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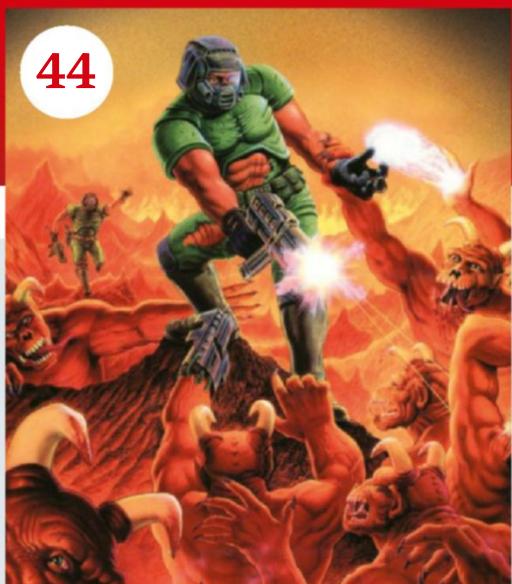
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# MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD



[ THE TOP STORY ]

## STREAM HONKERS

As PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds hits 500,000 players, griefers are getting creative

**P**layerUnknown's Battlegrounds recently broke 500,000 concurrent players on Steam, placing it alongside the likes of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* and *Dota 2* in terms of sheer popularity. It's one of the biggest success stories on PC, but a new feature is proving bothersome for some players. Horns were recently added to the game's banged-up cars, which enterprising stream snipers have found a way to exploit.

Stream sniping typically involves playing on a server with a streamer while watching their stream to gain an advantage. It's thoroughly unsportsmanlike, but some gamers find the activity hugely entertaining.

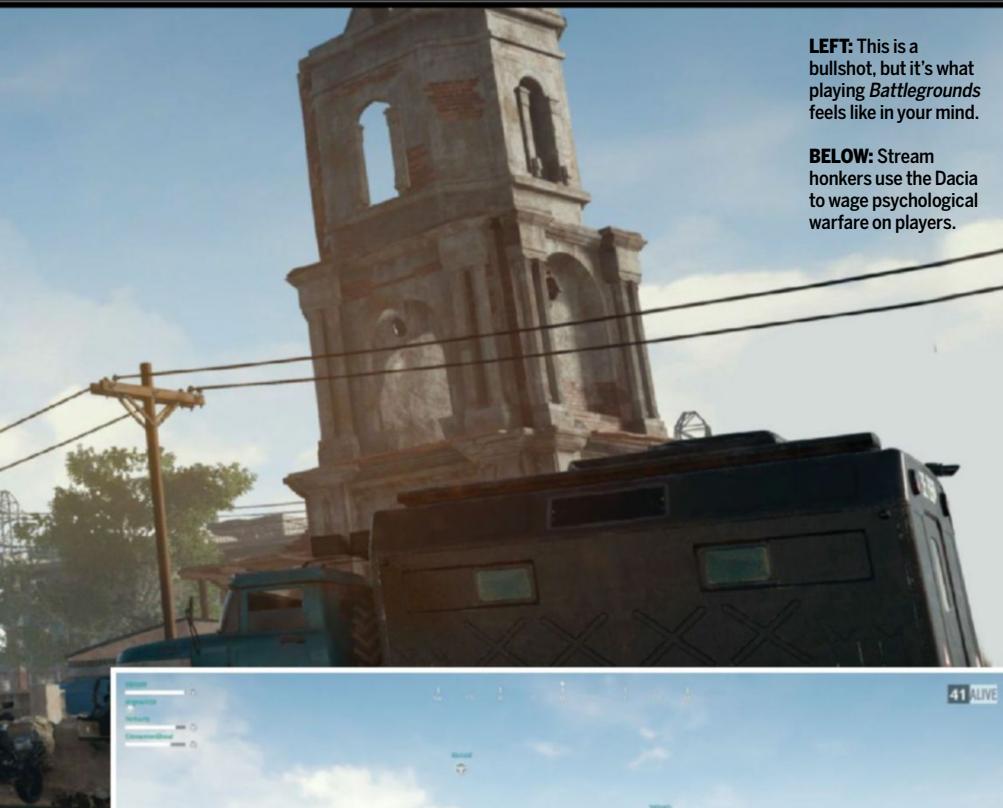
Snipers have now found a way to use *Battlegrounds'* new horns to help them out. Stream honking, as some refer to it, involves getting into a car, holding the horn button down, then chasing streamers around.

When they get shot at, they speed away only to return later with more maddening honking. It's enormously childish, but also kinda funny. Although if it was happening to

me I'm sure I'd find it anything but. *Battlegrounds* developer Bluehole has a strict policy of banning stream snipers, so it remains to be seen whether this will extend to stream honkers. Some will view it as little more than a bit of harmless tomfoolery, but for others it will actively ruin their enjoyment of the game.

*Battlegrounds* has also introduced FPS-only servers, which were hugely popular in *DayZ*. These restrict all players to a first-person perspective, which makes the game doubly tense. And considering how tense it already was, that's saying something. The view forces you to be more careful, and means you're unable to swing the camera around to look around corners and through windows. It's a purer, tougher way to play.

**SOME WILL VIEW IT AS  
LITTLE MORE THAN A BIT  
OF HARMLESS  
TOMFOOLERY**



**LEFT:** This is a bullshot, but it's what playing *Battlegrounds* feels like in your mind.

**BELOW:** Stream honkers use the Dacia to wage psychological warfare on players.



### CRATE EXPECTATIONS

A new feature that hasn't been quite as well received, however, is the addition of paid-for crates containing cosmetic items. "I do understand your concerns about the system, but I feel testing for a sturdy economy on the Steam Marketplace is necessary at this stage and ultimately beneficial for the game," says *Battlegrounds*' creator, Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene. "We are taking your concerns into consideration when it comes to the ability to get free cosmetics by playing the game."

A game as widely-played as *Battlegrounds* is always going to make decisions that divide the community, but the game's wild popularity shows no sign of waning. I can't help but think of how *DayZ* was the hot new thing for about a year, but slowly fizzled out. It'll be interesting to see how *Battlegrounds*' longevity compares, and how it evolves with future updates. ■

*Andy Kelly*



## HIGHS & LOWS

THE MONTH IN PC GAMING



### HIGHS

#### The Long Dark

Hinterland's survival sim finally leaves Early Access, complete with atmospheric story mode.

#### PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

The new first-person servers are a revelation, upping the tension to a ridiculous degree.

#### Wolfenstein II

The imaginative Swedes at MachineGames are doubling down on *Wolfenstein*'s absurdity.

#### Tacoma

Fullbright brings its rich worldbuilding and keen storytelling to space, and it totally works.

#### Hearthstone

The new expansion is bringing 135 new cards. Time to get sucked in again.

#### Steam

It's about time Valve updated Steam's default UI. Even Uplay looks nicer these days.

#### Early Access

We get the benefits, but can someone just, like, released a finished game for once?

#### Dust

Whoever invents a PC that doesn't constantly get coated in dust will be a rich, rich person.

#### Half-Life

With *Black Mesa*'s Xen level incoming, the lack of any new official games stings harder.

### LOWS



## WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

# T H E S P Y

The Spy is neither seen, heard, nor smelled.

# H

ello, friends. The Spy is back with some more scalding hot PC gaming rumours. Well, reasonably hot. Mildly warm in some cases. But whatever the temperature, you can rest assured that the following nuggets will assuredly reveal themselves to be either correct or incorrect. That's a Spy guarantee, and you can count on The Spy's guarantees. They're worth their weight in gold, and can actually be used as legal tender in over a dozen unrecognised rogue states across the world. Just tell 'em The Spy sent you. And if they give you an angry look, swear profusely, or brandish some kind of weapon, tell them The Spy is sorry about whatever it was that blew up that one time.

Remember **Midnight Club**? Well, Rockstar's street racing series may be making a comeback – if a supposedly leaked screenshot is to be believed, that is. It appears to show the game's start screen, with an Xbox One button prompt. And if it's coming to Xbox One, it's coming to PC too. There's no number in the logo, so this is either a remake of the first game or a reboot of some kind. Or it's a fake

screenshot. Coincidentally, the *Midnight Club* is the name of a bar in Zurich where The Spy was almost poisoned by a rival agent. It's a good thing The Spy is able to vomit on cue and ejected the deadly spiked Martini just before the toxin worked its deadly magic.

Another beloved Rockstar game may be returning as well. A dump of concept art allegedly from **Bully 2** has surfaced online. There's no way of knowing if this is legit, or even from a game currently in development, but the art is of a high enough quality to make The Spy think there might be something to it. Then again, *GTA Online* has been such a huge hit for Rockstar, would it

lease of life in the form of PlayStation 4's *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy*. This collection of remastered platformers has been something of a nostalgia-fuelled hit for Sony, but it appears an Xbox version may be in the works. Not only did retailer Super Gamer list it on its site, but one of developer Vicarious Visions' artists posted a few UI shots on their portfolio showing Xbox button prompts. And in this bold new world of Xbox being a single, unified format, that means it might be headed to PC. Honestly, The Spy doesn't care much of bandicoots. Once, on a mission, an eccentric Aussie megalomaniac tossed The Spy into a pit of hungry bandicoots with lasers attached to their heads. It was most unpleasant.

Former *Uncharted* writer Amy Hennig is working with Visceral and EA on a **Star Wars** game, and some plot details have leaked courtesy of makingstarwars.net. Apparently the main character will be called

Dodger, a criminal who 'dodged' the draft into the Imperial army. He'll reportedly be played by Todd Stashwick (recently seen in the *12 Monkeys* TV series), and if Hennig's previous work is anything to go by, will almost certainly be roguish and/or charming. Sounds like Visceral is going big on story, which makes sense given Hennig's involvement. The game, which is still untitled, will allegedly take place just before *The Empire Strikes Back*. ■

*The Spy*

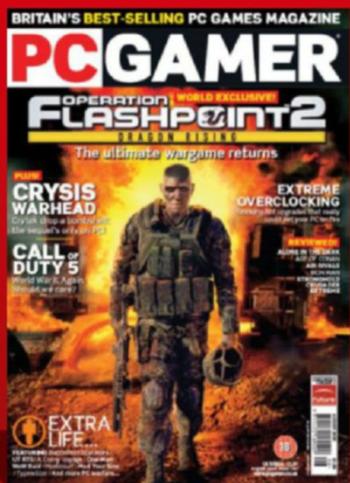
## ROCKSTAR'S STREET RACING SERIES MAY BE MAKING A COMEBACK

really go back to *Bully*, a game that doesn't lend itself to multiplayer? The Spy thinks these might be images from an abandoned project. At Spy School they called The Spy a bully. But if you're going to leave your underwear unattended, of course an enterprising agent is going to bug them and feed the sound of you going to the toilet through to the cafeteria.

### CRASH LANDING

Grinning marsupial **Crash Bandicoot** has recently had a new

## This month in... 2008



1 Former PC Gamer writer Jim Rossignol, now a game developer in his own right, wrote a feature for this issue about the growing Russian and Ukrainian game development scene. As well as featuring a photo of a very cold-looking Jim standing in Red Square, the feature also sung the praises of Eastern-developed games like *STALKER* and *Men of War*.

ISSUE  
190, August 2008  
ON THE COVER  
*Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising*  
IN THE CHARTS  
MGMT – Kids



2 In reviews this month Tom Francis slaughters Atari's ill-fated *Alone in the Dark* reboot. "I've played worse," he says. "But I can't remember when."

3 Tim Edwards previews *Far Cry 2*, which would become one of the most divisive games on PC. He tells us about blowing a zebra up with an RPG and interviews creative director Clint Hocking. "There are two kinds of zebra in the world," he says. "One is endangered, one isn't. And ours is the one that isn't. That doesn't mean it's okay to kill them."



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MAKING GAMES IS HARD

**ABOVE:**  
*Arkham Knight* is the poster child of ports that weren't given enough time or resources.

**RIGHT:** The PC versions of *Vanquish* and *SteamWorld Dig* both had significant delays – a decision that allowed for the best results.

## PORTING PITFALLS

Bringing games to PC is more complicated than it seems.



**P**orting games is a difficult task for devs, even if they're porting to the same platform they make their games on: the PC. As Disparity Games cofounder Jason Stark points out, "Gamers ask, 'Why can't they just release the version they develop with? Then, when developers do just release [that] and it's a buggy mess, they ask: 'Why are developers so lazy?' Well," says Stark. "It's because they released what they had."

Think about how many components that make up your setup. Each runs on drivers that may or may not be up to date and interact with one another in complex ways. Throw a game that hasn't had much

troubleshooting into this soup of software and hardware and it's no wonder tweaking game settings is a foundation of PC gaming. In this context, the difference between a 'good' and 'bad' PC release can come down to how much time and money you can throw at your title.

"Bringing a game to consoles is difficult," Stark says. "But at least you know that a bug that happens on your Xbox One is going to happen on every Xbox One."

When you port your game, you're essentially creating a unique version of it. This means every platform a developer decides to launch on effectively multiplies their present and future workload. When you launch on multiple platforms, your ability to react to suggestions or complaints slows. You have to test updates and patches on every platform you support before release. You're constantly ensuring something you did to improve one version doesn't break another. And, after all that, you still need to go through the arcane series of checks and balances console manufacturers require.

Creating a PC port of a game from a previous console generation also has its problems. A title that previously ran at 30fps can't magically run at 60fps. Games half a decade old or more won't suddenly look refreshed at 4K resolutions. In fact, the logic underlying a game may have to be bent in order to accommodate higher framerates. In *Vanquish*, this resulted in a bug that caused 60fps players to take twice the damage of those capped at 30fps. And a bug causing weapons to degrade twice as quickly in the 60fps PC port for *Dark Souls II* took a full year to fix. Full-scale emulation, a meticulous rebuild of the game in a new engine, or entirely revamping portions of the visuals could be necessary, as with the recent PC release of *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger*. And in the case of games like *Icewind Dale II*, the source code is lost, meaning it's impossible to rebuild the game for an 'enhanced' release.

### THE SUPPOSED 'BUTTON'

The ease of porting a game can be affected by a multitude of factors. No matter what complexities you encounter during this process, you're also under pressure to make sure that the effects look functionally similar. However, it's difficult finding people willing to speak on record about the details of these factors, what makes certain platforms difficult to develop for, or what role engines play. There are legal reasons for this, but, as Jason Stark puts it, "You don't hear negative things about porting, because it's not in a developer's interest to antagonise platform holders. You don't get featured by Unity by complaining about them."

### "YOU DON'T GET FEATURED BY UNITY BY COMPLAINING ABOUT THEM"

Aside from these difficulties, there's another fundamental reality of development if you want to live off of your work: selling your game. According to Nicole Stark of Disparity Games, each port you create involves a new piece of outreach. New YouTubers to contact, new communities to manage, and new art and descriptions to match the platform. As Image & Form Games CEO Bjarnn Sigurgeirsson tells me, "It's harder to release games for many platforms at the same time." His studio has 20 people dedicated to development, just three of which handle the publishing, marketing and sales of its games. For smaller teams, many of which have to handle several responsibilities alongside development, you can imagine the strain these duties can take.

### POSITIVE PROGRESS

However, by tying the move of *Armello* out of Early Access to a console release, League of Geeks director Trent Kusters found, "It changed our launch from 'Hey,

*Armello* is coming out of Early

Access' to 'Hey, *Armello* is launching on this day.'

Developers face an audience frustrated by cash grabs, expecting ever-increasing efforts in search for the 'ideal' port. Despite these obstacles, many are *still* deciding to tackle the many challenges porting poses and provide their players the best experience possible. When you see a decade-old console game topping the Steam charts, it's a sign. It shows that players can appreciate the end results of a good port, and they're willing to pay for it. ■

Xalavier Nelson Jr



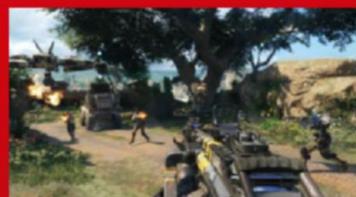
## Porting Paragons

THERE ARE GOOD PORTS, AND THEN THERE ARE GREAT PORTS



### 1 ALAN WAKE

Remedy Games packed the PC version of *Alan Wake* with improvements. It bundled the episodic DLCs with the game, and, as a bonus, included hefty options to boost the visuals beyond that of the original.



### 2 CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III

The PC version of *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* has local multiplayer options, custom dedicated servers and official support for what has become a vibrant modding community.



### 3 DARK SOULS III

This is notable in how it learned from the mistakes of its predecessors. After the poor ports of the first and second games, FromSoftware put the time in to ensure the PC port of *Dark Souls III* was rock solid.



### 4 JOE DANGER

Hello Games increased the resolution and stability of both *Joe Danger* games for their Steam releases, adding Workshop support for players to share levels, as well as a set of *Team Fortress 2* cameos.



PCG INVESTIGATES

# HÖYLING TO GLORY

How a 17-year-old community is keeping Elasto Mania alive.

**ABOVE:**  
Probably not what you'd imagine if we said it's a game of competitive apple picking.

**ABOVE RIGHT:**  
Half the challenge is figuring out the quickest route through the maze.

**I**t may lack the spectacle of football's greatest stage, but the stars of the *Elasto Mania* World Cup have just as much power to amaze as the likes of Messi, Neymar and Ronaldo. The long-lived shareware elastic motorcycle puzzler celebrated its seventh World Cup this year with a schedule of virtual apple consumption and intense höyling – a word meaning to play a level endlessly – spread across 15 events in three months.

It took winner Zweq some 150 to 200 hours of playtime, distributed across the entire tournament, to rack up the event rankings and consequently the points needed to top a field of 138 competitors. Consistency was essential to finding and mastering his bewilderingly-difficult apple-collecting routes. “I tried to play one to three hours every day, even if I wanted to be somewhere else,” he explains. “If you try to pack in a 15-hour play session just before the event ends, you just don’t get as good results as spreading your playtime on every day.”

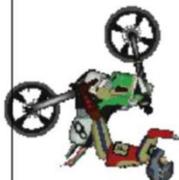
Zweq came to the World Cup fresh from a six-month break from *Elasto Mania*, and while he ranked among the favourites to win, his own expectations were modest. “That was probably the key to my success,” he reflects. It

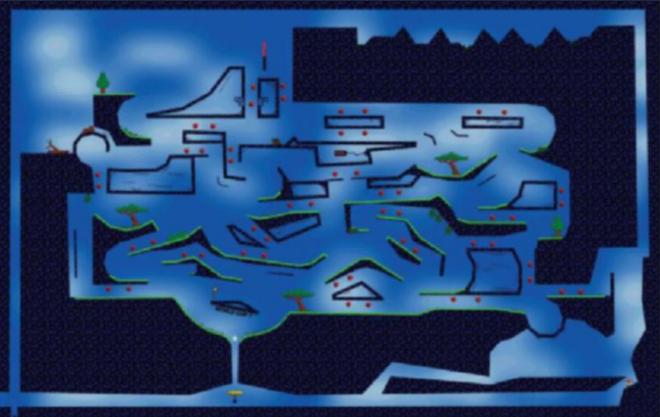
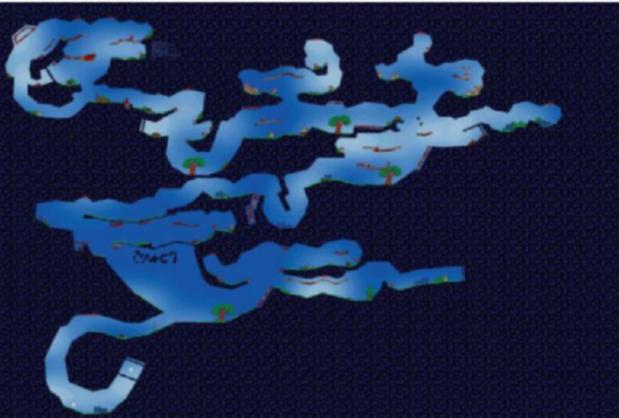
made him work harder, more consistently. And smarter. For the first time in his *Elasto Mania* career – after 14 years in the community, 20 years of obsession with the game and its predecessor and 20,000 hours or so of estimated total playtime – Zweq tried developing his routes with a tool-assisted speedrunning patch. He couldn’t use it for official attempts, but the tool allowed him to save his practice runs at any point and repeatedly attempt the same trick to perfection, without having to worry about redoing everything that came before it.

It worked a treat. With route-finding assistance from his teammate, World Cup runner-up Zero, with whom he shared ideas and replays over a Discord server, Zweq was top of the standings after four events, and he bucked past trends by staying there until the end. “I was surprised to actually see Zweq pull through and win,” notes co-organiser Sune ‘Kopaka’ Sørensen. “While he is arguably the best player in the world, and has been for many years, he has never made top results in a big cup.” He would always lose motivation or run out of steam.

## SLOW AND STEADY

Stamina and motivation seem to be the big equalisers in events like the World Cup. “You’ll always see people who





give up after a number of events,” Kopaka continues, “and see people who weren’t doing good in the start suddenly being able to compete in the top because others fall off.” Case in point: 11th-placed Kazan was second when he stopped playing after the seventh event, while seventh-placed Mira and eighth-placed pawq each managed to make the top five in only three events.

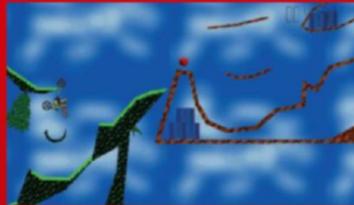
Not everyone tries to compete with the likes of Zweq, Zero and third-placed adi, though. More than just a contest to crown the best player, the tournament has an important role in maintaining an ageing community. “These bigger events bring people back,” explains co-organiser Ville J, who finished 19th overall (he took no part in selecting levels so that he’d be eligible to play). “People who never talk anywhere in our community, who haven’t been really active at all.”

After competing in all of the previous six World Cups, 28th-placed Tisk was happy just to participate. With less spare time and ever-tougher competition at the top, he says he preferred to sit back and go along for the ride — to play for five hours or so per event and then watch the top replays in awe of the variety and raw talent on display.

Event 11 designer and 23rd-placed 8-ball shares a similar sentiment. He admits to lacking the commitment and perseverance to match his top ten ambitions, but he loved seeing the skill on show elsewhere — especially from

## Amazing Replays

THE BEST MOMENTS OF THE TOURNAMENT



### 1 ZWEQ ON WC708

An eight-second win showcased the full artistry of the champion. “My team tried that route and decided it’s impossible to pull off, but Zweq found a string of moves that made it barely possible,” says 8-ball.



### 2 ZERO ON WC705

Zero showed just why this level was titled ‘This Could Be Heaven or Hell’ as he zigzagged his way through its claustrophobic spaces at dizzying speed with the precision of a surgeon.



### 3 ADI ON WC702

It’s spins galore in adi’s masterful run. “The spin in the end was just ridiculously nice,” Zweq says of a remarkable seven-rotation spin from top to bottom of the level during which adi collected two apples.



### 4 ADI ON WC711

Designer 8-ball tried to offer many viable routes, but adi found an unintended faster path. His backwards-swinging hang and spin trick at the start was a special highlight that nearly every other player missed.

Zweq, whose winning Event 8 replay was lauded for the speed and effortlessness with which he executed seemingly-impossible tricks like clockwork.

### MASTERCLASS

Event 8 designer Ramone gushes that he’s seen Zweq’s “perfect” winning replay “well over” a hundred times. “Normally, World Cup wins don’t look that unflawed,” he explains. Ramone went through 118 revisions of the level, which was an experiment in adapting a ‘first-to-finish’ short-yet-tricky battle-type level for the week-long World Cup event format. But he tried to get it pulled from the competition when he saw how hard the prior World Cup events were. He was shocked to see it voted best of the tournament by the community. He even jokes that maybe people actually voted for Zweq’s winning replay, rather than the level itself.

After an exhilarating few months, it’s now back to business as usual for the competitive *Elasto Mania* scene. That means a constant stream of new levels for super-short 15-minute battle events.

“We have thought that maybe it should be like 2021, because that’s when *Elasto Mania* turns 20 years old,” Ville J elaborates. “And, of course, it’s four years from now so it would be kind of like the football World Cup. That might be nice.” ■

**Richard Moss**

### WHAT'S ELASTO MANIA?

*Elasto Mania* was released in 2000 as a follow-up to developer Balázs Rózsa’s shareware hit *Action SuperCross*, which shared the same premise. Players control a paper-thin motorcycle with wheels attached by elastic bands, collecting all of the apples in a level before they touch the exit (a flower), and taking care to never allow the motorcycle rider’s head to touch any solid structures. A level-making and competitive scene quickly emerged, and to this day fans regularly engage in battles and tournaments to see who can get the quickest times.

**“I TRIED TO PLAY ONE TO THREE HOURS EVERY DAY, EVEN IF I WANTED TO BE SOMEWHERE ELSE”**

## PREVIEW

### Guild Wars 2: Path of Fire



#### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
22 September

DEVELOPER  
ArenaNet

PUBLISHER  
In-house

LINK  
[www.guildwars2.com](http://www.guildwars2.com)

## GUILD WARS 2: PATH OF FIRE

Mount up, we're going to the desert

**A**n MMO needs to be many things to many people. Some people want a social space to hang out with friends. Some people want a huge world filled with rich history. Some people want encounters to overcome, systems to master and gear to upgrade. Some people – for instance, me – just want to run around, leaping over other players on their new mount.

*Path of Fire* follows the template created by *Guild Wars 2*'s first expansion, *Heart of Thorns*. As in *HoT*, the level cap won't increase and no new tiers of gear will be introduced. Instead, progression comes through masteries – abilities that are earned via XP and Mastery Points, the former collected by killing and questing, the latter by completing special activities across the world. As in *HoT*, there are new elite specialisations available for each profession – each not only letting that class wield a new weapon, but also altering the way they play. And, as in *HoT*, there's a brand-new traversal tool.

Mounts are synonymous with MMOs, but they never felt necessary in *Guild Wars 2*. Tyria is a world with an extensive teleportation network, letting players travel to any waypoint in for a few silver coins. It's cheap and quick, and so there's little need for a mount's speed boost. But *Path of Fire*'s mounts are more an alternative to *Heart of Thorns*' glider. Yes, they make you quicker, but that's not the primary purpose. Instead, they're designed to provide new ways to move across the map.

I'm riding a Raptor. Its traversal ability lets me leap a great distance, meaning I can clear chasms or bound over rooftops. It's a fun new way to interact with a game that I'm intimately familiar with, opening up new possibilities – both for the design of *Path of Fire*'s new zones, and for the

PLAYED  
IT

way I mess around in the downtime between activities. Although not available in the demo I'm playing, the Raptor will be joined by three other mounts. Springers jump high in the air, Skimmers hover above ground, and Jackals blink forward. In all, this is going to make for some spectacular jumping puzzles.

"Basically, players can get anywhere now with the new toolkit that they're getting with mounts," says Tirzah Bauer, associate art director on *Path of Fire*. "We knew that from the beginning, and we got to design really fun environments, puzzles and interesting locations for players to go to. You can be way down at the water's edge, and you'll see a sweeping vista going up to a mountain range and know you can make your way up there."

I'm not doing anything quite as grand. Instead, me and my Raptor are exploring the Crystal Oasis, the first main zone of the expansion. We stumble across a farm that's under attack, and I leap into action with my mount's engage skill – an attack move specific to each animal. "Engage skills are what we have as a way to ease the transition from the mounted state to player combat in a cool action way," says designer Roy Cronacher. "It kind of felt bad to just dismount your character and go off and do your thing." The Raptor performs a leaping tailspin into a pack of enemies, and instantly I'm off and swinging my daggers. It's smooth, and works well within the context of *Guild Wars 2*'s fast-paced combat.

#### MASTER OF FUN

Progression for *Path of Fire* is also tied to mounts, with each of the four animals having its own mastery line. Each skill will improve your mount's existing abilities. "We found that when we were building the mounts, and thinking about what good mounts in *Guild Wars 2* look like, we realised it was a natural fit for how masteries worked," says designer Josh Diaz. For the Raptor, masteries will upgrade its engage skill, pulling enemies

**EACH SKILL WILL  
IMPROVE YOUR MOUNT'S  
EXISTING ABILITIES**

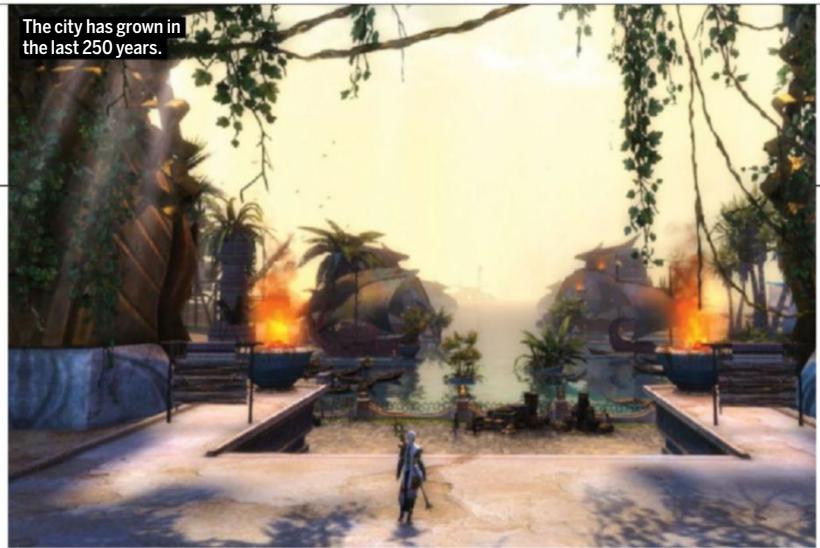


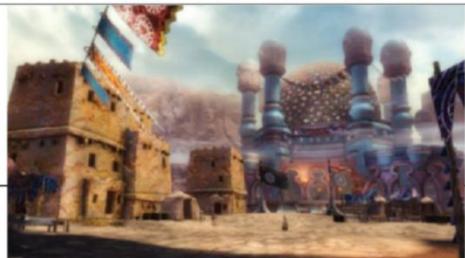
PREVIEW



## PREVIEW

### Guild Wars 2: Path of Fire





➤ into the area-of-effect attack, or enhance its leaping jump. "You go twice as far," enthuses Cronacher. "It's a very drastic difference once you get into it." The final skill of each mastery line will share a mount's passive bonus across the other mounts, improving them all.

With the farm saved, I remount and set off to explore the nearby city. It's telling that, even though mounts aren't strictly necessary for moving short distances, I'm summoning my Raptor every time. Mounts are such a natural part of MMO design that having one is immediately welcome. Fortunately, your mounts will also be rideable in most of *Guild Wars 2*'s original open world zones. "There are places where mounts don't make a lot of sense or can cause a really messy experience," says Diaz of the original maps. "And so, like we added no-gliding zones, we're doing similar passes to make sure that mounts don't completely invalidate or ruin the experience in the old world. But they will make things super different. It's worth taking a look at some of those old places and seeing how they feel on a Springer."

Even though mounts can leap around Lion's Arch, or take a trip to Tequatl, it's the new areas of the Crystal Desert that are built to support them. I got a taste of this with a race – a new event type that pits players against each other in a checkpoint dash across the world. Races are designed with each of the mounts' powers in mind, and so picking the right one for the job can offer a big advantage. Also new is the bounty system. I picked up a contract to take down one of the city's targets. Arriving, I realise my mistake. Bounty targets are powerful enemies, and require multiple players to take down. I'm one of a handful of people in this demo session, and everyone else is off exploring their own part of the huge map. I retreat, promising my foe that I'll be back to finish the job when the expansion is out and more players are around.

The Crystal Desert was part of the original *Guild Wars*, but *Path of Fire* is set 250 years after the events of that game. A lot has happened in the interim – not least of which is the emergence of the Elder Dragons. Unlike in *HoT*, though, the big

bad this time isn't one of *Guild Wars 2*'s six elemental lizards. Rather, here we're fighting the human god of fire, Balthazar. Dragons are still a big part of the campaign, however. "*Guild Wars 2*, from the beginning, is a story about humans learning to deal with the Elder Dragons. Humans coming to the realisation that this isn't our world – we're kind of imposters in the world," says Mike O'Brien, president and cofounder of ArenaNet.

For O'Brien, shifting *Guild Wars 2*'s focus lets ArenaNet ask questions with its stories. "What is the deal with the gods? Where the hell have the gods been? And really, the most existential question of them all – humans have been born in this world for generations, so are we now natives? Are we natives of Tyria? Is this our world? Should we fight for Tyria? Or is this the dragons' world? Or can we somehow coexist with the dragons? Who lays claim to this world?"

## HEART OF THE MATTER

While I'm interested to see where the story goes, I'm more struck by how these new zones feel like a deliberate departure from *Heart of Thorns*. "Claustrophobia was part of the thick rainforest vibe," says Horia Dociu, franchise art director for *Guild Wars 2*, about the first expansion's maps. "Now, coming out of the jungle is a totally different feeling. The idea of a desert can seem monotonous to people. You think of a long trek along beige sand, and the truth is that every corner you take around here – moving vertically, around bends, or opening and closing up – it all feels different and lush." Despite being a desert land, ArenaNet is taking steps to ensure *Path of Fire* feels varied and vibrant.

There will be a lot of land to explore, too. *Heart of Thorns* was billed as a feature expansion – designed to create the template that future expansions would follow. And so it is here, letting ArenaNet focus on making new stuff. *Path of Fire*'s five new zones might not sound like a big increase over *Heart of Thorns*' four, but ArenaNet claim that the expansion will be larger in area than both *Heart of Thorns* and the six additional maps released as part of the third season of the *Living World* story updates. The updates won't stop, either. Soon after the release of *Path of Fire*, ArenaNet will be launching into season four of its updates. MMOs need to be many things to many people, but, after a period of reassessment with *Heart of Thorns*, *Path of Fire* looks set to deliver.

*Phil Savage*

## YOUR MOUNTS WILL ALSO BE RIDEABLE IN MOST OF GUILD WARS 2'S OPEN WORLD ZONES



## A WAY OUT

PLAYED  
IT

Escaping prison and living a life on the run in couch co-op

**I**t's like a David Cage game but good," I say to PC Gamer US's James Davenport after we leave our session of *A Way Out*. This co-op narrative adventure game comes from Josef Fares and his studio Hazelight. Fares directed *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, which you may remember as a devastating entry in the 'sad boy' subgenre.

In this, you and another person play as Vincent and Leo, two guys who become pals in prison before breaking out. They form a kind of working relationship as they make their way through the world outside of their jail cells.

### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
Early 2018

DEVELOPER  
Hazelight Studios

PUBLISHER  
EA

LINK  
[bit.ly/eawayout](http://bit.ly/eawayout)

I don't really mean my slight towards Cage's work. The way his games present interactive storytelling is great – I just wish they were better written. *A Way Out* impresses in that regard. In the scene we play, set in a gas station, your goal is to hold the place up and take their money. This is not a branching adventure, but you can make choices that shape the dramatic beats. First of all, we can decide who's going to hold up the cash register – Leo or Vincent. We pick Vincent, my character, because Leo comes across as a hothead.

As we approach, we can send civilians away by lying to them about better gas prices across town. This reduces the likelihood that someone will call the cops. Inside the gas station itself, characters can interact with objects based on their personalities. Leo can drink beer, whereas Vincent can play around with a fishing reel.

Enough scene-setting, then. Vincent presses the gun in the attendant's face. I

find out there's a safe in the back, which Vincent yells to Leo. Unfortunately, Leo's grabbed by some guy as he runs into the back. I send Vincent out there and he socks the guy in the face, freeing Leo. I keep Vincent by the safe while Leo talks the attendant into giving up the safe code. One of the NPCs who we forgot to send away from the gas station has fetched the cops, and they're now incoming.

### OUT OF CONTROL

I point the gun at the attendant and pull the trigger, but Vincent just fires in the air. You can't go on a killing spree in *A Way Out* – the characters are who they are. We make a swift getaway in the car. That was a tense scenario that told me a lot about the kind of characters we're playing as, and the writing and acting is generally of a high standard. I'm impressed. You might say it's like a David Cage game, but good.

*Samuel Roberts*

# OUTSTANDING EVERWHERE.



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weight of 185 grams, meaning you not only have dedicated microphones and controls designed specifically for each scenario, but a truly cross-platform solution for at home and on the go. The Cross is never a burden, but always a trusty companion, that makes sure you go anywhere in style.



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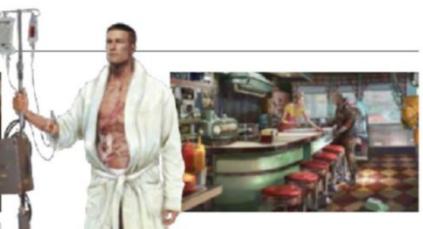
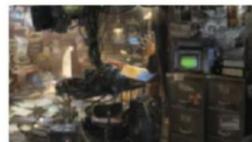
### *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*

Luckily, BJ's trigger finger has healed.



Exploring the streets of Roswell.



*Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
27 OctoberDEVELOPER  
MachineGamesPUBLISHER  
Bethesda SoftworksLINK  
[www.wolfenstein.com](http://www.wolfenstein.com)

## WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

Blazkowicz returns home to find America ruled by Nazis

**S**et immediately after *The New Order*, this sequel sees an injured BJ Blazkowicz returning to the United States to find his homeland occupied by the Nazis. Joining forces with a ragtag resistance, he embarks on a series of guerrilla missions to bring the German war machine down from the inside. “The first game was about building a resistance, or planting the seed of one,” says creative director Jens Matthies. “And in the new game these resistance groups are forming alliances to ignite a revolution and take back America. Then they want to use the United States as a platform to liberate the world.”

It's a bitter homecoming for Blazkowicz, who'll have even more reasons (as if he needed any) to want to kill every Nazi he sees goose-stepping over his country. “We've always wanted to bring Blazkowicz to the US from the beginning, but we needed a lot of time to explore it,” says Matthies. “It's his homeland and he has a connection to it, and that's interesting to explore.”

I play a level set in the desert town of Roswell, New Mexico. I'm in disguise and free to explore the streets, but if I get to close to any patrolling Nazis I'll be recognised. There are huge wanted posters all over town. I overhear an officer berating a pair of Ku Klux Klan members for their poor German, and the image of swastikas draped over the idyllic, romantic image of Main Street, USA, is quite striking. It's like a fascist Disneyland.

PLAYED  
IT

## FRESH START

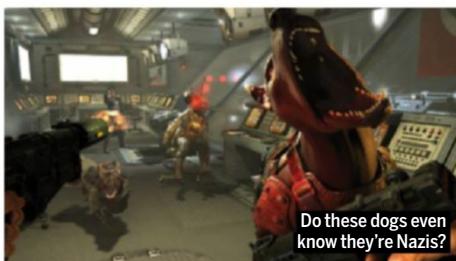
“We were incredibly happy with how the first game felt. But we switched engines, so we rebuilt every system, including AI, player movement and so on,” says Matthies. “It still feels like

*Wolfenstein*, but there's tons of new stuff happening. If a grenade goes off near you, you'll fall to the ground but can still keep shooting. Things like this make the combat feel more immersive, but we still want to retain the feeling of the original game. We're just evolving, polishing and refining it.”

When *The New Order* was released it was a bold reimagining of the *Wolfenstein* series. So, perhaps predictably, this new game doesn't have quite the same feeling of freshness. But that aside, the shift to an American setting, the increased focus on strong characters and dramatic storytelling, and an array of preposterous new weapons to wield makes Blazkowicz's return an exciting prospect. And if the opening level, in which our hero charges around in a wheelchair shooting Nazis with one hand and pulling himself along with the other, is anything to go by, MachineGames hasn't lost any of its sense of humour.

Andy Kelly

**“IT FEELS LIKE WOLFENSTEIN,  
BUT THERE'S TONS OF NEW  
STUFF HAPPENING”**



## PREVIEW

## *Tartarus*

*Alien: Isolation* is an obvious influence.



Your job is to make  
sense of this.



The ship is in a  
sorry state.



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
TBC 2017DEVELOPER  
Abyss FrameworksPUBLISHER  
In-houseLINK  
[www.tartarusthegame.com](http://www.tartarusthegame.com)

# TARTARUS

Code your way out of danger in this sci-fi adventure

**T**he mining ship *Tartarus* has activated its security protocol near Neptune. It's up to Cooper, the ship's cook, to restore its systems before it crashes into the planet. But Cooper knows more about sautéing mushrooms than he does repairing computer systems. Luckily, he has some help. An engineer called Andrews, who's trapped in another part of the ship, is guiding him by radio, which is easier said than done when you have no experience at all.

It's an interesting premise for a science fiction game. *Tartarus* is clearly inspired by the retrofuturistic aesthetic of *Alien: Isolation*, but there's no otherworldly predator to worry about on this ship; just the looming threat of it plunging into the swirling storms of Neptune and crumpling like a soda can. It's a puzzle game first and foremost, and Turkish developer Abyss Frameworks is keen to stress that a pen and paper are required. You'll explore the ship a little, but most of your time in the game will be spent with your head buried in chunky computer terminals trying to make sense of these complicated systems.

You have to dig through massive directories of folders and files, but without the benefit of a point-and-click GUI. It's all based around command lines, which means learning a system's commands before doing anything useful with it. One objective is reprogramming a set of misfiring pistons in the ship's engine, which involves finding pressure values and entering them into the system – which is

where your pen and paper comes in. The puzzles are, by design, complex and intricate. Abyss Frameworks knows this might turn some people off, but it's committed to making a hardcore, challenging puzzle game.

The developer admits that prior programming knowledge will help and that the learning curve will be steeper if you've never written a line of code before. But it's certain the game will tell you everything you need to know if you explore thoroughly enough. I don't know a thing about coding and, at least in this demo, I found the game a little daunting at times. Games like *Hack 'n' Slash* and *else Heart.Break()* do a great job of easing amateurs into the coding side of things, and I hope *Tartarus* learns a few lessons from them when it's released. Otherwise, people who can't write code will surely hit a brick wall and give up.

**LOST IN SPACE**

Abyss has the atmosphere nailed, though. The corridors of the *Tartarus*, like the USCSS *Nostromo* that inspired it, use light, shadow and an industrial ambience to create a feeling of isolation and claustrophobia. The glowing CRT monitors and bulky IBM-style keyboards make for a compellingly retro science fiction setting. But, at this early stage, the dialogue is unnatural and badly acted: presumably because English is not the developer's first language. I'd love to see them hire a writer to craft a mature sci-fi story worthy of those visuals, otherwise it could dampen the overall experience somewhat.

*Tartarus* is an interesting game, although anyone looking at the screenshots and expecting something like *Alien: Isolation* may be disappointed. This is a game about delving into complex computer systems to solve puzzles, not running away from aliens. But the fate of a starship being put into the hands of a lowly ship's cook is a compelling premise, and I'm looking forward to seeing more of what Abyss has in store. The developer promises that the puzzles will be constructed with a logic that means even casual gamers will be able to crack them if they persevere, but it remains to be seen whether it can deliver on that promise.

Andy Kelly

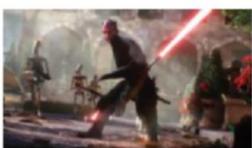


Making my way to the bridge.

**THE DEVELOPER ADMITS THAT PRIOR PROGRAMMING KNOWLEDGE WILL HELP**

## PREVIEW

### Star Wars: Battlefront II



"Open the door, we promise not to waterboard you."

#### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
17 November

DEVELOPER  
DICE/Motive/Criterion

PUBLISHER  
EA

LINK  
[www.bit.ly/BF2SW](http://www.bit.ly/BF2SW)

# STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Making the shooters' cinematic campaign mode

**A**fter *Doom*, *Wolfenstein*, *Titanfall 2* and even *Battlefield 1*'s War Stories, I'm prepared to convince myself that the singleplayer shooter is having a renaissance. *Battlefront II* stands out as it has the potential to join that roster of campaigns, and be a high-end bit of Star Wars fiction, with mocapped cutscenes and a story that bridges the gap between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*.

The early mission EA chose to reveal the campaign is a bit muted, however. Playing as Imperial commando Iden Versio, I start by piloting a TIE fighter around a large-scale space battle, locking onto X-wings and taking them out. While Criterion has revamped the ship combat for this sequel, this sequence is too brief for me to really tell the difference, but it sure looks like a pretty accurate recreation of a Star Wars space battle. The mission then calls for me to board a Rebel transport ship. I pilot the ship into the hangar, and on-foot, head through some corridors into the vessel. Using my little droid buddy, I can zap a Rebel who's been left behind and is banging on a door in a panic, an obvious reference to that fan service-y Rogue One moment where the Rebel blokes were comprehensively owned by Darth Vader.

The droid can hack computer systems, and perform stealth attacks. The bulk of the level is spent clearing out a large Rebel control room, where enemies are patrolling. I try to clear this with silent attacks, but it goes wrong fairly quickly.



PLAYED IT

**I FIND MYSELF IMPRESSED MORE BY THE SPECTACLE THAN WHAT I'M PLAYING**

The rest of the fight is a pretty standard *Battlefront* shootout. There's maybe more of a kick to the guns than there was in the first game, but I find myself impressed more by the spectacle than what I'm playing. But then this level is very early on in the game, not offering enough scope to really show off the potential of a *Battlefront* singleplayer outside of that opening space battle.

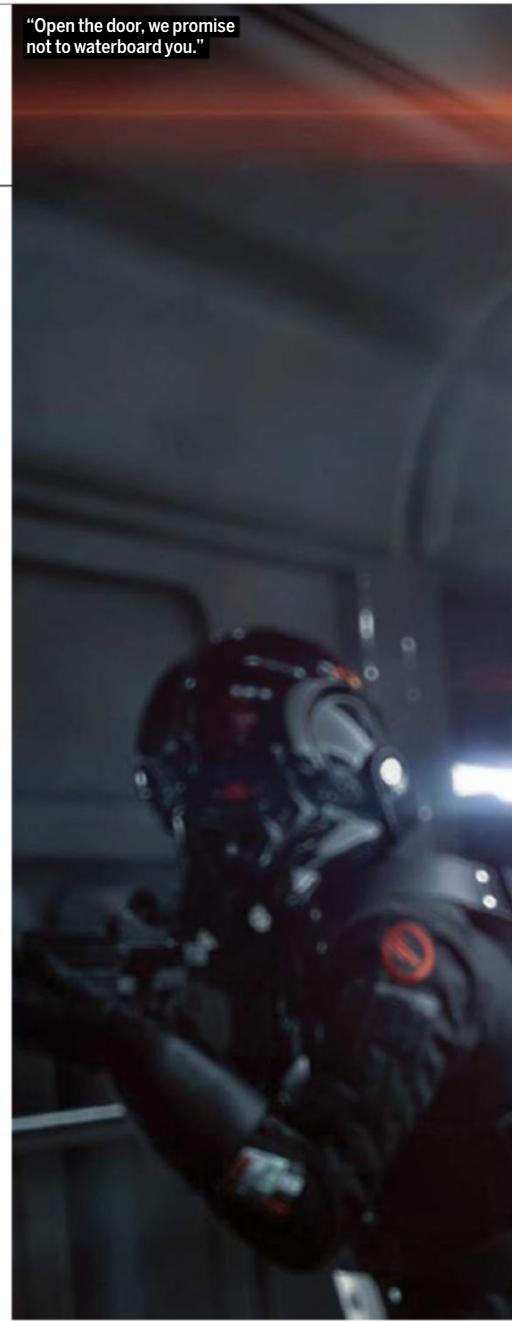
Oddly, I find myself more interested by the opening cutscene between Iden Versio and her father, an Imperial general, after the destruction of the second Death Star. The cutscenes are motion-captured, and they look and sound closer to live-action Star Wars than anything games have provided before. There's a legitimacy that comes from these high production values. With a story cowritten by Walt Williams, who worked on the memorable story in *Spec Ops: The Line*, I'm more compelled by the promise of a decent new Star Wars tale than I am about playing *Battlefront II* in singleplayer.

#### AFTER THE FALL

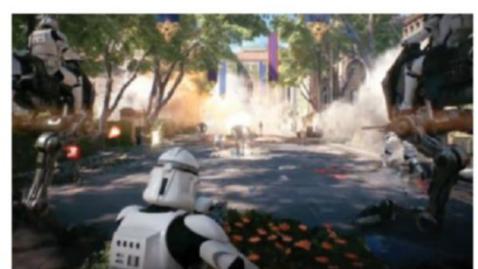
"We absorbed every single piece of Star Wars material that exists right now, all the authentic stories," cowriter Mitch Dyer tells me. "So the comic books, the novels – Walt and I read all of it. We read the young adult romance novel, which is incredible, by the way. Lost Stars? Amazing. It's the best Star Wars novel that's out right now. We absorbed all of that. I don't think there's a single voice to Star Wars, it's not like, 'This is what Star Wars is, match it.' It feels like something, it sounds like something, but there's wriggle room to make it your own and create distinct characters, which I hope we've done. There are certain characters we haven't revealed yet that are interesting and different, and you've never seen anyone like them in Star Wars."

The brief snippets of cutscenes shown in my demo feel very much like Star Wars, and the angle of playing as the bad guys is new enough that I want to see how Iden's story develops. Next time EA shows off *Battlefront II*, though, I'd like to see how the scale of a large *Battlefront* map can translate into an interesting campaign mission. That surely has to be the goal of the game's singleplayer.

*Samuel Roberts*



Somehow, even Naboo looks exciting.





"What if the bad guys are okay?"  
is a bold question for 2017.



The Empire's in ruins after the  
Death Star's blew up. Boo hoo.

## PREVIEW

### Call of Duty: WWII

#### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
3 November

PUBLISHER  
Activision

DEVELOPER  
Sledgehammer Games

LINK  
[www.callofduty.com](http://www.callofduty.com)

## CALL OF DUTY: WWII

The most we've enjoyed a *CoD* in some time

I

'll be honest – I'm a lapsed *Call of Duty* player. Ever since *Modern Warfare 3*, the series has felt less and less like my sort of thing. Maybe it's the pace of it, maybe it's the audience. *COD: WWII* has a back-to-basics approach, reflected by its choice of historical setting. It's a little slower paced than *COD* of late, since there's a cooldown on your sprint, and I'm totally okay with that.

Samuel Roberts

PLAYED  
IT

#### EASY ENEMIES

I play as the Expeditionary class in *WWII*'s capture point mode, which means I carry a shotgun and can keep hold of the tightest capture point on the map by patrolling the two-entrance bunker nearby. I'm playing against games journalists, so my K/D ratio is above 1:1.

#### WAR MODE

All of *COD*'s multiplayer modes are 6v6. In this one, you push or defend a location, with the battle lines moving each round depending on who manages to succeed. The map we play is a house, and the battle lines are pretty narrow – there's not loads of scope to flank.

**CAMPAGN**

Aside from giving orders to your teammates to bring you ammo and medkits, this looks like every *COD* campaign to me: pretty, and with plenty of spectacle, but linear. I watch a siege of a French church. It's dramatic enough, but still familiar.

**HEADQUARTERS**

There's a new *COD* social area in this one, with a firing range, one-on-one pit duels and more, to make it feel World War II-y. It sort of looks like the first episode of *Band of Brothers*.



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COVER FEATURE

Total War: Warhammer II



# RATS ENTERTAINMENT

Corrupting the New World with Warhammer's most nefarious race in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II**.

By Matthew Elliott

## Total War: Warhammer II



our hours is a horrible amount of time to play a *Total War* game. It's long enough that I got a sense of what's changed in *Total War: Warhammer II*, but it means abandoning a burgeoning Skaven campaign just as it was getting interesting. It's a good sign that I kept dashing back between interviews and presentations to squeeze in an illicit turn or battle, desperate to take one more bite out of my High Elf rivals.

I'm surprised at how much it clicked. The core races of *Warhammer II* – High Elves, Dark Elves, Lizardmen and the recently-revealed Skaven – don't resonate with

me in the same way as Dwarfs, Orcs and Beastmen. I care less about seeing the jungles of Lustria and tundra of Naggarond than I do famous Dwarf strongholds or bustling Empire cities. But even after a four-hour hands-on, it's impossible to resist the scale and sweep of *Warhammer II*. Suddenly, I wasn't playing a race I didn't care about – I was Queek Headtaker, dashing rat conquistador, spreading Skaven corruption in the New World.

It does a great job of setting this up. I played the campaign with the tutorial on, just to get a sense of the new tweaks, and I'm glad I did. It guides you through the basics well – the velvety-voiced advisor is back, helping anyone who promises not to eat him – and information is clearer this time. It's hard to know exactly how, but world events feel easier to parse and there's more information at your fingertips/claws. But more than this, the tutorial eases you into the story, reminding you where you are and why. There's a fabulous sense of place, similar to the feeling you get taking an English army to Jerusalem

**RIGHT:** Even Skaven siege towers look like they could give you a nasty infection.

**FAR RIGHT:** "Okay, one last time. These Skaven are small... but those back there are far away."



in *Medieval II*, for example, but heightened and refined. You're on the far side of the world, and it makes your army more precious, somehow.

This is reflected in the battles. Your first encounter sets the scene handsomely, hammering home something that doesn't come across until you start playing: you're pioneers in the New World, exploring unfamiliar lands. Nobody wants to be there. Queek grumbles about the mission in a cutscene at the start of the fight, which gives the campaign clear narrative direction. It's a smart touch, and I hope this is something Creative Assembly does for all the races. The regional detail is helped by improved maps. The ones I saw felt like real places, rather than the flat, often uninteresting sprawls of the first game. My first encounter took place in a map that had hills, lakes, temples and choke points that were enclosed by dense thickets of trees. But it didn't feel busy in the same way some *Total War* maps do – the varied terrain gives way to flat plateaus, perfect for pitched battles, so mobility and positioning are even more important. It also feels more *real* – the scale is tighter, and the spectacular creatures of Warhammer feel more impressive when framed against a relatable landscape.



## THE WORLD THAT WAS

A brief history of Warhammer games on PC

**HEROQUEST**  
1991

This isometric version of the board game appeared on DOS, set before the age of Sigmar.

**BLOOD BOWL**  
1995

A drab, DOS adaptation of the Warhammer tabletop game based on American Football.

**WARHAMMER:  
SHADOW OF THE  
HORNED RAT**  
1995

Excellent real-time strategy game, by all accounts.

**WARHAMMER:  
DARK OMEN**  
1998

Another fab strategy, and the direct follow-up to *Shadow of the Horned Rat*.

**WARHAMMER:  
MARK OF CHAOS**  
2000

A tolerable real-time tactics game arriving eight years after the last Warhammer title.

**WARHAMMER:  
BATTLE MARCH**  
2008

Expansion to *Mark of Chaos* which added Dark Elves and Orcs to the roster.

**WARHAMMER  
ONLINE: AGE OF  
RECKONING**  
2008

A lovingly-realised but doomed MMO, made by Paul Barnett.



## LARDER, BETTER, FASTER

The game removed the narrative stabilisers as I progressed, but kept dropping in additions to the campaign gameplay unique to Skaven. Their key resource is food. I accrued stores as I took settlements, which was essential for keeping my population happy. Once the food starts running low, it has a detrimental effect on your armies and public order. I was well stocked the entire time I played, and my happy, full minions never misbehaved. Another key addition is Skaven corruption. It's a characterful twist on Vampiric and Chaos corruption from the first game, which reminds you you're playing as, well... *vermin*. It's representative of your Skaven hordes using all the resources in an area, and the levels of corruption can be altered by building different structures in settlements. Or, to put it a less boring way, if your corruption is high it reduces public order, but

## THE SKAVEN BRING THE CAMPAIGN MAP TO LIFE



lets you summon troops in nearby battles by using the Menace Below ability. It works like raising the dead with Vampire Counts – units of chattering Skaven burst out from under the ground, making outflanking opponents dead easy. There's a balance to be struck whenever you develop a new settlement. Is living in filth worth the extra abilities you get in a scrap? (A question I often ask myself.)

Despite this, Skaven aren't *quite* as scheming as I hoped. I felt there was an opportunity to make them parasites, living off the success of other factions, but instead, they feel like a mix of familiar armies: the hidden camps of the Beastmen, the underways of the Dwarfs, the cowardice of goblins. But the menace of the Skaven brings the campaign map to life. They're brilliant bad guys, and they're everywhere. The only place ➤



### BLOOD BOWL 2009

Perfectly fine reboot of the Warhammer football game that nobody bothered to play.



### WARHAMMER QUEST 2013

PC version of the beloved board game, itself an advanced version of *HeroQuest*.



### BLOOD BOWL 2 2013

If you've read this far, you probably know what this is. In short: daft fun, but disposable.



### MORDHEIM: CITY OF THE DAMNED 2015

A tactical RPG adaptation of the slimy, grim tabletop game.



### WARHAMMER: THE END TIMES - VERMINTIDE 2015

Probably the best Warhammer game that isn't *Total War*.



### TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 2016

The Warhammer grand strategy game that we'd been waiting for forever.



### MAN O' WAR CORSAIR 2016

Cheerfully awful sailing game that has you fighting massive sea monsters.



» that remains unscathed is Ulthuan. It's a smart setup that makes you want to keep the rat-men out if you're playing as the High Elves, and infest their haughty island retreat if you're playing Skaven. It's also clever putting the Vortex, the source of power which dominates the New World campaign, smack-bang in the middle of the High Elf homeland. The only thing stopping you from scuttling in and devouring everything are the fortified gates that surround the island, each of which acts like a unique siege battle. The High Elves can pass through these easily, but there's no way other into Ulthuan for enemy armies. It's another nice touch which highlights the ancient, isolationist tendencies of the High Elves, and it made me want to smash them down. Nice island you have there, Elves. Be a shame if someone... corrupted it.

Characteristics like this aren't just superficial. Each race has a unique ability, taken straight from the lore. The High Elves can manipulate the world from behind their magical gates. They can earn influence, which can be used to purchase powerful heroes, or better still, affect diplomatic relations between other factions. If it's advantageous to you for Lizardmen and Skaven to break their non-aggression pact, for example, you can make it happen. It's a fabulously elf-y thing to do, and it makes them feel like they're sat back in their glittering cities, pulling strings across the map. Each race has an equivalent buff. Skaven can spend food to occupy settlements at higher

levels; Dark Elves can summon Black Arks – massive, floating cities used to support armies and invade other lands; and Lizardmen have a geomantic web that connects settlements and gives you access to more powerful regional commands. It's another way of making the races more distinct; a strength of the first game, taken to interesting new extremes in the second.

#### WEATHER OR NOT

Further distinction comes from the new climate system. This replaces

**ABOVE:** The Doomwheel. Hilarious right up until your elite units are minced underneath it.



the race-specific occupation from the first game. Any race can now occupy any settlement, with some caveats. There are ten different climates which characterise settlements across the world. Naggarond is a frozen wasteland, for example, and Ulthuan is an island paradise. Each race has three climates they like, three they're neutral to, and four they dislike. You can still go anywhere and take any settlement, but there are economic penalties if you move your frosty, mountainous dwarfs to the middle of a rainforest. It's a way of encouraging each race to stay in the geographic area they're associated with, but the choice is always yours. This is particularly interesting if you're after a certain resource – sometimes, it's worth taking the penalty to gain valuable assets, such as iron or diamonds. I didn't get to experience this in any detail firsthand – I was in the same area for most of my session, and my Skaven seemed delighted with the weather – but I'm fascinated to see how it works on the mega campaign. The idea of grumbling dwarfs on the far side of the map, sweating like British holidaymakers on a Tenerife bus tour, is a new kind of compelling.

None of this would actually matter if the races weren't fun to fight with, and I loved all the battles that I played. In combat, Skaven are a wild mix of other races. Their standard infantry is pretty feeble, although they lasted in matched combat a bit longer than I expected them to. It's the specialist units which make them interesting. Misshapen rat ogres can

## FOR THE MANY, NOT THE FEW

*Five things you need to know about Skaven*

### 1 RAT'S UNBELIEVABLE

Humans refuse to believe Skaven exist. That hasn't stopped them from building an empire and contriving to destroy the planet, though.

**3 UNLUCKY FOR SOME**  
Warpstone is the most precious substance to the Skaven. It's the solidified version of pure Chaos energy, used to power their nefarious-looking war machines.



### 2 STONE INITIATIVE

Skaven society is a tangle of infighting, but it's governed by the Council of Thirteen. Even then, it's not true co-operation; the Skaven are the least unified of all the Warhammer races.

**4 GOD MODE**  
Their god is the Great Horned Rat – a deity intent on covering the world in Skaven. During the End Times it did such a good job of ruining stuff that it ascended to being a Chaos god.

**5 HEAVENLY BODIES**  
In the lore, Skaven help destroy the planet – the world of Warhammer II no longer exists in the tabletop game. During the End Times, the Skaven blow up the moon. The dicks.

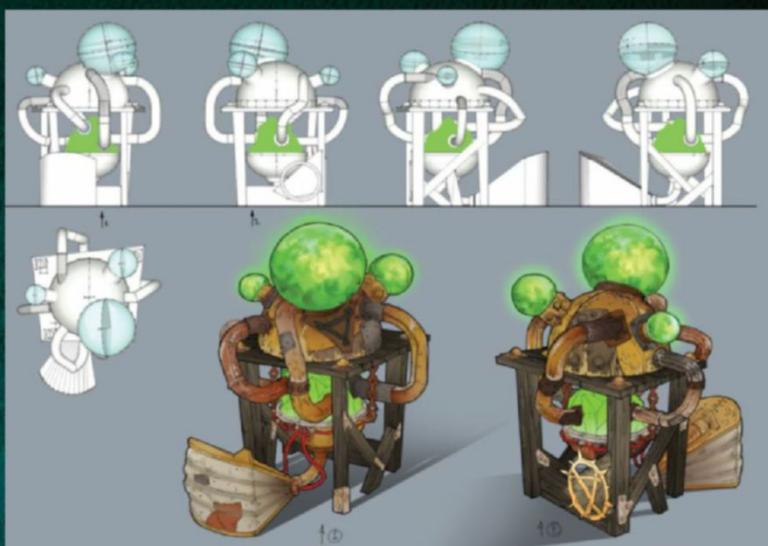
be used like Beastman minotaurs, lumbering into enemy flanks, knocking enemy troops about like empty soda cans; vicious war machines can tear through standard units and pinpoint enemy heroes with accuracy; and then there are things like the Skaven Doomwheel – part-hamster toy, part-meat grinder – which is frightening to behold when it rolls into the enemy line at full speed. Everything looks great, too. The first *Warhammer* game did an elegant job of animating creatures we'd only seen moving in our imaginations. For the most part, they were perfect – Harryhausen skeletons, lumbering trolls, and frenzied minotaurs made the world feel real. From what I've seen, *Warhammer II* is even better. Skaven units are packs of jittering teeth and claws, completely lacking in finesse,

## IN COMBAT, SKAVEN ARE A WILD MIX OF OTHER RACES

which contrast brilliantly with the Elves, who are somehow more impressive because they have less to do. They're upright, haughty and elegant. I love breaking them to bits, and I suspect playing as them will give you a fantastic sense of control. For me, part of the appeal will come from pitting the new races against old ones, and I can't wait to see what Elf spearmen look like when losing to Dwarf warriors.

**RIGHT:** Skaven machinations scream 'stay away from this lest you explode in a gas of corruption'.

**BOTTOM:** It's like clay pigeon shooting, but with warp lightning and dragons. Okay, it's nothing like that.



### ELF RETREAT

I also played one scenario battle with a high-tier Dark Elf army – a vicious, mobile, glass cannon force, which utilises shock troops, monsters, and powerful magic users. They're the military equivalent of stepping on a lightbulb – yes, it'll break, but by God it's going to hurt. My micromanagement in the battle was terrible, but I scraped a Pyrrhic Victory thanks to my elite units. It became a buddy comedy starring faction leader Malekith and a War Hydra. They both broke through the enemy line, with the Hydra scattering the High Elf elites while Malekith threw out powerful spells from the back of his Black Dragon mount. It's exhilarating stuff. It doesn't feel like magic users have been buffed to the point of being overpowered, but Malekith's spells certainly felt more

effective. Used correctly, I was able to knock out enemy infantry as they charged and 'encourage' opposing troops to leave the field. It forced me to play aggressively, push the enemy back, and use everything I had to defeat them quickly (and I say this as a Dwarf player, happy to wait for the enemy while my beard grows).

In the short time that I played it, I saw stuff that makes me think *Warhammer II* is more dense and varied than the first game. I bumped into rogue armies of Empire pirates; cleansed a shrine to Slaanesh in an abandoned settlement; and set sail for an elf island that I didn't have time to conquer. But the most surprising thing is how much the setting and story excited me. The nuanced racial traits make we want to play as High Elves, rather than just killing them, and the far-flung location feels like the opposite of the original *Total War: Warhammer*. The themes in the first game felt like classic Warhammer – notwithstanding Chaos, rebuilding the Dwarf Empire, unifying The Empire – but this sequel feels more intrepid and immersive. Creative Assembly has provided a much improved set of tools for roleplaying in the Warhammer world, and it says loads about the game that I'm suddenly invested in races that never captured my attention in the past. I want to tinker in the affairs of petty humans as the High Elves. I want to send Black Arks across the sea to gather slaves for the Witch King. I want to do whatever the shit it is that Lizardmen do. But most of all, I want to continue where I stopped, bash down those fancy Elven gates, and send my army of rats swarming into the Ulthuan. The New World looks like a wonderful place to ruin. ■



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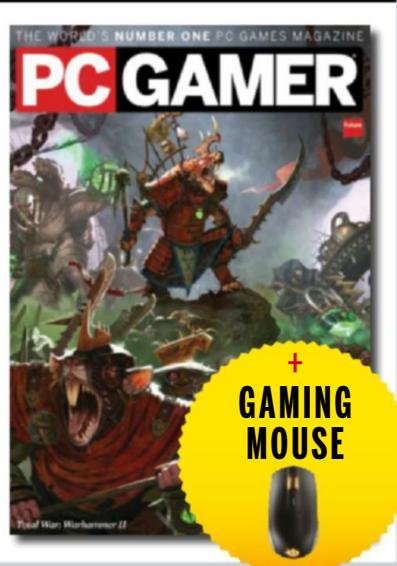
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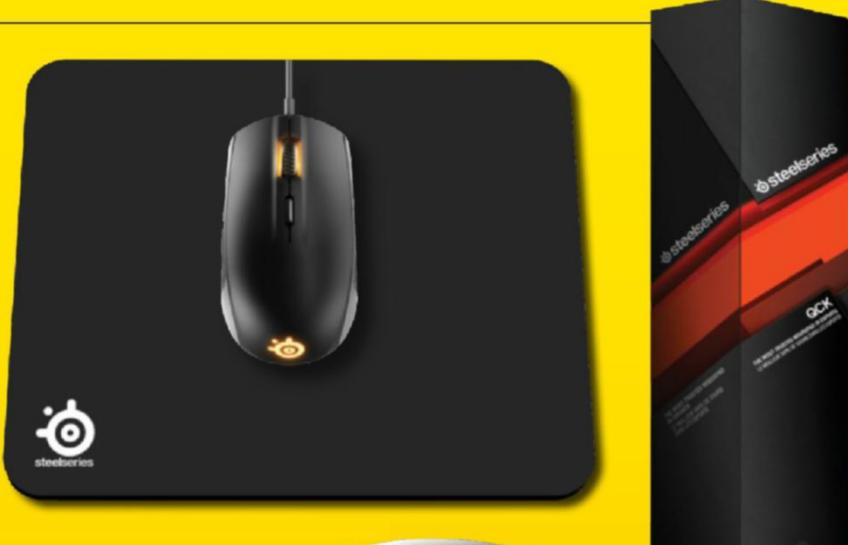
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THE HISTORY  
of the

# FIRST PERSON SHOOTER

PART I

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



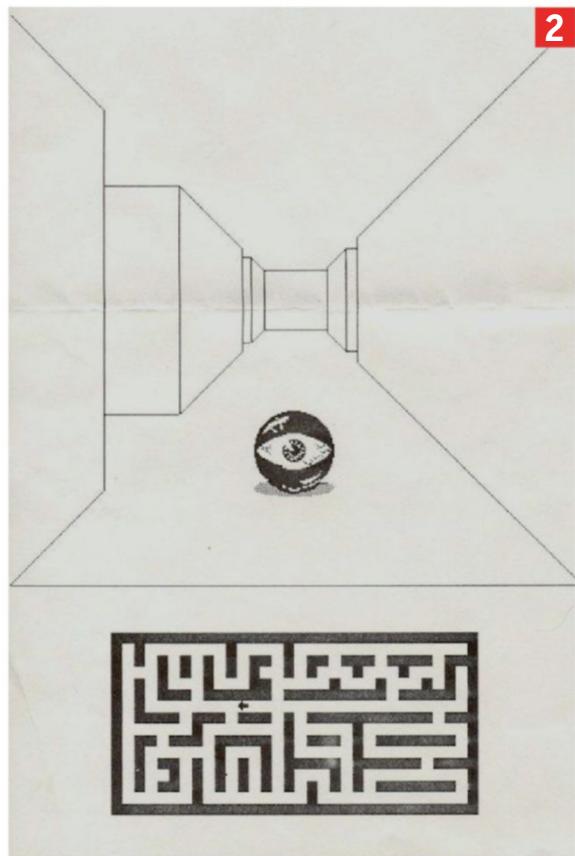
riters of videogame histories often think in terms of individuals and periods – great innovators and clear-cut ‘epochs’ in design, typically bookended by technological advances. Events or people who contradict those accounts have a tendency to get written out of the tale. According to one popular version of the medium’s evolution, the first-person shooter was formally established in 1992 with id Software’s *Wolfenstein 3D*, a lean, thuggish exploration of a texture-mapped Nazi citadel, and popularised in 1993 by heavy metal odyssey *Doom*, which sold a then-ludicrous million copies worldwide at release. The company’s later shooter, *Quake*, meanwhile, is often held up as the first ‘true’ 3D polygonal shooter.

Founded in 1991 by former employees of software company Softdisk, id’s contributions to what we now call the FPS is undoubtedly immense. Between them, *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* brought a distinct tempo, savagery and bloodlust to first-person gaming, and programmer John Carmack’s engine technology would

1  
Wolfenstein 3D

2  
Maze War

3  
*Doom II*



power many a landmark FPS in the decade following *Doom*’s release. But we shouldn’t view that contribution too narrowly, as simply one step along the road to a game such as *Call of Duty: World War II*. And nor should we neglect the games – before, during and after id’s breakthrough – that took many of the same concepts and techniques in different and equally valuable directions.

To think about the shooter’s origins is to think about labyrinths. Among the earliest pioneers of first-person videogaming is 1973’s *Maze*, a game cobbled together by high school students Greg Thompson, Steve Colley and Howard Palmer during a NASA work-study program, using Imlac PDS-1 and PDS-4 minicomputers. The three had been carrying out research into computational fluid dynamics for future spacecraft designs, an early show of what would become a problematic relationship between the commercial games business and the US military-industrial complex. Initially a single-plane, 16x32 tile wireframe environment for one player in which you’d turn by 90-degree increments, *Maze* grew to include shooting, support for a second player via serial cable, a corner-peaking functionality and indicators for which way the other player is facing.

After completing his spell at NASA, Thompson took the game with him to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. With access to a more powerful mainframe, and the aid of David Lebling – who would go on to create the legendary text adventure *Zork* and found Infocom – he added eight-player support over the US defence department-run ARPANET, a map editor, projectile graphics, scoreboards, a spectator mode and ‘bots with dynamic difficulty’, all features that would resurface in mass-market shooters many years later. *Maze War* was very popular on campus – it used up so much computing resources that the MIT authorities created a ‘daemon’



*Doom II*'s final boss  
is voiced by  
designer John  
Romero.



3

program to find and shut down sessions. In one of its later forms, the maze extended along the vertical axis and players could fly, shoot and take cover in any direction.

If *Maze War* sounds like a fully-featured FPS in hindsight, it's important to note that the category 'first-person shooter' is of much more recent inception – according to a 2014 study by the academic Carl Therrien, it only entered popular discussion around videogames in the late '90s. Many studios, including id, preferred terms and slogans like '3-D adventure', 'virtual reality' and 'the feeling of being there' when describing games that are played from a first-person viewpoint. Nor was the perspective exclusively, or even predominantly, associated

## MANY STUDIOS, INCLUDING ID, PREFERRED TERMS AND SLOGANS LIKE '3-D ADVENTURE'

with on-foot gunplay. There were racing games, such as Atari's 8-bit arcade offering *Night Rider*, which treated the player to a dashboard view of a road made up of shifting white rectangles. There were cockpit simulators such as 1974's *Spasim* (often granted dual honours with *Maze War* as the first-person shooter's oldest ancestor), a 32-player space combat game in which unofficial approximations of Star Trek vessels wage war at a mighty one frame per second.

There were dungeon-crawlers such as Richard Garriot's *Akalaeth* in 1976, which combined a top-down world map with first-person dungeon segments featuring coloured wireframe graphics. *Maze War* spawned a number of sequels and imitators, attractively billed as



## DOOM MARINES

For better and worse, first-person shooters have long seen service as military training simulators. In 1995, the US Army created its own *Doom* mod in a bid to cultivate such skills as ammunition discipline at a fraction of the expense of physical training, following budget cuts in the aftermath of the Cold War. Made publicly available after *Doom II*'s release, the mod sees a

fireteam consisting of a leader, two riflemen and a machine-gunner tackling a range of real-life scenarios, including hostage rescue. It also replaced the original's demons with generic human aggressors.

*Marine Doom* was never formally adopted as a training instrument, but paved the way for propaganda games such as the popular Unreal Engine shooter *America's Army*.

The Catacomb series began its life as a 2D dungeon-crawler.



1



## ARCADE FIRE

During the '80s and '90s, videogame arcades were still a force to be reckoned with – the most coveted cabinet games packed vastly more processing power and memory than home computers. Taito's 1992 escapade *Gunbusters* deserves mention for being one of the first lightgun games to support free-roaming. Players would scoot around small

arenas – an elevator with breakable glass walls, a small chain-fenced racecourse – using a joystick to move and the gun to turn and aim. The game also supported team deathmatch a year or so before *Doom* popularised FPS multiplayer, and remains worthy of inspection for its grimy, flickering *Akira*-style art direction and large, detailed 2D sprites.



‘rat’s-eye view’ experiences by a 1981 issue of Computer & Video Games magazine. The first-person shooter genre as we understand it today arose from the artistic friction between these approaches, shaping and being shaped by them in turn.

Naturally, methodologies shifted as new technology became available. Among *Maze War*’s more intriguing descendants is Paul Allen Edelstein’s *WayOut*, released for the Atari 8-bit in 1982. It made use of a rendering technique known as ray casting, whereby a 3D environment is generated from a 2D layout by sending out beams from the player avatar’s eyeball and drawing a pixel where they intersect with an object’s coordinates. Where light in reality bounces off many surfaces before entering the eye, ray casting simulates a ray’s collision with an object only once. While incapable of nuanced effects such as refraction, it was also much less resource intensive than other 3D projection techniques, which allowed for faster performance on the hardware of the day. If *WayOut* was a potent demonstration of ray casting’s utility, it is also worth remembering for its eccentric, non-combat premise. You play a clown trapped in a maze with a spinning, sinister ‘Cleptangle’ that will steal your map and compass on contact. A wind blows through the level, its direction indicated by floating fireflies. This interferes with movement, but also helps you get your bearings should you lose your map.

Cockpit simulations were especially popular during the '80s, beginning with Atari and Ed Rotberg’s arcade game *Battlezone*, a tank sim featuring wireframe vector graphics that came with a novel ‘periscope’ viewfinder (the US Army would later try, and fail, to convert the game into a Bradley tank training simulation). In 1987, Incentive Software released *Driller: Space Station Oblivion* – the first game to run on its proprietary

Freescape engine, which allowed for complex 3D environments dotted with simple geometric objects. The game assigned a sizeable chunk of the display to your offworld rover's dashboard, a fat slab of buttons and indicators. In part, the prevalence of cockpit games reflected the influence of Star Wars, with its lavishly realised starfighter dashboard displays. But it also arose from attempts to make often-unwieldy simulation technology more convincing by representing players at the helm of a lumbering vehicle. Among id's subsequent achievements was to narrow the gap between the player's body and that of the avatar, thus helping to open a space in which 'first-person' denotes not merely a perspective but a narrative in which the player is protagonist.

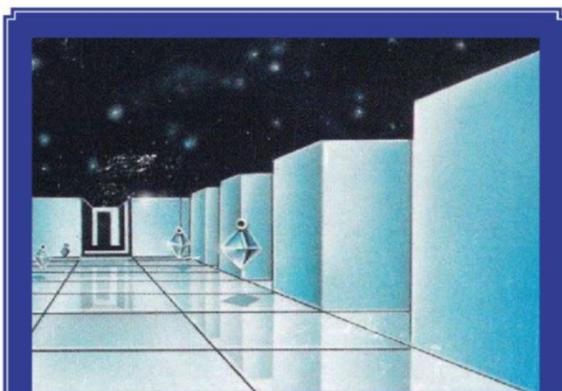
id's career as a first-person developer began with *Hovertank 3D* in 1991. A cockpit sim brought to life with ray casting and featuring animated 2D sprites, it featured players searching for civilians to rescue and tentacular UFOs to blow up. It was followed by *Catacomb 3-D* – id's first crack at a first-person character-led action game, with a visible avatar hand and portrait. *Catacomb* also

## ID'S CAREER AS A FIRST-PERSON DEVELOPER BEGAN WITH HOVERTANK 3D IN 1991

featured texture maps, flat images attached to surfaces to create the illusion of cracked stone walls and dripping moss. In this respect, id had been strongly influenced by Blue Sky Productions' breathtaking *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, often cited as the first 'immersive simulation', which offered 3D, texture-mapped environments featuring sloped surfaces, rudimentary real-time physics and the ability to look up and down.

*Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* – both developed after John Carmack glimpsed *Ultima* in action at a 1990 expo – can be considered combative responses to *Ultima*'s

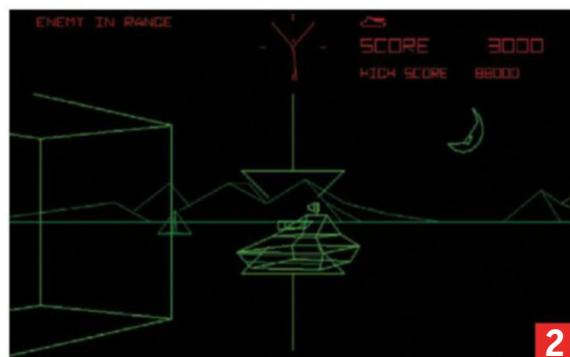
- 1 Catacomb 3-D
- 2 Battlezone
- 3 Hovertank 3D
- 4 Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss



## MAKING PLANET FALL

While not especially entertaining, David A Smith's 1987 Macintosh adventure *The Colony* was one of the earliest first-person games to support free real-time movement. Initially developed on a machine with only 128KB of RAM, the game casts you as a crash-landed pilot investigating an outpost infested by geometric aliens, some of which

shrink to peculiar eyeball artefacts when blasted. The game featured a drivable forklift truck, teleporters, cigarettes that kill you instantly and a monolith chamber that can't be escaped. While not widely embraced at launch – Orson Scott Card was among its detractors – *The Colony* stands today as an important precursor to immersive sims like *Deus Ex* and *System Shock*.



## FEATURE

### *The History of the FPS*



Doomguy is a silent but a vivid personality, thanks to his in-game portrait.





1

1  
Catacomb 3-D  
2  
Doom II



## GAME BOYS

The rise of the first-person shooter sadly coincides with a shift towards viewing games as a predominantly male-oriented pastime. Men dominated the industry during the '70s and '80s, but as Tracy Lien's 2013 study of videogame marketing for Polygon attests, there was less sense that games were the province of one gender. *Doom* widely aped, absurdly masculine

stylings can shoulder some of the blame for that, but the bigger culprit is perhaps Nintendo. Released following the North American market crash of 1983, the Nintendo Entertainment System was pitched specifically at boys under ten years old, its successor, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, targeted boys between ten and 15 years old.

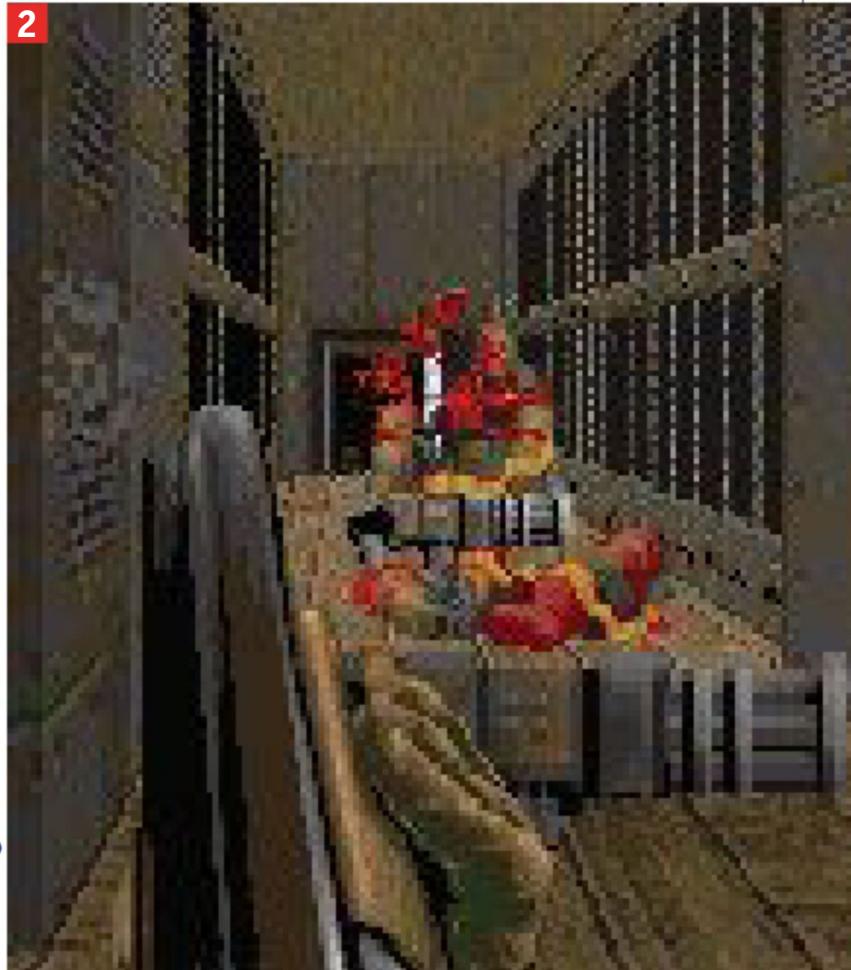


» representation of the possibilities of first-person 3D, eschewing the latter's more complex geometry and gigantic array of variables in favour of pace and immediacy. Though busier with ornaments than *Catacomb 3-D*'s levels, *Wolfenstein*'s environments are designed to run at speed – designer John Romero once planned to let players carry and hide bodies, but dropped the idea to avoid bogging players down. Where *Ultima* set out to make players feel like part of its world via deep, consistent systems and a wealth of lore, *Wolfenstein* dealt in simpler, visceral effects – the sag of your avatar's body when you take a step forward, the gore spraying from the pixelated torso of a slain Nazi. If the game pushed violence and politically charged imagery to the fore – somewhat to the distress of its publisher, Apogee – it also harkened back to the maze games of previous decades, with secret rooms to discover behind sliding partitions.

This emphasis on the avatar's bodily presence would set the tone for many subsequent shooters – notably *Call of Duty*, with its blood spatter damage filter – as would id's sense that player participation should take priority over narrative elements. When it came to *Doom*, there was disagreement between Carmack, Romero and id's creative director Tom Hall over how much plot and backstory to weave into the game. Hall had planned something akin to *Ultima*, with large, naturalistic levels built around a hub area and a multitude of arcane props. "Story in a game is like story in a porn movie," was John Carmack's infamous rebuttal. "It's expected to be there, but it's not important." Hall eventually resigned in 1993. In his absence, the team stripped out a number of more fanciful weapons, turned many plot items required for progression into generic keycards, and cleaned up certain environments to allow for speedier navigation.

Loaded with taboo imagery, ultra-modifiable thanks to id's decision to store game data such as level assets separately from engine data as 'WAD' files, and equipped with four-player multiplayer to boot, *Doom* was a phenomenal success. Such was its impact that before 'FPS' became an accepted term, many in the development community used '*Doom clone*' as shorthand for any first-person game involving gunplay. No game can claim to define a genre for long, however, and id's work would attract plenty of imitators and rivals in the years to come.

2



**F**our months before *Doom*'s arrival, a fledgling Chicago studio founded by Alex Seropian and Jason Jones released *Pathways Into Darkness*, a *Wolfenstein* homage with a pinch of *Ultima*-style item puzzling. It thrust players into the boots of a soldier fighting through a pyramid in order to nuke a sleeping god before it can bring about the apocalypse. One of the few Mac exclusives available at the time, *Pathways* was hailed for its colourful hand-drawn art and menacing atmosphere. It deserves mention today for the ability to commune with the ghosts of other explorers using special crystals and elusive keywords – an engaging, melancholy approach to textual backstory. The developer, Bungie, would build on this concept during work on two of the 21st century's best-known FPS series, *Halo* and *Destiny*.

Before *Halo* and *Destiny* there was 1994's *Marathon*, the series often billed as the Mac's answer to *Doom*. A suspenseful sci-fi offering set aboard a hijacked colony ship, it was a more complex game than id's offering – adding free look with the mouse and a range of terrain dynamics, such as low gravity and airless chambers. It was also a more convoluted work of fiction, which relied on players scouring its open-ended levels for narrative artefacts. In place of the souls of the slain, *Marathon* offered computer terminals through which you converse with various sentient AIs about the wider universe.

The game's reach was limited by its choice of platform, but it attracted a dedicated community thanks to its elusive narrative backdrop and infectious eight-player, ten-map multiplayer. 1995's *Marathon 2: Durandal* added co-operative play while 1996's *Marathon Infinity* introduced a 'Forge' level editor, two features that would become central to the studio's projects. Just as significant, however, was Bungie's work in the emerging real-time

1  
*Pathways Into Darkness*

2  
*Marathon*

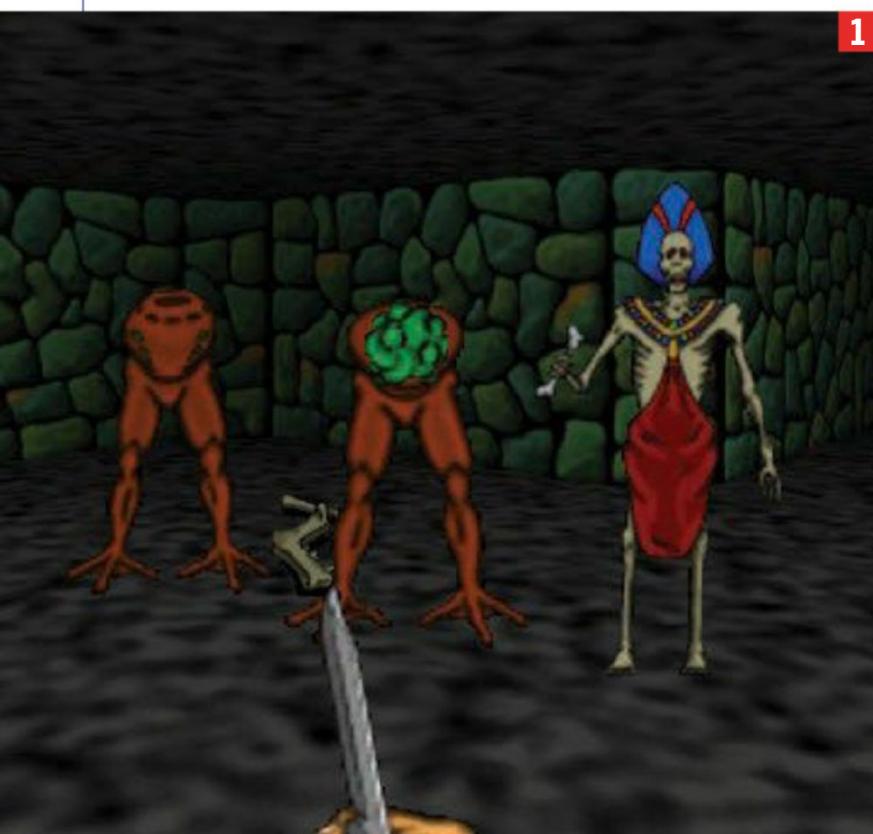
3  
*Doom Batman*



tactics genre. Conceived by Jason Jones in a bid to stand apart from id Software, the top-down *Myth* games equipped Bungie with a feel for how different unit types and variables might react together. This would yield fruit in the shape of *Halo*'s famous combat sandboxes.

Its sheer brilliance aside, *Doom*'s pre-eminence during the '90s owes much to id's embrace of the modding community, with players able to create their own maps using the developer's own editing tools (and thus, squeeze many hours of enjoyment out of the free shareware version). Fan concoctions ranged from Batman and Alien-themed conversions to trashy oddities like *The Sky May Be*, in which zombiemen moonwalk and the legendary BFG-9000 has a chance of conferring immortality on its target. Many up-and-coming designers cut their teeth on *Doom* mods, and other studios were eager to license it for commercial use. Among them was Raven Software, founded by Steve and Brian Raffel, which created the fantasy-themed shooters *Shadowcaster*, *Hexen* and *Heretic* using their own bespoke versions of John Carmack's engine technology. The two companies were at one point based just down the road from each other, and formed an enduring bond – id would eventually hand Raven the keys to the *Doom* and *Quake* franchises.

Raven's games were eclipsed, however, by the noxious excess of 3D Realms' *Duke Nukem 3D*, a celebration of B-movie tropes that occasionally resembles a post-modern satire, and occasionally the aimless, chauvinist doodlings of a 13-year-old boy. *Duke Nukem 3D* is an intensely antisocial game, its levels grimy parodies of real-world locales, such as movie theatres and stripclubs, guarded by porcine coppers and strewn with the corpses of cinema idols like Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker. While technically accomplished and formally inventive – it introduced jet packs, shrink rays, animated props such ➤





Duke Nukem 3D  
was the first  
shooter with  
working mirrors.





## TAKE A RAINBOW

In 1996, bestselling Cold War fantasist Tom Clancy founded a studio, Red Storm Entertainment, in order to adapt his universe of global intrigue and high-tech espionage into videogames. The developer's debut, *Politiika*, an RTS based on the novel of the same name, was a modest hit. 1998's *Rainbow Six*, however, was a phenomenon built around a simple formula: one shot,

one kill. Where peers dealt in surreal landscapes and superhuman capabilities, *Rainbow Six* focused on real-world situations, team tactics and keeping your head down and out of harm's way. Its impact can be traced both in how today's shooters incorporate stealth and in the fetishising of 'special operators' in games, such as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.



as arcade cabinets, physically impossible layouts and a protagonist who provides audible commentary throughout – the game is remembered today mostly for its jiggling softcore imagery. In years to come, shooter developers would spend as much time dispelling the notoriety *Duke Nukem* generated as they would profiting from his example.

*Doom*'s success also won the regard of franchise owners in other media. Maryland-based Bethesda – flush from the success of its eye-catchingly vast roleplaying effort, *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* – released a *Terminator* adaptation in 1995, endowed with lavish polygonal models. In hindsight, the game's vast, cluttered wasteland feels almost like groundwork for the studio's later first-person *Fallout* titles. In the same year, the venerable adventure game studio LucasArts shipped *Dark Forces*, the first Star Wars-themed FPS, inspired (and perhaps, annoyed) by the appearance of Death Star mods for *Doom*. LucasArts had designed a number of historical cockpit-based simulations during the late '80s and early '90s, but *Dark Forces* was a straight riff on id Software's work. The developer's impressive Jedi engine allowed for vertical looking environments busy with ambient details such as ships landing on flight decks, a range of effects such as atmospheric haze, and the ability to stack chambers on top of one another.

By the mid-'90s, developers had begun to shift from so-called 'pseudo-3D' techniques such as ray casting to fully-polygonal worlds, capitalising on the spread of 3D hardware acceleration and the arrival of the first mass-market graphics processing units. Released for the Mega Drive's 32X add-on in 1994, Sega's lumbering *Metal Head* is often touted as the first 'true' 3D shooter. Pitching large, plausibly animated mechs against one another in texture-mapped urban environments, it was a handsome





creation let down by repetitive missions. There was also Parallax Software's *Descent*, released in the same year – an unlikely but gripping hybrid of flight sim and dungeon crawler with 360-degree movement. But the game now regarded as a byword for polygonal 3D blasting wasn't, to begin with, a shooter at all.

John Romero had intended *Quake* to be a hybrid of Sega AM2's arcade title *Virtua Fighter* and a Western roleplaying fantasy. Conceived back in 1991 and named for a Dungeons & Dragons character, the game would have alternated between first-person exploration and third-person side-on brawling. Romero envisioned circling dragons, a hammer massive enough to send shockwaves through the earth, and events that trigger when players look in their direction, such as glowing eyes appearing in a cave mouth. By the time John Carmack neared

**1**  
Star Wars:  
*Dark Forces*

**2**  
*Metal Head*

**3**  
*Descent*

**4**  
*Quake*

## ROMERO ULTIMATELY RESIGNED HIMSELF TO A REIMAGINING OF DOOM IN POLYGONAL 3D

completion of an ambitious 3D engine in 1995, however, other id Software employees were exhausted and reluctant to depart too drastically from the *Doom* formula. There was also tension between the two founders over Romero's supposedly inconsistent work ethic and Carmack's view that the studio's engine technology took precedence over its games. Romero ultimately resigned himself to a reimagining of *Doom* in polygonal 3D – and resigned from id Software itself after finishing the game.

As Big Robot's Jim Rossignol has noted in a 2011 retrospective, something of this failure lingers in *Quake* as



## KNOW YOUR FOE?

The late '90s saw the beginning of a shift away from fairytale and science fiction opponents, as developers began to derive their bad guys from the headlines in hopes of reaching a wider audience. A 2013 study of 160 first-person shooters by Michael Hitchens, Bronwin Patrickson and Sherman Young found that portrayals of political enemies such as Saddam

Hussein's Iraq, rogue governments and terrorists as antagonists piled up dramatically between 1998 and 2005. The authors caution, "Military-themed videogames have the potential to create enthusiasm for military operations," but they also suggest that these games also serve as spaces where such warlike ideologies can be indulged, questioned or reduced to absurdity.

Such was the hype for *Quake* that id was approached about in-game ads.



1



## SIN WAVE

Half-Life overshadowed every other shooter that was released in 1998, for better and worse. Among the casualties was Ritual Entertainment's sleazy, yet surprisingly ambitious, *Sin*. The game doesn't look like much to write home about on the surface – it sees a barrel-chested, quip-prone meathead waging war on a sinister corporation helmed by a voluptuous lady in latex. And story highlights

include the sadly immortal line: "Check his ovaries." But it introduced novel features, such as location-specific damage (also present to a lesser degree in 1997's *GoldenEye 007* on the Nintendo 64, the best-selling console FPS), in-game computers with command line prompts, and player decisions that have an impact on the nature and order of levels.



it stands. Though cut from the same coalface as *Doom* – it offered fast, brutal gunplay, levels made up of corridors and arenas, and a multitude of secret areas – the game's aesthetic and fiction are curiously divided, at once crustily medieval and high tech. You can expect banks of computer monitors and teleporters, but also broadswords and monsters ripped from the pages of Lovecraft. In hindsight, it plays like a representation of the tipping point from avant-garde into profitable convention, the point at which the chimerical possibilities of 3D action solidified into the features expected of a modern first-person shooter.

In at least one respect, though, *Quake* was transformative – it introduced a thrilling element of verticality, with players dashing through the air above opponents rather than simply strafing or corner-camping. This quality proved an asset in the emerging field of online multiplayer: by the late '90s, Ethernet connections and modems had become ubiquitous and internet usage was rocketing. *Quake*'s multiplayer was initially designed for high bandwidth, low latency local area networks – it would check with a server before showing players the result of an action, which led to jerky performance online when there was a build-up of server requests. id swiftly released an update, titled *QuakeWorld*, which added client-side prediction. The result can be held up as the original esports shooter – software company Intergraph sponsored a US-wide tournament, Red Annihilation, in May 1997, which attracted around 2,000 participants.

As with *Doom*, *Quake*'s modding tools made it an attractive platform for amateur developers – its community gave the world *Team Fortress*, which would later flower into a standalone shooter, along with early specimens of machinima, including an epic known as The Seal of Nehahra. Its greatest descendent, however, would



prove to be a shooter from a developer founded by Microsoft alumni Gabe Newell and Mike Harrington.

Created using a modified version of the Quake engine, Valve Software's 1998 epic *Half-Life* remains extraordinary for how it reconciles the abstractions of game design with narrative tactics redolent of a novel (the game's tale of secret government research and alien invasion was, in fact, written by a novelist, Mike Laidlaw). Its achievement versus earlier shooters can be summed up as the creation of temporal unity: almost everything is experienced in real time from the lead character's perspective, with no arbitrary level breaks. In place of cutscenes, Valve weaves its tale through in-game dialogue and scripted events such as enemies smashing through doors – a tactic that both gives the player some control over the tempo and avoids jerking you out of the world. The game also sells the impression of a larger, unseen universe not via gobblots of textual backstory, but through the detail, responsiveness and consistency of its environment. The intro sees Gordon Freeman riding a monorail through Black Mesa, gleaning information about the location and your character from PA announcements and the sight of other employees at work. Following a disastrous experiment, you're asked to backtrack through the same areas, now fallen into chaos.

*Half-Life* created a blueprint many FPS campaign developers would adopt in the new millennium. In

## VALVE WEAVES ITS TALE THROUGH IN-GAME DIALOGUE AND SCRIPTED EVENTS

particular, its seamless, naturalistic design would guide studios looking to explore realistic settings, such as the 'World War' periods. But it also introduced a note of unreality in the shape of Gordon Freeman's murky reflection, the besuited G-Man – a personification of the game designer who sits a little outside *Half-Life*'s fiction. Together with the all-seeing, omnipresent AI manipulators of *Marathon* and the acclaimed cyberpunk RPG *System Shock*, the G-Man betrays a genre becoming increasingly aware of itself, and eager to turn its own structural constraints into a source of drama. ■

- 1 Quake
- 2 Quake
- 3 Half-Life



## EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

The elephant in the room when considering the early fortunes of the FPS is Japan, which has arguably yet to produce a standout shooter, despite serving as the heart of the industry following the US market crash of 1983. In part, this reflected the enormous success of Sega and Nintendo's 2D platformers and family-friendly character action games – it wasn't till the late '90s that

shooters began to sell in similar quantities. In 2013, Sega exec Harunori Satomi suggested that Japanese audiences prefer younger leads and non-military settings. Another plausible explanation offered by the makers of video series Extra Credits is that the figure of the gun is central to America's founding myth, whereas Japan's own culture vastly predates the adoption of the firearm.



**DON'T MISS PART II  
OF THE HISTORY  
OF THE FPS  
NEXT MONTH**

# RESTORING THE CLASSICS

How modders are unearthing oddities lost in development.

*By Sam  
Greer*





or as long as there's been a mod scene, people have tried to 'restore' parts of games that, for whatever reason, were never finished. In recent years, some of the efforts have become truly colossal. A few, like the *KOTOR II Restored Content* mod or the standalone *Stalker: Lost Alpha*, are deemed essential by some fans.

*Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* launched in a sorry state owing to a troubled development. Yet smitten with its ambition, fans have turned it into a beloved RPG. One fan is Werner Spahl. "I first took notice of unused assets when I installed an early version of the *Unofficial Patch*, at that time created by Dan Upright," says Spahl. "When I took over from him I started looking for other lost content, especially when I became aware of how unfinished Troika was forced to release the game."

Spahl is no stranger to the modding scene. For him it has been a

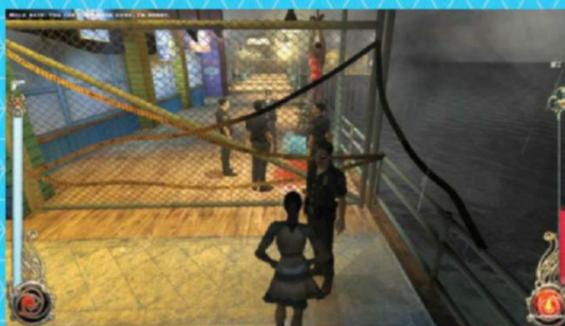
lifelong hobby. "I have prior modding experience from the Atari ST days onwards, when my brother and myself created a mod of one of the first multiplayer FPS games called *Midimaze Plus*. Later on I made a *Doom* mod called *Theme Doom Patch*, in which you could experience Aliens, Predators and Terminators, followed by a lot of small *Quake*, *Jedi Knight* and *Half-Life* mods up to *Xen Warrior*, in which you play as an alien grunt."

## EXHAUSTIVE RESEARCH IS REQUIRED TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE

I cannot recall a time when a discussion of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* didn't also include mention of the *Unofficial Patch*, a mod that not only makes the game vastly more playable but can, optionally, bring in a load of planned or unused content. A chemist by day, Spahl has been working on the mod for over ten years now. "I do it as a hobby, it's never been a full-time job."

### MODDERS TO THE RESCUE

That a game's good reputation largely rests solely on the effort of hardworking fans dedicated to making it playable and complete, is a tremendous compliment to the work put in by Spahl.



ABOVE: *Bloodlines* has its charms, and the *Unofficial Patch* makes it playable and adds higher quality effects.

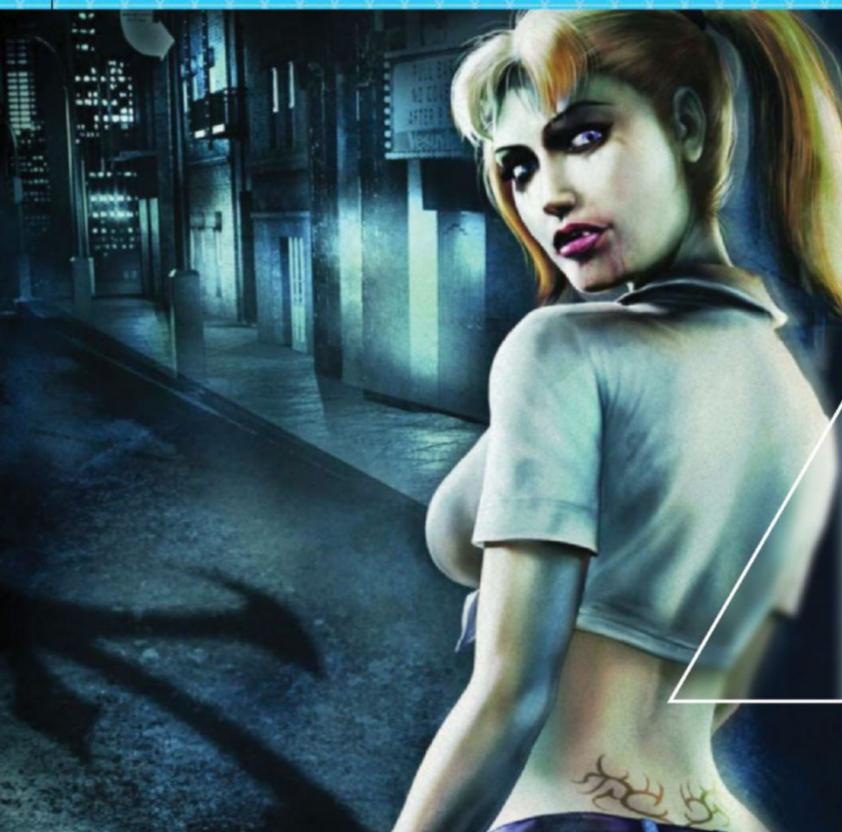
Yet even games that launched to huge success and were packed full of content still have a myriad of things left behind in development. The *Cutting Room Floor* is a restoration mod for sprawling fantasy RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Its creator, Arthmoor, has been working on it since November 2016.

"I noticed them almost immediately while I was working on the *Open Cities* mod," says Arthmoor about the markers he found hidden in three of *Skyrim*'s cities that seemingly served no purpose. "I was told not long after that they belonged to civil war content that had been cut. It wasn't until a couple of years later that I decided to go back and look to see if there was more and possibly bring it back to the game."

His mod restores entire quest lines relating to the *Skyrim* civil war and beyond, whilst also bringing in NPCs and locations. For a game already bursting with things to do, the *Cutting Room Floor* adds a lot that is substantial.

Like Spahl, Arthmoor is no stranger to modding. "By the time I was starting on *Cutting Room Floor* in earnest, I had several *Skyrim* mods already completed along with five years' worth of various projects for *Oblivion* as well. So I already had the experience behind me to start a project like this."

It's not just fans who have taken to modding. Josh Sawyer, project director and lead designer on *Fallout: New Vegas* at Obsidian, offered a small mod post-release called the *Jsawyer Mod* that tweaks the game





## MISSING IN ACTION *The stuff we might never see*



### HALF-LIFE 2

This went through numerous changes over its long development and left fans wondering about many cut enemies and ideas.



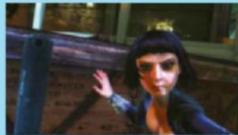
### HALO 2

Bungie's blockbuster sequel showed an entire section at E3 2003 which never made it into the final game. A shame – it looked pretty cool.



### BORDERLANDS

The loot shooter once had a realistic style with a different tone and was showcased in this form for a while before the cel-shaded look took over.



### BIOSHOCK INFINITE

A different-looking Elizabeth was shown at events, along with a game that was much bigger in its scope than what we finally got.



### ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Just about every single thing shown of this prior to release never made to the final game in that form.

more in line with his original plan for the difficulty. The mod was conceived after the game was completed. "I started to realise that with our development cycles for the DLCs, and due to some technical issues with how the DLCs and main game interact, there were quite a few issues that we wouldn't be able to officially address."

Intent on addressing these issues, Sawyer was also keen to balance the game's difficulty more towards his original vision. "I held back on the base difficulty of *Fallout: New Vegas* because *Fallout 3*'s base difficulty was low and I didn't think it was reasonable to spike up the challenge too much. I wanted to create a more challenging experience in the mod."

His list of tweaks might seem minor but they make for a vastly different experience when put into practice, and for the curious, represents a chance to play a kind of 'Director's Cut' of the game.

"Most of the changes were easy to make," Sawyer elaborates. "Bethesda's tools are terrific for making and editing content. My workflow at home was very similar to what it was as work. The reason the mod is called *JSawyer* is because our naming convention for local files at work was first initial and last name. So the mod is really just named that way because my work environment at home was the same as at Obsidian. I just wasn't connected to any source control."

### THE NITTY-GRITTY

Sawyer continues, "There were a few things I had difficulty changing and I made a bunch of 'dirty' edits in the process. Dirty edits (changes made as a shortcut to get a mod working that may in turn cause problems or conflict with other mods) aren't really a thing that we had to worry about when working on *Fallout: New Vegas* through source control, so I wasn't sure how to deal with them. A

**TOP:** It's hard to believe anything was left out of the massive, jam-packed *Skyrim*.

talented modder [Xporc] helped me clean up the dirty edits and make the changes I was having difficulty with."

Restoring missing content is, as you might imagine, no easy task. Exhaustive research is required to make it possible, trawling through every inch of the game's files. "At first I simply started checking out the game files themselves, a lot of which are in normal text format like those defining items, stats, dialogues or bringing quests together in Python scripts," Werner Spahl explains of his research for *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines*. "Later I began to search the VPK archives [the means by which assets are stored in Valve's Source game engine] with PakExplorer for unused models, graphics and sounds too."

For this mod, Spahl didn't limit his search for information to the game itself. "In case of our biggest restoration yet, the library quest, I contacted Brian Mitsoda [designer



» and writer on VMB] and he sent me whatever he could remember and we built the quest around his info.”

Not only does completing work left unfinished by the devs take time, sometimes there are few traces of the original assets. Entirely new ones have to be created, in specification with the originally intended idea. “I also asked him about most of the other new maps we created, but sadly he couldn’t help us much, so a lot is improvised,” Spahl says.

In the case of Arthmoor’s *Cutting Room Floor* mod for *Skyrim*, the process was straightforward. “At first it was a matter of reconnecting a few dialogue options in quests to restore their flow, then reintegrating some items and other simpler things that had been included with the game but not added to things like the levelled lists. Most of the data was already in place so it wasn’t overly difficult to reconnect a lot of the material.” There were a few exceptions, though. “All of the assets used by the mod were already included in the game, but some did need modification to be completely useful, like the southeast entrance gate to Riften, and the sleeved version of the Stormcloak armour. Since I’m not at all versed in 3D modelling, I had some help from friends and community members to fix those parts up.”

Remember that gate? Blocked off for seemingly no reason at all? Incredible that it took a fan to set things right but still, Arthmoor has done us all a public service.

Of course, even the restoration mods themselves have to cut some

**ABOVE** The Mojave Wasteland can still make me pause but its beauty hides the deadliest modern *Fallout*.

## BEFORE AND AFTER

*Doing more than just adding content*

### SKYRIM

*Skyrim* never lacked for content but *The Cutting Room Floor* breathes new life into stretches of empty wilderness.

BEFORE



AFTER



### STALKER

*Stalker Lost Alpha* is a mod that transforms the base *Shadow of Chernobyl*/game into a stranger, wilder version of itself.

BEFORE



AFTER



### VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE

The shonky original game was polished by the *Unofficial Patch* which added whole new areas.

BEFORE



AFTER



### FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

The *JSawyer Mod* turned the already challenging *Fallout: New Vegas* into something more akin to a difficult survival game.

BEFORE



AFTER



content. “I elected to leave out the portions of cut content that referred to the civil war, the real-time carriage rides, and to the battle arena in Windhelm,” explains Arthmoor. “The civil war content had already been restored by ApolloDown’s *Civil War Overhaul* mod and there would have been considerable overlap between the two projects. The complexity of it would have been fairly overwhelming

at the time, and still would be, due to the sheer number of places that quest line covers.”

And as someone who laments the cut to a loading screen, it’s a shame about the real-time carriages. “It would also have required extensive edits to a lot of navmesh records on main roads, near high-population areas, which would have resulted in a ton of compatibility issues with other



mods and sometimes official DLCs as well," says Arthmoor. "The *Touring Carriages* mod does a bit of a better job with this content now, but even it still suffers from the major compatibility problem and limitations of the game's engine, but a lot of people like it and it works well enough under most conditions."

#### A PROMISING FUTURE

The same goes for Werner Spahl's *Unofficial Patch*, in which there was simply too much with too little information to go on. Despite the incredible efforts of these fans, there remains a version of these games that is still unseen.

For these talented folks, their mods are just the start. They have their own ideas and more games to work on. "I've been playing through some of the backlog of other games I've built up, in addition to continuing work on *Witanlore* – an indie game I'm helping develop for Druid Gameworks," Arthmoor says.

*Witanlore* is a bear-themed RPG where its *Elder Scrolls* influences are obvious. It's available on Steam Early Access. Werner Spahl too has plans for the future. "I'm still busy with the patch and while there is little that we will be able to restore in the foreseeable future, I bet there are still some hidden bugs that could be fixed. Besides doing a bit of patching for the two great free standalone mods *The Babylon Project* and *The Dark Mod*, I would like to continue my work on the two rather underdog Deep Shadows games *White Gold* and *The Precursors*."

**ABOVE:** With vast stretches of nothing, survival can be tricky in *New Vegas*. Not least avoiding these vicious tap-dancing geckos.

**RIGHT:** They might have managed to include buff, shouty norsemen but plenty of other stuff got left out of *Skyrim*.

I can make a heartfelt recommendation for *The Dark Mod* for anyone after a polished, *Thief*-esque stealth fix. Spahl is definitely a man of many talents.

What about the developers who worked on these games, how do they feel about the restoring of cut content? Josh Sawyer seems pretty laid back about it all. Speaking on *Fallout: New Vegas*, he says "I don't think there's anything special about the content that was cut. I don't mind

## "COMMUNITIES PRESSURE MODDERS TO OVEREXTEND THEIR SCOPE"

people restoring/extending it, but I also don't think there's anything more interesting about what we cut compared to new content that modders could develop."

On the community surrounding these demanding projects, Sawyer has more complex feelings. "Participating directly in the modding community also helped confirm that the communities also pressure modders heavily to overextend their scope by accommodating feature requests over time," he explains. "I suspected this was a problem, which is why I made no concessions to making versions supporting just the base game, supporting various combinations of DLCs, or making

changes to my mod to support compatibility with other mods. It's also why the only official hosting location for my mod is on my website. I can't control what people do with it once it's out there, but I can state, 'This is the only official place to find my mod and if you find it somewhere else, I disavow it.'"

For a group of people who do this solely out of their own passion, unpaid, it is a shame to hear that demands from the community can be overwhelming. Their work is enjoyed by many and in some cases is essential for a functional game experience. Yet their efforts go largely underappreciated and sometimes unfairly criticised. In the comments sections or forums surrounding them, users will bitterly demand one small thing or another, adamant that it would be easy to add despite having no experience themselves. Coping with that pressure is a talent all in itself. Making some legendary mods on top of that is exemplary.

The capability of a few dedicated fans never ceases to amaze and restoration mods are perhaps the most fascinating niche of that scene. What they do is more than just put out lots of new content to play. Through exhaustive research, modders have preserved these pieces of the medium's history that would otherwise have been lost. They may be small, curious insights into content that may even have been cut for good reason, yet these mysterious artefacts are now preserved in digital space for us to enjoy, free and available to all. ■



# 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](http://www.bit.ly/pcgreviews)



## Walking and talking

*Gone Home* is a heartfelt story, deftly told – even if Metacritic's user reviewers might disagree. Now it seems that Fullbright has done it again. Andy's review of *Tacoma* suggests an adept sci-fi mystery that uses its holographic conceit to great effect. You get to ponder the big, existential questions about artificial intelligence and corporate interest, but also enjoy the more personal, nuanced dramas of the space station's crew.

There's plenty more to love this month, too, from the brutal survival stories of *The Long Dark*, to the cheery paternal dating of *Dream Daddy*. And then there's *Hollow Knight*, this issue's highest scoring game. We're a little late on this one – it was originally released in February – but even six months later, it's well worth a look.

*Phil Savage*

PHIL SAVAGE

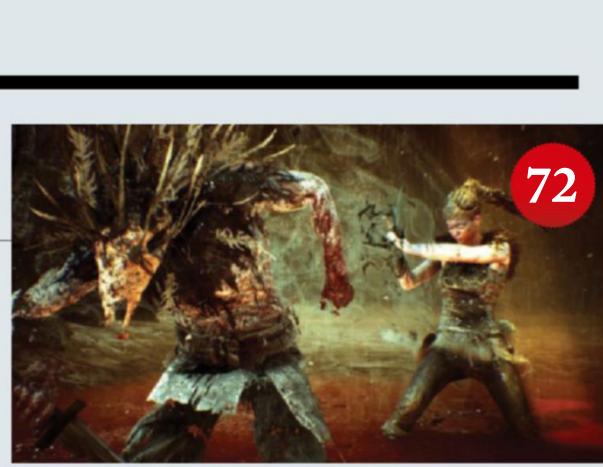
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**LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK**  
 Email us via [pcgamer@futurenet.com](mailto:pcgamer@futurenet.com) with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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72



90

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## This month's omnipresent AIs...



**ANDY KELLY**  
Specialist in Adventure, walking  
**Currently playing** Tacoma  
**This month** Our ambulation expert walked on everything, from golf greens to space stations.



**JODY MACGREGOR**  
Specialist in Strategy, urchins  
**Currently playing** Antihero  
**This month** Artfully dodged his way through a 19th Century criminal underworld. Gained victory points.



**RICHARD COBETT**  
Specialist in MMO, magic bees  
**Currently playing** Secret World Legends  
**This month** Returned to a land of conspiracy. Still didn't like the combat.



**WES FENLON**  
Specialist in Sports, reading  
**Currently playing** Pyre  
**This month** Discovered that reading books is more fun when there's wizard basketball.



**TOM MARKS**  
Specialist in Dungeons, departures  
**Currently playing** Hollow Knight  
**This month** Handed in his badge and bow-tie, and departed PC Gamer on a high (scoring review).



**HANNAH DWAN**  
Specialist in Dating sims, dads  
**Currently playing** Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator  
**This month** Investigated the paunch-ridden world of daddy dating.



**CHRIS THURSTEN**  
Specialist in Retro, cleaning  
**Currently playing** Mount & Blade: Warband  
**This month** Was both the cause of and solution to spilled blood and viscera.

# PLOTS IN SPACE

**TACOMA** is a sci-fi mystery from the creators of *Gone Home* set on a mysteriously abandoned space station. *By Andy Kelly*

**D**rifting somewhere between the Earth and the Moon, the lunar transfer station Tacoma lies empty and abandoned. An incident has forced the crew to evacuate and you, Amy Ferrier, have been sent to investigate and recover its omnipresent artificial intelligence, Odin. But even though the six people who ran the station are long gone, their presence is felt all around you. And not just because of the empty coffee cups, photos of loved ones, and other traces of life they left behind – making the station feel like a sci-fi Mary Celeste.

Venturis, the megacorporation that owns Tacoma, has 3D recordings of every second of the crew's year aboard the station, which you've been granted access to. And it's through these ghostly memories – which Amy relives using an augmented reality viewer – that you'll learn about the people who lived and worked there before the incident. It's a compelling mystery that grabs hold of you the instant your magnetic boots clamp to the station and never lets go.

When you first float into Tacoma's zero-gravity hub, an area you'll revisit often, a procession of bulkhead doors open one by one to reveal a long, rotating corridor stretching into the distance. It's an evocative introduction to the station, and an early example of the game's exquisite worldbuilding. I suddenly feel a powerful urge to explore, but also a flutter of unease and trepidation. A mood that developer Fullbright,

whose debut game was the equally mysterious *Gone Home*, has proven to be particularly adept at.

The eerie calm is broken only by a cleaning robot occasionally buzzing past my head, still dutifully performing its chores in the crew's absence. Around me there are colour-coded doors leading to different areas of the station, branching off

from the hub like spokes on a wheel. But until I fulfil a certain objective, most are inaccessible to me. The game methodically guides you from one location to the next to tell its linear story, which can be stifling at times. I would have liked just a little more freedom to explore.

The first wing of the station I can access is Personnel. Now pinned to the floor by artificial gravity, I walk into a communal dining area and an AR recording flickers to life. A timeline appears on the HUD allowing me to scrub through the

I'm immediately struck by how believable the dialogue is

memory, pausing, rewinding, or fast forwarding at my leisure. The crew, represented as digital silhouettes, are preparing for a party, and I'm immediately struck by how believable the dialogue is. It has a natural, conversational flow, never feeling contrived or overly expository.

The crew, despite appearing to Amy only as faceless figures, have nicely rounded personalities. This is thanks to the game's impressively expressive animation and superb voice acting, which combine to create characters who buzz with life. At first the recordings don't seem to be anything more than elaborate audio logs, passively relaying a story to you in a way games have been doing for years now.

## TALKING POINT

But the clever thing about *Tacoma* is how its cast covers a large area, with conversations spread between many different rooms. Say you're observing an argument between three people and one leaves the room. If you stick around, you might hear them talking about her behind her back. And if you decide to follow her, she might confide in someone in another part of the station about what just happened.

This is a simple, abstract example, but other interactions are much more granular. I watch a couple holding hands, suddenly letting go when a fellow crew member appears from a nearby office. A tiny gesture that

## ROLL CALL Meet *Tacoma*'s crew



**EV ST JAMES**  
Station administrator  
The boss. Manages the station, but ultimately reports to Venturis, the corporation that owns it.



**ANDREW DAGYAB**  
Botanist  
Grows food for the crew in the biomedical wing and cultivates oxygen-producing algae.



**CLIVE SIDDIQI**  
Operations specialist  
EV's trusted second in command. Deals with the day-to-day admin of running the station.



**SAREH HASMADI**  
Medical officer  
Keeps the crew healthy and makes sure they're sticking to their diet and exercise plans.



**ROBERTA WILLIAMS**  
Mechanical engineer  
Bert makes sure the station doesn't fall apart. If something needs fixin', she's the one to call.



**NATALI KUROSHENKO**  
Network specialist  
Nat looks after Tacoma's systems, including the AI assistant Odin.

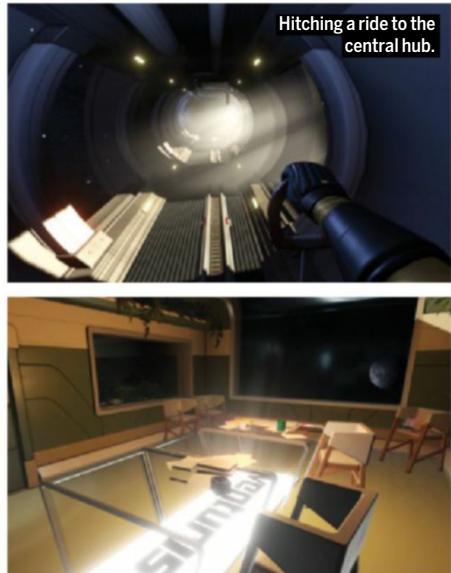
The crew celebrates the end of a year's work.



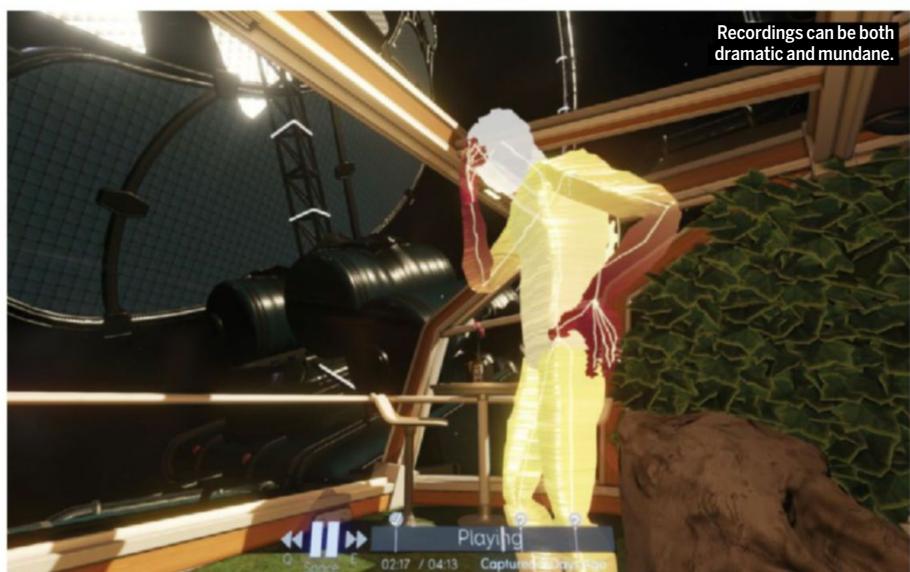
The incident affects everyone in different ways.



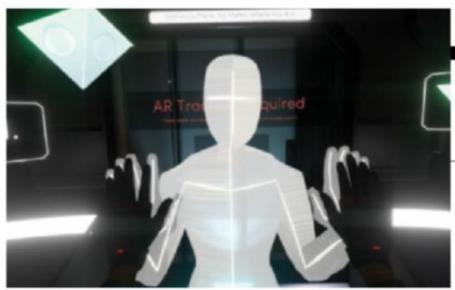
Hitching a ride to the central hub.



Even the sick bags are super detailed.



Recordings can be both dramatic and mundane.



The crew formulates a plan.



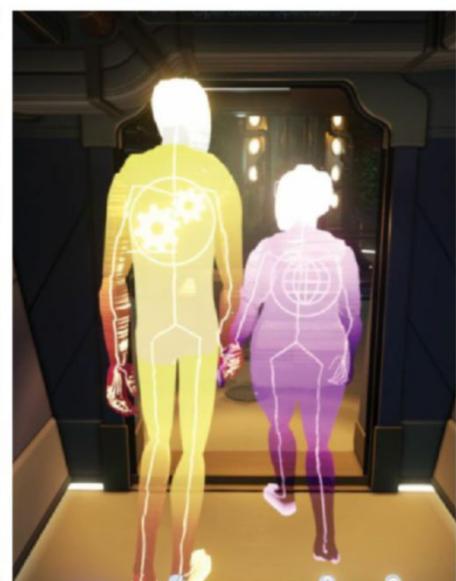
You can play zero-G basketball in the hub.



Taking in the view from the observation dome.



There's no such thing as privacy on Tacoma.



» brilliantly illustrates, to my mind at least, their reluctance to make their relationship official. And the game is full of these fleeting, human moments, which really bring the characters to life. A recording may only last three minutes, but catching everything that occurs within that time frame, from major story beats to these ephemeral character moments, will take much longer.

Fullbright's other great talent is building worlds. The attention to detail in *Tacoma* is extraordinary, making thorough exploration of the station rewarding. Every object feels like it was placed with considered purpose, painting a vivid picture of the crew's day-to-day life. As well as creating a resonant sense of place, this also fleshes the characters out in subtle, intimate ways. Anxiety medication in a bedside table. A photo of a recently deceased relative hidden in a drawer, face down. A rejected job application angrily screwed up in a trash can. These understated touches humanise the crew, making them feel like real, flawed, fragile people, and I couldn't help but get swept up in their lives.

Fullbright also seems to have spent a lot of time thinking about the practicalities of how a station like *Tacoma* would operate, with a Kubrick-esque eye for detail. You get the sense that this is a functioning place and not just a movie set, which only adds to the richness of the setting. I also love catching glimpses of the station's vast, rotating rings through windows and skylights, reminding you of just how massive it is. And there's something haunting about seeing Earth hanging in space, lonely and distant. You can just imagine the crew staring at it, yearning for the comforts of home.

Like *Gone Home*, there's a satisfying physicality to your interactions with the environment. You can grab hold of drawers and slide them out, pick objects up and examine them, and pull things aside to peek underneath. And I want to thank Fullbright for the 'put back' option, which lets you pick stuff up without leaving a mess of scattered physics objects in your wake. There aren't any puzzles, but sometimes you'll have to locate a key or door code to access certain parts of the station. *Tacoma* is more about storytelling, discovery, and character development than navigating levels and solving problems.



## DIET PLAN *A peek inside Tacoma's pantry*



**BIXBY**  
Beer brewed in Portland. Judging by the empty cans littering the station, the crew loves a brewski.



**ZUP!**  
Cakes of melon-flavoured mochi, a snack made of rice that's been pounded into a sweet paste.



**TAITTINGER**  
Celebratory booze in a handy bag from a famous French wine family famed for its champagnes.



**WHOLE MEAL**  
This bar is the equivalent of an entire meal, with all the proper nutrition. Tomato and basil flavour.

## LAST LAUGH

Characters will pull up their personal desktops during a recording, which you can access to see what they were looking at. I catch one crew member reading a trashy crime novel about an orbital casino heist while waiting for someone to get off the phone. Elsewhere, a woman discusses her troubled relationship with an online therapist, and a man chases high scores in an AR videogame. There are a lot of jokes buried in these optional desktops as well, and it's worth noting that *Tacoma* has a mischievous sense of humour that loosens it up and prevents it from ever becoming too saccharine or earnest.

The first hour is pretty sedate, giving you space to observe and get to know *Tacoma*'s crew. But then, suddenly, an accident leaves the residents of the station in a dire situation, and the rest of the game focuses on their attempts to deal with it. Seeing how each person copes with the stress of what's happening is where some of the best drama emerges. It's tense, fraught, and often heartbreaking. But the shift from watching people making cakes and playing pool to fighting for their lives is a little abrupt, and I would have enjoyed spending more time with the crew in happier times before the incident.

A grander narrative begins to emerge as you journey deeper into the station, and it becomes about much more than the six people who lived there. Themes confidently tackled include the rights of sentient artificial intelligence and corporate versus human interest, which gives

the story a very '70s feel. It's dark, thoughtful science fiction, dwelling on the perils and ethics of advanced technology and space colonisation. But while a lot of science fiction from that era has a cold, nihilistic view of mankind's place in the universe, *Tacoma* has a heart. The crew are the soul of the game, and even when things are falling to pieces, their innate humanity always shines through.

By the time the credits started rolling I'd grown genuinely attached to these six unique people. I spent so long reading their emails, snooping around in their living spaces, and

eavesdropping on their many conversations that I felt like I knew each of them. And that made saying goodbye particularly difficult. I missed them so much, in fact, that I immediately started a second playthrough.

And there was unexpected value in that, because things I learned in my first run brought new context to certain events and conversations the second time around. There's a lot going on in *Tacoma*, much of it subtle, hidden away, waiting to be uncovered. And in that sense, as a game about piecing together a story, it's immensely rewarding. I won't forget my time aboard that station any time soon, or the people whose lives I got hopelessly tangled up in while I was there. ■

### PC GAMER

### VERDICT

A smart, thoughtful sci-fi story with believable characters and an atmospheric, beautifully realised setting.

84

# ARTFUL DODGERS

Crime pays – specifically, it pays three gold to hire an Urchin in **ANTIHERO**. By Jody Macgregor

**T**his always happens: you're teaching someone how to play a cool board game that you love, selling them on the unique theme, the clever, meticulously crafted rules, what each of the sweet little wooden tokens do. Then they ask, "How do you win?" And the answer you have to give them, through gritted teeth, is, "By scoring the most victory points." Then suddenly that cool game you love sounds boring.

So please stick with me while I describe *Antihero*, a turn-based strategy game about crime in the Victorian era. Two thieves guilds compete over the gas-lit streets where the fog of war is literal fog. As guild leader you burgle buildings for cash or infiltrate them for long-term gain. The names of each inn or estate or orphanage are perfect. Chosen randomly from a pool, they sound like old medical conditions: Chiseler's Foot, Salty Navel, Old Custard.

Big-headed woodcut criminals compete for control of those buildings and streets. Gangs scuffle in the gutters; Urchins commit blackmail; Saboteurs lay traps. An estate might be guarded but it contains valuable loot, a strangefellow club gives bonuses to Thugs and Gangs once taken over. And then, yeah, one player scores the right number of victory points and wins.

It's more fun than it sounds. Victory points are earned by killing assassination targets, blackmailing churches, or buying bribes. However, bribes cost lanterns, which you also need to buy upgrades across three skill trees: skullduggery, sneakery, and staberry. Skullduggery perks, like Fine Ale, increase the health of thugs, the sneakery perk Art Critic lets you steal paintings, and stabberry is, of course, mostly about damage. It's a tough choice because each bribe costs more than the last, and the price goes up no matter who buys them. Do you strengthen your hand with upgrades or grab victory points on the cheap?

There's a little randomness in *Antihero*, but it doesn't bother me.

## Everyone decides on the most efficient playstyle and sticks to it

Invisible dice control the placement of assassination targets, and neutral Thugs who block streets. Business placement and burglary rewards are also random, though you're guaranteed a trading house within one move of the starting point. Occasionally you rob a house and get a lantern instead of the gold you needed to buy an Assassin that turn, but it's a minor inconvenience.

Each map has something unique about it, usually an extra path to victory points: a masquerade ball that can be looted if you steal an invite, or

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Thieves' Guild Simulator: 1888 Edition.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£12

**DEVELOPER**  
Tim Conkling

**PUBLISHER**  
Versus Evil

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

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Online and hot-seat

**LINK**  
[www.antihero-game.com](http://www.antihero-game.com)

a ship at the docks that has to be held for a turn to get the cargo. These maps are arranged into an 11-chapter campaign with comic strip cutscenes telling the story of a thieves' guild taking down its competitors. It takes six or seven hours to finish.

From then on it's all about multiplayer. *Antihero* can only be played one on one at the moment, but there's both a hotseat mode with robust options for house rules and online multiplayer. Online, it can be played live with time limits, or asynchronously over a few days. The game emails you when it's your turn.

## NANTY NARKING

The downside to going online is that, like many board games, after enough plays it becomes a solved problem. Everyone decides on the most efficient playstyle and sticks to it. In *Antihero* that means racing to level up a Gang, adding Thugs to increase its health and then killing the opponent's Gang so you dominate the map. The counter to Gangs are Assassins, so if you lose the Gang race the only option is to rush through the sneakery tree to unlock them. I've only played one match that hasn't gone the same way. Objectives introduce only the slightest variation.

Unusually, you get more variety playing against the AI. In skirmish mode the computer plays with more diversity than people do. If there was a way to link skirmishes together into a campaign, a kind of Dickensian Long War, I'd play the hell out of that. As it is, there's no progression between matches and so instead I'll go back and replay the campaign on Hard. I'd definitely play an add-on that was basically *Brood War* but with orphans. What I'm saying is, "Please, sir, I want some more". ■

## GUTTERS NIPES Collect all the crims.



### MASTER THIEF

You only get one, but they're immortal. Scouts, burglars, can upgrade to attack.



### URCHIN

Your Artful Dodger. Put three in an orphanage and they'll be able to evict other urchins.



### GANG

Your William Cutting. Evicts urchins, attacks. Levels up with each murder.



### ASSASSIN

Causes six points of damage, then goes away. Probably on a well-deserved holiday.



### THUG

Can block streets for two turns before heading home with an Orcy "JOB'S DONE!"



### TRUANCY OFFICER

Collects urchins, and takes them away in a cage to the poorhouse.

## PC GAMER

## VERDICT

Like a board game you play to death then put on the shelf to bring out on special occasions, with urchins and stabbings.

75



Cooking  
Unlock Urchins.  
(Infiltrate businesses.)  
I free Urchins.

Sneakery

Staffery

Charity

It's not a PC game without tech trees.



# SHIVERDANCE

A wonderwork of sight and sound, **HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE** explores mental disorders by dissecting demons. *By Leif Johnson*

**S**enua, Celtic warrior extraordinaire, her face and arms slathered in cerulean woad matching the colour of her eyes, slices her way through the hordes of the imposing Viking undead with the severed head of her dead boyfriend strapped to her belt. In some ways, then, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* comes off a little bit like a gritty reboot of Grasshopper Manufacture's hack-and-slasher, *Lollipop Chainsaw*.

But there are few laughs in this gloomy world and certainly no lollipops. *Hellblade* is serious business – so serious, in fact, that behind all of its Viking swagger and Celtic rage it aims to let us peep into the mind of someone afflicted with psychosis, a mental disorder with symptoms ranging from hearing voices to a near-total disconnect from reality. Games often mishandle this sort of thing, but Ninja Theory eagerly proves it did its homework with a documentary on the title screen detailing how the studio chatted with Cambridge professors and actual psychosis patients in the hopes of letting players understand psychosis through the interactivity games offer.

And wonder of wonders, it generally works. More than that, it works with a title like '*Hellblade*', which conjures images of a Kratos-like hero stomping into hell to kick

ass (and there's certainly some of that). But most of all, it works because of Senua herself. Ninja Theory uses haunted eyes to full effect in long, moody closeups peppering the narrative. She peers

not only into the darkness, but seemingly past the camera, past the screen. Looking back, I found depths of despair and anger there that were sometimes hard to meet head on.

All this makes *Hellblade* more of a psychological portrait than anything else, and as such, the story itself isn't all that complicated. Following a Viking attack on her home in the Orkney Islands that left her lover Dillion dead, Senua descends into the Norse underworld of Helheim to reclaim Dillion's soul from Hela herself. So far, so 2010's *Dante's Inferno*. But this is a hard battle for Senua, emphasised brilliantly with her slow tread,

## Ninja Theory uses haunted eyes to full effect in long, moody closeups

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A moody hack-and-slash exploring mental illness against a backdrop of Viking and Celtic myth.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£25

**DEVELOPER**  
Ninja Theory

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Windows 10, 16GB RAM,  
GeForce GTX 980

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.hellblade.com](http://www.hellblade.com)

reluctant jog, and hurried breathing. Here we find a girl who was kept out of sight as a child by her father, and whom the villagers blamed for bringing the Vikings upon them. Some people would crumble under such pain. But still Senua fights. It's a little inspiring.

### FIGHTS AND FRIGHTS

It's a shame that inspiration doesn't carry over to the actual fights – not initially, anyway. Senua's animations are impressive, but her bloody business never grows more complicated than delivering a barrage light and heavy attacks while blocking, evading, and parrying. I frankly found it kind of dull in the one-on-one duels at the start, and it didn't help that the enemies sometimes seem to skip a few animations when reacting to attacks. Nor does it help that there's precious little variation in the foes themselves, who almost always show up as tall, shirtless warriors with deer skull helmets or as beefy berzerker shamans. By the end of the first hour, you've basically seen every non-boss you're going to see.

Much of the combat's shortcomings slink away once ever-larger bands of the deer helm gang crowd the scene, forcing Senua to take on around seven at once, culminating in a final sequence where she leaps around the floor hacking and slashing like a bladed pinball knocked about by bumpers. If she parries enough, she can 'focus' by pressing 'E' or squeezing a gamepad's right trigger to slow down time to slice her enemies with comparative ease. Then the drums thunder. A chorus of warriors chants. In *Hellblade*'s most triumphant moment, the music even bursts into an electronic dance song that somehow doesn't feel out of place. In these frantic moments, combat in *Hellblade* becomes a thing of beauty – a dance that recalls the kinetic artistry Ninja Theory achieved so skillfully in 2013's *Devil May Cry* reboot, *DmC*.

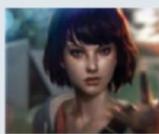
## MIND GAMES

*Games that give us new perspectives on mental illness*



**THE WALKING DEAD:  
MICHONNE  
2016**

A Telltale miniseries that follows the fan favourite as she deals with PTSD.



**LIFE IS STRANGE 2015**

An game that tackles grief and depression through the powers of a girl with the power to change the past.



**SPEC OPS: THE LINE 2012**

The morally objectionable situations here are more likely to give you PTSD than lead to wellness.



**DEAR ESTHER**

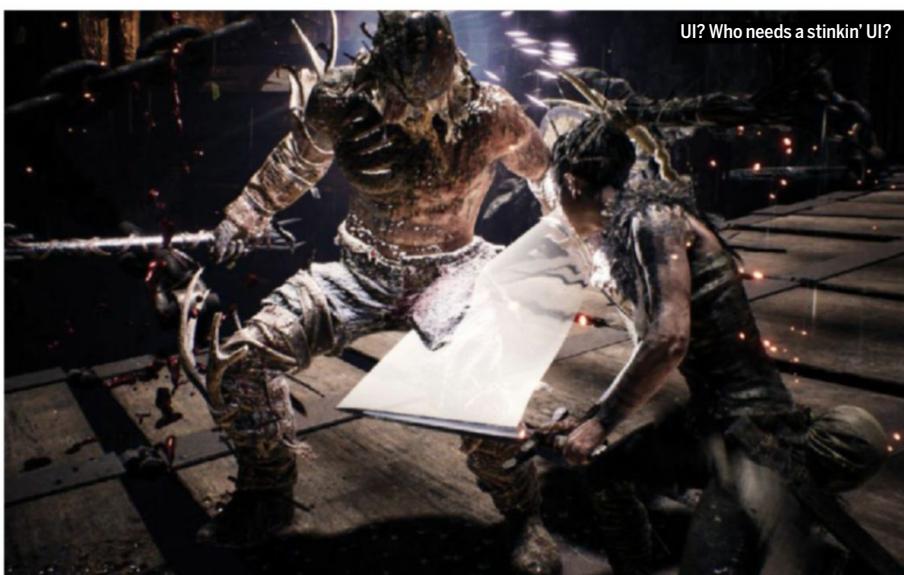
An artistic experience that explores issues of grief in the form of a first-person ghost story.



The threat of losing everything  
makes you play smarter.



Time for a story  
from Druth!



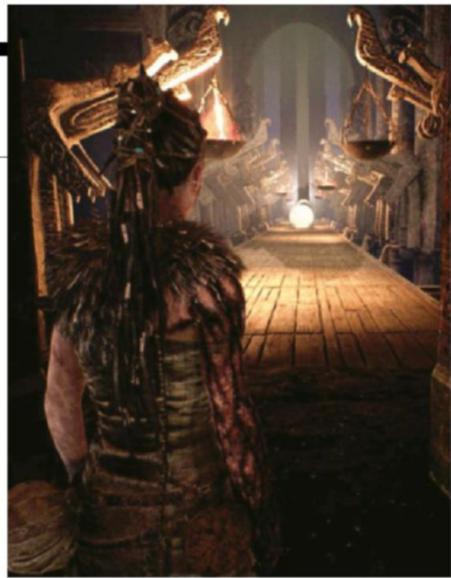
UI? Who needs a stinkin' UI?



But is it real?



Hell in Senua's world both freezes over and burns.



Hitting them with the pointy end.



Hellblade's Photo Mode allows for hellraising selfies.



Senua is among the most human of gaming's action heroes.

The shield guys are tougher than some of the bosses.

## » HELL ON FEELS

The fluidity of this dance of death suffers a bit from the awkward need to lock onto different enemies solely by looking at them. There's no manual way to do so. Sometimes I'd need to prepare to parry the berserker charging me, but couldn't easily switch the target from the shielded warrior I'd be whittling down – leaving me no option but to dodge the berserker. It's the sole real flaw of *Hellblade*'s nonexistent user interface, which otherwise allows the force of Senua's raw emotions to filter through the screen unblemished by numbers or meters. The only element that even resembles UI is the way a magic mirror on her belt lights up when it's time to trigger her combat focus attack. It lends intensity to boss fights, as you're never really sure when they'll end.

The trouble is that mistakes mean something here. Senua doesn't have many opportunities to screw up. Hela infected her arm with rot, you see, and the tendrils of decay creep further up her limb with each death. The game tells you that, when the tendrils reach her head, all progress will be erased. It's but another element that helps make Senua's plight relatable. When she hesitates, I hesitate. When she's scared, I'm wary. I also have something at stake, too, however minor it may be.

The approach goes a long way toward explaining the relatively short eight or nine-hour running time. Fortunately, it's not as harsh as it could be. I died maybe six times in my playthrough, and by the end the rot had only snaked up around three quarters of her arm. Good thing, too. Sometimes I failed for the dumbest reasons, as when I ran past a torch while fleeing a beast in the darkness. I let my fear overpower my logic. Senua wouldn't have done that.

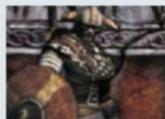
## THE DRUTH IS OUT THERE

Is Helheim real? It's never clear – a consequence of Senua's psychosis. But it certainly feels like it, and it hammers home why Vikings were so eager to die in battle and hang out with the bros in Valhalla rather than dying of old age. Having the gall to do that, it turns out, lands you a prime spot as a charred arm among millions, grabbing at passersby.

## Senua doesn't have many opportunities to screw up

## GET YOUR VIK ON

*A sampling of the best games about runes and reavers*



### RUNE 2000

Dark for its time, *Rune* follows the Viking Ragnar as he tries to stop Loki from bringing about Ragnarok.



### FOR HONOR 2017

It takes a few liberties, but few games capture the brutality of Viking combat so well.



### THE BANNER SAGA 2014

This beautiful adventure follows a band of allies as they attempt to flee the world's end.



### THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM 2011

The Nordic culture it depicts captures the Viking spirit in memorable ways.



### JOTUN 2015

The story of a warrior who gets a second chance to earn a place in Valhalla by defeating a race of giants.

Senua learns about all this Viking stuff from an Irish scholar and former Viking slave named Druth, hinting that his tales might have helped shape the vision of hell she travels through. She recalls Druth's lessons as she encounters runestones along the way, which trigger Druth's optional but wonderfully acted narrations of the 'greatest hits' of Viking lore.

Druth stands out because he's a voice that Senua can choose to hear. She can't turn off the constant voices of the women in her head, who mock her, argue with one another, and advise her even to the point of

drowning out Druth's lessons. They're the nags of anxiety, fear, and doubt we all know, but Senua hears them as real voices, a gossipy clique chattering about her life as though it were a new episode of Game of Thrones.

"Can you see that?" they whisper ominously as Senua sails by men impaled on stakes. "They're going to do that to you."

They sound close, a whisper away. As visually stunning as *Hellblade* is, its true triumph is its sound design. Strap on some good headphones, and the voices of the women and a gruff dude who sounds like the Mouth of Sauron swirl around you in 3D binaural audio, warning Senua to 'watch out' when an enemy attacks from behind or telling her when to 'focus'. Focusing is Senua's way of imposing her will on her world, and it's used extensively, not only in combat but in sequences where she has to listen for the precise direction of the chanting of an evasive boss or feel her way through the pitch

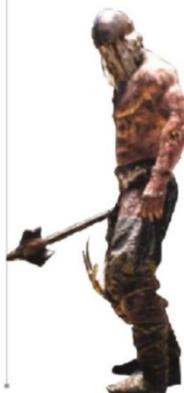
blackness of a lair where frightful blobbing enemies lurk.

## ON THE BEATEN PATH

*Hellblade*, in fact, is just as much about solving puzzles with focus as murdering Nordic hellspawn, with many of them involving finding the shapes of Viking runes in the chance alignment of random objects or standing at the proper spots to dispel illusions. These are my favourite parts of the game, being neither too hard or too easy. Even better, *Hellblade* never lets these elements grow stale. Sometimes, to take an example, it will throw a curveball and make you discover the runes while running from an unbeatable flaming monstrosity that stalks Senua, Balrog-style, through a ruined mead hall. The problem? There's little room for exploration. *Hellblade* isn't exactly a *Final Fantasy XIII*-style corridor, but neither is it far off.

"She needs to remember the way back," the voices say at one point. C'mon, it's not like it's that hard.

Perhaps, of course, they weren't talking about the mini-maze. As Dillon himself tells Senua in happier times, "The hardest battles are fought in the mind, not with the sword." Senua, though, fights both types of battles at once. She fights them to return to the only sense of happiness that she once knew. Other games have focused on such themes as this, for sure, but few, if any, have delivered the truth of that message with such conviction. ■



## PC GAMER

## VERDICT

It could benefit from more exploration, but it's a powerful portrait of the strength of will over personal demons.

78

# MAGIC ACT

Has going free-to-play given **SECRET WORLD LEGENDS** a new lease of life? *By Richard Cobbett*

**A**ll conspiracies are true. Dark days are coming. Also, you just swallowed a magic bee. In an instant, your world is changed forever. Your life now belongs to the cheerfully evil Illuminati, proud and proper Templars, or chaotic Dragon faction. Before you've even had a chance to process that, you find yourself standing between the world and Lovecraftian nightmare. And you're not even getting overtime.

The *Secret World* has always been my favourite MMO that I wish hadn't been an MMO. It a wonderful setting: a convincing world with urban fantasy twists. Everything, from starting out as an Illuminati in a New York district to glancing at the first maps of the major hub of Solomon Island, offers a crazy universe worth exploring.

Along with the fantastic map design, *The Secret World's* writing is a joy. True, the decision to have a silent protagonist is regrettable, but that doesn't matter when facing the likes of party girl Illuminati handler Kirsten Geary, magic school headmaster Montag or Stephen King expy Sam Krieg. And that's to say nothing of some of the amazing missions. While they do include plenty of kill or fetch quests, just as often you're being murdered by spirits, raising an army of the dead and returning to kick seven different supernatural varieties of arse.

Unfortunately, the game's qualities were undermined by its MMO side,

which meant the distraction of other people, padding and combat that can be charitably described as, 'Look, it tried.' A subscription fee and box purchase at the dawn of free-to-play certainly didn't help.

## The game's qualities were undermined by its MMO side

With *Secret World Legends*, Funcom has rebooted the whole thing. It's the same maps and stories, at least for now – more is planned, as per the official roadmap. However, as well as being free-to-play, many of the systems have been overhauled. The original game was built on a myth about horizontal levelling. Now, you have levels, enemies have levels, quests have levels, and even equipment has levels with simplified skill trees for each one.

The result, though, is distinctly mixed. You can play through the campaign for free and not be bothered by any purchases, as long as you don't mind sticking to your starting weapons. If you're an existing *The Secret World* player, they're all unlocked for you. If starting fresh, you've got to unlock one weapon at a

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
The free-to-play reboot of Funcom's urban fantasy MMO, now more geared for casual and solo play.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Nothing

**DEVELOPER**  
Funcom

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Windows 10, i7, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA 980GTX

**MULTIPLAYER**  
MMO

**LINK**  
[www.secretworldlegends.com](http://www.secretworldlegends.com)

time, which costs real-world money or in-game currency.

## BEHIND THE LEGEND

The bad news is that while many of the MMO bits have changed, the changes don't deal with the problem. Skill descriptions have changed, yes, but remain vague and do a terrible job of pointing out what synergises with what and how best to build out a character. The worst of these changes is that instead of enemies dropping upgrades, they now drop basic gear. This gets as tedious as it sounds, especially with the need to later fuse high-level gear together and upgrade two weapons and seven talismans. Sometimes you just want to get a shiny new gun.

The story is mostly as was in *The Secret World*, though with a few changes. You now have to hit specific levels before continuing. Combat is now reticule-based, it's not great, but this is a five-year-old MMO. Key phrase: MMO. Padding and pacing remain an issue. Too many quests having too many stages, and there being some weird new decisions. The end of the first Egypt zone, for instance, takes you right to the entrance to the second map, in what has to be one of the genre's best visual reveals. To go in, though, takes another few hours through what was formerly DLC, killing the pace.

The more that you want to play *Secret World Legends* as an MMO, the more you're likely to chafe at this reboot's restrictions, especially in terms of loot. For more solo or narrative-focused players, however, it's a great second chance to see what it has to offer, as well as *The Secret World's* best chance in years to expand its reach and continue telling its story. ■

## TROUBLE ALERTS

Where the world's ending, at least today



**SOLOMON ISLAND**  
Lovecraftian horrors rising from the deep. Stephen King going, "I bloody told you so!"



**EGYPT**  
The Black Pharaoh Akhenaten rises! Beware of mummies who want to take selfies with you.



**TRANSYLVANIA**  
The vampires and werewolves are just the start. Dracula's missus has returned!



**TOKYO**  
Hell has broken through, along with a slew of interdimensional filth. Beware of tentacles!

## PC GAMER

An MMO that's best played solo or with a friend or two, and ultimately is well worth the time to explore.

## VERDICT

76

Ah. NPCs. It's like playing an MMO, minus the chat window.



In between each match you'll get a slice of story.



The little kickmen are a charming bunch.



This is what my kid's afterschool football looks like.

# OFF!

**BEHOLD THE KICKMEN** fancies itself as a parody, but it misses the target. *By Jon Denton*

**B**ehold the Kickmen is a football game from *Ben There, Dan That* creator Dan Marshall, a man who fully confesses to knowing nothing about – and indeed vehemently disliking – the sport of football. The joke is there for all to see. Unfortunately, that premise is represented entirely by the game's mantra, 'Do A Goal', a phrase that's like nails down a chalkboard for anyone who does actually happen to enjoy football.

This is a kind of hybrid of *Speedball 2* and *Sensible Soccer*, run through the filter of a mild superiority complex. Football as a sport and as an industry is ripe for parody, but *Behold the Kickmen* aims its sights less at the things worth poking fun at, and lays into the sport itself, and its fans.

If the jokes were insightful, then there would be a foundation to work from here. You're asked to name a team and battle your way up the 'Big Boring

Football Spreadsheet' by taking on rival teams one after another and 'doing more goals' than them to 'win the sport'. It's all rather tired.

In between each match, a story plays out involving your star striker and his falling out with a player from Brazil United, which wins the World Cup every year. There are actually glimpses of the flair of *Ben There*,

*Dan That* in the writing here. When *Behold the Kickmen* concentrates on a bit of character and wordplay, it's much more appealing to sit through.

Sadly, things just fall apart on the pitch. *Behold the Kickmen* is a sluggish chaos, where the footballers run around like school kids, but are slowed down into treacle-sludging zombies the second they gain possession. Passing is indicated with a line drawn between two players,

but it's near impossible to guarantee the direction you kick the ball. You can shoot by charging up a pass and use aftertouch with the right stick (a controller is recommended), but most goals come from the ineptitude of the 'goldkeepers' (yes), rather than anything resembling efficient play.

When you do manage to string a few passes together and 'do a goal',

## Most goals come from the ineptitude of the 'goldkeepers'

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A football game parody from a creator who dislikes football.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£2.80

**DEVELOPER**  
Size Five Games

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Windows 10, 8GB RAM, Radeon RX 480

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.bit.ly/Kickmen](http://www.bit.ly/Kickmen)

*Kickmen* has its moments. There's a tackling system that shows promise: charge your slide as you aim for the ball, release tackle, then hit the button again to gain possession, but it just slows the game to a crawl.

### RED CARD

*Behold The Kickmen* is just a bit smug. It can be funny to have a new offside rule which awards a red card to any player stuck in the 'wrong' part of the pitch when a timer runs out, but this comes in place of an actual offside rule. It means there's almost no way of stopping the opposition strikers from hanging out in front of your goal because the AI isn't smart enough to get in the way.

The game barely costs anything, so even if you did fancy jumping in for the gags, it's not a huge investment. Even if the jokes do appeal to your sensibilities, though, I can't possibly recommend a game that's bogged down by such a mind-numbing version of the sport. ■

### PC GAMER

A misguided attempt at a football parody, underpinned by a poor sports game by anyone's standards.

### VERDICT

26



# WIRED2FIRE

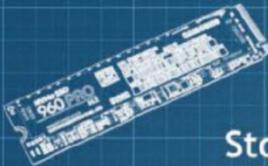
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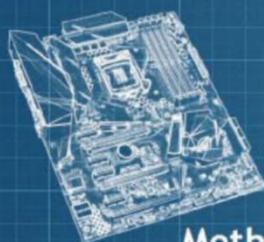
Graphics Card

Model: GTX 1080  
Memory: 8GB GDDR5X  
Memory Speed: 10Gbps  
Clock Speed: 1733MHz



Storage

Model: Samsung 960 Evo  
Type: M.2 PCI-E 3.0  
Total: 512GB  
Speed: 3.2GB/sec Read

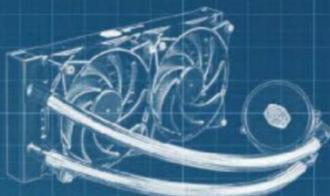


Motherboard

Model: Asus ROG Strix 270E  
Power: 10 Phase  
USB: 8 x USB 2.0 8 x USB 3.1  
Audio: ROG Supreme FX

## DIABLO ELITE

£1750 (inc VAT)



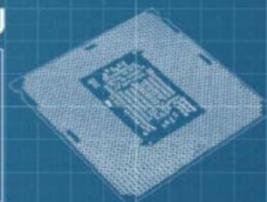
Cooling

Model: MasterLiquid 240  
Air Flow: 66.7 CFM  
Noise: 6-30dBA (Max)  
TIM: Arctic MX-4



## Memory

Model: Corsair DDR4  
Amount: 16GB  
Speed: 2666MHz  
latency: 16-18-18-35



## CPU

Model: Intel Core i7 7700K  
Base Speed: 4.2GHz  
Overclock: up to 4.8GHz  
Cache: 8MB

Diablo Ultima	Diablo Reactor	Diablo Predator	Diablo Xtreme
Intel i3 7300 CPU	Intel i5 7600K CPU	Intel i5 7600L CPU	Intel i7 7800X CPU
GTX 1050 Ti Graphics	GTX 1060 Graphics	GTX 1070 Graphics	GTX 1080 Ti Graphics
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# ABOVE PAR

**THE GOLF CLUB 2** hits harder with more accuracy, but the ball still occasionally ends up in the rough. *By Andy Kelly*

Once upon a time, PC was the home of golf games. *PGA Tour, Links, Jack Nicklaus*, you were spoiled for choice. But then the genre faded away, which made the arrival of the original *Golf Club* back in 2014 so exciting. Golf is back! But while it was a decent simulation with an admirable lack of gimmicks, it was lacking in a few key areas – some of which this sequel has, I'm glad to discover, confidently dealt with.

There's a career mode now, with a bit of a twist. Instead of playing through a prescribed series of tournaments, you can create your own season, choosing which courses to play on, how many rounds there are and so on. The downside is that a career doesn't feel as handcrafted as it could have been, with cinematics and visual flourishes to make you feel like you're playing in something like the Masters or the British Open. This is one area the later *PGA Tour* games excelled in. But I can forgive HB Studios for not having the financial clout of EA to buy the rights to these events.

Tournaments feel livelier – crowds react with cheers, groans, or sharp intakes of breath as you play. This is a small touch, but a big improvement on the lifeless first game. And while the tutorials in the original were relegated to external YouTube videos, here there's a slick, interactive, and easy-to-understand guide to the intricacies of the game, from something as simple as taking a shot,

to techniques like drawing and fading the ball. As a result, the game should be more welcoming to new players.

The lack of a career mode and tutorials were some of the most common complaints about the first game, and it's clear HB Studios has been listening. Elsewhere, though, the core golfing feels very familiar. I advise playing with a controller, because the swinging feels tailored to an analogue stick. Pull it back to

determine how hard you'll hit the ball, then push it forward to swing. The straighter your push, the straighter the ball will go. It's an elegant system, but lacks the precise feedback of a power bar setup.

Tempo is new in *The Golf Club 2*, however. Pull back or push forward too slowly or too quickly and your shot will suffer. Get both just right with a smooth, even swing and your ball will soar with increased accuracy. It's a nice addition to the swing system, bringing an extra layer of depth. Putting is still a nightmare,

## Crowds react with cheers, groans, or sharp intakes of breath

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A golf sim with a course editor.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£30

**DEVELOPER**  
HB Studios

**PUBLISHER**  
Maximum Games

**REVIEWED ON**  
GTX 1070, Intel i7-5820K, 16GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
1-4 players

**LINK**  
[www.thegolfclubgame.com](http://www.thegolfclubgame.com)

though. The learning curve is either steep, or the green is hard to read. I can't figure it out, and I never have more trouble than when I'm trying to sink the ball at the end of a hole.

I'm glad to see (well, hear) the return of commentator John McCarthy, whose encouraging narration is a highlight. He's the only real personality of the game, which otherwise feels quite cold and clinical. It's had a noticeable visual boost, but shadows pixelating and trees popping in during hole flyovers are a few of the visual niggles that stop the thing from feeling polished.

### TEAM PLAYER

As for multiplayer, you can play locally or in a turn-based mode with a ghost ball, which isn't quite the same as playing in real time with a pal. And Societies let you create and join guilds of like-minded golfers. Be warned, though: if you're planning on playing a solo career, you'll need an active internet connection. An option to download courses to play offline would have been nice, but alas, it's online or nothing. This seems like the kind of game that would be good to take on a laptop on a train journey, and it's a shame to limit that.

*The Golf Club 2* improves on just enough from its predecessor to justify its existence, and feels like a much more refined package. Even with all the new bells and whistles, I still like how it's a gimmick-free experience. HB knows, first and foremost, we're here to play golf, and that seems to have remained its focus when making this sequel. With a bit more polish, proper online multiplayer, and a more bespoke, handcrafted feel, this series could become something special. And it's not like there's any competition to worry about. ■

## SWEATER SHOP The game's worst jumpers



**THE KRINGLE**  
A festive jumper to be worn ironically at Christmas.



**THE PARTRIDGE**  
A classic Argyle sweater favoured by local radio DJs.



**THE SOLDIER**  
For the military nut who loves golf as much as war.



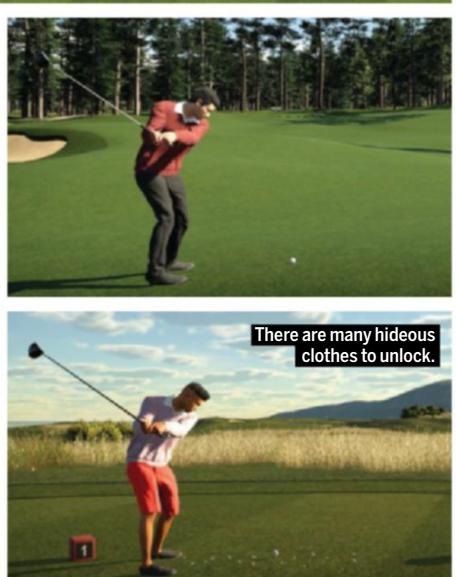
**THE EXTROVERT**  
When you really want to stand out from the crowd.

### PC GAMER

### VERDICT

Deeper and more refined than its predecessor, but there's still room to improve its game.

71



# FIRST DANCE

**Stunning art and a well-written story, but PYRE has an overlong, repetitive campaign.** By Wes Fenlon

I spent a long time staring at my screenshots of *Pyre* before writing about it, because every frame captures a pure fantasy setting so otherworldly I envy the minds able to bring it to such vivid life. I'm also staring at my screenshots of the purgatory-like Downside, the world where *Pyre* takes place, because my opinion of it is as confused as *Pyre*'s own identity. *Pyre* is half-fantasy sport and half-text adventure, it's exquisitely made, yet neither half lives up to its potential.

*Pyre* begins with a spark of hope for a trio of exiles in the Downside, as they find me near death in the desert. Through a series of dialogue choices I define the broad strokes of my history: like them, I'm a woman exiled from the Commonwealth. We soon discover that I'm a Reader, literate in defiance of the Commonwealth's laws, and by reading a magical relic called the Book of Rites, I may be able to guide us out of the Downside.

As in many visual novels, characters address the screen directly as they share their stories with me or ask where we should go next. This starts with the trio of Hedwyn, a gentle and optimistic nomadic wonderer, the imposing and gruff horned demon Jodariel, and dapper mustachioed dog-man Rukey

Greentail, who all invite you into their wagon.

This setup sounds like a fantasy RPG take on *The Oregon Trail*, and that's what I expected at first. Hedwyn tells me life is harsh in the

Downside, so surely our course through its beautiful wastes will matter. But it doesn't: almost every choice of path in *Pyre* is binary and inconsequential. Within the first hour, you've essentially experienced the game's

confines of play. There is dialogue, and then there are the Rites, the strange fantasy combat sport that makes up *Pyre*'s other half.

Unlike *The Oregon Trail* or a more traditional RPG, there is no survival aspect, there are no quests or sidequests, no minigames, no cities to explore and really no exploration, period. Within a few hours I'd seen

## This setup sounds like a fantasy RPG take on *The Oregon Trail*

all of the Downside, but felt like I had actually interacted with none of it.

### SPLIT IDENTITY

*Pyre* is more visual novel than RPG, though you do assemble a party of characters as you progress. Instead of peppering narrative sequences with puzzles, *Pyre* instead switches over to the Rites, a three-on-three competition that's basically wizard basketball. Each team tries to douse the opponent's pyre, which starts with 100 HP and takes damage as a character flings or runs the ball – well, orb – into its flames. There's disappointingly little connective tissue between the two modes. Most times, choosing a destination on the map just results in a minor buff or debuff to one of your party for the next round.

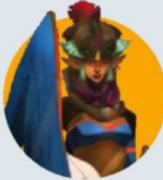
Larger characters, like Jodariel, move slowly but do more damage to the pyre. Rukey can briefly sprint at a much greater top speed, but deals less damage. Each character also has an aura around them that will 'banish' or briefly knock out the enemy if it touches them. This aura disappears while holding the orb, so winning the Rites comes down to how you use those auras offensively and defensively, and how skillfully you can avoid them by jumping or sprinting around enemies.

Building your team for the Rites is where *Pyre* most resembles an actual roleplaying game. Each character in your party comes with unique abilities and a simple skill tree. Most of the races can jump and fire their aura in a straight line, like an energy beam, but there are plenty of exceptions and twists on that basic setup. One of my favourites is the slithering worm knight called Sir Gilman, who's naturally the fastest member of the party. Instead of firing his aura, Gilman can detonate a trail he leaves behind him, banishing any enemies that he has passed in the last few seconds.

Ability upgrades further augment these skills and change how you use

## MEET THE EXILES

*The Downside's exiles are an eclectic bunch*



**PAMITHA THEYN**  
Pyre's most tragic figure, one of the last of a race of harps nearly wiped out in a war. She was exiled for betraying her sister in a misguided attempt to save her life.

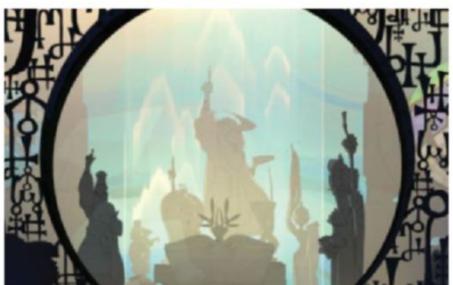
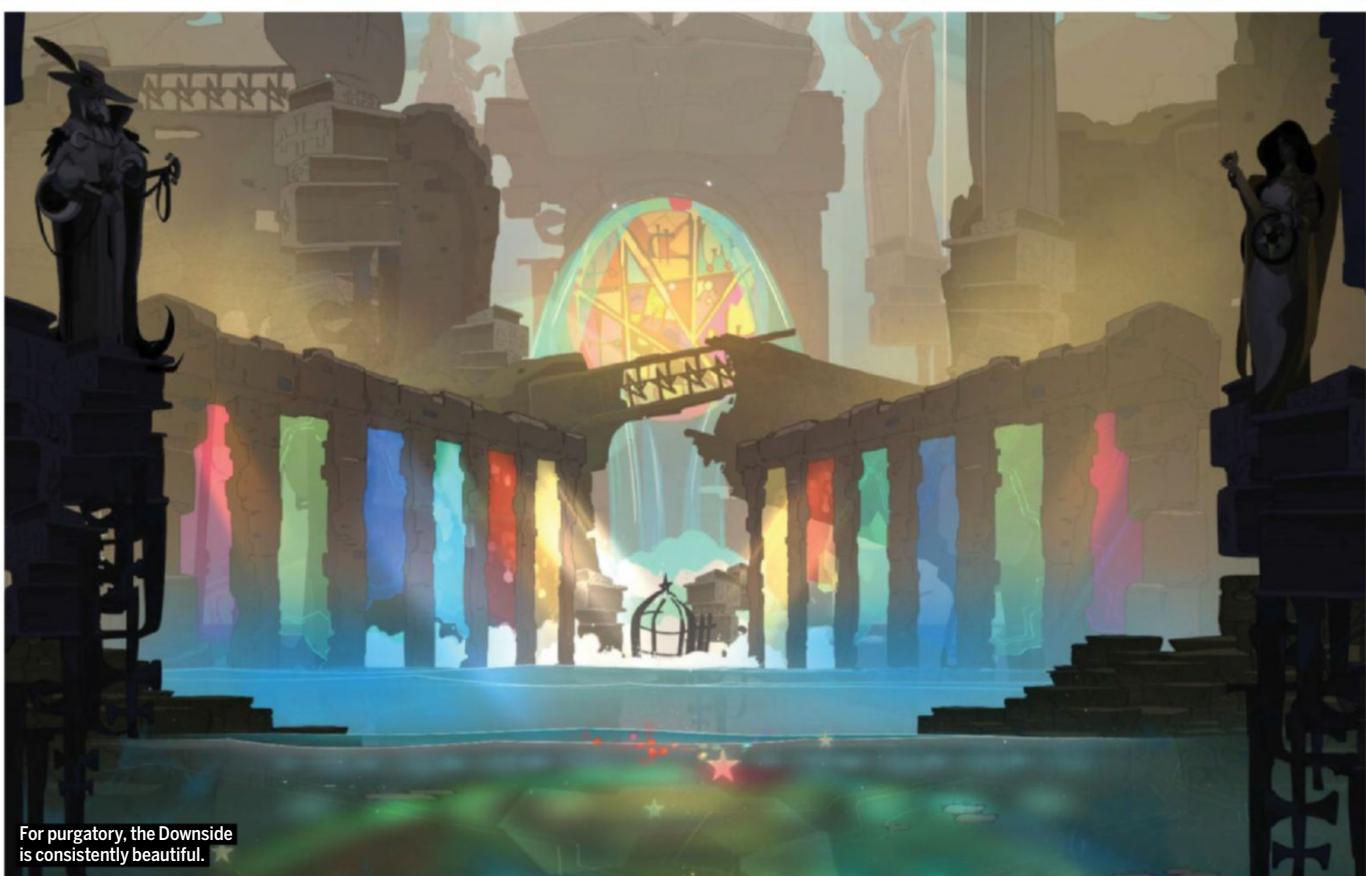
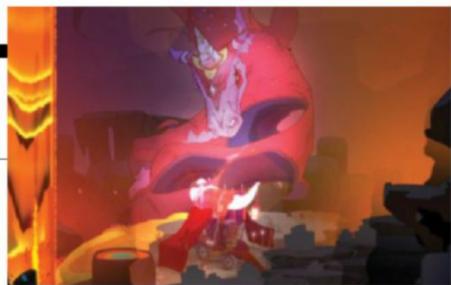


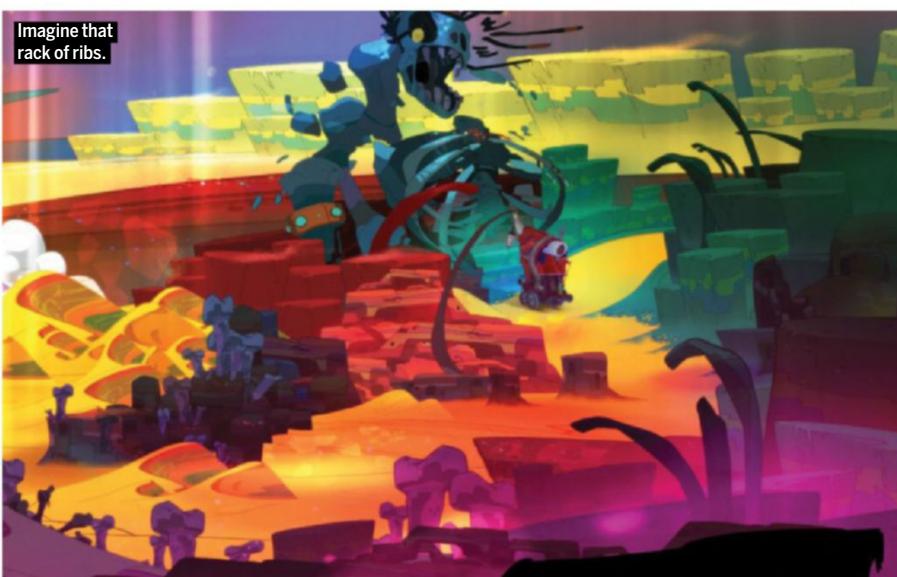
**DALBERT OLDHEART**  
One of your first opponents in the Rites, Dalbert is an elderly cur who only wants to win in the Rites in a bid to earn freedom for his adoptive human son, Almer.



**SIR GILMAN**  
A wyrm knight of the sea and Pyre's silliest character, who refers to himself in third person and is chuffed to prove his honour at any occasion. Not keen on flying.

Gilman isn't a fan of flying things.





them. With the character Pamitha, who flies instead of jumps, I beelined through the skill tree to an ability that enabled her to fly into the enemy's pyre holding the orb without being banished – a big advantage, because normally the character that enters the enemy's pyre has to sit out the next round.

Like in their last game, *Transistor*, Supergiant Games' designers did a great job creating a diverse array of abilities that combine and change in interesting ways over the course of the game. I love the structure and strategy of *Pyre*'s Rites. The problem is that I never found playing them fun enough to justify how much time the game devotes to them.

## RITUAL

After more than 15 hours, I never enjoyed managing my entire party in the Rites. You can only control one character at a time, pressing a key or a controller button to swap between them. There's just enough of a delay here, and often just enough confusion about which I'm switching to, that I rarely made use of more than one at a time. Sometimes I'd position one character in midfield so their aura was an obstacle, or pass the orb back across the map to keep it out of enemy hands. But I never felt like I could switch control quickly enough to embody a defender in a snap and stop a quick enemy from jumping into my pyre.

Rites move with the speed and fluidity of a sports game, and controlling a single character feels tactical and responsive. It's almost akin to *Rocket League*, hurtling towards the goal while dodging, jumping, putting on a burst of speed. But imagine playing a game like *Rocket League* where the rest of your team stands still while you control them. Imagine three-on-three basketball, but two of your players stand under the basket until you bring them to life.

*Pyre* was designed to play this way, of course, so it's not broken, but it never feels right to me. Switching characters isn't immediate enough to allow for full use of a team – and while I'm sure there will be a contingent of high-level *Pyre* players who prove a counterpoint, the game never demands that degree of skill. At the same time, the Rites are too fast to offer the satisfying planning-then-execution of an RPGs or turn-based strategy game.

## CUT FROM THE TEAM *Fantasy sports that didn't quite make it*

*Pyre*'s Rites are a strange sport-like ritual that I've come to call 'wizard basketball'. According to super-secret design documents, these are the alternatives that didn't quite pan out.

### SPICE GIRLS QUIDDITCH

A fearsome combo of brands. What could go wrong? (Turns out the licensing would cost £1,000,000,000.)

### WHITE WALKER MARATHON

Seven years later we're still waiting for one of them to cross the finish line.



### TAROT TEXAS HOLD 'EM

This experiment ended after a full house of Devils full of Deaths just seemed like a really unsettling way to win \$35.

### WAAAGH FOOTBALL

A disaster. The referee's head ended up as the ball and the Orks went back to Blood Bowl.



### RING OF POWER TOSS

No one would toss the damn ring.



### ENT LUMBERJACKING

"It's for the world record!" TreeBob cried, tears of sap streaming down his face, as he sawed TreeBobson in twain.

As I had to do more and more Rites, I grew more and more tired of *Pyre*'s unchanging structure. Click a location on the map, read some dialogue, play wizard soccer, repeat. That may sound reductive – after all, aren't most RPGs simply walking to a new place and fighting battles along the way? – but the lack of true exploration and side activities hurts *Pyre*, as does its linear story. The grind makes an overlong campaign feel even longer.

### FOLLOW THE STARS

The narrative half of *Pyre* is an endless stream of wonderfully written dialogue, imbuing each character with a personality magnified by expressive character portraits. And while there are a few twists along the way, and small stories that develop between characters, the trajectory of *Pyre* at the end is the same as it is at the beginning: you and your companions striving to escape the Downside. It all feels inevitable, which may be thematically appropriate for a game about destiny and mythological traditions, but doesn't make for an engaging story after a dozen hours.

Even as I was bored with the predictable arc of *Pyre*'s story, I admired how much work it took to make my personal version of this tale work. You see, your cast of exiles can one by one escape the Downside, but only if you win certain Rites. As I won, my party shrank, and *Pyre* had

to account for who remained. I was left wondering how differently this tale would play out if I lost those critical Rites, and it's a testament to how much I liked these characters that my heart clenched with stress when their freedom was on the line.

In the end I loved how their stories wrapped up, which made *Pyre* a strange contradiction for me: I preferred the destination to the journey. And as frustrated as I was

with its lack of variety, I was just as in love with its small touches. Instead of a generic 'continue' text prompt, for example, every action in the story gets its own unique bit of writing. 'Seek now your destination', 'journey

onward', 'accept this, for it is done'. I didn't think there was room to innovate the 'continue' button. I was very wrong.

That creativity is what I'll remember about *Pyre* as I look back on it. It's clearly made with great skill and great care, blending art and music and words with more confident style than most games can hope for. But its story and combat never really meld, and neither was quite as fun or varied as I wanted them to be. ■

### PC GAMER

*Pyre*'s campaign is repetitive and its combat never really clicks, but a thoughtful story makes it worth sticking with.

### VERDICT

71



# DEAD COLD

**THE LONG DARK** is a gruelling fight for survival in a snowy Canadian wilderness. *By Andy Kelly*

A mysterious geomagnetic anomaly has plunged the world into darkness and rendered all technology useless, including the plane you were flying over the frozen wilds of Canada. You awaken surrounded by flames and wreckage, and find yourself in a battle to survive in one of the most inhospitable corners of the planet. It's a hell of a place to spend the apocalypse, and death lingers around every corner of this deadly, wintry expanse.

There are two ways to play *The Long Dark*. There's Wintermute, an episodic story mode that follows bush pilot Will Mackenzie as he searches for his missing friend in the wilderness. This is a linear experience with stylish, melancholy cutscenes exploring Mackenzie's past. Then there's Sandbox, which lets you tell your own stories. The only objective here is surviving for as long as possible, and how you do that is left to you.

Wintermute is a good place to start. It begins with a series of tutorials designed to drip-feed the game's systems to you. You'll learn about treating wounds, foraging for plants, building fires and other essential skills. Sometimes you'll meet survivors who need your help, forcing you to complete fetch quests, which grind the story to a halt and feel a little too much like busywork.

But it's in Sandbox mode where *The Long Dark*'s survival knife is sharpest. Having the freedom to explore its large, interconnected regions is more compelling than following a prescribed path. Choosing how you spend each day is more engaging than ticking off objectives. This freedom and unpredictable elements, such as the weather, make every game fertile ground for emergent storytelling.

## MEMORY LANE

Some of my most vivid memories of *The Long Dark* were not created by the developers, but emerged naturally from its systems. I remember the unbearable tension of being on the

edge of starvation, one bullet in my rifle, and a skittish deer in my sights. Cowering in a cave at night, campfire about to burn out, listening to wolves howling outside. Limping half-dead through a blizzard, only to see the

silhouette of a life-saving shelter through the wall of snow.

Wildlife is a nuisance. Wolves will catch your scent and stalk you, and if they attack you'll be left with a number of

serious wounds. Honestly, they're miserable to deal with, spoiling the pensive mood of the game. Surviving the elements is far more interesting to me, and I'm glad there's a difficulty mode in Sandbox that disables animal attacks. But in story mode you have no choice but to deal with them.

## Surviving the elements is far more interesting to me

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A survival game set in the Canadian wilderness.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£27

**DEVELOPER**  
Hinterland Studio

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

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

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.intothelongdark.com](http://www.intothelongdark.com)

The weather is constantly in turmoil, which can change the mood of the game in an instant. One minute it's a crisp, clear day with piercing blue skies. The next a stormfront is rolling in, the wind blowing the falling snow so hard it moves horizontally. Watercolour skies shift from a blanket of looming grey to the dusky pink of early evening, painting the snowfields around you in vivid colours. It's an incredibly atmospheric game, with a gorgeous art style that lends it a peculiar, ethereal beauty.

### ON THE MENU

Like a lot of survival games, everything in *The Long Dark* boils down to managing a series of meters. But thanks to the elegant design of the simulation, and a slick, minimal UI, it's not a game where you feel like you spend half your time buried in menus. The abundance of progress bars is disappointing, however. Many actions, such as breaking a branch down for firewood or cooking food, happen off-screen, illustrated by a slowly filling circle. I would have liked to see my character interacting with the world a little more directly.

There are only a handful of great survival games on PC, and *The Long Dark* is one of them. Wintermute has its moments, and does a decent job of telling you how the game works, but it's when you're creating your own stories in the sandbox that it's at its most absorbing. Beautiful art direction and rich sound design bring the deep forests, frozen lakes, and ragged mountains of Canada to life. And your endless struggle to keep the Grim Reaper at arm's length is enormously rewarding, providing you have the patience to appreciate its slow, measured pace. ■

### HEALTH CHECK

*How to take care of yourself*

**HYPOTHERMIA**  
There are lots of ways to contract this, like walking into the wind and falling through ice. Warm yourself by a fire to combat it.

**FOOD POISONING**  
This will severely weaken you. Cure it with antibiotics or a tea made from Reishi mushrooms.



#### CABIN FEVER

Stay in one place and you'll develop cabin fever, which prevents you from resting until you move somewhere else.

#### BURNS

If you stumble into a campfire you'll be badly burned. Apply a bandage, then use painkillers or brew up some Rosehip tea.

#### SPRAINS

Fall and you'll sprain your ankle, which slows you down. And if you sprain your wrist you're unable to use guns or bows.

### PC GAMER

Deep, brutal, and hauntingly atmospheric, *The Long Dark* is an example of a survival game done right.

85



## REVIEW

Hollow Knight

# DUNGEON CRAWLY

Explore a beautiful dead world in **HOLLOW KNIGHT**. By Tom Marks

I'm in the middle of exploring a lush cavern called the Queen's Garden when the ground gives way beneath my feet. Instead of hitting spikes and resetting back to safety to try again, I just keep falling. If I had found the double jump ability by this point, I could hop up to an exit path and continue exploring in the relative safety of the Garden. But I haven't, so I can't. Instead, I have to fight my way through a spider-filled hell for hours. Hallownest is an unforgiving place.

It's also ridiculously huge. *Hollow Knight* is a 2D action platformer centred on exploring an open map, hunting for secrets and finding abilities that let you reach previously inaccessible areas. What makes it stand out, above all else, is how expansive and detailed the subterranean kingdom of Hallownest is.

The themed areas interlock with a logic that only reveals itself through exploration – everything is built on fading history. *Hollow Knight*'s world is long past its prime. There's nothing but a desolate and dark landscape on the surface and a winding catacomb filled with the stink of death below. You control an emotionless knight, your purpose not entirely clear at the outset, and delve into that land to ward off the evil within.

Fighting is simple: I dance around enemies, trying to slash them with my nail while dodging their attacks. But the hits feel chunky and real, bouncing me back a little every time I

connect. Likewise, when an enemy hits me, I feel it. The game pauses for a split second as a crack flashes over my character before I go flying back. Those hits hurt, even if healing is as simple as finding a safe moment and channelling a resource called Soul to fill myself back up.

*Hollow Knight*'s combat never did much to surprise me over the course of the game. You fight with the same weapon and essentially the same moveset the entire time – while attack patterns, strategies and stats will change, nearly every enemy is defeated with a similar rhythm. Variety instead comes more from navigating the levels and the brilliant charm system. Charms imbue the player with special abilities, but you only have a limited number of 'notches' in which to equip them. They can do simple things, such as improve your attack range, as well as apply more complex modifications, such as giving you a ranged attack

### The sheer amount of stuff to do in *Hollow Knight* is staggering

#### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A hand-drawn explorative adventure in a dark, but adorable, bug-filled world.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£11

**DEVELOPER**  
Team Cherry

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Windows 10, 8GB RAM,  
GeForce GTX 970

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.hollowknight.com](http://www.hollowknight.com)



while at full health. The stronger the effect, the more notches they take.

#### CHARMFUL SUBSTANCE

Beating difficult bosses is often a process of finding a new charm combination to give me an edge. At one point I bested a particularly fast boss by equipping all my charms that did indirect damage – one that emits a poison cloud, another that strikes back when I take damage, and so on. It's not a build that was strong for general use, but it was exactly what I needed against that specific enemy.

The charms come alongside permanent ability unlocks, most of which are movement abilities. There are a few optional combat abilities, such as a sword spin, but I rarely use them due to the long charge-up time they require. Even if *Hollow Knight*'s combat didn't change much as I played, my approach constantly evolved as its movement abilities opened up new options. A double jump makes larger enemies easier to get around, while a wall climb makes fighting flying enemies less stressful. I enjoy how intertwined the platforming and the battling is.

The sheer amount of stuff to do in *Hollow Knight* is staggering. At around the five-hour mark, the map opens up and I started losing track of all the things I could be doing – to the point where I began keeping notes on a custom map of my own. It's a bit overwhelming. The more effort I put into it, the more *Hollow Knight* rewarded me with thrilling challenges and beautiful, storied caverns to discover. I reached 100% completion practically by accident. I just wanted to keep exploring all the mysteries the world had to offer me. I can confidently say *Hollow Knight* is one of the best games I've played. ■

## THE DEEP ROADS

Keep your bearings in Hollow Knight's labyrinth

1 Once discovered, stations let you fast travel between zones.

2 Benches are essential save and recovery points.



3 Stuck? Look for any gaps to see if your new abilities grant you access to new areas.

4 Defeat the ghost of your past self here to reclaim your lost wealth.

#### PC GAMER

#### VERDICT

*Hollow Knight* is a modern classic, with a dense and detailed world that is full of clever secrets to discover.

92

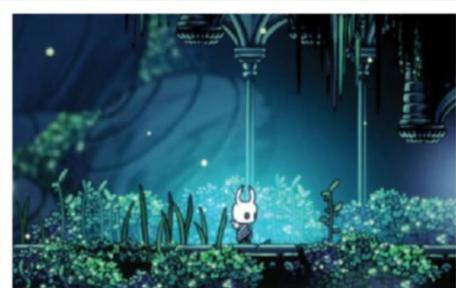
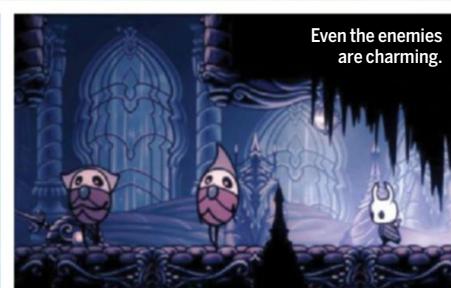
The Knight is cute for  
a deadly warrior.



The world is large  
and complex.



Even the enemies  
are charming.



# DAD INTENTIONS

**DREAM DADDY: A DAD DATING SIMULATOR**  
gives love a dad game. By Hannah Dwan

**D**ating simulators often present an esoteric mix of clichés and quirks, and those that introduce high-concept comedy into the mix tend to do so satirically. *Dream Daddy* could so easily have been that – a parody of the way visual novels tend to simplify relationships down to dialogue options, or a commentary on the usage of queer relationships in the genre. It isn't, though. Beneath the dad jokes, it's a game about kindness and positivity.

You play your own, custom-created dad, who's moving to a new area with his daughter, Amanda. After his partner died, he's been raising Amanda as a single father, and the two have a very close relationship. The cul-de-sac they move to is, conveniently, filled with dads, most of whom are single (the other is in the perpetual relationship state of 'it's complicated').

After introductions, you get to choose dads to go on dates with, which can range from a trivia night with the local English teacher Hugo, to fishing with handyman Brian. The third date is the kicker, as that decides which dad will be your 'Dream Daddy', ending the game. You can rush through, quickly choosing a favourite and heading into bed together, or take your time, playing the field before choosing your match.

For the most part, those dates are wonderful. You might say the wrong things, or have to save a girl who waddled into the penguin enclosure at the aquarium, but it's always a fun time. After each one, you'll come

back to Amanda and relay what happened, usually, followed by, "I love you," and, "I love you too, Pops."

That's what *Dream Daddy* is about – healthy, loving relationships where people are able to speak their mind about emotions, flaws and love. Each dad is complicated and flawed in some way, and you won't 'fix' them but you'll help them in some way. The relationships you make end up improving the lives of everyone

involved, as these dads forge a support network. It sounds corny, but that's the where *Dream Daddy* succeeds. There's an unrelenting kindness running through it, both in your dad's dates and in his relationship with his daughter.

There's an underlying motive given to your dad early on: he just wants the best for his daughter. Much of what he does, he does for her. Above all else, he wants to make sure Amanda is happy. How he goes about that is up to you, but the aim is always to do what's best. That's the same across all of the dads. Most activities have some underlying

## DIAL-A-DADDY Who will be your dream dad?



**CRAIG**  
Your old roommate, now a fitness guru.



**MAT**  
A hipster ex-musician coffee shop owner.



**BRIAN**  
A competitive handyman with a corgi. He likes fishing.



**ROBERT**  
Whiskey-drinking 'bad guy'. He likes knives.



**DAMIEN**  
The friendly neighbourhood Goth, and a hip gardener.



**HUGO**  
Your daughter's English teacher.



**The youth pastor for the nearby church, married.**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A dating simulator, full of dads.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£11

**DEVELOPER**  
Game Grumps

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i5 7400,  
8GB RAM, GeForce  
GTX 1060

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.twitter.com/dreamdaddygame](http://www.twitter.com/dreamdaddygame)

theme of 'We're doing this for our kids,' and the dads love it.

Some of the relationships are messy – one dad is married and has some issues he's bottling up, while another is looking for hookups – but the focus is on communication. In the cases where things went wrong, someone didn't communicate their problems and things got out of hand. Love one another, respect one another, and forge healthy relationships where friends aren't afraid to ask for help, lend a hand, or just say, "I love you." That's the core message of *Dream Daddy*, and it takes precedence over more serious issues. The game unfortunately skirts around the cultural climate of queer politics and only gives brief mentions to the struggles of single parents, the innately queer relationships here aren't even discussed. All the dads are queer in some way, and that's that.

## DAD TO THE BONE

In that respect, *Dream Daddy* falters. As much as the core message of open love between family, friends and partners remains, it avoids the minefield of finding other queer folk in a predominantly heterosexual society. This aspect feels important to *Dream Daddy*'s message, and unfortunately isn't addressed. *Dream Daddy* is kind and nice, with writing that's funny and uplifting, but it neglects the greater issues it alludes to. It doesn't push the boat out in its social commentary.

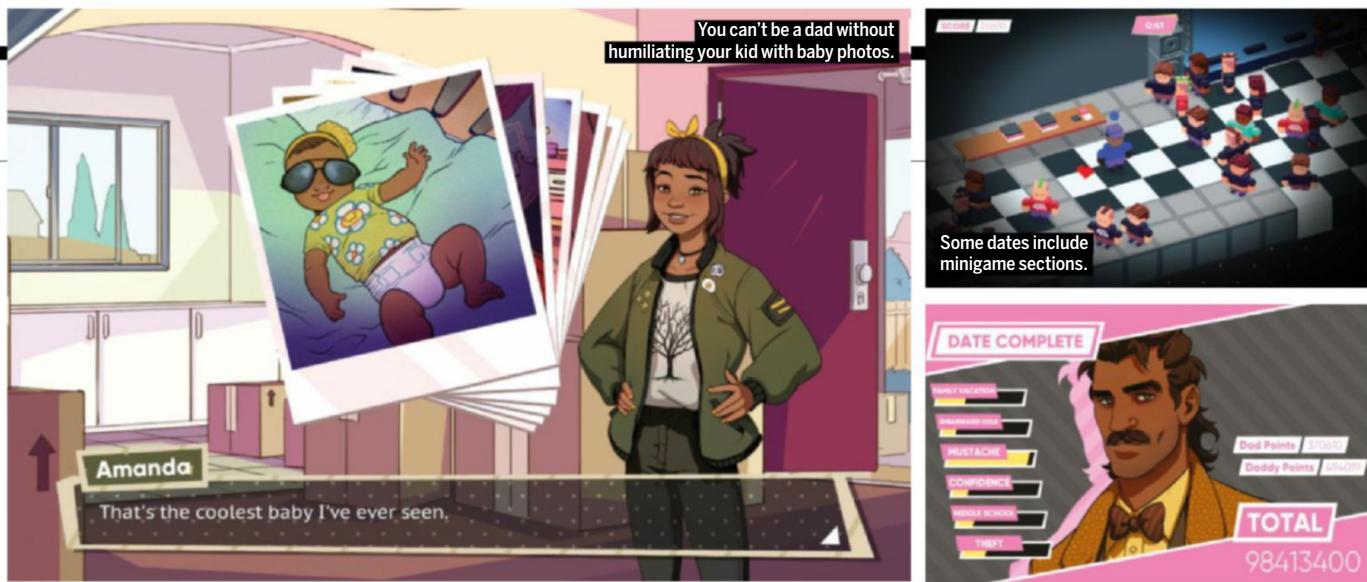
Despite that, what's here is great. The characters are diverse, well designed, and smartly written. I was smiling for pretty much my entire time playing, and it always felt like a positive game. Unfortunately, though, it's ambivalent about the queer culture it sits on. ■

## PC GAMER

## VERDICT

While it succeeds in being a happy, positive experience, *Dream Daddy* just doesn't go far enough.

70



## THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Chris Thursten



# SAGA HOLIDAY

**MOUNT & BLADE: WARBAND** has made people excited about being killed by a sword

A loud and passionate group of people care very much about this low-fi, but ambitious, simulation of life as a freelance medieval swordsperson, which has grown steadily from a rough-but-full-of-dreams paid alpha to a (relatively) polished sandbox with a vast number of mods and expansions to complement it. The release of *Warband* was the point at which *Mount & Blade* started to feel like a full game.

That game involves charting a self-directed path to power and wealth by assembling a cadre of soldiers and trotting across an overworld either currying favour with local lords or taking what you want at lance-point. Battles are fought in first or third-person using a relatively realistic, albeit clunky, combat system.

A spear delivered unto a howling naked man at sufficient trot will slay him; an arrow

### Mount & Blade lets you fight howling naked men on a barren heath

to the face hurts a great deal. People yell and groan a lot as they fight, get bloodier over time, look perpetually lost and cross, and then die. It is this grounded feeling – which makes *Mount & Blade* a sort of medieval *ArmA* – that makes these games so enduring. It has only got more relevant over time, arguably, as the movement of Game of Thrones

towards the heart of culture ensures that thoughts of a good death at the end of a bardiche are never far from the minds of the nations' youth.

This era's games always had very good castles and villages. *Warband* shares a particular atmosphere with certain mid-'00s MMOs, games of starkly polygonal taverns and slab-like gatehouses where gawky merchants, villagers and soldiers mill around under grey

skies. Not realistic or pretty, certainly, but evocative. I imagine that I could show this game to Chaucer, and he would nod and agree that '*itt reallig waes thys shitte*', or something.

*Warband* can also be exciting, I should stress. The number of games that let you crash a big, fast horse into a shield wall is remarkably few, and this is one of them. And despite its

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
All of the Hound's bits in Game of Thrones back to back.

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£15

**DEVELOPER**  
TaleWorlds

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

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

**MULTIPLAYER**  
64+ players

**LINK**  
[www.taleworlds.com](http://www.taleworlds.com)

age it can still successfully evoke something of that experience: if you would like to build your empire by lugging sacks of dyed wool from one village to another then nobody is going to stop you, but boy – it would be a shame to come all this way and not try the murder.

### NAKED AMBITION

Loads of mods and an impending sequel has meant that *Mount & Blade* has never really gone away, but it's worth considering how much its popularity is owed to the scarcity of games with this attitude to medieval life and war. *The Witcher* may place you in the boots of the coolest man in all the land and encourage you to boink everybody, but *Mount & Blade* lets you fight howling naked men on a barren heath with your only friend, a guy in a hat called Marnid, who gets knocked unconscious in the opening seconds of every battle you fight. Somehow this is better, and worse, at the same time. ■

### PC GAMER

Ugly and exciting and janky and deep all at the same time. A compelling simulation of a terrible time to be alive.

### VERDICT

81

# BUCKET LIST

## VISCERA CLEANUP DETAIL gets grimy

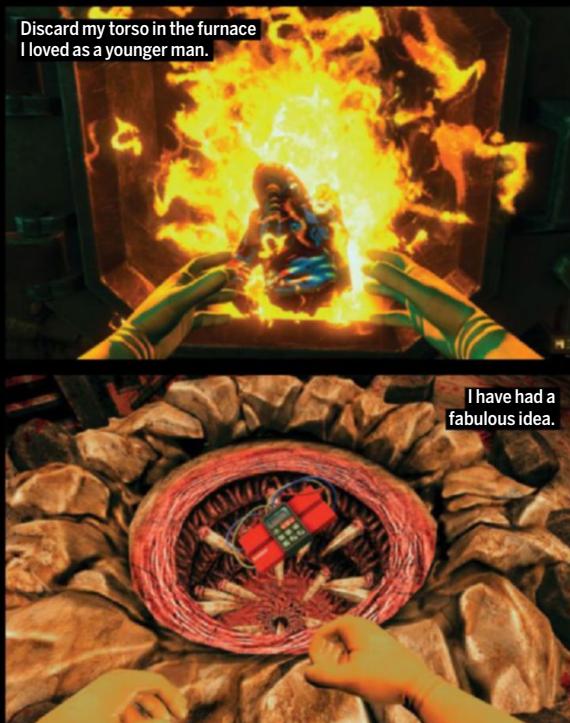
**A**lso bravely going to bat for the idea that games should sometimes be about the crap parts of life is *Viscera Cleanup Detail*. It is not very old, but if I can't stretch the remit of this section to 'games from a couple of years ago that we didn't cover much at the time and maybe in hindsight that was a mistake' then hell, I think we've all got a problem.

In VCD you and your friends are sci-fi janitors that are sent in to tidy up after space marines and aliens have done their bloody business. You have a mop, your own two god-given grabbin' hands, and a little sniffer device that detects grime. Your goal is to appease the sniffer by cleaning every inch of loads of different environments.

*Viscera Cleanup Detail's* soul lies entirely in how easy it is to fail miserably. Mopping a bloody floor

requires that you have a bucket of water on-hand to clean the mop, and a deft physics engine ensures that you will, at some point, knock that bucket over and give yourself a bigger problem. For some reason this is brilliant fun. The physics are even physics-y enough to let players knock things out of each others' hands. The day you send your friend Dan's box of legs flying because you didn't watch where you were going with that torso is a day that you and Dan will remember, let me tell you.

This is complicated by the environments themselves, which range from small and manageable to zero-G accident factories and alien ruins full of janitor-devouring maws and sensitive explosive charges. You probably missed this at the time and if you didn't miss it you might not have played it because it's about cleaning. But you should! ■



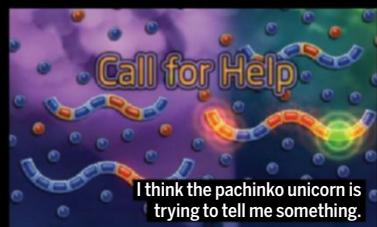
### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
£10

DEVELOPER  
Runestorm

PUBLISHER  
In-house

84



## PEGGLE NIGHTS

The name might conjure thoughts of an illicit *Peggle* nocturne, an after-dark special for the sorts of people who fill glittery Russian ice bars in adverts for vodka. With the flash of a card gilded with the sign of a unicorn, gorgeous people filter into exclusive chambers to conduct the kind of clean, frictionless pachinko orgy that you can only imagine if you're not there. Put these thoughts aside. 'Nights' means that the *Peggle* is conducted against a background that is a darker shade of blue. Even so: this remains one of the defining addictions of the PopCap back catalogue, a game of ball-play that climaxes in the best use of Ode To Joy this side of A Clockwork Orange. ■

75

## FLOTILLA

Turn heads at your next dinner party by waiting for somebody to bring up *FTL* (this will happen) and asking if they've played *Flotilla*. It's a bit like *FTL*, see, but it's older, fewer people have played it, and there are talking animals. You bounce between galactic nodes upgrading your ships and fighting enemy fleets and if you die that's it for you. Combat is nothing like *FTL* at all, mind – it's 3D and all to do with plotting manoeuvres and feels a bit like naval warfare in a fish tank – but don't mention that, we've got an anecdote to usurp. Similarly: this is an oft-overlooked part of the Blendo Games back catalogue, should your unlikely conversation move in that direction. ■

79

## CAPSIZED

I started thinking about *Capsized* again because of *VCD*: they both star spacepeople, and both are – as the kids say – 'well physics-y'. This is a 2D blaster about surviving on an alien world. In addition to a slew of *Quake*-ish guns you've got a grapple and jet pack for hoisting yourself, and enemies are happy to manhandle you in a way that most games don't really do. Fights have a sense of slapstick peril, and this is a well-rounded experience supported by a bunch of arcade modes that unlock as you progress. ■

80



# AWARDS

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# HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

**96**

## GROUP TEST

Every racing aficionado needs a wheel. But which one is the best?

**102**

## REVIEWS

Zak rounds up the latest in tech, including this strange-looking case.



**104**

## BUYER'S GUIDE

Whether it's a new build or a single upgrade, our guide can help.

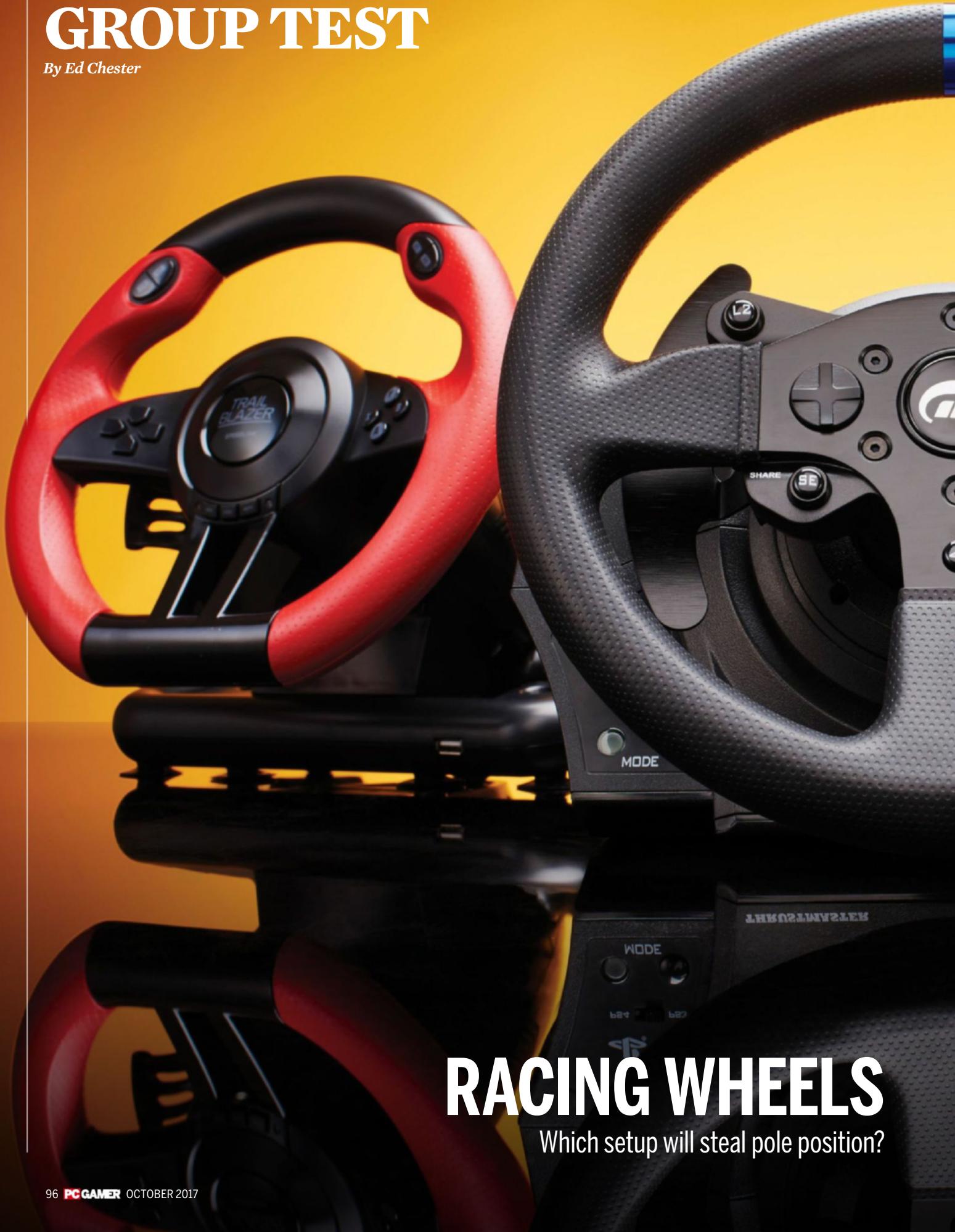
We can't guarantee it'll help your lap times, but we can guarantee you'll look 30% cooler. (No, we can't.)



[ UPGRADE ]

# GROUP TEST

By Ed Chester



## RACING WHEELS

Which setup will steal pole position?

## Q&A

### What is force feedback?

This is where the wheel reacts to what's happening in the game, twisting and turning in your hands, giving you a physical sense of what's happening to the wheels under the car.

### Why should I spend more?

Aside from better build quality and extra features, the key benefit with racing wheels is more powerful force feedback and more accurate response. Basic wheels give you a few clues as to how the car is reacting. The best make you feel like

you're in control of the real thing. Plus, top-end models are more modular.

### Are they easy to set up?

Most wheels will work well enough straight away, however, you may have to map all the controls of a game to the various buttons.



**R**acing games can be great fun when played with just a controller or even a keyboard, but to get the most from them you need a proper racing wheel. We've grabbed seven of the most widely available wheels on the market, ranging from £40 up to £500 (and even higher if you include some of the add-ons we tested them with), and given them a test drive. All are, of course, PC compatible, although some are designed to be used with a PS4, an Xbox One or both.

## Dictionary

**Torque:** The rotational force of the wheel, measured in Newton metres. The higher the torque, the more powerful the feedback.

**Drive system:** Force feedback is provided by a system of motors, belts and gears that combine to provide as smooth and accurate a response as

possible. The most expensive setups offer direct drive feedback but they're a rarity. Pulley systems are preferred to all-gears as the latter can feel notched and less smooth in their feedback.

**Degrees of rotation:** How far the wheel turns. More turns isn't always better, but the cheapest wheels have a very limited range of motion.

**Servo base:** High-end racing peripherals have detachable wheels. What's left behind is the servo base – the bit that does all the hard work.

**Resolution:** The accuracy of each analogue component of a racing peripheral is called resolution. Measured in bits, most wheels are 16-bit. Cheaper pedals may have a low bitrate.

## HARDWARE

### Group Test



1



2



3

## FANATEC CSL ELITE

[www.fanatec.com](http://www.fanatec.com) £460

→ Fanatec is a specialist in this field and that dedication is clear in the quality of its products. The CSL Elite is the more basic of the two servo bases the company offers, but it beats out most of the other wheels here.

1

Its 6Nm of torque is second only to the Thrustmaster TS-PC Racer and nearly double that of the others. It also offers 1080 degrees of rotation and its optical sensor offers the standard 16-bit rotation resolution, making for an incredibly accurate and engaging driving experience.

The servo base can be bought on its own or with one of several wheels. Overall, build quality is very good with plenty of metal used throughout, though if premium build materials are what you're after, you'll want to spend £200 on the ClubSport base and one of the premium wheel options.

Included in the £460 CSL Elite bundle is Fanatec's basic pedal set. They're all-metal, but there's only two pedals. Upgrade it with the £110 loadcell kit and it not only adds a third pedal, but one that's pressure sensitive (rather than position sensitive) and offers graduated response, making it feel far more like a real brake pedal.

Overall, this is a great starting point for a premium racing setup.

90%

## SPEEDLINK DRIFT OZ

[www.speedlink.com](http://www.speedlink.com) £40

→ If you're taking your first foray into racing wheels then you may be looking to spend as little as possible, and at just £40 the Speedlink Drift OZ is just about the cheapest one you can get.

2

Unfortunately, such a low price means crucial features have been omitted. For instance, the base for this wheel has no bolt-mounting points and comes with suckers to grip the surface you're using it on. Meanwhile, the most obvious omission here is force feedback. Instead of the wheel physically fighting back it just offers a rumble effect.

Otherwise, this wheel fares better than you might expect. It has a mass of buttons on the wheel and includes paddle gear shifters. They're all fairly low quality, but they work.

Unfortunately, the real death knell for this wheel is its performance. Its old driver means a lot of faffing around to get it to work, and even when it does, the accuracy is woeful. There's a huge dead zone in the centre of the wheel making it impossible to make small adjustments to your direction.

It's hard to recommend this, even with it being so cheap. However, if you're looking to practice your gear shifting and general driving co-ordination then it's a start.

65%



## SPEEDLINK TRAILBLAZER

[www.speedlink.com](http://www.speedlink.com) £80

→ The reason the Speedlink Drift OZ is so cheap is that it's old and has been replaced by the Trailblazer. However, while twice the price, the Trailblazer brings far less to the table than you might hope.

3

The hardware is essentially identical. There's a change of colour here, a different sticker there but the underlying gear is the same. However, Speedlink has improved the driver for this new model, so it requires less faffing around to set up.

Performance, though, is identical. There's the same dead zone and sense of inaccuracy. As such, if you're after a budget wheel just for practicing the basics of driving, then you might as well get the cheaper Drift OZ.

If you're looking to upgrade, consider the Thrustmaster TMX or T150. I didn't have room to fit these into my test, but I've tried them before and they offer the accuracy and force feedback that you'd hope for from a proper racing wheel. They miss out on the modularity and build quality of better models, but are a better option for only £120.

If you can find it for the same price as the Drift OZ, the Trailblazer is the better budget racing wheel option. For double the price? It's not worth the upgrade.

60%

## LOGITECH G29

[www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) £220

→ Logitech makes just two racing wheels, and both are essentially identical. The G920 and G29 are both PC-compatible but the former is designed to work with the Xbox One, while the G29 is compatible with PS3 and PS4.

4

Aside from this, the only difference between the two is that the G29 also includes an on-wheel gear-shift indicator, which is the reason we'd recommend it over the G920 for PC users.

Otherwise, this wheel offers a great balance of features. You get a proper metal-clad set of three pedals, so there's no need to go upgrading straight away as with some alternatives. And the wheel base feels sturdy and has a built-in mounting system that's by far the quickest and easiest to set up of all the wheels in this test.

With its twin motor, all-gear drive system able to deliver 2.1 Nm of torque, the G29 provides a decent level of force feedback. It lacks the power and smoothness of the best but it's quiet and provides much of the sense of realism you'd hope for. Basically, the G29 has a lot going for it. It offers a lot for its price, plus it has the easiest-to-use software in our test. If you're looking to invest in more of a racing system, though, then its lack of versatility is a limiting factor.

80%



5

## THRUSTMASTER TS-PC RACER

[www.thrustmaster.com](http://www.thrustmaster.com) £500

→ Thrustmaster has just announced the T-GT, a wheel that adds column depth movement as well as rotational movement for an even greater sense of immersion. But with it not yet available, the TS-PC is its current top dog.

5

Oddly, though, unlike the T300/TX and T150/TMX wheels, the servo base isn't sold separately and only comes with an open steering wheel, despite the base offering 1080 degrees of rotation – you don't want to be rotating an open wheel that many times.

Nonetheless, there are a lot of reasons to get this wheel. For a start, build quality is fantastic. From the metal wheel, to the responsive gear shift paddles and suede-covered grips, it oozes quality.

What's more, this thing kicks like a mule. It's the most powerful wheel in this test and the most accurate, too. Both it and the Fanatec feel in a different class, providing the sort of tussle that elevates the feel of using them from being a simulation to driving the real thing.

It's a close call between the CSL Elite and TS-PC as to which is best, but the Thrustmaster maybe just takes the lead for force feedback feel and accuracy. If you can see yourself upgrading further, though, then the CSL Elite has greater potential.

85%

## THRUSTMASTER T300RS GT EDITION

[www.thrustmaster.com](http://www.thrustmaster.com) £270

→ While the likes of Fanatec is aimed at the high end of the market and Speedlink at the low, Thrustmaster is the only brand out there that offers a comprehensive range of racing wheels and other sim-oriented peripherals.

6

It offers several tiers of wheel. The TMX and T150 are entry-level PC options, the TS RC and newly announced T-GT are the top of the range, and the T300 and TX sit in the middle.

The T300 is for PC and PS4, while the TX is for PC and Xbox. And this T300 RS GT Edition adds the three-pedal set, which is a crucial upgrade. The default twin-pedal set is small, all-plastic and tends to topple over and move around, whereas the three-pedal set stays put and works superbly.

As for the wheel and servo base, there are two key upgrades from the T150 to the T300. The first is that the wheel is removable on the T300. The second is that the drive system of the T300 is dual-belt, while the T150 is a hybrid system. This results in a smoother response that in turn makes for a fantastic force feedback feel.

If you're after a quality wheel then the T300RS GT Edition is an ideal option, offering excellent force feedback, build quality and modularity.

85%



6



7

## THRUSTMASTER TX FERRARI 458 ITALIA [www.thrustmaster.com](http://www.thrustmaster.com) £220

→ Thrustmaster's TX range is the Xbox One-compatible sibling to the T300 range. It uses essentially the same servo base – there are just visual differences. However, it's available with a range of different wheels and pedals.

7

This TX 458 version gets you an officially-licensed, three-quarter-size Ferrari wheel, which may sound cool but is actually a touch disappointing. Unlike the wheel on the T300 RS GT Edition, this one is nearly all plastic and really does look it.

That said, it feels great. The shape and contouring of the wheel provides a nice balance between grip styles for different types of driving. The way the buttons have been incorporated so that they match those of the real car is neat, too – the Engine Start/Stop is the d-pad, for instance. The wheel is also removable, so you could step up to something like the official Ferrari F1 wheel add-on.

The pedals are less appealing. Although metal-topped, they're fairly basic. There's just two of them, they don't feel great and the small base is prone to toppling and moving around.

Otherwise, the TX 458 delivers the same great driving experience as the T300 RS GT Edition. It's great, but we'd probably opt for a different wheel and pedal set.

75%

## STACKED UP



## ESSENTIALS

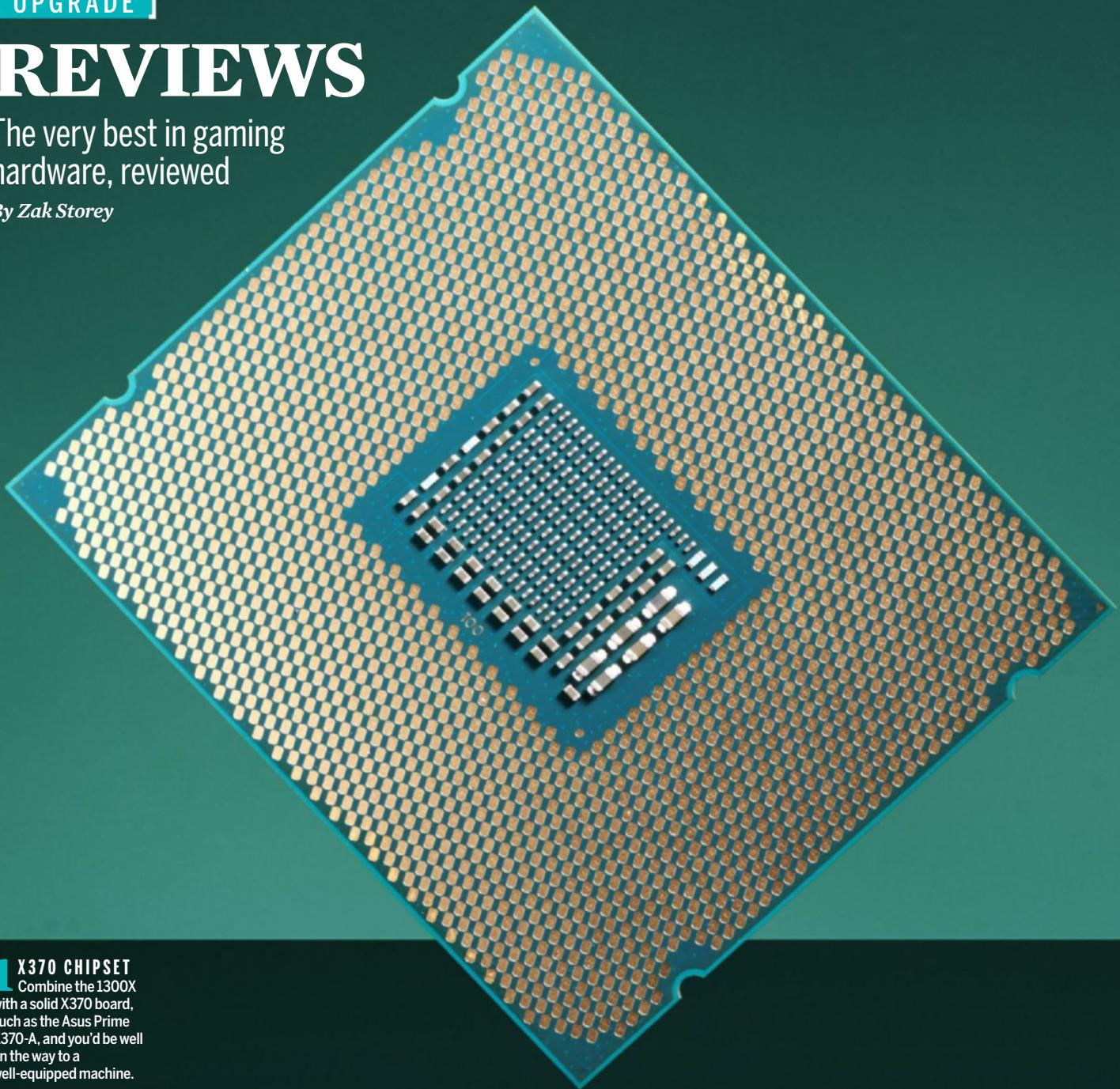
	Drive system	Number of Pedals	Detachable/Swappable wheel	Steering resolution
1	Single gear toothed belt	2	Yes	16-bit
2	N/A	2	No	N/A
3	N/A	2	No	N/A
4	Dual-motor, geared	3	No	16-bit
5	Belt	0	Yes	16-bit
6	Dual-belt	3	Yes	16-bit
7	Dual-belt	2	Yes	16-bit

[ UPGRADE ]

# REVIEWS

The very best in gaming hardware, reviewed

By Zak Storey



## 1 X370 CHIPSET

Combine the 1300X with a solid X370 board, such as the Asus Prime X370-A, and you'd be well on the way to a well-equipped machine.

## 2 SINGLE-CORE PERFORMANCE

Unfortunately, this is still a little bit lax – at least, until AMD refines that core architecture.

## 3 INTEGRATED GRAPHICS?

We're still missing this, and it could be a while until we see Vega GPUs baked into these as well.

## 4 OVERCLOCKING HEADROOM

Like most of Rydens, you can clock this up to around 4 GHz across all the cores, adding an extra 160 points in Cinebench.

## RYZEN 3 1300X

[www.amd.com](http://www.amd.com) £125

CPU

→ Another month, another processor. This time I've got one of the more price-conscious processor parts. Don't be fooled by the naming scheme, this is a fully-fledged four-core, four-thread part, more akin to a Core i5 than anything else, but at half the price.

We're seeing a war occur between the two major processing powerhouses. With AMD's 16-core Threadripper right around the corner and Intel's 18-core Skylake-X to follow suit late October, it's looking like a exciting time to be a CPU enthusiast.

It's the low end that interests me, though, and the 1300X hits the nail right on the head. It's a four-core processor, with 8MB of cache, and 3.7 GHz turbo. It doesn't have the multithreading of the 5 series, but it comes with a decent cooler and uses 65W of power.

In CineBench R15 the 1300X managed 562, with 154 points for single-core performance, putting it in line with a Core i5-4670K. In-game, the 1300X performed well, scoring 70 fps in *Far Cry Primal*.

Ultimately, the Ryzen 3 1300X, is a sound quad-core part. I would've liked to have seen higher clock speeds for better single-core performance, but aside from that, it's a solid chip.

BASE/TURBO CLOCK: 3.5 GHZ / 3.7 GHZ / CORES/THREADS: 4/4 /

LITHOGRAPHY: 14NM / CACHE: 8MB /

MEMORY SUPPORT: 64GB DDR4 @ 2666 MHZ / MAX PCIE LANES: 16

94%



## ASUS TUF X299 MARK 1

[www.asus.com](http://www.asus.com) £285

MOBO

→ It's weird to think that this is one of the most affordable X299 motherboards out there right now. TUF hasn't ever let me down in the past, and, as a brand, it's one of the few I go to without question.

If the brash styling of Asus's ROG Strix line doesn't cut it for you, perhaps TUF's armour-based X299 boards can sway you instead. The integrated PCB/M.2 cooling, memory support and clean RGB lighting makes this a solid choice for anyone looking to build a crisp-looking setup.

91%

I managed to reach an impressive 4.4 GHz on my Core i9-7900X with relative ease. Asus's BIOS is also one of the easier to work with if you're new to overclocking.

CHIPSET/SOCKET: X299 / LGA2066 / FORM FACTOR: ATX /  
MEMORY SUPPORT: 128GB DDR4 @ 4133 MT/S /  
M.2 / U.2 SUPPORT: 2X M.2 /  
SATA SUPPORT: 8X SATA 6GB/S

## CORSAIR VOID PRO WIRELESS

[www.corsair.com](http://www.corsair.com) £100

HEADSET

→ It's been a while since I first took a look at Corsair's Void series of headsets. I've always had a penchant for wireless headsets, and so when Corsair announced a V2 of its Voids, I had to get a pair.

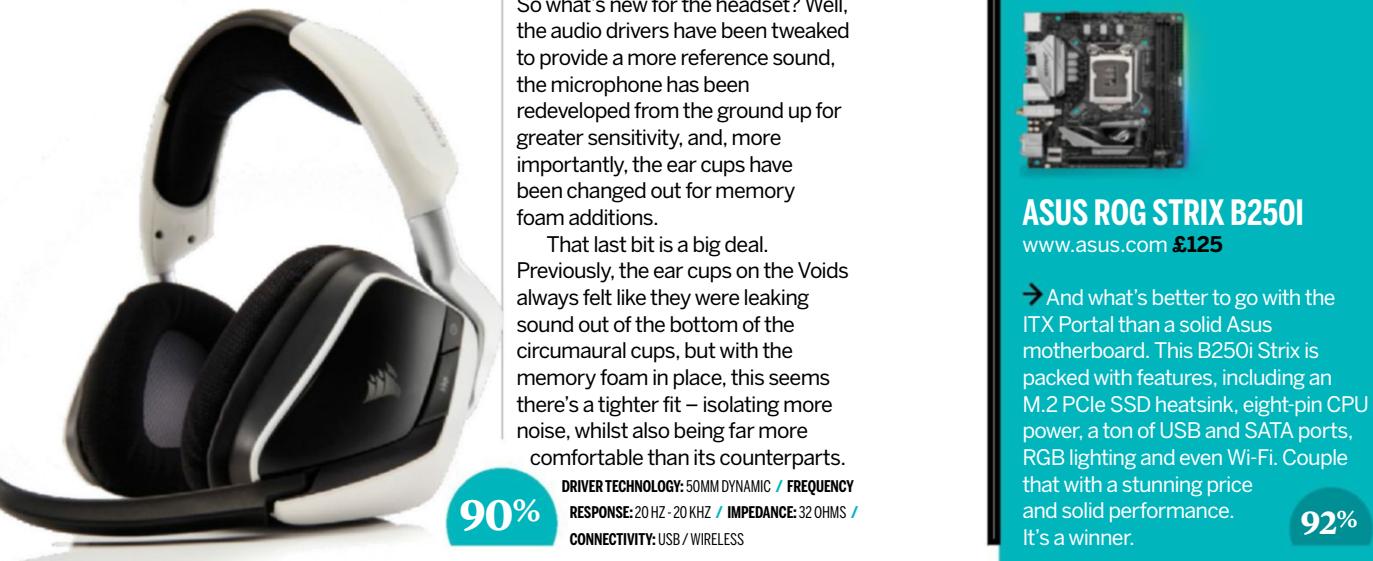


90%

So what's new for the headset? Well, the audio drivers have been tweaked to provide a more reference sound, the microphone has been redeveloped from the ground up for greater sensitivity, and, more importantly, the ear cups have been changed out for memory foam additions.

That last bit is a big deal. Previously, the ear cups on the Voids always felt like they were leaking sound out of the bottom of the circumaural cups, but with the memory foam in place, this seems there's a tighter fit – isolating more noise, whilst also being far more comfortable than its counterparts.

DRIVER TECHNOLOGY: 50MM DYNAMIC / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20Hz - 20kHz / IMPEDANCE: 32 OHMS / CONNECTIVITY: USB / WIRELESS



## ROUND-UP



### ASUS RADEON RX 580 4GB

[www.asus.com](http://www.asus.com) £380

→ The RX 580 might not be anything other than an overclocked RX 480, but that doesn't mean it isn't a good card. Although the price of these is through the roof, once they come back down to that £220 sweet spot (god damn it, cryptocurrency), it'll definitely be the card to get, especially if you game at 1080p.

84%



### BITFENIX PORTAL

[www.bitfenix.com](http://www.bitfenix.com) £120

→ BitFenix has always designed some bonkers cases, whether it's the Prodigy or the Shinobi, it has always been at the forefront of pushing those case design boundaries further. The Portal is no exception. Its crazy cylindrical ITX design is impressive, the materials used exceptional and the cooling acceptable.

88%



### ASUS ROG STRIX B250I

[www.asus.com](http://www.asus.com) £125

→ And what's better to go with the ITX Portal than a solid Asus motherboard. This B250i Strix is packed with features, including an M.2 PCIe SSD heatsink, eight-pin CPU power, a ton of USB and SATA ports, RGB lighting and even Wi-Fi. Couple that with a stunning price and solid performance. It's a winner.

92%

[ YOUR NEXT PC ]

# BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



## KEY

### *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*

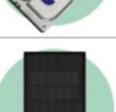
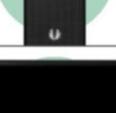
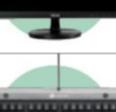
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.



## BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

**TOTAL  
£878**

MOTHERBOARD		<b>H270M Bazooka</b> MSI £84
PROCESSOR		<b>Pentium G4560</b> Intel £60
GRAPHICS CARD		<b>GTX 1060 3GB</b> Gigabyte £240
MEMORY		<b>Fury Black 8GB @2400</b> HyperX £67
POWER SUPPLY		<b>500BQ</b> EVGA £60
SSD		<b>CS1311 120GB SSD</b> PNY £40
HDD		<b>Caviar Blue 1TB 7200rpm</b> Western Digital £44
CASE		<b>Neos</b> Bitfenix £37
DISPLAY		<b>Asus VE247H</b> Asus £110
KEYBOARD		<b>K30</b> Corsair £35
MOUSE		<b>Rival 100</b> SteelSeries £18
HEADSET		<b>HyperX Cloud</b> Kingston £59
CONTROLLER		<b>Xbox 360 Wired Controller</b> Microsoft £24



## MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

**TOTAL  
£1,652**

MOTHERBOARD	<b>X370 SLI Plus</b> MSI £140
PROCESSOR	<b>Ryzen 5 1400</b> AMD £155
GRAPHICS CARD	<b>GTX 1070 FTW Gaming ACX</b> EVGA £470
COOLER	<b>Kraken X31</b> NZXT £53
MEMORY	<b>Fury 16GB (2x8GB) DDR4 - 2666</b> HyperX £140
POWER SUPPLY	<b>RMx 650W</b> Corsair £90
SSD	<b>850 EVO 250GB</b> Samsung £85
HDD	<b>Caviar Blue 1TB 7200RPM</b> Western Digital £44
CASE	<b>Eclipse P400S TG</b> Phanteks £80
DISPLAY	<b>Q2778VQE</b> AOC £205
KEYBOARD	<b>Alloy FPS Cherry MX Blue</b> HyperX £96
MOUSE	<b>Castor</b> Mionix £35
HEADSET	<b>HyperX Cloud</b> Kingston £59



## ADVANCED BUILD

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

**TOTAL  
£3,311**

MOTHERBOARD	<b>Crosshair VI Hero</b> Asus £225
PROCESSOR	<b>Ryzen 7 1700</b> AMD £288
GRAPHICS CARD	<b>GTX 1080 Ti Founder's Edition</b> MSI £700
COOLER	<b>Kraken X62</b> NZXT £145
MEMORY	<b>Vengeance LED 32GB - 2666</b> Corsair £242
POWER SUPPLY	<b>HX750i 80 Plus Platinum</b> Corsair £134
SSD	<b>960 Evo 250GB M.2 PCIe SSD</b> Samsung £119
SSD 2	<b>MX300 1.1TB SSD</b> Crucial £252
CASE	<b>Enthoo Evolv ATX TG</b> Phanteks £153
DISPLAY	<b>AGON AG271QG</b> AOC £560
KEYBOARD	<b>K70 LUX RGB</b> Corsair £153
MOUSE	<b>Rival 700</b> SteelSeries £70
HEADSET	<b>ATH-AG1X</b> Audio-technica £270

# EXTRA+LIFE

## CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

The wasteland is full of evocative scenery.



## “Before the bombs fell, it was once the floor of a vast ocean”

Finding beauty in the wasteland of **MAD MAX**

**A**t first glance the Great White looks like any other post-apocalyptic wasteland. An expanse of barren desert littered with the remains of the old world. But then you realise that, before the bombs fell, it was once the floor of an ocean. You see the rusted carcasses of boats buried in the sand and ragtag settlements built around containers spilled from cargo ships long ago.

What used to be a seawall is now an impenetrable fort with an intimidating, fire-spewing gate blocking access to the Dead Barrens beyond. And your faithful mechanic Chumbucket's temple is a vast, upturned cargo ship. It's a unique

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH  
Wandered the ruins of the old world.

ALSO PLAYED  
*Sniper Elite 4*

take on the world of *Mad Max*, and wonderfully evocative.

Eventually you break through the gate and journey into the Dead Barrens, which was once the coastline of that forgotten ocean. Here you find the ruins of small coastal towns and the fallen turbines of a wind farm – a last attempt to avert the oil crisis that triggered the world's collapse. Head north and you'll reach the Dunes, an area

swallowed up by sand. It's mostly an empty desert roamed by ruthless bandits, then you see something like the tip of a spire poking out of the dunes, giving you an idea of just how deep it is. There's a surprising amount of variety in this wasted land.

As you drive from the Great White through the Dead Barrens and up to the Dunes, a picture forms in your mind of what this landscape would have looked like before the world went to shit. There's a consistency to its design that isn't obvious, but

**IT'S ONE OF THE PRETTIEST, MOST ATMOSPHERIC OPEN WORLDS ON PC**

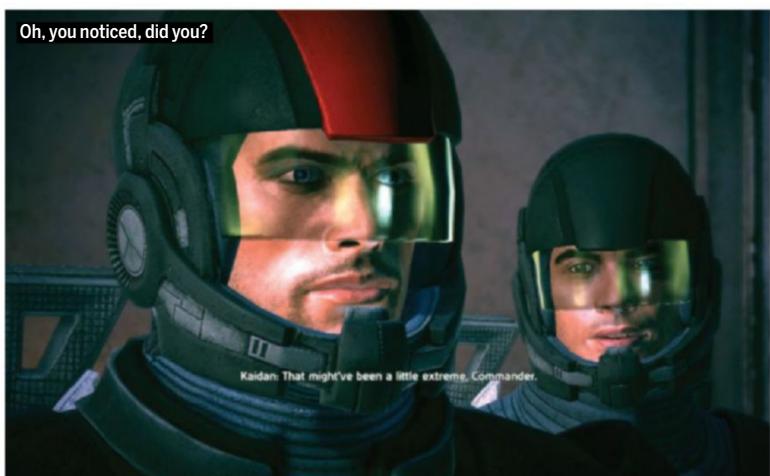


emerges the longer you spend there. It's clear a lot of thought has gone into the map's structure. The developers have thought about where things should be relative to one another, rather than just stuffing it full of cool imagery.

### WHOLE NEW WORLD

It's one of the prettiest, most atmospheric open worlds on PC, and is confident enough to make its own mark on established *Mad Max* lore. There are some references for series fans, like the remains of a war rig in a collapsed tunnel and a battle in a thunderdome, but otherwise it's a new world. And I like how vague it is about where it's set. The right-hand drive cars and Aussie accents suggest we're in Australia. Then you see a sign for Gallup, a city in New Mexico, and clues that this might be somewhere in the former USA.

But *Mad Max* has always been inconsistent. The Road Warrior is a legend of the wasteland, and each film is a story about him told around a campfire with exaggerations and embellishments. A trend the game continues, suggesting developer Avalanche understand the movies beyond its visuals. And that's why it's such a success. It captures the tone, the haunting landscapes, and mythical aspect of the character perfectly. This makes it feel like a legitimate part of the *Mad Max* world, and not just a spinoff made to coincide with the *Fury Road*. ■



# “That might have been a little extreme”

## Pulling no punches in MASS EFFECT

► SAMUEL HORTI



**THIS MONTH**  
Did horrible things and felt great about it.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Metro 2033, Overwatch*

**N**o one is saved,” Dr Manuel says, his eyes wild. “The age of humanity is ended. Soon, only ruin and corpses will remain.” Naturally, there’s only one way Commander Shepard can respond. He lumps the man. A hook to the jaw. Manuel buckles. “Err... that might have been a little extreme, Commander,” Lieutenant Alenko mutters.

I started out this playthrough roleplaying a renegade – a man with a military background who just wanted to get the job done. But it has descended into a farce. Back on the ship, Shepard is mouthing off like a teenager that’s just been grounded, telling the council to “kiss my ass”, shouting at new recruit Ashley for daring to return to the ship and jumping down navigator Pressly’s throat for making polite conversation. I can just imagine the rest of the crew whispering behind my back when I’m in the loo. “Shepard’s really gone off the rails, hasn’t he?”

Things don’t improve when I reach the Citadel. I come across a

hanar – a tentacled alien race renowned for their politeness – arguing with a security officer over his right to preach. “Why can’t that hanar act in an orderly and lawful manner?” the security guard asks. Cue Shepard’s best line in the whole game: “Because it’s a big, stupid jellyfish.” Completely straight-faced, with dollops of malice. Magnificent.

I’m so glad that BioWare went for the extremes in *Mass Effect*. It’s what it should’ve done in *Andromeda*, which aims for shades of grey in its dialogue but ends up with a palette of beige. BioWare forgot that it’s the outrageous choices that are often the most entertaining. It needs only have played the original for a reminder.

### HARD HITTING

I know that some of the decisions ahead are actually going to be uncomfortable. I’m dreading squaring off against Wrex later on. But for now, I’m enjoying the absurd ride.

Later on I’m approached by a reporter. The questions are fairly innocent. “You’ve been given command of an advanced human warship. Is there anything you’d like to say about it?” Shepard’s having none of it. The dialogue wheel pops up. “Time to shut you up,” Shepard takes a step towards her and clobbers her. Live on camera. “Your career is over,” she screams. Shepard stares her down, glassy-eyed, until she walks off. I’m Commander Shepherd, and I’m a massive, massive bastard. ■

Those riot boys are tough to take down.

Place/Remove Marker  
Intel radio



# “I’m unequipped and unprepared, without a cardboard box to my name”

Attempting to improvise in **METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN**

I’ve played almost 80 hours of *Metal Gear Solid V*, and much of it in a specific way. I’m almost entirely silent and non-lethal, with silencers on my various tranquiliser pistols and sniper rifles. I’ve even equipped Quiet with a non-lethal rifle, meaning most outposts are already dozing by the time I arrive. And when stealth does fail, I fall back on sleep grenades, smoke grenades, active decoys and – most effectively of all – running away. It’s a fun way to play, but, outside of boss encounters, I’ve rarely felt the need to switch up my tactics.

This isn’t a story about me actively seeking new ways to play. Instead, it’s *MGSV* that forces my hand, offering special versions of previous missions with specific restrictions. The most interesting of these is the ‘Subsistence’ rule, in which all weapons and items must be procured on-site. I can’t choose what time of day I arrive, nor bring a companion along – not even the horse. I’m unequipped and unprepared, without even a cardboard box to my name.

As I exit the helicopter, the sun is high in the sky. That’s not great when

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH  
Did extensive cardio training.

ALSO PLAYED  
*Grand Theft Auto V*

you’re an unarmed man crouching-walking through a warzone. I approach a small outpost, hoping to find a few weapons before tackling the mission proper. A distant guard spots me immediately. In a panic, and with no other options, I repurpose an old tactic: I run. Not away, but directly towards the guard. He opens fire, and the screen turns red as the bullets connect. I keep running. I’m nearly dead, but I reach the guard in time. Snake slams him to the ground, knocking him unconscious.

That went badly, but I do at least have a weapon now – a basic SVG-76 assault rifle with a handful of bullets. My actual objective is to destroy

**IN A PANIC, AND WITH NO OTHER OPTIONS, I REPURPOSE AN OLD TACTIC: I RUN**

some comms equipment in a nearby base. I decide to plot a path through the mountain, as the high ground should let me scout the area unseen, but my route leads straight into a wolf’s mouth. I quickly dispatch my canine attacker, but the gunfire draws the attention of the base’s guards.

## EXPLOSIVE ACTION

Actually, this is good. The guards are leaving the base to explore the mountain. If I drop down off this cliff, I’ll be clear to complete my mission. Before I can even finish the thought I step on a mine. The explosion doesn’t kill me, but I’m wounded and now the base is on full alert. I dive into a nearby building. Outside, guards in riot gear shout instructions through radios. In the distance, I hear an enemy helicopter.

I prepare for a last stand, but then realise I’ve taken shelter in the outpost’s ad-hoc comms building. Finally, some luck. I shoot the comms station, completing the mission but alerting every nearby guard to my location. Maybe variety and improvisation are overrated. Maybe it’s okay to stick with what you know; what you enjoy. That’s what I tell myself as I dive out of the window and, once again, bravely run away. ■

# “You feel like a dad having a midlife crisis”

Being a one-person biker gang in **GTA ONLINE**

In the slightly directionless world of *GTA Online*, where NPCs ring you with mission requests every five minutes and the map is strewn with task icons that mostly seem like busywork, the best thing you can do is own a piece of Los Santos that feels like yours. Aside from buying apartments or cars, there are several ways to do this – the most appealing (and cheapest) of which is running your own biker gang. I spend just over \$500,000 to get a decent hangout in the middle of Los Santos, money I saved up from doing heists with the PCG team. I christen this new gang ‘Biker Grove’. Ha. I’m a cool guy. I’m also the only one here.

Here’s my dilemma: I don’t want to let any old wanker into my biker gang, and the PC Gamer boys are all offline. So I’m a one-man biker gang – which isn’t really a gang at all. I have a two-storey clubhouse, and a foul-mouthed lady behind the bar who comes with all the biker hideouts. I also have a bong, and a dart board. But these things aren’t fun by yourself. The point of a biker

## SAMUEL ROBERTS



**THIS MONTH**  
Became the lone rider, and not in a cool way.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*The Sexy Brutale, Night in the Woods*

gang is you’re supposed to ride in formation with buddies. When it’s just yourself and a big empty clubhouse, you sort of feel like a dad having a midlife crisis.

In my head, I see it exactly like this. The kids have moved out, and your partner’s joined a silent religious sect because they’ve had enough of your near-constant bullshit. So you sell the house then buy a run-down biker bar, and hire someone to work there who won’t even play darts with you. I paid half a million hard-earned *GTA* dollars to experience this virtually. I could just live this in real life in 20 years’ time.

## THE POINT OF A BIKER GANG IS YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO RIDE IN FORMATION WITH BUDDIES

## LONELY ROAD

The good news is I can still take on jobs that earn easy money. I go and steal a prison bus from a gas station, and drive the convicts across town away from the cops. It’s reminiscent of a singleplayer mission in *GTA: The Lost and Damned*, where protagonist Johnny Klebitz does the same thing. It’s a pretty exciting mission, which ends with you dropping off the cons at a couple of helicopters.

The biker update to *GTA Online* in general feels like a homage to that expansion – although the lack of any narrative direction to owning a biker bar makes it feel a bit uneventful. With friends, though, the co-op missions and driving in formation are fun. It’s not meant to be played solo, really. Having other friends join, then assigning them roles that give them extra abilities in combat, like calling in AI gang members for support, is the real reason you do it. You’re not meant to be a lone ranger, simply because it’s embarrassing.

I get drunk and have a game of darts rather than run another mission. Next time Phil comes online, I’ll force him to join my club, since being his line manager, I can probably do that. ■

BULLSEYE



Oh, neat! And yet, I’m so alone.

If I play darts, this random man turns up to make me feel less sad.



## TOP 10 DOWNLOADS

FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB by Tom Sykes

The wintry Bruma is hardly a departure from Skyrim.



# 1 BEYOND SKYRIM - BRUMA

**MOD** Return to the world of *Oblivion*, 200 years later

**L**ike many people, I have a certain soft spot for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, although the thought of playing through it again brings me out in hives.

There are some great quests, locations, and a terrific sense of freedom, but I don't think I could stomach traipsing through its ugly world, chatting to NPCs played by one of three voice actors, and with faces that resemble cabbages. I'm so glad that modders are bringing the world of Cyrodiil into *Skyrim*, then, from the ambitious *Skyblivion* to the equally daunting *Beyond Skyrim - Cyrodiil*, which has recently released its opening chapter. Unlike *Skyblivion* – which aims to bring the landmass, NPCs and quests of *Oblivion* into the *Skyrim* engine –

*Beyond Skyrim* takes you back to Cyrodiil for some new adventures in a fresh time period. It's set in the time of dragons, around 200 years after all of that business with Patrick Stewart and Sean Bean.

I don't know if you've noticed, but Cyrodiil is rather huge, so the team has sensibly chopped *Beyond Skyrim* into separate chunks. The first, *Bruma*, transports players to the frosty city of, well, Bruma and its surroundings, with a load of new quests, and hours of additional music and voiceovers. The team boasts that it's bigger than the official *Dragonborn* expansion – one-and-a-half times bigger, in fact. If you've ever wondered what's been happening in the world of *Oblivion* since you've been gone, then get downloading.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/BeyondBruma](http://bit.ly/BeyondBruma)

2

## CGA JAM

**FREWARE** Relive the evocative early days of computing

**T**

The CGA jam invited developers to make games using the strictly four-colour palettes of early IBM PCs. That and using chiptune-style soundtracks were the only restrictions, so a wide variety of games were entered into the competition. Be sure to browse your way around itch.io for the rest, but here are some of the best.



**A**

**SCANLINE** You're outrunning a wall of death in this platformer – a wall that covers the screen in lovely scanlines. If only you had the time to appreciate them. [DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/CGAJam1](http://bit.ly/CGAJam1)



**B**

**SABRE** A bulletless shoot-'em-up, *Sabre* gives you a giant sword to dispatch enemies with. If they get too close, you also have a nifty dash move. [DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/CGAJam2](http://bit.ly/CGAJam2)



**C**

**GOLDEN SWORD** Or *Golden Sword of Dragonwalk*, to give it its full name. It's a visual novel based on a book of the same name, full of game overs and, naturally, dragons. [DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/CGAJam3](http://bit.ly/CGAJam3)

# 3 GRADIENT ADDICTION

**FREWARE** Explore a bizarre city in this adventure

**T**he prolific Jake Clover has supplied another strange world to explore in *Gradient Addiction*, a game that plonks you in a striking city where hand-drawn and even hand-written assets collide with low-poly buildings, and where ugly textures smear the tarmac. It's a brilliant mess that transcends its crude aesthetic and glitchy nature through its sheer personality. This is a game that celebrates its amateur status, and that

has no desire whatsoever to look or play like a commercial release.

There are several surprising locations to discover, but the city hub is the most fun to explore. Rather than limiting your jump, as most games would, Clover allows you to jump and jump again, meaning you can effectively fly around at will. It's god mode, and it allows you to poke around in every nook of this odd world.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/GradientAddiction](http://bit.ly/GradientAddiction)



You play as a sort of backpacking robot.

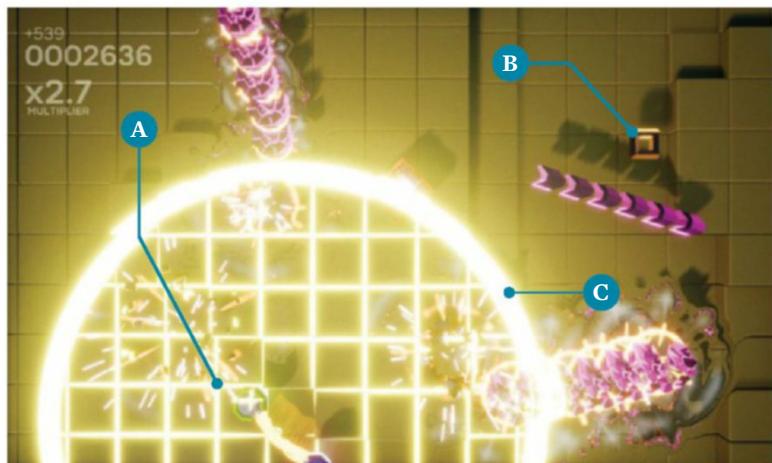
# 4 EVADER

**FREWARE** A shoot-'em-up without power-ups

**T**he more abstract the game, the more attention developers might want to pay to its look, sound and feel. Jam game *Evader* demonstrates an innate understanding of this balance – and while it takes place in an abstract void populated by basic geometric shapes, this endless shoot-'em-up looks, sounds, and feels silky smooth to

control. You're welcomed by a catchy soundtrack, slick menus, and professional-quality lighting as you make your way to the top of the leaderboard. Unlike in most shmusps, you won't be firing any bullets here. Instead, your weapon is a laser that you lug about between two small craft.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/EvaderGame](http://bit.ly/EvaderGame)



**A STICK SHIFT**  
You control these circles, by moving the left and right analogue sticks.

**B WALK THE LINE**  
You may need trace a deadly circle around more powerful enemies.

**C BOOM SERVICE**  
It's a difficult game, but if it gets too much you can always drop a bomb.



# EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE OK

**DEMO** Check out this surreal and hyperactive fanzine

**T**his in-development title has been described by its creator alienmelon as an 'interactive zine', and it has much in common with enthusiastic fanzines, even if it lacks a theme tying every 'page' together. Upon loading the game, you're greeted by a bunch of vaguely connected scenarios, each telling a surreal story supported by animation and the odd flash of full-motion video to keep you on your toes. This exuberant experiment often feels like a parody of the internet, obsessed as it is with social media and the user experience, something that manifests in a particularly hilarious questionnaire.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/EverythingOK](http://bit.ly/EverythingOK)

# 6 GLENMORIL

**MOD** FromSoftware's masterpiece comes to Skyrim

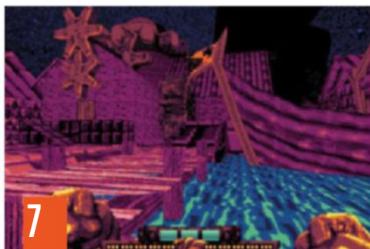


It isn't *Bloodborne* without its monstrous mobs, though.

If you're a *Dark Souls* fan, there's a good chance you've bought, borrowed or stolen a PS4 to play its spiritual sequel *Bloodborne*. However, if you've somehow resisted, you can get a taste of From Software's gothic RPG with the ambitious *Glenmoril* mod for *Skyrim*. It aims to, well, not to turn *Skyrim* into *Bloodborne*, exactly, but to infuse Bethesda's frosty adventure with weapons, clobber, and quests inspired by it. *Bloodborne*'s signature combination of dandy highwaymen, decaying Victoriana, and nightmarish creatures is represented here with some terrifically authentic items that look convincingly like their From-made counterparts. It's a shame that *Skyrim*'s clunky animation and combat is lurking underneath, but you can't have everything.

*Glenmoril* isn't quite finished yet, but there's a ten-quest-long episode to keep you busy while modder Vicn works on the rest. There's also a (sadly unfinished) test map set in a spooky Victorian city presided over by an enormous moon – and if that's not *Bloodborne*, I don't know what is. Setting it up is a little complicated, not least because the mod defaults to Japanese, but an English translation is supplied. If you're after something more developed, check out Vicn's *Vigilant*, which fulfills much the same function, but for *Dark Souls* instead of *Bloodborne*.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/Glenmoril](http://bit.ly/Glenmoril)

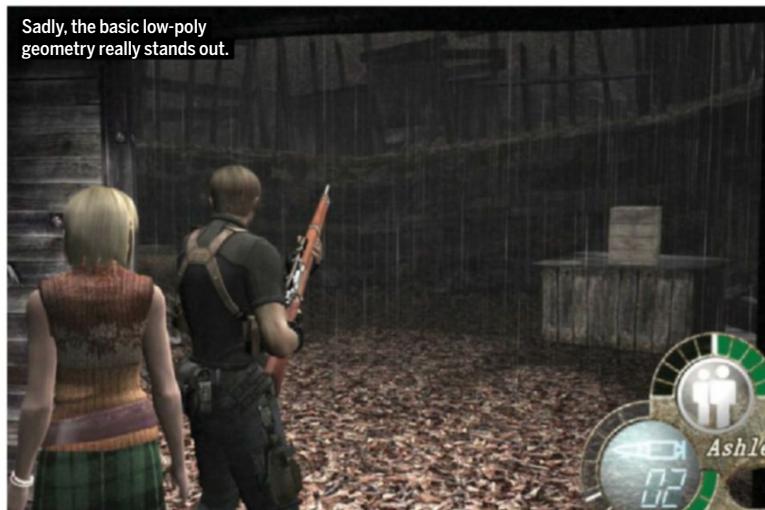


## FIGHT KNIGHT

**DEMO** Punch your way to victory in this amusing dungeon crawler

One way to inject life into something you've played countless times before is to attempt it without any of the powerful items you're showered with throughout the game. *Fight Knight* takes this approach and runs with it, taking the traditional first-person dungeon crawler and stripping out all the equipment that has laden down the genre for the past couple of decades. You fight only with your fists, pummelling enemies via a beefy, real-time combat system seemingly inspired by beat-'em-ups. Amusingly, you also chat with NPCs, and even interact with menus via the art of punching, so committed are you to your duels. Four floors and a couple of bosses await in this meaty demo.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/FightKnight](http://bit.ly/FightKnight)



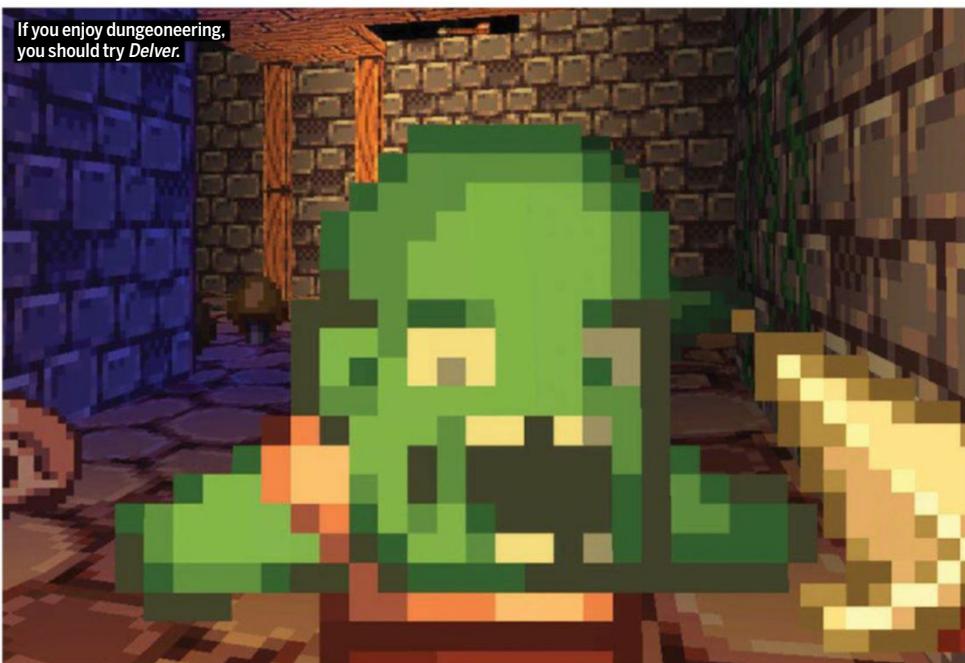
## 8 RESI 4 HD VILLAGE

**MOD** Village of the damned good looking

There's already an 'Ultimate HD Edition' of *Resi 4*, of course, but if you want those textures to be even sharper – gloriously so – you'll want to grab the latest build of this fan-made high definition mod. In addition to offering higher-resolution textures – in many cases, by sourcing the original photographs Capcom used as references, and recreating them in greater detail – the mod also tweaks the

lighting, bringing the game firmly into 2017. After tweaking the Salazar Castle area, the team has just finished work on the opening village environment, which is now so sharp it could slice through bone. It also changes the colour tone, and eliminates much of the haziness as well. If you're planning to pay Salazar a visit later on, note that you'll need to install the *Castle* update as well.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/ResiVillage](http://bit.ly/ResiVillage)



## 9 DELVER MODS

**MODS** The roguelike now has Steam Workshop support

**D**elver's the best roguelike you've probably never heard of: a first-person dungeon dive featuring some fantastic pixel art and music, and with a far more approachable nature than many games in the genre. You begin on the outside of a huge dungeon, chatting to a few fireside NPCs and maybe purchasing a few items, before delving into a procedurally jumbled labyrinth in search of a

magical orb – which, in the grand roguelike tradition, you then have to lug all the way out. While the (Early Access) game hasn't changed a huge amount in the past couple of years, one important recent update saw the addition of a level editor and Steam Workshop support. Some inspired mods have been uploaded to Steam already. You'll want the *Weapon Expansion Pack* if you find the equipment selection lacking, but be sure to check out the following, too.



10

## DEVIL'S FLOWER

**FREWARE** Better the devil you grow

**H**ere's a bold dungeon crawler that doesn't feature any combat, but still offers a satisfying journey through a mysterious dungeon. While you won't be whacking enemies with swords, *Devil's Flower* nonetheless has much in common with the likes of *Eye of the Beholder* or *Lands of Lore*. You'll need to map your surroundings,

## DUNGEON MASTER

Delve into the shop of horrors



**A OVERWORLD TEST**

This mod adds the armour and weapons from *Hyper Light Drifter*, including the light blade and blaster pistol.

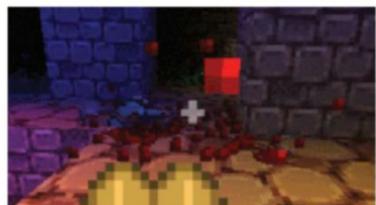
[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DelverMods1](http://bit.ly/DelverMods1)



**B HYPER LIGHT DELVER**

This mod adds the armour and weapons from *Hyper Light Drifter*, including the light blade and blaster pistol.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DelverMods2](http://bit.ly/DelverMods2)



**C GUNS!**

*Delver* is set in a fantasy world, so the missiles are pelted by wooden bows. This mod chuck's in modern weaponry.

[DOWNLOAD AT bit.ly/DelverMods3](http://bit.ly/DelverMods3)



TURNING GAMES  
JOURNALISTS  
INTO SPORTS  
ENTERTAINERS IN

# FIRE PRO WRESTLING WORLD

---

Will the PC Gamer team  
survive the unforgiving  
and elitist world of  
professional wrestling?

*By Matthew Elliot*



**THE RULES**

**1** I can only play as wrestlers that I have created.

**2** Everything has to have a wrestling explanation.

**3** I'm not allowed to max out the stats of my creations.

I'm going to make a new stable in *Fire Pro Wrestling World*. My goal is loftier than simple recreations of famous wrestlers, though. I've set myself an objective of Promethean arrogance: I'm going to create a compelling sports entertainment story using members of the PC Gamer team.

I'm going to limit myself to members of the team I know, because the only thing stranger than meticulously creating a colleague is doing it to someone you've only met once. I'm also going to be realistically unrealistic about stats. PC Gamer might be the most physically imposing team in the games industry, but they're not wrestlers. To represent this, I'm giving them stats that are good, but not great. *Fire Pro* is as much about the quality of the match as it is about who wins and loses, which is handy, because I'm expecting a few failures.

I start with Phil. I could have saved time by downloading Damien Sandow from the Workshop, because he and Phil have the actual same face, but the rules dictate I must make him myself.

This is my first ever creation in a *Fire Pro* game and I strive for perfection. I get the height about right – Phil's a solid six foot three inches, which is wrestler-big anyway – but I exaggerate the weight. I'm struck by how creepy this idea is around the same time I'm checking Facebook to get all the birthdays right. I can't stop now, though, because details are important and I've already been commissioned. Thus, Big Daddy Savage is born.

Making his model is more complicated. The character creator in *Fire Pro Wrestling World* is a lovely paradox – it looks basic, but everything slots together to allow a staggering degree of creativity. I get stuck early on –

there's a blank space where a human ass should be – but I get the hang of it. I subconsciously cast Phil in the image of Decker from a long-forgotten Taito coin-op called *Champion Wrestler*, a game that was almost certainly terrible, then move on to tweaking stats. I decide to give him insanely high defence because fighting Big Daddy Savage should be like punching a multistorey car park, but again, the rules dictate that I'm not allowed to max him out. His finisher is a chokeslam I call 'Savatage'.

**MONSTER FACTORY**

Samuel Roberts is next, and he's relatively easy – I call him Slamuelf (because why wouldn't I?), give him massive arms, then spend 20 minutes trying to find the right face. I give up when I realise there are over 300, and just go back to my first choice. He's a monster: if you say 'suplex'

three times in the mirror at midnight, Slamuelf will appear and drop you on your neck. My favourite creation, however, is Tom Senior. Because his Twitter name is PCGLudo, Tom becomes The Ludodor – the world's only videogame-based lucha libre wrestler, complete with a PC Gamer-themed

colour scheme. You can add another layer of authenticity to his character by producing Tom's surname in the style of Speedy Gonzales (don't do that). I'm tempted to keep going – art editor John Strike has a name that screams 'spin kicks' and Drew Sleep already sounds like a finishing move – but it takes ages to make each one, and I'm keen to get my slam on. The only thing left is a name for my new stable. After discarding some dogshit ideas (The Beta Males, The 4K Horseman, and The Roguealikes), I settle on The Noob Day. Yes, that was honestly the best one.

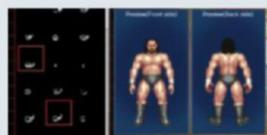
I set up a three-on-three tag match between The Noob Day and a team of NPC wrestlers. I was aiming for a

## THE CHARACTER CREATOR IN FIRE PRO WRESTLING WORLD IS A LOVELY PARADOX



## MONSTER FACTORY

*Fleshmolding perfection in Fire Pro's character creator*



### 1 BEARDS

There are a mad selection of beards. You can filter it to make finding the right fuzz simpler.



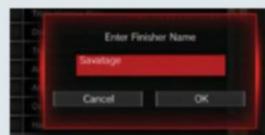
### 2 CLOTHES

Clothes are split into two parts. Getting it wrong leads to a condition known as 'Ghost Ass'.



### 3 PERSONAS

These can be tweaked. There aren't many music options, though. Feeder for Phil it is, then.



### 4 FINISHERS

Naming finishers is a joy. There's also a menu that lets you rename *all* of the moves.

» boisterous tornado match, but I miss the option to change it from a normal tag team bout. It's not bad for a debut, but the chemistry isn't there – that's another way of saying it takes me ages to find the tag button, and that The Ludodor refuses to tag out even though he's getting pulverised. He reaches Big Daddy Savage, who charges in and chokeslams Bobby Bobby (yes, that's really his name) for a muscular win. The match gets 82%. Not bad.

It's then I realise I'm doing *Fire Pro* all wrong. Not the fighting itself – the match was a slobberknocker – but the structure. Why the hell am I using cabbagey default wrestlers when I could download a superstar? The game's only been in Early Access a week and there are already over 150 pages of custom creations featuring every notable wrestler that is, was, or ever will be. I open up the Workshop to find pristine versions of the biggest names in sports entertainment. I think about pitting The Noob Day against Shinsuke Nakamura, Kenny Omega and Kazuchika Okada, but then something changes my mind.

It's Bob Ross. Someone has actually made Bob Ross, and he's perfect. The clothes, the beard, the trademark sunrise of curls. Even the height is correct (a surprising six foot two inches, not including permmed Afro). I decide that pitting The Noob Day against niche wrestlers will only entertain 50% of readers, so I cast my net wider. I scroll past Solid Snake, Chris Redfield and A Bear

(description: 'IT'S A BEAR'), but they're not good enough. No, I need to pick cultural touchstones that every PC Gamer reader will understand and adore. I chose Gabe Newell, Geralt of Rivia (complete with three different clothing options) and, erm... Bob Ross. I was always going to pick Bob. I'm not apologising.

I set up a mighty Battle Royale and pick the teams, forgetting that a Battle Royale, by its very definition, is all-against-all. I decide there's a very good wrestling reason why Samuel, Tom and Phil are enemies now – fast friendships strained to destruction by arguments over the positioning of *Dragon Age II* in the Top 100. Perhaps it doesn't matter. Whatever the cause, as soon as the bell goes they're kicking the hot takes out of each other.

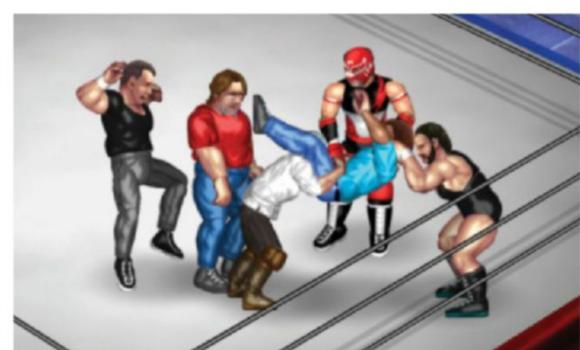
I'm playing as Big Daddy Savage (BDS for short, which is an 'M' away from being a far more sinister gimmick). Phil locks up with Gaben first – two mastodons of the squared circle, smashing into each other like angry ice cream trucks. The match breaks up, and Savage hits a monstrous double powerbomb on Bob Ross, helped by Geralt of Rivia. A high spot early in the match? This is going to be good.

I notice a red stain in the corner of the ring – Gaben has been busted open. He staggers across the ring wearing a crimson mask that matches his shirt. On the other side, Bob Ross has mounted Samuel and is headbutting the devil out of him, blows apparently not softened by Bob's fuzzy hair. The referee checks to see if he submits. Roberts is made of sterner stuff, but the damage is done.

### HAPPY ACCIDENT

The trauma of being brutalised by the man famous for popularising the wet-on-wet oil painting technique has left Samuel physically and mentally wrecked. He stumbles around the centre of the ring like a child lost at a car boot sale, and the canny Geralt sees an opportunity. He wraps Roberts up in a La Magistral cradle, pins his shoulders to the canvas, and we have our first elimination. Sam leaves the ring, disgusted with himself, but maybe, just maybe, relieved to be a safe distance from Bob Ross.

Bob Ross specialises in bringing the pain.





Phil forgets the probably-betrayal of his former colleague, picks up Geralt and hits the Savatage. It's enough to keep Geralt down for three, but the match doesn't let up. Gabe takes a superkick from Tom Senior and Phil capitalises, snapping Newell into a figure four leglock. There is no escape. Perhaps this is revenge for those bankrupting Steam summer sales. Or perhaps Phil was trying to hurt Tom and got confused. Whatever, Gaben taps and we're down to three competitors. Phil, Tom, and softly-spoken submission machine Bob Ross.

But there are no friends here. Tom and Phil go at it, and Bob Ross lurks in the corner, like a panther in double denim, darting in to apply cruel submission holds to anyone unlucky enough to fall. Tom is next. Bob locks him in a modified kabel naria – a type of surfboard stretch with a facelock, which I'll rename to The Happy Little Tree if I ever remember. Phil

could save his former colleague, but this has become more than just a wrestling match; this is war. *Battle war*. The pain of betrayal and actual pain is too much for Tom, who submits, and we're down to the final two.

Big Daddy Savage isn't underestimating Ross. He might be a pacifist with a fondness for waterfalls, but he's dangerous. He locks Phil in yet another horrible submission move, but Savage powers free and takes his chance. He draws a deep breath, grabs Bob Ross and hammers him into the mat with a chokeslam. He falls on top of him and the referee counts. The unholy bloodbath ends. The dance

of slams is over. The lights in the nightclub are on, and Violence and Spectacle are leaving together. Phil has done it. The Noob Day has splintered after just two matches, but a long and illustrious singles career awaits the one they call Big Daddy Savage. ■

## BOB ROSS LURKS IN THE CORNER, LIKE A PANTHER IN DOUBLE DENIM



# DIABLO III NECROMANCER PACK

Lock up your corpses, an old friend has returned. *By Tom Senior*

**T**here aren't many games that let you weaponise a corpse. I'm quite sure that there are no games that let you weaponise corpses with the grotesque invention of *Diablo III*'s Necromancer. He can blow up bodies to kill enemies. He can turn them into corpse-spiders that run towards nearby enemies and then explode. He can bring fresh cadavers back to life in order fight at his side. Nothing rests in peace when he's around.

He's great fun. The classic *Diablo II* class has made the leap to the sequel and he's faster, deadlier and Gothier than ever. You can run around with a posse of skeleton warriors, death mages and flesh golems. If you take damage you can suck the blood out of your enemies to heal up. If enemies get too close, you can repel them with a blood nova. You can curse enemies so that when their health bar hits 15% capacity they instantly die. You can command a flesh golem to fall over and splat into half a dozen corpses, which you can then blow up or resurrect as tiny flesh golems.

## BODYBLOW

This is, of course, horrible. The Necromancer is the hero nobody

### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
27 June

DEVELOPER  
Blizzard

PUBLISHER  
Blizzard

LINK  
[eu.battle.net](http://eu.battle.net)

deserves. The prime evils might have plotted to destroy the world with their demon armies, but when Deckard Cain died they left his remains well alone – at least they have standards. Deploying the Necromancer is like sending Hannibal Lecter to catch a killer, except in this case Lecter's tame: he will just eat a few people. The Necromancer will corpse-explode you and everyone you care about.

The skills are absurdly overpowered at normal difficulties, which gives a Necromancer run this giddy sense of abandon. When you can summon a death mage that can almost one-shot Azmodan there are no rules anymore. When you find a legendary item that lets you double your summons, you have little choice but to laugh maniacally and roll with it, barging into hell with your undead army of stupidly powerful minions. Laugh as you impale demons with bone spikes. Laugh as you suck all the blood out of the Skeleton King (where is he keeping it all?). Laugh as you curse the grim reaper Malthael

to an early demise. Ha ha, in your face, death.

## LIFE SKILLS

The Necromancer's power speeds you through the levelling curve at double pace. You unlock gruesome new skills and rune modifiers every 15 minutes or so. You don't even need to start thinking about health recovery skills until higher difficulty levels, so you are free to build aggressively. He reminds me of the wizard, whose laser beams and starry supercharged form carried him through the game in fast and spectacular fashion. There's something more appealing about the Necromancer's graveyard vibe, though. Scythes and skull pauplrons are cool. Standing back and letting mooks do your dirty work is cool.

Transposing the Necromancer from *Diablo II* to *Diablo III* tells you a lot about how the games differ.



## LAUGH AS YOU SUCK ALL THE BLOOD OUT OF THE SKELETON KING

*Diablo II* is rightly revered for its gritty levelling systems and the sort of build-tinkering numberwang that has you thinking about gem synergies on the bog. *Diablo III* has some of that, but it's a game about watching thousands of things die in gross but satisfying ways. It's like popping bubblewrap. It's an unrepentant appeal to the lizard brain. In *Diablo II* the Necromancer had to raise zombies out of corpses one at a time. In *Diablo III* when you install the summon skill seven of them crawl out of the earth and start hacking foes without you having to ask. No need for admin, get straight to the killing.

Classes are so important to *Diablo III* that the Necromancer pack feels like a decent expansion. Blizzard says it added him to celebrate the game's 20th anniversary, but if it goes well then it presents an exciting model for *Diablo II*'s future. The game has plenty of terrain and enemy types. We don't need more killing fields, but if they're as destructive as the Necromancer more mass murderers – ahem – heroes, are welcome. ■

## KILLER SKILLS

*The Necromancer's most metal abilities*



### COMMAND GOLEM

Raise a golem and let it smash things.



Suck the life out of nearby enemies to regenerate health.

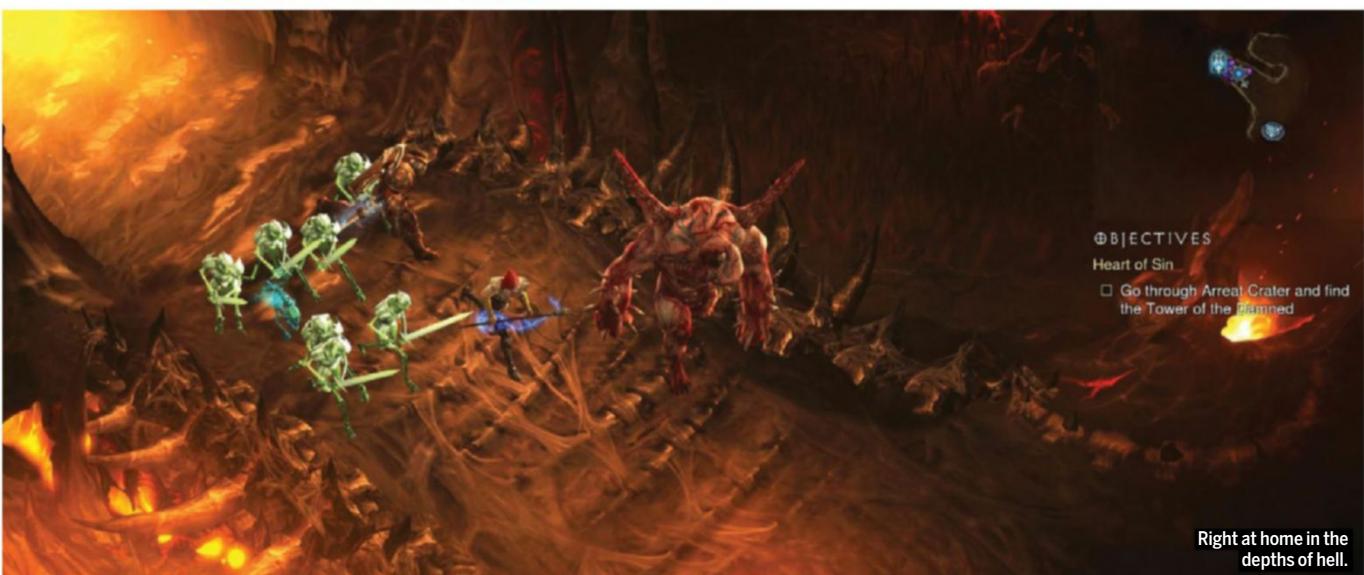


Summon a robed companion to blast enemies to ash.



Eat bodies and poop out health orbs.







REINSTALL

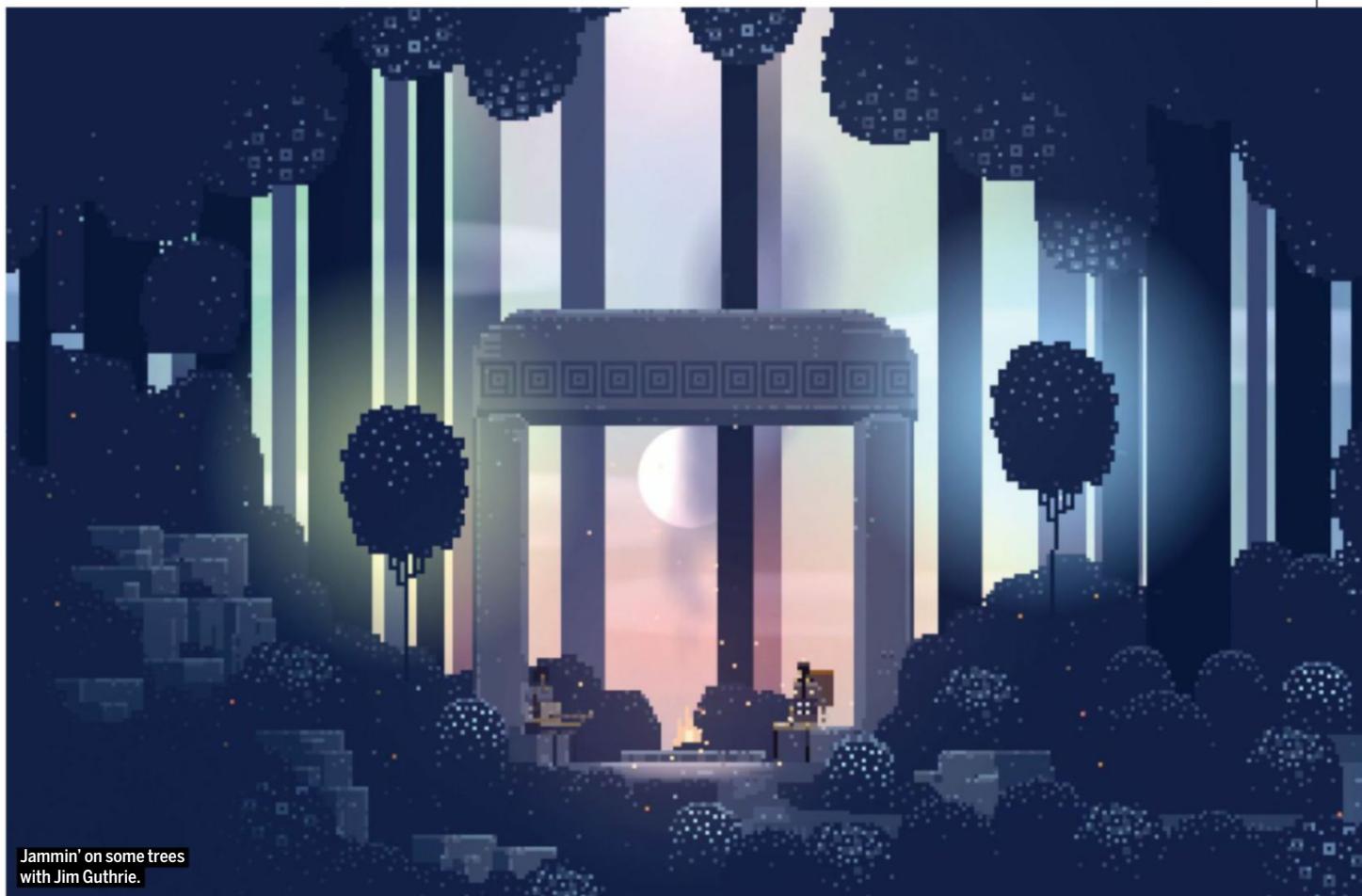
OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



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“It remains an affecting and mysterious success”

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# SUPERBROTHERS: SWORD & SWORCERY EP

A woeful errand through pixels and music. *By Phil Savage*

**S**word & Sworcery EP wants you to lose yourself in its world. At its most effective, it creates an unearthly atmosphere that lodges itself in your subconscious to the point that, years later, you might catch yourself remembering its gloomy landscapes, or haunting music. I've thought about it a lot in the five years since I first played it. On that basis, it remains an affecting and mysterious success.

I'd love nothing more than to praise the mood of what is essentially a collaborative art piece masquerading

as an adventure game – and I'm going to spend plenty of paragraphs doing so. But, replaying it now, I can't help but notice how ill-fitting the game can feel on PC. *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* was originally made for iOS, and it shows.

Instead of clicking, you're instructed to 'tip tap' on the screen. Instead of dragging, you're asked to 'tap and hold'. But it's not just the verbs that feel out of place. Much of *Sword & Sworcery*'s puzzles rely on the tactile connection between the world, its music and your fingers. The pleasure is in playing with the environment, and, while that does come across in its biggest, most

spectacular moments, many of the more subtle interactions feel rote when performed with a cursor.

Many iOS games do carry their spark over to PC, but *Sword & Sworcery* is more experimental, and so some elements are lost in translation. This is, after all, a game that lasts for around three hours, but that will take you a full lunar cycle to play. It's weird and indie – in the truest, most Beck sense of the word.

It opens with the Archetype, a representative of Superbrothers, and the Dante of this world. The Archetype introduces each chapter, breaking the fourth wall to frame the story proper. More generally, the Archetype is a statement of intent with regards to *Sword & Sworcery*'s style and mood. Once briefed on what's to come, you take control of the Scythian – a warrior who has travelled to the Caucasus Mountains to complete her woeful errand.

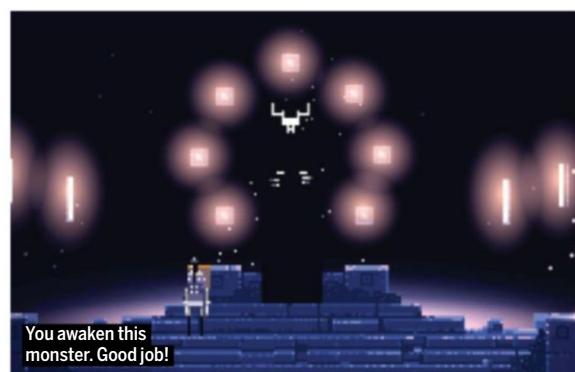
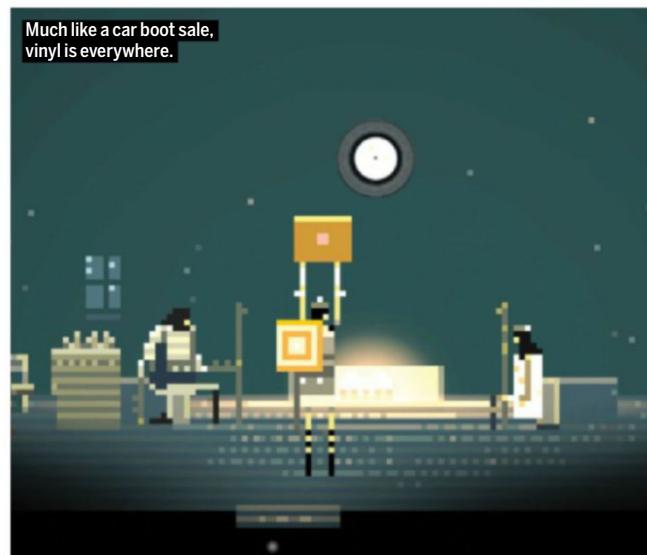
## NEED TO KNOW

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PUBLISHER  
Capybara Games

DEVELOPER  
Superbrothers/Capybara

LINK  
[www.swordandsorcery.com](http://www.swordandsorcery.com)



## I WANNA ROCK

The most notable things about *Sword & Sworcery* are how it looks, how it feels and how it sounds, and later, as the woeful errand approaches its conclusion, how these elements intertwine to create something arresting. The environments are simultaneously detailed and sparse – strange, eerie and beautiful, and reminiscent of '80s Amiga platformer *Another World*. This is no coincidence. Back in 2010, a year before *Sword & Sworcery*'s iOS release, Superbrothers' sole member, Craig Adams, wrote a manifesto for the site Boing, Boing.

Called Less Talk, More Rock, the manifesto is, in part, a statement of intent with regards to what *Sword & Sworcery* would be. Its 'hall of fame' is a list of games that adhere to Adams's philosophy, and so likely influenced *Sword & Sworcery* in some way. It's a varied selection, containing everything from *Another World* and *Demon's Souls*, to *Rez* and *Motorstorm: Pacific Rift*.

The 'Less Talk' refers in part to the creative process. "Maybe you get lost in all that talk – all that intellectualising, all that 'what if?'."

Adams writes, "all those numbers and sales projections or what-have-you, all that self-doubt – and you lose your way." But 'Less Talk' also applies to the writing within games. Adams goes on to praise *Zelda*'s sparse, dialogue – such as the iconic: "It's dangerous to go alone. Take this."

"When there's just a little bit of talk like this it has a peculiar, haunting, poetic effect," he writes. "It tickles the intellect just enough for it to stir, but not enough to irritate it."

This philosophy is found throughout *Sword & Sworcery*. Every segment of dialogue comes in at under 140 characters. As the Archetype explains, "Our research indicates that social support networks will play a significant positive role in the outcome of *Sword & Sworcery EP*." I disagree. The game's social integration made slightly more sense in 2012, before Twitter was a garbage fire of hot takes, but even then not a lot.

## WOEFUL FRIENDS

Your new companions, and the weird shit they say



**THE SCYTHIAN**  
Says: "We were tempted to maybe just stop with the whole woeful errand but there's something attractive about martyrdom."



**LOGFELLA**  
Says: "In my experience, there are times when owls are not what they seem and at other times they're just plain old owls."



**GIRL**  
Says: "If I'm being honest the sylvan sprites totally freak me out. I mean... what are they? Where are they from?"



**THE ARCHETYPE**  
Says: "Are you feeling that vibe? It is a time of miracles! Sing a Song of Sworcery and look up to the looming angry birds."



**DOGFELLA**  
Says: "Sometimes I grow weary of barking all the time but a dog's gotta do what a dog's gotta do what a dog's gotta do."



The landscapes are pretty (and pretty weird).

## JIM GUTHRIE'S SOUNDTRACK IS THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE GAME

The Scythian is part mythological warrior, part beatnik. "To the mountain folk of The Caucasus he was known as 'Logfella' and he seemed cool," she says of one of the game's few main characters. "Logfella knew all about our woeful errand and he agreed to lead us up the old road. Still we definitely got the feeling that he wasn't super jazzed about this." The Scythian's colloquial musings fit well within *Sword & Sworcery*'s whole ethos, reinforcing its tone and thus strengthening its best moments.

The true hero of *Sword & Sworcery* is its music. Jim Guthrie's folksy electro soundtrack is the heart and soul of the game, providing depth and texture to the world. It makes itself known early on, as the Scythian, Logfella and Dogfella (a dog) journey to the mountain Mingi Taw backed by the wonderful song *Lone Wolf*. Later, while exploring the forest peoples' dream world, the Scythian

meets Guthrie, and is invited to sit as he plays a tune on his guitar. The Scythian, versed in the musical magic of Sworcery, can join in, using the trees as instruments to jam along. It's a beautiful, contemplative moment.

The bulk of *Sword & Sworcery*'s puzzles involve looking around the screen, clicking on bits of scenery to summon a sylvan sprite. Collect enough, and you can trigger a time of miracles – summoning a triangular piece of the *Zelda*-like 'Trigon'. You'll click on some owls. You'll click on some sheep. You'll strum a waterfall like it was guitar strings. This is *Sword & Sworcery* at its weakest, at least on PC. These interactions are playful, but rarely feel engaging. The soundscape maintains a specific mood, though, even when you're trying to work out the correct order in which to click on some trees.

### MOON WALK

Around these more mindless sections, though, *Sword & Sworcery* is fun to interact with. Its battle system works well. It's simple – you click on the sword or shield at the correct moment – but the fights have a rhythm action quality, and enemies

will telegraph their attacks with driving beats against their shields. It sounds great. Particularly good are the battles to tame the pieces of the Trigon. These are protracted, multistage boss fights, set to a dark and pulsing song. It makes the mythology of the world feel wild and unsettlingly anachronistic.

One of *Sword & Sworcery*'s most experimental tricks is how it uses the phases of the moon. As the Archetype reveals, "This session typically requires a lunar month to complete." That's because the dark and light Trigon will only appear on dates when there's a new or full moon. This is another element that feels a bit out of place when played on PC – a device that you can't carry on you at all times. Still, I like the commitment to the concept. And if you can't be bothered to wait, you can fight a naked boar guy for the key to a secret room that lets you control the moon.

*Sword & Sworcery* isn't one of the great PC indie games. But it is a great indie game that's on PC. Many iOS ports feel more suited to desktop, but, even despite its problems, *Sword & Sworcery* remains a memorable and enchanting experience. ■



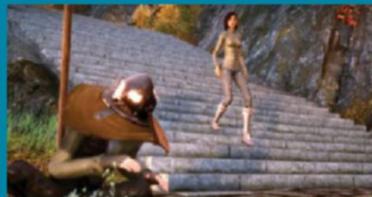
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

# COLE FROM DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

A peek inside your own mind.

By Hazel Monforton



LEFT: Cole can be found in odd places in Skyhold, but is usually in the attic of the Herald's Rest.



**W**hen Cole arrives at Haven to warn you about the Red Templars marching your way, he yells "I can't come in unless you open!"

He's talking to the door. And he talks to his shoelaces, and Sera's bow, and the face cards during the game of Wicked Grace you play with your companions. Because in the Fade – the realm of spirits and demons that parallels Thedas in the *Dragon Age* series – these inanimate objects would speak. Or, at least, they would tell him things.

Spirits are reflections of a feeling, not born into a physical form – and in the Fade, Cole's true name is Compassion. It's why Cole can hear the tree from which Sera's bow was carved, and the lovers who kissed beneath its boughs. Because in the Fade, they're connected, and the divisions he experiences as a human – physical, social, and emotional – are incomprehensible to him.

Cole is one of the potential companions for your Inquisitor in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. While *Dragon Age II* gave us an example of a spirit's existence with Justice and his possession of the mage Anders, Cole is a fully independent spirit. His origin, more fully described in the tie-in novel *Dragon Age: Asunder*, explains that he isn't possessing a human body, but has instead managed to manifest a physical form. While it's slyly hinted that this isn't the first time it's happened in Thedas, it's strange enough to make Cole a unique companion in the Inquisition.

While his thought patterns and turns of phrase are at once poetic and inelegant ("Cole, the wooden duck I found on my bed... was that you?"/ "No, I am not a wooden duck;"), from breathlessly describing another

## HELPING HAND

*Skyhold's is alive with reports of strangeness caused by a young man*



### TURNIPS

A servant finds turnips in a fireplace. Then a man mentions a soldier passing peacefully. The soldier's last thoughts, thanks to Cole, were of the turnip stew he ate as a child.



### PLUMS

A woman will mention finding plums, which are attracting flies. Later, you hear someone say that cobwebs are good wound dressings. The flies were meant to attract the spiders.



### CHEESE

Cheese and mint go missing. The maids say the cook hasn't yelled at them. The cheese brought mice, which brought cats, which act silly because of the mint, delighting the cook.



### DAGGERS

A soldier will talk about finding a barrel full of missing daggers. Later a woman will mention being unable to find her dagger when she nearly pulled it on someone in a drunken fight.



### BREAD

A servant will mention bread going missing. Then, a patient will talk about seeing the birds on the rooftops. Turns out they had vowed to keep holding on to life if the birds stayed in Skyhold.

companion's emotions in alliterative whispers to struggling to comprehend a knock-knock joke, his fumbles through the physical world are both endearing and relatable. He doesn't understand that Orlesians are wearing masks because, internally, the masks are their own faces. He didn't think Cullen's armor could come off because Cullen, traumatised and under enormous pressure, never drops his emotional guard. And while Cassandra corrects Cole when he calls her grandmother's locket "Anthony's", Cole understands that the small portrait of her dead brother has more emotional resonance to her than a grandmother she never knew. Cole becomes a medium for characters' emotions, helping them through their difficulties.

### HUMAN OR SPIRIT?

But while he understands other peoples' struggles, he has trouble finding and articulating his own. His personal quest comes down to a decision to determine his future as a spirit and a human; Cole confronts the man who murdered him (it's complicated), and can either understand, forgive, and forget the hurt that caused him, or accept his own emotions. In other words, he can return to being a spirit, shedding his attachments, memories, and pain and living as Compassion, or he can choose to become more human by accepting his own emotions.

It's a pivotal moment, not just to Cole's storyline, but to understanding

how struggle and pain make us real. While he lives for others, Cole's compassion does not have to come at the expense of his own emotional wellbeing. He can continue being a reflection of others' feelings, or learn how to grow himself. It's through this choice that we can see how a part of our humanity is a vulnerability to emotional and physical pain, and how asking for help is just as important as giving it freely.

As with all *Dragon Age* companions, Cole exists as an entry point for the us to understand some

## HIS FUMBLES THROUGH THE PHYSICAL WORLD ARE BOTH ENDEARING AND RELATABLE

critical aspect of the world of Thedas. While the Fade, spirits, and demons are explored in the series, Cole is the first spirit we can befriend. His manner might bewilder those around him – us included – but his story arc sheds light on both the Fade's inner workings as well as the ways we, as humans, process our emotions. But ultimately, he makes us rethink things that are taken for granted. Speech, memory and compassion, even making someone else happy – Cole approaches each with a level of clarity that we might find confusing, at first. But as with any companion in *Dragon Age*, we're richer for learning from his differences. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

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18 November 2014

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OUR REVIEW  
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LINK  
[www.dragonage.com](http://www.dragonage.com)



**RIGHT:** Cole helps people with their pain, but how he does it can be influenced by you.



**JOE  
DONNELLY**

Spanning 26 years, the following games are not only my favourites but also a measure of my age.

**THE EVIL WITHIN**[theevilwithin2.bethesda.net](http://theevilwithin2.bethesda.net)

→ After playing *The Evil Within* at launch I came away underwhelmed. But after watching the sequel's reveal trailer at E3, I decided to give the original another go. I'm loving it and, better yet, I'm not sure why. Nothing has changed, but I've suddenly (re)discovered one of my favourite horror games.

**PLAYERUNKNOWN'S  
BATTLEGROUNDS**[www.playbattlegrounds.com](http://www.playbattlegrounds.com)

→ I recently interviewed Terry Crews for PCGamer.com and learned that the Hollywood actor's favourite game at the moment is *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*. I'm not sure if I'm quite as invested in the battle royale murder simulator as him, however I am really, really enjoying it.

**LITTLE NIGHTMARES**[www.little-nightmares.com](http://www.little-nightmares.com)

→ When it comes to horror platformers, *Inside* and *Limbo* top the genre. *Little Nightmares* lacks the same depth from a puzzling and pacing perspective, however what it lacks in those departments it more than makes up for in scares. Featuring some truly awful bad guys, play this one with the lights on.

**DARK SOULS 3**[www.darksouls3.com](http://www.darksouls3.com)

→ I'm now on my fourth playthrough of *Dark Souls III*. And despite my familiarity with Lothric – and with the Boreal Valley, Farron Keep, Anor Londo and beyond – I'm still discovering new gear, items and fragments of its ever-suggestible lore scattered around its nightmarish and ashen grounds.

# MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST  
OF THE BEST  
GAMES YOU CAN  
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Joe Donnelly

**LITTLE RED LIE**[www.littleredlie.com](http://www.littleredlie.com)

→ *Little Red Lie* is *Actual Sunlight* creator Will O'Neill's latest venture. This time split between two protagonists, *LRL* explores the lives of an ostentatious businessman, and the day-to-day struggles of an office administrator. Lying in order to get by is the central theme in this bleak, but interesting, narrative game.

**PUSHOVER**[www.atari.com](http://www.atari.com)

→ I recently discovered an Atari ST emulator that transported me back to my childhood. Puzzle games have always been my thing and returning to *Pushover* has been a joy – as has guiding an ant around a industrial world, toppling dominos as its only means of escape. Which, when written down, does sound weird.

**LEMMINGS**[lemmings-windows-10.en.softonic.com](http://lemmings-windows-10.en.softonic.com)

→ Who thought this stuff up? Okay, here's a series of treacherous environments, filled with traps and pitfalls. See that skylight? Hundreds of blue robe-donning, spiky green hair-sporting lemmings are about to fall through it, and you're tasked with sending them home unscathed. The early '90s were damn weird.

**FOOTBALL MANAGER 2017**[www.footballmanager.com](http://www.footballmanager.com)

→ With the new football season almost upon us I've jumped back into *Football Manager 2017* at the expense of my social life. The best management sim around, *FM17* deftly balances football knowledge and understanding with stats and figures management. The best there is gets better with each passing year.

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“  
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*in that drawer over there*”

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*Requiescat in pace, LOSER*

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