrant post-apocalyptic wasteland, but still tinged with the melancholy, desolate tone that defines the Fallout series. You begin the game on the edge of the desert among isolated towns and rolling tumbleweed, then move closer to New Vegas itself, where civilisation has a stronger foothold.

"So much of Fallout is bleak," says writer and designer Eric Fenstermaker in a 'making of' film included in the Collector's Edition. "Everything has been blown up, but the New Vegas Strip is unique in that no nuclear weapons hit it. So when you go in you're immediately struck

by the fact that this is one of the last places that still feels like the old world." And although the reveal of the Strip isn't as impressive as it could have been - a result of the slightly creaky, ugly engine the game was built in - it's still interesting to explore an area of Fallout's wasteland that isn't totally ruined.

#### **WEST WORLD**

But the Mojave has a very different feel when you wander out to the edges of the map, feeling more like an old western - an atmosphere enhanced by the catchy cowboy ballads that play on your Pip-Boy's radio. "I took a motorcycle trip through the desert and went all around the outskirts of Las Vegas," says project director Josh Sawyer in the same making of film. "Travelling by motorcycle, you get a lot more opportunities to see the world around you. And it gave me a really

#### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED October 2010 **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

**PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks

www.bethesda.net

### © REINSTALL







strong feeling of what it's like being out there in the desert, which I then tried to bring into the game."

A slick, smooth-talking New Vegas gangster called Benny, played brilliantly by Matthew 'Chandler Bing' Perry, is the man who shoots you in the head, and chasing him is, at least to begin with, the focus of the story. Benny's appearance, specifically his garish black-and-white plaid suit, is based on real-world Vegas gangster Bugsy Siegel - one of many historical figures Obsidian looked to for inspiration when creating the game's characters. But in the big picture, Benny is small time compared to some of the other antagonists you'll encounter in the Mojave.

There's the enigmatic Mr House, inspired by infamous Vegas businessman Howard Hughes. He's a pragmatist, and even a force for good in the wasteland in some ways. But you don't get that powerful without a certain amount of ruthlessness. Then there's Caesar's Legion, a tribal army planning to assault and capture the New Vegas Strip and nearby Hoover Dam, whose preferred method of dealing with enemies is crucifying them. And there are other, smaller

groups, too, including the Powder Gangers, the Boomers and the Jackals. You're never short of enemies in New Vegas.

One of *New Vegas*' best tricks is sidelining the binary karma system for reputation. Karma is still there, but it has much less bearing on the game. How the factions perceive you is a lot more important, and it's worth making a few friends. Get cosy with the Brotherhood of Steel and they'll give you access to their safehouse and occasionally fill a crate with energy weapons and ammo. But anger them and Veronica – one of the better

companions – will refuse to join you. Pal up with the New California Republic and you'll get a radio that lets you call for backup and supply drops. Upset them and they'll send a hit squad to kill you.

But the game's greatest strength, and the reason many consider it the best of the 3D *Fallout* games, is the writing. Obsidian has a solid background in storytelling, and it shows in *New Vegas*. Quests are more interesting, with a moral greyness that *Fallout 3* sorely lacked. In a GDC talk about designing its branching narrative, Sawyer said he wanted to

#### TOWN AND OUT Places to call home in the Mojave



PRIMM
Recognisable by the famous El Diablo rollercoaster, this town was a budget Vegas before the bombs fell.



GOODSPRINGS
A quiet one-horse town on the edge of nowhere. Not much here but dust, tumbleweed and a run-down old saloon.



NOVAC
Built around the ruins of an old desert motel, this settlement is dominated by a huge statue of Dinky the T-Rex.



NEW VEGAS

A walled-in wasteland paradise of gambling, excess and vice, ruled and protected by the enigmatic Mr House.



## THE MOJAVE ISN'T AS EVOCATIVE A SETTING AS THE CAPITAL WASTELAND

avoid Jesus/Hitler' moments: those blunt choices where one option is selfless and noble, and the other is comically evil. "The agony of a choice should fall somewhere between these two spectrums," he says in the talk. "A player should feel like there's something good *and* bad about what they pick."

New Vegas doesn't have the moral ambiguity of some of Obsidian's other games, particularly the magnificent

Pillars of Eternity, but it's one of the things that sets this Fallout apart from the Bethesda entries in the

series. Arguably, though, the Mojave isn't as evocative a setting as the Capital Wasteland. Civilisation's post-nuclear collapse is felt more vividly in Washington DC. It has a bleakness that you never really get a sense of in the Mojave.

That was almost certainly Obsidian's

intention, to show us another side of the *Fallout* setting, but there's something more compelling about the hopelessness of the Capital Wasteland.

#### **ALLIED ASSAULT**

But in pretty much every other respect, Fallout: New Vegas is the better game. Many of the companions are rich, interesting characters with distinctive personalities, and not just dumb automatons following you around. There are more ways to talk and think your way out of trouble. And the faction system makes it enormously replayable. In one playthrough you might side with the NCR to protect the Hoover Dam; in the next you'll buddy up with Caesar's Legion and help them capture it. And depending on who you decide to join forces with, some missions will close off and others will open up. Your allegiances really do have an impact on the game.

Some of the worst things about New Vegas – dead-eyed character models, janky animation, feeble FPS combat – were inherited from Fallout 3, so I can't really blame Obsidian for much of that. Overall, it did an incredible job, especially when you consider that it created the entire thing in just 18 months. It also found time to make some quality of life improvements, including a radial menu that lets you easily give orders to your companions, and the ability to mod guns with scopes, silencers, and so on. It even added a survival mode that forces you to eat, sleep, and drink to stave off death, and where companions can die permanently if they take too much damage.

The debate about which 3D Fallout is best has been raging for years, and probably will forever. But for my money, New Vegas is the clear winner. Obsidian's historical ties to the series and its deep understanding of the lore - thanks to the involvement of 'Fallout Bible' writer Chris Avellone - makes for a much more consistent, authentic take on the setting. The quests are more entertaining and varied, the characters are stronger, and the faction system makes it a much richer role-playing experience. I don't know if Obsidian will ever make another game in the series, but I'd love to see it take another yank of the one-armed bandit.







LEFT: Games are interspersed with training. Perform well to increase Alex's stats and impress the manager.





hen FIFA 17's story mode was announced, the response was mostly mockery. Will there be Renegade

and Paragon options for post-match interviews? (Yes). Will it end with a 'suicide match' consisting of all the characters you've met so far? (Sadly, no). Yet when I actually gave it a try it ended up being one of the most unusual and innovative stories I've ever played.

Let's set the tone: the game begins with you, Alex Hunter, as a ten-yearold boy playing football in the park. After winning or losing the match, Alex goes back to his tiny, pokey terraced house and distracts himself playing keepie ups while his parents argue downstairs. This is not the kind of scene I've ever encountered in a videogame before. It's more akin to Eastenders than Mass Effect.

There's a reason for this: the story is set across a full season of Premier League football and Alex can sign for any team in the division. Because of this, there's no way FIFA can tell a traditional underdog sports story, after all I might be playing for an awful team and lose a lot. Instead, they're forced to make a story about human drama. Mostly about Alex's relationship with his best friend Gareth. They both sign for the same team (whichever one you choose), but Gareth is initially more successful, and the fame and media adulation slowly go to his head, leading him to demand a transfer (and also subtweet Alex on the in-game Twitter).

Gareth isn't the only NPC injected into a real football roster, there's also two veterans, Gallo and Bernard, who mentor you in whatever team you sign up for. Then there's Danny, a fellow youngster playing for

#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASED** 27 September 2016

**EXPECT TO PAY** 

**OUR REVIEW** 

www.easports.com/fifa

#### #FOOTIEBANTS

Yes these are their real in-game Twitter handles



#### GARETH

@realgazwalker @MrAlexHunter is doing great in the lower leagues, maybe that's where he belongs.



#### DANNY

@THE\_williams\_footy @EASports you've rated me way too low in the latest FIFA, sort it out.



#### AGENT

@MichaelTaylorRS Hi @MrAlexHunter do you think your grandad will sign mv scarf?



#### BERNARD

@li\_li\_foot One must master the appetiser of the lower leagues before one can move on to dessert.



@cat hunter football @MrAlexHunter I hear it's going to be cold tomorrow. #wrapupwarm

whichever lower league team Alex gets loaned out to. When you first encounter him at your tryout session he's a swaggering prick who is convinced he's headed for the big time. He pops up again once Alex gets loaned out, but not making it to the top level has humbled Danny, and he slowly comes to replace the distant Gareth as Alex's new closest friend. He's still self aggrandising, but now it feels like a joke you're in on, rather than a one-dimensional cocksure swagger. It's not easy to create a likeable character with these traits, and vet somehow Danny became a personal favourite of mine.

#### **FANTASY FOOTBALL**

At other times the cracks in the real-world/fiction artifice begin to show. Since none of FIFA's

recreations of real-life football managers are voiced, you only ever talk to their assistant, while a silent Arsene Wenger looks on approvingly in the background. At a certain point in the plot your team will make a big money transfer for a player in your position, which can result in the bizarre spectacle of James Rodriguez moving from Real Madrid over to Middlesbrough.

There's also little nuggets of procedural narrative lurking around. When I was near the top of the table, players suddenly started talking

#### I WAS LUCKY, MY SEASON **ENDED IN THE MOST PERFECT** POSSIBLE WAY

about a title challenge. Picking a team that had qualified for the Champions League got me a talk from the Assistant Manager about how different European football is. If I'd done poorly, would that story have instead pivoted to a desperate relegation battle?

#### **SEASON FINALE**

I was lucky, my season ended in the most perfect possible way, with Alex playing in the final of the FA Cup against Gareth. This finale is semi-planned, Gareth's team will always make it through to the final, and Alex doesn't play in the first few rounds, ensuring his team can progress. Yet there was still the very real possibility I could've lost the whole thing, ruining the fairytale.

Next year's FIFA is confirmed to carry on Alex's story, and I can only hope they continue this weird experiment. Perhaps they could lean even more on the fictional side, I would honestly be happy if Alex played for a fictional team staffed entirely by NPCs. Yet regardless of which direction they go in, it's worth going back to FIFA 17 and sampling Alex's first story. Yes, for the first time ever, an out-of-date FIFA game is actually worth buying.





LEFT: Mourinho's too important to voice act, so the assistant manager does most of the talking.







#### ANDY KELLY



I am the rocker, I am the roller, I am the out-of-controller. And I love applying thermal paste to CPUs.



#### **ELSE HEART.BREAK()**

#### www.elseheartbreak.com

>In a digitised world, anything can be hacked. That's the premise of else Heart.Break(), a wonderfully unique game about love, youth, and cybercrime. Use a tool called a Modifier to hack objects and change how they function, and use your newfound coding skills to impress a gang of hacktivists.



#### **NO MAN'S SKY**

#### www.nomanssky.com

→ The recent Atlas Rising update has given this divisive space exploration game a new lease of life. A dramatically upgraded mission system has given the story some much-needed structure, and planets you land on are a lot more varied and exotic. I'm glad the devs are still dedicated to improving the game.



#### **GRAND THEFT AUTO V**

#### www.rockstargames.com

→ GTA Online is great, but I keep coming back for the singleplayer. It's one of my all-time favourite story modes, squeezing an enormous amount of variety, personality, humour, and thrilling action into its lengthy running time. I'm still gutted no story DLC was ever released, and likely never will be.



#### SWAT 4

#### www.irrationalgames.com

> Before *BioShock*, Irrational made this brilliant SWAT simulation. It sees you intervening in a number of dangerous crimes, from a gas store robbery to a hostage situation in an office. And dealing with them requires patience, planning, and playing it by the book. Still one of the best tactical shooters on PC.





#### **MAD MAX**

#### www.madmaxgame.com

→One of the most underrated open world games in recent years. Become the Road Warrior and roam the deserts of the old world, beating up bandits, scavenging for fuel, and getting involved in some incredibly exciting car chases. You even unlock the iconic V8 interceptor when you finish it.



#### **GONE HOME**

#### www.gonehomegame.com

> Tacoma, the latest game from Fullbright, is fantastic, But Gone Home is still its finest moment for me. The heartfelt story is told beautifully, and the grand, empty Greenbriar household is dripping with atmosphere. Go in blind if possible. It's best experienced knowing nothing about it.



#### **DUSKERS**

#### www.duskers.misfits-attic.com

With a retrofuturistic aesthetic reminiscent of the computer consoles from Alien's USCSS Nostromo, this game about scavenging abandoned starships with drones immediately won me over. But it was the tense horror, deep strategy, and unnerving atmosphere that kept me playing.



#### STORIES UNTOLD

#### www.storiesuntoldgame.com

→An anthology of brilliantly constructed, nerve-wracking horror stories, all built around the idea of interacting with a variety of archaic computer systems. In one you play an old horror text adventure that bleeds into reality. In another you're a scientist experimenting on a strange alien artefact.

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