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LIFTING THE LID ON VIDEO GAMES

LITTLE NIGHTMARES II

Issue 46 £6

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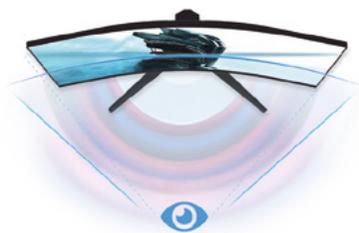
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Diluted dystopias: what's the value of corporate cyberpunk?

At the time of writing, I haven't played *Cyberpunk 2077*. It's been delayed again. Despite mandatory crunch to meet their November deadline, and apparently over numerous periods before that, the team at CD Projekt Red didn't have it quite ready, and presumably have to crunch again to ensure a pre-Christmas release. The firm worked hard to create its dystopia of corporate subjugation. And in the game.

It's a cheap joke, but it indicates a wider truth – the critical power of dystopian themes in big-budget games gets undermined by the demands of corporate production. So often, as sci-fi and games scholar Pawel Frelik has said, “cyberpunk games position corporate entities and their employees as ideological antagonists, but their very status as a cultural object is predicated on the perpetuation of such industries.”

We see this in promotional activities, too. Last year, an early demo of *Cyberpunk 2077* was criticised for an in-game advertising poster that (as so often in media) reduced transgenderism to the status of sexual curio. According to CDPR, this hypersexualised corporate advertising made sense in the game's dystopian setting. It was “just terrible” and “what you're fighting against”. Yet when CDPR held a promotional cosplay contest this year, one of the finalists they selected was dressed as the poster model, replete with glowing blue phallus. The terrible dystopia of hypersexualised advertising was fair game to score some easy hype.

Even more overt anti-establishment fictions are compromised by corporate needs. *Watch Dogs: Legion* deserves credit for simply taking a political stance and tucking some radical ideas between typical genre accoutrements – it sends up right-wing populism, discusses the roots of fascism and surveillance tech, and centres its campaign on collective resistance. But its dystopian themes sit awkwardly next to wide-eyed celebrations of hedonistic consumerism. As Ubisoft's promotional material explains, the game includes “dozens of boutiques and stores where you can buy clothing, including jackets, shirts, hats, and



JON BAILES

Jon Bailes is a social theorist and freelance games critic. He's the author of *Ideology and the Virtual City: Videogames, Power Fantasies and Neoliberalism*.

more”, all available through an “earnable in-game currency called ETO”. It's not surprising these days, but jars heavily against the game's scenario.

And that's before we recall the major problems in Ubisoft's work culture that have surfaced this year. Employees in many of the company's studios (including *Legion*'s Toronto team) were reportedly working in a hostile atmosphere of misogyny and racism, with sexual harassment and even assault cases mishandled or ignored to protect abusive bosses. In the aftermath, a company survey revealed that 25% of staff claimed to have witnessed or experienced misconduct.

Since these issues went public, Ubisoft has reacted. But its image-saving shake-up doesn't address the generic problems of a model that exhausts employees, enforces the hierarchy that can enable abuse, and places monetisation and promotional stunts above artistic vision. These aren't merely individual moral failings or hypocrisy, they're systemic limits. The sheer bloat and cost of many triple-A games in itself virtually ensures crunch, microtransactions, and other top-down demands that detract from any critical themes.

There's a decades-long debate about whether subversive ideas remain subversive if they're disseminated through commodified media. On one hand, it's better to have them out there than not, and the bigger the game, the bigger the reach. Indie games often explore dystopian themes in more nuanced and interesting ways (play *Paradise Killer!*), but garner a tiny fraction of the attention. Some might argue that the corporate model is the price of being heard at all.

But when the final product is so heavily coated in the trappings of profiteering, and its creation so reliant on unequal and exploitative work relations, how much is that worth? No matter how sincere the politics of dystopian games are, if they can't touch the model that enables them, or suggest alternative ways of organising their own industry, they feel like cynical cash-ins. There's no easy answer, but what's the purpose of more cyberpunk visions if their production only brings us closer to the dystopian futures they warn against? ☹

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WELCOME

Games are amazing, aren't they? It's just a shame about gamers. Well, a small but vocal number of them anyway. The release of the unfeasibly anticipated *Cyberpunk 2077* was met with a tidal wave of extremely long and detailed reviews in December 2020, and discussions about the wealth of bugs still apparent at launch (you can read Ian's own review over on page 92). But then, predictably enough, there were darker things happening at the fringes. Journalist Liana Ruppert wrote an article on Game Informer warning of the flashing lights in one sequence and its potential danger to epileptics. A certain subset of gamers then responded by harassing the author with hurtful videos and messages. For their part, CD Projekt Red pledged to fix the issue Ruppert raised, but that didn't stop a number of gamers from continuing their harassment. The levels of vitriol and sheer meanness aimed at anyone who dared criticise the game – especially if they didn't happen to be white and male while doing so – once again highlighted an ugly side of the industry. Even a cheery game like *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* has toxic strata among its community; when journalist Alex Donaldson tweeted a comment about the addition of Sephiroth to the game, he was met with a series of racist messages and other abusive material. Over time, the industry's undoubtedly becoming more diverse and inclusive; here's hoping that, eventually, those less enlightened sectors of the gaming community will also move with the times.

Be excellent to each other, and enjoy the new issue.

Ryan Lambie
 Editor



Return of the sinister Six

Tarsier Studios give us the latest on its
chilling sequel, *Little Nightmares II*



In February 2015, Sweden's Tarsier Studios uploaded a trailer for its current work-in-progress, *Hunger*. About a little girl roaming a nightmare world of monstrous adults, it had the shadowy, handmade feel of a stop-motion animated movie. For narrative designer Dave 'Merv' Mervik, the trailer launch was a nervous moment: "It was just a bottle of scotch, sat in the dark, panicking and hoping that we hadn't ruined everything," Mervik tells us. He needn't have worried: *Hunger* soon caught the attention of Bandai Namco, who stepped in as publisher and provided the resources Tarsier needed to finish the game, released as *Little Nightmares*.

The resulting platform-puzzler was thick with ominous atmosphere: its setting, an undersea vessel called The Maw, was packed with unforgettable encounters, whether it was fleeing from a gigantic, maniacal chef or avoiding the long arms of a shambling janitor. Equally memorable was its silent protagonist, Six, whose yellow coat and expressive movements made her into an immediate fan favourite.

Six is back in *Little Nightmares II*, but not necessarily in the form fans of the first game might expect: the sequel's protagonist is a new character, a masked young boy named Mono, while Six returns as a computer-controlled sidekick who, according to producer Lucas Roussel, has "her own agenda". *Little Nightmares II* takes us out of The Maw and into a much larger – but no less frightening – setting called Pale City, where the populace is controlled by a mysterious television ▶

▼ This time around, you'll have to co-operate with Six, now your AI companion, to solve puzzles and traverse the landscape.





signal. There are more puzzles to solve – made quite different from the first game, thanks to your new AI partner - and even weapons to pick up and wield. Don't imagine for one second that the sequel's gone all gung-ho, though: Mono's still just a kid, and in one sequence, struggles to lift a branch over his head. Once again, the theme of the game is powerlessness: of traversing a world that isn't your own.

Here's what Mervik and Roussel have to say about *Little Nightmares II*'s production, themes, and cinematic influences.

Can you talk about how *Little Nightmares II* got started, and why you came up with a new main character rather than continue with Six as the lead?

Dave Mervik: It's a weird one because we thought *Little Nightmares* was always about more than Six. We didn't expect Six to become as popular and precious to fans of the game as she did. And then it becomes another thing to consider – you're making decisions based on more than just the world and the best stories to tell. But you can't ignore the fact that people are invested in that character. So there's a whole other strand to think about, really, and we didn't want to lose that, either. We didn't want to lose that plan of introducing the older children into this world and what they're going through, but what we've done is combine the two: how does this new character [Mono's] journey coincide with Six's journey? And what story can we tell to let you know more about Six?

The concept of the TV screens affecting viewers is an interesting one. I don't know if that's meant to be a nod to *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*? Are you all big film fans at the studio?

DM: After the first *Halloween*, it's my favourite because it went a completely different way. It's amazing. And it scarred me – I watched it as a kid. So that's where my brain kind of went to mush. Our [creative director] is another real horror fiend, but everyone's got different loves. When we were talking about the TVs and what they could mean, everything comes up – every TV that has had an effect on you in a movie. So *Poltergeist* is obviously hanging in the air; *Season of the Witch*; *The Ring*. It's not like you think of that first and then go, "Oh, let's do a TV as well" – it's the other way around, always. So you kind of have to do your best to sidestep all of that and [ask], "What could we find that's new? How can we tread new ground?"

people found jumping tricky with the kind of camera that we used [in the first game], and we don't want [players] to feel frustrated. We want them to feel like they stand as good a chance as their skills allow. And so obviously they wanted to improve on that from the first one.

Lucas Roussel: I think there's a lot of things we wanted to improve from the

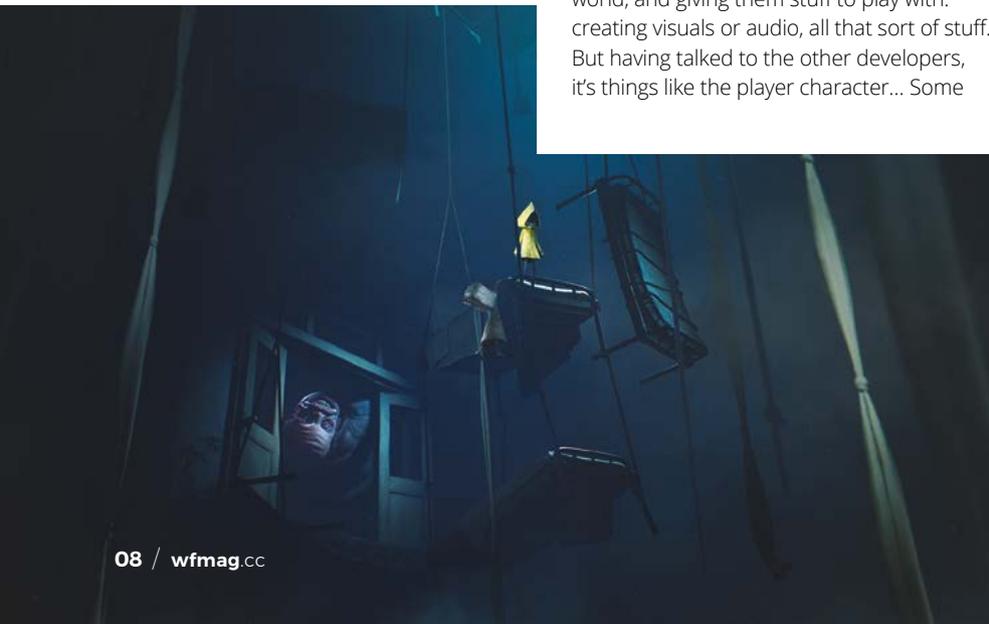
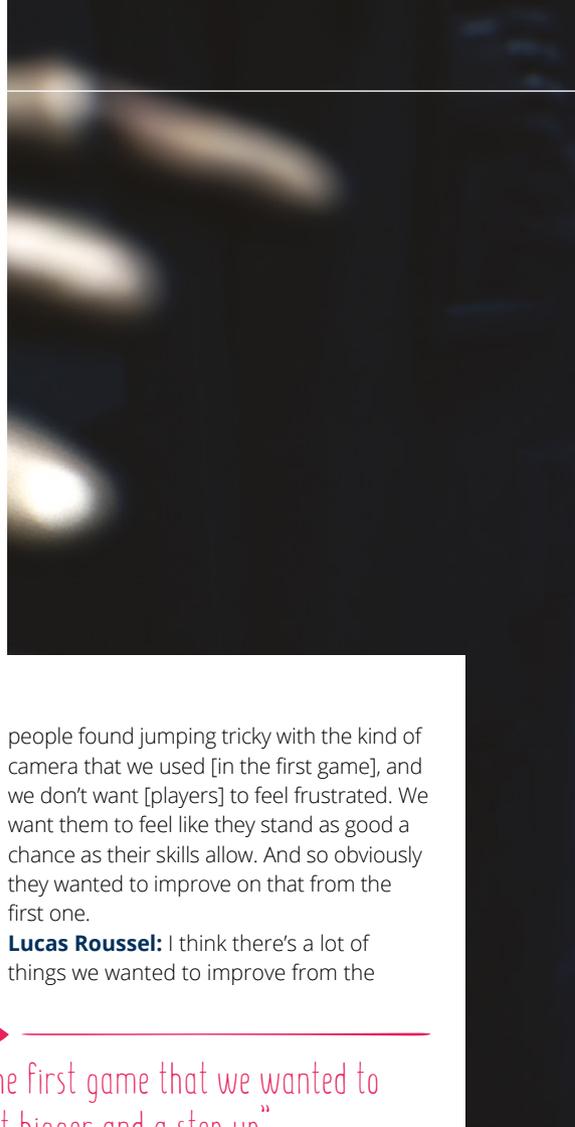
“We're aware of the flaws from the first game that we wanted to improve, and just make it bigger and a step up”

In terms of developing the game, are there certain things you learned in the making of the first one that you brought over to the sequel?

DM: Speaking personally, it's knowing how hard it is to tell a story without dialogue. My role on both games has been the world creation and backgrounds. So it's making sure that everyone knows the lore of the world, and giving them stuff to play with: creating visuals or audio, all that sort of stuff. But having talked to the other developers, it's things like the player character... Some

first game. And yeah, there were some issues we had with perspective, as Merv said, and of course, the game being rather short. I mean, *Little Nightmares* was what we originally planned, but it's true that some people said it's a bit short. So this is also why we're introducing outdoor environments as well. The first game was confined to one location; in *Little Nightmares II*, you're going to visit several locations, both outdoors and indoors, so we have more gameplay variations with the AI companion and our combat mechanic. We're aware of the flaws from the first game that we wanted to improve, and just make it bigger and a step up compared to the first game. It's also why we took some time to make it – we didn't rush to release *Little Nightmares II*. We really wanted to make something bigger and better.

You mentioned the AI companion – is that one of the technical challenges, to make Six feel human, like a real character, but also not unpredictable and frustrating for the player to interact with?



▼ Tarsier's Lucas Rousset (left) and Dave Mervik (right)

▲ *Little Nightmares II* contains more exterior locations than the last game, but there are still plenty of claustrophobic interiors, like this frankly terrifying hospital.

LR: Yeah, it's even more difficult, because you know Six from the first game, so you can't make her look like a dog following you around, because it could impact the credibility of the character. So there was definitely a technical challenge to make her feel alive so that she's useful to the player and not a burden. There's also a lot of polished animations to make her feel like she has her own personality and she's doing her own stuff. And she might have her own agenda, which is pretty interesting, too. It was difficult. It was one of the reasons why we took some time – let's just make Six look good, make Six *feel* good. Because if you don't get that right, I think that truly affects the quality of the game.

When Mono picks up a stick, you can see in the animation he can only just lift it over his head. It's a really interesting dynamic, because like the first game, you're not controlling powerful characters.

DM: That's a really nice touch from the animators there – because like you say, even though you're technically wielding

something, you're still totally at a loss. You're buying yourself time at best. I really felt that when I played through the game – it's not a power trip that you're on, you're just doing your best in this world that's someone else's.

Powerlessness is an interesting theme for a video game, because so many are power trips. So why did you want to explore that in these games?

DM: I guess that [power] is such a trend that it feels like the default setting? You know, certainly for the popular games, it's just, 'Who do we pander to? Who do we perceive as our core audience [that] plays games? Oh, well, guys, I guess.' It's just not true, though, is it? You know, I'm a guy, and →



SCALING UP

"We pretty much doubled in size at one point," says Lucas Rousset, when we ask whether the sequel's larger scale required a bigger team at Tarsier. "It brought some challenges in terms of production, because you don't work with 40 people the way you work with 20. So we had to adapt – at one point we had to go to a smaller team size again, not as far as the first one, but something in between. We decided to take a bit more time to make a good game rather than just putting the content in the game and then getting something we're not happy with. There were some challenges but we've been able to overcome them, and that's the most positive thing – how we learn by experience to hopefully make it a better game."



▲ The *Little Nightmares* games are, Mervik says, partly influenced by games like *Flashback* and *Another World*, where players were “thrown into the middle” of a story.

I was thinking that these games feel like twisted versions of what children go through in the real world. You forget as a grown-up how strange the world is when you're very small. Nothing is really designed for you. Even chairs are too big.

DM: It's one of those things where, once you grow up, you're part of the gang, and then it's, 'Yeah, I don't need to worry about that now.' It's a schoolyard mentality, isn't it? 'I'm one of the big kids now, so I get to bully the ones smaller than me'. It's about remembering that and connecting with it. I'm thinking it must just suck for kids. I've got a young lad now, he's almost two. I've seen how he's reacted when he's been to school, and come back, and his first contact with these teachers. He has nightmares for days. And I swear it must be that, because there are these people who are grown-ups and they're telling you what to do, or they're just there instead of your parents. And nobody thinks about that, you know? I think all we're trying to do is look through those eyes. The flavour of that is what connects with me – so much more than being toolled up and going after wave [upon] wave of grenade-throwing henchmen. I know how it feels to be alone and vulnerable in the world. I'm sure loads of people do.

You have the teacher character in the game, who looks frankly terrifying. Is that loosely based on anything autobiographical?

DM: [laughs] She reminds me of Medusa from *Clash of the Titans*. There I go again – movie reference. But no, it's nothing personal. It's taking things that inspire you

SET DESIGN

When it comes to figuring out the games' lighting and atmospheric effects, the team at Tarsier concentrate on designing small slices of each chapter. “Very early on, [the team] define what they want to have for a specific environment,” Roussel tells us. “And then they take a very small section of the game, with no enemies, nothing. They put all the lighting in there, and also the environments and a first set of props. They make a scene and then they'll share the vision to the world team about what the chapter will look like. We do that on a very small section, because it's expensive to do that so early. And then that really gives all the guidance to the team.”

I'm not interested in that in the slightest. We've just got to recognise there are more people out there than the lowest common denominator who just want to kill stuff. People are looking for more.

We want to do something for everyone – more of a [universal] experience. If you feel powerlessness, like in our game, there's something about that that really connects with me. That this world wasn't made for Six, you know, so how do you cope with that? How do you deal with these grotesque creatures who, for some reason, have total power over you? This is their world and you're just thrown into it. There's something really primal about that. Certainly, if you have any memories of being a kid.





◀ Plot details are under wraps, but a mysterious signal tower is pivotal to the story. "There's something unpleasant about the hum, pulsing – this static feeling," Mervik says. "It puts you off balance straight away."

and thinking about what they represent. We always talked about it in the early days, when we were thinking about how the characters look. Say if a kid has a nightmare, or if they meet some creepy person in real life, and they come back and tell you, everything's writ massive, isn't it? It's just, 'They had the longest neck and really, really long, gangly arms' and stuff. If the kid then drew that, it wouldn't be the teacher, it would be something terrifying. It's taking those things, like a teacher who the kids fear: why does this person always know what I'm doing before I do it? So it's taking that idea of the all-seeing teacher, and making it manifest in this infinitely

LR: The starting point was the doll-house feel that we wanted to give to the player, with this very specific camera, in *Little Nightmares*... the art direction makes it feel like some sort of stop-motion movie. I agree with Dave, it's the brilliant folks from the art department. I remember when we were showing the first game at events like Gamescom, a lot of people were attracted to the game just because of the look and the art direction. Sometimes families – a mother or grandmother who weren't interested in video games – were stopping by, saying, 'What is this? I've never seen something like this'. I think that makes *Little Nightmares* very different from most

more tools to play with, because now you have two characters who are able to collaborate. You also have a weapon mechanic that you can use in puzzles. It's not only about defeating enemies. So without saying too much about the puzzles, I think they're more diverse. And because the game is longer, I think we needed this in order to ensure that there's no redundancy in puzzles.

So going back to the first game – how did you react as a studio to the success of it? How did it affect you, and were you expecting the kind of reaction that you got?

DM: No! Not at all. The lovely thing about working in Sweden is the level of humility... We talk about this all the time – when we released the *Hunger* teaser way back in the day, it was just a bottle of scotch, sat in the dark, panicking and hoping that we hadn't ruined everything! [laughs]. And then obviously, things went from good to better. We met Bandai, and then it just blew up.

Now there are people out there with theory videos, people making music videos – it just blows my mind.

What mood or feeling do you want to leave players with once they've finished this sequel?

DM: I think it's always 'unease' for us. We don't like to give people that nice tidy resolution where they win. We want people to go away and feel like they've got some sort of closure. But there's also something just sticking in their throat or they want to think about it afterwards. That's what I like, again, with movies – you want to go away and you need to get your head around it and think about it instead of just going, 'Yes, that movie happened and now I'll never think about it again.'

I think that's something you should do with any kind of art – you want to give people something to take away and put something of themselves into it. The whole interpretive nature of these games that we make is so people engage with them, and fill in the blanks. There's something about that that is so much more nourishing. So yeah, I guess 'uneasiness'. 🍷

“We don't like to give people that nice tidy resolution where they win... there's also something just sticking in their throat”

stretching neck. I think it gives the art team something to really go hog-wild with and turn those feelings into something physical.

other games. I think the second one will be faithful to the first game, but pushing the bar higher.

These games feel so handcrafted, but in reality, you're making the game in Unreal 4 – you're using digital tools to create a digital world. So what's the secret? How do you make something digital look handcrafted?

DM: I don't know if I'm really qualified to answer that. Other than saying – and I'm not biased here – that we have a phenomenal art department, and I think they were very clear from the beginning that they wanted that stop-motion animation style.

Can you talk a bit about creating the puzzles? You've got new things to work with in this game – weapons, and the AI companion as well.

LR: In the first game, we had a limited number of mechanics, and I think they were well exploited. Some of the puzzles were also quite unique because of the art around the puzzle. If you remember the sausage-grinder, for example, it's quite a simple puzzle, but the art makes it really unique. Now the designers have

***Little Nightmares II* is due for release on 11 February 2021.**



Your Disciples stumble upon two vampires deep in conversation. To your immense horror, instead of plotting their next atrocity, the pair are wasting time composing ludicrous poems.

Battle of the badstards

Rogue Lords tests the old adage that it's good to be bad

Info

GENRE

Devilry sim

FORMAT

PC / PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER

Leikir Studio,
Cyanide Studio

PUBLISHER

Bigben Interactive

RELEASE

TBC 2021

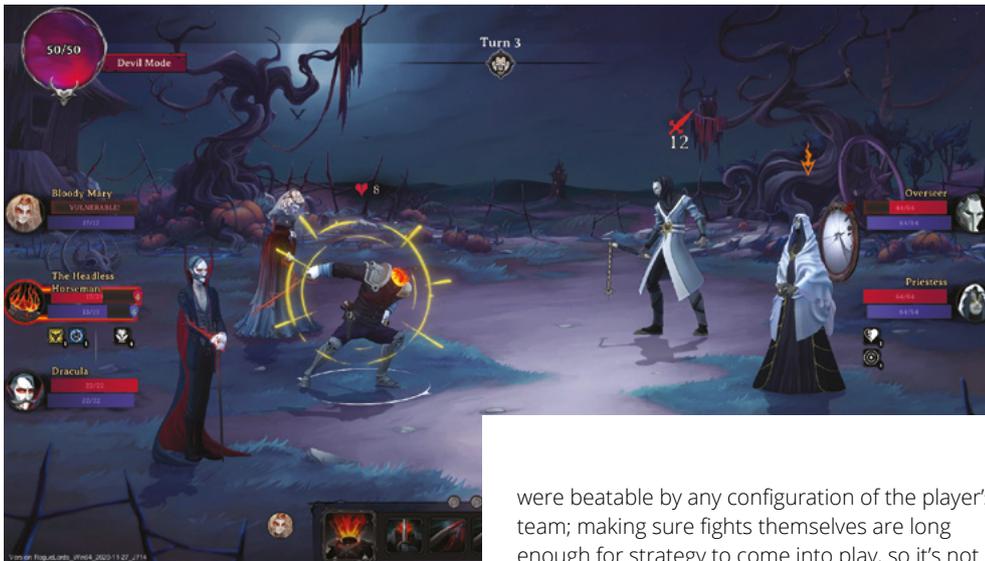
✓ Your motley crew is made up of fictional history's worst of the badfolk. Not all of them can wear hats, sadly.

Roguelikes could be described as devilish, and it seems Leikir Studio and Cyanide Studio have both taken this a bit more literally than expected with *Rogue Lords*. In this (would you believe it) roguelike, you play as the Devil himself, recruiting a band of evil-doers from the ranks of history's greatest – Dracula, Bloody Mary, the Headless Horseman – to battle the mortal forces of good in a series of turn-based, tactical battles. It's a straightforward idea mechanically, with a few wild cards thrown in for good measure and all backed by sumptuous visuals, evoking the early day style of Tim Burton before he started shooting monkeys into space and lost his touch.

Players make their way in each run towards a selection of artefacts, which the Devil needs to wreak their revenge on the good-doers who foiled his last evil plan. This means making progress step by step, encountering events or battles as you go, and using the nefarious forces of evil in your battles – with the Devil acting as a fourth character in your team of three. “[The Devil] can cheat at any time by modifying the game interface. He can change a life bar value, the probability of success of a narrative event, or even create paths on the map. The Devil does not play the same game as the rest of the world!” explains Jérémie Monedero, game director at Cyanide. The fact the Devil is able to cheat – though at the expense of an in-game currency, souls – all comes back to the original idea for *Rogue Lords*: a game where you played as history's most evil fictional characters. But the original brief only went as far as that, so this is a game that has gone through a number of changes and iterations over the past five or six years.

“Originally it was a classic RPG but with fights quite close to those of today, and the action was set in an original science fiction universe,” says Monedero. “The universe, quite complicated to elaborate, was quickly replaced by this idea of the avenging Devil. And soon after, the theme of an imaginary New England shaped the current game. The fights of the initial concept were extremely related to the sci-fi universe we





wanted to develop, so it was necessary to modify our intentions. We made small prototypes on our side and we even produced, with Leikir, a real prototype of the game, which was an XCOM-like, where the Devil was already bending the rules.” Through NACON purchasing Cyanide and the project being put on the back burner for a while, all Devilish roads have led to what we have now: a Gothic-inspired tale of nefarious deeds by nefarious characters, centred on deck-building-inspired (though deck-less) combat.

Despite the grimdark-sounding content, *Rogue Lords* is rather light-hearted – not out-and-out comedy, of course, but it’s certainly not a sad slog through sadness.

“For me, the universe is more poetic than really horrific,” says Camille Lisoir, artistic director at Cyanide. “We wanted to create a dark tale – which was the code name of the game at the beginning – with a little bit of humour like you can find in Tim Burton’s movies, for example.” This, of course, has to be balanced with a combat system that is both accessible but deep – the sort of thing a roguelike lives or dies by, especially when so much of the heavy lifting is handled by this area of the game.

“We wanted to keep a simple game system where the player feels in control,” says Sébastien Perouffe, lead game designer at Leikir. “And as far as possible, we wanted to avoid systems with high random number generation or which create depth only by adding a lot of complexity. It took a lot of iteration and balancing to find the ‘formulas’ that work well, and build interesting enemies to face.”

Some important aspects to cover, according to Perouffe, included the need to give the player enough information *without* drowning them in it; to make sure even the most difficult of enemies

“We wanted to create a dark tale with a little bit of humour”

were beatable by any configuration of the player’s team; making sure fights themselves are long enough for strategy to come into play, so it’s not just a one-and-done bite-sized battle, and making sure the player has the opportunity to impact the outcome of situations with decisions to be made and responses to be read. It’s a lot of work for a small team, especially in pandemic times, but it’s something Leikir CEO Aurélien Loos is confident the team has handled well.

“Depending on the needs of the production, we have between 14 and 20 people,” he says. “Covid-19 didn’t have a significant impact on production; we made the choice to start the home office one week before the lockdown in France, which gave us time to prepare to work remotely.

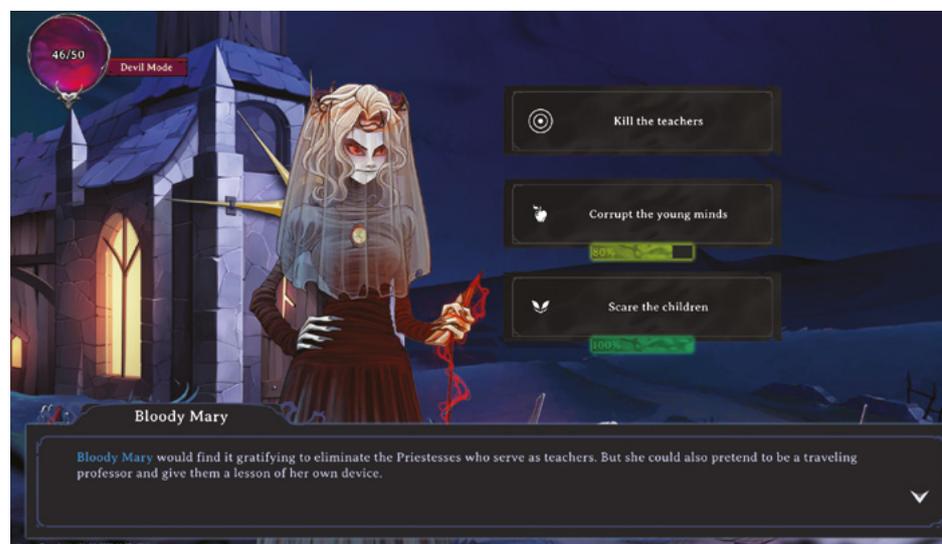
We are fortunate to have a close-knit team that communicates well and is totally committed to the game. We keep a lot of attention on each other’s morale. Between the two lockdowns, we gave everyone the choice between coming back to work on-site or teleworking.” So not quite the march of death you may expect from other, bigger games, then. At least that bit’s not evil. 🗿

◀ **Combat is straightforward turn-based strategy, and makes up the backbone of the entire experience.**

WHY ROGUE?

There are a lot of roguelikes around, meaning developers can find it hard to make theirs stand out – a fact not lost on Monedero, but he remains confident in what *Rogue Lords* can do. “My gamer’s heart calls for roguelike, it’s a real trend that has come back into fashion after being modernised,” he says. “It’s a genre that’s probably niche and may not suit everyone. But very few games are actually for everyone and it’s not a problem, quite the contrary... It’s possible that in some time we’ll start to say that the market is saturated, but when I see the quality of the roguelikes that are delivered today, I can’t reasonably want us to stop!”

♥ **It’s always nice to have options, especially when they’re all one form or another of evil.**





In Sound Mind

A survival horror game that requires patients

Info

GENRE
Survival horror

FORMAT
PC / PS5 / XB X/S

DEVELOPER
We Create Stuff

PUBLISHER
Modus Games

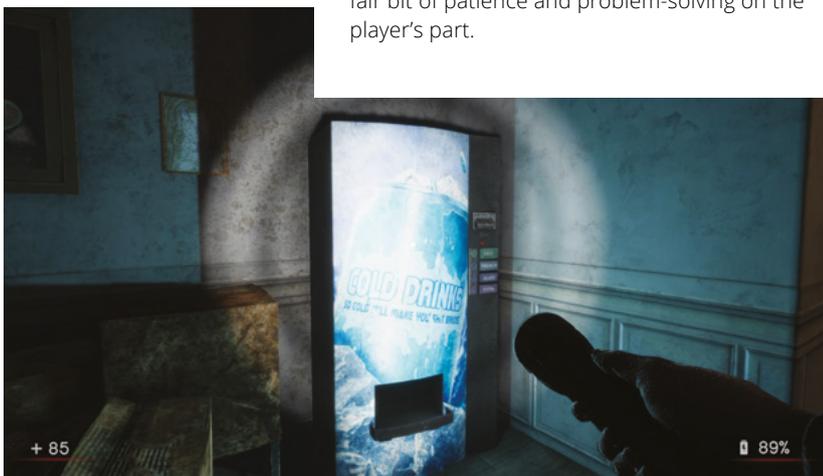
RELEASE
TBA 2021

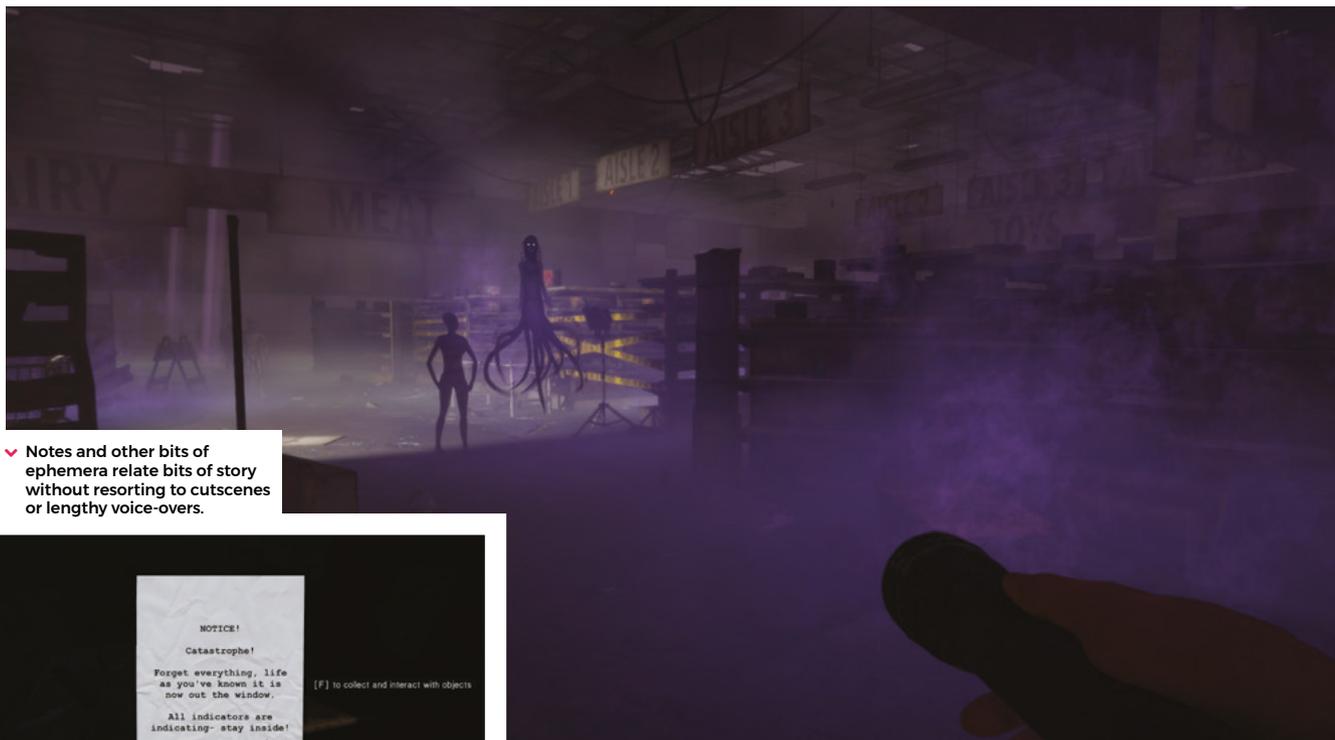
✓ Lighting plays a big part in *In Sound Mind's* atmosphere, with your torch requiring steady supplies of fresh batteries to keep it topped up.

Tell me, what good is a PhD if the world around you is crumbling?" asks a gruff, mysterious voice on the end of an old-fashioned telephone. You've stepped into the shoes of one Desmond Wales, a small-town therapist trapped inside the nightmares of his patients – which is why the building he explores is a darkly surreal place with water lapping at its front door, and why that mystery character keeps ringing up to deliver taunting messages. But despite the voice mocking Desmond for his doctorate, a bit of education comes in handy here: *In Sound Mind* is a survival horror game where you're as likely to be following clues and solving puzzles as you are wielding a gun. In fact, even acquiring a gun requires a fair bit of patience and problem-solving on the player's part.

In Sound Mind is the first full game from We Create Stuff, an indie studio that previously brought us *Nightmare House 2* – a free-to-play horror shooter built in Valve's Source Engine – and it's a chiller full of contrasts. On one hand, there's the suspenseful build-up of exploring areas, finding hidden items, and finding keys to locked doors; on the other, there are sequences where you'll be gunning down demonic entities with your trusty revolver. In fact, the game's creative director Hen Matshulski envisioned the game as "like *Shadow of the Colossus*, but horror," when it was first conceived back in 2007. Gradually, however, the game evolved from a game about horrifying boss fights into something more low-key and ominous: a nineties-set mystery where every note and item you find lying around tells you more about your patients' stories: "You'll find [audio] tapes, and each one unravels a new section, where the emphasis and the game mechanic follow the patient's story," explains producer and studio co-founder Ido Tal. "Their character and struggles connect you to a bigger conspiracy that unravels through the game."

On Steam, you'll find a chunky one-hour plus demo that showcases how each of these areas (or 'tapes') plays out: from the slow build-up of solving puzzles and unlocking new areas – there's an entertaining conundrum involving malfunctioning washing machines in here that we greatly appreciated – to the mounting sense of dread as the spooks close in near the end. "We originally tried to release a 'normal'





Notes and other bits of ephemera relate bits of story without resorting to cutscenes or lengthy voice-overs.



In Sound Mind is running on Unity using the new rendering pipeline HDRP for PC, PS5, and XB X/S," the team tells us. "We use Blender and Substance for pretty much all 3D [models], animations, and rigs."

demo in length – something like 20 minutes of gameplay," Tal explains. "But we felt like that wouldn't be a good representation of the game, so we went ahead and decided to release an entire area, a full 'tape'. It took so much more work to polish at this early stage, but it was worth it – we learned so much more about what works and what doesn't."

So what goes into designing a puzzle that involves repairing a vibrating washing machine? "When I approach a new puzzle, the process for me is to reverse-engineer it," explains Matshulski. "I start from the solution and break it into parts.

For example, we wanted to put an emphasis on the elevator at the start, so it would be a reward to ride it. [It's broken], of course, and you have to fix it. We used the washing machines in the next room [so that the player can] manipulate their fuses and use them to fix the elevators... We try to focus on a theme for every puzzle. In the hub area, which connects the different sections of the game, you slowly unlock more and more areas as you progress in the game and find more tools to use. So these mechanics combine, and new, more challenging puzzles appear. It's a tiny bit Metroidvania."

"You can sneak, go out guns blazing, or do some platforming and puzzling"

As for the more action-oriented sections of the game, *In Sound Mind's* creators are designing set-pieces that can be approached from a multitude of angles. "In most cases, we give the player several options to engage with tough situations, like most boss encounters in the game," Matshulski says. "You can sneak, go out guns blazing, or even do some platforming and optional puzzling to gain an advantage."

Making such a large demo wasn't without its challenges, however. In one section, you get to pet Tonia, a cat who's something of a recurring motif in the game. In order to avoid players experiencing a distracting bug, the team were forced to make cunning use of a chair. "When you go to pet Tonia, you might notice there's a chair blocking your way to go around her that wasn't there before," Tal says. "That's because prior to the demo release, we found a major bug with the code that forced her head to rotate 180 degrees in the most creepy way if you [walked] around her. We couldn't fix it in time, so there's a chair to block you from snooping around. Sure, we're creating a horror game, but there are some things you can't unsee! We've fixed it internally since... a game studio is a team of people who want to create a breathtaking, uncompromising piece of art, but are in reality forced to make thousands of little compromises." 🐱

DEATH NOTES

One of the tried-and-trusted ways *In Sound Mind* builds its narrative is through clues and details left behind on notes. One of the ways We Create Stuff keeps these notes engaging for the player, according to Ido Tal, is by keeping them brief and to the point. "It's such a fine thing to balance – the text length, the visuals around the note, their volume and placement in the level," says Tal. "We found that if you keep the notes short enough and visually diverse – like using doodles and coffee stains in the supermarket notes – most players would actually give them a read and pay attention. True, we spend more time designing each and every note, but the upside is the opportunity to build a much more engaging world that players actually want to read."



Maskmaker

Crafting face coverings and solving a mystery with Innerspace VR's next foray into virtual reality

Info

GENRE

Adventure

FORMAT

PC (VR) / PSVR

DEVELOPER

Innerspace VR

PUBLISHER

MWM Interactive

RELEASE

Early 2021

✓ No, it's not a feature from HackSpace magazine – crafting masks makes up a big part of *Maskmaker*.

Putting on a mask and taking on a whole new personality has been done – but it's proving hard to think of a time it's been done in the always-that-bit-more-immersive world of virtual reality. *Maskmaker*, from Innerspace VR, marks the studio's next attempt at bringing something creative and unique to the VR realm: an adventure game based around exploration of a magical world known as the 'mask realm'.

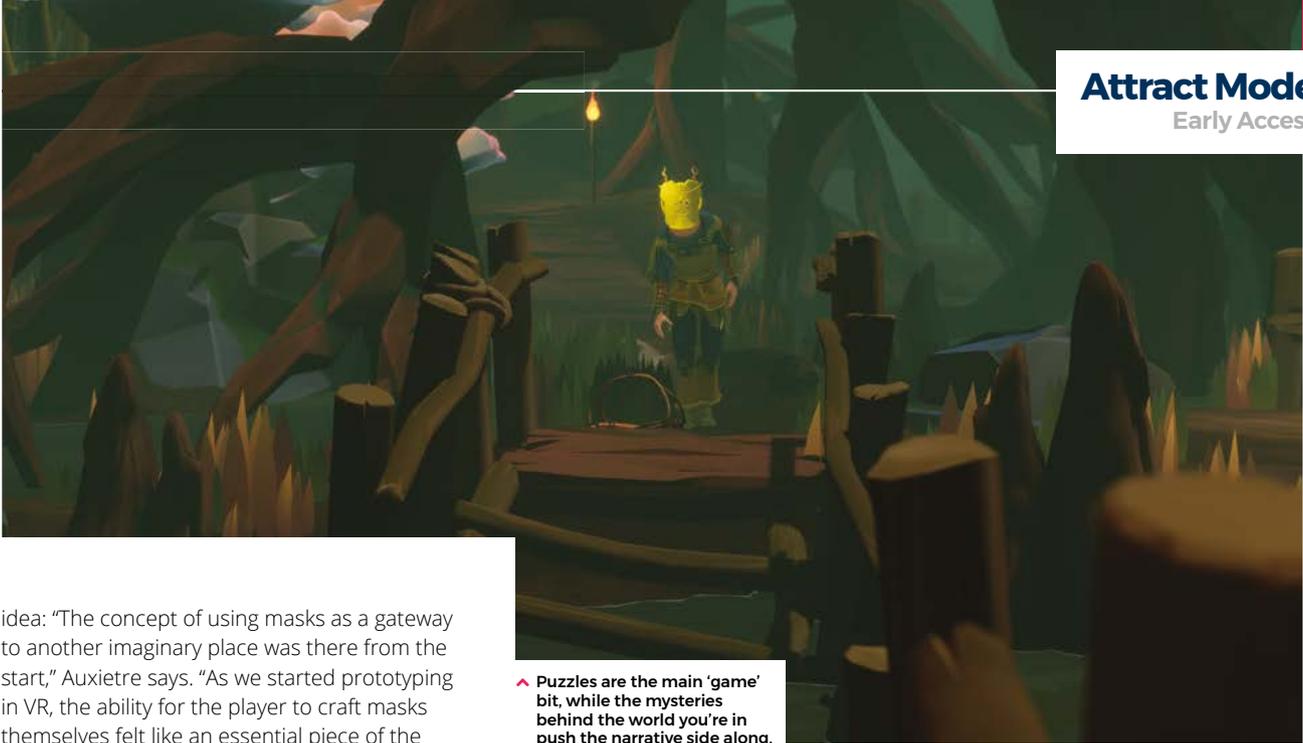
Said exploration is handled by crafting and wearing magical masks – it's *Mask-'maker'*, not *Mask-'buyer'* – with each face covering having the ability to transport you to a different place,

another biome of the mask realm, each time in a different character. On these mask-tical journeys, you solve puzzles and pick up on more of the mystery behind the game's narrative – who was the mask-maker that owned the workshop you now craft the masks in before you got there? Why did they disappear? And who's this Prospero chap, king of the strange universe you inhabit? All will, hopefully, become clear.

"My father has collected masks from all around the world throughout all his life," explains Balthazar Auxietre, co-founder and creative director at Innerspace VR. "As a young boy, I used to spend a lot of time in his workshop where he stored them, dreaming of what was 'behind the masks'. It was, for me, like exploring a parallel world!" From those formative explosions of childhood imagination, it wasn't until adulthood – and a development studio focused on the medium – that VR brought those memories together with the potential of an interactive project.

It isn't Innerspace VR's first game, however. It's actually the studio's fourth, though it travels more in lockstep with previous release *A Fisherman's Tale* in approaching things from a more fantastical, atmospheric position. But beyond the more limited scope of *Fisherman's*, *Maskmaker* brings with it a more open-ended world, one that the team hadn't actually planned for from the outset. The design of the core game, however, didn't change much from that initial





idea: “The concept of using masks as a gateway to another imaginary place was there from the start,” Auxietre says. “As we started prototyping in VR, the ability for the player to craft masks themselves felt like an essential piece of the puzzle and was really rewarding. So it grew until it became the other half of the game. The players are now part crafter, part explorer.”

The studio is still learning all the time – it’s still relatively new as a game development team, and VR tech is itself still *relatively* early along, at least in this latest iteration. There’s been a lot of hard work put in to make sure *Maskmaker* features puzzles that ‘feel’ right – that object manipulation looks the part and doesn’t make your brain reject what’s happening, and there’s a focus on cohesion between the worlds and

what’s happening in them.

Everything to put your mind at ease, to make the game able to draw you in deeper, and to have more fun with it. “For example, we worked a lot on wood mechanisms, levers, and winches and tried to give the feeling of friction and heaviness so that you really feel like you’re moving heavy objects without going too much into the it’s-so-realistic-it’s-not-fun-anymore route,” Auxietre says. “We also designed puzzles based on reproducing some of the characters’ postures and actions. These are very specific VR puzzles where players are fully engaged with their whole bodies.”

VR itself is sort of *there* in modern gaming – it didn’t take over as some hoped, but it didn’t disappear again as others expected. It’s a niche. But it’s an important niche to Innerspace VR, and not just because it has the letters in its name. “Immersive is not a buzzword for us,” Auxietre says. “We didn’t name the studio Innerspace VR just because it sounds cool, but because we feel there is a world of artistic possibilities to discover. We identify VR more as a medium in its own right, even if it can still be argued that it’s either a technology or a genre in games. So we feel we are bound to prove that it has indeed some potential beyond these, because it’s true that

▲ **Puzzles are the main ‘game’ bit, while the mysteries behind the world you’re in push the narrative side along.**

the little we have seen – and made ourselves – is not enough. We will continue our explorations of this medium, especially as the technology moves forward and becomes more prominent in our lives, because great things, art, poetry, needs to happen on these platforms, not only social networks and commercials for eyeballs.”

And when it comes to Auxietre’s hopes for *Maskmaker*, the irony isn’t lost on him. You are, after all, attempting to achieve some level of escapism from the modern world by putting on a different sort of face mask, to play a

game centred entirely around the concept of putting on masks. “We hope players will enjoy the magical atmosphere of the world and find a feeling of freedom and discovery in wearing masks and travelling through them,” he says.

“We also hope the world of *Maskmaker* can bring a little bit of fresh air and wonder in these depressing times, even if that means wearing another mask!” 🗨

“We identify VR more as a medium in its own right”

▼ **There’s a clean simplicity to the visuals that, at a guess, helps to stop a player getting overwhelmed. VR sickness is real, kids.**



VIRTUAL LIMITS

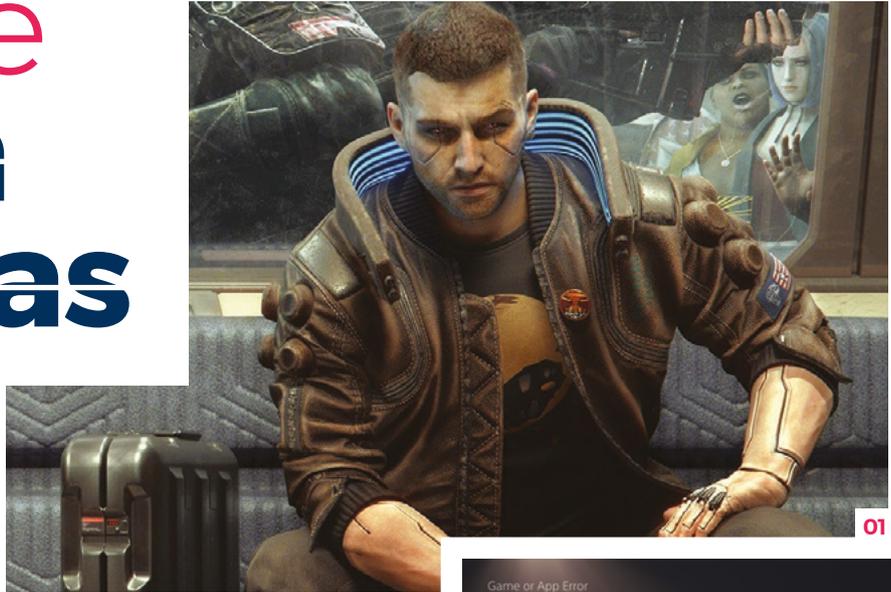
Imagination is the only limit in design, of course, but there are other bumps in the road along the way – like the fragmented state of current VR hardware, with no unified platform for everything to appear on. “When you develop a game like *Maskmaker*, with an open-ended universe and a storytelling based on exploration of huge landscapes, you know for sure that it will require a lot of optimisation to adapt it for the different platforms’ specifications,” Auxietre says. “So you have to plan it upfront in terms of general design, number of assets, FX...”

That was the month that was

01. Cyberpunk'd

Cyberpunk 2077 released, bagged a bunch of incredibly high scores, and sold millions of copies, making its development costs back in a matter of days. And that was all that happened, and everyone went to bed content and happy in the choices they'd made in life. Except... the previous-gen console versions of the game exist, and it didn't end up being as simple as that. You can see our verdict for the PS4 version (via PS5) over on page 92. As you'll see, it *definitely* wasn't as simple as that.

Where to start? Well, epilepsy: one mechanic in the game sees use of a 'braindance' device, which initially displayed a pattern of flashing red and white lights. This appeared to mimic a pattern used specifically to induce seizures in people suffering from epilepsy, and was swiftly

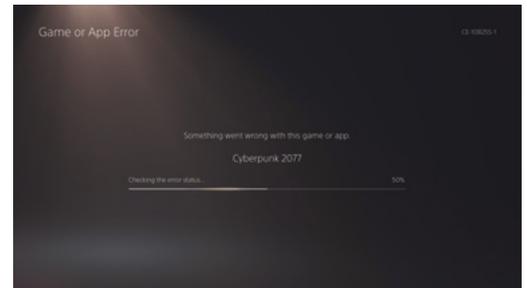


patched out, along with a warning screen being introduced. A less-than-good start.

Other patches followed to help stabilise and improve performance, mainly on the console versions of the game, but disappointment was such that people were being granted refunds by platform holders for their digital purchases of the game. This was later backed up by CD Projekt Red itself, which set up a dedicated refunds email address to help disappointed console players get their money back.

But hey, at least *Cyberpunk 2077* broke PC records for the number of simultaneous players in-game on Steam, hitting over a million the day of the game's launch. It also broke records for the fastest-selling PC game ever. *And* it crashed less on PC, so that's cool.

Then what should have been the winning moment came in a call hosted by CDPR, in which the studio was asked how the game in an obviously shoddy state had achieved certification for consoles. Seems it was because Sony and Microsoft trusted the studio, per Video Games Chronicle's



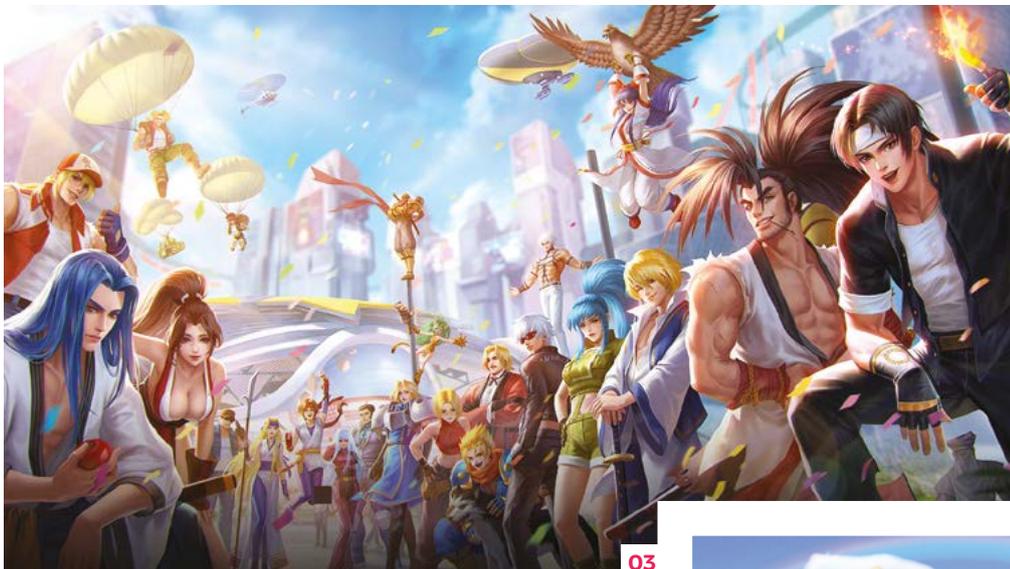
transcription: "This is on our side," said Michał Nowakowski, SVP of business development. "If I can say anything it's that I can only assume that yes, they were counting that we were going to fix the things upon the release and that obviously did not come together exactly as we had planned."

But then the winner in this clusterfuck: Sony pulled the PS4 version from sale in the middle of December and began offering refunds for those who'd purchased it digitally. CDPR could barely contain the disdain in a statement which painted wronged consumers as people "not willing to wait for updates", and the whole thing just stinks, frankly. Patches are incoming to fix things, but this is a bad look for a company that once had so much goodwill from fans.



Uri Geller allows Kadabra Pokémon cards to be sold again

John Carpenter says *AC Valhalla* is 'great'. Yes, this is news to us



03



02. Cod-EA-s

Well, that didn't last long: Codemasters' sale to Take-Two apparently bit the dust as EA stepped in to up the bid, slapping a cool £1 billion on the table to up the ante. At the time of writing, the board had encouraged shareholders to accept the deal, and it very much looked like the decades-old UK developer would indeed be entering the EA fold. That said, we reported last month the same thing about it being a done deal with Codies heading the way of Take-Two, so who knows what'll happen next month. Perhaps Raspberry Pi will step in with a bid. (Spoiler: Raspberry Pi will not step in with a bid.)

03. Prince of Fighters

Also in takeover news, the Saudi royal family is set to become controlling shareholder of SNK via the MiSK Foundation. The non-profit organisation has purchased around 33% of SNK with the plan to pick up a further 18%, amounting to a 51% controlling stake. MiSK was established by HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. A new SNK console was teased not long after the takeover, but it's doubtful that's related. We're keen to see what happens with SNK in the future – whether it will see further investment or just be a nice bauble to hang from the Prince's tree of Stuff He Owns.



04

04. Games be good

Games are officially good for you, according to academics handling an Oxford University research project. Mental health was positively impacted by playing titles like *Animal Crossing*, according to the study, which aims to set a *proper* baseline for further research into video games and their impact on players. Lead researcher on the project Andrew Przybylski told The Guardian: "This is about bringing games into the fold of psychology research that's not a dumpster fire", showing he's absolutely the right sort of person to be handling this stuff. Further research will follow, and it's not all expected to be rosy – but that's a good thing too. Proper research is better than none at all.

Surgeon Sim dev Bossa restructuring, sees lay-offs



Neil Druckmann takes role of co-president at Naughty Dog



05. Following

05

Launching a new studio in the midst of a global pandemic might seem like folly, but here we are: industry veterans from the likes of BioWare, EA, Activision Blizzard, and Ubisoft have banded together to open Yellow Brick Games. Based in Quebec City, Canada, but with remote working a focus, the new group includes ex-BioWare writer Mike Laidlaw, former Ubisoft chap Thomas Giroux, ex-EA and Ubisoft (and level designer on *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Klingon Honor Guard*) Jeff Skalski, and Frédéric St-Laurent B, also ex-Ubisoft.

We spoke with Laidlaw – whose role is creative director at Yellow Brick – about the new studio's launch and all it entails: "We're setting out to make games that can really focus on what we see as the best part of gaming: the emergence that comes from giving players a rich set of tools to interact with their world, and a rich playground in which to use those tools," he said. As for the studio's name, the intent is twofold – first, the more obvious connotation of going on a journey with friends "where your goals were intelligence, compassion, courage, and finding home", but also for a much more personal reason.

"One of our founders sadly lost his daughter after a battle against cancer," Laidlaw explained. "Her name was Dorothee, so you can see the obvious inspiration in both our name and logo. She would love to grab toys like swords and lightsabers and would tear around the house "fighting" the disease, and we wanted to start something that paid homage to both her courage and boundless spirit."

As for the studio's work – there's *something* coming, but Laidlaw has to remain *schtum* for the time being. The focus for now, he told us, is both on getting the project beyond its very early days while also establishing the studio – its culture, communication, setting clear goals, and ensuring healthy working habits.

The pandemic does of course factor in here, with a big challenge in Yellow Brick's setup coming from the more remote-focused nature of things. One solution, Laidlaw points out, was somewhat obvious: "WEBCAMS FOR EVERYONE!" Less shouty-joke, though: "It has been exceptionally challenging to set up something this involved while respecting the very real threat of Covid-19," he said. "The ease of



communication that comes from being in the same space is never quite the same when you have to log into a call to have a discussion. Thankfully, our entire team has worked with multi-studio setups before and we're all used to hopping into conference calls, and how to be polite, and not talking over one another. The upside to it all is that we're now 100% ready and confident in expanding our team to remote work, which we might not have been if it hadn't been forced by circumstance."

Those interested in potentially working with Yellow Brick Games should take a look at the studio's page (wfmag.cc/YBG): "We're always on the lookout for talent in general as we grow the team," Laidlaw said, "but have some specific roles in mind to help out with our early stages: level artist, VFX artist, and sound designer."



Zelda CD-i titles remastered and freely released, for some reason

Activision Blizzard accuses Netflix of 'poaching' former CFO, takes it to court



06



Sony PlayStation 5 PS5 Console Physical Disc Edition: New & Sealed - IN HAND

Condition: New

Sold for: **£824.99**
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07

07. Thanks scalpers!

Missed out on a PS5 at the end of last year? That might well be down to the fact that UK-based scalpers appear to be running with some well-developed methods to pick up consoles before your regular Joe can get their card details entered. One group going by the name CrepChiefNotify claimed around 3500 consoles had been snapped up to resell, with prices on eBay pushing up to the £1000 mark ahead of the busy Christmas purchasing period. 'Tis the season to get ripped off, tra-la-la-la-laaa...

08



08. In numbers

A joint statement of intent has been released by Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony, outlining the platform holders' commitment to making online gaming as safe as it can be for those taking part. Prevention focuses on informing players and parents/caregivers about their options for controlling content, as well as engaging in preventative measures on the company's part. Partnership is a bland commitment to working with law enforcement agencies etc. And Responsibility accepts the platform-holders bear responsibility for safety on their online networks. It changes little, but it's a nice step to see the companies take together.

06. BioWare away

BioWare announced the departure of two senior members of staff, with both Casey Hudson and Mark Darrah departing for pastures new. Hudson was most recently studio general manager following his return to the studio in 2017, and had previously been integral to *Mass Effect's* early days during his first stint at BioWare. Darrah, meanwhile, was working as executive producer on the *Dragon Age* series and saw heavy involvement in every game carrying the *DA* name. The moves have seen Christian Dailey put in charge of the next *Dragon Age*, taking his attention away from reviving *Anthem*, while Samantha Ryan has been placed in charge of the studio's day-to-day running.

Nintendo issues cease and desist over Etika Joy-Con shells that raised thousands for charity



DOOM somehow ported to Pico-8; is wonderful

Post Apocalypse

Indie takeovers, generational confusion, and The Hobbit: it's this month's reader letters...



Issue #45

Want to write to Wireframe?
Message us at wfmag.cc/hello
or tweet us @wireframemag



Generation Why?

Generations seem messed up. They seem to change in meaning according to marketing campaigns and Wikipedia. How do you decide what a generation is? *Alien: Isolation*, *Metal Gear Solid V*, and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* were all released on the Xbox 360, PS3, Windows, PS4, and Xbox One. Does that make them seventh- or eighth-gen? Is *Breath of the Wild* an eighth or ninth-gen game, since it was released on both the Wii U and Switch? Do you call the Switch an eighth-gen console because it isn't more powerful than the PS4 in every aspect

but has more modern CPU technology? The Wii had *Twilight Princess* at launch, a GameCube game. It was also not as powerful as the competition and released five years after the GameCube launched (four if you're in Europe). The Switch launched four-and-a-half years after the Wii U. The DS released three years after the Gameboy Advance, and it wasn't a big jump in power, either. The Neo Geo was far ahead of its 16-bit competitors as it ran full arcade games, but it was said to be part of the same generation of consoles as the

SNES and Mega Drive despite consoles not reaching that level of arcade-perfect games until the Dreamcast.

Soren

Ian writes:
It's hard to define things when there are no strict rules, but it's something we just have to do as humans and as people who want to be able to refer back to previous generations with relative ease. Generational divides will, as we're seeing with the Xbox Series S and X, become less prevalent, though.



Electronic Acquisitions

I read with interest the news that Codemasters, a company that began life selling £1.99 games for my ZX Spectrum, is now the latest to be absorbed by a massive conglomerate. In this case, it looks as if EA has prevailed over Take-Two in the bidding war, with the price being in excess of \$1bn. I had to sit down when I read that.

No slight on Codemasters there at all, rather that this is where gaming is. As gigantic as every other entertainment medium where it's a land rush to acquire big companies and boost the old bank of 'IP'. To give you an idea what an old fossil I am, I cringe at my use of 'IP' and will be making myself eat two Pot Noodles for each offence in this letter.

For EA to realise proper value from that purchase price, it presumably now has to apply its loathsome micro-transactions methodology to the likes of the Codies' hugely successful *DiRT* games. As one person on Twitter noted, are

we at a point where EA will now charge £1.99 so that your virtual car has a virtual spare tyre in its boot? Never have the creative industries needed independents more. To not just give us a broader flavour of games, but also something more fundamental: a pricing mechanic that's one-off and fair. Ah, well. I'm going to unpack my Spectrum and play *BMX Simulator*.

David Richards

Ryan writes:

Although the news was celebrated in some quarters (not least, I'm guessing, by Codemasters' shareholders), I can't help thinking that the sale of one of the UK's longest-surviving studios to a US publishing giant is more than a little sad. I'm hoping Codies' games will continue to thrive under the watchful eye of EA, and won't go the way of, say, Bullfrog or Black Box, which were acquired and later quietly shuttered.

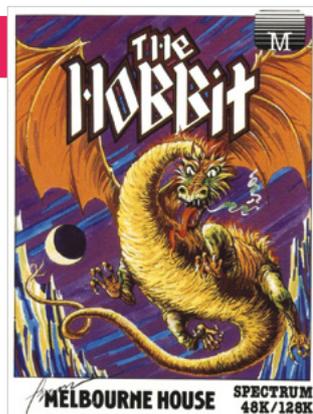
Bulbous Eyes

I confess I'm still stuck. How do you get past the pale bulbous eyes in *The Hobbit* on the ZX Spectrum? I know I may have passed the statute of limitations for the request, but I've been stuck on the sodding things for nearly 30 years now.

J R R Notverygoodatgames

Ryan writes:

Ah, so what you need to do here is wait twice, then move locations – you can't fight them, so you just have to



leg it. I definitely, absolutely, didn't just look this up on GameFAQs. Honest.

Shortcuts

As a new year commences, we asked Twitter: what game are you most looking forward to in 2021?

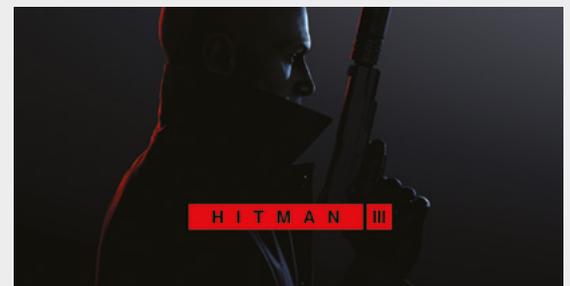
Hitman III without a doubt. And I am sure there is going to be some indie title that I haven't seen yet. [@fxgogo](#)

Really hoping 2021 is the year we get *Onar* and *Before The Blood* by Rewind Play Games and *Enter Yes* [respectively]. Also can't wait for *Paleo Pines* by Italic Pig. What could be better than riding around on cute dinosaurs? [@SaintlyStuart](#)

For me it's *Horizon Forbidden West*. I can't wait to explore new regions of the world. And I'm eager to see how the story develops. [@HdE_playsgames](#)

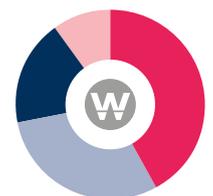
I've always enjoyed *Far Cry* games so [*Far Cry 6*] gets my vote. I know they're not the best or most serious, but they're just dumb fun! [@19AndSix](#)

Cyberpunk 2077. Because it will probably work by then. [@theruckuz](#)



The burning question

It turns out that the secret, 'quadruple-A' project developer The Initiative has been working on none other than its revival of *Perfect Dark*. Inspired by this, we asked Twitter: which of these old, arbitrarily chosen franchises would you like to make an expensive, 4K return?



Syndicate - 42%

Desert Strike - 30%

Road Rash - 18%

Kane & Lynch - 10%

Attract Mode



Party Animals ↗

Manic, physics-based multiplayer games are all the rage right now thanks to the likes of *Fall Guys*, and here's another crackers-looking offering from developer Recreate Games. As best we can work out, the game involves wrestling, punching, and generally roughing up your friends while in the guise of whimsical, overstuffed animals like puppies, kittens, and so on. There are also military vehicles like submarines and planes in the mix, and it all looks a tiny bit disquieting if we're being honest – but also tailor-made to get lots of views on Twitch and YouTube, so expect to see plenty more from this one in the coming months.

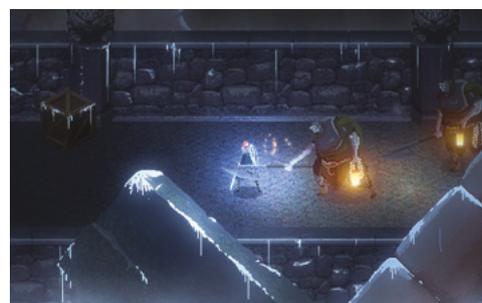


NEO: The World Ends With You ↗

Square Enix's action RPG *The World Ends With You* is getting a sequel, which means lots more slash-happy action and anime melodramatics – but the real reason we're looking forward to diving into *NEO* is because of its toon-rendered re-creation of Tokyo's Shibuya district. It was one of the highlights of the Nintendo DS original, and from what we've seen so far, it's going to be richer with detail than ever in this Nintendo Switch and PS4 follow-up, due out this year.

Humankind ↘

Amplitude Studios has already tickled our brains with the likes of *Endless Space* and its sequel, so we're greatly looking forward to *Humankind*, its take on a *Civilization*-style 4X strategy-'em-up. Building a city, developing new technology, and battering rivals in neighbouring territories – *Humankind* could well become another one of those engrossing games we turn on for a quick bout and inadvertently end up playing for hours on end.



Eitr ↗

Norse mythology's quite the in-thing lately, between *God of War*'s macho axe-waving and *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*'s icy drama. But *Eitr* provides a different take on the subject, with its sword-swinging action wrapped up in some fabulous isometric pixel art that reminds us passingly of the old Amiga title, *Moonstone*. Devolver is publishing this one, so we've high hopes it's picked another winner here.





New World ↗

Amazon Games didn't have the happiest of times with its first offering, the free-to-play MMO *Crucible*, which launched in May 2020 and then quietly shuffled out of existence again a few weeks later. Still, maybe the shopping giant's next foray into interactive entertainment will fare better: this is *New World*, an MMO set in the alternate world of Aeternum. Here, players will group together in teams of five, and as part of an even larger faction, set out to colonise a fantastical take on 16th-century America (hence the game's title) – expect the usual menu of activities you'd expect in a big online game, including crafting, PvP and PvE battles, and an economy that lets you flog your wares to other players for gold coins. Although we haven't delved into this one for ourselves just yet, the early verdicts from some players who've tested it out are extremely good – and from the footage we've seen, it sure looks pretty.

Will *New World* be a critique of humanity's grim capacity for colonialism and violence? An exploration of how entire continents can be founded on bloodshed? Or will it just be an excuse to hit stuff over the head with blunt instruments and have a jolly good time with our mates? After a couple of delays, we should be finding out this spring – assuming Amazon doesn't push its launch back again, of course.



In the Valley of Gods ↗

We loved *Firewatch*, so it absolutely stands to reason that we're looking forward to developer Campo Santo's follow-up, *In the Valley of Gods*. Brilliantly, it also manages to cover one of our favourite subjects: Egyptology. You're cast in the role of Rashida, a filmmaker exploring the tombs and monuments of the titular valley. It sounds like thoroughly enticing stuff – a first-person explore-'em-up, or a thinking person's *Tomb Raider*, if you will – so we're hoping we can coax Campo Santo into telling us more about its latest opus in an upcoming issue. Watch this space.



Scorn ↖

Serbia's EBB Software has been beavering away at this gloomy little number since 2014, and now it's preparing to bring the project into the current generation as a PC/Xbox Series X exclusive. The game's unabashedly inspired by the work of the late Swiss artist HR Giger, and there's a certain appeal to being plunged into a nightmarish, bio-mechanical world of squidgy walls and suggestive-looking doorways. We don't yet know how the first-person shooting action will compare to other Xbox offerings coming up – it has *Halo Infinite* to compete with, for one thing – but those shadowy, fleshy graphics are certainly a good showcase for the Series X's processing oomph. ➔

Construct the Headquarters building.
Gather carbonium 200/200

Attract Mode

Early Access



The Riftbreaker

This one looks like quite a mash-up: it takes in base-building, survival, and action RPG elements, and sees giant mechs tooling around a lush planet of exotic flora and fauna. Tactics, survival, and the odd bit of hack-and-slash dotted about the place? It's quite a raft of elements to balance, but *The Riftbreaker's* showing a lot of promise so far. You can give the demo a spin over on Steam, too: wfmag.cc/RiftyB.

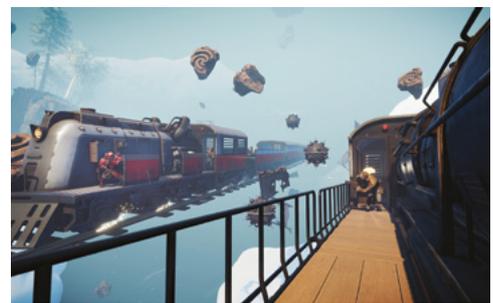
Backbone

If games such as *Inspector Waffles* and *Chicken Police* have taught us anything, it's that animals and noir detective adventures make for surprisingly happy bedfellows. The forthcoming *Backbone* is another gorgeous-looking example; a lovingly crafted yarn about a raccoon private detective roaming an alternate-universe Vancouver populated entirely by cats, foxes, and other furry creatures. It's a traditional point-and-click adventure at heart, but with some weighty themes on its mind. We can't wait to dig further into this one.



ASYLUM

So far as we can work out, this survival horror game has been in development since about 2010, but despite its lengthy gestation, *ASYLUM* is still very much alive and well. Inspired by Italian and British horror flicks of the sixties and seventies, *ASYLUM* hails from Argentine developer Agustín Cordes, who previously created the interactive chillers *Scratches* and *Serena*. Expect lots of puzzles, mysterious paintings, and a few splashes of gore here and there.



Voidtrain

Here's another survival game, this time with a curious locomotive theme. You're a mechanic plunged into an unfamiliar dimension where the laws of gravity seem to be all askew, and monsters float about the place. Naturally, you fall back on your training and decide to build train tracks, engines, and carriages to help you explore. It's a batty idea, alright – but admittedly, one perfectly suited to Steam (*You're fired – ed*).

Ready or Not ↴

The title may sound playful, but this ‘realistic’ first-person shooter is anything but. As a member of a SWAT police unit, you’ll be kicking down doors, rescuing hostages, and generally eliminating any mean-looking threat that passes in front of your cross-hairs. Developer VOID Interactive really is leaning into the realism aspect here, with talk of “ballistic penetration, ricochet, kevlar, and plate dynamics” all over *Ready or Not*’s Steam page. If ballistic penetration sounds like your thing, then here’s the tactical FPS for you.



Smalland ↴

Obsidian already has its *Honey, I Shrank The Kids*-inspired game – *Grounded* – in Early Access, but here comes Merge Games with a similar concept. As the trailer patter puts it: “You’ve been shrunk down to the size of tiny animals, and every rule has been changed.” Like *Grounded*, the chief aim in *Smalland* is survival – you’ll be gathering resources like food and water, crafting, and exploring, all while avoiding the assorted creatures that want to eat you. There are some playful elements thrown in to balance out the brutality, though, including riding rapids and traversing the forest on top of what looks like a toy train set. Will *Smalland* introduce enough fresh ideas to differentiate itself from *Grounded*? We’ll find out when it lands later this year.



The Ascent ↴

Assuming you aren’t exhausted by neon signs glaring down on filthy streets after playing *Cyberpunk 2077* for dozens of hours, then this action-RPG is definitely one for the watchlist. The isometric perspective, benighted city landscape, and bursts of blazing violence have us thinking back to Bullfrog’s old Amiga-era classic, *Syndicate* – and that really isn’t a bad thing. The important difference here is that, where *Syndicate* had you take on the role of a brutally amoral corporation, *The Ascent* places you at the control of ordinary people struggling to protect their district from the criminal and corporate elements threatening to tear it apart. It’s a great-looking game, rich with grimy detail and chaotic, industrial architecture, which is even more impressive given the team behind it – Sweden’s Neon Giant – is a comparatively small one.



Once upon
a time...

The epic history of

King's Quest

WRITTEN BY
JACK YARWOOD

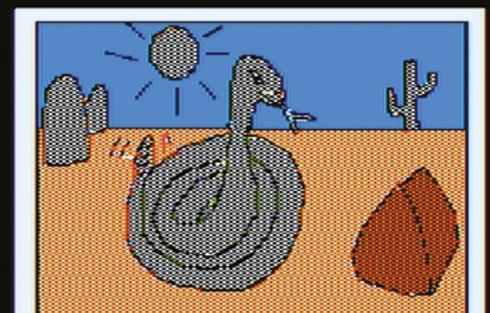
The making of Sierra On-Line's classic
adventure series – straight from the
developers who designed them



▲ Sierra's games were dazzlingly colourful for the time.

The King's Quest franchise owes its existence – in a roundabout way – to the teletype. In the late seventies, contract programmer Ken Williams brought one of these devices – essentially a printer which could send and receive messages – home with him from work. Keen to find the *Star Trek* game that had inspired his love of computing, Ken and his wife Roberta stumbled on a different title: Will Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure*. It was this pioneering text adventure that inspired the husband and wife duo to develop their own games, a dream they soon realised with *Mystery House* – the very first graphical adventure – as well as the formation of their own software company, On-Line Systems, later rebranded Sierra On-Line.

The company released many groundbreaking adventure games over the next 20 years, including *Space Quest*, *Quest for Glory*, and *Phantasmagoria*. It was the *King's Quest* series, however, that was most closely associated with Sierra On-Line's fortunes: from the original *King's Quest*, which was an early hit in 1984, to 1998's





▲ Manners make the man in the original *King's Quest*.



King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity, which saw the end of the Williams' involvement with the studio.

The couple no longer do many interviews about that era, and spend much of their time travelling the world on their boat, but we spoke to them recently, as well as other notable Sierra On-Line alumni, about the history of the *King's Quest* series, and its lasting legacy.

WIZARD AND THE PRINCESS

To tell the story of *King's Quest*, you first have to tell the story of 1980's *Wizard and the Princess* – a precursor of sorts to the *King's Quest* series. Taking place in the land of Serenia, it tasked players with rescuing King George's daughter Princess Priscilla from an evil wizard. The game was played using

a parser system, a textbox which allowed users to type their commands directly into the computer. It

was an important title for Sierra On-Line, not least because it was the company's first colour game, employing the use of dithering to create the illusion of a larger colour palette.

As a result, the game caught the attention of IBM, who not only licensed it for its computers under the title *Adventure in Serenia*, but also asked for an enhanced version for its upcoming IBM PCjr machine.

“The couple no longer do many interviews about that era, and spend much of their time travelling the world on their boat”

Roberta started developing this version of the game, but, as Ken recalls, “Roberta wanted to add animation.” So, instead of just doing a straightforward port, Roberta began developing a whole new title, which would become *King's Quest*.

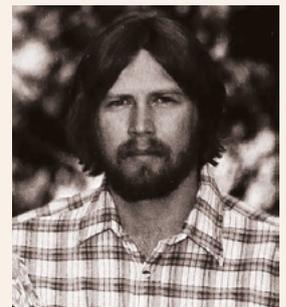
ARISE, SIR GRAHAM

King's Quest was Sierra On-Line's first game to use the AGI (Adventure Game Interpreter) engine instead of the spreadsheet-based engine they'd used on their earlier adventures. This new programming language allowed for more animation, giving the appearance of a character walking around in a pseudo-3D environment. It was an extraordinary feat for the time,

surprising even those inside the studio.

Much like *Wizard and the Princess*, *King's Quest* took place in a vast fantasy world,

with players exploring the Kingdom of Daventry. Taking control of the brave knight Sir Graham, you were required to retrieve three lost treasures for the ailing King Edward to prove yourself worthy of the crown. The adventure took Graham into a dragon's lair, a witch's den, and into the path of a terrifying ogre, with a single wrong move resulting in the knight's untimely demise. ➔



▲ Sierra On-Line's co-founders Ken and Roberta Williams now spend most of their time travelling the world on their own adventures.

Interface

The epic history of King's Quest



we were doing]," she says. "It was a game that people experienced with their families. We still hear from adults who remember playing *King's Quest* with their parents and grandparents... it was *the* game for families of that era."

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Family ended up being a key theme from then on. Following *King's Quest*, the first three sequels introduced players to King Graham's wife and kids. In *King's Quest II: Romancing the Throne* (1985), King Graham meets his wife, the beautiful princess Valanice locked away in a tower by the evil witch Hagatha. In *King's Quest III: To Heir is Human* (1986), players control Gwydion, a boy later revealed to be King Graham's long-lost son, Alexander. And in *King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella* (1988), players join Rosella as she sets off on her own adventure, travelling to the land of Tamir to find a magical fruit to save her sick father.

Each game brought new innovations. *King's Quest II* was the first to prominently feature a soundtrack, with former music teacher and Sierra On-Line programmer Al Lowe stepping in as composer. This desire to innovate was what kept the series relevant and players interested, but it didn't always result in the smoothest of development cycles. *King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella*, in particular, was a tough project, with a cavalcade of problems conspiring to delay it. The story goes that during production Ken and Roberta asked Sierra On-Line systems engineer Jeff Stephenson for new features, including 256 colours (the AGI system only supported 16) and the ability to use CD-ROM drives and sound cards. Stephenson took this as an excuse to also throw out the existing adventure-game-specific language for a new object-oriented

^ Forget *Dark Souls* – this beanstalk is the true benchmark of video game difficulty.

The game's punishing difficulty made sense when you consider the audience Roberta was designing for – those who only bought one or two games a year. "The games weren't supposed to allow you to just whip right through them," she says. "You needed to out-think the designer [to win]."

The original *King's Quest* was released on the PCjr in 1984, but had limited success due to the machine's commercial failure. Luckily, Sierra On-Line kept the rights to both the game and the engine, so Ken was able to quickly negotiate other releases, including versions for the Tandy 1000 and Apple II.

King's Quest: Quest for the Crown sold tremendously well, and sales climbed as the months went on. Plans for a sequel started almost straight away, with Roberta recognising the demand to know what happened next. "The huge sales, fan letters, and everyone asking for a sequel, all indicated that people liked [what



> Gotta love the time-honoured adventure game tradition of 'finders keepers'.





programming language in the new SCI (Sierra's Creative Interpreter) engine. "The benefits... were significant," Stephenson says. "In the old AGI system, pretty much any sort of behaviour you wanted in the game first had to be programmed into the game system itself before it could be used to write the game. With a general-purpose language like SCI, the game developers could write the behaviour themselves – in the game, without any work in the engine."

There was a problem, however. *King's Quest IV* continued the tradition of being somewhat of a testing ground for new programmers at Sierra On-Line. The new team not only had to get used to the realities of working on and shipping a game, but had to familiarise themselves with a completely new language overnight. As Lowe remembers, "In late August 1988, they called me in and said, 'Will you take a look at this game? Roberta doesn't think it's going to be done in a month.' And I looked at it and said, 'It ain't gonna be done in a year.' So we called off every other game in the company. Every other game was put on hiatus and we all programmed *King's Quest IV* for 30 days. And when I say 30 days, I mean 30 solid days like you would work until you couldn't see any more..."

With the current conversations around crunch in the games industry and its effects on workers, it's hard to hear comments like this from Lowe without flinching a little. Not only because of the impact this may have had on workers at the time, but because stories like this are still so depressingly familiar in an industry where innovation and passion often go hand in hand with terrible working conditions and excessive

crunch. While it can be argued that the industry didn't know any better at the time, it's much harder to make the case for that now as the industry has become more formalised.

With all hands on deck, *King's Quest IV* managed to release on schedule in 1988 and was another hit for the studio. *King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart Go Yonder!* followed in 1990, with a sequel, *King's Quest VI: Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow*, releasing two years after. Both games expanded on the *King's Quest* formula, boasting gorgeous VGA graphics and the introduction of voice acting, referred to internally as 'Mother Goose', due to its connection to another game Roberta Williams had previously worked on called 'Mixed-Up Mother Goose'.

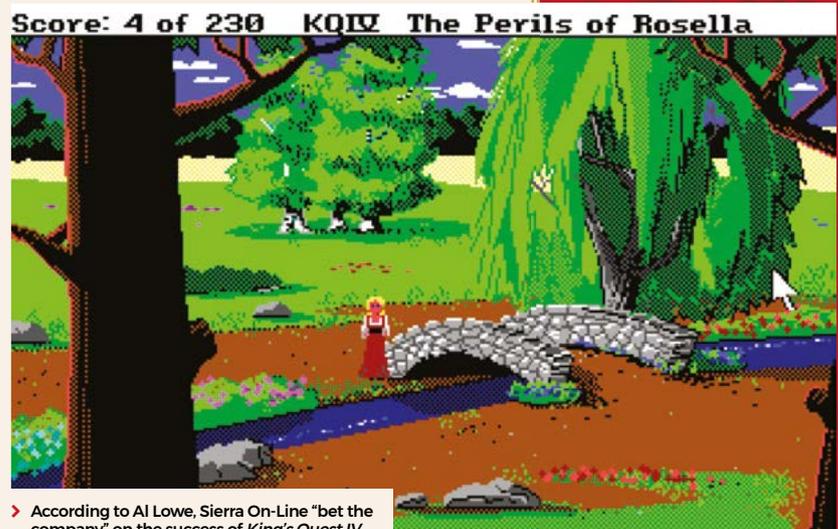
The decision was also made to switch the game from a tried-and-tested parser system to a cursor system from *King's Quest V* onwards – this came about after Roberta had witnessed her mother struggling to play her games. Ken assumed the change would inspire a flurry of hate mail, but in the spring 1991 issue of

Sierra On-Line's own InterAction magazine, he noted a mostly positive reception from fans of the studio. In the same issue, in fact, a parent wrote in with a story about their disabled son being able to complete their first *King's Quest* game with the use of a modified mouse. ➔

"We still hear from adults who remember playing King's Quest with their parents and grandparents"

Close Encounters

Before Sierra On-Line released the first *King's Quest* game, the video game crash of 1983 occurred, resulting in huge layoffs at the studio and payments the company was unable to make. These costs included the lease of a new studio in Oakhurst, California. According to Ken, it was Roberta who stepped up to keep the "dogs away from the door", taking on the role of purchasing agent to negotiate payment plans for any outstanding bills. Ken, meanwhile, went on the hunt for more financing for projects, using the progress they had made on *King's Quest*, to successfully sell IBM on other game ideas. This was enough to hire back some of the staff they had lost.



➤ According to Al Lowe, Sierra On-Line "bet the company" on the success of *King's Quest IV*.



Girl in the Tower

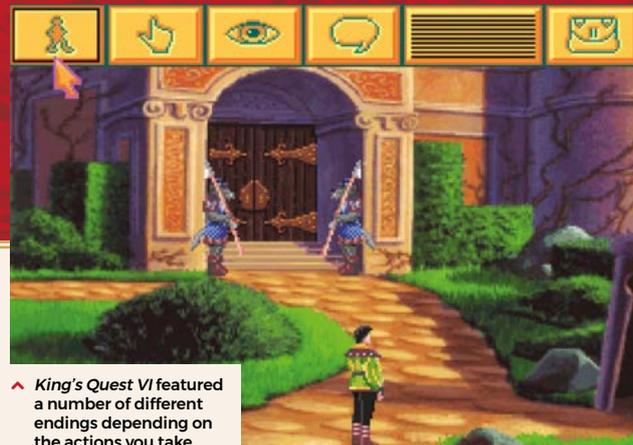
Sierra On-Line included a list of phone numbers for radio stations in the *King's Quest VI* box as a publicity stunt. The idea was for fans to call in and request the game's theme song *Girl in the Tower* to be played. But things backfired when angry radio stations started calling Sierra On-Line HQ, complaining about gamers jamming their phone lines. Talking about the stunt in 2003 on the Sierra Game Forums, Ken Williams said: "We sold around 400,000 copies of *King's Quest VI* the first week. Imagine 400,000 people calling radio stations at the same time to request the same song. Some played it, but most just got angry and called me, or had their lawyers call me. We jammed the phone lines. Radio stations threatened to sue me. I don't remember what crime they alleged that I committed, but in my opinion, the radio stations were the criminals for ignoring their customers – something I believe no business should ever do."

"We always wanted to add voices, better music, great animation, 3D, live actors, anything that would enhance the experience," says Roberta. "Anything that would add realism, we did. Everything is a progression. As soon as the machines could handle something, we wanted to take advantage of it. When you can, you do."

Following the success of *King's Quest V* and *VI*, the *King's Quest* series took a dramatic left turn with 1994's *King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride*. The game eschewed the look of the previous two games for a cleaner, more Disney-like aesthetic. It was an attempt to push the envelope even further, using traditional hand-drawn techniques to create more elaborate worlds. But for some, it was too great a departure, and perhaps an attempt to ride on the coat-tails of the Disney renaissance that was also happening at the time.

"The art style was something Roberta wanted to do," claims Mark Seibert, who was a producer on the project. He acknowledges the influence Disney films such as *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* had on the project, and remembers that Sierra On-Line contracted several different animation houses to help complete the scenes the project required. This resulted in heavy delays as Seibert and his team had to co-ordinate with multiple studios to ensure the animation remained consistent. Says Seibert: "I recall going to work on a Monday morning one week and not going back home until Thursday afternoon – I think the team started a pool on when I might fall asleep at my desk."

"I recall going to work on a Monday morning one week and not going back home until Thursday afternoon"



^ *King's Quest VI* featured a number of different endings depending on the actions you take.

When asked about overtime at Sierra On-Line, Seibert recalls "it was often 'mandatory', but we always tried to avoid that as it can only go on for so long. *King's Quest* games, or Roberta's games, were often notorious for being behind schedule due to the high level of innovation involved. That often created a lot of unknowns that just couldn't be scheduled. So many times, those of us on her projects just worked a little harder and later to get it done. I worked many 70- to 100-hour weeks during 'crunch' time."

TOO MANY COOKS

Today, *King's Quest VII* remains something of an oddity for those revisiting the series, as does *King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity*. Between the release of *King's Quest VII* and the start of development on the next *King's Quest* game, there were huge changes at Sierra On-Line. The biggest being that Ken and Roberta sold Sierra On-Line to the e-commerce company, Comp-U-Card.

It was under these peculiar circumstances that *King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity* was developed, with Roberta remaining at the company to try and complete the project. She refers to its development now as "an involuntary team effort", while Ken notes that Roberta grew increasingly upset at having her ideas and suggestions ignored, often coming home in tears. According to Ken, while he was at the company, he was an important intermediary between Roberta and the programmers, convincing them to try and accomplish her more "impossible" ideas. Without him there, her bargaining position was significantly weakened and as a result, she was unable to push her ideas as well as she had in the past.

King's Quest was also being developed on an external engine for the first time, created by Dynamix. As Seibert recalls: "Unfortunately,

✓ *King's Quest V* represented a huge graphical leap forward for the series, due to the introduction of VGA graphics.





▲ In *King's Quest VII*, players joined both Valanice and Rosella on a perilous adventure.

they weren't developing the engine specifically for *King's Quest*, and so our goals weren't always the same. After about a year, we chose to take the engine code to Seattle and finish it ourselves. This put us significantly behind."

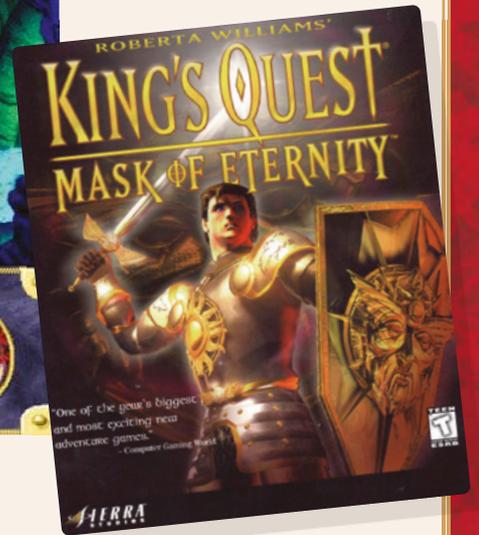
The initial plan for *King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity* was to make a 3D action-adventure, and continue the 'movie-like' approach they'd established with *Phantasmagoria* while introducing some lite-RPG mechanics. Players controlled a new character, Connor, who must rise to the occasion when King Graham and his family are turned to stone. For many players, *King's Quest VIII* was a somewhat disappointing end to a revolutionary series. For years after its release, rumours swirled about a potential sequel or reboot, but all attempts came to nought. That is, until August 2014, when rights holders Activision announced that indie studio The Odd Gentlemen was working on a revival. A love letter to *King's Quest*, it acted as both a sequel and a retelling of the series' events. Released episodically, the game was about family, succession, and managed to tie a neat bow on the series almost 30 years after it began.

"For us, the main concern was making sure the Williamses felt we had done their property justice," says Evan Cagle, the art director on 2015's *King's Quest*. "When we showed it to them, and they were excited about it, we knew we were on the right track."

According to Cagle, development was far from easy. The team had gone for an ambitious hand-painted art style, so to prepare for future episodes, they had to create all the requisite assets prior to releasing episode one. During development, however, they soon realised the need for more assets to prevent repetition. This



caused some notable delays in between episode releases, which combined with Activision's lack of marketing – and the decision to restrict the *Epilogue's* availability to the *Complete Collection* release – stacked the odds against it succeeding. There's been no news of a new *King's Quest* since The Odd Gentlemen wrapped development on *King's Quest* in 2016; Activision later abandoned its relaunch of the Sierra On-Line brand, leaving its future uncertain. As for Ken and Roberta, they're both retired, though they still speak fondly of their time with the series and continue to receive mountains of emails and letters from fans. For now, King Graham's journey is at an end. But with the *King's Quest* series still loved by so many, there's always the chance that another adventurer will one day take on the mantle. [w](#)

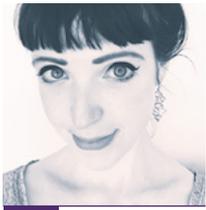


▲ *King's Quest VIII* is arguably the black sheep of the family.



▲ The first episode of *King's Quest* (2015), *A Knight To Remember*, recounts the events of *King's Quest I* and how Graham became King.

Gather Your Arty



LOTTIE BEVAN

Lottie's a producer and co-founder of award-winning narrative microstudio Weather Factory, best known for *Cultist Simulator*. She's one of the youngest female founders in the industry, a BAFTA Breakthrough Brit, and founder of Coven Club, a women in games support network. She produces, markets, bizzes, and arts, and previously produced *Fallen London*, *Zubmariner*, and *Sunless Skies* at Failbetter Games.

“Given the option, people like being a hotter version of themselves”

You've probably heard the phrase 'art imitates life', where art reflects society's real-world interests and views. Think Banksy, or *The Mummy 3* being all about how China scares

the US. But you've also probably heard the phrase 'life imitates art', where reality copies what art presents. Think body dysmorphia from Instagram or people being kinder because they watched a Tom Hanks film. Games seem divided on which way round the equation should go: broadly, players go one way and developers the other.

Larian Studios recently put *Baldur's Gate 3* to general acclaim (and a spot on the last edition's cover). Two months later, and it's sitting pretty at 88% positive on Steam with 29,000 reviews. Boxleiter maths would conservatively estimate that to be 1.5 million sales, which means it grossed £72,000,000 already – and it's still in Early Access. But less shiny was the mild industry buzz around a Steam update a week after launch. In the post, Larian gently ribbed its players for choosing, on average, a generically handsome white guy as their player character rather than the more exotic options offered by the character creation system. “We gave you demon eyes, horns, and even tails,” they wrote. “We are sorely disappointed.”

This was widely reported in industry press as a fittingly progressive dunk on white male gamers. A lot of those articles chose to run the

story with a headline image of a generically sexy female character with heavy eye make-up, but that's for another day. For now, it's worth digging into why the most popular player character was, in Larian's words, “the default Vault Dweller”.

From Larian's point of view, it's a shame that so many people weren't interested in the creative range available to them. But the player character is just that: the player's character. Given the option, most people like being a hotter version of themselves. This is why gyms, make-up brands, and cosmetic surgery are multibillion-dollar industries. The majority of gamers are real white men, some of whom are probably not as beautiful as they'd like to be. So it's unsurprising and benign that the most popular player character is a handsome white guy.

Larian hoped players would follow the game's lead and play a variety of diverse characters: they'd expected life to imitate art. Players hoped Larian would let them play the game in their image: they wanted art to imitate life. We laughed at those players, though it's worth remembering that the reason we want diverse characters in the first place is so minorities can look in-game like they do in real life. It's not coherent to laud some people for wanting that and laugh at others for the same thing.

Reality, as ever, is complicated. Art doesn't exist in a vacuum, and it's not in an isolated dialectic with life. It exists in a boiling chaotic mess of influences and experiences and context. It's vital to treat the world as it is – when we don't, we get Trump and Brexit. Games are still overwhelmingly played by white men, and that's neither apocalypse nor Utopia. We can encourage increasing diversity from our existing audience, as Larian has done, by offering diverse options and encouraging players to step out of their comfort zone. But art isn't enough. If we want player characters to be as diverse as *Baldur's Gate 3* wants them to be, we need to diversify the playerbase. And that's a long-term unsexy series of school talks and outreach and socio-economic change and non-game-making things that many of us don't have the time to pursue. But unless we do that, change will be slow. We'll make art for the audience we wish we had and scorn the one we do. 🗨️



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Competition closes on Monday 1 February 2021. Prize is offered to participants worldwide aged 13 or over, except employees of the Raspberry Pi Foundation, the prize supplier, their families or friends. Winners will be notified by email no more than 30 days after the competition closes. By entering the competition, the winner consents to any publicity generated from the competition, in print and online. Participants agree to receive occasional newsletters from Wireframe magazine. We don't like spam: participants' details will remain strictly confidential and won't be shared with third parties. Prizes are non-negotiable, and no cash alternative will be offered. Winners will be contacted by email to arrange delivery. Any winners who have not responded 60 days after the initial email is sent will have their prize revoked.

GAME

South of the Circle

DEVELOPER

State of Play

RELEASE

Out now

WEBSITE

wfmag.cc/southcircle





South of the Circle

South of the Circle deals with themes of survival – both in the present, where our protagonist is attempting to cross the Antarctic, as well as in their past, which makes itself known through more than just flashbacks. But all along the way, it's presented in a form of gorgeous desolation.

"The style was inspired by mid-century screen printing, including book covers by artists like Brian Cook, and travel posters of the era, which give the game a sense of time and place," explains Luke Whittaker, creative director at State of Play. "Artists like Edward Hopper also inspired the compositions and colour palette."

"This image shows Peter, the Cambridge scientist you play, driving up and over a mountain in a Mini, converted into a snow-going vehicle with snow tracks," Whittaker continues. "This was a real vehicle they put together in Antarctica in the 1960s; our research showed us how resourceful they had to be out there at the time with limited technology and budget."

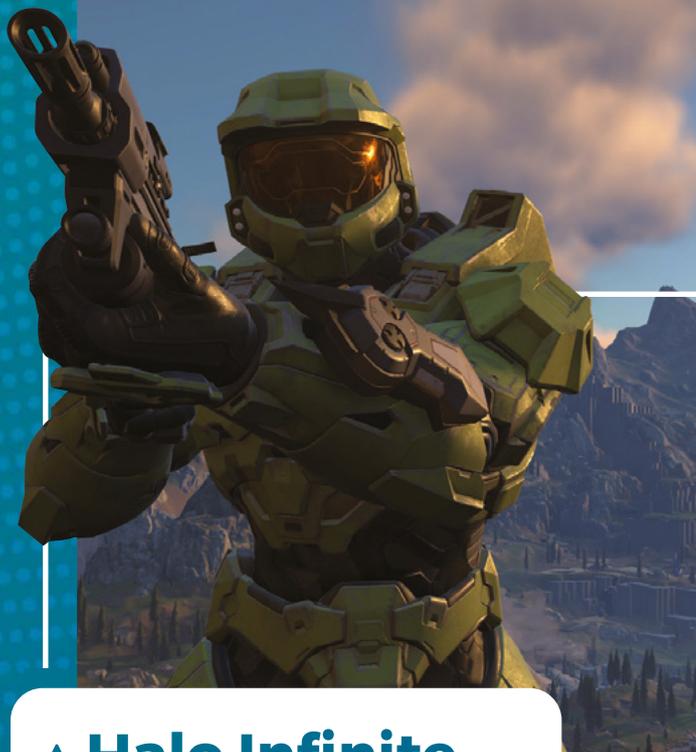
GAMING STUFF

— TO LOOK —
FORWARD TO IN

2021

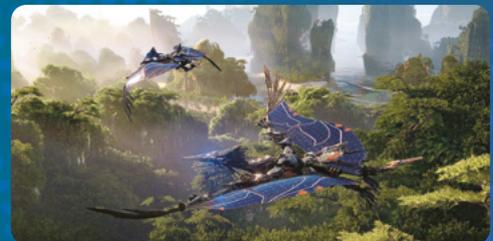
The pandemic may have cast a pall over 2020, so here's hoping this year will be a brighter one. With this in mind, join us as we look ahead to all the gaming-related things we have to look forward to in 2021 – big games, yes, but also plucky indies, hardware, and a couple of movie adaptations...

WRITTEN BY
IAN DRANSFIELD
AND RYAN LAMBIE



▲ Halo Infinite

The infinite wait for *Halo Infinite* continues, as Microsoft and 343 Industries has pushed Master Chief's latest alien-blasting lore-'em-up back another few months, into the autumn. Originally intended to be a launch title for the Xbox Series S/X, it's telling just how significant a delay this has become – and shows just how much *Infinite's* final quality matters to both the developer and platform holder. The core game sounds like it's all but done beyond polish, with recently hired creative director Joseph Staten saying he's played through it at least twice (and that he was "stunned" by it, of course), so this extra time sounds like it's being focused on upgrading the graphics significantly and a heck of a lot of other polishing and tweaking elsewhere. As long as there's a tribute to Craig the Brute in there, we'll surely be happy.



▲ Horizon Forbidden West

Guerrilla Games' post-apocalyptic world of marauding robot animals was an intoxicating one in 2017, and *Horizon Zero Dawn* remains one of the finest console games of the last generation. Its setting felt like a genuinely hostile, dangerous place, where humanity was no longer anywhere near the top of the food chain. How, then, will Guerrilla take advantage of the PS5's extra processing power and DualSense controller for *Horizon Forbidden West*? While we'll have to wait and see on that front, we're already impressed by the footage we've seen of the sequel so far: protagonist Aloy now roams a devastated California, a place where yet more fearsome mechanical creatures and mysteries await. If Guerrilla can retain – and even improve on – the tense, enthralling hunting mechanics from the first *Horizon*, then *Forbidden West* could end up as one of 2021's finest games.

THE BIG HITTERS



▼ Hogwarts Legacy

So very much pressure. Avalanche Software is handling the first major Harry Potter title in a fair old while – sorry, Wizarding World – as young Hazza makes no appearance here, what with it being set in the 1800s. Anyway, Avalanche has some chops when it comes to making kid-friendly adventures, with its experience in the decent *Disney Infinity* toys-to-life series getting it through a stint under the watchful gaze of the *House of Mouse*. How this will translate to an open-world title with players taking on the role of a young wizard as they attend classes, then bunk off and get into spell-flinging duels behind the broomstick shed, is yet to be seen. There's such a tightrope to walk – the huge licence means plenty of eyes are on *Hogwarts Legacy*. The fact it will be a top tier new-gen release within the first twelve-or-so months of the new Xbox and PlayStation gives it extra importance, and the raw *expectation* of the fan base means anything other than spectacular will be a let-down. So yeah, sorry to bring it up like this, Avalanche, but the pressure really is on here.



▲ Resident Evil Village

It's *Resident Evil 8*, but they're not calling it that. Instead, we get the decidedly strange decision to call it *Resident Evil Village*, like it's a horror-themed take on Pontins or something. Regardless of the odd naming, though, this is one we are extremely keen on. *Resident Evil VII* was an absolute barnstormer of a horror game in its own right, never mind a bold and terrifying reinvention of the series that had lost its way somewhat over the past decade. There's the chance this could work against *Resident Evil Village*, of course – the fact we now *expect* great horror biting it on the bum like a particularly rude zombie – but there's no reason to believe the tenth main entry will leave us wanting. Plus Chris Redfield's back, so it's possible we'll again get to hear a man with gigantic biceps asking for eggs before punching a rock.



▲ GhostWire: Tokyo

Tango Gameworks' third game and second new IP, *GhostWire: Tokyo* is a) a PS5 console exclusive made by Bethesda, which is owned by Microsoft, and b) described as 'karate meets magic'. OK, so on the first point, it's only an exclusive for about twelve months, then it'll surely appear on Xbox. And the second point? Well, that's where the fun comes in: *GhostWire* sees you travelling around an abandoned Tokyo hunting ghosts and other such supernatural, spirit-y beings using your magical attacks which are indeed based on martial arts. It's a directorial debut for Kenji Kimura, one would assume with direction from Tango's Shinji Mikami, and also has Shinichiro Hara on board – a combat designer from 2016's *DOOM*. So while the director himself might not be wholly proven in the role, he's backed up by some solid talent. It's going to be fun to see what Tango does outside of the survival horror genre, with *GhostWire* tilting far more towards action than horror. ➔

MUST-PLAY INDIES



▲ Axiom Verge 2

Indie developer Thomas Happ has a tough act to follow, given just how good the original *Axiom Verge* was: its Metroid-esque alien world, full of bizarre creatures and exotic weapons, was riveting to explore. To his credit, Happ's going for a markedly different style for the sequel: where the first game was all shadowy chambers and bio-mechanoid critters, *Axiom Verge 2* goes for a brighter, more colourful palette, and environments that look almost Mesopotamian – statues with enormous beards are the order of the day here. As well as being a top-notch game designer, Happ's also an accomplished storyteller, so we're looking forward to seeing what sci-fi yarn he has in store for us this time.

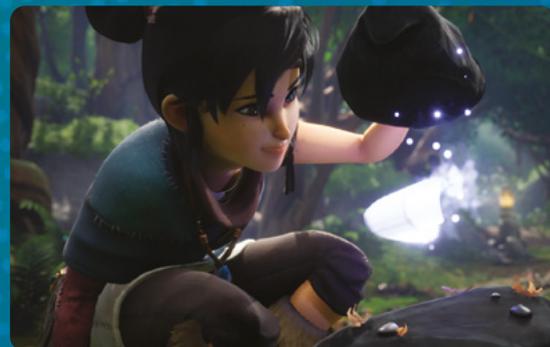
▼ Endling

We all need some positivity after that *thing* that was 2020, and *Endling* – bleak as it might look on first glance – could well give us that jolt of hope we all so clearly need. For those who didn't see our coverage of the game in issue 41, you play as a mother fox, looking after her cubs in a post-disaster world riddled with dangers both natural and human-made, though mainly the latter. It's a wordless tale of survival, with a hint of horror, and the bravery to offer something we might well recognise as 'the potential for a happy ending'. That said, it could just make us all even sadder. Be fun to find out, anyway.



▲ No More Heroes III

The last mainline entry to this series came out in 2010, meaning it'll have been an eleven-year wait for *No More Heroes III*, Goichi Suda's continuing adventure of Travis Touchdown. That's long enough to be forgiven for thinking it would never be happening, to be fair. Anyway, *NMHI* sees Travis battling a full-on alien invasion this time around, with the extra-terrestrial baddies who have, handily, adopted superpowers in order to help them conquer the Earth. It can never be easy, can it? After such a long wait we're excited to see what rich ideas have been percolating in the brain of Suda51; hopefully this Switch exclusive will let him unleash his best work yet.



▲ Kena: Bridge of Spirits

The first game from US studio Ember Lab, *Kena* is a third-person action-adventure with some really gorgeous character and environmental designs. As the titular warrior, you roam a leafy fantasy world populated by creatures both cute and deadly; the action looks a little like a late *Zelda* game, but the style and attention to detail set it apart: the particle effects and textures on display should really pop on the PlayStation 5. Impressively, this slick-looking game was created by a relatively small team of around 14 designers. If the gameplay can match the visuals and sound, we should be in for a treat here.



▲ R-Type Final 2

It's been over 15 years since the last proper *R-Type* game, and it's fair to say that side-scrolling shoot-'em-ups have only grown more niche in the intervening years. But developer Granzella, led by the director who oversaw the previous *R-Type Final*, is looking to bring both the series and the genre back in style. Built in Unreal Engine 4, the awkwardly named *R-Type Final 2* brings a retro genre up-to-date with some swanky lighting and explosion effects. The humble shoot-'em-up probably won't break back into the mainstream anytime soon, but games like this will, we hope, keep the old flame burning for a while longer.



▲ Sable

We've been looking forward to getting our hands on *Sable* ever since we first previewed it in these pages way back in 2019. First, there's the look of the thing: it's an open-world game with the pen-and-ink style of the late artist Jean 'Moebius' Giraud, and will see us traversing lonely desert landscapes on a futuristic hoverbike. We're told to expect plenty of environmental puzzles, but it's the exploration we're most enthusiastic about: developer Shedworks' sci-fi world looks like one well worth getting lost in.



▲ Balan Wonderworld

Although hardly made on a shoestring like some indie games, this forthcoming opus from Yuji Naka and Naoto Ohshima isn't exactly a triple-A release, either, so we thought we'd slot it in here. The *Sonic the Hedgehog* duo are teaming up for another fantastical action adventure, though this one looks more like a spiritual successor to *Nights into Dreams* than anything starring the blue blur. It's a colourful fantasy game with a musical theme; we can't yet know whether it'll live up to Naka and Ohshima's finest works of the nineties, but we're more than willing to give it a shot.

▶ 12 Minutes

This mystery-thriller looked intriguing enough in its early stages, but the arrival of publisher Annapurna Interactive has given developer Luis Antonio the resources to spice it up even more with motion-captured performances and voice-acting. It's the concept that intrigues us the most, though: a mysterious intruder breaks into a couple's flat one evening and murders your protagonist's wife. To solve the mystery, you work through the same twelve minutes over and over, hunting for clues. With its eerily detached top-down perspective, this looks like a fascinating take on the increasingly popular genre of time-loop games we've seen of late.



◀ SkateBIRD

The title isn't misleading: it's a skateboarding game – with birds. Indie developer Megan Fox's upcoming sports title looks absolutely adorable, and quite relaxing, to boot. Courses are cobbled together from bits of cardboard and sticky tape, and you'll be able to kit your avian skater out in little hats and scarves. There's a proper skating game under all the whimsy, though, with all the flips, grabs, and grinding you'd find in, say, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. We can't wait for this one.

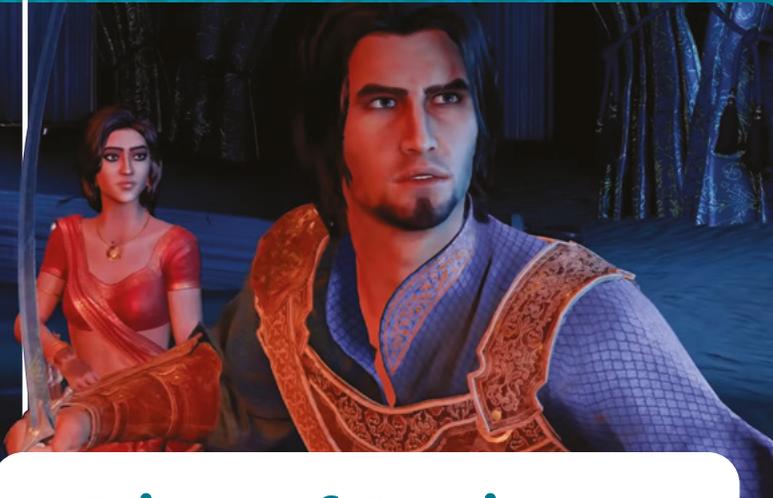


◀ Jett: The Far Shore

It's been a while since Superbrothers has had a hand in anything that's seen release, with its eponymous *Sword & Sworcery EP* releasing back in 2011. But here we are, gearing up for something new from the enigmatic Canadian team, alongside co-creators Pine Scented and music by scntfc. So what is *Jett: The Far Shore*? Well, it's a game where we'll be exploring an ocean planet, blundering through a stylish adventure, and investigating the mysteries within, all backed up by Superbrothers' penchant (based off one game) for style, depth, and intelligence in its creative output. ▶



REMAKES & REMASTERS



▲ Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

Young 'uns could do with some learning forced on them – like a swift reminder that, before the original release of this game, the action-adventure genre tended to be wafer-thin and presented itself as little more than an interactive popcorn movie. At best, *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* flipped the script, presenting players with a stylish and genuinely quite good story, unique presentation, and backed it all up with a game that was as inventive as it was fun to play, with a combat system and time-rewind mechanics that are still riffed on to this day. A remake of the master, therefore, we welcome with open arms.



▲ Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX

Sega is pleasantly open to letting fans of its back catalogue get involved in the revival of its much-loved mascots – *Sonic Mania*, for example, began life as a fan-made project. Similarly, the upcoming remake of Master System platformer *Alex Kidd* was itself the product of some enthusiastic fans, before Sega stepped in and made it an official product – and we can see why they were impressed enough to add their stamp of approval. It takes the 8-bit original and gives it a welcome lick of modern paint, with hand-drawn characters and more detailed backgrounds. It looks like a cracking remake so far.

▼ Mass Effect Legendary Edition

The original BioWare trilogy comes to modern formats, remastered and bundled together with all its disparate DLC to make the ultimate collection of one of the finest western RPG series ever seen. Yes, even with the damp squib ending *Mass Effect 3* once had. A *Mass Effect* collection is especially exciting since we've not seen a release of the original trilogy in almost a decade, so there's been enough time for it all to feel fresh again. And newcomers? You're in for a treat. Especially with the music.



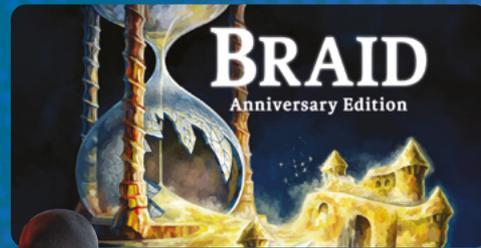
▼ The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe

Opportunity knocks twice, it seems, as this return gives all those who missed it first time around the chance to atone and blunder their way through one of the wittiest and most meta video games seen in... well, ever. *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* contains the whole of the original release, as you would expect, with a host of extra content, tweaks, nips, and tucks slathered liberally on top. It's coming to consoles as well as PC, and it's something you should all both look forward to and *actually play* when it eventually releases. Notice we're not telling you anything about the game specifically here? Yeah, that's because it's one of those games. To say anything would be to ruin the fun, the surprise, the humour within.



▼ Braid, Anniversary Edition

For some reason celebrating its 13th anniversary or thereabouts, *Braid, Anniversary Edition* (yes, the comma is part of the title) sees the indie classic get more than just a bit of spit and polish. We'll see the game repainted in higher resolution, with new animations, reworked audio, and a commentary track so you can listen in on the whys and hows of the game from its enigmatic creator, Jonathan Blow (and, of course, others involved in the making of both versions). And if none of that tickles your fancy? Just press a button to get back to the original version, graphics, sounds, and all. It's win-win.



TECH & MOVIES



▲ Uncharted (the movie)

After absolutely years in development – remember when Mark Wahlberg was originally going to play the lead? – the movie adaptation of Naughty Dog's blockbuster series is finally on the home stretch. Filming has wrapped, and Tom Holland is front and centre as a youthful Nathan Drake. Oh, and Wahlberg isn't out of a job, either: he's moved over to the role of Sully, Drake's friend and mentor. How faithful to the video games will it be? Well, we're hoping for lots of scenes where Nate guns down entire armies of villains, makes a glib joke about it, and then scuttles off to nick some more treasure.

▼ Analogue Duo

Analogue is a company that makes *good hardware*. Look online and you'll find complaints about limited stock, opaque pre-order practices, and early-day bugs in its machines, yes. But look a bit harder, find those who own anything Analogue has made, and you'll find a hell of a lot of people absolutely overjoyed with some of the most faithful, and beautiful, FPGA console re-creations in the world. And now it's the turn of the PC Engine/TurboGrafx and its variations. The Analogue Duo is compatible with TurboGrafx-16, PC Engine, SuperGrafx, TurboGrafx CD, PC Engine CD-ROM², and Super Arcade CD-ROM² games – disc and card – and offers a magnificent way to play old games on a modern display, with all manner of customisable elements behind the scenes to make things look as crisp or as retro as you want them to. We're gushing a bit, but as proud owners of both Analogue's Super Nt and Mega Sg, we've supreme confidence the Duo will be another winner. At least once its firmware is sorted a few months post-launch...



► Playdate

This cute device caused quite a stir when it was first announced in May 2019. Nearly two years on, and we'll soon be able to check it out for ourselves. In case you aren't familiar, it's a handheld console distinguished by a little handle on one side, which could be used for all kinds of interesting mechanics if developers have the imagination to integrate it into their games – or it could prove to be a quaint-looking gimmick. Playdate's other novel idea is how games will be delivered: they'll arrive monthly as surprise launches, and developers such as Keita Takahashi and Zach Gage are among the names already signed up.



▲ Mortal Kombat (the movie)

We've had movie adaptations of Midway's ultra-violent beat-'em-up series in the past – the 1995 one even starred the mighty Christopher 'Highlander' Lambert – and they weren't what you'd call classics. Nor did they delve too deeply into the gorier aspects of the *Mortal Kombat* game franchise – the infamously grotesque Fatality moves were conspicuous by their absence. The filmmakers behind this new movie are reportedly aiming for an R rating, however, so there's a strong possibility that we'll see the games' assorted spine-ripping and face-melting splashed across the big screen. That should make up for the absence of Christopher Lambert.

▼ Polymega

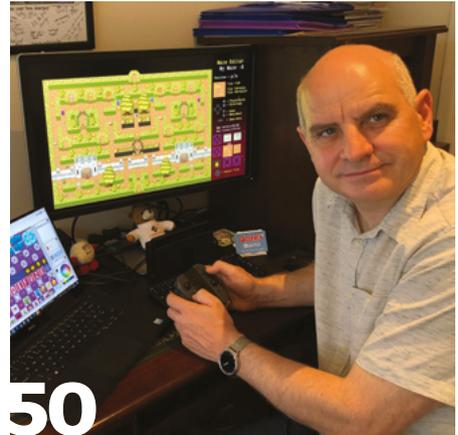
OK, so it's not the FPGA system we originally hoped for, but Playmaji's upcoming retro console still has plenty going for it. First, there's its novel design, which will allow you to plug different modules to the front of the base system, depending on which classic console you want to emulate. Systems supported so far include the Sega Mega Drive, PC Engine, NES, SNES, and Saturn, and early reports suggest that the emulation is pretty solid. Each of those modules also has the appropriate port – depending on which console it supports – so you'll be able to use your existing Mega Drive or NES controllers if you still have them lying around. The versatility aspect alone makes this one of the more interesting clone systems on the horizon. 🤖



Toolbox

The art, theory, and production of video games

- 46. CityCraft**
Exploring Final Fantasy VII's iconic city, Midgar
- 48. Design Principles**
The flight that led to the creation of the infamous E.T.
- 50. Developing for Nintendo Switch**
The Oliver Twins on making their first game in 25 years
- 58. Narrative Design**
More invaluable expert advice from Antony de Fault
- 60. A guide to testing your game**
...without the expense of a quality assurance team
- 66. Source Code**
Recreate the tense puzzling of 1989's Pipe Mania



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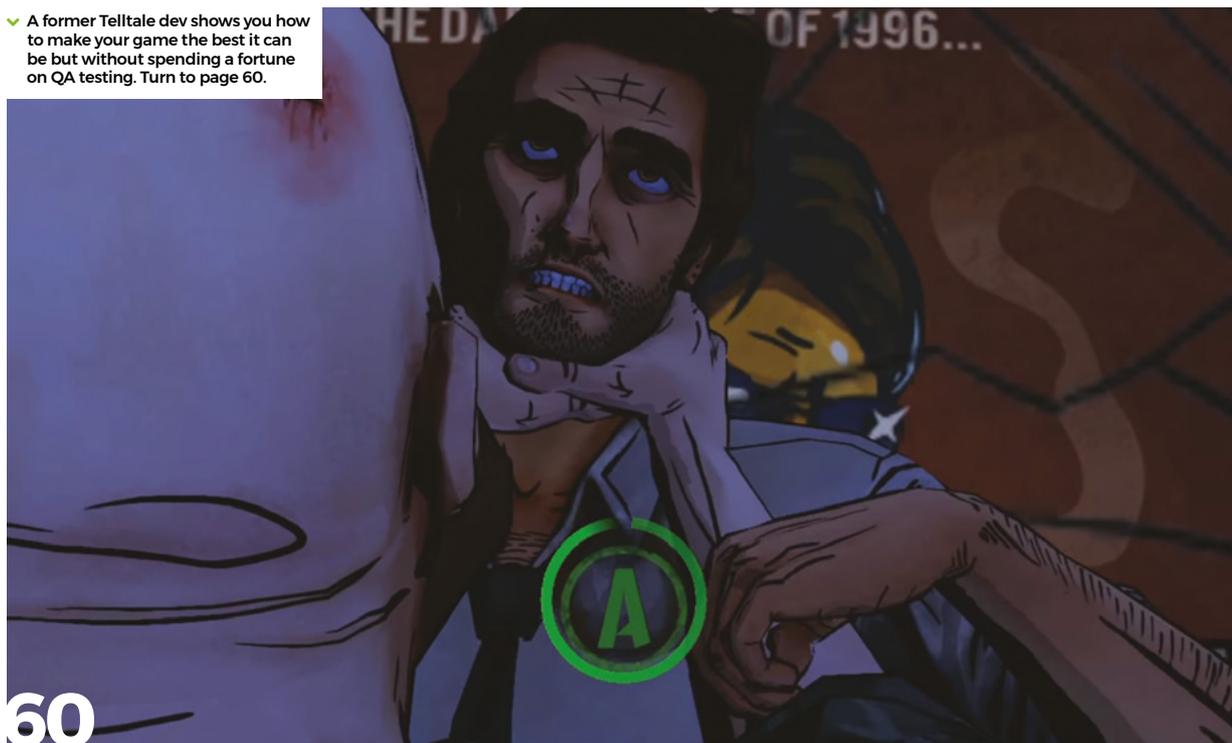
▲ The Oliver Twins show you how they developed *Fast Food* for the Nintendo Switch using FUZE. See page 50.



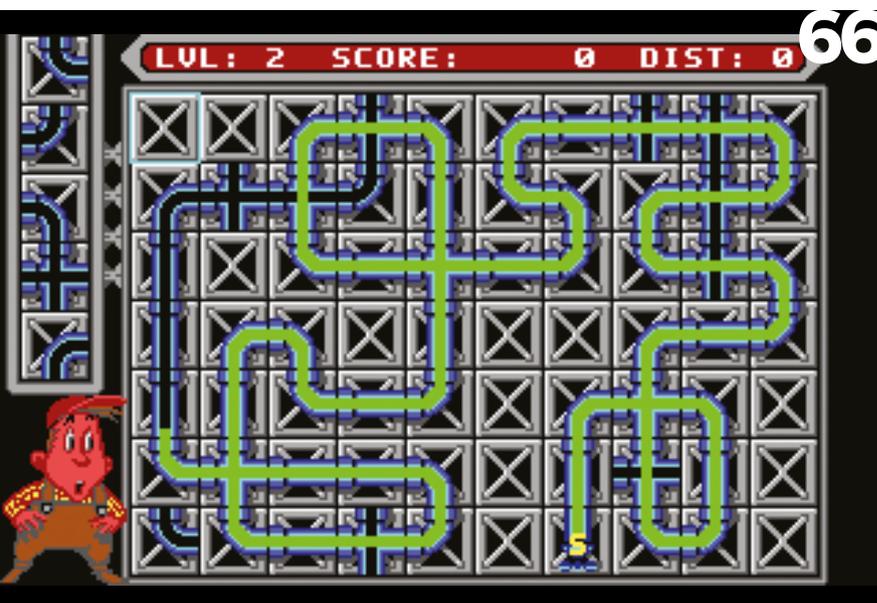
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▲ What makes *Final Fantasy VII*'s Midgar such an effective game location? Find out on page 46.

✓ A former Telltale dev shows you how to make your game the best it can be but without spending a fortune on QA testing. Turn to page 60.



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✓ Code a Python and Pygame homage to the frantic 1989 puzzler, *Pipe Mania*. See page 66.

✓ Howard Scott Warshaw shares his memories of flying to director Steven Spielberg's office on page 48.



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Exploring Final Fantasy VII's Midgar

A look at the design choices that made Final Fantasy VII's city an icon of virtual urbanism



AUTHOR
KONSTANTINOS DIMOPOULOS

Konstantinos Dimopoulos is a game urbanist and designer combining a PhD in urban planning with video games. He is the author of *Virtual Cities* atlas, designs game cities, and consults on their creation. game-cities.com

Final Fantasy VII was the first of the series to become a global phenomenon, and the only instalment I played to completion. It also introduced JRPG tropes and aesthetics to a wider western audience. And although it was the glowing reviews, stunning 3D effects, and cinematics that drew the crowds in, what's arguably most memorable is the city of Midgar

(with Cloud's hair a close second). This metropolis lay at the heart of the game's outlandish plot and setting, and felt appropriately huge and intimidating. Midgar was a place that managed to define, encapsulate, and summarise a whole setting – a pithy urban symbol of *FFVII*'s world. That the recent *FFVII* remake focused even more prominently on the city was far from surprising. So why is Midgar so memorable? What made it a successful game city? Why is it still loved, and considered fascinating?

Unsurprisingly, a straightforward answer that applies to the design of all imaginary cities simply doesn't exist. Midgar's appeal is partly because it exists within an excellent – if not groundbreaking – game. The clever combat system, the minigames, the characters, the visual style, the sense of cohesion and in-world realism, the brilliantly framed shots, and even the soundtrack play an important role in our overall perception of the city, as they support it, flavour it, and help it shine.

Midgar itself masterfully combines granularity with an epic scale. It manages to conjure a sense of spectacular size, and imbue it with the detailed,



^ There's an excellent look at how Square Enix rebuilt Midgar for the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* over at the studio's website: wfmag.cc/midgar-remake.

> The pizza-like structure of the plate, and the centrality of the Shinra headquarters, define Midgar's form.



◀ The Mako Reactors - located between sectors - help with the world-building, are narratively important, and also function as recognisable landmarks.

dense familiarity of the local as expressed on the neighbourhood level. To achieve this, the city had to, first of all, be legible – spatially, sociologically, and ideologically. Initially shown off as a whole from afar and in its entirety, and then experienced locally; or, in actual game terms, introduced via a breathtaking cutscene to make its size and complexity felt, before zooming in on a specific building and its immediate environs to start the game proper.

Being easy to grasp and to mentally map, and so ensuring that players effortlessly understand its topologies and structure, is important in maintaining the illusion of a cohesive and convincing space. It's a city defined by the themes of oppression and hope, built around extreme class division, ecological disaster, and corporate power, and enriched by the presence of magic and strong surrealist touches.

Midgar is so legible that its structure can be described in a few sentences: it's a city of two tiers with strong internal and external boundaries. The upper circular tier, the plate, often likened to a pizza, stands directly above the slums of the poor, and is where the rich live. It's subdivided into eight sectors, each bookended by Mako Reactors at the plate's rim, while the defining Shinra headquarters edifice stands at the circle's centre. The slums below are also divided into eight respective sectors.

As for Shinra's HQ, it's emphatically out of scale, and gives the city its ideological and political tone. It also serves as an important gameplay location; the political and structural tension between the plate and the slums is incorporated into the plot, too, as the developers weren't afraid to treat their city in a dynamic fashion and collapse part of the plate.

With its easy-to-grasp civic form, *FFVII* paints a lasting picture of an ever-present urban whole

“Midgar masterfully combines granularity with an epic scale”

in players' minds, and is then free to let them explore selected locations within it. With the fundamentals of the geography in place, players are then showered with all the detail we'd expect in such a complex urban centre. Lively, intricately designed, interaction-rich sub-areas are eventually opened up for exploration.

The way the game chooses to focus on the neighbourhood level to create a sense of detail is a brilliant design choice. In the cities we experience as residents in real life (and not, say, as tourists), we get to know our surroundings on this exact level. We form our everyday relations and sense of civic reality in small, dense chunks of the urban fabric we can intimately explore.

What's more, we also know how to move between different chunks of this sort, and effectively connect them to create our own, personal versions of civic space. Interestingly, *FFVII* seems

to take this tendency of ours into account too, since it presents us with interconnected and appropriately varied locales.

Variety is itself a quality we expect to find in large metropolitan areas, and the designers' choices in this regard will shape players' experiences. Midgar imaginatively curates its showcased spaces, and takes players from train graveyards, humble homes, and slums to lush gardens, red-light districts, abandoned cathedrals, and corporate plazas, implying everything else in between. These are all locations with distinct personalities, and can be mentally placed on the city's map as they're visited. The plate embodies the city's main social and spatial dichotomy, so we instantly know that affluent surroundings place us on top of the plate, whereas the train graveyard scene could only take place below it.

Finally, it's worth noting that the game's prerendered backgrounds, a technical necessity for the era, were a limitation the dev team masterfully embraced. It allowed them to frame their scenes, imply more with less, and choose more cinematic angles, while also hiding structural contradictions via careful shots. 🗨

CIVIC CHARACTERS

Spiky-haired urban guerrilla Cloud, the homeless of the Sector 7 slums, Aerith tenderly caring for a flower patch, and even local slumlords, are all characters that both fit in and characterise their environment. They're shaped and, in turn, shape the city they live in, and elegantly fit in, both narratively and stylistically. The characters of Midgar are believable and breathe life into the place exactly due to simultaneously being the city's mirrors and defining actors.

✓ The iconic Shinra Building finds itself both at the core of the game's urban environment and its plot.



The principles of game design

In an excerpt from his new book, Howard recalls the 1982 flight that ultimately led to the creation of his infamous E.T. video game



AUTHOR
HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Howard is a video game pioneer who authored several of Atari's most famous and infamous titles. This is the first chapter from his upcoming book, *Once Upon Atari: How I made history by killing an industry*. onceuponatari.com

I hate getting up early in the morning. Aside from a brief stint in real estate, I've always worked hard to maintain a life that never needs an alarm clock. It's just no way to start the day. However, when a Learjet is waiting to take you to Steven Spielberg's office, it eases the sting considerably.

I make it to the airport at the appointed hour and there, to my considerable delight, is an actual Learjet waiting just for me. I love airports and airplanes – I took my first flight at two weeks old, and in this moment, I'm incredibly psyched. I board the jet and take the first of the six seats. The pilot is kind enough to leave the cabin door open (it is 1982, after all). I can see right through the cockpit windows without having to move from my comfy chair. The take-off is smooth, and soon we're soaring just above a sea of clouds – soft,

serene, and endless. It seems such a beautiful place to stroll, but I decide to remain in my seat. We're flying to Burbank, then riding to Warner Studios where Spielberg and his sprawling office await. But it turns out we're not going to Burbank, at least not yet. First, we'll stop in Monterey to pick up some additional passengers.

As we near the Monterey area, an unsettling sight appears through the pilot's windshield. The soft white carpet of clouds is now punctuated with a cluster of mountain tops. As we descend through the bright white layer and the visibility shrinks to zero, I can't help thinking that mountain tops usually have mountains underneath them. In this case, I'm really hoping I'm wrong.

Fortunately, the pilot missed every one of them and landed cleanly on the Monterey runway. He taxied a bit, then came to rest on a vacant section of tarmac. Nearly vacant that is, because just as the plane slowed to a stop a big black limo pulls up right off the left wing. The doors open and out pops Ray Kassar (Atari's CEO), Skip Paul (chief legal counsel), and Lyle Rains (coin-op game engineer). Apparently, Lyle is doing the arcade version of *E.T.*, and I'll bet he's getting more than five weeks to make it. OK, I didn't really think this last part. After all, this is only 40 hours into the project, so I'm not bitter yet. As they file onto the plane, I hear Skip say to Ray, 'What? They couldn't get the Hawker?!' He sounds disappointed. They take their seats and away we go. The take-off is carefree since mountains aren't nearly so scary on this side of the clouds.

We fly for a while more; Ray and Skip are chatting a bit, but Lyle and I are silent. The time of the presentation is approaching, which means the tension and the focus is building. We land in

✓ Director Steven Spielberg was a big video game fan back in the eighties. Here he is reclining in his office next to his *Donkey Kong* cab.



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Burbank Airport and once again, just as the plane comes to a halt, another limo pulls up alongside. 'It's just like in the movies', I think to myself, which makes sense since we're going to meet Steven Spielberg. This is so cool. I can hardly believe it's a workday... but it is, which makes it even cooler.

We get in the limo, and it's a remarkably well-appointed vehicle. In addition to the plush seating accommodations, there's a phone, a TV, a small fridge, even a sink. Skip reaches over and pushes the lever to watch the water stream out, but nothing happens. The amazing thing was the look on his face. He says, 'Do you believe it, the water doesn't even work'. Oh my god. He's serious. This guy just got off a private jet into a waiting limo and he's annoyed that the water isn't running in the car's sink. I realise we're from different worlds, and much as I'd like to belong, I'm not really a part of his. I'm always interested to get a glimpse into other people's perspectives. Not always relieved, but interested.

The guard waves us through the gate at Warner and we proceed along the lot until we arrive at the office. We go in and pleasantries are exchanged all around. Now it's presentation time and Lyle goes first, which gives me a little time to chill. My thoughts begin to drift. Spielberg's office is small... for a luxury apartment. It's nice to be back here again. A calm settles in... but not for long. "Wait a minute", I think to myself, 'why am I here?'

It occurs to me I don't have an answer. I realise it's because I said 'Yes', of course, but why did Ray call me directly? That's never happened before. This has all been so exciting, I forgot how odd

**"I wasn't the first one
Ray called about doing the
E.T. game"**

it was. Atari is big on secrecy and back-channel communications – there is always something going on you don't know about.

Here's what I didn't know: I wasn't the first one Ray called about doing the *E.T.* game. His first call was to George Kiss, my grandboss (or boss's boss). George was the head of engineering for the Atari home game system, and he told Ray what any sane and knowledgeable person in that situation would: you cannot do a game in five weeks. It's simply not enough time.

Most CEOs don't like 'no' as an answer. It rarely contributes to shipping product and making money. So, after being told by the head of development it couldn't happen, Ray still thought it was worthwhile to make one more call. I had apparently built enough of a reputation – or made enough of an impression – that he believed I might come through when others couldn't.

Or it might have to do with the time Ray saw my personal notebook and asked to peruse it. I lent it to him, and it came back through inter-office mail a few days later with a note attached. 'Thank you, Howard. You are a Renaissance man'. This is the nicest thing anyone can say to me.

This was all very flattering and, as I think about it now, rather creepy. I told Ray it absolutely would happen, right after my grandboss told him it couldn't. That's what I didn't know, and I'm glad I didn't. Talk about undermining relationships. Suddenly, the question 'Howard, what have you got for us?' pierces my reverie and brings me back to the moment. Now it's my turn, and I begin my presentation... 🗨

Once Upon Atari: How I made history by killing an industry is available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

▲ Unfortunately for Atari, the resulting *E.T.* game, rushed to release as it was, didn't become the blockbuster it had hoped.

▼ A posh Learjet, possibly like the one Howard rode in 1982.



Lockdown Dizzy: developing Fast Food on the Nintendo Switch

The Oliver Twins explain how they made their first game in 25 years – and how you can use FUZE to make your own



AUTHOR
PHILIP AND ANDREW OLIVER

The Oliver Twins have been making games since the early eighties, and can now be found at their new consultancy firm, Game Dragons. gamedragons.com

Back in November 1988, Andrew and I had the crazy idea of writing a game in one weekend and getting it released in time for Christmas. By Monday morning, after very little sleep, we had 30 playable mazes. Within a few more days we had a game ready to ship on Amstrad and Spectrum: *Fast Food*, starring our egg hero, Dizzy. Sadly, there were some delays in publishing and it was finally released in April 1989 – but still, it went on to be a huge success, with ports to the Commodore 64, Atari ST, Amiga, and PC. It sold over 150,000 copies – not bad for a simple maze game created in less than a week.

Over the years, we've been asked to write new Dizzy games, but we're not up to speed with current development languages and toolsets. We just haven't had the time. When the Nintendo Switch came along there were, yet again, lots of requests for Dizzy games on Nintendo's neat new hybrid console. Andrew and I love the Switch and the idea, but making new, state-of-the-art games is expensive and high-risk. But recently, as consultants at our company, Game Dragons, we met the team at FUZE Technologies who have a passion to teach people how to code. They always do this through the challenge of making games – something we fully endorse.

The programming taught in schools tends to be task-based and uninspiring. Young people love games. If you want to teach them programming, let them make games – it's how our generation learned to program. FUZE Technologies have developed the FUZE programming language which is based on BASIC, which is designed to be easy to learn. This makes it the perfect stepping stone between Scratch and more complex languages like Lua, Python, Java, C++, and C#.

Last year, FUZE released a version of the platform on the Nintendo Switch, allowing the console's users to become amateur developers. We were really impressed by this, and made the throwaway comment that we could probably write Dizzy games in FUZE and how it would be

♥ Dizzy's back in a shinier, HD form on FUZE.





< FUZE programming being taught in a school club.

cool to have them run on a Switch. The team at FUZE jumped at this and challenged us to do it. We said that *if* we were to do this, we'd want to remake *Fast Food*, as it was an easy game to make and also fun to play. The next thing we knew, they'd produced a mock-up screenshot – always the best starting point for any game. We gave some feedback and a list of the other graphics required, and over the weeks that followed, they produced these too.

“If you want to teach young people programming, let them make games”

We hoped that someone else would write the game, but then came coronavirus and lockdown, and Andrew and I suddenly found we had more time on our hands. We therefore agreed to write *Fast Food Dizzy* on Switch within FUZE, to be given away free with their FUZE Player.

START WITH A PLAN

With any project, you need to have a plan. The plan may change along the way, but it's always better to have a plan than nothing at all. We wanted to create a fun game that was easy for players to open the code, see how it works, then modify it to make their own maze games. This meant the code had to be elegant, flexible, and easy to read and modify. Even if players only modify a few mazes and tinker with a bit of the code, they'll have a greater depth of understanding of how games are made. ➔

OUR SCHEDULE

Here's the schedule we came up with:

WEEK ONE: (STARTING 1 JUNE)

- Get to grips with FUZE, understand how it works, and set up the basic structure of the game
- Create the design and work out all the assets required
- Mock-up screen layouts

WEEK TWO:

- Create the game's code and data structures
- Put all the graphics in place, and have them load into the game correctly
- Display a basic maze constructed from tiles
- Move several animated sprites around the screen under simple player control
- Get Dizzy walking around a maze correctly

WEEK THREE:

- Establish audio requirements and locate within FUZE's vast libraries
- Add system for large scenic objects
- Add behaviour routines for all the different moving sprites
- Design nine mazes – three for each style
- Structure to allow the game to self-demo on the title screen

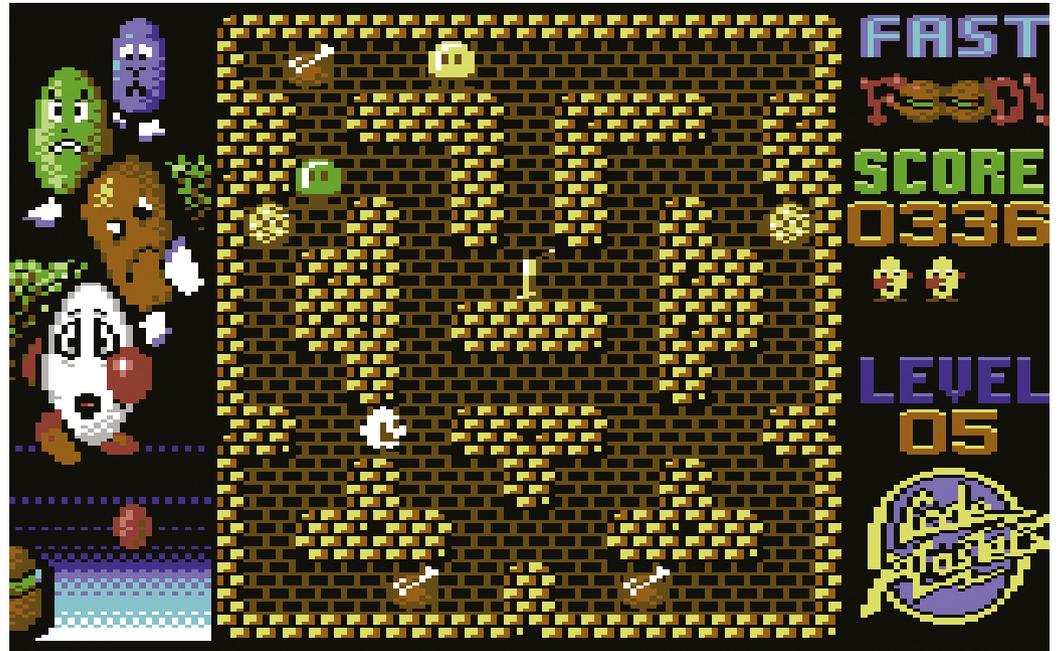
WEEK FOUR:

- Add music and sound effects
- Add the title screen and a high-score system
- Test, tweak for playability, and debug
- Tidy the code
- Submit to FUZE for listing on their virtual store
- Write this article for Wireframe



^ Fast Food appeared on a number of systems, including ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC, and Amiga, pictured here.

v You can read more about FUZE on the Nintendo Switch in our feature in Wireframe #24.



The original game was written in less than a week, but that's because we were 'in the zone' both in terms of knowing the programming language and also having all the tools in place. Added to that, we were working insane hours without any distractions. This time, while we were in lockdown, there were still many distractions, plus we were working remotely, and working in a language we hadn't used before. We figured we should be able to do this in a month, between other work. (You can see our full schedule in the box on the previous page.)

Due to feature creep, things didn't exactly follow the plan – but then again, neither did the government's plan with lockdown...

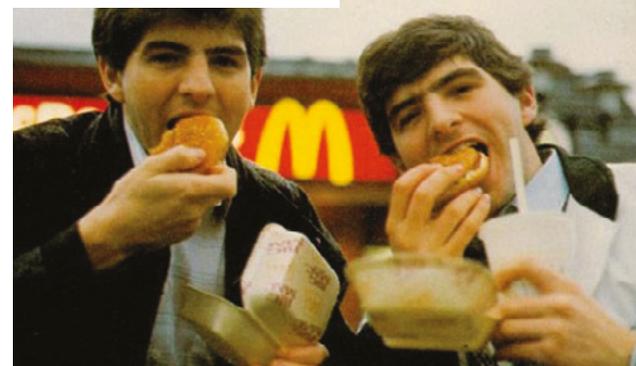
CONCEPT

The original *Fast Food* was initially based on 8-bit technology, occupying 32kB of RAM and with a screen resolution of 160 × 200 pixels on the Amstrad CPC 464. The Atari ST and Amiga versions took up 512kB RAM with a resolution of 320 × 200 pixels.

Technology and player expectations have moved on a lot over the last 30 years, and while we could give the game a retro feel by using pixel graphics, we felt players expect more from a Switch. The Switch screen resolution is 1280 × 720 in handheld mode, increasing to 1920 × 1080 when docked. Artist Jonathan Temples created the original concept screenshot that helped us buy into the project, and later produced a bunch of other assets at our request.



v The Oliver Twins researching for the original *Fast Food* game in 1988.





Fast Food is a maze game inspired by the original *Pac-Man*. What's different is that the food doesn't want to be eaten, and players, controlling Dizzy, have to chase it around the mazes. The mazes are also occupied by guards that must be avoided, and there are power-ups to keep things varied. It all sounds pretty easy, and a good example game for FUZE.

While developing the game, we inevitably thought of more interesting features. If there had been a pressing deadline, they may have been shelved, but the lockdown seemed to keep getting extended, so we had more time. The project started as a simple maze game – but how impressive could we make it? We both agreed that we were keeping it restricted to 2D, even though FUZE has extensive 3D capabilities.

Our first big decision was, what size should the mazes be? The original versions were all single screens, but that's quite limiting and FUZE could easily do scrolling, so within the first week, we decided to change from fixed-screen mazes to scrolling, giving far larger maps and more depth. Then we wondered about the resolution and size of the characters on the screen. The graphics had all been drawn as 64 × 64 pixel textures, yet we were displaying them at 16 × 16 pixels, to give a good playable area of visibility.

“The project started as a simple maze game – but how impressive could we make it?”

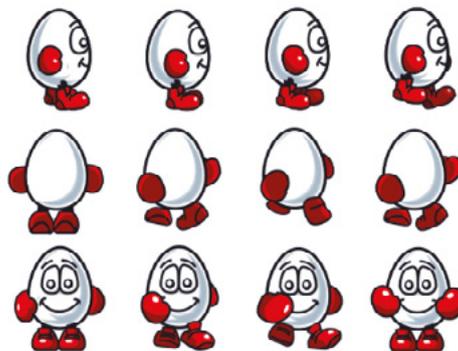
This felt a bit of a waste since they looked great close up. So Andrew started experimenting with zooming in and out. It looked fantastic to have a dynamic camera and showed the best of both worlds – it just created a fair bit more work.

As well as improving the graphics and sounds, we felt the design could be enhanced, too. Dizzy collects stars in his adventure games, so we thought it would be a good idea to include these in *Fast Food*. While it's possible to complete a maze without collecting all the stars, players are encouraged to collect them all and receive a special bonus if they succeed.

Meanwhile, Jonathan created a bunch of hats for Dizzy, which the original *Fast Food* didn't have. While they looked great, we were wondering what to do with them. In the original game, Dizzy could collect a shield which he could use to turn the tables on the guards, much like the power-pills in *Pac-Man*. But while the guards fled from Dizzy and started to flash, nothing happened to Dizzy to show he possessed this special power, so we thought Dizzy wearing a hat would show he was now in predator mode.

This led to quite a lot more coding and work figuring out offset tables to ensure that, as Dizzy ran along in any direction, the hat moved correctly with his animation. This meant we could put hats in the mazes to be collected and we would

need to find another use for the shield or lose it. Never wanting to waste good graphics, we turned it into an invisibility shield. Now when Dizzy collected the shield he'd become translucent, and the guards wouldn't be able to see or catch him. ➔



DESIGNING THE TITLE SCREEN

A classic trick of eighties games was to use the game in auto-play to create an 'attract mode', so this became the title screen. It was the cheapest approach both in terms of memory and development time and worked well. In our original games, we had a routine we used that recorded us playing and we would play that through the input routine and the game would then just appear to play itself. We were tempted to write this but instead allowed it to just use the logic routines that were there already for the guards, just changing the target for the closest food. The title screen was further improved on by overlaying the title of the game and other important title screen information like inviting the player to press start and further instructions. We felt this approach would work well for us since we wanted to keep the code focused to the game, rather than the presentation.

◀ Dizzy's walk cycle comprises four frames of animation for each of the four cardinal directions.

DIZZY AGAIN

Says artist Jonathan Temples: "When I was working on the Commodore 64 in the late eighties and early nineties, creating games for Codemasters, I was offered my first Dizzy creative experience with the C64's *Panic! Dizzy* loading screen. Soon after I was asked to create all the graphics for the new different-styled *Bubble Dizzy*. Just like this Switch game, *Fast Food Dizzy*, *Bubble Dizzy* was a departure from the original adventure exploring Dizzy games and was an underwater puzzle jumping platform game. I never thought I'd get the chance to do another retro 8-bit-type game again, never mind Dizzy. But once I was contacted by Jon Silvera, managing director at FUZE, I knew it was a brilliant opportunity. Plus if you look behind me (below) – that's the original Commodore 64C that I created the graphics for *Panic! Dizzy* and *Bubble Dizzy* on, way back in the early nineties."

✓ Jonathan Temples working on *Fast Food's* graphics in July 2020.



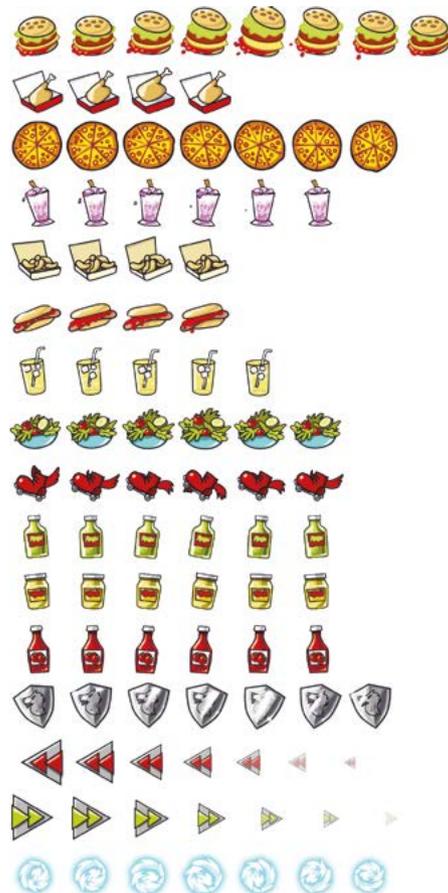
DEVELOPMENT TOOLS & ENVIRONMENT

Normally when developing games, you need a PC or Mac, the target hardware, a compiler, an art package, and various other software tools. Since we were developing this entirely on the Switch within FUZE, however, we had everything we needed in the package. To make things easier to use, we purchased two external USB 3.0 keyboards from Amazon at £20 each and hooked our Switches up to monitors.

Andrew took care of the coding but had never used FUZE before. As mentioned, the FUZE language was inspired by BASIC, and anyone can get things running on the FUZE with a few lines of code. The typical BASIC cliché we grew up on was:

```
10 Print "Hello World"
```

```
20 Goto 10
```



✓ New fast food and power-up assets, courtesy of the great Jonathan Temples.

This wouldn't work in FUZE because it's considered poor coding practice. **Goto** isn't a feature of any other programming language other than BASIC, and line numbers aren't referenced in code; instead, FUZE uses function names. So FUZE looks more like the programming language, C:

```
Loop
```

```
Print("Hello World")
```

```
Repeat
```

You can quickly progress to add more functionality, and it's really easy. Especially given that the context-sensitive help is built-in and you can find out more about each function.

The **PrintAt** command allows you to define the position and colour of the text to print. It's based on 0,0 being the top left corner of the screen and works on character spacing which is based on the current font and size, which is also definable. So this code prints 'Hello World' in red 10 times, from the top left corner down:

```
For a=0 to 10 Loop
```

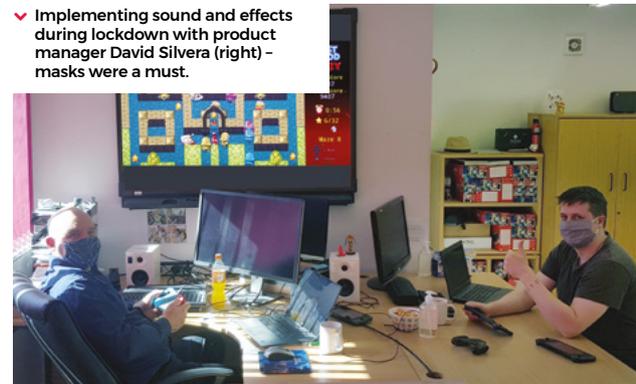
```
PrintAt(10,10+a,Red,"Hello World")
```

```
Repeat
```

Again, it feels like a C-based language, but without much of the fuzzy syntax, and doesn't require defining all the variables upfront. While FUZE is able to handle all this background automation, it also allows you to define it, so it becomes very simple to code as you start to explore further. You can also define your own structures and functions.

Andrew was able to set up the moving entities, called Actors, into structures quickly and easily:

✓ Implementing sound and effects during lockdown with product manager David Silvera (right) – masks were a must.





^ Andrew Oliver coding in his lockdown study.

```

Struct _Actors[
    .x
    .y
    .speed
    .anim
    .state
Sprite .image
String .name
]
_Actors Actor[16] //gives me 16 actor
structures
Actor[0].x+=Actor[0].speed //add the speed to
Actor[0] x coord.
    
```

Note that you don't need to define types of variables in structures. They're all assumed to be floating-point numbers, but if you want to override this to an integer, array, or string, you can easily instruct it.

```

Actor[0].name="Dizzy"
    
```

So now all the variables are packaged up nicely for each 'Actor', they could be passed to previously created functions:

```

For a=0 to 16 loop
    Move(Actor[a])
Draw(Actor[a])
Repeat
    
```

Within the **Move** and **Draw** functions, they can call on further functions for collision with the maze walls and the various other Actors. It was so

simple, and part of the reason for the feature creep was because adding functionality was so easy and intuitive.

MAZES

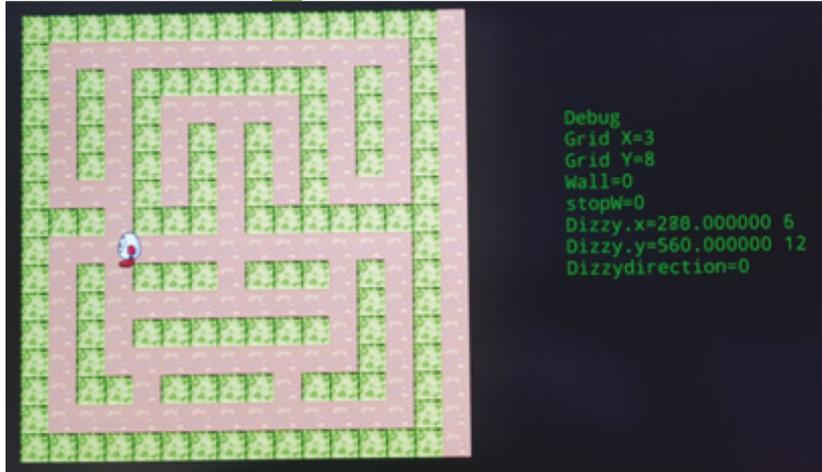
When creating any 2D game, it's common to use tiles to construct the background, so the first thing to do was to work out all the different tiles required. Jonathan created three base tile sets: Garden, Temple, and Ice. The mazes were to be stored in a table of data – one entry per tile. A basic maze can be created with just two states per tile: solid (impassable) or not solid (passable). We obviously wanted much more tile variety, so we gave each space one byte-length integer. We ordered the tiles so that any tile under 128 would be a solid wall of some description, so it was an easy test for the code in terms of collision, while anything over 128 would be open space or used to set up the maze with the starting locations of moving entities (Actors).

To make the walls look more natural and fit together nicely, we needed around 24 tiles in each style to cater for corners, shadows, and so forth. Tiles 128 through 159 were a variety of floor tiles which would need to be printed before the walls and sprites. This would ensure they were not just the deepest depth but that walls and foreground sprites with transparencies would have floor showing through.

Beyond this, we assigned groups to all the other entities which needed locating in the mazes. ➔

^ A hat for every occasion – and all four directions.





▲ *Fast Food* early in development. We have Dizzy in a maze!

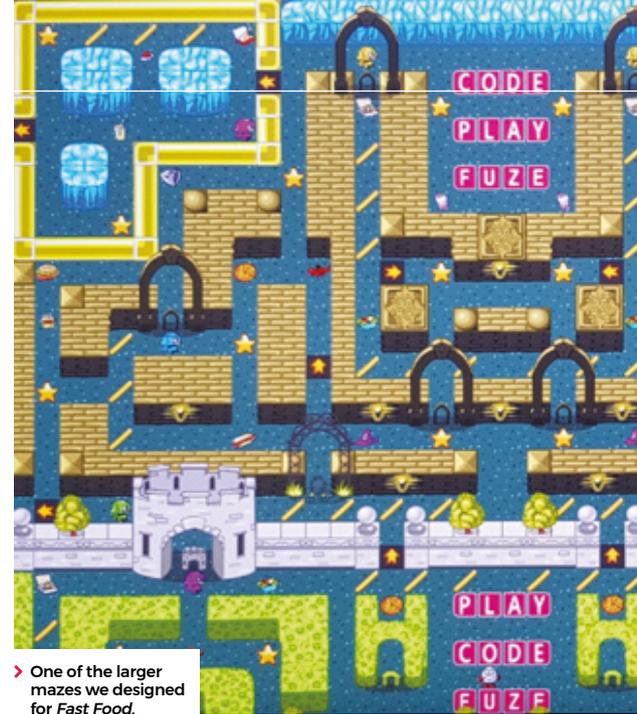
- 160 - 175: Overlay sprites: Gates, trees, etc
- 175: Dizzy (his starting point).
- 176 - 185: Hats
- 186 - 189: Guards
- 190: Fries
- 191: Spinning Star
- 192 - 199: Fast Food
- 200 - 207: Power-Ups

Tiles were drawn on 64×64 pixels textures with four-byte colour depth: three bytes for RGB plus one byte for a transparency value. These were drawn on PC, stored as PNGs, and imported into FUZE.

As a new maze starts, the code works through the maze data, copying it to a temporary RAM buffer and when it finds a Guard (Tile 186) it adds it to the Actors list. This has 64 slots to hold all the Actor details. Once the code has put the guard into the Actors list, it clears the maze data slot back to the floor (Tile 128). Stars and Fries are separate lists as they don't need to move or have as much functionality as the Actors. We also had space for 64 'Scenery' objects. There were around 15 large sprites: trees, arches, and even a castle. These are simply put down in the editor in a single 'floor' space as a representative icon and added to the scenery list, which is a list of sprites with coordinates that are correctly sorted by depth, so that Actors appear and move correctly in front and behind them.

The Switch is a powerful enough console, but FUZE is an interpreted language, so you still need to use smart techniques to ensure the game runs

“What started out as a passing comment became a reality due to the coronavirus”



► One of the larger mazes we designed for *Fast Food*.

quickly. We put a limit on the maze size of 60×60 tiles. We limited both Actors and Scenery sprites to 64 slots, but allowed as many Stars or Fries as empty floor space would allow, and this allowed the game to still maintain a respectable 30 frames per second (fps) during play. Most mazes don't use anything like this, and the game mostly runs at 60 fps, which looks very smooth.

CREATING THE MAZE EDITOR

As with the original, there are a number of different maze graphic styles, including hedge mazes, brick walls, ice, and pipes. All these tiles and features had to be turned into fun, aesthetically pleasing mazes with the right amount of challenge. The original idea was to have arrays (data tables) in the code that describe the mazes. There would be a number for each

tile type, then players could go into the code and change maps by overtyping the data. But we then decided to create ten large

mazes – mostly because we had ten hat types and thought it would be good to have a different hat per maze.

So we needed a Map editor. The easier it was to design the mazes, the better they would be. It would be tough, then, to type these back into the code, and so we added an extra feature to save and load mazes, so that players could feel free to do so without ruining the built-in levels.

THE ACTORS

In *Fast Food*, the enemies – or guards – are programmed to behave in a similar way to the ghosts in *Pac-Man*. When Dizzy is vulnerable, they chase him by looking at his coordinate and direction and then heading towards him.

FRIES WITH THAT?

In the original *Fast Food*, there were only four items: burgers, chicken, pizzas, and milkshakes, so we decided to increase the menu selection and even added salad bowls to encourage healthy eating. Real fast food also usually comes with fries; these weren't in the original game, but we loved the 'chain mechanic' in classic games like *Bomb Jack*, where players are encouraged to collect chains of items for exponentially increasing scores. Because of this, fries were added and made to spin faster the more they were worth. Tasty.



Each uses a different equation for the decision-making, which results in slightly different behaviour. If Dizzy is wearing a hat and therefore on the attack, the guards do similar calculations but for the opposite direction. All movement uses floating-point values, and '1' was chosen as the default speed for Dizzy. All other actors were then given speed values based on this and would all move at different speeds.

SOUND AND MUSIC

FUZE readily plays MP3s, and already contained a set of original *Dizzy* soundtracks, so it was easy to assign these to the title screen and individual mazes. FUZE also has a library of stock sound effects to use, and Andrew populated the game with these. It became apparent pretty quickly, however, that these sounds were all from different sources in different styles and didn't really do the game justice. Many of the sound effects were created by FUZE's David Silvera, and he agreed to create a set of more bespoke sounds for Dizzy. When the game was complete, we met at the FUZE offices and implemented the new sound effects together.

THE FINAL STAGES

Most games go through Alpha and Beta mastering phases. Our console games always had around a month for each, maybe more, but with a game of this scope, we fitted all this into around ten days. During development, we made mock mazes to test new features. Within the last two weeks, it became virtually feature complete, so then the final mazes had to be created in around a space of a week. I created these with the help of my daughter to type in large amounts

of data. I reported bugs to Andrew while he was also finding his own bugs to fix. Andrew enjoyed receiving and playing the new mazes as the layouts were a complete surprise to him.

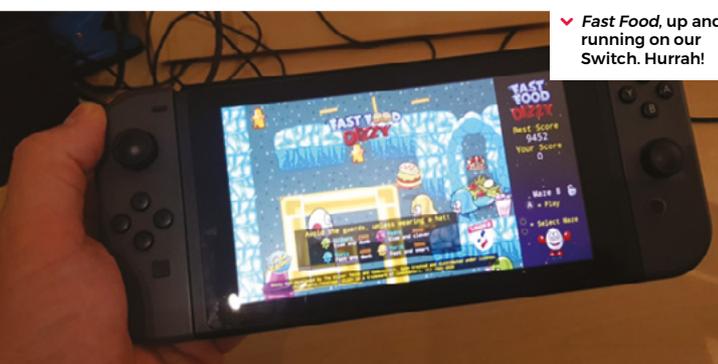
Once the sound effects were implemented, Andrew and Dave played the game from start to finish by way of a final QA test and signed off the master on 20 August. The game ended up at around 3000 lines of code, taking around 80 days. Whilst that was far more time than we had originally envisaged, the game was far more than we had planned and we were proud of what we had made. This is the first time we've made a game since the mid-nineties!

What started out nearly a year ago as a passing comment became a reality due to the coronavirus. What started as a quick four-week port of an old *Dizzy* maze game became almost two and a half months of development. But if you're going to do something, it's worth doing it well, and all this hopefully serves as a good example of what can be created in FUZE with a bit of time and effort. We hope *Fast Food Dizzy* will attract more people to learn to code – and perhaps some will go on to become professional game developers in the future. 🙌

▼ Philip Oliver busily making mazes in FUZE.



▼ *Fast Food*, up and running on our Switch. Hurrah!



Unstitching the Banner

The Banner Saga is one of the richest examples of interactive fiction. Here's what we can learn from it



AUTHOR
ANTONY DE FAULT

Antony is Wireframe's game writing and narrative design columnist. He's also creative director of Far Few Giants, and you can find his work on [default.games](#) or [@antony_de_fault](#) on Twitter.

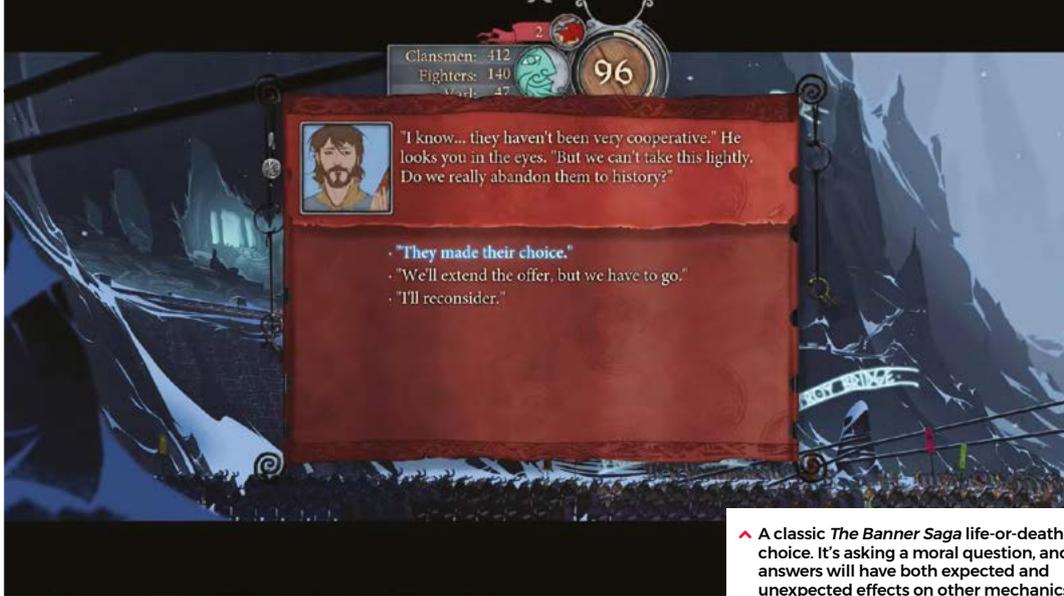
The Weave

The diagram opposite is the sum of my investigation, and is worth reading to appreciate the complexity this game pulls off. Down the left side, we have various gameplay features, such as Heroes, Battles, Supplies, and Time. Each feature is followed by a description of what it is and/or how it relates to other features. On the right, we have a node representing the game's narrative choices. But the really interesting part is what happens between the features and the story, so I've mapped all the relationships out and labelled them with what can happen. Each feature has two arrows describing its relationship with the story: one going from left to right, showing how the feature can affect the story and what choice options are available; and one going from right to left, showing how narrative decisions made by the player can affect that feature.

Much like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Banner Saga* trilogy charts a species-diverse group's splintered journey across a detailed fantasy world, as the forces of world-ending evil close in. But this time you play as each of the lead characters, making decisions which will change the course of that journey permanently, determining who lives, who dies, and what they experience in-between. Then, at the end of all three instalments, if the sum of your decisions is found wanting, you'll fail to stop the world ending. So you better choose carefully.

The reason *The Banner Saga's* choice-points are so constantly engaging is because almost every one of them has some sort of implied stakes. A few drunk men and a wagon of supplies tumble off a cliff. Do you move on? Do you order a group of warriors to start constructing a winch to retrieve the supplies and bodies? Or do you send a hero down there to haul it all back up? Moving on may lower morale and sacrifice the supplies, but could save time. The winch will probably cost time and resources, and you may get attacked while building it, but it seems a safer way to retrieve things. Send your hero solo, and he may succeed,



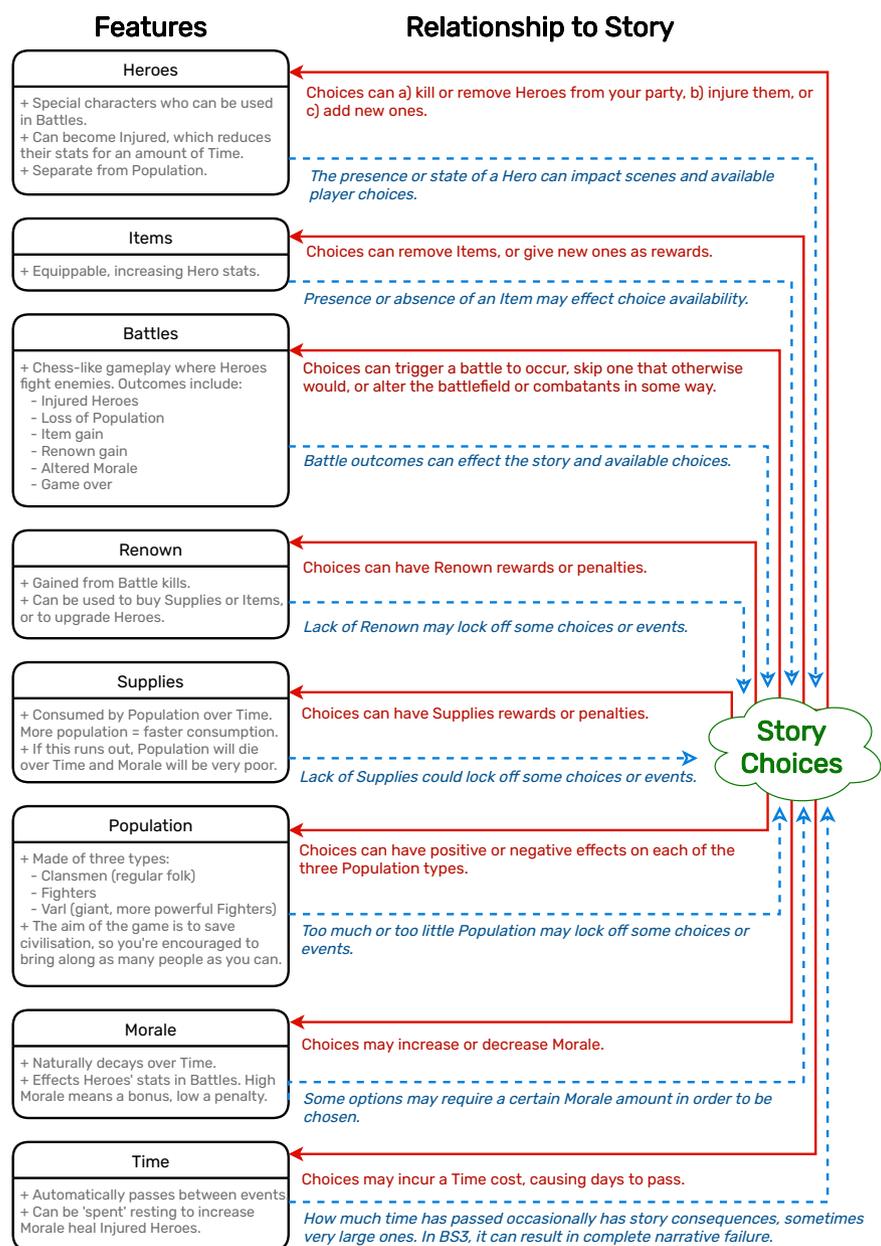


▲ A classic *The Banner Saga* life-or-death choice. It's asking a moral question, and answers will have both expected and unexpected effects on other mechanics.

but it also leaves him vulnerable at the cliff's base and there are giant bears in the area, so you could lose him permanently. There's always a myriad of competing potential good and bad outcomes to consider to a given course of action, and you never know how it'll play out. There's almost no randomness here, but the writers don't shy away from unexpected consequences. This is all no easy feat, and is specifically enabled by the writing's tightly woven relationship to a variety of interconnected gameplay features, such as chess-like hero battles; currencies like 'Renown', supplies, and your caravan's supply of people; and more abstract systems like time limits and your party's level of morale. Take a look at the diagram opposite to get a taste of the ways in which the story's choices are given weight and consequences by a supporting cast of game mechanics.

"It's all a complex way of determining one thing: who lives"

None of these stakes would be worth a damn if *The Banner Saga* didn't feature characters worth saving. It's all a complex way of determining one thing: who lives. Overspending Renown on Items might mean running out of Supplies, which lowers Morale, in turn weakening your Heroes in battle, leading them to get Injured, which means wasting Time recovering, which may result in the bad guys catching up and characters dying. If you didn't care about the characters and their goals in the first place, it wouldn't matter. But my takeaway is this: if writing a lengthy interactive fiction, consider adding a small web of different narrative 'currencies' and gameplay resources, and at least some basic relationships between them. Then, once good characters are introduced, your handful of interlocking mechanics will mean that, by liberally sprinkling resource or currency consequences onto outcomes, every choice can be a subtle, nuanced, and engaging dilemma. 🌐



How to QA test your game (without a QA team)

Here's how to make a game the most playable it can be - without the expense of a quality assurance team



AUTHOR
JOHN MAULDIN

John is a writer and programmer with a passion for interactive narrative and story-driven design, having worked on games like *Fables: The Wolf Among Us*, *Tales from the Borderlands*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy: The Telltale Series*.

♥ How many times does a player have to climb a tower to update the map in *Far Cry 3*? How many times have they also had to do this in other games? Some mechanics can feel stale through sheer market saturation.

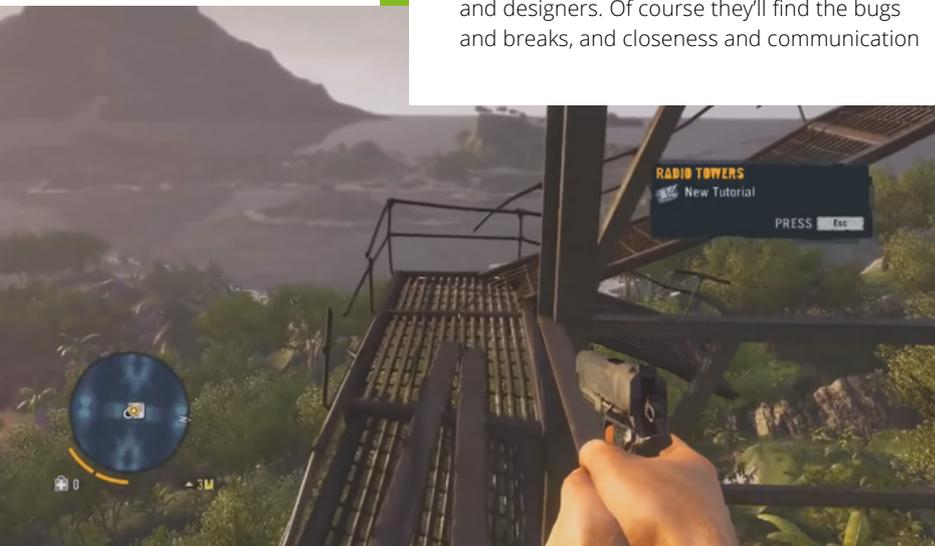
A few years after I started working at Telltale, there was a massive team move in our office building. All the programmers were moved to a new floor, maybe ten feet away from our in-house quality assurance (QA) teams, and it didn't take long for me to realise why. Testers are a great resource for programmers and designers. Of course they'll find the bugs and breaks, and closeness and communication

are key to fixing things as quickly as possible, but if you want to know how a game 'feels', then you have to go to who's already been playing it more than most other players ever will.

This made even more sense to me once I realised that most of us were testing our scenes and sections in a vacuum of sorts. I would rigorously play through what I'd built myself, but getting the full picture of how the entire episode came together required something I didn't have time for in my workday: a full playthrough. 'You can't see the wood for the trees', goes the old saying, and this speaks to exactly why QA became so invaluable to me, and why I began talking with them earlier and earlier, before the bugs even got there.

Did our character's intent, motivation, language, and choice options feel consistent throughout the episode? Where did the episode get exciting? When did it start to drag? What was useless, confusing, or outright exhausting? These were all things I couldn't answer for myself.

If you don't have an entire team of testers at your disposal, however, there's still a lot you can do on your own to build strong testing habits, and philosophies to adopt early on to make your game a playable experience.





COUNT, CUT, MAKE SHORTCUTS

In classic adventure games, advancing to the next room or screen could be summed up rather simply with: click on object X to get key Y to unlock door Z. However, in practice, if we were to go so far as to count all the clicks needed to access inventory and traverse a level, our short list would get longer and longer, and this is why some gamers call these adventure experiences 'slow'. This really made sense for me at Telltale when I asked one of our more senior programmers why we stopped relying so much on inventory systems, and the brilliant response was "Why waste time when you could put those options in a conversation?"

Another way to think of this is that a player's 'time' is the resource we must respect the most. What I continued to see around me, and in my own work, was that cutting down the time it takes to show the player how to do something can improve just about every aspect of the game.

A quick example from Telltale: how backstory and extra contextual information was handled

"If you don't have a team of testers at your disposal, there's still a lot you can do"

in two of our games. The classic approach is to provide text logs and journal entries for those who enjoy exploring and clicking on everything, but this also requires a player to stop what they're doing, open a menu, and read the info inside. This isn't the biggest time sink in the world, but it removes the player from the present action and scene they're inhabiting. In

Fables: The Wolf Among Us, however, backstory

lived outside the game itself in the extras menu, so a player could read up on a character they were unfamiliar with. But placing this

story stuff outside the game's present action reinforces the idea that it's extra information, and not needed for advancing the current scene or solving the case.

In Telltale's *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Peter Quill communicates with his teammates via a comm-link radio which provides backstory, while audio logs are read to the player through voice-overs. The main takeaway from these examples is that one offers information without removing the player from the main story, while the other →

^ This scene in *Fables: The Wolf Among Us* originally had simple puzzles to solve, on top of the scene's investigation. However, the slowness piled up, and it ended up making the most sense to cut the puzzles, and keep the drama in conversation.



^ Plenty of people have placed *The Witcher 3* on their list of titles they've never finished. Some games can be memorable even with the entirety of their stories going unresolved.

seamlessly integrates itself into the present action of a scene, without stopping or detracting from the player's exploration and puzzle-solving.

Learning to count everything a player does can give an excellent idea of how 'exhausting' a game experience can be. Once you can actually break down what's required of a player, you begin to get a real sense of the good and bad that's piling up.

WEIGH THE DISCOMFORT

'Pain points' was a handy phrase that I always liked to use when speaking with our QA teams, because exhaustion does add up, and anyone who *has* to play a game for long enough can tell you exactly when something annoying begins to feel exhausting, or even painful by the end.

Here's a quick list of what I think are the types of things that can cause these pain points:

- What takes time
- What's repeated
- What's difficult

Let's take a look at each of these in turn.

What takes time

This relates to what costs a player their time to get through. For an open-world adventure game, this metric could be framed as: how long does it take to go from quest giver to quest objective, how long does it take to gather the necessary objects once there, and how long does it take to return and complete that quest?

When widening our scope, however, cutscenes can also take time, and remove the player from the action. Searching for clues in a crime scene can take time, and prevent the player from the next breadcrumb of plot or character development they may be itching for. Understanding how much time you're keeping from a player advancing to what might be important to them, like an action scene, or the plot, are important to think about.

Another example of this comes from Telltale, as, over time, we noticed that 'hard fails' – mistakes that require a player to restart the entire scene – became a careful balancing act. If our players were in a long scene with tough dialogue choices and lots of exploring, and *then* got thrown into action with quick-time events and hard fails, it became very apparent that having to replay the majority of the scene before returning to the point of failure was painful. So, creating more checkpoints to



◀ *Super Mario Odyssey* and *A Hat In Time* both came out in 2017, and while *Odyssey* has over 880 Moons to collect, *A Hat In Time* manages to achieve a full and rewarding experience with only 40 Time Pieces to collect in total.

restart at the beginning of the action, or after important or difficult dialogue choices were made, became key in preserving a player's time investment, and allowing the slower or longer scenes to stay 'smooth'.

It's why *Dark Souls* games will often use level design to wind players back around to another camp-fire after tough sections, or give them an item to return if needed. Backtracking once

“Counting everything a player does can give an idea of how ‘exhausting’ a game can be”

something is ‘completed’ can feel punishing, and it's why cellars and dungeons in *Diablo III* have pillars at the end to instantly return players to an entrance.

What's repeated

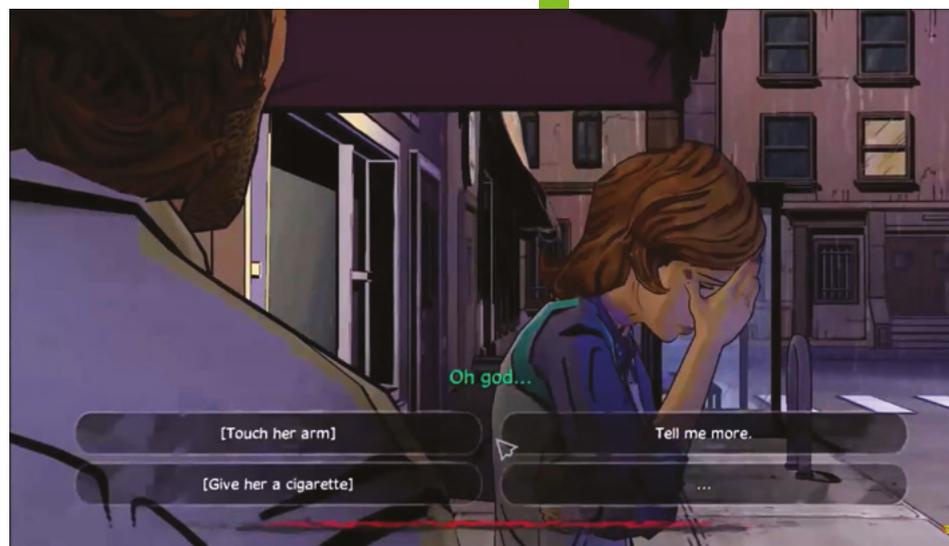
This relates to what's used throughout a game to give a player a sense of challenge and engagement – the game's mechanics and moments of action, problem-solving, exploring, and so on. Or there are the side helpings of minigames used to pad out or complicate otherwise simpler experiences, like picking locks or hacking a computer terminal to open a locked door.

In collectathons, like *Super Mario 64* and *Super Mario Odyssey*, we could ask: how many Stars, or Moons, do I need to unlock the next level? Is it easier, or does it take less time, to advance to a

new level with more stars, or to return to older levels that are already well-known, to complete the harder challenges? Players of *Super Mario 64* might even feel how restrictive and 'slow' it is compared to *Super Mario Odyssey*, in the way that finding a Moon in *Odyssey* doesn't restart the entire level the way *Super Mario 64* does after finding a Star.

In the ever-popular looter shooter *Borderlands*, it's valuable to ask how many waves of enemies a player has to wipe out before advancing to the next wave, or before the challenge ramps up with a boss. Similarly, in games that use puzzles for minigames, it's ➔

▼ 'Silence as an option' was not just a choice in *Fables: The Wolf Among Us*, but also a 'catch-all', in case a player didn't want to their version of the main character to be mean or rude, or if it was just too painful for them to talk at times.



Toolbox

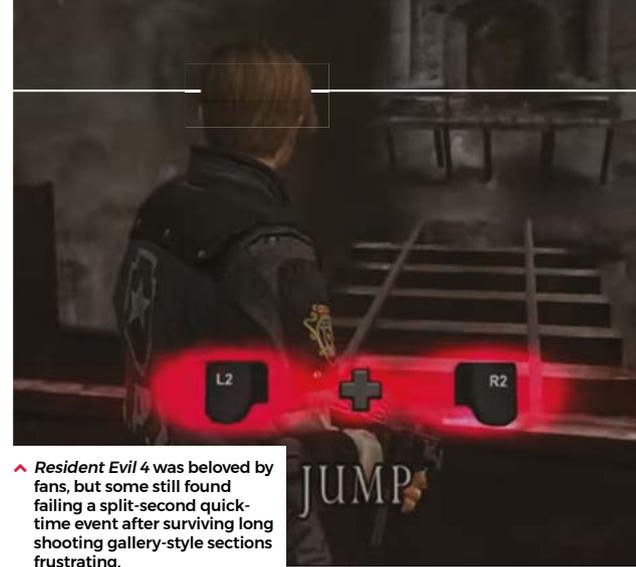
How to QA test your game

important to weigh how simple the challenge is with how often a mechanic is used without evolving in scope or difficulty.

At Telltale, we had a simple puzzle that we intended to use multiple times in one scene. The player was going to be tasked with sliding the faces of a cylinder around to complete the picture on it. But we realised these puzzles never got more complex or interesting, so we actually reduced the puzzle's usage from several times, to one, and then to none, because the drama of the scene itself was more interesting than the mechanic. At the end of the day, it's always important to ask yourself if what you're 'charging' the player with is worth the overall cost, not just in the moment, but in the long run as well.

What's difficult

These are moments that require the most of a player's attention or skill to be completed. They need their own special sense of balance, not just in understanding how difficult something is, but also how long we've had to learn and get better at the skill required. This is often thought of as the difficulty ramp, with it being important to



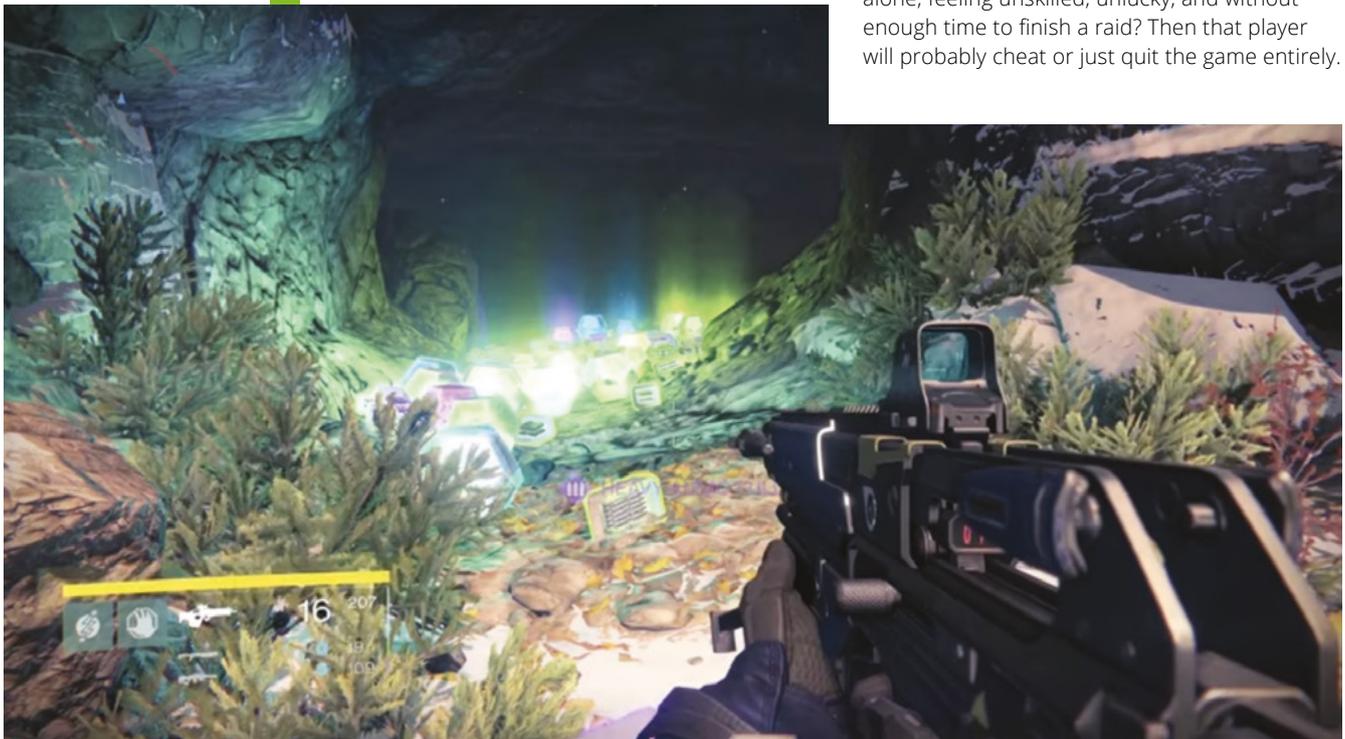
▲ *Resident Evil 4* was beloved by fans, but some still found failing a split-second quick-time event after surviving long shooting gallery-style sections frustrating.

remember that, while difficulty can be fun, there's a difference between discomfort and pain.

Apply this to another looter shooter game like *Destiny*, and it makes sense why the infamous Loot Cave became a popular workaround for farming items. As in, if an endgame activity like a raid is difficult, does that mean it also requires X amount of teammates and co-ordination? Does it also require a long time to complete? And finally, does the raid require luck to get the outcome or items the player wants? Factor it all up, and you can get some idea of how much work, or time, players need to get what they want out of that activity.

Difficulty is what a lot of gamers are here for, but a waste of someone's whole night doesn't sound too appealing. When weighing difficulty, ask if a player can also be 'low' in any of these required resource areas as well. Are they playing alone, feeling unskilled, unlucky, and without enough time to finish a raid? Then that player will probably cheat or just quit the game entirely.

▼ *Destiny's* infamous Loot Cave saw constantly respawning, low-level enemies charging forward from a single point. Perfect for farming items.





There are other important questions to ask, such as: is this mechanic explained well enough, or does the difficulty show up too fast and unexpectedly (implying an improper difficulty curve)? Are simpler puzzles instructive in teaching and exposing a player to complexity as the difficulty builds? Can we provide more tools, like varying power-ups to soften the challenge as needed, or new weapon loadouts or combinations to give newer players a useful edge?

Giving the player only one route to success – as in needing skill, support from other players, expertise, or luck – can be a miserable bottleneck for them to fit through. It's also important to think of not just the best players, but the youngest, newest, and those with physical handicaps. For them, something as simple as a button combo can be painful, and will therefore make your game more limiting. Working to support these players with helpful mechanics and systems is always worth the effort, because helping everyone cross the finish line is better than leaving some out in the cold.

These can be things like scaling difficulty after so many fails, or extra clues from characters if a puzzle is taking too long to solve, or, in the case

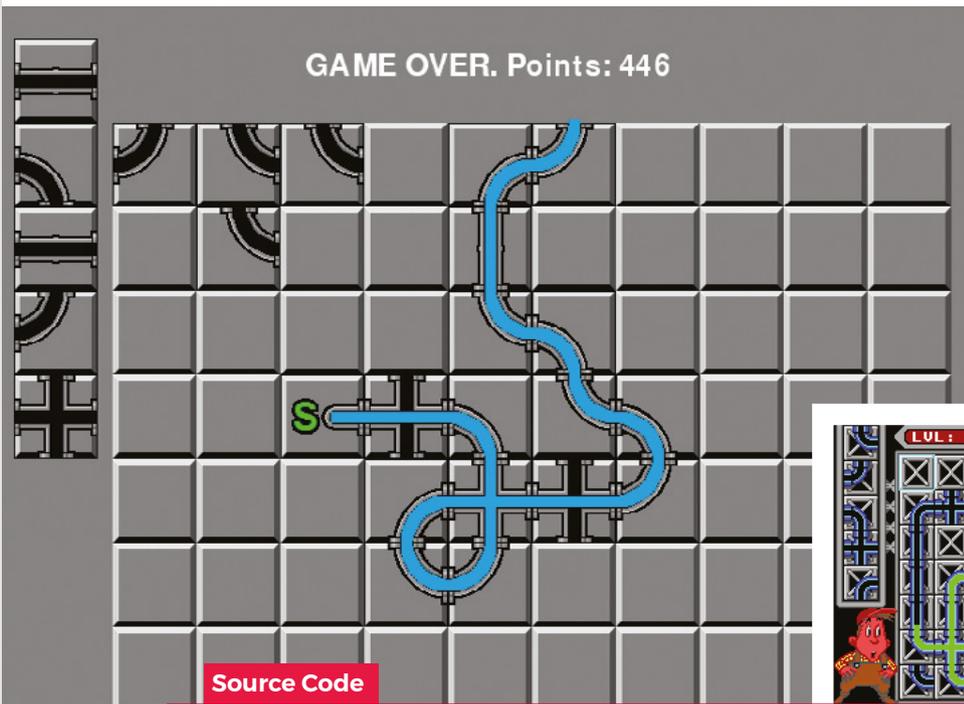
of one of the earliest button mashes in *Fables: The Wolf Among Us* (see pic above), after talking with QA and realising that some of our testers were trying too hard to win at what was actually an unwinnable button mash, the decision was made to make this button mash impossible to fail, which carried over into later designs and other episodes where we realised that the difficulty itself was distracting. This all comes to a head when thinking not just about playability,

but replayability.

Because Telltale's narratives often had branching choices with multiple outcomes, the final thoughts on an

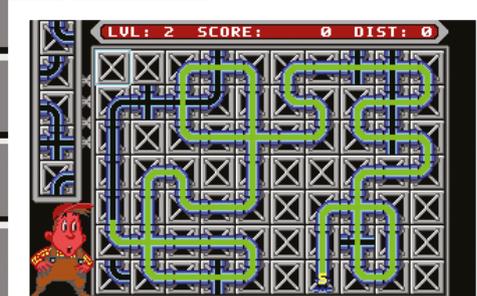
episode being too slow or difficult always came back to the question of: are we discouraging the player from replaying and seeing those other branches? Because if we're making more choices that are interesting and meaningful, but it takes too much work to replay, then what's the point in working so hard on something most people won't have the patience to ever see? The ultimate hope being that, if a game is an enjoyable, smooth, and pain-free ride once, maybe it has a chance at being fun again and again, and worth returning to even years after. That's the ultimate test of what makes a game not just good, but truly great. 🐾

^ An 'unwinnable' button mash in *Fables: The Wolf Among Us* – it made sense within the context of the game's plot, but confused and frustrated some QA testers as to what message we were sending.



◀ Our *Pipe Mania* homage. Build a pipeline before the water escapes, and see if you can beat your own score.

▼ *Pipe Mania's* design is so effective, it's appeared in various guises elsewhere – even as a minigame in *BioShock*.



Code your own Pipe Mania puzzler



AUTHOR
JORDI SANTONJA

Create a network of pipes before the water starts to flow in our re-creation of a classic puzzler

Pipe Mania, also called *Pipe Dream* in the US, is a puzzle game developed by The Assembly Line in 1989 for Amiga, Atari ST, and PC, and later ported to other platforms, including arcades. The player must place randomly generated sections of pipe onto a grid. When a counter reaches zero, water starts to flow and must reach the longest possible distance through the connected pipes.

Let's look at how to recreate *Pipe Dream* in Python and Pygame Zero. The variable `start` is decremented at each frame. It begins with a value of `60*30`, so it reaches zero after 30 seconds if our monitor runs at 60 frames per second. In that time, the player can place tiles on the grid to build a path. Every time the user clicks on the grid, the last tile from `nextTiles` is placed on the play area and a new random tile appears at the top of the next tiles. `randint(2,8)` computes a random value between 2 and 8.

`grid` and `nextTiles` are lists of tile values, from 0 to 8, and are copied to the screen in the `draw` function with the `screen.blit` operation. `grid` is a two-dimensional list, with sizes `gridWidth=10` and `gridHeight=7`. Every pipe piece is placed in `grid` with a mouse click. This is managed with the Pygame functions `on_mouse_move` and `on_mouse_down`, where the variable `pos` contains the mouse position in the window. `panelPosition` defines the position of the top-left corner of the grid in the window. To get the grid cell, `panelPosition` is subtracted from `pos`, and the result is divided by `tileSize` with the integer division `//`. `tileMouse` stores the resulting cell element, but it is set to `(-1, -1)` when the mouse lies outside the grid.

The `images` folder contains the PNGs with the tile images, two for every tile: the graphical image and the path image. The `tiles` list contains the name of every tile, and adding to it `_block` or `_path` obtains the name of the file. The values stored in `nextTiles` and `grid` are the indexes of the elements in `tiles`.

The image `waterPath` isn't shown to the user, but it stores the paths that the water is going to follow. The first point of the water path is located in the starting tile, and it's stored in `currentPoint`. `update` calls the function `CheckNextPointDeleteCurrent`, when the water starts flowing. That function finds the next point in the water path, erases it, and adds a new point to the `waterFlow` list. `waterFlow` is shown to the user in the `draw` function.

`pointsToCheck` contains a list of relative positions, offsets, that define a step of two pixels from `currentPoint` in every direction to find the next point. Why two pixels? To be able to define the 'cross' tile, where two lines cross each other. In a 'cross' tile the water flow must follow a straight line, and this is how the only points found are the next points in the same direction. When no next point is found, the game ends and the score is shown: the number of points in the water path, `playState` is set to `0`, and no more updates are done. 🕒



Pipe-wrangling in Python

Here's Jordi's code for a *Pipe Mania*-style puzzler. To get it working on your system, you'll need to install Pygame Zero – full instructions are available at wfmag.cc/pgzero.

```
# Pipe Mania
from pygame import image, Color, Surface
from random import randint

gridWidth, gridHeight = 10, 7
grid = [[0 for x in range(gridWidth)] for y in range(gridHeight)]
tileSize = 68
panelPosition = (96, 96)
numberNextTiles = 5
nextTiles = [randint(2, 8) for y in range(numberNextTiles)]
nextTilesPosition = (16, 28)
tileMouse = (-1, -1)

tiles = ['empty', 'start',
         'hori', 'vert', 'cross',
         'bottomleft', 'bottomright',
         'topleft', 'topright']

pathTiles = [image.load('images/' + tiles[i] + '_path.png') for i in
             range(1,9)]

waterPath = Surface((gridWidth*tileSize, gridHeight*tileSize))
waterPath.fill(Color('black'))
grid[3][2] = 1 # start tile
waterPath.blit(pathTiles[0], (2 * tileSize, 3 * tileSize))
currentPoint = (2 * tileSize + 43, 3 * tileSize + 34)
waterFlow = []
start = 60*30 # 30 seconds

playState = 1

pointsToCheck = [(2, 0), (0, 2), (-2, 0), (0, -2),
                 (2, 1), (1, 2), (-2, 1), (1, -2),
                 (2, -1), (-1, 2), (-2, -1), (-1, -2),
                 (2, -2), (2, 2), (-2, 2), (-2, -2)]

def draw():
    screen.blit('background', (0,0))
    for x in range(gridWidth):
        for y in range(gridHeight):
            screen.blit(tiles[grid[y][x]]+'_block', (
                panelPosition[0] + x * tileSize,
                panelPosition[1] + y * tileSize))
    for y in range(numberNextTiles):
        screen.blit(tiles[nextTiles[y]]+'_block', (
            nextTilesPosition[0],
            nextTilesPosition[1] + y * tileSize))
    for point in waterFlow:
        screen.blit('water', point)
    if playState == 1:
        if tileMouse[0] >= 0 and tileMouse[1] >= 0:
            screen.blit(tiles[nextTiles[-1]]+'_block', (
                panelPosition[0] + tileMouse[0] * tileSize,
                panelPosition[1] + tileMouse[1] * tileSize))
```

```
    if start > 0:
        screen.draw.text("Start in "
            + str(start // 60), center=(400, 50), fontsize=35)
    else:
        screen.draw.text("GAME OVER. Points: "
            +str(len(waterFlow)), center=(400, 50), fontsize=35)

def update():
    global start, playState
    if start > 0:
        start -= 1
    elif playState == 1:
        if not CheckNextPointDeleteCurrent():
            playState = 0

def CheckNextPointDeleteCurrent():
    global currentPoint
    for point in pointsToCheck:
        newPoint = (currentPoint[0] + point[0], currentPoint[1]
            + point[1])
        if newPoint[0] < 0 or newPoint[1] < 0 or newPoint[0] >=
            gridWidth*tileSize or newPoint[1] >= gridHeight*tileSize:
            return False # goes outside the screen
        if waterPath.get_at(newPoint) != Color('black'):
            waterPath.set_at(newPoint, Color('black'))
            waterFlow.append((newPoint[0] + panelPosition[0] - 4,
                newPoint[1] + panelPosition[1] - 4))
            currentPoint = newPoint
            return True
    return False # no next point found

def on_mouse_down(pos):
    if playState == 1 and tileMouse[0] >= 0 and tileMouse[1] >=
    0:
        if grid[tileMouse[1]][tileMouse[0]] != 1: # not start
            tile
                grid[tileMouse[1]][tileMouse[0]] = nextTiles[-1]
                waterPath.fill(Color('black'), (tileMouse[0] *
                    tileSize, tileMouse[1] * tileSize, tileSize, tileSize))
                waterPath.blit(pathTiles[nextTiles[-1] - 1],
                    (tileMouse[0] * tileSize, tileMouse[1] * tileSize))
                for i in reversed(range(numberNextTiles - 1)):
                    nextTiles[i + 1] = nextTiles[i]
                    nextTiles[0] = randint(2, 8)

def on_mouse_move(pos):
    global tileMouse
    if playState == 1:
        tileMouse = ((pos[0] - panelPosition[0])//tileSize,
            (pos[1] - panelPosition[1])//tileSize)
        if pos[0] < panelPosition[0] or pos[1] < panelPosition[1]
            or tileMouse[0] >= gridWidth or tileMouse[1] >= gridHeight:
            tileMouse = (-1, -1) # mouse outside panel
```



GAME
In Sound Mind

ARTIST
Josh Culp

RELEASE
2021

WEBSITE
insoundmind.com



In Sound Mind

**READ
MORE**
turn to
page 14

Currently being developed by indie studio, We Create Stuff, *In Sound Mind* mixes puzzle-solving, jabs of action, and slow-drip suspense to create an eerie survival horror experience. Set in the mid-nineties, it finds a therapist lost in the minds of his patients, and his survival depends on unravelling mysteries and fighting the demonic entities he finds along the way.

When creating each of *In Sound Mind*'s areas, creative director Hen Matshulski tells us, colour and lighting are key to the design process. "It was important for us from the very beginning to create a clear pattern that each major section in the game follows," Matshulski says. "Among story, mechanics, and special boss fights, a solid colour was a central element for each area to make it stand out. You might notice the pink/purple colours for The Watcher, and in recent trailers, you'll see a brownish colour for The Shade. You can basically tell where you are just by looking around, and each area is unique in that way."

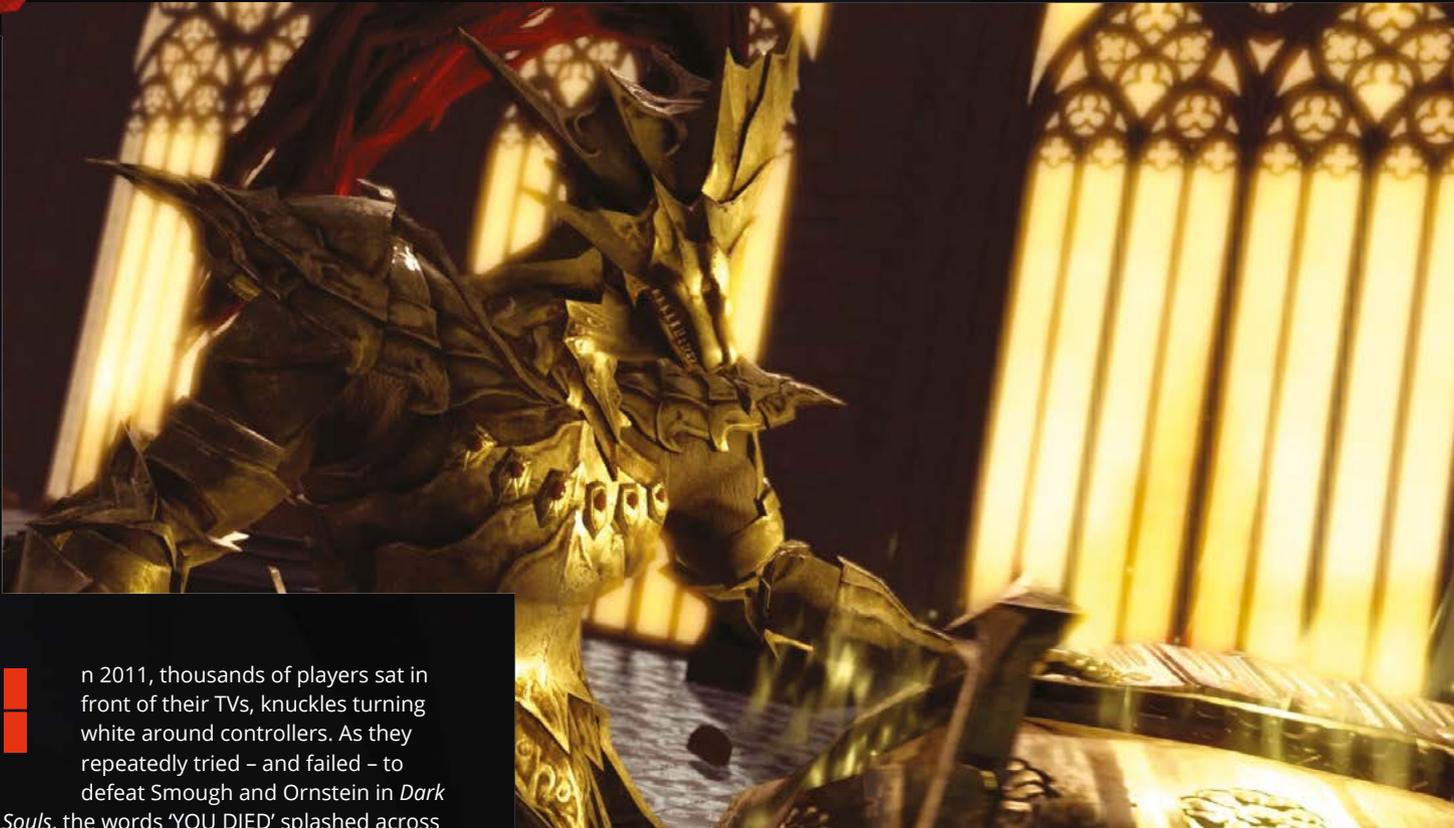
The concept artwork dotted around these pages give an idea of what *In Sound Mind*'s nightmarish forces will look like – the floating figure with the flowing, Medusa-like hair? That's The Watcher. Shudder.



The video game death instinct

What do a 20th-century
psychoanalyst and video
games have in common?
Death. Repeated death

WRITTEN BY
DANIEL LIPSCOMBE



In 2011, thousands of players sat in front of their TVs, knuckles turning white around controllers. As they repeatedly tried – and failed – to defeat Smough and Ornstein in *Dark Souls*, the words ‘YOU DIED’ splashed across the screen. There was frustration, rage, but also determination. So why do we gamers persist in the face of repeated death? Do we subconsciously need this act of repetition, of dying and trying again?

In 1920, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud published a paper called *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which explored how the ego affects perceptions of pleasure and pain. It might be hard to see what this has to do with video games, but there are more similarities than you might first think. The paper postulated that people develop a repetition compulsion, reliving the same scene regardless of the emotional outcome, destroying the idea of ‘self’ for an ultimate goal. Or, “You have to kill your creations and kill your old self every day in order to improve,” as Cezary Skorupka, level designer on *SUPERHOT*, puts it.

Freud first began examining this theory as more of his patients described how they relived childhood traumas. Patients would re-enact a past moment in their minds, yearning for a different outcome – even though changing the result of past events is impossible. Freud began to wonder why we insist on reliving such dark moments, and he developed the idea of the Death Instinct, also known as Thanatos, named for the Greek god of death. Three simple features make up the Death Instinct: aggression, risky behaviour, and reliving trauma.

This style of repetition may sound familiar to some. Aggression can be seen in shooters; we take numerous risks through gravity-defying jumps, and continuing to play after a Game Over could be seen as reliving trauma. Under the right circumstances, this is a healthy way to learn and better ourselves. Not only does repetition strengthen our resolve, but it also allows us to internalise our mistakes. Matthew

“You have to kill your creations and kill your old self every day in order to improve”

Barr, lecturer at the University of Glasgow, believes games give us the freedom for failure. “Failing when it really matters is not something most of us want to experience,” he says. By contrast, Barr sees video games as a way of “practising failure”. In games, this failure mostly comes from death.

We can see the Death Instinct in early games like *Pac-Man*, where players died repeatedly in pursuit of high scores. Over the years, entire sub-genres and movements have pursued the Death Instinct as a central tenet – speedrunning, no-hit runs, 100% completions. Each of these sub-genres has one thing in common: repetition through death, leading to mastery. ➔

▲ The bane of so many players lives, Ornstein, along with Smough, still prove to be one of the biggest challenges in *Dark Souls*. How many lives have they taken?

▼ Matt Barr, lecturer and author, has heavily researched the destruction of self in video games.



Interface

The video game death instinct



▲ There are moments of respite in *Dark Souls*, as in life. But they are few and far between, when life hangs in the balance.

SKILL UP

When asking Matthew Barr about the implications of learning real-world skills from video games, he explains: "Transferability of skills and experience is notoriously hard to demonstrate in a scientifically sound way, but such transfer makes intuitive sense. Why else would the military, for example, invest so heavily in training simulations, if the effects of such training didn't transfer to the 'real world'? The U.S. Army has long used a video game (the imaginatively titled *America's Army*) to recruit and ultimately train personnel."

Roguelikes epitomise this idea, with the concept of permadeath being a staple of the genre. Matt Dabrowski, developer of *Streets of Rogue*, agrees. "In roguelikes, you gain all sorts of inventory items and abilities throughout your progress," he says. "The frequent deaths allow you to rebuild from scratch over and over again. There's a sense of being unburdened with what has come before." Here, then, is self-destruction through repetition. "The more you die," Skorupka says, "the more you lose, the better your knowledge of games mechanics, timing, level layout, etc."

SUPERHOT's producers push the idea further with the sequel, *SUPERHOT: MIND CONTROL DELETE*. "We see the hero of the first game stuck in a 'hacker room', forced to relive traumatic moments through puzzling levels," says Skorupka. "This is achieved by destroying each version of the hero, accepting failure in a quest for freedom."

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud tells the story of staying with a family and noticing one day that a toddler had created a game. The child would throw toys under furniture or out of his cot, and say 'fort' ['gone' in German]. They would then 'find' the toy with a joyful 'da' ['there' in German]. It became clear that the game was based on *instinctual satisfaction* – creating a moment of fear and challenge in order to feel the joy of the toy's return.

Freud posed the question: "How does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle?" To this, the psychoanalyst explained: "At the outset, the boy was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by an experience; but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took an active part." In this way,



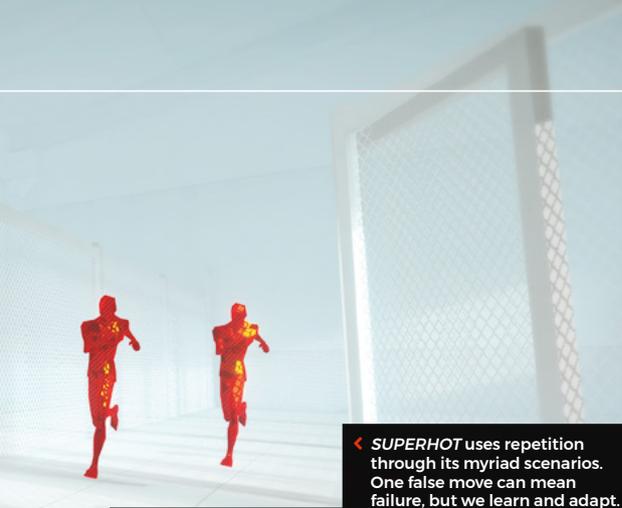
the small boy controlled and mastered his emotional reactions through a game.

Let's transfer this to games by looking at *Super Mario Bros*. In order to win, players must master each stage, which will likely result in repeated deaths. The flag-pole at the end of each stage is the 'joy', and in order to get there, players must learn where all the dangers are and how to avoid them. The level opens in the 'passive state' and cycles through programmed loops. It's only through repeated – 'active' – actions and acceptance of death that this learning is achieved. Freud describes this as "an urge inherent in all organic life to restore an earlier state of things".

Speedrunners force errors and take risks in order to find the most efficient path to the end. With each death, they're taking an active part in working towards the moment of acceptance through this self-reward.

Freud's 'Death Instinct' needed contrast. Thanatos gave way to Eros – the Life Instinct. Eros is the base need for survival, and Freud believed that one wouldn't exist without the other. This led him to state that "The aim of all life is death". Within games, though, death is never final. It's a part of the cycle; games can be started and restarted. Death is eventually beaten, ending in survival. The completion of a game, for many players, is the end. To track with Freud's theory, if the aim of life is death, death represents a state where there are no tensions or stimuli to impinge upon our psyche. Once we've reached the end-point, the active becomes passive again, and we reach a state of peace.

We could see this mastery through repeated death as a way of aggressively diverting emotions and trauma from life and extrapolating it into the game. "*Dark Souls* is about death, thematically, but mechanically the game is also about dying, as the player learns from their mistakes and ekes out a little



◀ *SUPERHOT* uses repetition through its myriad scenarios. One false move can mean failure, but we learn and adapt.

progress,” says Barr. He doubts the idea of self-destruction being a driving force, but believes games create a yearning for resolution. “Games are absolutely about mastery. In education, learning is centred on getting feedback on your actions until you achieve a certain level of performance or proficiency. In many ways, players are practising the scientific method.”

The Death Instinct, which allowed Freud’s patients to heal, allows gamers to work through external issues with practical problems, often resulting in exporting basic skills into the ‘real world’. As Barr explains, “we can develop the tools required to pick ourselves up when things go wrong. It’s worth remembering that games, in a sense, are ‘real’ – we’re still firing real neurons, exercising real skills when we play. Transfer [of skills] makes intuitive sense.”

“The frequent deaths allow you to rebuild from scratch over and over again”

Dabrowski agrees. “Failure in games is a pretty minor thing, but you could certainly find areas in the real world where the skills learned from games would apply. *Streets of Rogue* encourages the player to attempt creative strategies – and players tend to gravitate towards these strategies with every death.”

Karl Menninger also looked into similar theories in his book, *Man Against Himself* (1938). He examined the idea of self-harm and self-destruction. If we look at each attempt to complete a difficult game as a form of repeated self-destruction, then we can read differently into a passage of text from his book: “The symptom (destruction) is, therefore an attempt at self-healing, or at least self-preservation.”

We can see this theory in *Dark Souls*. As players approach a new area, they won’t know the enemies, where they’re positioned, or what their pattern of attacks are. The cycle of deaths this introduces is frustrating, but what if we’re drawn to this frustration as a way of controlling our fate? Sometimes a player will

storm into a boss with death as the goal, purely to learn, knowing they get another chance. We fail. Failure strengthens us. Skorupka taps into the idea neatly: “We know it will hurt, we know we may fail, but we have to suffer through it to create anything.”

Dabrowski also sees repetition in the act of designing a game. “When I’m learning something new in the world of development, I tend to brute-force my way through to a degree that could be seen as self-destructive,” he says. “I become obsessed with powering through, regardless of how many headaches and hours of crunch I’ll be taking on.”

James Paul Gee, an American researcher, looked to games in his paper, *Good Video Games and Good Learning*, to see how repetition through destruction and problem-solving could be applied to education.

He found that players had to “rethink their now taken-for-granted mastery, learn something new, and integrate this new learning with their old mastery”. This process is sometimes called the ‘Cycle of Expertise’.

If self-destruction forces learning and the transfer of skills, this repetition is potentially soothing for players – a contained way to explore subconscious emotions. Dabrowski agrees: “People often find comfort in playing games where they know exactly what to expect. It allows them to zone out – maybe even into a meditative state.”

Through games, we can achieve the seemingly impossible through repetition, and through death, we can reach a form of peace. The anguish is worthwhile; each misstep or unparried attack, each Game Over, fulfils our Death Instinct. The pursuit of repeated death cleans the slate, bringing us to a point where anguish no longer exists. Freud could see this as moving through passive and active states at will by our own control. One of Karl Menninger’s patients said it best: “You have to taste the bitter part of life to enjoy the sweet.” ☹️



▲ Matt Dabrowski wowed roguelike fans with *Streets of Rogue*, which seemed to be a runaway hit online with players as they saw how crazy their experiences could be.



▼ *Streets of Rogue* gave players the chance to experiment through death, with each new area opening almost like a puzzle box. Sometimes death is the answer.



FIXING GODHOOD

Abbey Games tell us about the painful yet enlightening process of reworking its latest god game

WRITTEN BY RYAN LAMBIE



▲ Designer and studio co-founder Adriaan Jansen.

▼ The Abbey Games team, pictured at the launch of *Godhood's* Kickstarter campaign.



Something wasn't quite right with *Godhood*. As less-than-favourable reviews appeared on Steam and sales failed to take off, it gradually dawned on Utrecht-based developer Abbey Games that its god sim had fallen short of expectations. It was, according to designer and studio co-founder Adriaan Jansen, a situation that sprang from a well-intentioned attempt to cram too many ideas into the game. "It was a slow realisation that we were fighting ourselves and the game by projecting too many personal ambitions into it," Jansen tells us. "More and more things just weren't shaping up as we thought they would be."

It's common for developers to talk openly about a game that's sold thousands of copies and garnered positive reviews. It's comparatively rare for a studio to talk candidly about a game that has struggled to find its footing – or, in Abbey Games' case, forced its founders to make the painful decision to cut its team of a dozen or so developers down to just three. "For some of us it was devastating," Jansen says of that dark period in 2019 when three quarters of his team were made redundant. "We'd not only built up a game company, but also a tight group of friends. To give you an idea, I had to fire the person who is now my fiancé, and another who is going to be my best man. Also, a lot of talent was lost to us."

Godhood's story began in January 2019, when Abbey Games took to Kickstarter to raise funds for its *Populous*-inspired sim. The studio had already built a reputation for making well-received titles in a similar vein with *Reus* (also a god game) and *Renowned Explorers* (a strategy-adventure); *Godhood* would continue in a similar yet far more ambitious vein, with an intricate build-your-own-religion system and tribes of rival acolytes to fight. The project may have been niche, but it soon passed its €50,000 target.

As development progressed on *Godhood*, however, it became clear that Abbey Games' ambition – and the creative environment at the studio – were beginning to work against it. It was an environment that Jansen now calls





Interface Fixing Godhood

“toxic friendliness” among the team members: “We were on such equal terms and had such aversion to things that looked authoritarian that we ended up spending a lot of time on making compromises,” he says, “many of which were too ambitious.”

PLAYING GOD

When *Godhood's* July 2019 Early Access appearance was met with disappointment (“promises the world, but delivers much less”, was Polygon’s downbeat verdict), its creators had to think carefully about what to do next. “We never talked about giving up,” Jansen says, “but it was more a matter of principle than business at that point. Initially, we were going to finish *Godhood* with just three of the founders out of pure pride; we couldn’t leave *Godhood* in that unfinished state. It both forced and helped us to be decisive, and bring it to a much better and unique place right now. Business-wise, it also turned out to be a good decision to chase higher quality.”

By December, the studio had pared its ranks down to Jansen and programmers Maarten Wiedenhof and Manuel Kerssemakers. Together, the trio applied a similar winnowing process to *Godhood* itself: they stripped back unnecessary elements and focused on making its god-game core more fun to interact with. “The plan was simple: focus on the aspect that was the most fun, and sink all other ambitions until further



Programmer Maarten Wiedenhof, posing with a crisp supermarket salad.



Programmer Manuel Kerssemakers.

notice,” Jansen explains. “It was mostly internal, but some fans helped out a ton. This allowed us to focus on making the game playable, and if there would be thematic or technical ideas, they would only come to be if the foundation below it was strong. Better to make something for someone, then everything for no one. Before, it was easy to come up with a new, bigger ambition to fit everyone’s view of the game. Even if that ambition was too big. This sounds obvious, but the simplest things are the hardest.”

This uncompromising approach soon paid dividends: when the finished *Godhood* launched in August 2020, the consensus on Steam had risen to ‘very positive’ – an impressive turnaround, given Abbey managed to rework the game in less than one year. Says Jansen: “When we returned to a smaller crew, I finally felt we could make quick decisions again with clear responsibilities and an adequate amount of discussions. It was also a ‘never again’ moment for me, which gave me a lot of resolve. If you prioritise being nice above [making a good game], you’ll end up in a painful situation like this.”

LIFE AFTER ABBEY

Breaking up a close-knit studio may have been difficult, but it wasn’t all bad news for the team members let go in the wake of *Godhood's* Early Access launch. “First, we honoured the contracts which had a termination period of two to four months,” Jansen says. “Second, most got compensation equal to one or two months’ salary depending on the time they worked with us. A few chose to trade in a part of that compensation for a share in the revenue of *Godhood*. That turned out to be a good deal for them, so we’re happy to give them a bit extra. Last but not least, we tried to help them get a new place, or help their new business. A few got some paid assignments through us. Like Marlies Barends, who became a freelance artist for board and digital games. And three other employees started their own project with *Cat Cafe Manager*, under their new studio, Roost Games.”

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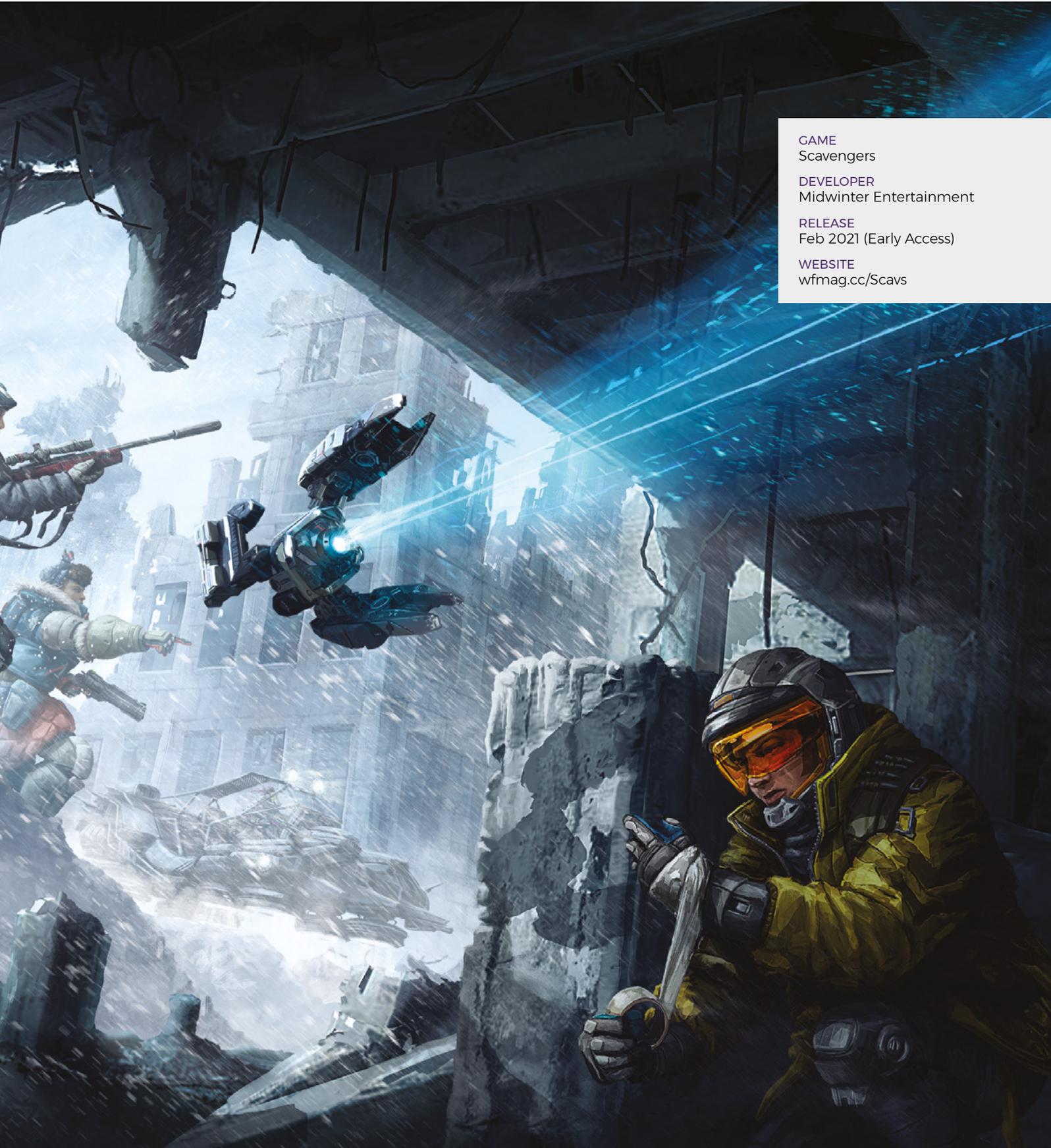
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Scavengers

Scavengers brings together dev talent from the likes of *Halo 5*, the *Battlefield* series, and earlier *God of War* titles in one big pile of survival-shooter coldness. We'll be taking a closer look at it soon, but for now, here's some concept art to take a look at. "[The artwork] expresses 'pre-combat' in the hostile, frozen world of *Scavengers*," explains Daryl Anselmo, director of art and UX at Midwinter Entertainment. "One team, in the shadows, prepares to guard their resources against approaching competitors. The keeper drone scans the area for the presence of threats. Cruz bandages himself, suggesting that he recently finished one battle and must be ready to engage directly in the next. Halden is about to start the skirmish by tossing a grenade into the scene. This image was created to highlight the colourful Explorers against the wintery backdrop, and celebrate our Closed Beta period."

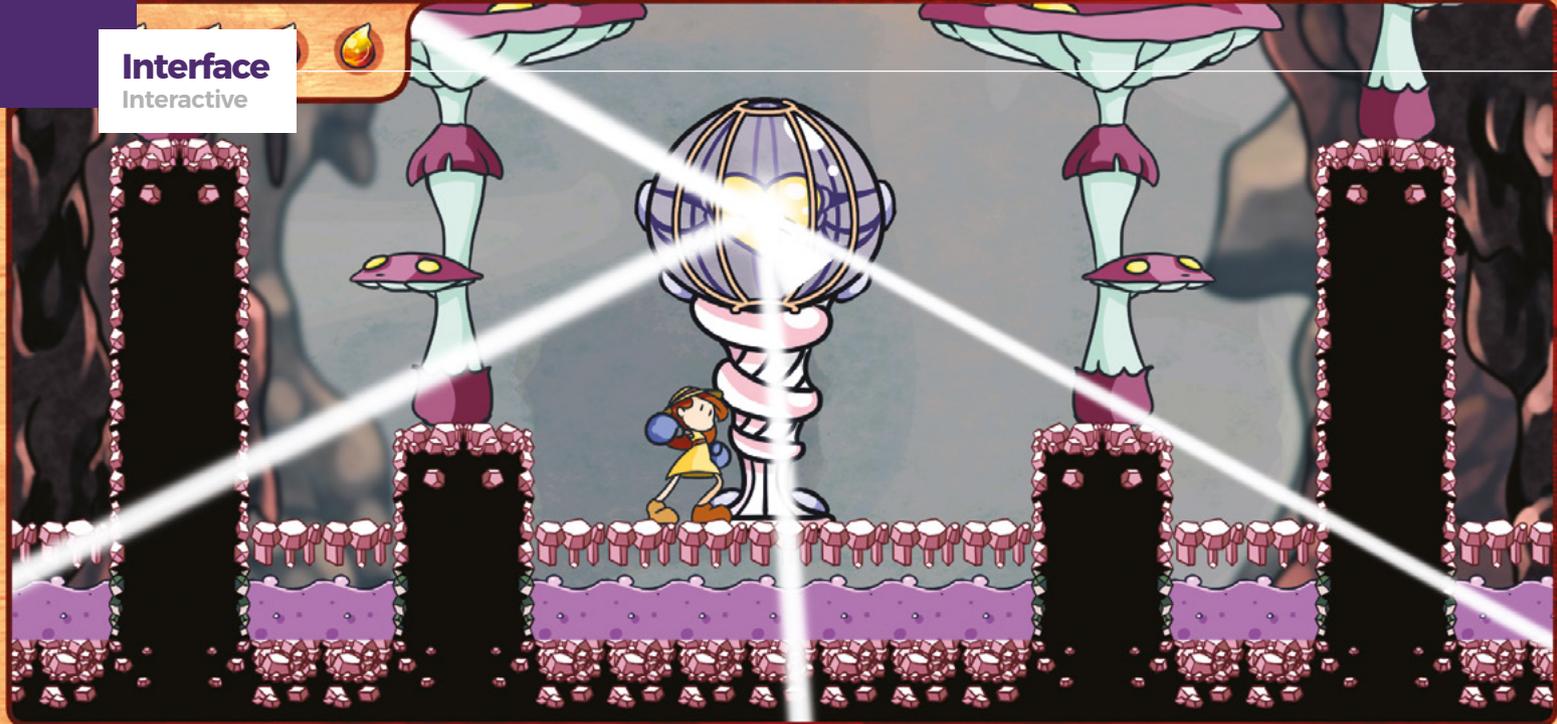


GAME
Scavengers

DEVELOPER
Midwinter Entertainment

RELEASE
Feb 2021 (Early Access)

WEBSITE
wfmag.cc/Scavs



Interactive

Decline's Drops

Kirby meets Smash Bros. in this indie platformer from France

Are you a solo developer working on a game you want to share with Wireframe? If you'd like to have your project featured in these pages, get in touch with us at wfmag.cc/hello

▼ Drazglb. has "two best friends" in the development of *Decline's Drops*: GameMaker Studio 2, its engine, and Clip Studio Paint, for creating assets.



Games spring into being for many reasons, but rarely as a joke. For Drazglb. (the full stop's intentional), an indie developer from Normandy, France, this is exactly how *Decline's Drops* got started. "I wanted to create a little game for my brother's birthday," he says, "but it was just a joke and never intended to go further after that. Then *Decline's Drops* appeared..."

The game is a light, bouncy platformer in the vein of the *Kirby* and *Yoshi* series, but with one key twist: its heroine, an athletic puppet named Globule, has some seriously powerful punching moves at her disposal, much like Drazglb.'s other big inspiration, *Super Smash Bros.* Playing through the demo (wfmag.cc/drop-demo), the impact of these moves becomes immediately clear: rather than just jumping on enemies' heads or hitting them with a blunt implement, you can go for rapid punches, then follow up with a devastating uppercut, making each encounter – against chickens with cybernetic arms, bees, and bullet-spitting, frog-like critters – feel like a miniature battle rather than simple point-scoring.

Given that *Decline's Drops* is Drazglb.'s first game, it's already looking and feeling remarkably

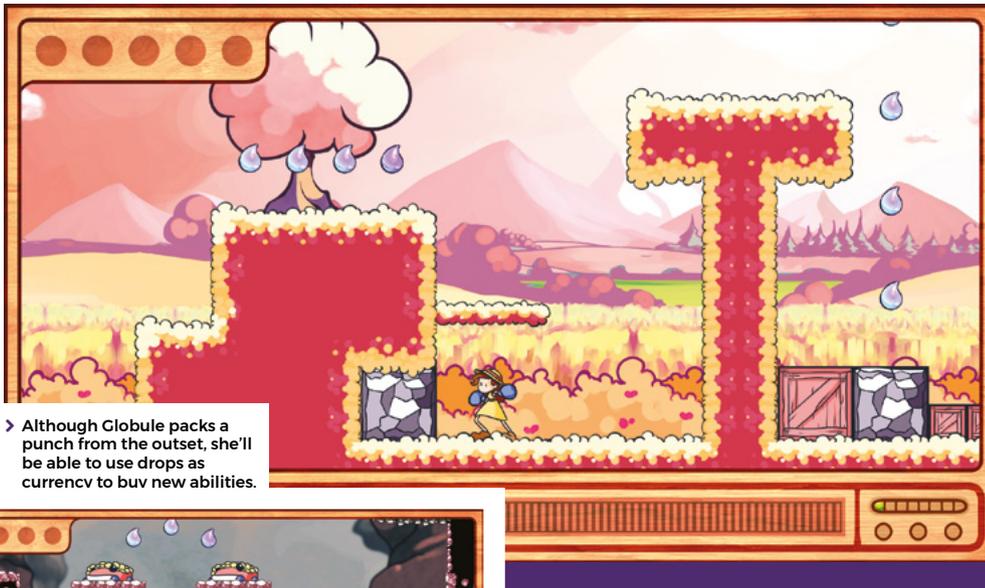
polished, with smooth character animation and tight controls. "When you create a platformer focused on combat, your animations have to be instantly clear, visible, and varied enough so the player doesn't confuse them," Drazglb. says. "So I took inspiration from fighting games, especially *Super Smash Bros.* (obviously). As for Globule, the challenge was to create varied attacks, but with her solely using her gloves. I think constraints are a great way to be more inventive."

Aside from punching enemies out of existence, Globule's main task is to collect titular drops scattered around each stage,

and defeat the evil force – called the Decline – which has destroyed her beloved garden. Traversing each of the six worlds requires a deft combination of jumping

and platforms (which feels almost *Ninja Gaiden*-like in its smoothness), and even a spot of puzzle-solving: the demo includes a neat little segment where Globule has to punch movable blocks to create routes to out-of-reach areas. Mostly, though, it's the combat mechanics that separate *Decline's Drops* from its platforming peers – and it's this aspect that's taken time to perfect, Drazglb. says. "I don't even want to know how much time I spent on trying to find the right physics, the right gameplay... I think

"The combat gameplay in a platformer was a risky approach"



▶ Although Globule packs a punch from the outset, she'll be able to use drops as currency to buy new abilities.



▲ There are some puzzles on Globule's path through the levels. These require a bit of thought and some precise punches to solve.

it took me one year and about three or four months. The combat gameplay in a platformer was a risky approach; I was very afraid of people thinking the two genres couldn't fit together, so I tried many things to keep the whole thing entertaining, and hopefully I did it!"

With this being Drazglb.'s first game, he found himself learning a lot as he went along – including, he says, programming. "At first, it isn't easy at all," he tells us. "But I believe when you're passionate, you can learn anything. I learned almost everything from videos I found on YouTube, especially HeartBeast, who is a formidable pedagogue – and [former Ubisoft designer and YouTuber] Shaun Spalding, of course!"

Drazglb.'s project got a major boost when he decided to turn to Kickstarter; although original game ideas sometimes struggle on crowdfunding sites, *Decline's Drops* has surpassed its £10,681 minimum goal at the time of writing. Launching a Kickstarter takes effort, Drazglb. says, but it's ultimately proved worthwhile. "I started to think about a crowdfunding campaign the moment I realised I wouldn't be able to create the soundtrack and the sound design myself, so basically it was planned six or seven months ago. I also wanted

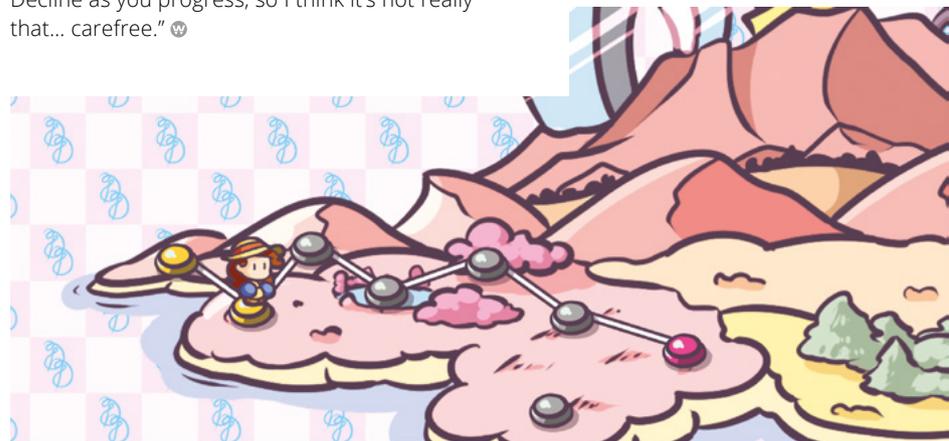
to make sure people were interested in the project itself, so I released a little demo months before the Kickstarter launch and received some positive feedback... It was a lot of work, but in the end, I'm very glad to see it was worth it. I think anyone who'd like to [start] a crowdfunding campaign should really look at what they have to offer at launch: a strong concept, a solid community, a playable demo."

Drazglb. still has lots to do on his platform-brawler: the first world and parts of the second and third are complete, but the rest are, he says, "in my head, waiting to be drawn and coded." Those worlds – and the story – will also grow increasingly dark and melancholy as the player progresses. "The title gives a hint about that," he explains. "I always love how *Kirby* games can become suddenly dark and creepy, and while I don't want *Decline's Drops* to be 'creepy', the game sure gets darker and darker. Every world becomes more and more consumed by the Decline as you progress, so I think it's not really that... carefree." ☹

NEEDLE DROPS

A self-described house husband, Drazglb. has largely worked on *Decline's Drops* at night, while his family sleeps ("I'm very thankful to my wife for her support and confidence in me," he tells us). For music and sound, though, he's tracked down some valuable collaborators: "I work with an excellent composer I found maybe seven or eight months ago, ModalModule, who's already worked on various games. I found him while watching a trailer for the latest game he'd worked on, *Super Gear Quest*. I fell in love with the trailer music and contacted him. He's very talented, and my English vocabulary isn't good enough to explain how much I love his work. I'll be working with Pixel Audio for the sound design. They're very nice people, too, and I discovered their amazing work while playing *Spiritfarer*."

▼ "I wanted to keep things simple, so it's a totally linear adventure," Drazglb. says, "just like *Yoshi's Island*, *Donkey Kong Country*... mainly because it's my favourite kind of game."



Online Diary

GITTIN' GUD

Time to change course in favour of success:
it's score-chasing in Pinball FX3

WRITTEN BY IAN "SLAMTILT" DRANSFIELD

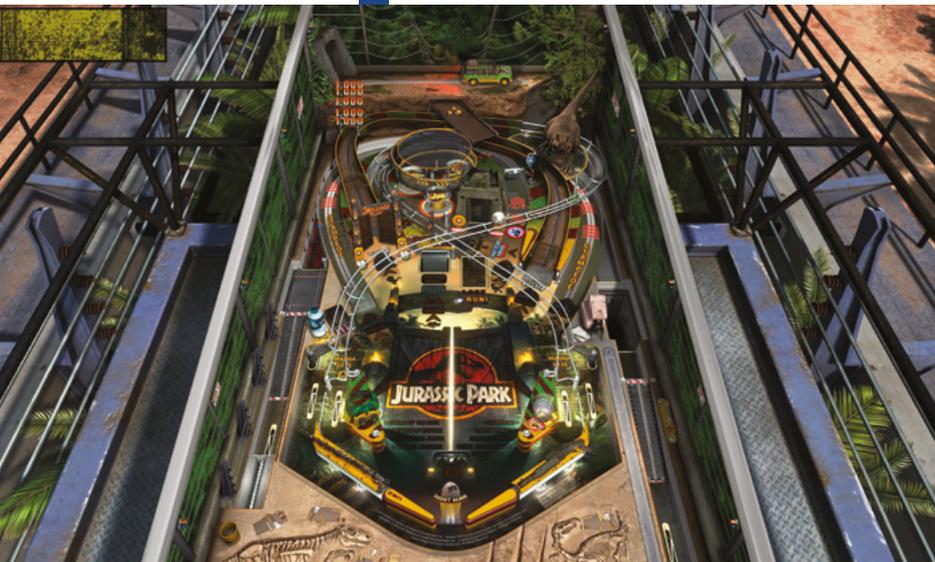
I've been playing *Pinball FX* – formerly *Zen Pinball* – for about a decade now, with the heyday for this mix of made up, licensed, and real-world pinball tables (for me) hitting back in the PS3 era. I played a lot, and I was good; obsessively playing and playing and playing again the World War Hulk and Wolverine tables, keen to see that score ticker hit the tens of millions. Even hundreds of millions. It was a game I genuinely saw myself as capable at, and one I enjoyed far more than countless other major releases in the PS3 era. *Zen Pinball 2* – the version I focused most on – was *my* game.

What the heck does this have to do with an online diary? Why, dear reader, I'm letting you in on my cunning scheme. See, previous entries in these pages have seen me attempting to take on the minions of the online sphere at their own game(s). I've jumped into the hot new shooters or tried to race against literal children who have played a specific game for longer than they've actually been alive. Somehow. Whatever I've been doing, it's generally been stepping into their world: real-time, focused competition, in games I'm largely unfamiliar with. With *Pinball FX3*, it's different.

For one, it's competitive, but not real-time. This is an online game that – at least how I play it – focuses on topping the high score table, whether that's between those on your friends list (recommended) or everyone in the world who plays the game (let's just ignore that part). As such, there's less pressure in the moment-to-moment play; you're not being shunted off course by an aggressive competitor or distracted by an opponent's skilful play.

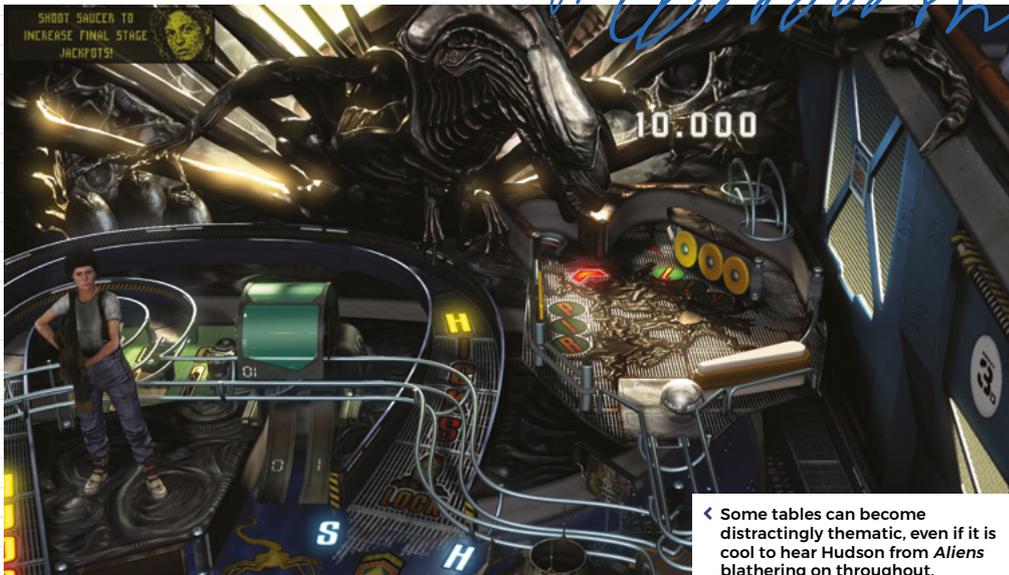
And part two: this is my jam. My pinball jam. As I said, *Zen Pinball 2* was something I was

▼ Let's play a game of spot the ball! (There is no prize, don't write in.)



▼ 'Just one go' turned into two dozen, because the Creature from the Black Lagoon Williams/Bally table is phenomenal.





◀ Some tables can become distractingly thematic, even if it is cool to hear Hudson from *Aliens* blathering on throughout.

good at, and *Pinball FX3* is just a shinier version of exactly the same game, and exactly the same tables. The dirty little secret here is that I absolutely, 100% tried to stack the deck in my favour with this decision, attempting to prove that there is a spot for me that already exists in the online gaming world – it's just one I hadn't thought of until I was tired of losing non-stop at *Call of Duty*. All the same, it's been quite a while, and I've hardly played the game since it made the leap to PS4.

I started out with an old favourite: Wolverine. A quick-paced, small table focused on everyone's pint-sized piranha (he's a man), it's a table that needs quick reactions, but that focuses on a select few well-aimed shots to bag the big points. Friends sit above me on the table – just a couple of them, seems I'm not the only one to have lapsed with my pinball play – but I make it my mission to remember how good I was in the heyday of about 2010 by playing repeatedly until I take out that damn sentinel. Dear reader, I did not take out that damn sentinel, and soon enough gave up to move on to another table because, by criekey, Logan asks a lot of these frail old bones.

On to licensed fare: *Aliens*. Thematically incredible, this table brings together elements from one of the best films ever made and tops it off with – you guessed it – pinball! Pinball is great, by the way, and anyone on the fence about it, or a complete doubter, should get on board immediately and play pinball forever. Criekey, pinball is good. What a game it is. I'm

“The dirty secret is that I 100% tried to stack the deck in my favour”

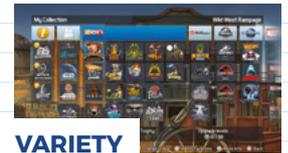
stalling for time, because the truth is I absolutely sucked at the *Aliens* table, in big part because there's so much going on – flamethrowers, the queen eating your ball, missions to choose from, an APC escape minigame – it wasn't something I was ready for there and then. So, again, I quit and chose something else.

Jurassic Park? Didn't have the proper music, moved on swiftly there. That's just an excuse for not beating my friends' scores, of course. Finally, I settled on *Creature From the Black Lagoon*: a licensed table based on a real-life table, modelled on the actual unit and playing pretty much exactly like the hardware did back on its release in 1992. This is where the old muscle memory came back into things: less faff, less showy, it's all about flippers and ramps. No minigames, no mucking about with T-rexes roaring at you and putting you off, just high scores on the horizon.

It took a while. Well over an hour, maybe two. But it washes over you – the rhythm. You pick your spots, time your flipper flips, know what lights to look out for (e.g. flashing white on side lanes = extra ball). It becomes a trance-like experience, and soon enough, there it is. I've done it. I've hit the high score. 287,770,660. I'm there. Top of the table. Reclaiming my place. I am the winner I always knew I could be: the pinball wizard we all so desperately needed here on Wireframe. I am *the best*.

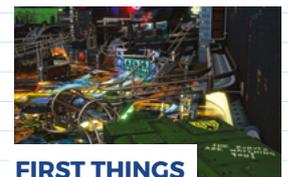
What do you mean that's the local high score and I'm still a hundred million short of the top spot on my friends list? Oh, for the love of... 🙄

Pinball wizardry



VARIETY

Pinball FX3 features dozens of tables in all manner of styles – some made up by the dev team, some based on licences like *Aliens* or *Skyrim*, some meticulously modelled on real-life tables. Play them for free in demo form, and settle on the few you get along with.



FIRST THINGS

Skill shots are a big thing in pinball, usually requiring you hit a target with the ball from launch. Rather than hammering the button to get back into play after going down a gutter, they offer a nice chunky points boost if you stop, take stock, and pay attention to what's required.



PAY ATTENTION

It's easy to assume that playing pinball is much of a muchness. Balls. Flippers. Tilting. But *Pinball FX3* nails the fact that each table is markedly different to the next – Wolverine, for example, is a very compact, fast-paced table. Learning what they play like is key to mastery.



Developer Profile

Night School Studio

A short, rich history of an indie darling

▲ Hell has become party central, but it's still somewhere you need to escape. How? Drinking game, obviously. Afterparty was another great.

W

ith the split comes the risk, always, but jumping from both Disney Interactive and Telltale Studios to set up your own independent team, and focusing on making a game that prioritises dialogue and naturalistic characters over easy-to-digest bombast and... erm... guns – it's an approach that ratchets up the risk manyfold. So it's a good thing that we're able to talk today about Night School Studio in the present tense here; a team created by cousins Sean Krankel and Adam Hines in 2014, focused on taking a different approach to story-led games, and – so far – proving a success with just four releases under its belt. It does help, of course, when your first release is *Oxenfree*, one of the most popular and – frankly – brilliant indie games of the last generation.

But it took a while for that relative comfort to be achieved, and Night School's early days were somewhat fraught according to Krankel, now operating as creative director at the company: "Before getting the funds together, it was terrifying," he says. "Very much a 'fake it 'til you make it' thing. I was recently out of work and only had a

few months before burning through my tiny cushion. Granted, my wife has a great career, but our daughter had just turned two, and I was having a career existential crisis after getting booted from Disney's mobile division.

"But once the funds came together, things were immediately thrilling – electric," he continues. "I look back on every part of the studio's inception with fondness. We were working out of my house, ordering food in and watching *Boiler Room* streams all day, coming up with game ideas. Bryant Cannon was building tools and prototypes, Heather Gross was designing characters, and Adam Hines and I just kept cranking on story, structure, and mechanics ideas for those first couple of months. In between, we'd squeeze in the hunt for an office, checking out all kinds of janky places before we landed on our quirky office."

All that work was focused on what became *Oxenfree*; an idea that had been in the works not forever, but for a while before Night School became a thing. Working at Telltale proved fertile ground for coming up with what-ifs, with Krankel and Hines wondering what it would be like to make a narrative-led game, akin to Telltale's output, but without





^ All of Night School's games have seen stunning presentation, and *Next Stop Nowhere* was no different.

those immersion-breaking cutscenes popping up. The duo came up with a shorthand description for this approach: 'Run, Jump, Talk, Talk'. Focus was required, helped by that shorthand, no doubt, in order for the team to be confident it could deliver the game it promised without going a bit too far, and promising a bit too much. The risk of failure – and a DOA studio – was very real at this point.

"We were very intentional about focusing on only the things we knew we could guarantee we were confident to deliver on," Krankel explains. "So we rallied around our team's internal story and writing chops, narrative design, our confidence in directing talent, scntfc's music as a bed, and tied it all together with Heather's art. But each of these ingredients really only came together with the incredible, tight team that contributed to it all. The further we went, the more plans leaned into the strengths of our team. Spencer Stuard joined midstream and tied it all together with some very strong design and presentation."

ARG LIFE

This focus and tight teamwork didn't come without effort or forethought – managing a studio and all it entails is a tough ask, and it took determination from everyone to keep everything running as that well-oiled machine they all hoped it would be. "The biggest challenge back then, and to this day, is ensuring that everyone on the dev team has a crystal-

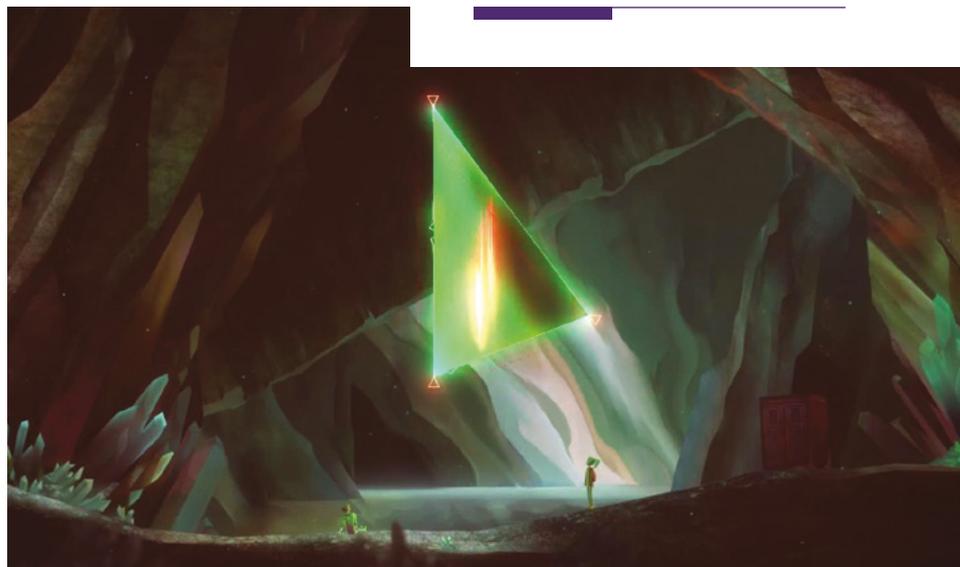
clear understanding of the project and feels clearly empowered to contribute their best work," Krankel says. "We've been really deliberate, and ultimately fortunate, to hire and work with great people. But if your team doesn't implicitly understand the player experience goals, and aren't actively collaborating, the whole process gets really siloed and feels less like a cohesive project."

That cohesion showed in other ways, too, with an ARG backing up *Oxenfree* and kicking up more interest in the game – itself designed by Krankel himself, rather than outsourced to a marketing team. "I had spent a few years as an agency →

Oxenfree

PC / XBO / PS4 / multi – 2016 ▾

Night School's breakthrough might have taken twelve months or so to actually break through, but it doesn't take away from *Oxenfree's* achievements. A whip-smart young adult novel of a game linking narrative and in-game action together seamlessly, making for an experience where, actually, you *do* want to sit through entire conversations because a) they don't stop you playing, and b) they're actually very well written and are backed by well-realised characters. There's a reason *Oxenfree* is indie royalty.





Mr. Robot: 1.51exfiltrati0n

iOS / Android – 2016 ▾

A mobile-only tie-in to a cult TV show isn't where you usually look for great writing and solid ideas, but that's what we got with Night School's licensed *Mr. Robot*... game? Game, sure. A very thematic take on the tale of futuristic hack-o-ramas, *1.51exfiltrati0n* played out as a sort of AR, text messaging-based story with multiple decisions to take and paths to go down. Think *Her Story*, or *Telling Lies*, but based on a TV show and without someone's big face staring right at you.

creative director, and wrote and directed an ARG for the animated movie *9*," Krankel says. "The *Oxenfree* ARG mostly kicked off with me just wanting to do more of that kind of thing because it was a fun, strange way to extend the fiction of our game. It turned out that Andy Rohrmann (aka scntfc, our composer) was a crazy ARG fan as well, and had done some really cool stuff on *Sword & Sworcery* that mixed music and non-traditional storytelling, and things just snowballed from there. That canonical, high-touch storytelling that exists outside of the game proper is still exciting to us, and I think we'd like to explore more of that in the future."

"2016 was a rollercoaster; it took until 2017 before *Oxenfree* really blew up"

After 13 months of full development, and just managing – 'by the skin of our teeth' – to keep the team of five paid and with health insurance (as well as covering a few contractors), *Oxenfree* released in January 2016. It was met with glowing reviews and delight by those who played it – but it took a while to take root: "The first six months after *Oxenfree*'s launch were scary as hell! Launch week on Steam and Xbox were OK, but then it kind of flatlined," Krankel explains. "We launched on PlayStation 4 a few months later, and iOS after that. All of

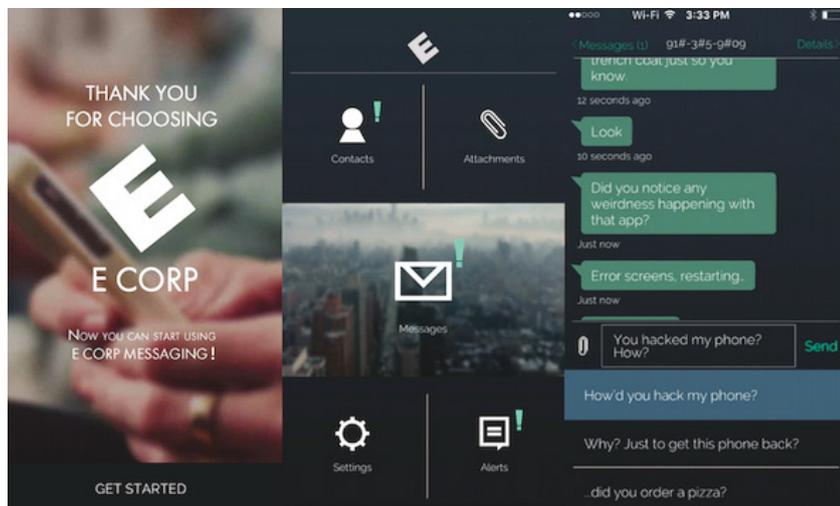
2016 was kind of a rollercoaster; it took until early 2017 before the game really blew up. Lots of strong word of mouth, streamers, a cultural zeitgeist around the genre, all added up to it finally becoming a big success. But that was really about twelve months later."

Fraught as it might have been for a time, still Night School had to look to its next project: *Bounty*, the game that would become *Next Stop Nowhere*, was on the cards. A small, personal space adventure, it would take what made *Oxenfree* great and jet off in a markedly different

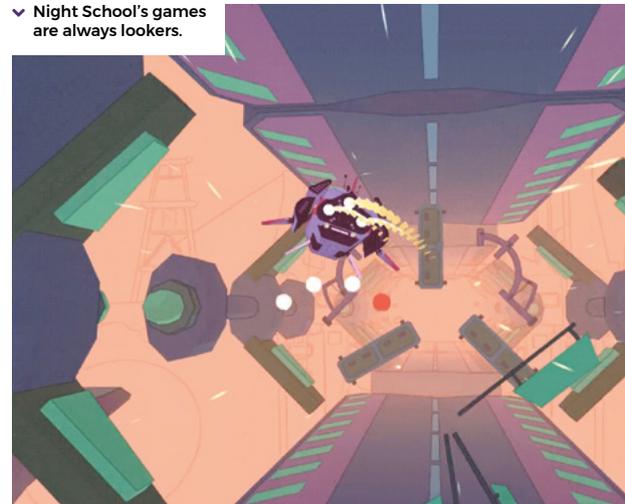
direction. Except: "Then the *Mr. Robot* project fell into place extremely quickly and we shifted

focus." It's hard to see how the *Oxenfree* approach didn't have a positive impact on what actually was Night School's next outing – made in just four months, the team put together a tie-in for the TV show *Mr. Robot*, titled *Mr. Robot: 1.51exfiltrati0n*. A creative mix of narrative adventure and ARG, the mobile-focused title acted as both a solid licensed game and a way for Night School to flex its creative chops.

"An old friend of mine, Pete Wanat, took me to lunch to congratulate me on the release of *Oxenfree*," Krankel says. "He was working at Universal at the time, and was lamenting how difficult it was to find a developer to work on this new TV show called *Mr. Robot*. By the end of lunch, I had pitched him on the idea of a texting adventure and a week later, Adam and



▾ Night School's games are always lookers.





^ Demons, bored of hell's hellishness, have turned things into non-stop nightlife in *Afterparty*.

I were flying to New York to meet with the showrunners. It was pretty surreal." The official pitch was accepted, and the game swiftly went into production, needing to meet the timeline set by the TV show's air date – standard licensed fare, no doubt. But things did differ here, thanks to Krankel's own knowledge of working on licensed titles and friendships with people 'on the inside', as it were: "We were extremely fortunate," he explains, "to have a great set of allies on the Universal side who were helping us every step of the way, and direct access to the creative team on the show, which is not typical with licensed projects. I loved that game; development of that project was probably the most freewheeling time we had in the studio because the game was done, concept to completion, in only four months. We tried some strange new design concepts, and the game felt like an authentic text conversation."

HELLO STRANGER

Work on *Mr. Robot* brought Night School – itself made up of some former Telltale employees – back into the Telltale fold, as the company ended up publishing the tie-in. This late-stage relationship was a positive one, and left Krankel and the team wanting to work more with its one-time publishing partner in future.

"About a year and a half later, Telltale was going through their own internal rebirth, and they had some really cool projects in the pipeline," Krankel says. "One was a big, standalone *Stranger Things* game they were building internally. It was going to be rad; they were pushing on their own internal design methodologies more than they had in years. They were borrowing some of the real-time dialogue and movement systems that we had pioneered in *Oxenfree*, but doing it on a way bigger budget with a massive brand. Long story short, they reached out to us and wanted to try something new that could tie directly to their game."

Night School was tasked with making a mobile partner game for the main *Stranger Things* release; a title that would talk directly to the console product and offer players a level of cross-interaction they'd not seen before. "Basically, think about the texting mechanics from *Mr. Robot*," Krankel explains, "but with a much more interesting first-person interface, using props à la *The Room* games, and playing as all of the cast from the show. Our game would lead directly into theirs."

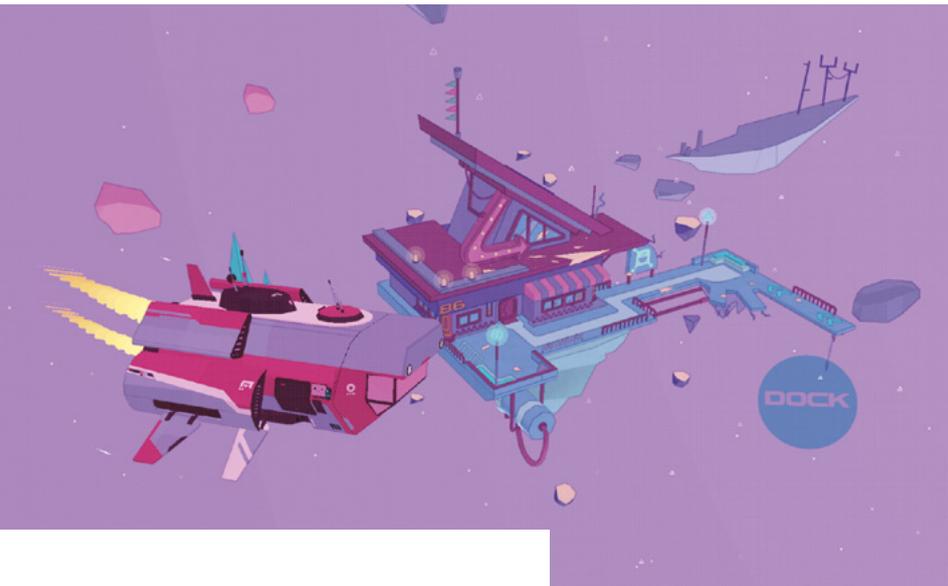
The idea was one everyone was excited about, and development of the Night School version of *Stranger Things* reached alpha stage. Then, the same day the general public heard the news, Krankel →

Afterparty

PC / XBO / PS4 / Switch / Mac – 2019 ^

Beat the devil in a drinking game, win freedom from the trappings of the eternal party that Hell has become. It's a simple – and creative – setup for *Afterparty*, Night School's second 'proper' game, and proved a winning formula. Leaning heavily on the writing chops of the studio, this tale of stolen adulthood, regrets and anxieties, and plentiful cocktails flew somewhat under the radar compared to *Oxenfree* – but it deserves a lot more attention. We're sure it'll come, with time.





^ *Oxenfree* remains a flag-bearer for that period of indie games where lo-fi, heartfelt narratives took centre stage.

Next Stop Nowhere

iOS / Mac – 2020 ^

After years on the back burner, *Next Stop Nowhere* released exclusively via Apple Arcade to... a middling response, let's say. Krankel accepts the game was released too soon and needed a bit more work before it was ready, but scratch past those issues and you're met with another well-written, imaginative tale woven by Night School Studio. A bit slight, and in need of a fair bit of polish, *Next Stop Nowhere* proved the first real stumble for the studio and, likely, a real teaching moment for the team.

and the team were informed Telltale was to close, and all its ongoing projects would be shelved. While that changed over time and we now have some vague facsimile of Telltale working on some titles, the effective truth of the matter was and is that Telltale went away, and with it Night School's hard work.

"It would have been awesome to get the game out, especially because it was on the riskier side when it came to narrative design," Krankel says of the aborted tie-in. "I always like when we take bigger swings, as it keeps us on our toes. That game was going to be pretty weird.

But in retrospect, I also think it didn't have the greatest business model, and its ability to be perceived as a real creative success would have been tied very closely to whether or not the bigger Telltale product turned out well. Being this far away from it now, I think it's fine it didn't come out." At the time, though, it was "financially a dark moment": "We got stiffed on a lot of money that we were owed, and the remainder of the project, which we were banking on," Krankel explains. "Creatively and morale-wise, it put a big dent in our crew. Hannah Filipksi, who is now working on the next *God of War*, wrote the whole game and none of her work saw the light of day. It was a big bummer, but we needed to

"There are a ton of gems on Apple Arcade; I think our game is one of them"

keep moving forward, so there wasn't too much time to feel sorry [for] ourselves."

GOING UNDERGROUND

And move forward Night School did – though still not with *Bounty/Next Stop Nowhere*, which, while being a project the studio wanted to work on, was becoming a bigger project than the team could take on in its current form. So it was that its focus shifted from the stars, and straight to Hell. *Afterparty* entered its period of creation in earnest in 2017, with Night School focusing on this tale of two friends dead and in Hell, needing to beat the devil in a drinking contest to earn their freedom. With a lot of conflicting factors leading decision-making at the studio, it was a convoluted and roundabout

journey to the decision to make the game. Or, as Krankel puts it: "[In short], we wanted to make

a game about being in a bar."

Bars have been in games a long time, of course, but the team at Night School figured they hadn't been the core – the centrepiece of a game in the most part, so this was largely unmined territory. "We thought we could intelligently build on our dialogue systems by making drinking an ability; something that could augment your personality," Krankel says. "And finally a game where you were dead and in Hell just seemed like a fun space to play in. A big departure from our last games, something comedic and light-hearted in the tone of *Superbad* meets *Beetlejuice*."

The release was a superb mix of well-written dialogue and genuine emotional





clout, with *Afterparty's* simple-seeming tale dealing with issues well beyond a drinking contest and escaping the devil's dance-halls. We gave it a whopping 86% in Wireframe #33, if you need proof of its quality. But it didn't quite hit in the same way *Oxenfree* did – *Afterparty* didn't *take over* like Night School's last big release had done. "I just think we had a few strategic things against us on *Afterparty's* initial launch," Krankel says. "We released in the middle of Holiday 2019, sandwiched just days between massive titles like *Death Stranding*, *Luigi's Mansion 3*, *CoD: Modern Warfare...* it was brutal.

"I think folks who are fans of our other work would love the amount of heart, lore, world-building and player agency in *Afterparty*," he continues, "But some didn't give it a shot because of its comedic tone in our marketing. I think it didn't have the immediate mystery, danger, and onion layers of narrative potential that *Oxenfree* had, at least on the surface." But by no means has *Afterparty* called last orders, with releases on Switch and Steam bringing it to new audiences, and a slow-but-steady ground-swell of support building for what is, by all accounts, a bit of an overlooked gem.

ENTER THE ORCHARD

Needing more support than it could offer itself, Night School was grateful for the new focus on game developers shouted about by Apple when the megacorp announced its Apple Arcade platform. *Next Stop Nowhere* was taken to the home of the iPhone and supported wholeheartedly from the outset, with the finished game being what Krankel calls

'definitely an Apple Arcade project from the jump' – not just the controls, but the art style, the characters, and the journey players take was all focused with phones and tablets in mind.

But *Next Stop Nowhere* brought with it another first for Night School Studio: negativity. The game looked the part, and was full of imagination as you took a road trip in space, alongside an ex-con trying to save her son, and an AI ship. But it was a buggy launch. Not the usual narrative earworm the team was known for, and just not the sort of rough feel you would expect from Night School.

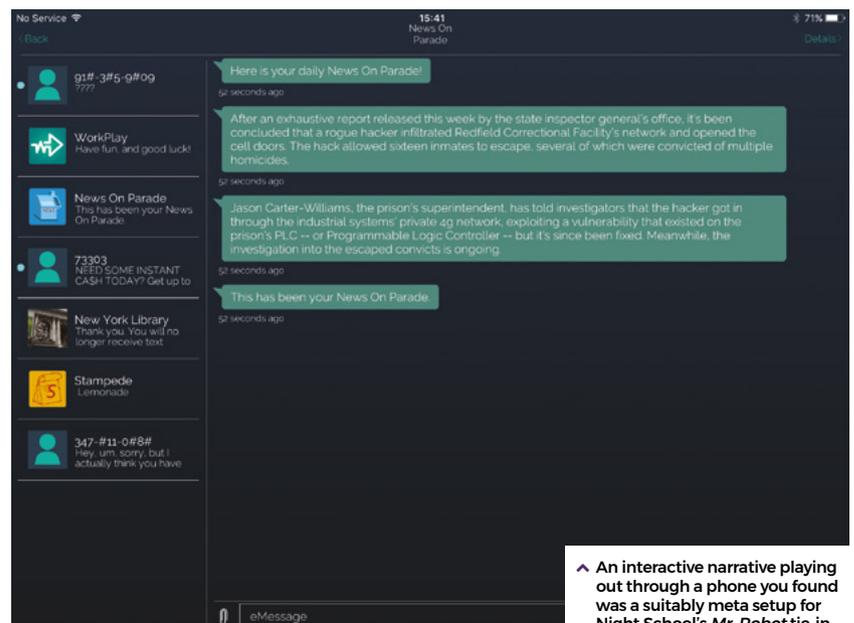
"That project was a bit of a mixed bag at launch," Krankel says. "Frankly, we put it out a little too early, which yielded some annoying bugs for users. But fundamentally that's our fault; Apple didn't rush us... We are really proud of *Next Stop Nowhere* now that it's gone through a few rounds of fixes. I'm hoping more people give Apple Arcade a look, as there are a ton of gems on the platform, and I think our game is one of them."

And so we arrive here, in 2021. And it's not the end – nothing close to it – with Night School focused on two games that Krankel says will define the studio's next

chapter; both original games, and both a return to the mysterious and scary. Not forgetting the *Oxenfree* TV show, which is still happening, and should have some news about it coming this year.

As for Krankel – he's not done with this particular venture: "It's been an extraordinary ride, and it kind of all just becomes your identity in ways you don't foresee," he explains. "The fact that anybody has even heard of *Oxenfree* still stuns me. Many of us came from larger media companies where we were tethered to a decision-making process we didn't agree with. It wears on you. So in starting a small studio, I've always wanted the team to feel confident that they had a place to collaborate, free of bureaucratic bullshit, where they could do [their] best work. I hope that ethos is continually felt in the studio.

"I think we all just try to keep our outlook as simple and focused on quality work as possible... It's hard because you are constantly putting yourself on the line with creative work, especially something that eats years of your life. Audiences will either come along for the ride or wait for the next one. You can't force it." 🗨️



^ An interactive narrative playing out through a phone you found was a suitably meta setup for Night School's *Mr. Robot* tie-in.

New Year's resolutions



STEVE MCNEIL

Steve wanted to do a pun in the article title about 4k resolutions on the new consoles, but he couldn't think of a good one. Sorry.

“My New Year's resolution is to maintain this policy of picking a single main game and sticking with it”

Hello, dear reader. I'm writing this on the release day of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Up until recently, I'd 100 percent definitely have pre-ordered the game in anticipation of being part of The Discourse for such a huge release. Then, on day one, I'd have played it for about six hours, got distracted with life stuff, and come back to it about three weeks later, at which point I'd have forgotten the controls and what was going on, and abandoned it. Then, a further four months later, I'd have come back to it a third time and restarted from the beginning, done exactly the same thing again, before repurposing the box indefinitely as a decorative dust magnet.

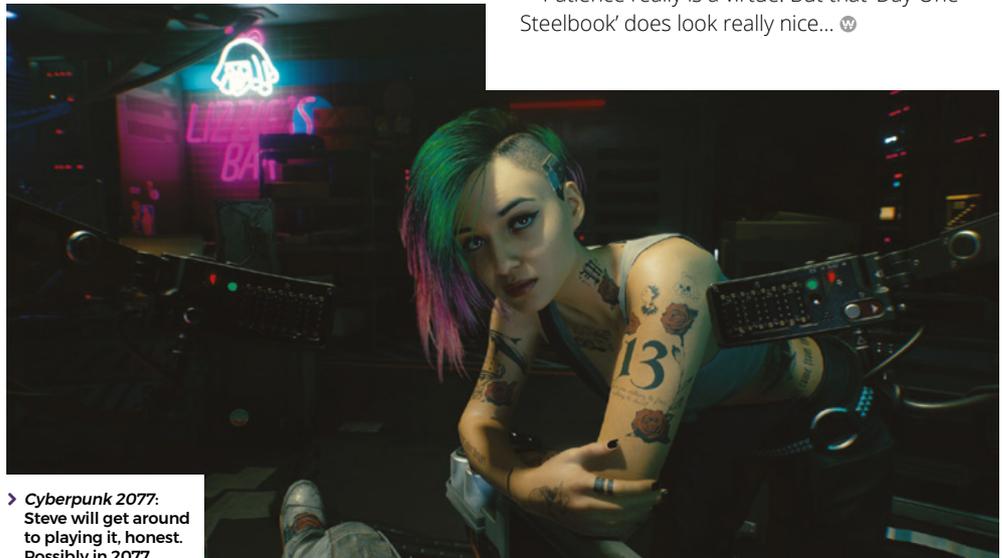
As a result of this imbalance between my enthusiasm for big game releases and the amount of time I can realistically give, this has become my relationship with most of them (recent victims include *The Last of Us Part II*, *Paper Mario: The Origami King*, and *DOOM Eternal*). But something about the new generation of consoles has stopped me in my tracks. Since the release of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, I have given myself exclusively to that game. I will occasionally dip into the likes of *Tetris Effect* or *Forza Horizon 4*

for a brief change of pace, but I haven't tried to explore any other new worlds. As a result, I'm about 50 hours deep in Eivor's journey, and totally committed to the narrative in a way that has eluded me for years.

So, my New Year's resolution this year is to maintain this policy of picking a single main game, and sticking with it. In truth, that will probably still be *Valhalla* in January, as Christmas with my young child isn't the best time to put a shift in on 4K decapitations. And I'll probably hold off on investing in new titles until I've given my pile of shame a bit of a thinning. Of course I'll want to play *Horizon Forbidden West* the moment it arrives, but as I've still never got past the first bit of *Horizon Zero Dawn* it seems absurd not to finish that first; even more so given this latest generation's backwards compatibility.

What this means is that by the time I do finally get around to playing *Cyberpunk 2077*, it'll probably be 2077, but that arguably gives the whole thing an added dimension that'll be lacking right now. And, more seriously, it'll almost certainly be a lot cheaper by the time I'm ready to dive in, plus they'll have had plenty of time to iron out all the bugs and whacked the DLC in an Ultimate Edition too.

Patience really is a virtue. But that 'Day One Steelbook' does look really nice... 🙄



> *Cyberpunk 2077*. Steve will get around to playing it, honest. Possibly in 2077.

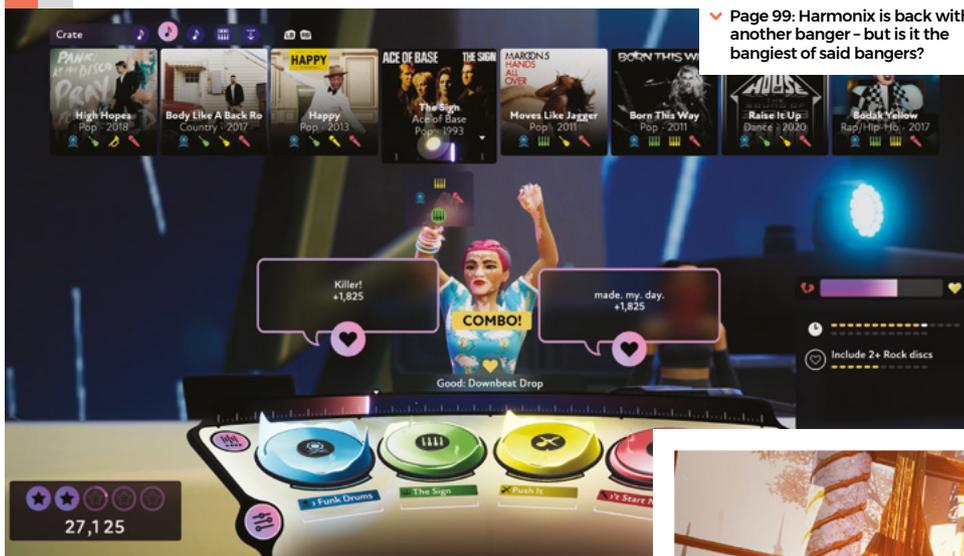
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Reviews, retro games, and lots more besides

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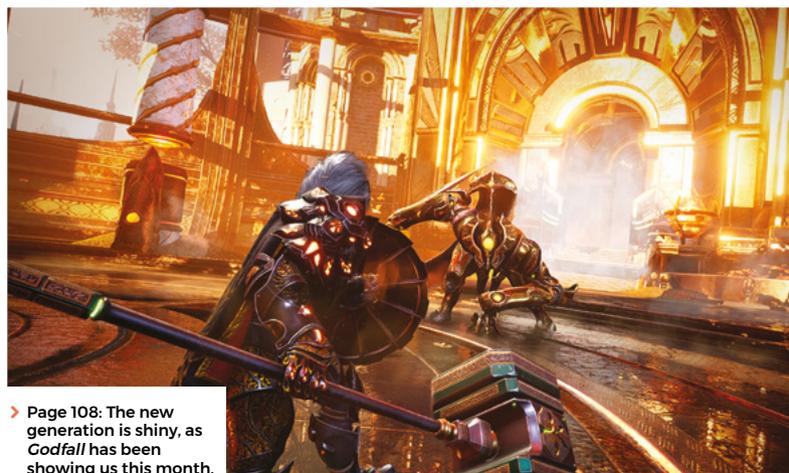
OUR SCORES

- 1-9**
Trash. Unplayable; a broken mess.
- 10-19**
A truly bad game, though not necessarily utterly broken.
- 20-29**
Still awful, but at a push could be fun for two minutes.
- 30-39**
Might have a redeeming feature, but otherwise very poor.
- 40-49**
Adds in more redeeming features, but still not worth your time.
- 50-59**
Average. Decent at best. 'Just about OK'.
- 60-69**
Held back by glitches, bugs, or a lack of originality, but can be good fun.
- 70-79**
A very good game, but one lacking spit and polish or uniqueness.
- 80-89**
Brilliant. Fabulous fun. Everyone should at least try it.
- 90-99**
Cutting edge, original, unique, and/or pushes the medium forward.
- 100**
Never say never, eh?



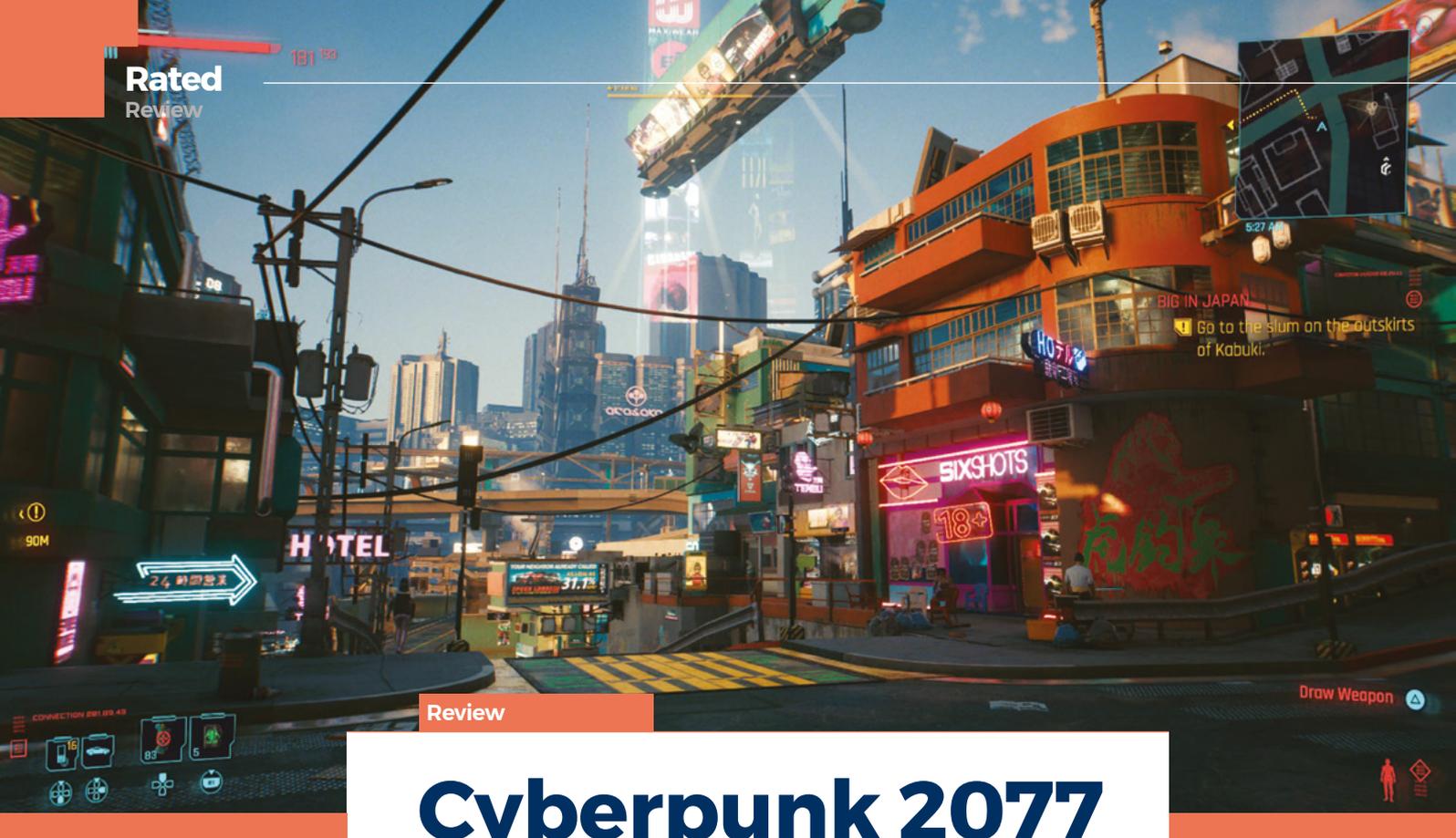
PLUS

- 104. Backwards compatible**
Is it naughty to use your new-gen console to play old games? No. But should you bother?
- 108. Now playing**
Games fresh or stale, big or small – we might be playing any of them



Rated
Review

181/199



Review

Cyberpunk 2077

Dystopian

Info

GENRE
RPG

FORMAT

PS4 [1.04 patch] (tested)
/ XBO / PC / Stadia

DEVELOPER

CD Projekt Red

PUBLISHER

CD Projekt Red

PRICE

£49.99

RELEASE

Out now

REVIEWED BY
Ian Dransfield

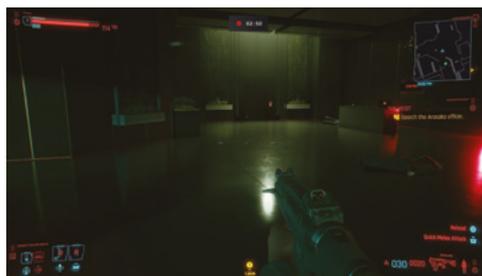
It was around the 20th crash in my playthrough of *Cyberpunk 2077* that I thought something might be up. I'd heard the rumours pre-launch, that the console version of the game hadn't been shown because it wasn't up to spec, and I'd had fellow professionals tell me directly that it was a bit of a bug-fest, but I am nothing if not magnanimous about these things. A game always has more than a few chances to prove itself, and I gave *Cyberpunk 2077* all the help it could get by playing the PS4 version installed to the internal SSD of a PS5. Announced eight years ago, based on a much-loved pen-and-paper role-playing licence, accompanied by a tidal wave of hype, produced by CD Projekt Red – the studio behind legendary RPG *The Witcher 3* – it felt like a dead cert. Too big to fail. A bold future of gaming.

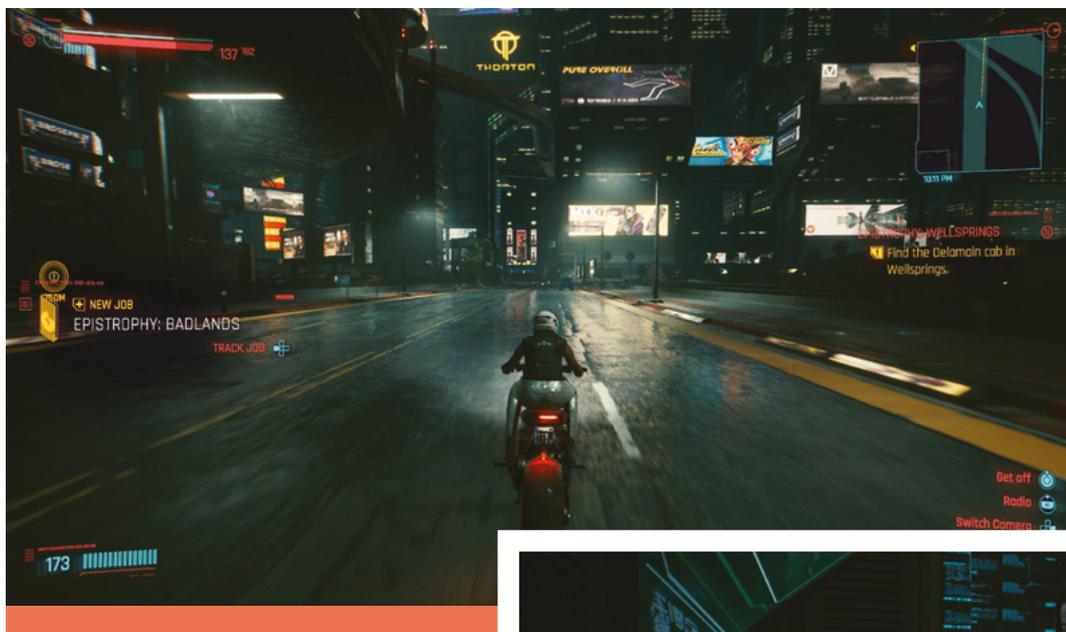
Cyberpunk 2077 reminds me in many ways of a little-remembered PC release from 2005, titled *Boiling Point: Road to Hell*. An open-world

adventure combining first-person shooter mechanics, free-roaming driving, and RPG elements, it held a lot of promise. It was utterly broken at launch, and resulted in one of the most unintentionally brilliant games of the era as you ran for your life, pursued by a jaguar stuck in a pounce animation that hovered after you. It was awful on the surface, studded with potential underneath, and something you could enjoy for a laugh before most of the hitches were fixed and it became a more sedate affair. But *Boiling Point* was funny in how broken it was; it wasn't backed by an eight-year wait and the sort of hype that makes you question the position critics and journalists inhabit in the world of gaming. *Cyberpunk 2077* was. And this is where the comparison falls apart, because when in *Cyberpunk 2077* my car clips a corpse and flies into a building, getting half-wedged in there and requiring a save to be reloaded, I don't laugh. With millions of dollars, years – and many pages – of hype, and a culture of crunch behind the creation of the game that is *entirely* shown up by this end product, it just isn't funny. It's sad. A let-down. A crushing disappointment for anyone who hoped back in 2012 their then-next-gen RPG would be something special, instead of a flat, empty, and broken missed opportunity.

Thing is, it's not just technical hitches. There are areas in which *Cyberpunk 2077* would fall flat even when running on a superpowered rig from the year 2078. The game's setting of Night City

> This early bug, by way of example, saw an enemy with an item that needed looting from them falling through the game world and landing around 2 km away. Handy.





- ◀ Exploring the open world should be exciting; instead, it proved harrowing because of the number of crashes (around 25 at last count).
- ✔ There are good elements, and Keanu Reeves's performance is certainly one of them.

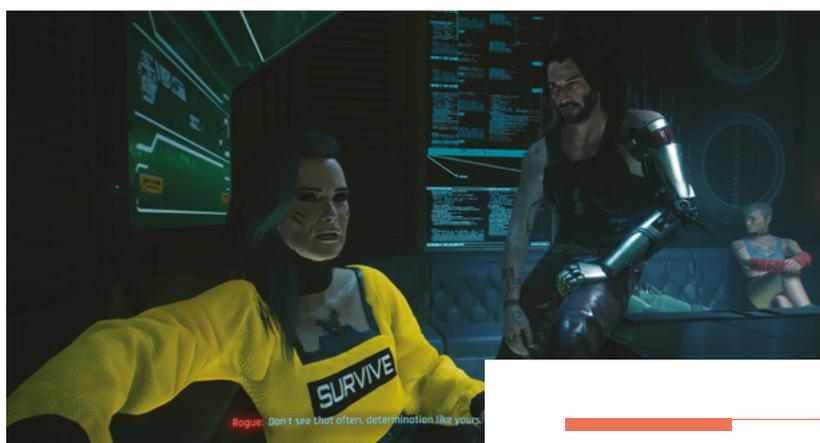
is beautiful and atmospheric, the sort of place you want to wash over you and bathe you in its filth... but there's nothing to do there. Outside of your main and side missions, the odd shop, a few sex workers, and a couple of gun-ranges, you're left lacking in muck-about activities. A city so incredibly vibrant, that initially engulfs you and leaves you gasping for air, ultimately reveals itself as flat and empty.

Digging into combat is initially fun, but it's rendered dull thanks to a lack of adaptability – the quickhack powers you wield generally boil down to hurt, hinder, or distract, despite their different names and descriptions. Stealth regularly results in NPCs seeing you through walls, or at extreme distances, so becomes a chore. Exploration is uninteresting because of that lack of interaction I just mentioned, and also because it's worrying to drive long distances in a game so unstable, when it appears the open world is what prompts the PS4 version to crash.

The muck-about factor – incredibly important in open-world games – hardly registers. Minigames and side attractions? Well, from the studio that made *GWENT*, you'd have high hopes – and they wouldn't be met.

So it is that even ignoring myriad technical hitches, overlooking a managerial culture that values overwork rather than careful planning, and sidestepping a plethora of questionable creative decisions/alleged transphobia, we're still left with a game that isn't as good as the hype said it would be. One with an open world that

“A city so incredibly vibrant ultimately reveals itself as empty”



pales next to *GTAV*'s. With emergent encounters that offer a paltry amount of choice next to *Metal Gear Solid V*. With RPG mechanics that aren't even as good as CD Projekt Red's own *The Witcher 3*.

It's fair to say this is a review that lands on the negative side of things, so it ending with a score that's not, say, 12% might be a surprise. But

Cyberpunk 2077 has seen so much hype behind it – even in the pages of this very magazine – that a wall of positivity has overshadowed any real critique of the

game. It's good to balance things, and so here that involves focusing on the bad.

There are positives, though. *Cyberpunk 2077* is, puerile nonsense aside, well-written. It features interesting setups in main missions and some side quests. There's heart in the narrative at times, and Keanu Reeves clearly had a ball playing Johnny Silverhand. Night City is impressive to look at. But that's surface-level stuff. Scratch past the neon sheen, and what you find is dull, grimy, and very unlike what it claimed to be. 🗿

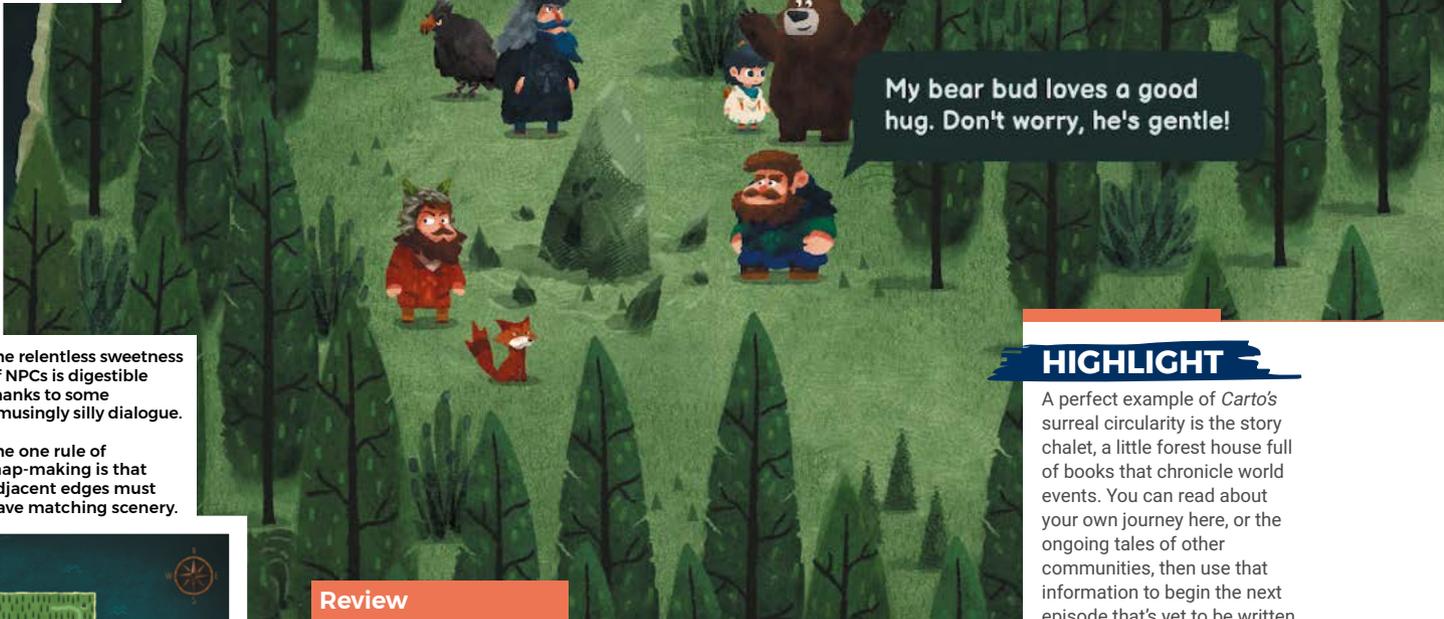
VERDICT

A bright neon future comes crashing down, myriad technical issues the albatross around its neck.

58%

ALTERNATIVELY

Cyberpunk 2077 is far more stable and reliable on both PC and Stadia, so if you're playing it over there add 15% to the score here. Fact is, even with the technical hitches fixed, this is still a game lacking that real oomph to push it over the edge into classic territory, though it is a lot more fun to be able to drive around without fearing yet another crash.



- The relentless sweetness of NPCs is digestible thanks to some amusingly silly dialogue.
- ✓ The one rule of map-making is that adjacent edges must have matching scenery.

HIGHLIGHT

A perfect example of *Carto's* surreal circularity is the story chalet, a little forest house full of books that chronicle world events. You can read about your own journey here, or the ongoing tales of other communities, then use that information to begin the next episode that's yet to be written.

Review



Carto

Mapping all over the world

Carto blossoms in a delicious paradox of cause and effect. Its map screen is a scatter of little paper squares that you arrange like sliding block tiles, and rotate to corral together patches of grassland, forest, or desert. They don't chart the pastel-sketch landscape, they define it – every composition you create is instantly reflected in the world.

But somehow the results of your tinkering also seem to precede it. A shepherd wants you to find a lost sheep that likes to graze in beds of yellow flowers. Your map reveals a sparse spread of individual yellow plants, which you shuffle into a cluster. Now there's the bed, and there's your sheep amidst the sunny blooms, just as the shepherd foretold. It was always there. But also not. Schrödinger's sheep.

Carto gently pushes this anomaly towards the corners of its potential, coaxing you to unlearn the assumptions of map-reading in ways that make a pleasing sense, although they really don't. There's gratification in lazily picking up the square you occupy and slotting it next to a previously distant destination. Or mixing up a building plan to turn a basement into an attic. Or crossing a great desert by cycling the same two sand tiles.

These aren't puzzles exactly, more creative exercises, with the odd sprinkle of deductive reasoning. Textual clues quickly concede to solutions and new map pieces that reveal the

next path forward with some playful application. On occasion, you pick up important items which come to find delightfully eccentric uses, but they trigger automatically when the time is right.

It's just enough to sustain the game as an inventive, tactile smile-raiser. Yet *Carto* further broadens the grin by propelling its upside-down logic into its world and people. Similar to how *Gorogoa* textures the surreal to create a sense of the uncanny, *Carto* wields it in the service of a bottomless whimsy.

Arrive in one of the game's regions and you'll meet a tiny tribal community living by local natural rhythms. These NPCs never seem perturbed by your presence, whether they're static or apparently moving freely behind the scenes. And they're always so

friendly. They instantly welcome young *Carto* into their midst, offering memories and traditions to help you conjure up new features and layouts, which in turn help them.

Everything in *Carto* is cheerily mellow, overly so early on, as it spends too long making you feel at home. But it's a game in which mild gestures have life-changing effects, and like its adventurous hero, it refuses to settle, always leading you to fresh ideas and warming tales that clot and split with the tiles. *Carto* is a blanket-wrapped snuggle by the fireplace on a winter's night, drinking hot cocoa while idly building a jigsaw puzzle depicting a litter of puppies. 🐾

“Carto is a blanket-wrapped snuggle by the fireplace”

Info

GENRE
Puzzle adventure

FORMAT
Switch (tested) / PC / PS4 / XBO

DEVELOPER
Sunhead Games

PUBLISHER
Humble Games

PRICE
£17.99

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Jon Bailes

VERDICT

A light, fluffy adventure with plenty of tricks up its sleeve.

74%



Rated
Review

HIGHLIGHT

Moscow-based Alter Games treat *Partisans'* themes with melancholy rather than chauvinism. In-game documents eulogise partisan valour, while the contradictions of Zorin's doctrine of retaliation are suggested by news of punitive attacks against civilians by German police.

Success often blends stealth and direct encounters, but failure usually follows the latter.

Review

Partisans 1941

Lacking bipartisan support

The genre and setting of *Partisans 1941* recall the classic *Commandos* games, but *Partisans* fashions an original approach by blending real-time tactical combat with RPG skill trees and inventories, plus the meta-layer of base management. This is an effective palate-cleanser between missions, where you optimise your preparation by procuring supplies and constructing equipment. The essential tactics are similar to those of *Desperados III*, but it is with a heavier dose of explosive dumb luck that you operate behind enemy lines. Levels consist of patrols guarding objectives and lootable supplies. Enemies have vision cones and are as susceptible to lures as to a swift shank in the side. And when everything goes wrong, a slow-motion mode lets you plan tactics on the fly.

What makes *Partisans* different is the license you have to indulge in spectacular action. Combat is scrappy and fun. While you might mask your scent in tobacco or unplug the floodlights to stay incognito, you can often solve your problems with copious grenades. Skill cooldowns and ammunition are rarely prohibitive. Of the lightly differentiated partisans you bring on missions,

some, like Fetisov with his SMG burst, lend themselves to skirmishes. Even when armed, partisans are vulnerable and outnumbered. If going loud is reckless, staying quiet requires patience. This tension between evasive and confrontational behaviour is always absorbing.

Unfortunately, *Partisans* is routinely frustrating to play. The reluctance to channel the player into particular strategies can be paralyzing, while engagements have a trial-and-error nature dependent on save-scumming. *Partisans* incentivises obsessive looting of levels to outfit your base which can drag, and the actual interaction, from inventory management to movement orders, is fiddly. *Partisans* have an upsetting habit of taking cover on the exposed side of cover and throwing grenades at their own feet. Then there's the maddening behaviour of enemies in an alarmed state, who become spontaneously omniscient of every bush where you've stashed a partisan. There are enough of these issues to form a wider impression of brokenness.

Too frequently, the player is grappling not just with the designed experience but the ambiguous systems of the game itself. Yet *Partisans 1941* is compelling enough to keep me going for hours. Having navigated past bugs and belligerents, I'm rewarded with a feeling of deep satisfaction. The messiness and halting gameplay is annoying, but the strong core experience at least recommends it to genre fans and *Commandos* nostalgics. It's a surprise combination of genres, resulting in a satisfyingly balanced diet. 🍷

Info

GENRE

Real-time tactics

FORMAT

PC (tested)

DEVELOPER

Alter Games

PUBLISHER

Daedalic
Entertainment

PRICE

£25.99

RELEASE

Out now

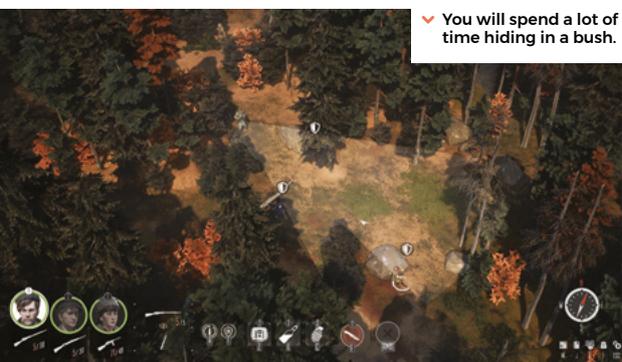
REVIEWED BY

Kyle Hoekstra

VERDICT

Slick sandbox tactics in a solid setting, let down by fiddliness and drudgery.

67%



You will spend a lot of time hiding in a bush.

Rated Review

HIGHLIGHT

Working out the nuances of different bosses' special powers, and experimenting on how to effectively utilise each in battle, never stops being fun, even after several playthroughs. However, by the end of that half-hour process, any possibility of being challenged for the rest of your run is eliminated.



Review

Groups of unaffiliated goons often guard crates that may contain high-grade weaponry, useful consumables, or improved armour.

Empire of Sin

Bugsy

Info

GENRE

Turn-based tactics / Management

FORMAT

PC (tested) / Mac / PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER

Romero Games

PUBLISHER

Paradox Interactive

PRICE

£34.99

RELEASE

Out now

REVIEWED BY

Alexander Chatziioannou

VERDICT

With nothing ventured and everything gained, there's little appeal to *Empire of Sin* past a first, exploratory playthrough.

42%

The Donovans are attacking you. You have a 74% chance of winning". To the casual passer-by, the kind that might be strolling down these Prohibition-era streets moments before yet another outbreak of gang-related violence, these might sound like decent odds. But spend a few hours in *Empire of Sin's* Chicago and it becomes obvious how vastly it overestimates the threat. See, in the game's turn-based combat system, gang leaders act first. Their special power – available immediately – has the potential, when carefully deployed, to take out multiple lackeys in a single turn. A conflict framed as moderately challenging ends, in fact, before your enemies even have a chance to react. Regularly.

Before a certain ennui sets in – as it dawns on you that the *actual* chances of winning most low-level skirmishes rarely drop below 100% – there's excitement to be had in your first steps towards building the titular empire: discovering the turfs and dispositions of rival gangs while establishing your presence in the city through brothels and speakeasies, first in your immediate neighbourhood, then slowly expanding outwards. There's personality there too, with each kingpin featuring their own skillset and backstory, a colourful array of lieutenants embroiled in individual side-quests, and the American 1920s vividly conveyed through detailed environments.

But it's not just the lack of challenge that erodes your interest as surely as your enemies' influence on the local underworld. *Empire of Sin's*

entire management layer reveals itself as an irrelevance early on. Neighbourhood prosperity – a crux for the morally ambiguous narrative – offers little competitive advantage. Why spend time and resources upgrading and protecting your rackets when it's more effective to simply keep expanding, eliminating any competition in the process? Not even the police, which could have been leveraged as a deterrent to overly belligerent approaches, seem willing to step in. The game, at odds with its own genre's primary attraction, offers no reasons to shift strategies at any point, no incentive to adapt.

Nevertheless, there's something that will force you to reload frequently, though not exactly by design: *Empire of Sin* is plagued by bugs. Weapons vanish from your inventory. Missions restart the moment you finish them. Skills refuse to activate. On one occasion, a corpse discovered by Chicago's finest meant one of my lieutenants had to spend some time in jail. Only she would still tag along for the occasional scuffle, at least until the game, as if confused by her inexplicable presence, froze during her combat turn.

Even if some of these issues are fixed through subsequent patches, *Empire of Sin* seems to be clashing with itself on a more fundamental level, trading intrigue and consequential decision-making for the dubious joy of continuous, barely resisted expansion. Despite a promising start, its narrative of criminal ascension is a nonchalant stroll rather than a tense clawing of your way to the top. 🗿

Rated
Review

HIGHLIGHT

When things finally click, you'll find some really interesting strategy underlying the experience. Figuring out whether to take your turn first, or wait and gain some bonus cards and coins, adds another layer to proceedings and will test your understanding of the other mechanics.

⬅ The UI is pretty cluttered, especially in the corners.

Viticulture

A dry and flavourless tippie that's lacking in body

Viticulture is a board game that you need to understand deeply before you can enjoy it. In a physical setting that's fine, because you've got a partner in your learning.

You can stop and check the rules, discuss what they mean, and figure things out together.

You don't get that luxury with this digital version. You get told what to do in a simple tutorial, and then you're left to your own devices. To say it's overwhelming would be something of an understatement. Your first handful of games are going to be exercises in trial and error and you're likely to get pretty darn frustrated.

The game sees you running a vineyard. You need to place workers, pick grapes, ferment wine, and sell the produce. Games are split into different turns and seasons and there are actions to take in all of them.

Knowing what to do, especially in those first few games, is going to be an uphill struggle. The tutorial explains things, but in a barrage rather than a smooth trickle. You're going to take a beating, even at the lowest difficulty setting.

It's a real shame, because *Viticulture* feels like one of those games that could have offered something different. The setting in particular is an intriguing one, and there's a number of bright ideas that, once they shine through, are pretty impressive. The seasons are one of those. You don't just need to know what to do in one, you need to plan ahead and make sure you've got workers and cards to use in the others. You select a family at the start of the game too, and they give you different boosts and buffs.



The UI doesn't help things either. It's cluttered and cumbersome, with important information hidden in corners and presented in tiny digits. Nothing feels natural or fluid. In fact, it quite often feels like you're fighting against the presentation to try to get to grips with what's happening.

Underneath all of these problems there is an engaging experience, but it's such a slog to get to that a lot of players will abandon *Viticulture* before they get there. The amount of work that you need to put in just isn't worth it in the end, and you're going to put the game down and find something that scratches your digital board game itch in more pleasing ways.

Viticulture fans are at an advantage; already knowing what you're doing is definitely a boon, and bypasses a lot of the problems this version of the game has. Think of it as a much more portable version of a game you already love.

Coming in fresh is going to leave your head spinning though. If you're looking for a new game to add to your digital board game nights, then there are definitely better options out there. 🍷

Info

GENRE
Board game

FORMAT
iOS (tested) / Android
/ Steam

DEVELOPER
Digidiced

PUBLISHER
Digidiced

PRICE
£8.99

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Harry Slater

VERDICT

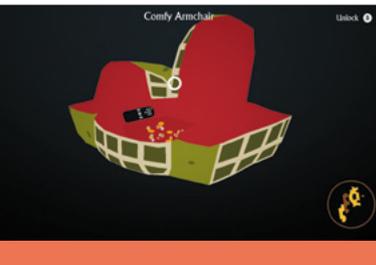
An interesting game that's obscured at almost every turn. Give the physical version a try instead.

56%

Rated
Review



- > Shelmerston may be a small place, but it's positively dense when you can drill down on so many individual objects.
- > You never know what you might find under or inside an object, which is what makes slicing such a delight.



HIGHLIGHT

As you might expect from an Annapurna Interactive-published game, the voice acting in *I Am Dead* is top notch, while also featuring a terrific and diverse range of British accents. You'll hear most of these as you slice into people's memories, which all help to build a fascinating picture and story of the ghosts Morris is seeking out.

Review

I Am Dead

The upsides and insides of being a ghost

Info

- GENRE**
Narrative / hidden object
- FORMAT**
Switch (tested) / PC
- DEVELOPER**
Hollow Ponds
- PUBLISHER**
Annapurna Interactive
- PRICE**
£14.99
- RELEASE**
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Alan Wen

VERDICT

I Am Dead delights in its playfulness as much as in its charming storytelling.

78%

X-ray scanners are cool but you won't have come across a scanner quite like the one former museum curator Morris Lupton has in *I Am Dead*. The more precise term for it would be slicing, as you select an object and then zoom in with a trigger, smoothly slicing into it, revealing perhaps another object inside, or several new layers or textures, though you can go to the extreme and slice it out of existence.

You wouldn't think it from the game's simple pastel-coloured palette and children's book aesthetics, but deep down there's a lot of detail packed into these environments and objects. These range from simply slicing through a block of cheese filled with holes or the circuitry inside a computer, to finding a whisky bootlegging operation inside an old boat, which paints just one of many fascinating stories on the peculiar island of Shelmerston.

This is all possible because Morris is, well, *dead*. It's easy to get distracted with his new-found spectral powers, but you're also on a mission to save your home from the impending doom, since the island's volcano is on the verge of erupting. So while you're free to float around Shelmerston's delightful diorama-like locations – ranging from a lighthouse doubling as a yoga centre to a park filled with all kinds of weird art installations – to poke around to your heart's content, you're actually looking for a key number of mementoes

that will help you find other ghosts who might be able to help save the island.

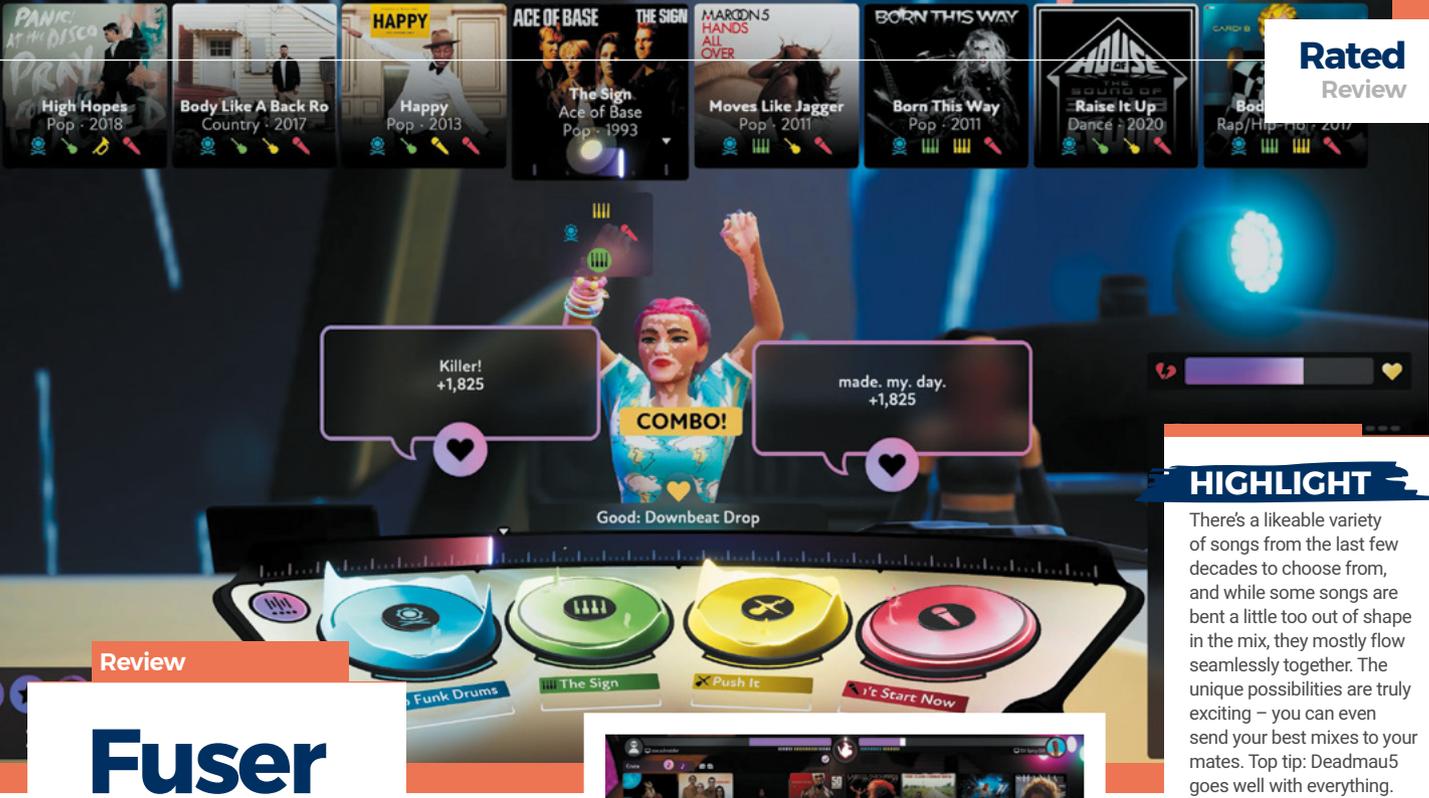
By slicing into islanders' memories, you'll figure out what memento to look for, and the story might even drop a hint, such as a Buddha statue that got accidentally hoovered up, but a lot of their locations are just as likely to leave you scratching your head before you find yourself zooming in all around the place. Hollow Ponds has at least thrown in optional quests like a bunch of sprites hidden inside objects to keep you busy. While these require slicing at a certain

depth and angle to bring up a specific pattern, hints for when you're warm are also clearer, even sometimes attuning the object at the right position for you once

you get close. Those up for a challenge can even try to solve riddles where you're given much less of a helping hand.

The game's playfulness wonderfully complements the story, which revels in its whimsy. It's a place where humans co-exist with fish people with a love of toast, and birds who come on holiday by ferry, while you also spend your time conversing with the ghost of your pet dog Sparky, as you do. Yet there's also poignancy as Morris weighs up these islanders' stories with his own life and whether anyone will remember him. *I Am Dead* is certainly not as morbid as its title implies; it instead spends its time magnifying the little extraordinary lives lived. **W**

“A place where humans co-exist with fish people”



Rated Review

HIGHLIGHT

There's a likeable variety of songs from the last few decades to choose from, and while some songs are bent a little too out of shape in the mix, they mostly flow seamlessly together. The unique possibilities are truly exciting – you can even send your best mixes to your mates. Top tip: Deadmau5 goes well with everything.

Review

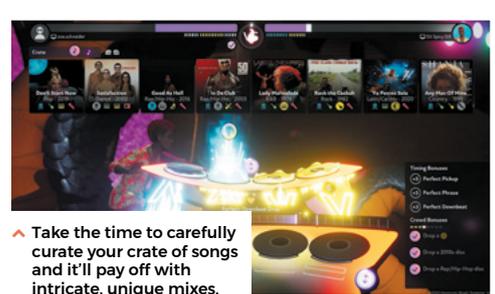
Fuser

EDM Hero

Fuser might seem, initially, like a simpler concept than, say, strumming a plastic guitar. But one of the reasons the *Guitar Hero* series fell out of fashion was its reliance on recreating the music of others, rather than the creativity of the player. With its latest release, Harmonix turns the tables... literally. Here you choose from a bunch of songs from varying genres and lay down up to four tracks in time to the beat, adding in drums, bass, instruments, and vocals. Immediately, *Fuser* allows you to mix songs in a satisfying fusion that'll make you feel like an EDM genius, giddy with excitement. The party atmosphere only adds to the hyped-up, good-time vibes.

Through the campaign mode, though, the complexity soon ramps up. Split between six different festival stages, each set adds another element to your musical toolset. You'll drop tracks on seamless pickups, freestyle on unlockable instruments and effects, manually change keys and tempo, muting and soloing specific tracks and more. As you progress, you'll level up and collect points to spend on unlocking new songs, effects, and clothing for your avatar. You can return to previous sets to improve your score, too, though it's not always clear how the system works – dropping tracks in time isn't enough. You need to truly understand the music to make the most of your set time and get the crowd going.

Fuser is presented in a vibrant, eccentric package. There's a welcome diversity to the range of avatar options and DJs who assist in each set, with tongue firmly in cheek in typical Harmonix fashion. If you've ever wanted to dress up in



neon with a futuristic wolf head to a backdrop of dancing ice cream cones and corgis, mixing Dolly Parton's *Jolene* vocals to the thundering beat of Rage Against The Machine's *Killing In The Name...* well, now you can.

The colourful visuals mask what is an impressive suite of music manipulation that requires genuine musicality to excel at. This is far more than just rhythmic beat matching.

But *Fuser* is also a video game, and here it stumbles. During each set you're given challenges by the resident DJ and requests from the crowd. These teach you the basics, but also get in the way of the mix, tasking you with changing things up in a way that doesn't always make sense. The time it takes to tick off these challenges is sometimes out of step with the rhythm, upsetting the carefully curated balance of your mix. And with so many tools at your disposal, the controls sometimes feel fiddly and limited. Simply put, the actual game gets in the way of the fun.

The campaign, though, is essentially a tutorial for the main event: freestyle mode. Without restrictions and requests, you can finally set your inner DJ free, experiment unconditionally, and unleash the flow of creativity the game demanded of you all along. No matter how it might sound, the dancing corgis are always your biggest fans. 🐾

Info

- GENRE**
Music
- FORMAT**
PS4 (tested) / XBO / Switch / PC
- DEVELOPER**
Harmonix
- PUBLISHER**
NCSOFT
- PRICE**
£54.99
- RELEASE**
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Ed Nightingale

VERDICT

Fuser is a video game masquerading as a hugely impressive piece of music software.

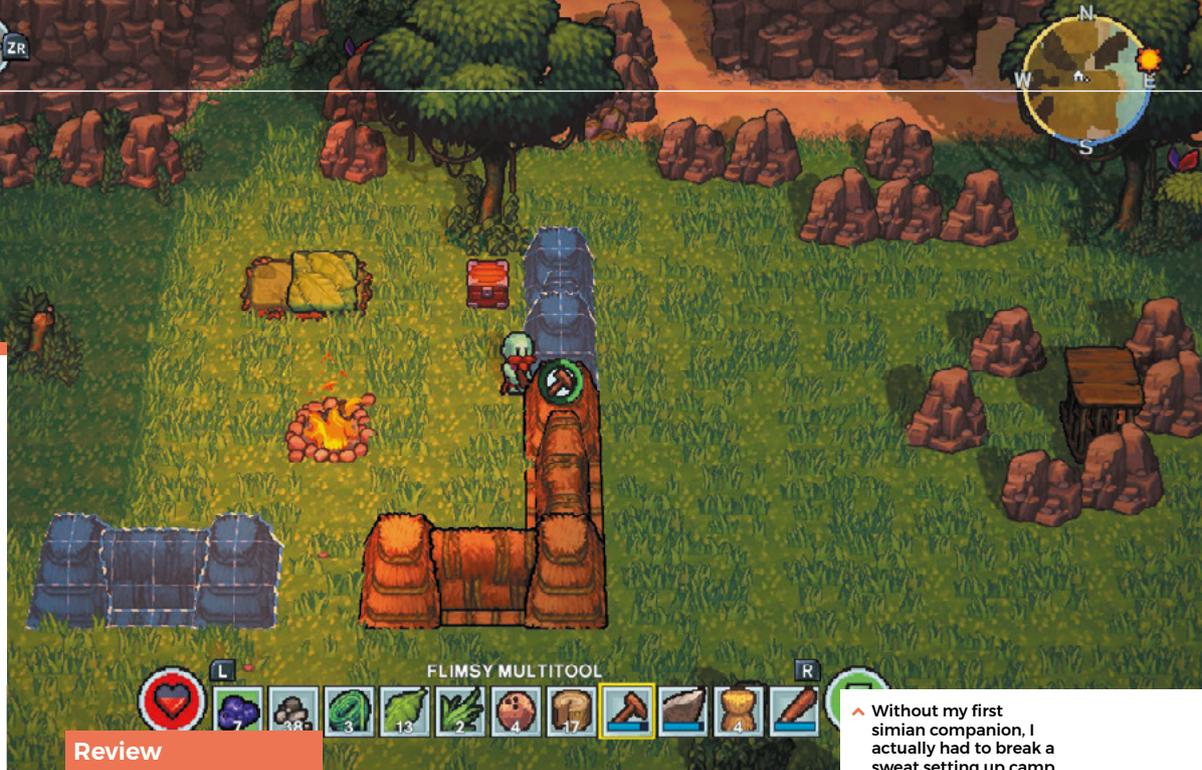
79%

Rated
Review

HIGHLIGHT

There's a feeling of art imitating life here. I sent out a monkey to harvest wood by showing them how to chop down a tree.

Ten minutes later, there were no trees left standing on my island. I showed them next how to make swords and soon had an army. I felt like Jeff Bezos, minus the billions.



Review

Without my first simian companion, I actually had to break a sweat setting up camp.

The Survivalists

It's like *Swiss Family Robinson*, but with an entire army of monkeys

Info

GENRE

Monkey-'em-up

FORMAT

Switch (tested) /
XBO / PS4 / PC /
Apple Arcade

DEVELOPER

Team17

PUBLISHER

Team17

PRICE

£21.99

RELEASE

Out now

REVIEWED BY

Daniel Lipscombe

VERDICT

A briefly satisfying yet hollow experience which doesn't quite capture the spark of *The Escapists*.

61%

The *Survivalists* is a canny choice when expanding the universe of *The Escapists*. After all, the previous game had crafting, fighting, and surviving already. Instead of prison yards, we now have islands, jungles, and an annoying race of goblins to contend with. Oh, and monkeys. This game loves monkeys. Had *The Survivalists* focused only on survival, it would have been a competent, if vague facsimile of *Don't Starve*. However, the central mechanic constantly hammered home the ability to train the local primates, urging them to build, craft, and gather for you, while you build, craft, and gather elsewhere.

This concept is endearing and recalls *Autonauts*. The player holds a button placing the monkey into 'observation' mode while they complete an action. Following this example, pass the monkey the correct tool and they'll stand ready and willing. For example, a monkey can be trained to build furniture at the crafting table; if they're near your campfire, they can also make dinner. But you have to train a second monkey to grab materials from a chest, and a third to take the complete item to another chest. In the end, you have a reasonable production line.

The idea that this mechanic could take out the boring aspects of survival games feels forced and situational. When the time came to build a small boat for further exploration, I decided

to try it myself, only to watch my islander moan that the monkeys could do it while he explored. The monkeys became the main point of playing, whether they followed me, carrying a chest to store items – because the hotbar never expands, and switching out items is a chore – or were armed with swords to fight my battles, which is handy, because the combat is clunky.

Away from primates, the actual act of surviving is fine, though the game constantly undermines itself. The island replenishes every few in-game days, meaning food isn't that hard to come by, and materials for basic recipes are always to hand. There are random chests to be found here and there, which when broken open reward the player with tools, weapons, and rarer materials.

I reached a point where I didn't build any tools at all and had a chest brimming over with good weaponry. It entirely removes the need to get out and explore. As does the magical shop which appears randomly and accepts gold, which tends to fall out of everything you pick up.

Of course, there's a loose storyline to give players a sense of completion, and there are temples full of treasure and enemies, but none of it feels particularly rewarding. Maybe it's because I didn't build much along the way – I simply sat back and let everyone else do the work. Bring in a friend via multiplayer, and you're a consortium fleeing the local inhabitants for profit. 🐵

“The monkeys became the main point of playing”

Kinta and the Monk

■ Obtain Soul Stealing Mask 0/1



HIGHLIGHT

Dinner is the perfect time for Sakuna and her misfit human charges to get together for some lively conversation, sometimes uncovering the island's lore or each other's backstories. Myrthe, a missionary from a foreign land who also cooks the meals, provides a fresh outsider perspective to an otherwise very Japanese game.

Review

Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin

Rice rice baby

Cute farming sims are all the rage for those in the market for a relaxing, wholesome game but if, like me, you also like your action and crave a combo, then *Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin* is the best of both worlds. Set in a heavenly realm based on ancient Japan, with visuals reminiscent of *Ōkami* and *Muramasa: The Demon Blade*, you play as the titular spoiled harvest goddess who's banished from her carefree palace life and tasked with taming an island cursed with demons. Setting up base in a small hut and also responsible for a band of trespassing humans, the bratty princess is finally forced to get her hands dirty in honest living. It's a relief then that she turns out to be more than just talk.

Exploration of the island is split into small and often cavernous 2D levels where Sakuna proves an adept fighter. Stringing attacks together from a mixture of farm tools and magic, she can learn a range of mappable skills using a single button and different directional input akin to *Super Smash Bros.* – each getting more powerful the more you use it. More interesting is how her extendible garments can also be used

for climbing environments as well as grabbing enemies and using them as weapons. Much of the joy of combat comes from smashing enemies into each other for maximum damage, which becomes a vital tactic for taking down tricky bosses early on.

You can't just sate your appetite with the meat of demonic rabbits, boar, or deer though, so you also spend half the game farming rice, which is way more in-depth than you'd imagine. Across the seasons, albeit condensed to a few days each, you'll plant rice seeds, water the field, and pull out weeds. During harvest time you're drying, threshing, and pounding the rice, and before you know it, you're tilling the soil to start the cycle again. Each of these minigames is mundane yet utterly absorbing and immersive, and like the combat, you also gradually learn more advanced techniques or can craft new tools to work more efficiently. As someone raised on rice – and who still eats it on a daily basis – I really learned to appreciate each stage of how it's actually made.

Things can get repetitive, especially as progress is often gated until you've raised your exploration level to an arbitrary amount, done by replaying stages and completing not-so-optional objectives. Some boss fights will also take multiple attempts as, despite being able to get stat buffs from the previous night's dinner, any health regeneration properties only work when not in combat. Still, farming remains a therapeutic pleasure, and it's lovely watching the seasons change, which even carries over to the action levels. It's a surprise combination of genres, resulting in a satisfyingly balanced diet. 🍚

Info

GENRE
2D action / rice-farming sim

FORMAT
Switch (tested) / PS4 / PC

DEVELOPER
Edelweiss

PUBLISHER
Marvelous Games

PRICE
£34.99

RELEASE
Out now

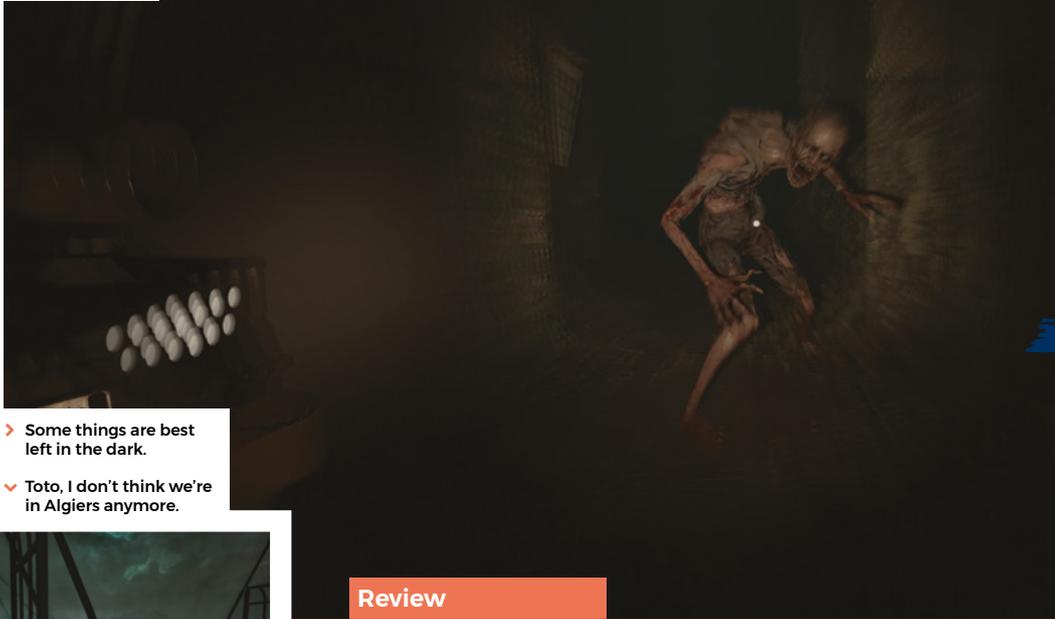
REVIEWED BY
Alan Wen

VERDICT

Sakuna will fill your appetite for fun action combat as it does with in-depth rice-farming.

77%





- Some things are best left in the dark.
- Toto, I don't think we're in Algiers anymore.

HIGHLIGHT

The player is never really shown many of the surrounding team members of Tasi's expedition. We only see them in sketches from her journal, swirling into focus as they reveal story beats. This helps us to see them all through Tasi's eyes, emphasising her emotions and grounding us as outsiders.

Review

Amnesia: Rebirth

Anybody got a light?

Info

GENRE
Survival horror

FORMAT
PS4 (tested)
/ PC

DEVELOPER
Frictional Games

PUBLISHER
Frictional Games

PRICE
£23.79

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Daniel Lipscombe

VERDICT

After months of gestation, Frictional Games delivers again.

87%

Two things constantly ran through my mind as I played *Amnesia: Rebirth* – sequel to one of the finest horror video games of recent generations.

One: why can't I pick up this candle? And two: this lady is going to harm her unborn child. As with most games, and certainly horror games, there's a lot of disbelief that needs to be suspended. I wasn't questioning why a spectral lady of local Algerian myth was attempting to help a hapless group of explorers after their plane crashed. I didn't bat an eye when our protagonist, Tasi, pulled an amulet from around her wrist and began opening interdimensional portals in mid-air. But why couldn't I pick up the damned candle?

Because *Amnesia: Rebirth* focuses on light and dark, much like its predecessor – stay in the dark for too long and Tasi begins to hear and see things which may or may not be there. So begins the quest for matches and oil for a battered old lantern. The game directs the player to seek out light, because as we all know, the darkness is where the monsters live. And the monsters are properly monstrous; grotesque humanoids devoid of any sense of their past lives as people, they roam and scream and search for Tasi. All Tasi wants is to find the other survivors of the plane crash, then get home with her baby.

The baby itself is a guiding bastion of normality. It keeps Tasi, and by extension, the player, grounded. Not only by reintroducing

the 'human element' but by literally calming Tasi, eliminating her fear. When prompted by a throb through the DualShock and a flash on the screen, I was told to hold the circle button, causing Tasi to rub her belly and talk to her child. The tendrils at the edges of the screen retreat and on we go to the next environmental puzzle under the sands of Algeria, in a Roman temple, or an otherworldly plane.

The bulk of the game is made up of great puzzles decorated at the edges by background lore, usually voice-acted brilliantly, creating a world which feels compelling. The overarching story of humanity is smart. As the story untwists itself, it reveals a beating heart of emotion, love, and empathy. It deals with the legacy of death and how to survive grief. We're shown early on that Tasi and her partner Salim had another child, a daughter, Alys. Through hand-drawn loading screen vignettes, we get the sense that Alys was ill, suffered, and through this, an attachment between Tasi and the player grows.

Tasi is the strength of the game, in many respects; as well as a great protagonist, she also drives an emotional story that soon outweighs the horror. In fact, it's not long before the ghosts and ghouls become an annoyance rather than a hindrance. The spooks do, however, keep hammering home the notion that horror is about survival and overcoming adversity, about sparking a light in the dark and facing your fears. And ultimately, *Amnesia: Rebirth* is a very good horror game indeed. 🗣️

HIGHLIGHT

The menagerie of animals flittering or scampering around are so much fun to find. I actually let out an embarrassing yelp of glee when I spotted a rare owl in a tree – capturing all the wildlife on camera is a truly compulsive pastime. Gotta catch 'em all.

Alba: A Wildlife Adventure

Saving the world – one act of kindness at a time

Like most people, I didn't get a holiday this year thanks to a certain pandemic doing the rounds. Thankfully, *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* more than makes up for it. After a couple of hours in its carefree company, I feel like I really have pitched up on a Mediterranean island for a couple of weeks' exploration in the sun. Not that ustwogames' latest is entirely without drama; its heroine, Alba Singh, is an eco-conscious youngster who, with the help of her friend Inés, sets out to save a local nature reserve from being tarmacked over and turned into a hotel by greedy property developers.

The duo's plan is simple: roam the island, doing good turns for the locals, who'll often sign your 'save the nature reserve' petition in return. There are other things you can do, too: take photographs of local animals on your smartphone, or picking up litter and putting it back in bins, or using your set of tools to repair signs and benches around the neglected nature reserve. Those tasks might not sound like a great deal of fun in isolation, but what *Alba* does so brilliantly is depicts the world from a child's perspective. Before long, you're excited to see a

rare bird of prey and snap a picture of it on your phone; fixing bird-boxes and seeing the sparrows and finches turn them into little homes brings its own frisson of cheer.

There's also some wonderful writing in *Alba*. When the island's shiftier mayor breaks the news of the hotel to a gathering of locals, there's a believable range of reactions: while the grown-ups are ambivalent ("It's a shame, but think of the job opportunities", and so forth), the children are unshakeable in their belief that it's an ecological catastrophe. There's a sweetness, too, in Alba and Inés's idealism: their faith that a few signatures on a petition here, and a fixed-up bridge there, will really make a difference as the builders and diggers start to roll into view.

Alba's only a short game – you could speed through it in a couple of hours if you so wished – but it's a considered kind of brevity. The island's compact, but every inch of it is packed with things to do and low-poly detail, from the exquisitely observed movements of animals to the instantly recognisable Spanish houses and shopfronts. It's such a pleasantly wrought setting that you'll likely find yourself thoroughly enjoying what might seem like pointless busywork in other, bigger games: picking up litter has rarely felt as pleasing, or as soothing, as it does here.

Above all, *Alba* gives you a new perspective on everyday life. If you haven't been birdwatching or exploring in woodland since you were a little kid, this is the kind of game capable of reigniting a childlike glee at the wonders of the natural world. When the end credits on *Alba* rolled, I really wasn't ready to take the trip back to grey old reality. 🐦

Info

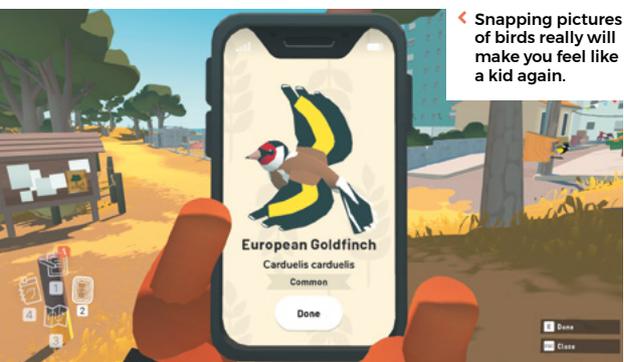
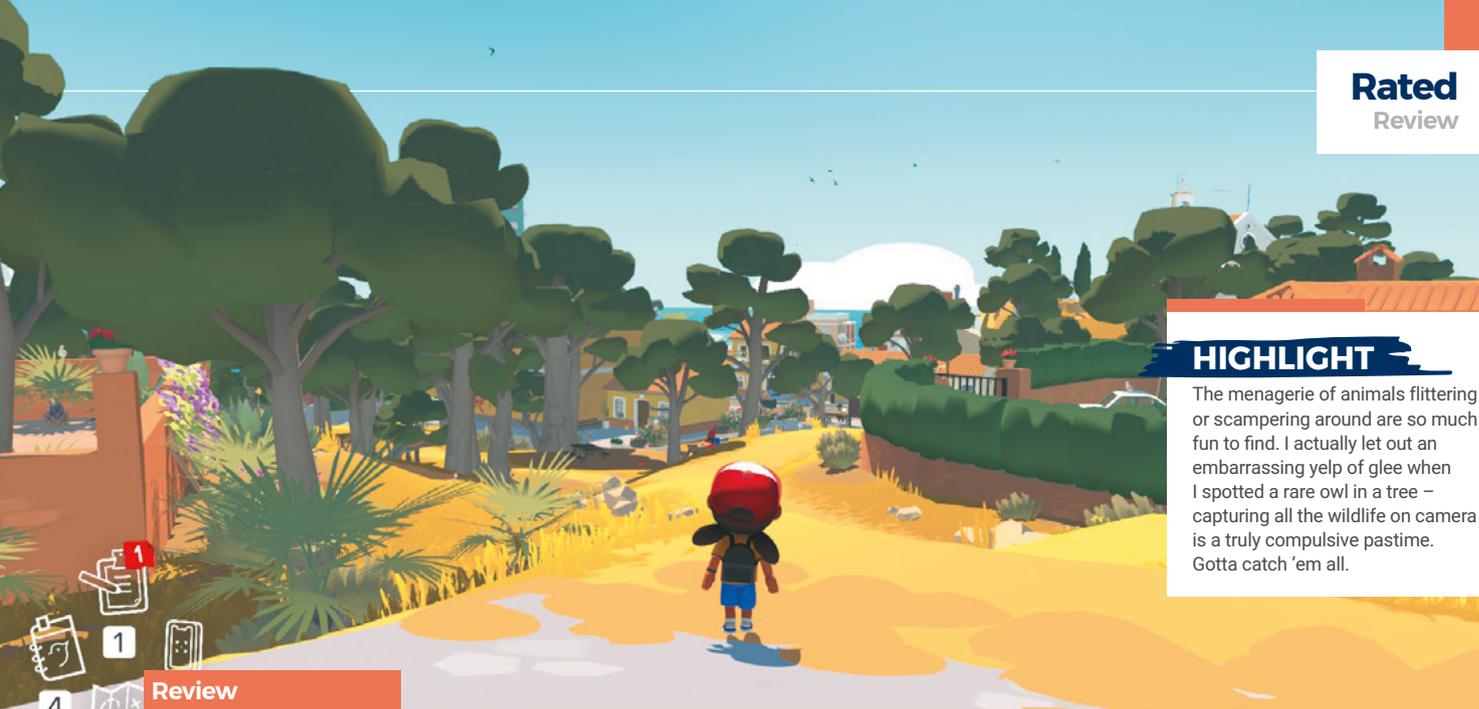
GENRE
Nature-'em-up
FORMAT
PC (tested) / PS4 / XBO / Mac
DEVELOPER
ustwogames
PUBLISHER
ustwogames
PRICE
£13.49
RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Ryan Lambie

VERDICT

An absolutely charming eco-fable that deserves your attention.

82%



Backwards compatible

WRITTEN BY RYAN LAMBIE

Shut up, crime

Old games are like time capsules: they provide not only a glimpse of once-popular genres and design conventions, but also a snapshot of pop culture at the time they were made. I've recently been battering my way through the PC Engine and arcade versions of *Vigilante*, a scrolling brawler originally released by Japanese developer Irem in 1988. The action itself is repetitive, even by the standards of the time: as a martial arts expert on the trail of your kidnapped girlfriend (called Madonna), you walk from left to right, kicking and punching the villains that plod onto the screen. Occasionally, you get to pick up nunchucks to flail in your opponents' faces. What keeps me engrossed in *Vigilante*, though, is how steeped in late-eighties culture it is.

The game came out towards the end of an era that saw the release of such films as *Death Wish 3*, where American cities were depicted as crime-ridden battlegrounds with good citizens forced to take the law into their own hands. But because *Vigilante* is a Japanese game, it takes a distinctly quaint, outsider's perspective: the game's head-smashing action begins, of all places, outside a lobster restaurant (which, in arcades, is called 'Good! Friends'). As our hero progresses, he passes some kind of clothes store called Maria – with, inexplicably, a pistol-wielding cowboy on the sign – and a shop named Musical, which appears to sell nothing but tubas.

The action really heats up outside a seedy-looking nightclub, where the rank-and-file hoodlums you've been punching are joined by a big guy wielding a revolver. The drama of the encounter is undercut when you notice the nightclub's named Pipi Room. It's also noteworthy that, although *Vigilante* takes place in broad daylight, the shops are shuttered and the streets are empty, leading me to think the entire game unfolds on an otherwise humdrum Sunday morning. Maybe the villains kidnapped Madonna out of sheer boredom.

Later stages take place in a scrapyard and what appears to be the Brooklyn Bridge. But again, *Vigilante's* take on late-eighties New York is a quaintly askew one: it's a place where hoardings advertise music events at jazz clubs, and also Manzai comedy nights – a type of quintessentially Japanese double-act routine that was almost entirely unknown to westerners at the time. And while the bad guys look like the typical mohawked punks and bulked-up heavies of 1980s action movies, the titular Vigilante, with his Bruce Lee slip-on shoes, dungarees, bright red belt, and matching wrist bands, looks both perfectly of his time and curiously out of place. But then again, the naivety is part of *Vigilante's* charm: the game ends with the upbeat message, "Way to go, dude!!! You saved Madonna. Law and order failed, but the vigilante prevailed. The vigilante rules the city!!!" In the world of *Vigilante*, the only way to protect the proprietors of lobster restaurants and tuba shops is by kicking crime square in the face.



Birth of Venus

Sega celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2020, and one of the ways it marked the occasion was with the release of the Game Gear Micro – a bewilderingly dinky homage to its early-nineties handheld. Sticking with the handheld theme, Sega also revealed a fascinating bit of vintage tech that it's never shown in public before: the Sega Venus.

This was Sega's internal code name for what would become the Nomad – a short-lived 1995 handheld that essentially functioned as a portable Mega Drive. The Nomad was an odd-looking beast – angular but also slightly out of square, with a case that was wider on the left than on the right. At the prototyping stage, though, the Venus looked a little more like the Game Gear, with the same round D-pad and a more symmetrical case. The Venus was unveiled during a curious lecture, of sorts, in which Sega's Hiroyuki Miyazaki provided a 'seminar' in the company's consoles and their planet-based code names. It's a fun little video, and well worth watching – both for the Venus reveal and for details on other projects, such as the unreleased, cartridge-based Jupiter console which was dropped in favour of the Dreamcast. You can check it out at wfmag.cc/venus.



Capcom Stadia

Capcom's taking a trip down memory lane this year, first with a remake of its monstrously tricky platform classic, *Ghosts 'n Goblins*. With the pixel art of old replaced by hand-drawn graphics (in a style akin to *Child of Light*), *Ghosts 'n Goblins Resurrection* is an otherwise faithful-looking update of the arcade hit that cruelly emptied our pockets of spare change back in the eighties.

On the subject of arcades, Capcom has also announced a separate collection called *Capcom Arcade Stadium*, which gathers together no fewer than 32 of the company's eighties and nineties hits, ranging from the familiar – there's *Strider*, *Final Fight*, plus several flavours of *Street Fighter II* – to the more obscure. It's quite exciting to see the underrated *Carrier Air Wing* – a spiritual sequel to the great *U.N. Squadron* – on here, for example. The slight downer is you'll have to purchase the games in 'packs' of ten, though you do get a free copy of *1943: The Battle of Midway* to start you off. Capcom's collection hits the Nintendo Switch eShop this February.

Wizard of Egg

If you enjoyed the Oliver Twins' piece on making *Fast Food* for the Switch (see page 50), then there's good news: the veteran programmers have since overseen the making of another game, *Wonderful Dizzy*, starring their ovoid mascot. Loosely based on *The Wizard of Oz*, it's playable on both a ZX Spectrum 128 emulator and on the modern ZX Spectrum Next, and basically has all the 2D action-adventuring you'd expect from a *Dizzy* title.

You can play it for free right now at wonderfuldizzy.com.



Backwards compatible

WRITTEN BY IAN 'SOFTBRICK' DRANSFIELD

Boxwards compatible

You may have seen it, but if you haven't: did you know you can play PS2 games on the Xbox Series S/X? And you don't actually need to hack anything? Well, here we are.

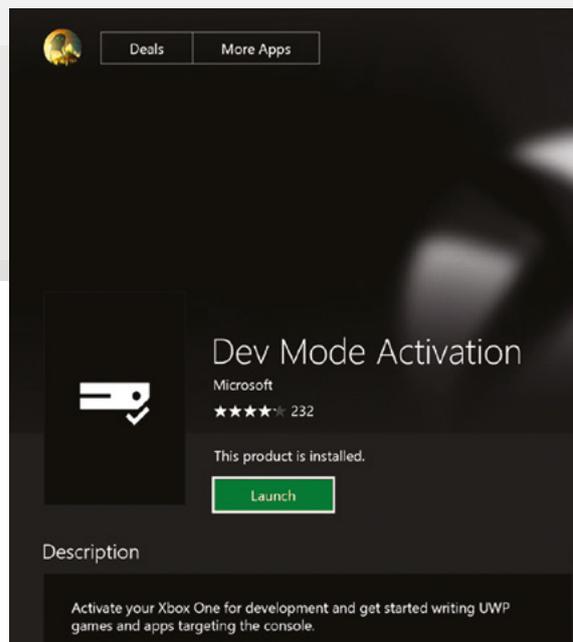
Microsoft opened up its last-gen Xbox consoles to developers through the use of a dedicated app – pay a fee, unlock the ability to use dev mode, be able to 'sideload' apps onto your retail console. No hacking at all.

From there came development of RetroArch specifically for Xbox One – the multisystem emulation front-end that's pretty much *the standard* when it comes to playing old games on machines that weren't actually built to play them. And from *there* came the ability to use apps developed for Xbox One on the Xbox Series consoles, with better performance thanks to the consoles' improved specs. That's the short version without instructions. Basically, I've been

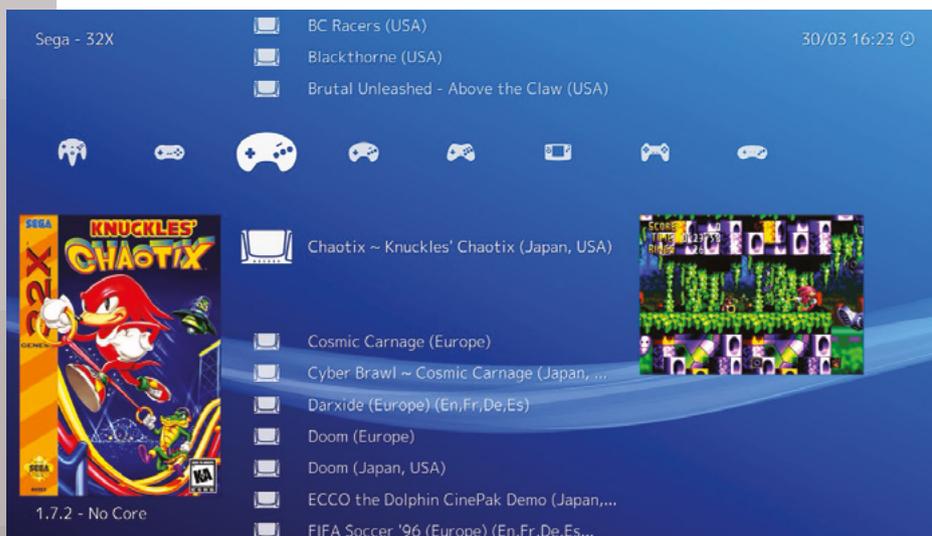
playing *Super Mario World* on my Xbox Series X.

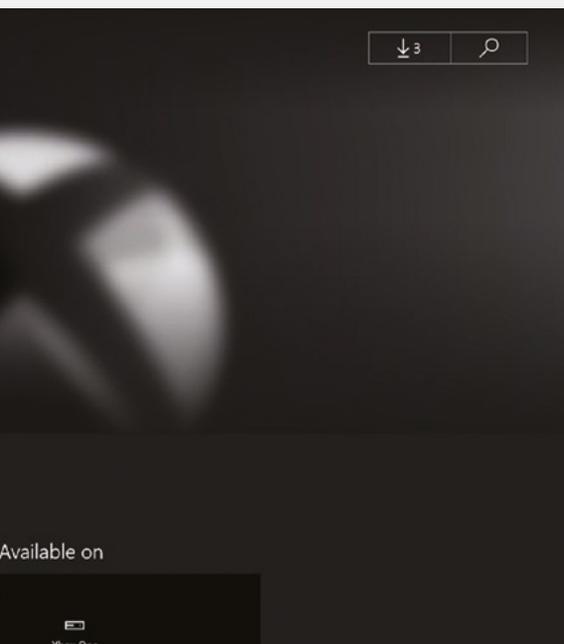
Now while plenty of you will have already jumped at this opportunity, and more of you will be licking your lips in anticipation at finally being able to run the Game Gear version of *Road Rash* on a console manufactured in 2020, I'm here to pitch caution. I am no stranger to 'mucking about' with my devices, making them run things they're not necessarily supposed to, opening stuff up and tinkering, annoying all the warrantyphiles around the world. I'm no expert, but I'm not an idiot. Yet I managed to semi-brick my Xbox Series X, adding RetroArch in there, almost killing a £450 machine just so I could play *Steven Seagal Is: The Final Option* on it.

By no means are these reports widespread, so I do think it was a quirk of my specific use of the machine, all the same: I switched to dev mode using a button combination, as the official



app route doesn't function when you're in the Xbox Insider's program. After messing around a while, I opted to return to the regular retail Xbox Series X in preparation for some solid *Fallout: New Vegas* sessioning the following day. During the five-minute wait for the console to switch modes – yes, it is that long – my wife put a TV show on, and I left the Xbox pootling along in the background, safe in the energy-wasting knowledge it would shut itself down after a time. The next day I was met with an error number no amount





improving, meaning GameCube will be a viable option at some point, and there are even murmurs of the Dreamcast emulator working well, though I wasn't able to test that. It's fun, and cool, and definitely a novelty that's worth playing with if you're of the mind and can handle the slight risk.

As an aside, it's worth pointing out RetroArch did make its way to PS4 at the end of 2019, and it works pretty well. Thing there is, though, you can only use it if you *properly* hack your console – Sony certainly isn't in the mood for allowing regular users to tweak things and sideload apps in any official sense. And I'm sure a PS5 port will follow when that console's inevitably hacked. But for accessibility's sake, it's the Xbox Series S/X that takes the podium here. Unless you factor in PCs, because then... well, just use a PC if you've got one, or pick one up for less than the price of an Xbox Series S. They're significantly cheaper, better, and easier for emulation.



Next-gen

Just enough space to throw this in and say: I did indeed move on from playing *Oblivion* on the brand new Xbox Series X to instead play... *Fallout: New Vegas*, a marginally newer RPG using an updated version of the same engine as *Oblivion*. I am nothing if not entirely predictable in my behaviour.

The backwards compatible version of Obsidian's flawed diamond runs well, crashing nowhere near as much as it did back in 2010, and it's offered me a chance to finally sit down and crack on with the apparently excellent DLC packs I never touched first time around. So thanks again, the future of gaming consoles, for helping me plug gaps in gaming's past.



of Googling (or Binging) could solve, and was forced to reset the console to its defaults, reinstalling the OS in the process. Fortunately, my installed games and saves survived, so this was more a warning shot than anything else. But the lesson remains: when you're messing about with stuff you shouldn't *necessarily* be messing about with, you have to accept that it could go wrong and you'll lose all your precious data. And you'd have no recourse to complain if you did. So, yeah: I'm the harbinger of data doom – heed my warning.

All that said, this is really quite something from a novelty perspective, playing games from long-dead formats nothing to do with Microsoft on its own Xbox devices. And while there's a learning curve if you've not used RetroArch before (remember those BIOSes!), and incompatibilities and errors up the wazoo, when it works it does so really well. Your 8- and 16-bit machines are pretty much flawless in their re-creations, while the jump to 32- and 64-bit sees a lot less compatibility, but it's getting there. You can play PlayStation games on Xbox, yes. You can also, as mentioned, play some PS2 games. Dolphin compatibility is ever-

Now playing
Zen and the art of racing



Zen and the art of racing

This month, Ryan unwinds by destroying some dry stone walls in Scotland

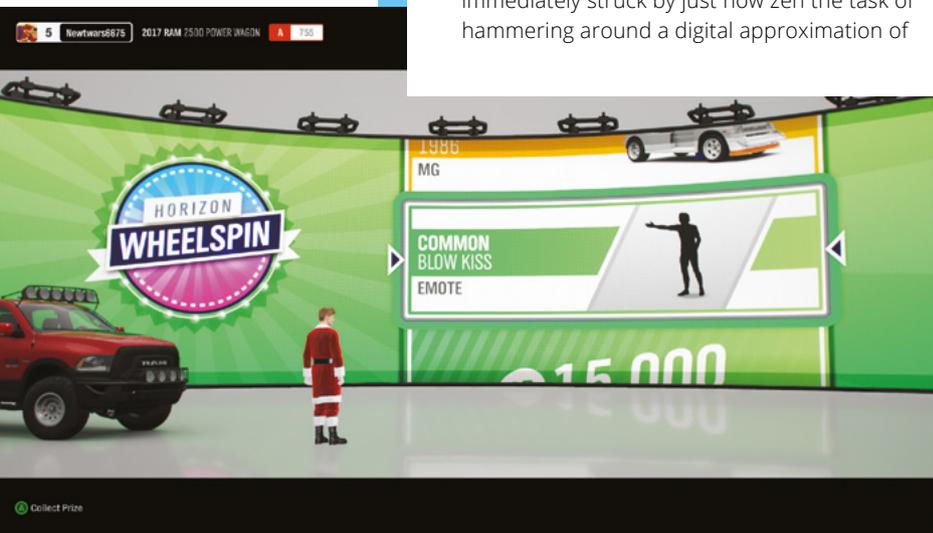
Given they're about hurtling down undulating ribbons of tarmac at absurd speeds and trying not to die, driving games ought to be pretty nail-biting stuff. Lately, though, I've found myself increasingly turning to the genre when I need to relax – which is where *Forza Horizon 4* comes in. I've only caught up with Playground Games' arcade racer recently thanks to Xbox Game Pass, and I was immediately struck by just how zen the task of hammering around a digital approximation of

the UK can be. As I glide across the Scottish Highlands in the game's opening stretches, avoiding oncoming traffic and occasionally joining the odd race, I find myself pleasantly enthralled by the idealised world Playground has created here. The roads have traffic on them, but not too much traffic – you won't get stuck in endless tailbacks, or look in your rear-view mirror to find an Audi driving perilously close to your rear end. The hills are green and pleasant, with cows and sheep that scatter as I take an accidental shortcut across a field. The handling is forgiving and silky smooth as I perform tidy drifts through a long bend before bringing the rear of my Subaru Impreza back into line on the straight. Even something as disastrous-sounding as hitting a dry stone wall at 100 miles an hour is curiously soothing – veering slightly off-course and demolishing an ancient bit of the countryside is described here as 'Landscaping', adds to your Skill Points, and is joined by a muffled and quite pleasant rumbling sound.

One time, I became so calmly immersed in the task of weaving through Scotland's highways that I entirely overshot the waypoint for a race, kept on driving, and found myself slap-bang in the middle of Edinburgh. But even this wasn't quite the self-own it might be if it happened in real life; again, there's no rush-hour traffic or throngs

Hammering across muddy courses in *Forza Horizon 4*: far more relaxing than it sounds.

I've won... an emote from a fruit machine. Yay, I guess?





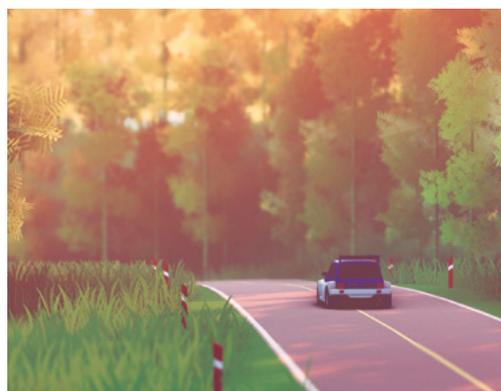
▲ *Art of Rally*: understated and soothing – even when you’re sliding around bends at 80 absurd speeds.

of tourists to contend with here, and so I was free to take in the sights and trundle back out of town in search of my next race.

My main beef with *Forza Horizon 4*? Probably its tendency to burden me with dozens of progress bars to fill and trinkets to collect. I’m absolutely fine with winning races to earn cash, which I can, in turn, spend on cars and modifications, but I’m less interested in the sundry hats, emotes, and hundreds of other bits and pieces I can unlock. Every completed race ends in flickering displays of progress bars filling up, levels met, and trinkets acquired. If I do really well, I get to play a gaudy fruit machine where I can win anything from extra credits to new cars for my garage. In these instances, *Forza Horizon 4* starts to feel more akin to a free-to-play opus like *Fortnite* – a sensation not helped by occasional entreaties to buy something called a ‘Welcome Pack’ from the in-game store. It’s as though the developers behind the game are fearful that players won’t find the racing interesting enough by itself, when that’s exactly why I booted the game up in the first place. Besides, there are all kinds of fun diversions in here should I get fed up with trying to win conventional races – like performing high-wire antics for a distinctly wooden-looking film crew in the Stunt Driver chapters, for example. Taking the helm of a Bugatti Veyron, and sending this million-pound piece of exotic machinery hurtling into the air like it’s been shot out of a cannon? It’s the perfect way to unwind on a winter’s evening.

“Hitting a dry stone wall at 100 miles an hour is curiously soothing”

On the subject of zen-like racing experiences, I also highly recommend developer Funselektor Labs’ *Art of Rally*. It’s a game we scored highly in last month’s edition, and Kyle Hoekstra’s review immediately left me hankering to download it from the Epic Games Store. Unlike *Forza Horizon 4*, which piles its parcel shelf high with all kinds of cars, racing disciplines, and bits to unlock, *Art of Rally* goes the logical indie route and strips everything down to its bare essentials: starting in the late sixties, it’s a game that turns racing on rough surfaces into a soothing, almost ambient experience. *Art of Rally* can’t afford to license real cars, but the handling of each – whether it’s a stand-in for an aggressive Audi Quattro or a compact, plucky Mini Cooper – is distinct and far more involving than the game’s presentation might lead you to expect. In short, *Art of Rally* doesn’t need expensive licensing or absurdly detailed vehicle models to create an enthralling racing game; from the minute I started driving down my first blocky, pastel-shaded alpine course, I was completely transfixed. 🗨



Wireframe Recommends



Hotshot Racing

PC, PS4, XBO, SWITCH
Our issue 39 cover game, Sumo Digital and Lucky Mountain’s racer is a glorious homage to the likes of *Daytona USA* and *Sega Rally*: the polygon counts are low, the speed is absurdly high, and drifting through bends quickly becomes a blissful, almost meditative pastime.



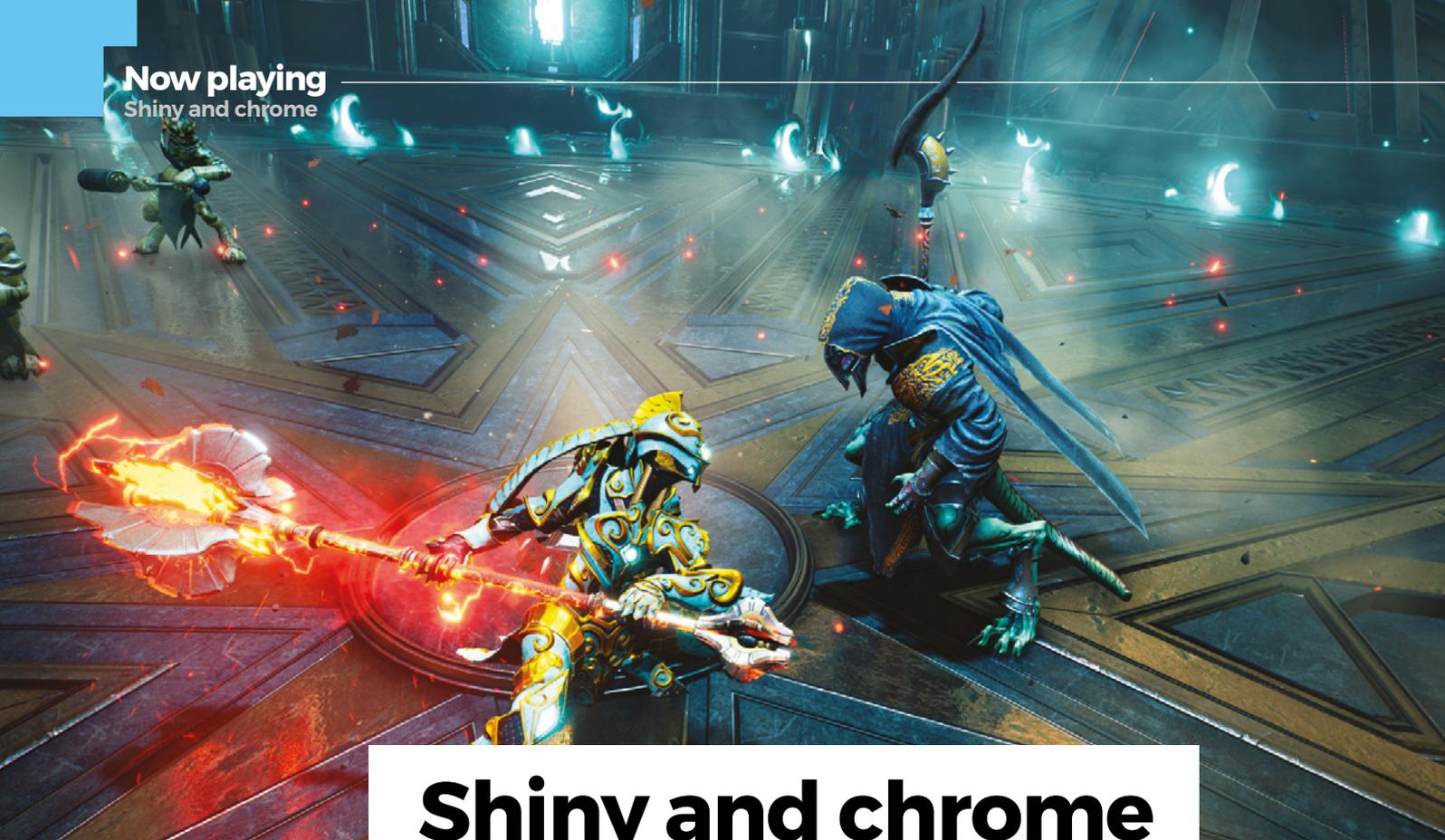
OutRun 2

ARCADE, XBOX
Sega’s belated sequel to perhaps the first-ever zen racer is ridiculously good: a tail-happy, sun-drenched driving reverie that has about as much to do with real-world racing as *Star Wars* does to space travel. Getting on a bit now, but still a classic.



R4: Ridge Racer Type 4

PSONE, PS4, PS VITA
Namco arguably polished its arcade racing series to a perfect shine with this 1998 release; the cars’ handling is sublime, the music catchy, the circuits thrilling. This is one series we’d love to see back on our screens.



Shiny and chrome

Ian's playing catch-up and trying not to Godfall behind

There's a bit of a responsibility with new consoles, that we as paragons of all that is good in games writing be the ones to impart essential knowledge to you, our fine readers. But there's a lot of games, and only so much time to complete this all-so-important mission (that I may be overstating *slightly*). Still, I've been working hard to not fall behind on those new games, and so it was I found myself playing *Godfall*, and not really liking it much, but then... playing it more. There's certainly something going for it, I'll admit that.

But it's not much. Is it enough? I don't know. I can't see myself sticking with the game beyond a few more sessions unless something fundamental changes about either the game or how I'm playing it – maybe I'll make some friends and we can play together; that always makes anything infinitely more fun. But it's unlikely. I'm an abominable bore, after all, and people are far more focused on games that are immediately rewarding and not *absolutely gorgeous* but thoroughly bland. Who wants to have to convince others to play a game with them? This stuff should come naturally.

But still, I go back to the fact that there is *something* about *Godfall*. It's likely a mix of aspects, thinking about it: it brings in elements of loot and chest-hunting, showering you with an ever-changing array of spoils with which to adorn your chunky sci-fi-fantasy knight in. There's a definite feel of personalisation on the go with things like the weapons you decide to use – it's always up to you what you go with, so you can pick a specific approach and stick with it or change it up on the fly to fit in with different enemy types. That stuff works – it's ever-reliable, it's always going to be a draw.

And then... well, not to be too low-brow and think about the pretties over the mechanics like some silly people would, but *Godfall* is *really* pretty. Gobsmaekingly so, at times. And it's not

✓ These are official press shots of the game, but there are no two ways about it: *Godfall* does look this good on a PS5 and high-spec PC.





◀ Loot glorious loot, there ripe for the picking, give that chest a boot, new gear you'll be flicking ('through menus to put on').

just lots of polygons and some good shaders: it's imaginative and creative in how everything is presented. I've seen styles like this before, sure, so it's not exactly unique, but it does show there's been thought and care put into not just what you're seeing, but why you're seeing it. Were I still 14... well, I'd be worried and go see a doctor. But I'd also be very much into This, devouring what I'm sure is a thick tome of lore behind it all and becoming utterly lost in a delightfully nerdy little festival of shiny armour, hovering neon-coloured things, and oversized swords.

Put those elements together and you have a game that offers something, even if it does feel slight when it's all factored in. A compelling loop of fights, loot, and upgrades all playing out on a ridiculously shiny canvas with just enough creative spark about it to stop it from falling in with all those unremarkable slogs you half-remember from your gaming past. Fracture. Inversion. Timeshift. Totally different styles of game, but absolutely what I'm talking about when it comes to those vague, uncreative chunks of game that your brain tosses aside minutes after you're done with them.

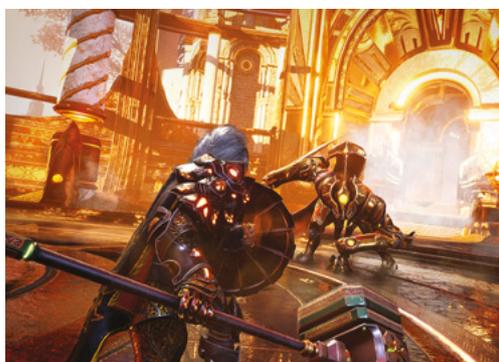
No, *Godfall* has made an impact, and for that I have to applaud it. I'm never going to hail it as

“A compelling loop of fights, loot, and upgrades all playing out on a ridiculously shiny canvas”

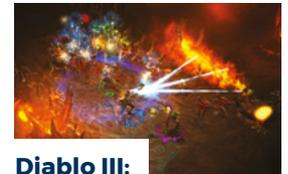
a specifically good game, nor am I going to be singing from the rooftops in 18 months' time about how it was overlooked and deserved better. If anything, it's been overhyped, and will both succeed and suffer more than it otherwise would have as a result of being a high profile PS5 release title (that's also on PC).

Because as a game it's *fine*, and nothing more. It wouldn't have received anything like the attention it did were it not for that launch game treatment, and while I by no means wish any sort of failure on the part of *Godfall* in its future, I really can't see it carrying on to be some kind of dependable

sort-of-*Diablo*, sort-of-*Borderlands* action-RPG standard. It'll go on, I'm sure it'll improve over the months and years, and I'm sure it'll get looked back on as one of the shiniest games we saw in all of the hell that was 2020. But I won't be playing it by the time you're reading this, so let's pretend these pages are called Then Playing, just this once. 🗨

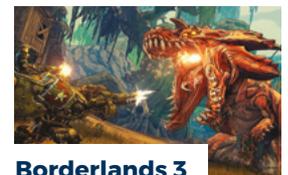


Wireframe Recommends



Diablo III: Eternal Collection

SWITCH, PS4, XBO, PC
Specifically on Switch – *Diablo III* is a great game anywhere, but there's just something I love about its slightly fuzzy, perfectly functional sort-of-handheld version. A classic action-RPG, and something to really get stuck into with friends/non-friends.



Borderlands 3

PC, PS5, XB S/X, MULTI
Maybe the second one instead? I've got the third in my head as it's the most recent entry in the once-genre-bending FPS/RPG hybrid, rather than for any other reason. It's a good game, especially played with others, and *especially* when you ignore the Hilarious Banter.



Path of Exile

PC, PS4, XBO
I've not played this one, to be honest, but all the recommendations come in from all the right places: a *Diablo*-like that wears its inspiration very much on its sleeve, while also offering one of the fairest free-to-play systems out there.



The Elder Scrolls

Punching immortal enemies forever: it's learning by doing

BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS / 1996-ON / PC, EVERYTHING

W

hile the very first *Elder Scrolls* game, *Arena*, didn't feature it, there's been a focus by Bethesda ever since on making it so that you upgrade your skills and abilities in its endless-roam RPGs by *just doing things*.

Need to get better at sword wrangling? Wrangle more swords. Need to spec up your sparkly click-fingers ('magic')? Then do more of that. Want to cheat to improve your combat skills? Punch an undying enemy who won't get aggressive in the back of the head, forever. Need to get better at jumping? Jump everywhere, all the time, always.

Admittedly that latter point was lost by the 2011 release of *Skyrim*, given the acrobatics skill no longer existed in the dragon-baiting sequel, but it's certainly a fond memory for anyone who put countless hours into *Oblivion* or *Morrowind*. The best way to get better at acrobatics was indeed to spam the jump button, meaning anyone who had this little nugget in their brain would make a habit of bunny-hopping their entire existence in whichever game it was. It may have looked stupid, but it worked, and became such a force of habit that some of us (hello!) continue doing it to this day in *Skyrim*, even though that is, indeed, pointless.

But it does all come back to the very smart and sensible decision by Bethesda 25 years ago to make it so that you got better at things by doing those things. After all, that is how real life works. Usually. It's a staple of the RPG genre – encouraged by *Dungeons & Dragons* in the most part, no doubt – that you choose what to upgrade when levelling up, at least at certain milestones. So while you might have spent your entire campaign wailing on any and all that passed in front of you like

a true murder hobo, when it came time to choose an attribute to rank up, you might well have gone straight for Charisma. After all, there's nothing more charming than hitting everyone you ever see with a mace.

I don't mean to imply anything in *D&D*, the *Elder Scrolls* – *Fallout*, whatever it might be – is realistic: it's obviously not. But there's an *element* of realism to how things work out when you learn by doing. When you're on your serial-killing rampage only to spec up your charm, it feels wooden, like a game system being played with. When you get better at chatting up the locals because you've put time into bartering and deception... well screw it, it *does* feel more realistic. And as

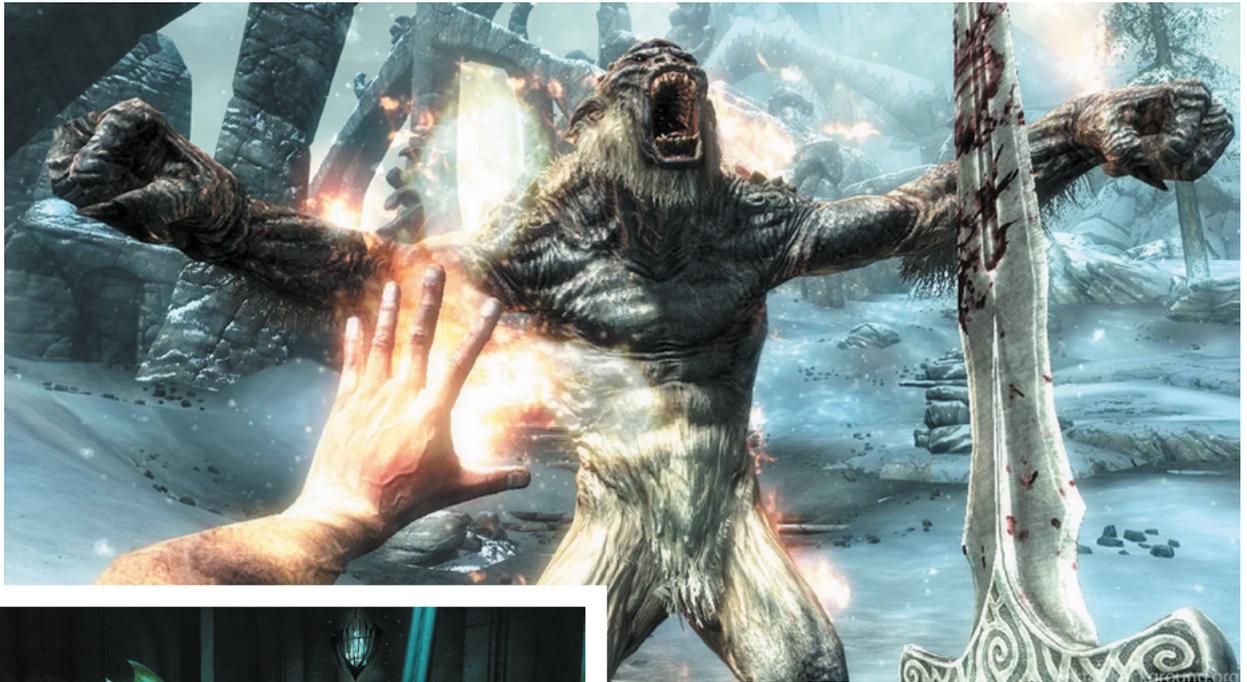
a result, it doesn't take you out of the experience as much as it otherwise might.

See Bethesda's other big RPG series for a fine example of just this: *Fallout* operates on a straightforward system of earning experience points, levelling up, and

choosing from a list of perks. Previous entries to the series saw the ability to bump skills up point by point, meaning you could indeed talk your way through literally every situation you encounter only to put all your levelling into energy weapons. As a game mechanic, just as with *D&D*, it does a job. But it also takes you out of things as you weigh up the pros and cons of where to assign your new Token Of Power.

The fantasy side of the RPG aisle, meanwhile, offers a far more elegant approach and one that has served the *Elder Scrolls* series very well over the decades. It's one that's been lifted from wholesale by other RPGs – though, to be fair, I can't say for sure if Bethesda's series was the first to go this route (and I doubt it was). It also helps to make something that can be overwhelming and off-putting to newcomers that little bit

“Need to get better at jumping? Jump everywhere, all the time, always”



more reasonable to get their head around. One more time with feeling: it's learning by doing. You get better at picking locks by picking locks, just like you haven't got better at playing the clarinet because you stopped playing it when you were at school. It might be a world surrounded by house-sized mushrooms and thieving cat-people, but everyone can understand the concept of 'do the thing, improve the thing'.

As mentioned, *Skyrim* did remove some skills – more than just acrobatics, there were plenty of elements nixed for the most accessible entry to the series. But I'm hoping this isn't the case with *The Elder Scrolls VI*, whenever that releases. I wouldn't say it needs to go the direction of *Morrowind*, which had you learning entirely different skills for long and short blade, axes, and spears as if there are no transferable skills in this fantastical realm. Nor would I want it pushed back to a *Daggerfall* level of having to learn medical skills in order to be able to diagnose the disease that's currently killing you. That would be silly, and off-putting, and overly complex – as well as just not fun.

But I do sincerely hope acrobatics gets reintroduced, because I want to once again be jumping everywhere I go with a purpose in mind, instead of just because that's the only way I know how to play the *Elder Scrolls*. 🐾

Defend the endumbing

Speaking to IGN back in 2011, Bethesda top guy Todd Howard explained why the studio had decided to remove a bunch of skills and attributes in the face of claims things were being 'dumbed down'. "In *Oblivion* you have your eight attributes and 21 skills," he said. "Now you have 18 skills and three attributes. What we found is that all those attributes actually did something else. A fan may say 'You removed my eight attributes!', and my answer is, 'Which ones do you want? They're all a trickle down to something else'. Now when you level up you can just raise your Magicka. In *Oblivion* you have to raise your Intelligence knowing that your Intelligence raises your Magicka." *Skyrim* is Bethesda Game Studios' most successful release and has been re-released countless times on every format under the sun. Removing skills and attributes did *not* ruin things, it seems.



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Editorial

Editor

Ryan Lambie
Email ryan.lambie@raspberrypi.com

Features Editor

Ian Dransfield
Email ian.dransfield@raspberrypi.com

Sub-Editors

David Higgs & Vel Ilic

Design

criticalmedia.co.uk

Head of Design

Lee Allen

Designers

Sam Ribbits, James Legg

Contributors

Jon Bailes, Lottie Bevan, Antony de Fault, Konstantinos Dimopoulos, Alex Hadziioannou, Kyle Hoekstra, Daniel Lipscombe, John Mauldin, Steve McNeil, Ed Nightingale, Philip and Andrew Oliver, Harry Slater, Howard Scott Warshaw, Alan Wen, Jack Yarwood

Publishing

Publishing Director

Russell Barnes
Email russell@raspberrypi.com

Director of Communications

Liz Upton

CEO

Eben Upton

Advertising

Commercial Manager

Charlie Milligan
Email charlotte.milligan@raspberrypi.com
Tel +44 (0)7725 368887

Distribution

Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Ave, London EC1A 9PT
Tel +44 (0)207 429 4000

Subscriptions

Unit 6, The Enterprise Centre, Kelvin Lane, Manor Royal, Crawley, West Sussex, RH10 9PE

To subscribe

Call 01293 312192 or visit wfmag.cc/subscribe

Subscription queries

wireframe@subscriptionhelpline.co.uk



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Wireframe magazine is published by Raspberry Pi (Trading) Ltd, Maurice Wilkes Building, St. John's Innovation Park, Cowley Road, Cambridge, CB4 0DS. The publisher, editor, and contributors accept no responsibility in respect of any omissions or errors relating to goods, products or services referred to or advertised in the magazine. Except where otherwise noted, content in this magazine is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0).



ISSN: 2631-6722 (print), 2631-6730 (online).

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