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from the makers
of Northgard

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iconic teleporting
mechanic in Unreal

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Pooing cars, and why bigger gameworlds aren't always better

I'm sitting on a horse, galloping at full speed towards my destination, deftly weaving around the occasional tree and across lush green meadows. See how the grass bends around my steed's feet? Majestical. Oh no!

A small stone wall. This is no problem for my mighty steed, as we clunkily hop over it with a slightly ill-fitting animation but *never mind that!* Onwards! Just another eight miles or so to the mission marker.

Look, we all love a good horse. Pop a carrot in their happy, enchanted faces. Watch as their swishy tail chases flies away which immediately re-land on them. Over and over, an endless cycle. It's a good time! We all love a horse, which is lucky, because these days every single game has a rideable horse in it.

The trouble with horses, you see, is that they're also exceptionally boring. They run in a straight line and that's about it. I think we can all remember when we first got on a horse in a video game – a sort of living, breathing car that was harder to turn – and we thought, "This is the future! Look at it go, with an average speed of 25–30 miles per hour!" Until it dawns on you that this is a pretty rubbish mode of transport for a gameworld that's 25–30 miles wide.

And that's the problem, isn't it? It's not the horses. Horses are fine. They're like cars that poo. Who wouldn't want a car that poos? No, the problem is the gameworlds, which for marketing purposes have become bigger. Not better, no. Not more dense, more interesting, more stuffed to the gills with intriguing detail – just purely and simply *bigger*. This means when I hop on my trusty pooing car and set off in the vague direction of the next yellow minimap icon, I'm pretty much guaranteed to be sitting there, zoning out, watching a horse's arse bobbing up and down for the next ten minutes, as we canter our way through



DAN MARSHALL

Dan Marshall set up Size Five Games in 2008 before selling indie games online was really a thing. His most recent smash hit indie game was *Lair of the Clockwork God*.

a vast expanse of empty nothingness. Where am I? No idea. No points of interest to keep my bearings, just acres of green, a general sense of direction, and a small stone wall on the horizon to slow me down a bit.

Hold the left stick forwards, and wait. This is gameplay, is it? I'm currently careering around on horseback in the excellent *Ghost of Tsushima*, having spent what felt like most of last year doing the exact same thing in *Assassins Creed Valhalla*, and the year before moseying into town in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (having yee-hawed my way across America for 20 solid minutes). And *The Last of Us Part II* popped me on a horse, didn't it? And *Breath of the Wild*.

Have I been on a horse for the entire last generation of games? Feels like it. *Horizon Zero Dawn* was a robot horse, but don't think for one second that doesn't count because they're functionally equally incapable of leaping over a small stone wall gracefully.

Now look, I'm probably just salty because I have a kid now, and, as such, my gameplay time is limited. But I'd quite like to spend my gameplay time actually doing things, progressing the story, solving puzzles, getting into scraps. But instead, here I am staring down a horse's arse and drifting off. £60 well spent. And I'm fully aware there are some games out there that don't feature *any* horses, let alone make you ride them.

So, it's probably time for the marketing people to stop having such a say in how big gameworlds are, if 'sitting on a horse for ten minutes' is the best option we have for traversing the gaping mass of soil in between points. Smaller gameworlds, please. That way we don't need any horses, we can just run quickly. Or if you do insist on your gameworld being unmanageably large, at least write dragons into the story, or teleporters, because the wow factor of sitting on a horse has definitely, *definitely* worn off. 🐾

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WELCOME

Just as this edition was in its final, pre-press stages, news broke that Sir Clive Sinclair had sadly passed away at the age of 81. We'll save a more detailed article for a future edition, but for now, I thought I'd take a moment to mention how pleasing it is that so many of the tributes that have sprung up over the past few days have – rightly – focused on Sinclair's incredible contribution to the British games industry.

For years, the UK media had a tendency to point to Sir Clive's failures – most commonly the C5, his ill-fated electric vehicle from 1985. But with the passing of time, the impact of Sinclair's most successful computer, the ZX Spectrum, has really begun to be more widely understood.

The plucky machine brought computing to the masses, turned a generation of kids into game developers, and helped kick-start an entire home-grown industry. Not bad, considering Sinclair wasn't a gamer – he thought of the Spectrum as a business machine for accounts and so forth. Instead, the Speccy became a portal for wide-eyed youngsters who wanted – needed – a way into computing. Your humble editor was one of them, and the ZX Spectrum provided many happy hours of gaming and amateurish programming. Heck, I probably wouldn't even be editing this magazine if it wasn't for the Spectrum.

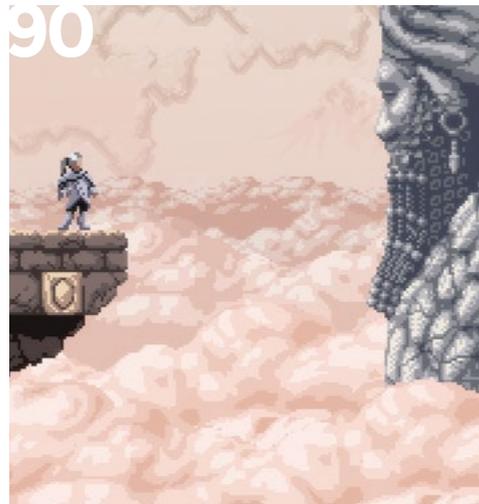
Rest in peace, Sir Clive, and thank you for the memories.

Ryan Lambie
Editor



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TALE SPIN

True grit is on display through Shiro Games' latest freedom-toting RPG, Wartales



^ Combat aims to suit an individual's tactical approach, rather than funnelling them in a specific path.

Freedom is an intoxicating brew, offering video game players the chance to do far more than they might – or could – in their everyday existence. Fantastical, impossible feats are one part of the lure, of course, but there's something to be said for freedom alongside grit. Hard work. Even suffering. *Wartales* is an open-world, turn-based tactical RPG from Shiro Games, the studio behind Viking strategy title *Northgard*, and it's a game that revels in both the freedom it offers players, and the realism it portrays in its fictional medieval setting.

Wartales sees players exploring, fighting, and growing their wealth – all while they keep their band of hired mercenaries happy. 'Happy', of course, meaning paid and fed. That or risk walkouts, mutinies, or harsh deaths in an uncaring universe. It's not necessarily uplifting, but *Wartales* does at least let you slog through the

world on your own terms, and in your own way. You're not going to be seeing mages lobbing fireballs at the party, either, thanks to that aforementioned lean towards realism... though 'realism' can be flexible, with some creatures and beings in the game that science would struggle to explain away with ease. Everyone loves a surprise, right?

It's a compelling package, running a different route to the usual epic fantasy, you-are-the-hero sort of thing. You're not a hero. You aren't even one central character, rather playing as your mercenary band. There's a real grounded air to things – some might argue cynical, even – and it all comes together to form a very particular atmosphere for *Wartales*: one not of hope, but of just trying to get by. The urge to survive in mind, we had a chat with Nicolas Cannasse, creative director and co-founder of Shiro Games, and Quentin Lapeyre, lead designer on *Wartales*, to find out more. ➔

Where did the idea for *Wartales* come from?

NC: There were a number of games I played when I was younger that had a large role in the inspiration for *Wartales*, particularly *Heroes of Might and Magic* – which I played a lot – with its tactical combat and focus on controlling groups of characters.

Players have also compared the game to *Battle Brothers*, which, while it is a fantastic game, we hadn't actually noticed the similarities between them until we were quite far into development...

I also always wanted to play more of *Mount & Blade*, but the combat system never quite clicked, a bit too action-oriented and messy for me personally as more of a strategy guy. So I thought, 'Hey, wouldn't it be cool if we could have *Mount & Blade* with a bit more scenario behind it, a little more RPG focus, and where you could approach it more tactically', so... that's what we did!

Why did you opt for the gritty, realistic medieval-style setting?

NC: Well, there's already so many games where it's a huge, epic fantasy, where you're a hero out to save the world and overcome the highest of stakes – we wanted to do something different here. We wanted

to make sure that the player isn't the stereotypical 'hero' of the story; you don't control one specific person in *Wartales*, it's a group of morally questionable mercenaries.

We made a lot of parallels with classic, European medieval stories – the presence of a plague, a powerful and influential church (not the Christian church exactly), and more.

The world is dark and gritty, a very low fantasy setting. There's no magic per se, or goblins and dragons, but there may be some fantastical aspects of the world that players will be able to uncover.

How much fun is it to invent a whole new world for a game?

NC: We did actually imagine and write 1000 years of history for the world, based on the interest I have in history, covering the different events that have happened over the documented period of human history, with everything happening in the world having roots in the past and consequences in the present. This played a big role in developing and defining the world and the history of *Wartales*.

In fact, there was an ancient civilisation, 'the ancients', that created this... actually, I can't talk about this just yet. No spoilers.



^ Nothing better than sitting around camp, laughing at your pack-donkey, and plotting the next mass murder and robbery on your spree. Well, unless you're playing the game like a nice person, that is.

How large is the game's world? Does it involve procedural generation, or is it manually crafted?

NC: The map itself is entirely handcrafted, allowing us to put much more life and detail into the whole world, and by extension, making it much more interesting for the player. But the player can explore the world at will, without limitations based on story progression or anything like that.

However, some aspects of the game use a mix of procedural generation and hand design. For example, the mission system is almost entirely procedurally generated alongside a lot of the events within the world, and we are doing a lot of work to randomise various aspects of the game so that on subsequent playthroughs, things will never happen exactly as they did in previous ones.

The goal is to make it possible to play the game for hundreds of hours before you can even begin to feel like you've seen everything, and we'll be continuing to iterate on this alongside our community throughout Early Access.

What's the secret to designing a compelling game world?

NC: One of my most important game design philosophies is to always surprise and reward the player, with this being particularly apparent in the *Evoland* games, where every time you open a chest, you either unlock something cool or change the world/gameplay.

We're taking a similar approach in *Wartales*, where every time you visit a new region, it feels fresh and exciting, with landmarks, people, creatures, occurrences/



^ We're sure the miller is just having a lie-down, right? Right?



events being completely different and distinct from what you have already seen elsewhere. We really want the players to feel rewarded for exploring and discovering the map.

How much does the game cater for the player's approach – is customisation more cosmetic, or something that changes the approach in battles, or even something that directly impacts the narrative with choices?

QL: We obviously have a bit of cosmetic customisation, but we're focusing on an impact in the game. First of all, in terms of combat.

The game is partially inspired by modern RPGs in which players express themselves with the skills they choose to use, and which represent their in-game identity. In this sense, we have a huge variety of weapons, active skills, passive skills: in short, customisation! Whether you're defensive, aggressive, or more of a control player, you will find something to suit you in *Wartales*. For example, you can build a team based on the use of poison, burning, or bleeding by playing around with the riposte and disengagement mechanics, if you prefer to have tanks blocking enemies while your

“People have compared the game to *Battle Brothers*”

archers rain hell, or managing a real zoo by taming wolves, boars, and bears.

Secondly, the impact can be felt in the world: the game will not ignore your actions. While the guard will hunt you down for your misdeeds, major criminal organisations will contact you to recruit you. You'll discover new skills in banditry, hone your stealing skills, carry out assassination missions, be opened up to the underbelly of certain cities, and discover some secrets that would be better kept quiet. If you prefer the thrill of exploration and discovery, you'll become an expert in transcribing stelae, decipher the world's Codexes, learn new skills in purging plague rats, gain access to new alchemy recipes, or open the mysterious gates of Canope. It is important to us that

you can do what you want to do and that the game gives you strong answers in return.

In a way, these

paths complete the sentence 'I would like to be...' and rebuild a progression system with bonuses and perks to obtain, unlocking features, actions, events, and automatic content via your progress.

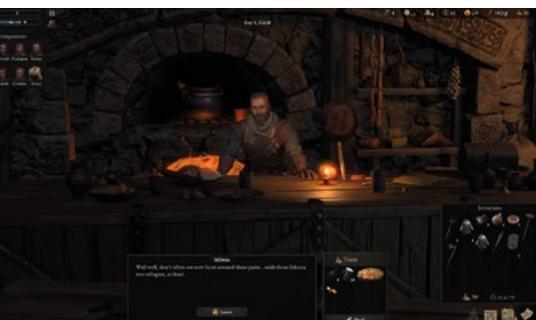
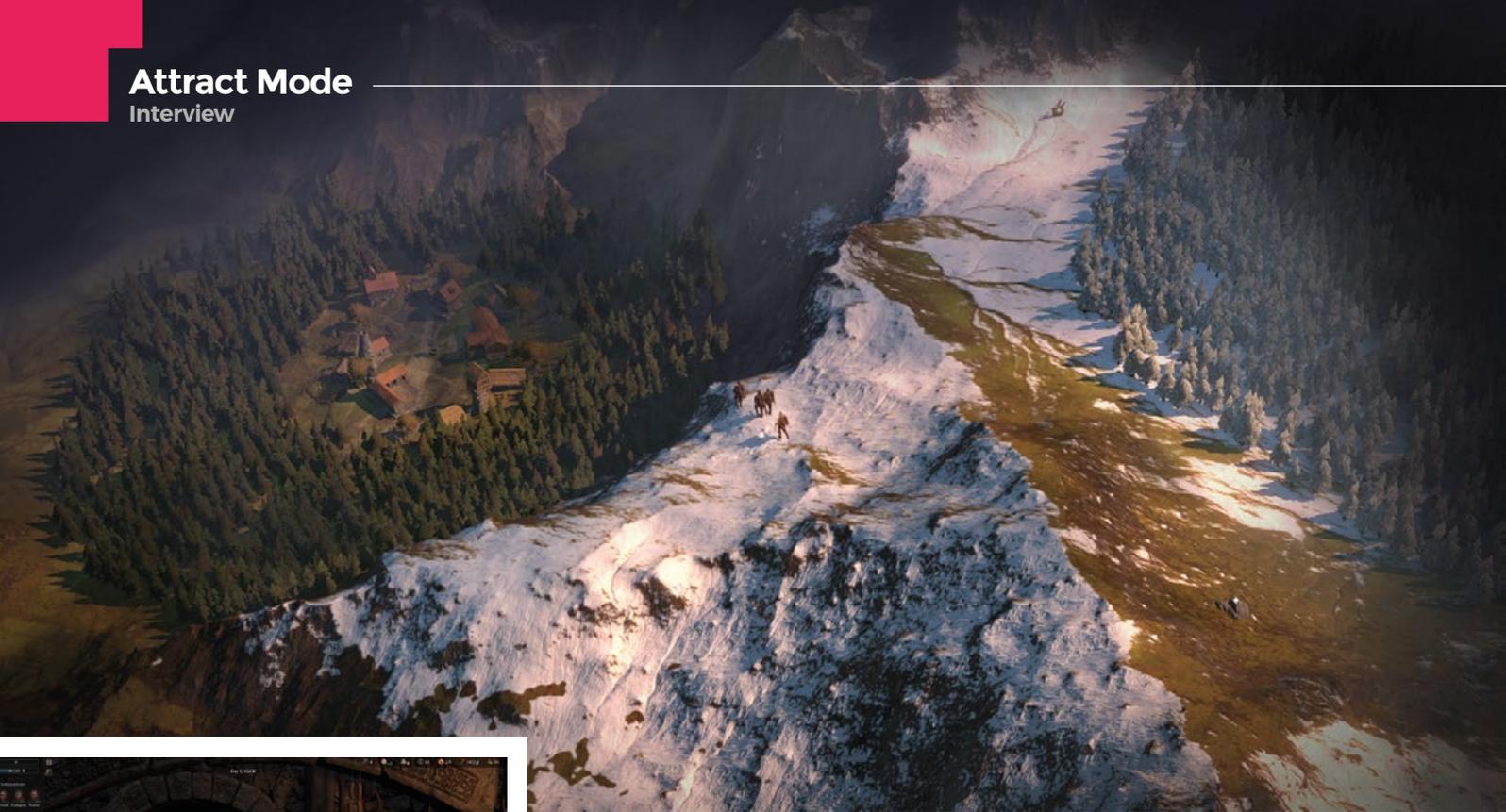
What have been the main challenges in creating *Wartales*' battle system?

QL: *Wartales*' combat system was designed to meet two requirements: the first being →

▲ **The look of *Wartales* is certainly.. desaturated, but there's a haunting beauty to the game that can't be denied.**

SWEET SMELLS

Shiro Games' previous titles *Evoland* (and its sequel) and *Northgard* were successful titles, but with success, is there an additional pressure to perform with the follow-up? "I mean, there's always pressure," Cannasse says. "When you make a new game, you kind of always want to go bigger and better than anything you've made before, so this is very much our mindset at least." With the team growing in the past couple of years, Cannasse says Shiro has been looking to take advantage of the growth rather than seeing it as a factor in any perceived pressure: "[We wanted to] put all of those resources into realising that 'bigger and better' project," he explains, "while also making something new and fresh that stands out from the rest of our catalogue. We're incredibly happy with the result and the community response has been wonderful, so it looks like, at the very least, we're going in the right direction!"



▲ Shiro Games is a French studio, but the game is being written with the English translation in mind at all times.

to distinguish itself from traditional tactical games by offering a more organic and faster system to learn and play. To do this, we removed certain mechanics, such as the chance to hit, and replaced them with a system of engagement that is simple to understand but whose mastery will make the difference between a perfectly executed fight and a mass grave. We wanted combat to focus on a turn-based system that valued the player's strategic and tactical intelligence rather than an explosion of varying percentages that affect chance according to dozens of criteria.

The second requirement was more of a challenge: we had to create a combat system that was as interesting with six fighters as it is with more than 20. While each enemy begins at a predefined location during a round, the player can activate any of their units when it's their turn to play. This system has the advantage of preserving the strategic composition of the player's band of mercenaries, rewarding

adaptability and tactical intelligence, as well as limiting the negative impacts of too many units: it is possible to focus on the enemies that will have their turn first in order to nullify their impact.

The same goes for Bravery Points (resources to be spent in battle to activate certain skills): rather than having to manage individual points for so many units, the player has an amount of Common Points to spend as they wish among all their units, which guarantees the implementation of a real group strategy.

Did the success of *Northgard* take you by surprise? And has it changed anything about how you approach *Wartales*?

NC: Actually, we were pretty confident about *Northgard* when it launched – maybe we didn't expect it to be quite as successful as it has ended up being – as we knew there was a market and interest for this kind of game, while the genre as a whole was going through a bit of a lull.

One of Shiro Games' core philosophies is that we want to make games that we ourselves would want to play, and this is exactly what we've done with *Wartales*, where we've made a game that I *really* wanted to play, so with any luck, there will be that same interest from the players out there.

There was a shift towards more 'realistic' settings from *Northgard-on for Shiro* (ignoring *Darksburg* for a second) – was this move a conscious decision?

NC: This was an entirely conscious decision, yes. We didn't want to go for the entirely photorealistic look for *Wartales*, but we did

want the game to be able to express this grim, poetic, medieval setting, and I think when you look at and travel

the world, you can definitely feel this kind of eerie atmosphere – something we are adding to with the music as well – and we wanted the style and visuals of the world to convey this and fully immerse the player.

Would you say *Wartales* is a cynical game? It feels dark and gritty, and motivations are profit – 'a thirst for riches'. 'You are not a chosen one', your goal 'is solely to survive', etc. Is that a fair take on the game's attitude?

NC: It's a realistic game in the sense that, as we mentioned earlier, we've actively tried to avoid the trope of good guys vs bad guys, no middle ground kind of stuff that is so popular in games, TV, and movies these days. You're playing as morally dubious people, in a morally dubious world. Everyone wants to survive, everyone has their reasons for what they do, things aren't quite as black and white as you would

"You're playing as morally dubious people in a morally dubious world"



^ It's not all trudging through the unforgiving wilderness - there's trudging through unforgiving inns and other buildings too.

normally expect - almost everything in *Wartales* can be justified with regards to the actions and attitudes of the inhabitants of the world.

It's not quite post-apocalyptic, of course. The results of this could be perceived as dark, but it's dark in a more realistic and grounded way, as opposed to exploitative. The world is cruel, people suffer, people are struggling to survive.

Being a French studio, are there any additional pressures, or challenges, in creating a game with a lot of narrative to it where the main language is English?

NC: Yeah, that's something we keep asking ourselves, really. One thing we do, for instance, is keep the English language in mind when laying out the vocabulary for weapons, armour, fighting, items, etc., to make it easier for us down the line when it comes to translation and localisation.

For the narrative, though, we're working primarily in French. But we're working closely with our translation services to ensure that everything is conveyed correctly, so our English-speaking fans don't have to worry!

How many people are working on the game?

NC: Well, we always try to keep a smallish team on each project, as we feel this lends itself to a smoother development - on *Wartales*, we have around 14 people at this time working across all areas of the game from design to animation, coding, art, and all the other areas of the game's development.

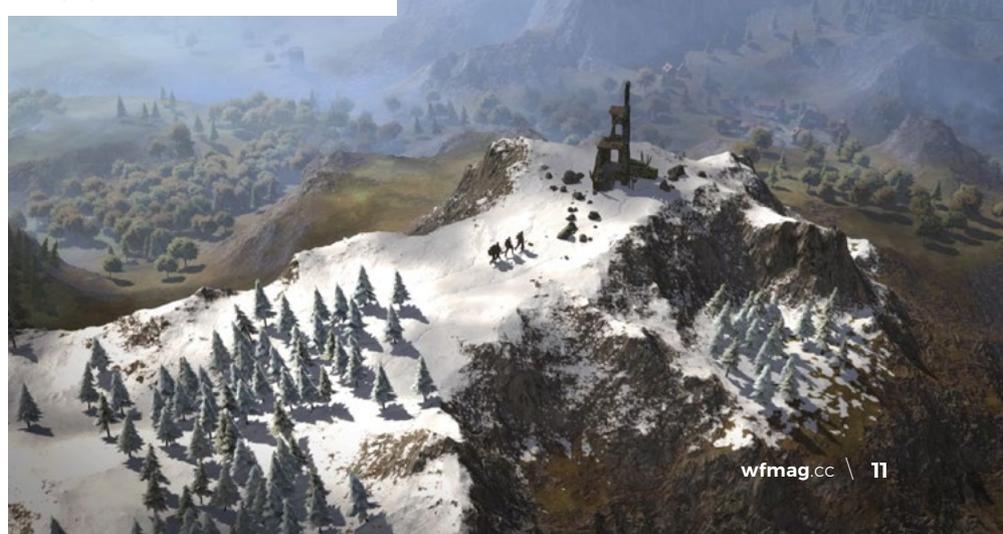
Northgard initially only had six devs on the project, whereas now we feel we have enough experience and synergy within the team to be able to focus properly on what is best for the game and what is important, without spending too much time dedicating resources to working on or looking into things that will likely never make it into the game.

Which engine are you using? What are its benefits?

NC: We're using our own engine, Heaps.io - it's based on the programming language I created called Haxe - as we have with every *Shiro* project to date.

One of the biggest advantages of this, obviously, is that we have complete control of the technology. It's not like Unreal, where the engine needs to be fit for purpose for a huge variety of different needs and studios.

^ Exploration naturally leads to more riches, but can also lead to intense danger. Intense danger you then have to stab in the face.



We are able to add and edit only what is necessary for our needs, which is massively useful for a smaller team such as ours.

The game sees an Early Access launch soon - what do you expect to gain from this availability?

NC: Early Access is planned to run for about one year. One of our main priorities is to work with our community to gather feedback, iterate the game, and develop something that people will want to play.

The Early Access version is already very highly polished, but there is still a way to go to meet our expectations of where the game should be following Early Access, and working with our players, especially with the size and complexity of the world, will help us to achieve this.

Once the game is finished, v1.0, and out there, what are your hopes for Wartales? What do you see in its future, post-launch? Or is that too soon to even consider?

NC: We already have a lot of ideas we've been throwing around for post-launch that we'd really like to see come to the game, from new content, system updates and additions, and new ways to fight and manage your troops. The possibilities within the world are pretty limitless, but we'll have to see how the game fares after release, and we'll go from there! 🗨

Wartales releases in Steam Early Access on 1 December, for PC



Saturnalia

Terror stalks the cobbled streets of a Sardinian village in Santa Ragione's upcoming horror. Director Pietro Righi Riva tells us all about it

Info

GENRE
Suspiria-rem-up

FORMAT
PC / Other
platforms TBA

DEVELOPER
Santa Ragione

PUBLISHER
The Quantum
Astrophysicists Guild

RELEASE
TBA 2021

SOCIAL
@santaragione

An air of mystery hangs as thick as fog in the village of Gravoio. Its maze-like streets change configuration each time you play, and there are shadowy figures that vanish when you attempt to follow them. Then there's the abandoned mine, from which an imposing, rattling creature will soon emerge to stalk and kill you. Should you get caught by the fiend, the game will switch perspectives to another character, the town will shape-shift into a new layout of narrow streets, and you'll continue on your quest to discover Gravoio's secrets: what

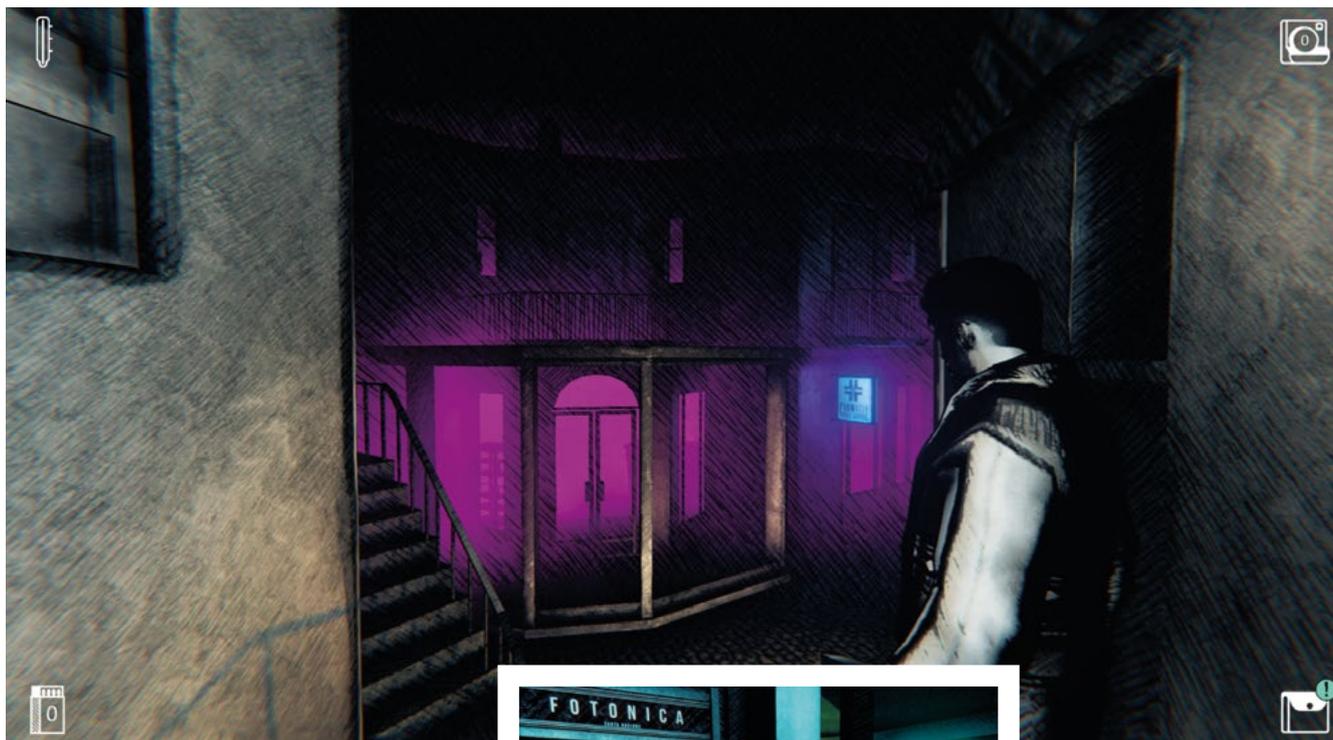
does the monster have to do with the mine that lies beneath the town? What connections does the game's cast of outsider characters have to the town and its ancient customs?

As play shifts abruptly from, say, Anita, a geologist investigating the mines, to Paul, a photojournalist who may have captured a rare image of a creature lurking beneath the village's streets, the effect can be borderline dizzying.

But what keeps you oriented in *Saturnalia's* fever dream is its ingenious menu system. It might seem odd to pick out something seemingly dry and functional in such a handsomely crafted game, but the Clues screen is something of a work of art in itself: a node-structured map of characters and items that gives you an at-a-glance guide to everything you've encountered so far and the things you have to do next. "I worked with two designers that specialise in infographics to find ways to convey how everything's interconnected," says studio director Pietro Righi Riva. "There's so much to keep track of in the game, and so much of the information about the characters and their backstories is explained through the things you find. So having a way to at least try to connect the dots for you – without excessive exposition or hand-holding – has been so important. We wanted everything that happens in the village to make sense in an interconnected storyline that can be discovered in any order."



▲ You'll be studying objects for clues a lot in *Saturnalia*. Don't worry – the chap on the couch there's just asleep.



▲ The splashes of vibrant cyan and magenta add to the sense of vivid, cinematic horror.

It's a valuable bit of grounding in a game that, otherwise, leaves you to figure everything out for yourself. From *Saturnalia's* opening frames, you're thrown headlong into Gravoi – a village nestled on the island of Sardinia – and the air of uncertainty and dread builds so subtly that it's only when you hear the death rattle of a monster behind you that you realise just how disturbing the game is. Certainly, the nightmare vision of Sardinia is far away from the sunlit idyll you might have seen in travel brochures.

"It's an island full of beautiful landscapes where people go vacationing," Righi Riva agrees, when asked why Sardinia was chosen as *Saturnalia's* location. "But Sardinia's also very isolated as a place. Sardinian, as a language, is so dramatically different from Italian that

if someone's speaking to you in Sardinian, there's no possible way, if you're Italian, that you'll understand

anything at all. The same goes for many sides of the Sardinian culture: inland, there are these isolated communities that still maintain rituals and culture that have existed for hundreds if not thousands of years."

One of those rituals – the titular Saturnalia festival, traditionally held each December – also forms the game's backdrop. As we stumbled about the place, slightly lost but constantly intrigued, something specific came to mind: the

"The Wicker Man is one of our most shared influences"

1970s cult horror film, *The Wicker Man*, also about an isolated island community and its secret, even murderous customs.

"*The Wicker Man* is definitely one of our most shared influences with the entire team," Righi Riva says. "Like, it's a required watch for everyone that's working on the project. Particularly

for its slow build-up.

Something's not quite right, but it's not right for the reasons you think it is. I love *The Wicker Man* because the protagonist

is this bigoted man who's judging the people in the village for all the wrong reasons, and ends up in a surprisingly different place from where he expected. We tried to convey this idea that the real horrors in the game lie elsewhere from where you expect at the beginning, in terms of responsibilities and the concept of evil itself."

Key to Gavroi's eeriness is not just the richness of its period detail – the 1980s political posters, which jump out amid the sketchy art style, the ➔

MOMENT IN TIME

Saturnalia's late-eighties time period wasn't chosen for *Stranger Things*-style nostalgia; rather, it's both practical – the lack of internet and mobile phones adds to the sense of mystery and isolation – and also political. Although *Saturnalia* isn't as overtly about, say, second-wave feminism as *Wheels of Aurelia* was, there's still a context waiting to be found if you want to find it, Righi Riva says. "I think, from a political point of view, [the 1980s] is a time that's recent enough, especially in Italian history, that its problems are also relatable to today's problems. So we can still talk about characters and their struggles, and their problems with discrimination, with workers' rights, and it's still very true today. People can still make the connection when they play the game, and relate to that."

STANDING OUT

Since its founding in 2010, Santa Ragione has put out a varied array of titles, from the one-button arcade action of *Fotonica* to the 1970s-set driving/adventure hybrid, *Wheels of Aurelia*. For Righi Riva, making these games thematically and visually distinct from each other wasn't just an aesthetic choice – it's also a means of standing out as a small Italian indie studio in a crowded marketplace. "Of the games we've made in the past as Santa Ragione, the idea is that each screenshot could be immediately recognisable as the game it belongs to," Righi Riva explains. "It's so hard to get your game noticed, to have people remember your game after they see it in a trailer. It's so commercially important to make something people can remember and find and notice when it comes out. Not just, you know, from a personal or artistic interest, but as a matter of survival."



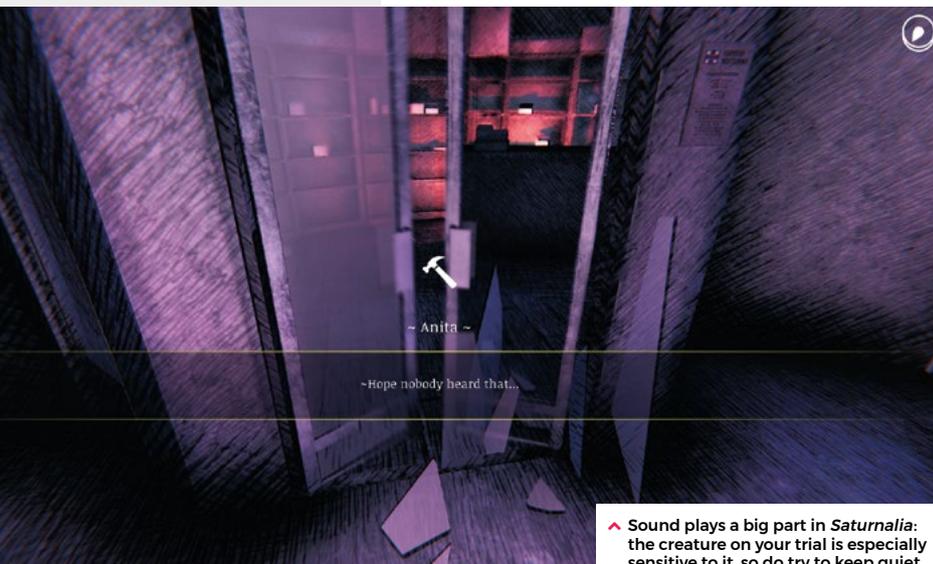
▲ Like the rest of Gravo, the mines change layout each time you visit them. It's pretty eerie down here.

sense of age in the stone buildings – but in the way its narrow streets and buildings reconfigure each time play switches to a new character. For Santa Ragione, it's a response to a typical flaw that game developers have wrestled with for years: once a player dies, how do you keep the sense of horror fresh, and avoid unnecessary repetition? "When you fail at the game, you're trading how well you've learned the village so far," Righi Riva explains. "Since that's a big part of the game – understanding your surroundings

and how everything's connected – there's those stakes. It's scary because there's something to lose, but we're not punishing you by making you repeat something. That's how we ended up with a procedural village."

That procedural generation didn't come without a development cost, however: every permutation of street, building, and staircase has to feel believably like a Mediterranean village, as surreal as the lighting and abrupt dead-ends might make it feel. To make matters more difficult, the mines that run beneath the village are intimately connected with the buildings above, while signs that, say, point the player in the direction of a church, have to change to match the newly generated layout. "The 'church this way' sign isn't pointing in the direction of the church in a straight line," Righi Riva says. "It's pointing you towards the roads that lead you to where the church is. And that's extremely hard to do, because it's all this dynamic pathfinding we're doing through the game."

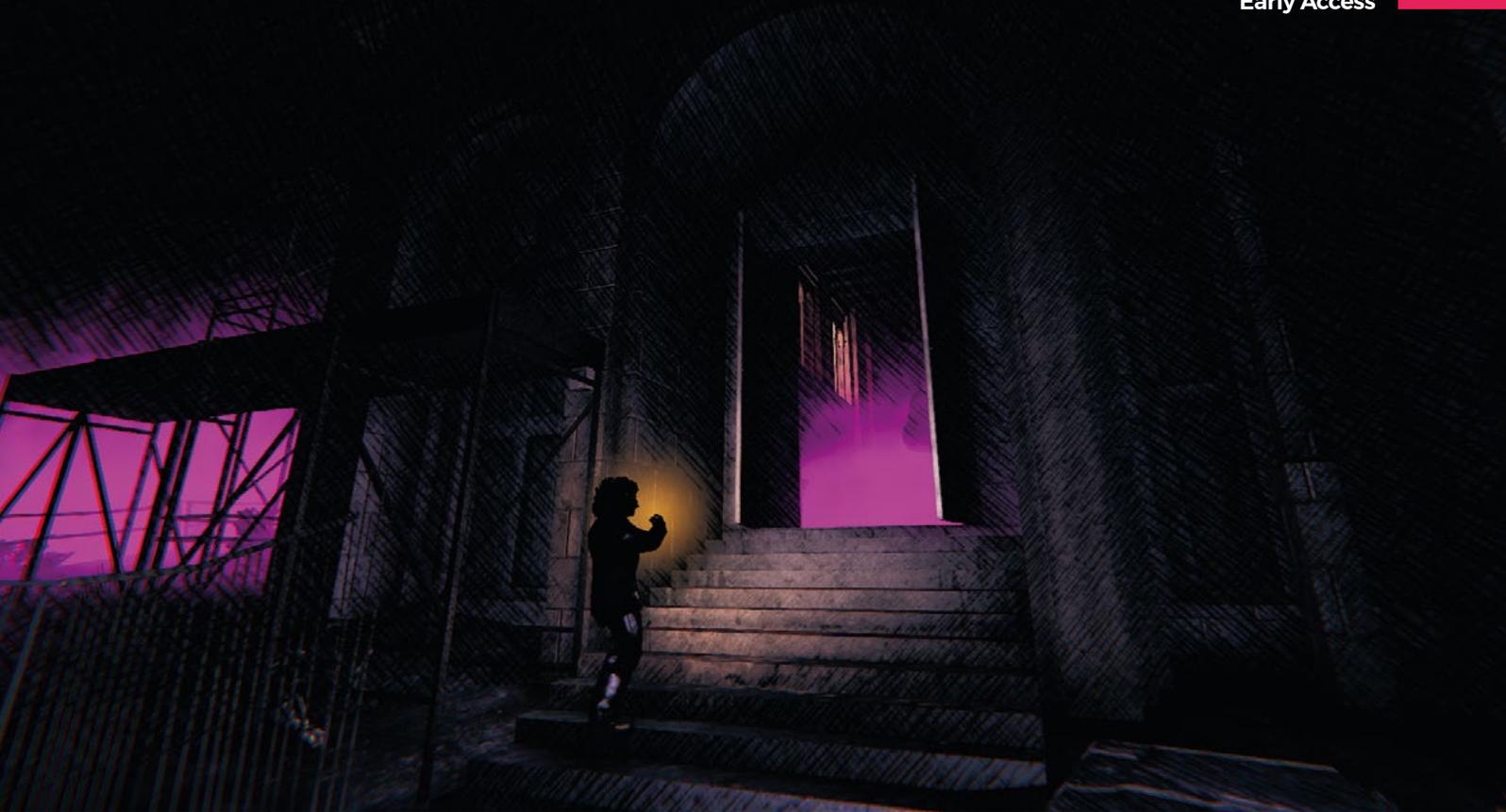
Nor is the map the only thing subject to this randomised approach; the game's four protagonists can be unlocked and engaged with in any order, and their location in the village will, inevitably, change during each run. This means that the narration itself needs to be procedurally generated, with the correct lines plucked from the script and presented, depending on where the player is in the story and the current context. "It's especially challenging to test,"



- Anita -

-Hope nobody heard that...

▲ Sound plays a big part in *Saturnalia*: the creature on your trail is especially sensitive to it, so do try to keep quiet.



▲ The run-down church looks unassuming enough by day; at night, it's an imposing presence.

Righi Riva tells us, “because you have to play through the game in all its configurations, doing missions in any order with any character, and see if it still makes sense, both from a narrative design standpoint, and also to test the logic is solid enough – whether it can sustain a specific situation and pull out the right lines from the screenplay.”

The random factor extends even to the sound effects: the creature you'll find stalking you through the streets – which we won't spoil by describing in detail here – makes a distinctive set of noises that are partly based on a quartet of

“When you fail, you're also trading how well you've learned the village”

singers recorded in Sardinia. “I feel like, when you have memorable horror monsters, they all come with their own sound effects,” Righi Riva says. “So we did a lot of research, using recordings and audio archives from traditional Sardinian instruments... you can also hear quarteto tenor singers at different points. We went to the island specifically to record them for the game. There are procedural Sardinian folk songs that are four people riffing off each other to create these melodies and sounds.”

Underlining *Saturnalia's* rising sense of dread is its captivating art style: a hand-drawn look with monochrome environments and bewitching splashes of eye-popping colour. It's a style

informed by the masters of Italian horror cinema – anyone who's seen Dario Argento's demented cult staple *Suspiria* or the work of director Mario Bava will recognise the game's dedication to deep shadows and punchy chromatic splashes. At first, we mistakenly assumed that the game's visuals were cel-shaded – something Righi Riva gently corrects when we ask him about it. “Without getting too technical, when you do cel-shading, you have these distinguishable lines where the

light changes intensity over a model,” he says. “We use a custom lighting model where the entire game is in black and white, and all the colour

you see is done in post-processing, so it's painted in based on the context. Every single texture in the game is black and white. Then, for everything that's animated, we sample everything at twelve frames per second, and then distort the mesh of the characters so that they look like they're being hand-drawn – they look like rotoscoped, traditional animation.”

Having spent some time with *Saturnalia*, it's clearly shaping up to be a unique, absorbing horror experience: entirely lacking in cheap jump scares, it instead draws you in with its believable characters and their everyday travails, before gradually lowering you into a benighted world of strange customs and subterranean terror. 🗺

♥ The Clues menu gives you a top-down view of characters, items, and your next objective.



WARNING! CONDITIONS SUBOPTIMAL
TOTAL COLLAPSE OF LOCAL SYSTEM IN 4
YEARS

MILATIANA

+1K *4/145



BUILD

What if we're **actually** doomed?

Build a new society on an alien planet – or die horribly in the attempt. Toronto-based studio BOBBY gives us a tour of its harsh RTS, *Chaotic Era*

Info

GENRE
RTS

FORMAT
iOS

DEVELOPER
BOBBY

PUBLISHER
BOBBY

RELEASE
October 2021
(Early Access)

SOCIAL
@chaotic_era

Beneath *Chaotic Era's* cool, retro-futuristic user interface, a potential humanitarian disaster is unfolding. After countless years in hypersleep, you and a small group of pilgrims

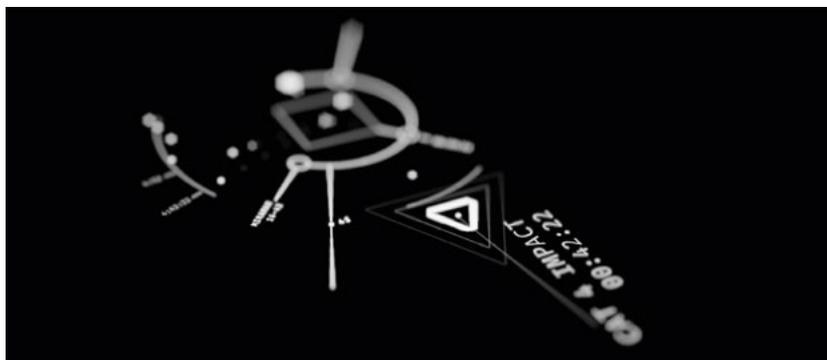
have emerged on an alien planet, hoping to find a hospitable new home now that Earth's on its last legs following years of ill-treatment. The problem is, the odds are decidedly not in your favour. In each run of the game, your starting planet can harbour all kinds of threats, from intense temperatures to natural disasters to hideous alien diseases. As the commander of this beleaguered group of survivors, you're responsible for exploring the planet, harvesting local resources that can be turned into energy, using said energy to build new units and structures, and eventually, forge a means of escaping your current world and finding new, habitable spaces elsewhere.

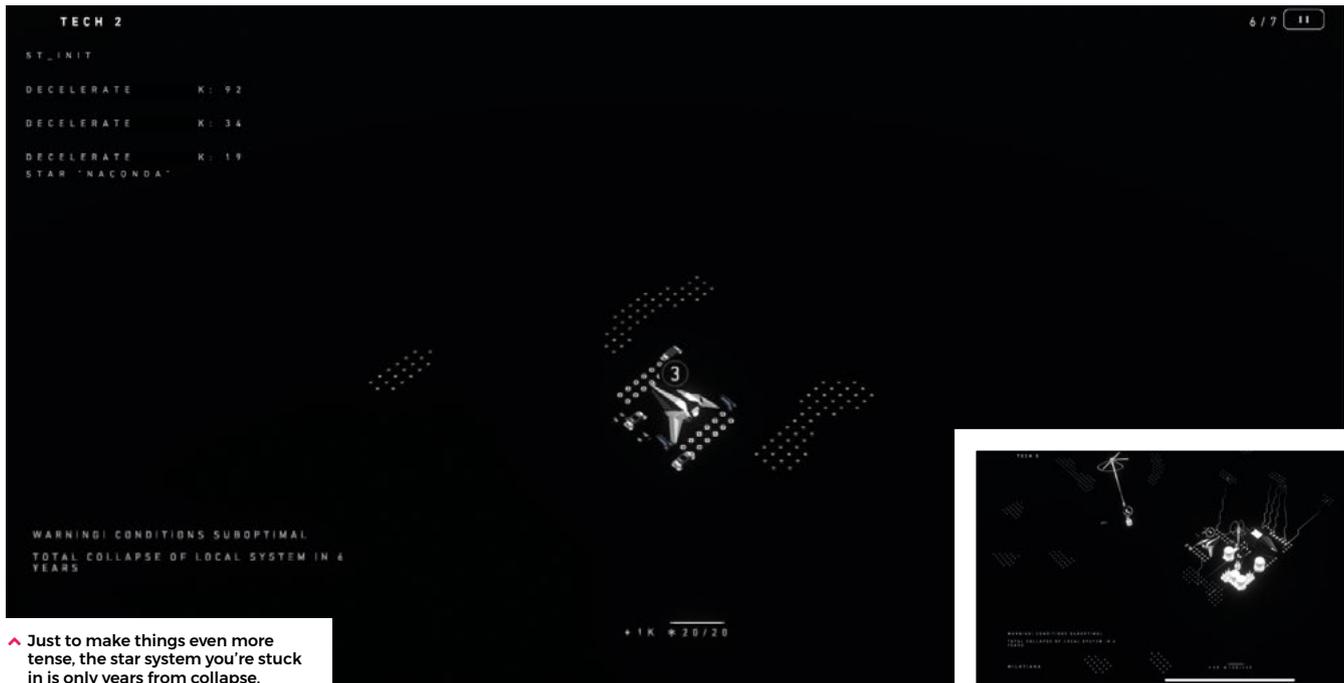
Chaotic Era is, in short, a real-time strategy game along the lines of *StarCraft* and *SimCity*, but served up with a detached technological style all its own: the monochrome visuals give the impression you're overseeing everything via the kind of analogue, chunky computer terminal once seen in seventies and eighties sci-fi staples like *Alien* and *Blade Runner*. It's an arrestingly clean, minimal look, but one that belies the ambition going on behind the scenes; for one thing, it's a pretty enormous game for a two-person indie team to tackle, and second, it's unusual to see an RTS game of this style and scope on iOS.

Remarkably, though, *Chaotic Era* was conceived as an even bigger project in its nascent stages. Programmer Gabriel O'Flaherty-Chan tells us that the initial thinking was to recreate a "proportionally accurate universe simulation" of stars and planets. "We had all these hopes and dreams of this incredibly immersive, realistic project," he says. "And we end up taking all these ideas, pulling out what we really liked, and figuring out how we could package them together into something we could actually finish. It's been a few years in the making, but without some of that focus, we wouldn't be where we are right now."

"It's been finding that balance between it being a mobile game, but also a macro experience," continues designer Kevin Donnelly. "And so, what's the correct balance between giving a player a universe or galaxy or star cluster to explore, and having them be able to play that effectively on mobile without it becoming a

✓ The retro-futuristic displays seen in *Alien* and *Blade Runner* formed the basis of *Chaotic Era's* minimalist user interface.





▲ Just to make things even more tense, the star system you're stuck in is only years from collapse.

really paint-by-numbers RTS? The challenge has been for us to constantly be pushing ourselves beyond what's already been done on iOS, and into this new territory of a large, complex game that we hope is going to offer folks something they've never played before."

One of *Chaotic Era's* noteworthy departures from the RTS playbook is its lack of combat; this places the emphasis firmly on survival – of building a new society in the face of almost impossible odds. "It's like someone getting dropped in the middle of the woods and needing to figure out how to live," Donnelly says. "That's what we wanted to create, except in space. And so that's why we decided to not include a combat system for the sake of emphasising survival and struggling – just trying to make it out of the depths of space alive, because space is the greatest enemy."

So if life on *Chaotic Era's* planets is so difficult, is there an ecological undercurrent to the game, we wondered? "I think so," Donnelly nods. "There's this core message of, what we've got is really special, which is a planet that has these resources and can support us. A lot of people get excited about going to Mars or going to other planets, but life on Mars isn't going to be great. It's not going to be a magical paradise – you'll be in an underground bunker 24 hours a day and you're going to miss Earth terribly. So there's this core thought: let's make a game about what it means for humanity to continue down a path of constant

energy consumption above all else, and not thinking about the long-term implications of that."

In *Chaotic Era*, then, the cruelty's the point: you'll die often, and you'll die quickly – but this being a mobile game, these short bouts make it ideal for short play sessions. "We've been doing a lot of playtesting recently, and we've seen people lose the game immediately," O'Flaherty-Chan says. "Most people that play the game, they'll lose within the first few minutes because they don't know how to strategically collect energy in a sustainable or scalable way."

"Yeah, the way we've built the game, there's so many possible ways it can unfold for you," Donnelly concurs. "There's possibilities of players landing on planets and they're screwed within seconds because they just made the wrong move at the start, or they're able to prosper for a long time because they're lucky. But then their next move to a different planet just completely messes them up... it's getting back to what we were talking about: this is what it's going to be like in real life. If we were to send out a thousand ships, in a thousand different directions, some of them will have a good time, and some of them will have a very bad time. We wanted to create that same experience for a player who boots up *Chaotic Era*, and they're not sure if they're going to have an awesome game that lasts two hours or if they'll have to restart within two minutes."

Like we said: harsh. 🗿

"We've seen people lose the game immediately"

CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Donnelly and O'Flaherty-Chan were originally colleagues at Shopify, but their mutual affection for sci-fi movies and literature eventually saw them strike out on their own as indie developers. Several sci-fi movies come up during our conversation – among them the 2019 Brad Pitt space epic, *Ad Astra*, which partly inspired *Chaotic Era's* bleak tone. "Spoilers for the entire movie," Donnelly warns. "But it turns out humans are actually alone in the entire universe. There aren't any aliens out there, which somehow is even worse than there being aliens who want to destroy us. We're completely alone. Me and Gabe both loved that nihilistic outlook on space travel. What if there's no sanctuary out there for humanity? I felt that wasn't represented elsewhere in sci-fi – there's a lot of habitable planets out there, apparently. But what if there really aren't? What if it isn't *Star Trek*? What if we're actually doomed? Let's play through that scenario."

That was the month that was



01. Firing line

Sony has acquired Firesprite Studios, bringing a team of around 250 people into the fold from the Liverpool-based studio. What makes this news extra tasty is that Firesprite was set up by old Psygnosis/Studio Liverpool alums, meaning some folks who were involved in the creation of original PlayStation classics like *Wipeout* and the *Formula 1* series are back working with Sony. Neat. While previously known for helping other studios with their games, Firesprite will be focusing on its own projects under the Sony umbrella. If this means *G-Police 3* is coming... *well then*.

02. Mappy

Just under a decade ago, Google teased the world with an April Fool's joke in which it showed off an 8-bit version of Google Maps for the NES. Enter 2021, and maker Ciciplusplus has combined the raw power of Nintendo's first home console with the adaptability of the Raspberry Pi, resulting in... an 8-bit version of Google Maps for the NES. Users control what the map is displaying with the D-pad, while A and B zoom in and out – and while not fully housed at the time of writing (it's still a prototype), this version of Google's worldwide spying network does indeed interface directly with the NES cartridge slot. See more here: wfmag.cc/NESmap.

03. RIP Sir Clive

Creator of the ZX Spectrum, Sir Clive Sinclair died at the age of 81 in the middle of September. Sinclair will be remembered as one of the main driving forces behind the home computer boom of the early 1980s thanks to his ZX80, ZX81, and ZX Spectrum computers. All shifted the narrative on what people could expect to own, use, and learn from in the home, and the ZX series had an incredible impact on what – eventually – became modern game development. Wireframe extends our best wishes to Sir Clive's family and friends, and our sincere thanks for all he helped create over the decades.



Street Fighter II (and more) cover artist Mick McGinty passes away

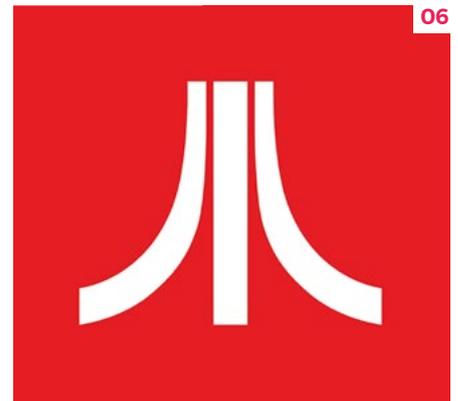
Marty O'Donnell found in contempt of court over use of *Destiny* assets; owes Bungie legal fees



04



05



06

04. Spiritual opium

China has moved to further limit the amount of time children and young people are able to play online games, cutting their allowance from 90 minutes on most days and three hours on holidays, to one hour... *only* on Fridays, weekends, and holidays. State media had earlier branded online games 'spiritual opium', according to the BBC, and recent moves along similar lines have seen responses like gaming giant Tencent introducing facial recognition technology into its games to ensure children and people under 18 were not playing online titles when the government had told them they weren't allowed to. Great days.

05. EAccessible

EA, in a rare show of 'doing something genuinely positive', has shared five patents the company holds for accessibility-related technologies. The patents include context-aware communications systems, à la pinging in *Apex Legends*, as well as systems around colour display and personalised music played for people with hearing issues. The Accessibility First Patent Pledge, as it has been titled, could see more patents added and makes them free for other developers to use as they see fit. Honestly, there's a desire to try and be snide here, but it's genuinely a very good thing for EA to have done – kudos.

06. Crank that

Rapper Soulja Boy claimed he was owner of video games company Atari during a livestream, resulting in... well, confusion, mainly, and no shortage of mirthful reactions. Turns out, though, that Soulja Boy does not in fact run Atari. Tweeting in response to the claim, a statement from Atari read: "We know that CEO of Atari is a dream job, but that honor [sic] belongs to Wade Rosen." Thing is, it wasn't actually that implausible to believe Soulja Boy might own Atari, given how much the company has been passed around over the last decade or so. Ah well, the dream remains unrealised.

No Man's Sky achieves 'mostly positive' user reviews on Steam



Battlefield 2042 delayed til 2042. Wait, no... 19 November 2021. That's the one.



07



09



08

07. Known

Brendan Greene, the eponymous PlayerUnknown, has left the owner of his creation *PUBG: Battlegrounds* to form his own development studio, PlayerUnknown Productions. The studio, based in Amsterdam, will initially be continuing work on a project Greene has been beavering away at for a couple of years now – tech demo of sorts, *Prologue*. “I’m excited to take the next step on my journey to create the kind of experience I’ve envisaged for years,” Greene said. “I’m thankful for everyone at Krafton for supporting my plans, and I’ll have more to reveal about our project at a later date.”

You can find further details, including open positions at the new company, over here: wfmag.cc/PUP.

08. Doubling down

In news that passed a chunk of us by, it seems PEGI has made the move to rate all games featuring simulated gambling – or ‘any new game that includes elements that encourage or teach gambling’, as Ask About Games puts it – will be rated 18. Old titles with these elements will not be impacted even if re-released, so long as the content is largely the same as it was at launch, but new titles all face only being available to those aged 18 and over if they have a bit of blackjack or roulette (or all the others) in them. The shift actually came in 2020, apparently, which shows how much of a devastating impact it hasn’t had on the world of gambling in games.

09. Golden Doom

Why this hasn’t been done before is going to be a question haunting many-a-dream for the nights to come, but there you go. It’s *Golden Axe*, in *DOOM*. That’s what it is. The mod was created by BBblazkovicz – probably not their real name – who has brought together a mix of fantasy melee combat, magic, dragons, and more with the first-person action of *DOOM*. And no guns, obviously. It works really surprisingly well, and has turned into one of those ‘Oh yeah, well, that makes perfect sense’ sort of moments for the modding community. You can find a pre-alpha version right here: wfmag.cc/golden.



Fortnite adds digital museum exhibit celebrating Martin Luther King Jr’s ‘I have a dream’ speech

Quantic Dream rumoured to be working on a *Star Wars* game



10. Good Citizen

The Advertising Standards Authority has risked the ire of a thousand space sim fanboys by telling Cloud Imperium Games it has to inform people some of the ships they might be buying for real money in the (probably still) upcoming *Star Citizen* don't actually exist in the game yet. Concept ships are sold as part of *Star Citizen's* ongoing crowdfunding scheme to fund the almost decade-long development of the game, but most of them haven't actually been made yet. Not so much as a sprite. Following a complaint, the ASA slapped CIG with an Advice Notice – and future newsletters began acknowledging these ships were, indeed, not yet actually available in the game. People power!

11. Paradoxical

Paradox Interactive's CEO Ebba Ljungerud left the company back in September, with "differing views on the company's strategy going forward" cited. Fredrik Wester, previous CEO of the company, took over in the interim and no further information followed.

What did follow – and what cannot be linked directly to Ljungerud leaving – was a company employee survey from Paradox's two main unions, Unionen and SACO. Leaked to Swedish site Breakit and later confirmed to be authentic by Rock, Paper, Shotgun, the survey saw 133 respondents, 44% of which claimed they had experienced bullying, gender discrimination, or other forms of mistreatment at the studio. Bad month for Paradox, there.



12. Acti Blizz updates

Overwatch character McCree is to be renamed, as his original moniker came from a developer later accused of sexual harassment at Blizzard – Jesse McCree. True to form, the name change is being made into a narrative arc for players to experience, because... just changing his name isn't possible? No idea.

Elsewhere in Acti Blizz news, workers at the ultra-studio have accused the firm of employing "union-busting and intimidation" techniques. An unfair labour practice charge was filed with the National Labor Relations Board alleging Activision Blizzard has threatened employees, told them not to discuss ongoing investigations into the company, engaged in surveillance of employees, and much more. The case against Activision Blizzard in California is still ongoing.

Xbox adds 'double-tap' feature to switch controller pairing from PC to Xbox with ease



343i again denies *Halo 5* is coming to PC, but the rumours are unlikely to die

Post Apocalypse

Unofficial Bond games, free magazines, and affordable console gaming. It's this month's letters...



Issue #54

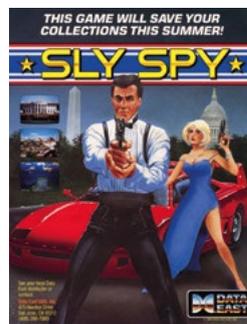
Want to write to Wireframe? Message us at wfmag.cc/hello or tweet us @wireframemag



Four Non-Bonds

I greatly enjoyed your article about the ingredients of a James Bond game last month, but it also got me thinking: many of the best 007 games ever made were unofficial knock-offs. Does anyone else remember *Sly Spy*? It was an arcade game that came out in 1989, so at a bit of a lean period for official James Bond titles. The 007 theme was so strong that I'm surprised the people who made it didn't get sued – your main character even looked a lot like Timothy Dalton-era Bond, and there were several bosses that looked like villains from the movies. I'm not sure how the developers got away with it, but I'm glad they did.

Danny



Ryan writes:
Ah, Data East – what a developer. The Japanese firm didn't get in trouble for *Sly Spy*, but it did manage to cause a bit of a kerfuffle with *Chelnov*, thanks to its name and theme seemingly riffing rather tastelessly on the Chernobyl disaster. Then it got itself in *really* hot water



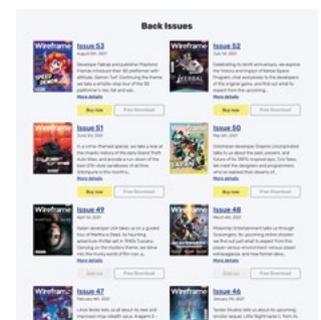
in 1993 when Capcom sued Data East for *Fighter's History*, a beat-'em-up that looked too close to *Street Fighter II* for comfort. Capcom eventually lost. Controversy aside, Data East made some cracking games in its prime, including *Sly Spy*, which, as you say, is one of the best non-Bonds ever made.

Wirefree

Hi, not an enquiry, but a compliment. Thank you for providing Wireframe for free. I really appreciate that you make that possible. I'm on a tight budget, so it helps. I too am an owner of a Raspberry Pi Zero and Raspberry Pi 3. Wonderful tools! Keep up the great work and never lose focus.

Anno

Ryan writes:
Thanks for your kind words. Talking of free mags: if you've missed an edition of Wireframe, back issue PDFs can be downloaded at wfmag.cc/issues. You can make a contribution to help the mag keep going, or just hit the Download button and get your PDF for free.



Shortcuts

With the GameCube celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, we asked Twitter: what are your most cherished memories of Nintendo's plucky little console box?

Back then, the PS2 was the big winner, but today I think a lot more fondly of the purple cube. It had a great library of games, a cool controller that dared to be different, and some of the best graphics of that generation.

@Rebusmind

The first and last console I bought. The experience of *Eternal Darkness*' sanity effects messing with your TV blew my mind!

@Steve_Bromley

It might have been outsold by its rivals but the quality-per-game meant it punched well above its weight. Countless childhood hours poured into *Paper Mario 2*, *Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader*, *Metroid Prime*, and *Zelda: Wind Waker*.

@TheWildeRobin

Well, for a start, it's easily the best-designed console of all time. A cube... in different colours... nothing says 'fun' more than that. Also notable for representing the beginning and end of the 'Consoles With Carry Handles' genre.

@Pixelated_Ben



In the midst of continual problems supplying games consoles, which seems a boring conversation to have after nearly a year, might I just give Microsoft a small amount of uncharacteristic praise? When the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X launched last year, I was torn as to which to get. Supply issues took care of the question, as I couldn't get hold of either of them, even if I'd taken the plunge.

Instead though, I had a cavalier moment and went for the Xbox Series S. Cheaper, less cutting edge? Yep. But it's the most fun I've had with a new games console since the launch of the Sega Dreamcast.

It sits modestly under my television, and I invested in the monthly gaming subscription service from Microsoft too. Since then, I've barely been off the thing. I'm genuinely impressed not just with the tidiness and speed of the machine, but also the streamlined service to actually

get games onto it. It's been a real joy to go back into the archives, and I'm now in the midst of *Day of the Tentacle* with my youngest. Had I plumped for either of the expensive machines, I doubt we'd have done that.

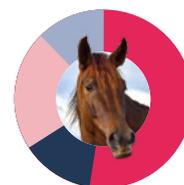
Granted, over the coming months we might actually see games that warrant the top-end powerhouse consoles, but just as with Nintendo and its Switch, Microsoft has come up with something really worth seeking out by – for a change – not trying to be the biggest and the best.

Jon Brown

Ryan writes:
Leaving the usual Sony vs Microsoft console wars nonsense to one side, the combo of a Series S and Game Pass is a ridiculously good deal. For those looking for a means of getting into current-gen gaming on a budget, it really is too good to pass up.

The burning question

Given that it's Halloween this month (assuming you're reading this in October), we decided to put a spooky-themed question to our readers on Twitter. Which of these sinister horror games is the best? We're frankly shocked – shocked – that *Pippa Funnell 2: Farm Adventures* didn't get a better showing.



Silent Hill 2 - 52%

Pippa Funnell 2 (DS version) - 14%

FIFA 22 - 20%

Too Human - 14%

Preview



Tales of Luminaria ↗

Little is known of this one at the time of writing – so we’re hoping it doesn’t get a surprise release before you read about its existence here – but here we go: *Tales of Luminaria* is a new entry in the long-running *Tales...* series from Bandai Namco. Only this time it’s on mobile phones. And that’s about all we know. Next!

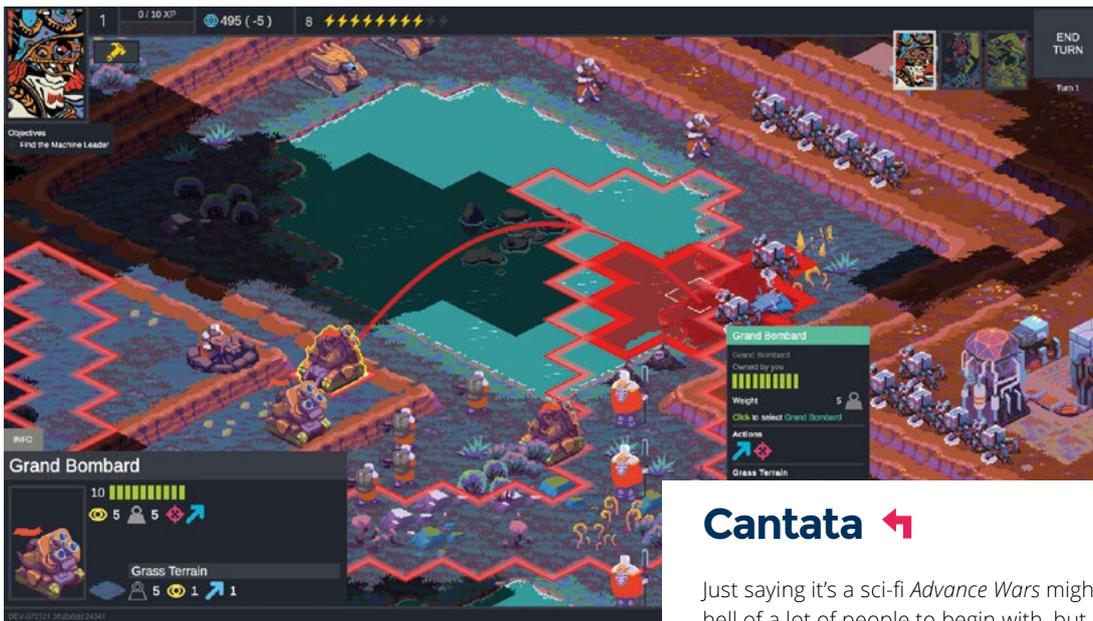
Fragile Existence ↘

It’s *Homeworld*. It’s *Battlestar Galactica*. It’s *Homestar Galactiworld*. Well, no, it’s *Fragile Existence* – but it’s also those other things. You control the last remnants of a spacefaring Earth (and near-Earth) civilisation, the remainder of your people wiped out by a hitherto-unknown threat, your few survivors having to keep on moving, ever pursued, in the hopes of surviving another day. On paper, it’s an absolute banger. Hopefully it can be in practice too.

Park Beyond ↘

Park Beyond lets the developers behind the *Tropico* series leave behind their stilted satire of banana republics and sets them loose on the entirely non-satirical world of theme parks. It’s all pretty by the numbers theme-parking at first glance, until you realise you’ve been staring at entirely ridiculous, potentially impossible ride designs: all part of the game’s ‘impossification’ system, which allows for ludicrous fairground creations. That alone has to be worth the price of a ticket. Maybe just a half-day pass. Not sure yet.





Cantata ↩

Just saying it's a sci-fi *Advance Wars* might be enough to lure in a hell of a lot of people to begin with, but *Cantata* adds so much to the mix that it would be doing the game a disservice to leave it at that. A bold colour palette joins a decidedly modern-style science fiction narrative to immediately help the game stand out from its peers – but as you'd expect, it's the actual game that's the real draw here.

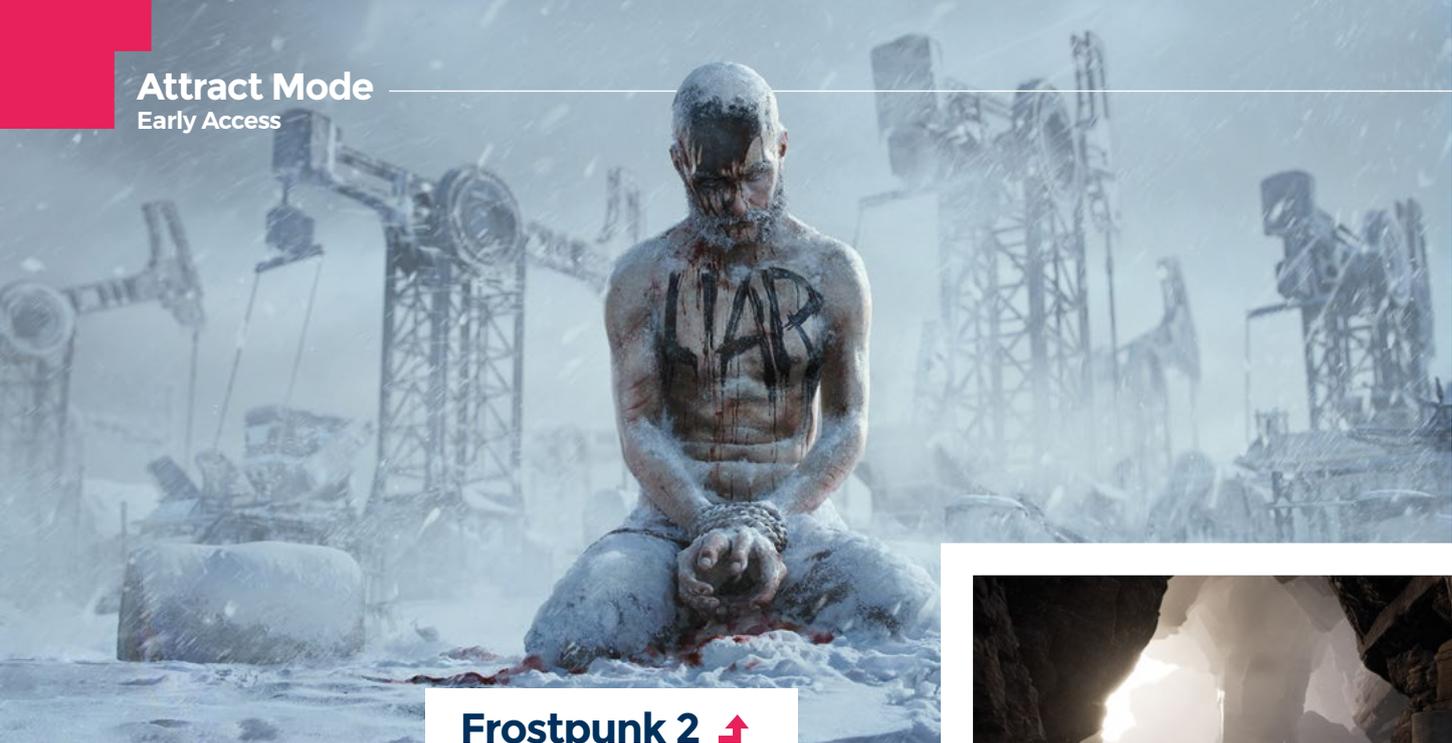
Cantata has you playing as one of nine commanding officers from one of three races – human, alien, or machine – in a mission to grow your hold on a mysterious alien planet. You go about this by exploring the map, plotting routes, and setting up your supply line as you go – and it's that supply line where *Cantata* really offers something interesting. Because it's vulnerable. The front can't operate if the back is broken, so it sounds like there's going to be a lot of thinking going on when this one finally releases.

Marvel's Midnight Suns ↗

Marvel's Midnight Suns is not *Marvel XCOM*, but at the same time it's made by the team at Firaxis which made *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, and it's based on an early nineties Marvel Comics story... so really it is *Marvel XCOM*. It's pushed as tactical card combat – 'cinematic' tactical card combat, actually – so you'll know in part what to expect.

You play as The Hunter, a custom main character of your design – who also happens to be the child of the story's antagonist, Lilith. You spend your time using magical powers in combat (again, player's choice which way you go with that) and, outside of combat at 'the Abbey', chatting with Captain Marvel, Wolverine, and Ghost Rider. And Captain America. And Iron Man. And Blade. And plenty more. It's very *Marvel-y*. It sounds like interpersonal relationships actually form more of an important factor in *Midnight Suns* than might have been expected – could it be a lead-up to making permadeath more impactful? Well, it's doubtful. *Marvel's* unlikely to let Cap and co die-die. Ah well, still sounds incredible.



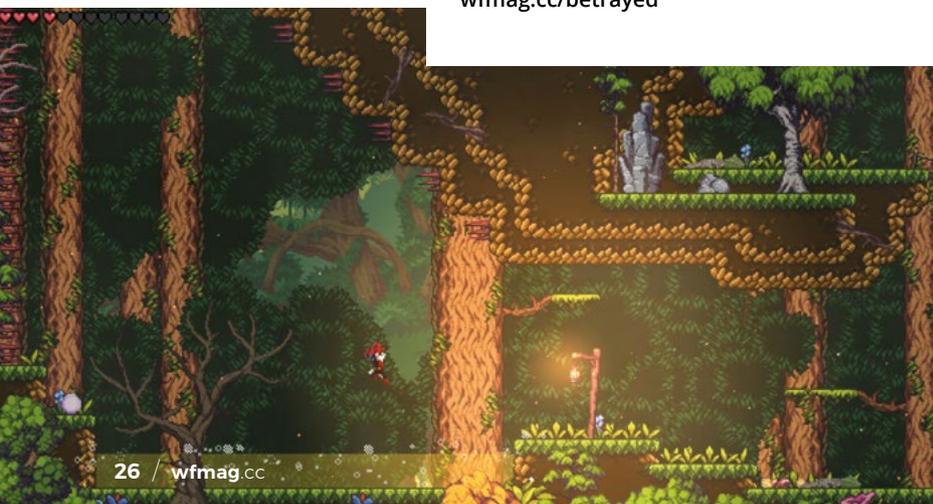


Frostpunk 2

Where the first game was the endless quest for more coal, *Frostpunk 2* takes the focus of this eternal winter survival/city management game to that of black gold. Which, to be fair, could also be coal. It's oil, though. 11 bit studios had a surprise hit with the original, so expectations this time around are significantly higher than they were before – but with an additional three years of learning what does and doesn't work, you have to have a fair old bit of confidence in the team.

Betrayer: Curse of the Spine

What have Metroidvania titles been missing to this point? Gigantic, screen-filling dragons – that's what. Step forward *Betrayer: Curse of the Spine*: a 2D action-adventure title typical of the genre, mixing that Metroidvania style with crafting, player choice, exploration, and multiple endings. And that giant dragon. The Prologue chapter (read: 'demo') can be found through here: wfmag.cc/betrayed



Dream Cycle

Stealth, exploration, magic, alternate dimensions, 'an epic quest' – all the sorts of things you expect to hear about a promising-sounding game. *Dream Cycle* adds an extra snipped in there, though, with the involvement of one Toby Gard – he of *Tomb Raider* fame and *Galleon* infamy. Hard to really put a finger on expectations here, to be perfectly honest, but it's a compelling enough setup so may well be one we revisit in the pages of *Wireframe* in a future issue.



Wizordum

Wearing its influences proudly, *Wizordum* is another in the all-too-welcome list of games harking back to classic first-person titles. This time it's the likes of *Heretic*, *Hexen*, and rather obviously from the look of the game, *The Catacomb Abyss* that are offering inspiration. Fantasy-themed (and violent) action sits alongside puzzle-solving, exploration, and cute little floating gems – thematically it's bang-on, so the hope is the rest of the game keeps the pace.



Saints Row ↗

Opting for the reboot route rather than a straight-up sequel, Volition is back at the helm to bring another *Saints Row* to the masses. This time around it's a new cast of gangland heroes (of a fashion), alongside your custom lead character, of course, with the action transplanted to the new fictional city of Santo Ileso – 'in the heart of the American Southwest'. Early showings of the game... well, it was a pre-rendered trailer so not much to go on there, but if *Saints Row 2* through *IV* are anything to go by, this will be a fantastic – and unique – way to spend a few dozen hours. Let's just hope the reboot doesn't kill off the sense of fun the series is known for.

Nobody Saves the World ↘

An action RPG from the folks behind *Guacamelee!* – that's Drinkbox Studios – *Nobody Saves the World* turns you from a nobody into more than 15 different forms in order to, yes, save the world. You can be a slug, a dragon, a robot, a mouse, and plenty more – each with different abilities and manners in which they can overcome the challenges you face along the way. It sounds like a great little idea and, helpfully, it already *looks* absolutely fantastic. Definitely one to keep an eye on.



Jurassic World Evolution 2 ↗

How a game about dinosaurs can claim its terrible lizards are 'authentic', given we're never going to be entirely sure of what they were like when they were alive... well, here we are. Anyway, *Jurassic World Evolution 2* looks to build on the success of the first game, released back in 2018. It brings a new campaign mode – and the return of Jeff Goldblum – with missions now taking place across various different environments for your man-made beast habitats. One intriguing addition is Chaos Theory mode, which pits players against scenarios from the entire series of films and can (hopefully) finally settle arguments about how you'd have dealt with Nedry's hacking exploits.

The original game was a bit front-heavy, delighting fans of both the movies and construction games in the first few hours of play, before revealing itself as a bit more limited than might have been hoped. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't a genre classic. Hopefully with more tinkering done, more focus in the campaign mode, and the added *chaos* of Chaos Theory mode, there'll be a lot more to sink your teeth into with this evolved sequel. Or a lot more to mash up with your flat-edged teeth we should say, if you're a herbivore.





GOD: Complex

WRITTEN BY JON BAILES

Developers of a new wave of games about gods explain their divine visions, and why their humans and deities don't get along



▲ The gods are selfish, cruel, and idiotic in Kaizen Game Works' *Paradise Killer*.

If you're dealing in power fantasies, as many games do, they don't come much bigger than playing god. We've done it numerous times, of course, mostly in the 1990s and early 2000s, often thanks to Peter Molyneux, as incarnations from *Populous* to *Black & White* defined gaming's take on divinity. They made us invisible deities with the power to flatten hills and direct civilisation with a wave of a hand, and to decide whether humanity should love us or cower before us in fear. It wasn't always easy, but there was no doubt who ran the world.

So how do you top that for a power fantasy? The answer in modern games is that gods aren't so great after all, that the real power is in rejecting them, if not doing the impossible – killing them outright. Maybe the change reflects our present reality. If the nineties were more a time of optimism that promised opportunities

to determine our individual and social futures, today there's increased uncertainty, a sense that agency is in short supply, and pervasive distrust in flawed leaders. The fantasy of being god is less appealing than that of wrestling back some sense of control *from* the 'gods', even if we don't know what comes after.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

Clever Beans' *Gods Will Fall* is a particularly pure example of the quest for deicide, in which a group of Celtic warriors travel to the Island of the Gods, enter portals to the realms of ten tyrannous overlords one at a time, and attempt to destroy them. The game's lead designer, Mark Wherrett, explains that the gods in the game shouldn't be thought of as omnipotent beings. "They don't represent classical gods, even though they come from that mythology," he says. "They actually represent adversity." ➔





^ *Eldest Souls*' bosses have a clear FromSoftware flavour. "I got hooked back when *Demon's Souls* came out," says Costantini. "For me, it was a revelation."

TURN-BASED DEICIDE

God-killing had virtually become a tradition in Japanese games well before *Dark Souls*, of course, especially in RPGs. From series such as *Final Fantasy* and *Xenoblade Chronicles* to *Breath of Fire* and *Persona*, it's almost a surprise if the ultimate antagonist isn't a behind-the-scenes god pulling the strings, or a human villain who somehow manages to rise to a higher state. They've provided us plenty of opportunities to prove the power of human unity against the hubris and madness of supposed omnipotence. And many a spectacular boss battle.

Wherrett explains that the philosophy of stoicism is a key theme in the game: the strength of will, endurance, and self-control that emerges both through the relationships between the warriors – whose stats and bonds are affected by setbacks, victories, fear, and resolve – and our mentality towards the game's challenge. "I'd like to think to a small extent, having played some challenging games, and learned how to get better by stopping and thinking and questioning my own actions, it's actually helped me in the real world as well," says Wherrett. "And I would like to think somebody might actually get that from playing *Gods Will Fall*. Maybe they stop repeating the same actions again and again and rethink their approach."

Power in *Gods Will Fall* is thus slowly gained and fragile. Should all your characters be killed, there's even a hard 'game over' state that forces you to restart from scratch, with the difficulty setting of each level randomly scrambled for the new run. "Right at the beginning, we make a point," says Wherrett. "We say, 'This is going to be impossible, you're going to get beaten and destroyed'. And it's going to change every time. So you're never going to know exactly what the correct route is going to be." But the threat of a reset isn't difficulty for difficulty's sake, he adds, it's designed to spur you on and ultimately reward your efforts.

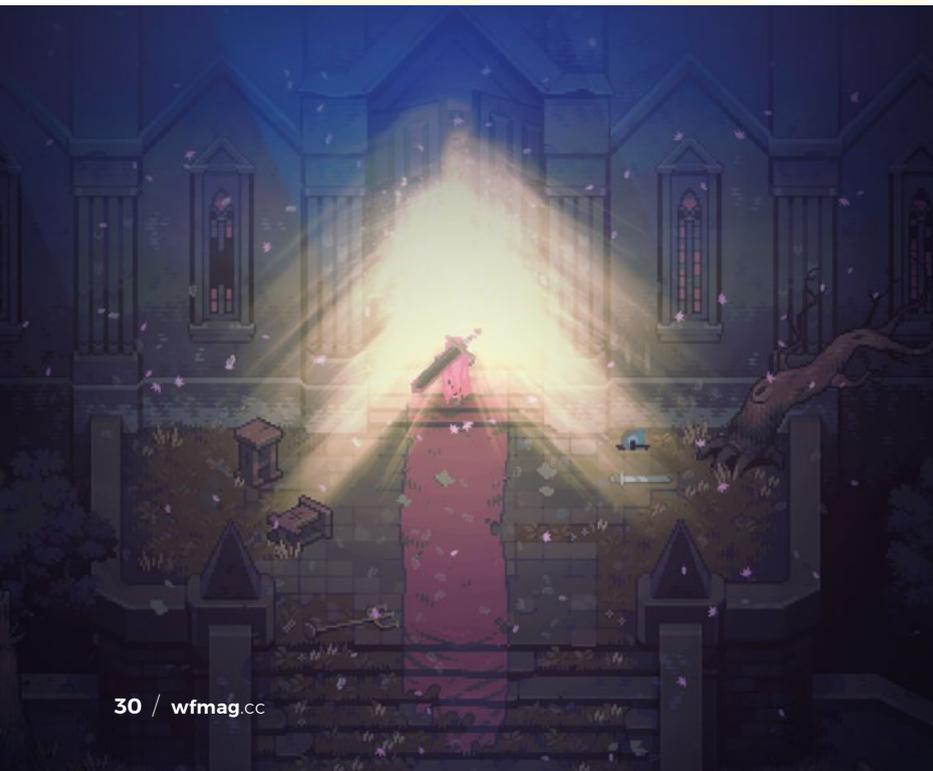
OLD GODS

It's no surprise that Wherrett mentions *Dark Souls* as an influence in terms of how to structure a rewarding challenge. Indeed, if there's one dominant touchstone guiding the depiction of gods in games these days, it's FromSoftware's seminal series (along with one of its own sources of inspiration, Kentaro Miura's manga, *Berserk*). Gods in *Dark Souls* games are generally pitiful beings, mere tragic theatre in an indifferent cycle of fire and darkness, destined to fade away. If players rise to the challenge, they can choose whether to do the gods' bidding or replace them, forging a new – yet equally transient – order.

Eldest Souls is another game with a declared debt to From's formula, and not only in terms of challenge. Here, the gods have been imprisoned, but have managed to unleash a plague-like 'desolation' across the land, and a lone warrior sets out to finish them off for good.

But these human-god struggles are more complex than this simple starting point implies. "I'm a bit of a history fan," says Jonathan

▼ More god killing in *Eldest Souls*.



Costantini, co-founder of Fallen Flag Studios and the game's designer. "For example, I love the Roman Empire transition from republic to empire, and historic revolutions like the French Revolution. I felt like it would be very cool to tell a story of similar proportions. And although it seems straightforward, there are a few plot twists that hint the relationship was not always so antagonistic."

Costantini and the studio's co-founder, Francesco Barsotti (who is also *Eldest Souls'* programmer) both come from Rome, and Barsotti feels that the fluctuating history of the Roman Empire and Papal rule – sometimes benevolent, other times tyrannical – may have shaped the game's ambiguous portrayal of godlike power. "Not all the gods in our game are necessarily evil," he says. "They still feel jealousy or greed or normal feelings that humans do. They just have this power that allowed them to be at the top of the pyramid for a long time."

At the same time, humanity hasn't exactly thrived without the gods, which – again, not dissimilar to today – leaves people seeking answers in many different directions.

"Maybe some groups are hoping to restore one of the caged gods," explains Costantini, "or maybe some other groups are hoping to have a whole different new order. There might even be certain NPCs that want to go back to when the gods ruled the world."

There's a general sense of human struggle, failure, and hope here that goes beyond worship and religion. There's no correct path, Costantini explains, just factions with their own motivations and beliefs. Killing the gods may enable one or more to gain new power.

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

Humans don't always want to kill their gods, of course. Sometimes they even seek to become gods or take on godlike powers. We've been gradually discouraged from this fantasy over the years, however, from the Bitmap Brothers' 1991 game *Gods*, where godhood is the desired reward of the hero, to that other ancient Greek saga, *God of War*, where Kratos ends up promoted to the level of god whether he likes it or not. As the epic complications of later games show, it's a poisoned chalice that leads to betrayal then revenge.

If that wasn't warning enough, this year's *Curse of the Dead Gods* is even clearer about the downsides of divine dreams. Its gods are hidden



▲ The Roguelike structure of *Curse of the Dead Gods* was designed to explore our relationship to death, by Crochet

TAKING THE MYTH

With so many games about gods, creators are increasingly seeking untapped mythologies.

Curse of the Dead Gods draws on Mayan history and architecture, although it's very much a fantasy reimagining. "Mayan mythology is really complex and not well-known," says Crochet, "and we didn't want to make a historical game." The ancient temple setting leant itself to Egyptian and Mayan mythologies, he adds, "but not many games used Mayan mythology, so it was a bit more original".

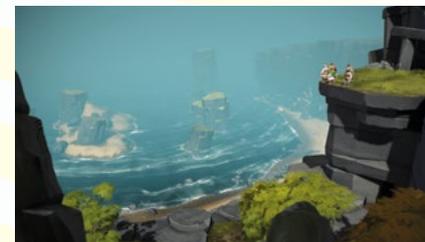
In *Gods Will Fall*, Celtic mythology suited the game's aims with its plethora of nature-inspired gods. "Wherever possible, we used a little bit of the Celtic gods as source material," says Wherrett. "It was never supposed to be completely authentic, but the foundations of their belief system are something that underpins every single one of the gods in the game."

behind the scenes, the grizzled Indiana Jones-like protagonist interacting with them through altars, exchanging boons for gold or blood, and animalesque avatars that act as bosses at the end of three temples.

It's a game built on familiar, modern roguelike foundations, as you creep through the treasure-and danger-stuffed temples. But developer Passtech turns the staples of the genre – looting, permanent upgrades, and resurrection – into a critique of adventurer's hubris and selfish desire.

"Why does the explorer come to this temple?" asks lead designer Adrien Crochet. "His first intention is to plunder it. He's not there for good reasons." One of the giveaways here is the 'greed kill' mechanic, rewarding you with extra gold for executing monsters in quick succession. "The game immediately tells players they're greedy for doing this," says Crochet, "and this is part of the philosophy behind the game to criticise the darkest aspect of humans."

Yet far from a critique of religious fanaticism, for Crochet, *Curse of the Dead Gods* focuses its gaze on modernity. Each temple represents ▶



▲ The group dynamic in *Gods Will Fall* sees tribes from different locations setting aside grudges and banding together for a common cause.

"Not all the gods in our game are evil... they still have normal human feelings"



▲ For Clarke Smith, the one redeeming feature of *Paradise Killer's* Syndicate is that "they're very accepting of different races, sexualities, and genders."

one of three aspects of divinity that people today aspire to, he explains – immortality, omnipotence, and omniscience – with destructive results. "If you're physically invincible, pain disappears and you can inflict pain more easily," says Crochet. "If you're all-powerful, you lose empathy with others, because you consider them to be lesser. If you can see everything including your future, you turn to madness." Indeed, you may discover that many of the monsters in the game were humans, turned immortal at the cost of their minds and souls. "The only thing that makes you human is that you can die," says Crochet. "If you're god, you lose your humanity."

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

It's a point that rings equally true in Kaizen Game Works' *Paradise Killer*, where the ruling-class Syndicate has been granted immortality by now-dormant alien gods, and presides over an enslaved 'citizenry' forced to toil, worship, and sacrifice themselves to help reawaken these beings. Called in from exile to investigate the murder of the Syndicate's governing council, you quickly see they're as crazed and bloodthirsty as the gods themselves.

"We saw the gods as a reflection of humanity rather than higher beings," says Kaizen's creative director Oli Clarke Smith. "They're selfish, cruel, and idiotic in their lust for power." At the same

H.P. SOURCE

When games feature so many horrible gods, it's rarely surprising that H. P. Lovecraft is often cited as an inspiration. "The designs of the gods in *Paradise Killer* are often influenced by Lovecraft's writing," says Clarke Smith. "Also, there is a really good Lovecraft story that features lizardmen living under pyramids in Egypt, and I really like the idea of animal men living as a secret society." Even so, he has no fondness for the man himself. "When I first read Lovecraft in my teens," he says, "I didn't have enough of a world-view to realise what a scorching racist he was. I don't condone his views, but his descriptions of alien gods really lodged themselves in my brain."

time, they're surreal creations, invoking an unfathomable terror. "It was important for them to be hard to comprehend so that they have mystery," he says. "The player should see how blind devotion to arrogant demagogues causes massive harm to society."

While it wasn't the initial plan, the premise lent itself to a pointed critique of modern politics. "Living in Britain, we see the corruption of our ruling elite and the cost capitalism exacts on society," says Clarke Smith. "We've also become more aware of the price of capitalism around the world as more voices have spoken out through non-traditional outlets." Through its freakish gods, *Paradise Killer* highlights how the most extreme ideologies or obvious forms of slavery and genocide can be normalised, even today.

"We have a government that actively ruins the lives of younger generations under the guise

"We saw the gods as a reflection of humanity rather than higher beings"

of traditional British values," says Clarke Smith. "It's very much like that 'leopards ate my face' political party joke tweet, and the same is true of the gods in *Paradise Killer*."

GOD'S DEAD – NOW WHAT?

In different ways, then, all of these games bring us to a similar point – that people need to use the power of their own tenacity, critical judgement, and even mortality over divine ideals. But that can be as frightening as it is liberating – just ask Friedrich Nietzsche. His famous "God is dead" proclamation asked whether a post-Enlightenment humanity could cope with the absence of moral certainty. Killing God leaves us staring into the abyss of meaningless existence and paralysing nihilism (a concept embodied in *Dark Souls 3*, where, as the age of gods fades, fated characters lose any motivation to fulfil their prescribed roles).

For Nietzsche, the challenge for humanity was to face this reality, define moral values regardless, and take responsibility for them. And all these games about opposing the gods touch on that task. The plotlines of *Eldest Souls* can lead to varied outcomes, for example,

some more hopeful than others. "You're sent to kill all the gods," says Barsotti, "but you're a bit unsure, as are the people, how things are going to turn out. You don't know if it's going to make things better." It's a hard struggle without guarantees, just a varied range of potentials.

The stoic demands of *Gods Will Fall*, then, encourage us to realise the strength of our own resolve, and as the game ends, the Celtic tribes have a new world to create, perhaps from the sense of unity they've forged throughout the game. *Curse of the Dead Gods*, meanwhile, shows the dangers of fixating on wealth, immortality, and control over our futures – and suggests a greater empathetic power in embracing human vulnerability, not least death itself.

As for *Paradise Killer*, we can't destroy the gods, or the Syndicate's deranged society, but the trial at the end of the game at least lets us execute some of its members. That feels more like a traditional power fantasy, briefly enacting a godlike control, and maybe we need a fresh taste of that, too. "I personally think there is some optimism in the climax of the game," says Clarke Smith. "Selfish elites that destroy lives can get shot in the face. That's pretty good!" 

▼ Power is difficult to gain and easily lost in *Gods Will Fall*.



Redimensioned and reappraised



KIM JUSTICE

Kim Justice is a YouTuber, streamer, and writer who specialises in the world of retro gaming. If she isn't making lengthy documentary videos about old games and companies, she's probably chatting and mouthing off about them live to a dedicated handful of people.

The gaming world was recently treated to a remake that nobody really asked for – out of nowhere, Secret Mode and the Sumo Digital Academy announced the imminent arrival of *Zool Redimensioned* for PC, and before anyone could say “Whatever happened to *Ninjabread Man?*”, the game was released on Steam in August. The elder folk amongst you may remember *Ninja from the Nth Dimension* as one of many mascot platformers arriving in the wake of a certain blue hedgehog, given birth to on the Amiga. He was fast, he had to collect a lot of things, and he had a great love of Chupa Chups. And he was brash – one magazine was bold enough to lead with a cover of Zool punching Sonic's lights out, telling him to move over and make way for Gremlin's new mascot. Before this new game, Zool was last seen in *Zool 2*, released in 1993.

When *Redimensioned* was announced, most people wondered why such a thing existed

– people remembered *Zool*, but they didn't necessarily like it. The game was pretty and had character, but also very flawed, much like a lot of Euro platformers – you had to collect too much rubbish, controls were fiddly, and it could be quite unfair. But as it turns out, *Zool Redimensioned* is a little triumph – the alien is back in a platformer that takes the original game and makes it exciting, and quite modern. Undeniably a lot of this has to do with fixing a great deal of the original game's issues – collection is much more forgiving, the controls are superior, and most importantly, the camera is zoomed out so the game can handle Zool's speed. There is an old-school mode for those who want a bit more of the original's bite, but either way, *Zool's* return is a welcome one, even if it comes as quite a surprise.

With this in mind, is it potentially worth looking past the more obvious successes from the olden days and reviving games and IPs that are... well, perhaps a little rougher but could shine with some fixing? Something that may not have succeeded originally, but had intriguing aspects and doesn't need to be treated with a certain degree of reverence? *Zool Redimensioned* makes a case for such a revival, as does Sega's recent *Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX*. On the other hand, the return of Bubsy the Bobcat a few years back was seen by many as a bridge too far. But even if irritating and overly talkative felines should probably stay in the past, there are certainly some games out there with very interesting concepts and stories that didn't stick the landing first time out but may well deserve a second chance. Could we see the return of *Chakan: The Forever Man*, or *Greendog*, or even *Earnest Evans*? Who knows. Some may rightly ask who on earth would be interested in such a thing, but a good game is a good game – even if it is a hard sell. 🗨

▼ There are sadly no Chupa Chups present in *Zool Redimensioned*. However, there is instead a perfectly decent modern platformer.



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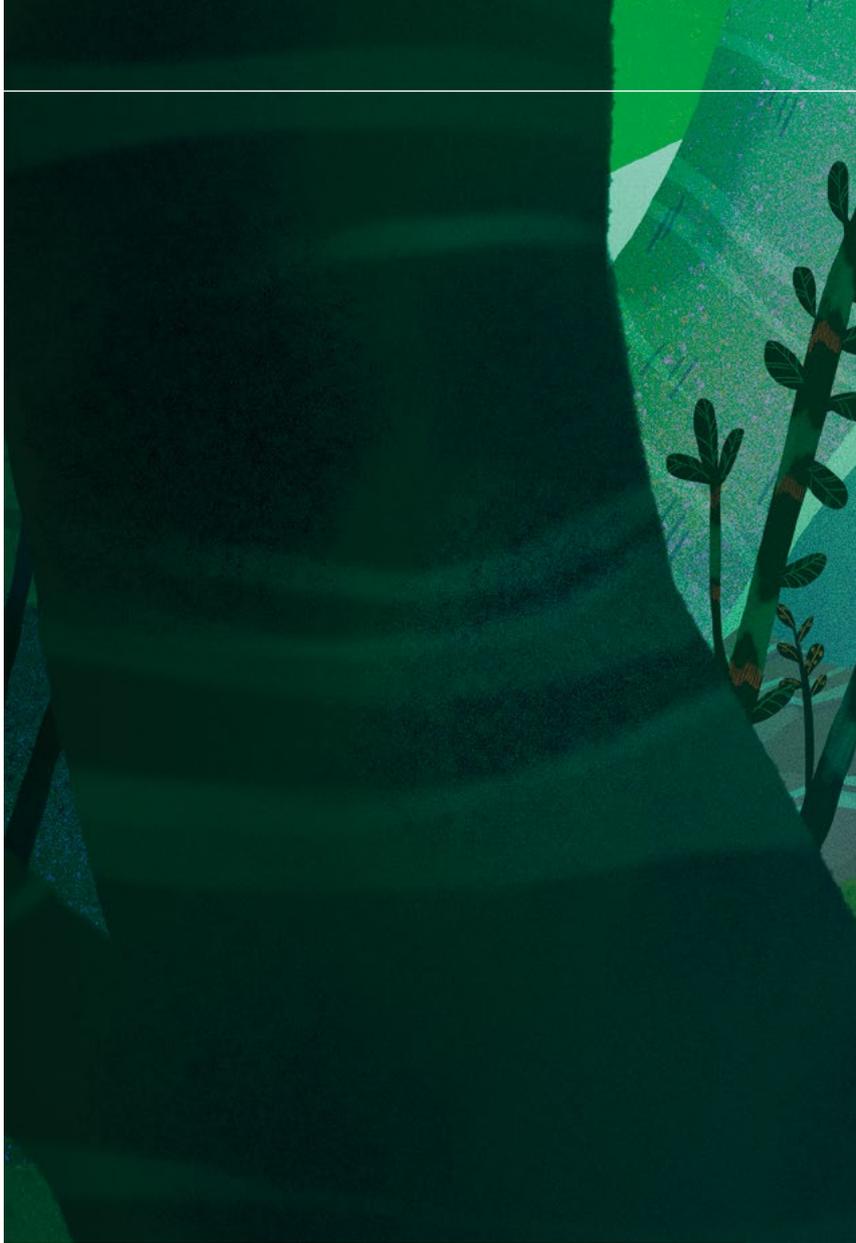
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Teacup

Hailing from Santiago, Chile, the whimsical adventure *Teacup* is described by its three-strong development team as “a warm and wholesome hug”. About a young, introverted frog and her quest to prepare for a tea party due to take place the next day, *Teacup* looks like a moving watercolour painting – tiny background details like drifting clouds and branches twitching in the breeze add a pleasing sense of depth to an otherwise two-dimensional game.

“Those little details were really important for us,” says environment artist Francesca Melio. “We wanted to make Little Pond a place that felt like you could live in, with people that had their own stories. To make the world feel bigger than what you could explore in-game, we used parallax as a tool to make the player wonder, ‘What exists beyond those puffy clouds or forest trees? More houses? Rolling fields of grass? Or something else?’”





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WEIRD FISHES

THE MAKING OF MOONGLOW BAY

Bunnyhug Games talks us through the making of its wholesome fishing RPG, Moonglow Bay

WRITTEN BY RYAN LAMBIE

Personal experiences can influence game design in all kinds of ways. Way back in the 1980s, designer Katsuya Eguchi began thinking about the sense of detachment he felt when

he first moved from his home town just outside Tokyo to begin working at Nintendo's offices in Kyoto. Eguchi wondered how a video game could capture the feeling of starting a new life far away from family and friends. It was the seed that eventually gave the world *Animal Crossing*.

Moonglow Bay, Bunnyhug Games' charmingly laid-back fishing RPG, has a markedly similar origin story. In 2016, studio co-founders Zach Soares and Lu Nascimento moved from Canada to the UK, and found themselves in a situation much like Eguchi's all those years earlier.

"Suddenly, we had no family, we had no friends," Nascimento recalls. "And we were trying to build a sense of having a family and a support system around ourselves."

"There's no one to talk to," Soares adds. "But we have dogs, so we built a community through our dog walks and stuff."

Nascimento and Soares have a lively and endearing way of exchanging sentences, like a verbal pair of tag-team wrestlers. This means a typical conversation will go something like this:

"So we're in the UK and making friends with the people that we would never imagine ourselves making friends with, just because we happen to walk the same place every day – we felt it was so important to have those people in our lives," Nascimento says, breathlessly, to which Soares adds, "Yeah, so there's characters in the game that will feel like that to you. You don't expect to ever talk to this person on a daily basis..."

"... but you'll end up getting to learn these very interesting, unexpected stories," Nascimento continues. "And I guess it also coincided with Covid?"

"That was just a coincidence," Soares points out. "We didn't want to make the story so dark that you feel like you have a heavy heart after playing it or anything. But we wanted to have the reality of what it is to go through a hard time, and then having people around you to kind of lift you out of that." →



FISHING FASHION

Nailing down the right clothes for *Moonglow Bay*'s cast of late-eighties characters was important to Nascimento and Soares.

"Instead of looking for generic eighties fashion, I looked at a Sears catalogue for Canada in the winter of 1981," Nascimento explains.

"But even then," Soares quickly adds, "that was a problem, because the 1981 Sears catalogue, it's really the upper-middle class that would be buying that. So we had to go back to the 1960s, because you tended to get hand-me-downs [of older clothes]. So a lot of the fashion [in *Moonglow Bay*] is actually sixties fashion that kind of just got brought into the eighties."

Although *Moonglow Bay* is the product of an eight-strong team of developers, Nascimento and Soares' personalities and interests are all over their gentle fishing RPG. Soares is a veteran voxel artist with ten years of industry experience; he's from Eastern Canada, a similar area to where the game is set. Nascimento is an art director (you'll find *Wargroove* and *Assemble With Care* among her credits) who felt that her Brazilian heritage was under-represented in video games; as a result, two of the playable characters you can select in *Moonglow Bay* are indigenous Canadians. "I kept thinking, 'Who else isn't seeing themselves in games at all?' And so, the whole representation thing was really important, especially for older people," Nascimento tells us.

"Eastern Canada is where a lot of Native Canadians are, and a lot of them are actually fishermen," Soares continues. "So two of the four characters you can choose from have Native Canadian heritage."

Set in the titular – and fictional – fishing town, *Moonglow Bay* takes place in the late 1980s, a time before people could readily form virtual communities online. Its heartfelt backstory also has a personal significance to its creators: you take on the role of a middle-aged, recently bereaved Moonglow Bay resident, and take up fishing as a means of processing your grief. "It's directly inspired by my father's best friend who lost his partner in middle age," Soares tells us. "He didn't know what to do. He kind of wanted to figure out

his own community and get in touch with everyone around him. He'd been with this person since he was a teenager, and it was, like, his one and only love. How do you deal with that? You don't just go back to the dating scene; you kind of want to, instead, stay in touch with the people around you. That was our route to the motivation in the game – we're not going to do a dating aspect of the game, because we want to focus on building friendships."

Beyond the story of your chosen character, there's the wider populace of the bay, whose little town has grown tired and dilapidated. But through completing fishing quests, you can gradually breathe life back into this huddled community – and at the same time, make new friends.

"We wanted to build these relationships that feel meaningful and natural," Soares says. "We didn't want to force it, either. So there's a main line story that you go through, and you make friends through that. And that's the bare minimum of friends you can build, which is going to feel totally natural in your day-to-day life. There's always going to be those two or three friends you make, but then you can go the extra mile and be friends with ten other people. And then you're like, 'OK, this is what it means to build this community'."

Moonglow Bay began life four years ago as a pitch to publisher Coatsink; although the game was conceived as a relaxing fishing RPG from the beginning, its creators spent a considerable amount of time iterating on the idea. "The biggest challenge was being confident that the base

> Cooking isn't the central focus of *Moonglow Bay*, but it's still a fun and worthwhile diversion, with a number of minigames and around 50 recipes you can discover and master as you progress.



mechanic was going to carry the game forward," Soares says. "You get this fear that it's not enough."

Bunnyhug spent around 18 months in pre-production, prototyping different ideas and adding extra systems until they – ironically – realised that their earlier, simpler concept was the best one. "The conclusion we all arrived at was, 'Oh yeah, the initial idea,'" Nascimento recalls. "We were going back to exactly that."

"You can imagine my frustration when our solution was to go back to square one," Soares says, with a rueful laugh. "You say, 'Oh, geez.'"

The advantage of that pre-production phase, perhaps, was that it revealed just how well a 'less is more' approach could work when it came to *Moonglow Bay's* fishing: there's a decent selection of rods and lures, as well as different kinds of fishing – net fishing, line fishing, ice fishing, and so forth – but the system's uncluttered and approachable rather than offering the fiddly mechanics you'd find in a hardcore sim. "We didn't want to make a complex game of numbers and matching too many things," Nascimento says. "We wanted it to be easy to pick up."

"Which is why you'll find a lot of really interesting design choices in a lot of things we do," Soares continues. "We could have expanded to ten variables with the fishing rods, for example, but we left it at three rods. It could have been so many more, but that adds so much weight [to development]."

"Yeah," Nascimento agrees, "we'd have to check every single one and balance the fish to its..."

"...so it's very much like a simplification of design, but also adding a lot of depth to that simplification," Soares adds, "so that's a hard balance."

"It's a very hard balance," Nascimento continues, "but it feels like every single little choice has a lot of impact because you have so, so, few tools that you can use as a resource."

Moonglow Bay's clean voxel art style – not to mention Nascimento's gorgeous character and UI designs – are also in keeping with the game's less-is-more approach. "I've been doing voxel art for almost ten years, and I feel there's a simplification to it," Soares says. "You can obviously get really complex by rendering things out to an almost realistic degree. But with the simplification that I apply to it, using Lu's palettes and her



^ Although they initially resemble real-world fish, the game's aquatic life becomes increasingly fanciful as the game progresses.

designs, I feel like there's a lot of opportunity to clearly communicate things to players. I can just put a little bit of extra detail on an object, and immediately, players will know 'Oh, that's an important thing'."

"I think it gives the player the feeling we used to get from pixel art games on a CRT television," Nascimento adds. "It leaves things open for interpretation."

As we spoke to Nascimento and Soares in August 2021, it was almost four years to the day since they signed up to make *Moonglow Bay*. Since the game got going in 2017, they and their

team have plugged away through the modern joys of remote working ("It spans the globe, so when one person's awake, someone else is asleep...")

to the small matter of shepherding a project in the midst of a pandemic. But with *Moonglow Bay* now available for the world to sample, its creators remain as refreshingly effervescent and upbeat as the game they've worked so hard to build.

"When we move to a neighbourhood, we like to make sure that everyone has what they need," Nascimento enthuses, returning to one of *Moonglow Bay's* dominant themes. "Yeah, we help our neighbours and stuff like that," Soares nods. "I think it's good to be connected to your community... And that's why the community aspect matters in the game – your growth is in line with theirs. It's like, when you're suffering, other people are suffering with you. You're not alone with yourself and your pain." 🐾

"WE WANTED TO BUILD THESE RELATIONSHIPS THAT FEEL MEANINGFUL AND NATURAL"

DEPICTING CANADA

With *Moonglow Bay*, Bunnyhug was finally able to give Canada the attention it rarely enjoys in TV, games, or movies. "Canada's rarely represented in video games," Soares says, "and when it's represented in media, it's typically as an American location."

Nascimento concurs: "So many games are actually made in Canada, but don't use it as a setting."

The 1980s period was also an important design decision, the pair explain. "It's a time before technology became what it is today," Soares tells us, before Nascimento adds, "...it gives us a time before the use of computers, the internet, and social media. You don't have a YouTube video that's going to debunk the myths of the fish around your town."

"Yeah," Soares agrees, "and the people speak to one another [in-person] to communicate rather than just messaging each other."

CASTAWAY

The world's most popular sport ain't half bad in virtual form: here's twelve of our favourite fishing games, mini or otherwise

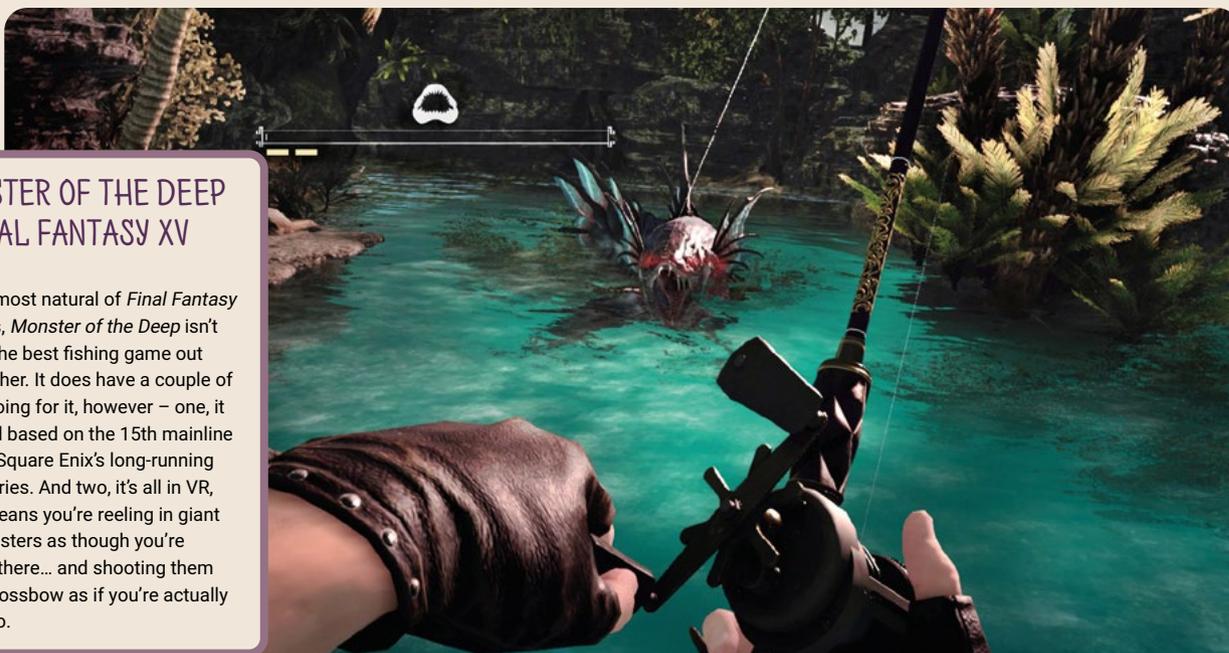
WRITTEN BY IAN DRANSFIELD



MONSTER OF THE DEEP – FINAL FANTASY XV

PSVR

Not the most natural of *Final Fantasy* spin-offs, *Monster of the Deep* isn't exactly the best fishing game out there, either. It does have a couple of things going for it, however – one, it is indeed based on the 15th mainline entry to Square Enix's long-running JRPG series. And two, it's all in VR, which means you're reeling in giant fish monsters as though you're actually there... and shooting them with a crossbow as if you're actually there, too.



RUNESCAPE

PC, Mobile

If you're looking for an active game of fishing, look elsewhere. If you're looking for an experience that's so hands-off you can literally leave the game running and go do something else, all while your character trawls through the local pond for kilos of aquatic life – and levels up while doing it – *RuneScape's* fishing is for you. It's been a stalwart of the long-running MMO for 20 years now, and still sees tweaks and updates released periodically.



SEGA BASS FISHING

PC, DC, Wii, PS3, X360

Buying the original coin-op is too big an ask, but those looking for the purity of an arcade fishing game with a rod peripheral could do worse than picking up a Dreamcast and its special fishy-fish controller to experience this angling classic (category: 'gimmicky'). Everyone else can stick to the many re-releases to relive the glory of hooking, fighting, and succeeding in the endless battle against... some fish. Great game.

THE ELDER SCROLLS V – SKYRIM

PC, PS5, XB S/X, PS4, XBO

If we stick with vanilla *Skyrim*, your fishing experience means wading into water to grab them with your hands. Fortunately, *Skyrim's Anniversary Edition* has will bring a proper fishing mechanic to the game, so you can sit on a riverside and casually watch the dragons fly by as you nab a few slaughterfish to sell to some local merchant later on. And when you're bored? Just go hop up a mountain for 20 minutes solid. Easy.



STARDEW VALLEY

PC, PS4, XBO, Switch, Mobile

It's not the main game, but fishing is such in *Stardew Valley* that you can play it for dozens of hours and *just* engage in the line-and-pull technique both to amass a small fortune and to make actual progression in the game. It's all anchored by a wonderfully simple mechanic to catch fish: keep them inside the green bit on the indicator. That's it. What it leads to is a skill- and timing-based battle that never stops being fun.



FISHING – BARENTS SEA PC, PS4, XBO, Switch

Shifting from the sedate act of sitting beside a body of water, not really caring if you hook a sprat or not, through to running a commercial trawler to dredge up every single piece of living matter – and dolphin – within a 25-mile radius of your licensed operating region might seem like a shift in tone... and it is.

Still, as long as you ignore the gargantuan amounts of (virtual) environmental damage you're engaging in, *Barents Sea* is a fun, and different, fishing game experience.



FISHING PLANET PC, PS4, XBO, multi

Those looking for a more realistic take on angling should look toward *Fishing Planet* – not only does it boast plenty of realism, including being able to gut the poor creature you've just ripped from its watery home – it's also free to play, so unless you want to grab some extra gear, speed up your progress, or something along those lines, you don't have to spend any money on the virtual pastime.



JACK CHARLTON'S MATCH FISHING

C64, Spectrum, CPC

Is it the best fishing game ever made? Absolutely not. But it is a sporting tie-in using a famous sportsperson that doesn't actually represent the sport said person was most famous for. Jackie was known throughout his life for his passion for fishing, so this one didn't completely come out of nowhere, but it's still one of those titles that has you frantically searching online for proof it was indeed real and not just a forgotten Christopher Morris joke. Oh, and the game's *fine*.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA SERIES Various

Appearing across at least seven *Zelda* titles over the years – starting with the original Game Boy *Link's Awakening* in 1993 – fishing has been both a standard part of the series and something that players have lost countless hours to. Who needs excitement, adventure, puzzle-solving, and tricky boss battles when you have a boat, a pond, a rod, and the desire to catch 'em all? Wait, no, that's *Pokémon*, not *Zelda*. Still, the point stands.



ANIMAL CROSSING

Various

You can probably get through your whole *Animal Crossing* life without devoting any real time to fishing, but if you're going about it that way, you're going about it the *wrong* way. Fishing is as integral to the experience of paying off a loan you never asked for from a local raccoon businessman, as digging up fossils is to the experience of paying off a loan you never asked for from a local raccoon businessman. So go forth and fish!



YAKUZA SERIES PS4, XBO, PS3

As with almost every side attraction in Sega's *Yakuza* series, fishing is something you discover by accident, intend to mess about with for five minutes while on the way to more pressing matters, then end up spending hours on. Until you catch a great white shark from a river in the middle of a bustling city, then you sort of have to go and sit down somewhere else for a bit because it all gets a bit too... bitey.



BREATH OF FIRE SERIES SNES, GBA, PSone

Until the fourth entry, the *Breath of Fire* games all featured fishing, with changes and increased complexity each time. The fact you earn extra cash and, in *BoF III* and *IV*, can gain access to powerful items early in the game *via* fishing, it's worth doing for progress reasons too, not just because it's compelling and relaxing.



Toolbox

The art, theory, and production of video games

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How 'winning' at video games has changed over time

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Living in a village versus a town, and how to depict it in a game

50. Portals in UE4

Recreate a classic teleporting mechanic in Unreal Engine 4

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A spoiler-filled examination of Disco Elysium's ending

58. Gameplay loops

These simple diagrams can transform the way you design a game

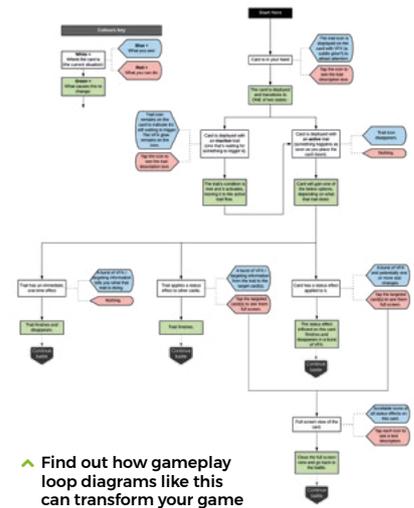
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Who they are, what they do – and how you could become one

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Make your own ZX Spectrum-style top-down arcade racer

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Disco Elysium's ending was one for the ages. But why did it have such impact? Spoilers ahoy on page 56.

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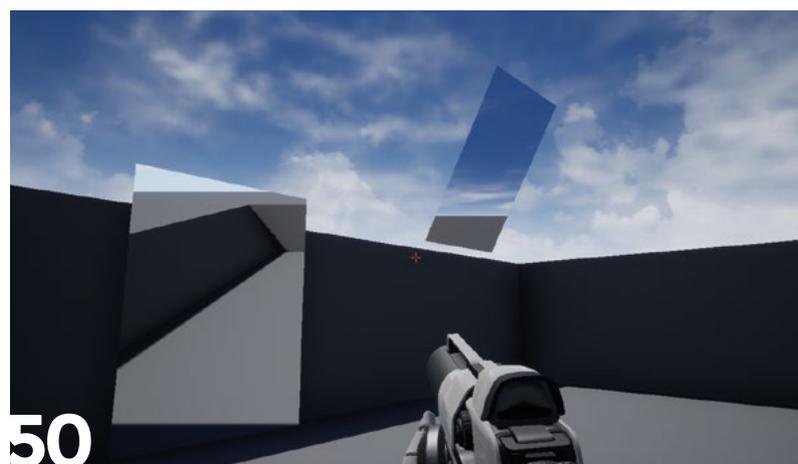


^ The difference between metropolitan and rural living is often overlooked in games, as Konstantinos explains on page 48.

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^ Make your own homage to *Portal* and *Splitgate* with our step-by-step guide on page 50.

The principles of game design

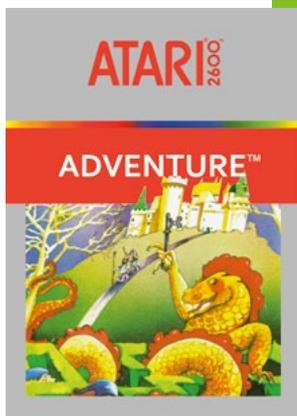
What does it mean to 'win' in a video game? The answer has changed as the medium's evolved, Howard writes



AUTHOR
HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Howard is a video game pioneer who authored several of Atari's most famous and infamous titles. His new book, *Once Upon Atari: How I Made History by Killing an Industry*, is out now. onceuponatari.com

▼ *Adventure*: the pioneering console game that created an entire open world with a handful of blocky pixels.



The term Instant Classic is an oxymoron. Classics only become classics by lasting. But how long must something last before it becomes a classic? I think that depends on the medium. Classic drama goes back millennia. Classic literature goes back centuries. For classic radio, film, and TV, it's decades. Classic video games are no different, except they tend to be measured in years. The rapid progression of technology ages video games faster than any other media.

Of course, when I say 'Classic Video Games', I'm talking about the verb. Noun-wise, Classic Video Games refers to old games that have withstood the test of time. As a verb, however, it denotes anything that happened in the Dawning-of-Video-Games epoch. And from that epoch arose a classic choice in game design that still rings true today: to win or not to win? That is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind

to play a game to completion, or to always fight on, postponing inevitable death, to create ever higher scores. To win or to lose later. Those are different goals, and they feel different.

Classic games were played until the last life was lost and the only remnant was score. *Pong* was different, but that was two-player competition. If you look at video game solitaire, the rule holds. There were different styles, of course. *Space Invaders*, *Breakout*, and *Defender* were classic wave-style games. You defeat one and here comes the next, but at least the player has the illusion of punctuation in a never-ending sentence. The quintessential play-til-you-die video game is *Tetris*. Once you start the game, the pieces just keep coming. It's relentless. You keep bailing against an accelerating parade of four-piece blocks until you're inevitably overrun. Waves or not, this is the How-High-Is-Up (HHIU) model in which you inevitably die in the pursuit of a higher score. As Rob Fulop (creator of *Demon Attack*, *Cosmic Ark*, and *Night Trap*) asserts in the *Once Upon Atari* documentary series, the fact that players always die in the end has contributed to the onset of a negative and fatalistic mindset for many who grew up playing these games. It's a theory.

Then came *Adventure*. *Adventure* broke this mould with a game that actually had an ending. It was, for all intents and purposes, winnable. This introduced the question: should a game end, or should it be an endless race for higher scores? It's all about the final moment. Did I win the game? Or did I simply succeed in losing later than ever before? It's rather like life. In the end,



was my life complete or did I simply die as late as possible? Are there bonus lives in Life? (see Hindu). But back to the classic question...

To win or not to win? Whichever I choose, there's still a catch. One of the most annoying aspects of all early video games is that I always start from zero. I must re-cover all previous ground before I get a chance to blaze new territory. Why? Because originally, video games had no memory. How's that for irony?

Although it seems like such an elemental aspect of things, it's easy to forget that we were well into the second generation (or debatably the third generation) of gaming before the possibility of saving game progress existed. In the evolution of computer gaming, this was an amazingly significant event. Think about it...

For years, games had the ability to do everything needed to play the current session. But the moment the game was over, the entire world that existed within that game was gone forever. It's like a person who has thorough cognitive functioning but only short-term memory relevant to the task at

hand. Every time a task completes, all memory relating to that task disappears. If you've ever seen the movie *Memento*, that's what video games were originally.

But finally, game consoles began saving space for game state and results (as coin-ops nearly always had). Then memory cards come about. Now I can not only save my status, but I'm able to transport it to another place and reinstate it. My gaming experience can travel. And that's big.

"If you've ever seen Memento, that's what video games were"



^ The Legend of Zelda's battery backup feature was another console first.



This is a different model of gaming. *Super Mario World* is notable in that it presents a world of discrete challenges. Like any game, the idea is to keep working my way through the world. But now I can move along however I choose. Once a level is open, I can play that level or revisit any previous level. I can have a much bigger game experience, and the only thing required for this was the ability to save my status.

This introduced the idea of discrete events in video games. Suddenly levels, side quests, and mini-missions are all natural elements of the gaming experience. What does that do to our main question? It renders it moot to some degree, because now I can create an enormous game world with many winnable elements. The game is huge, but it's still finite! It seemed the HHIU model's days were numbered.

Then came the internet, which initially just enabled you to broadcast your status. But soon comes the ability to create and disseminate a never-ending supply of fresh levels. The HHIU model didn't disappear, it evolved! Games went from having zero short-term memory to infinite growth potential.

To win or not to win? Paraphrasing Shakespeare doesn't seem to answer as many questions as it raises. How big is my game? What does it mean to win? Must people re-evaluate their concept of winning to accommodate their gaming? And who's winning, people or games? Classic questions lead to classic conflicts. Isn't it amazing that video game journalism can actually have anything in common with classic literature? Now *there's* a classic question. 🗣



^ Super Mario World expanded on the adventure elements introduced in Super Mario Bros. 3, with a larger overworld map, 72 levels, and 96 exits in total.

NEW RULES

Let's talk about metagaming. When I'm done playing the game, I can create games within the game. Defining my own parameters of competition and measuring my progress. When I've maxed out every level of a game, I can break out my stopwatch and play for best level time. Or see how far I can get with one life. These are metagames. Though I can say the metagame is a contribution, I can't say I never met a game I didn't like.

City versus rural living

Konstantinos explores a divide often overlooked in games: the difference between living in a city and a village



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 the *Virtual Cities* atlas, designs game cities, and consults on their creation. game-cities.com

Like every video game urban centre worth its salt, the Free City of Novigrad, one of the true stars of *The Witcher 3*, successfully presents players with its class structure and stark inequalities. The poor are desperate, mostly malnourished, and often kind-hearted, whereas the rich are cruel and corrupt – as is the case in both games and reality. What really impressed me about Novigrad, though, was how its urban poor were juxtaposed with the poor of the countryside. Inspired by real geographies of the European Middle Ages, CD Projekt made sure the city's destitute were obviously different from their rural counterparts. City dwellers knew more, had more rights, did the jobs of urbanites, spoke differently, and lived slightly better lives.

Why do I mention this? To point out that in the vast majority of settings – including the real world – the collective and personal experiences of those living in cities are fundamentally different

from those living in a village or tiny settlement. Most games tend to ignore this divide.

CITY LIVING

An urban society is markedly unlike a rural one, and not just in regards to its economy and size. There are more specialists and artists in a metropolis than in the countryside, and a village may predominantly focus only on farming. Daily life itself is more exciting in a city: a greater variety of things happen in greater frequency in the urban space. The daily pace is faster, time is condensed, people are more stressed, and measuring time is key. The personal clock is mandatory in any modern city, and the public one a staple of civic imagery. The complexities of daily life (such as catching a bus on time), and the need for societal co-ordination demand precise timing.

Constant interaction with strangers is another defining characteristic of the urban experience. In a village, an inhabitant probably knows the baker by name, and may be related to the postal worker. A reassuring yet often suffocating sense of intimacy prevails. In a city, on the other hand, nobody knows the name of the bank clerk, the bank clerk has no idea who their clients are, and yet everyone reasonably trusts each other to do their job. Keeping up with friends is also trickier in a city. People rarely drop by to check in on their friends, and even kids' play dates have to be arranged as the complexities and sizes of urban centres grow.

Density of experience goes hand in hand with the density of variety the city has to offer. Vastly dissimilar areas lie close to each other; ten minutes of walking in London can take you from a lush park, through a residential area, to the theatre district. Urbanites are used to such rapid spatial

METRO LIFE

Georg Simmel's 1903 essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* is a fascinating read on the effects of cities on the individual's mind and social relationships. The PDF of this classic is freely available at wfmag.cc/metrolife.

➤ Besides being packed with NPCs and varied architecture, *The Witcher 3's* Novigrad is also overflowing with stuff to do [map via witcher3map.com/v/1].





◀ Varied vignettes, unexpected details, and the sheer density of activity made *Disco Elysium's* world feel large and urban.

variations, and expect to find all sorts of places in the complex topologies of their surroundings. A kosher butcher, a tabletop game store, a specialised doctor, bars and restaurants, cinemas, a research centre, or an artisanal workshop of miniature flowers are more likely to be found in an urban centre than in a village; and all of them can coexist in close proximity. Emphasising this type of variety is one of the reasons *Disco Elysium's* Revachol, despite its relatively small size, felt like part of a greater metropolis.

Besides size and complexity, other qualities also factor in the ways urban life is shaped, and vice versa. The density of Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, for instance, fostered close relations between neighbours and forged mutual support networks, whereas the emphasis of ancient Athenian daily life on public matters shifted all attention and care from private to public buildings.

ON POLITICS

Politics and the city have historically been intertwined. The proliferation of socially and spatially defined groups, classes, and subcultures within large urban populations always led to political tensions and discourses. Radical, even illegal, ideas can also flourish in the anonymity a city provides. Often related to civic politics, artistic and philosophical movements also flourish, as do revolutions – an almost exclusively urban phenomenon. Paris is a prime example, with

three major, world-changing revolutions, while Berlin had at least one that could have averted the Second World War. And to further showcase the city and countryside divide, Berlin insisted on voting for communists and social democrats as rural Germany increasingly supported the Nazis. Worth noting, too, are the innovations of urban life such as the 13th century *Capitano del popolo* in Italy or the democracy of ancient Athens.

Anonymity has another function in a typical city: it allows the operation of secret societies, hidden groups, and, unsurprisingly, criminal organisations. Entire networks can exist unseen, and even a vampire could survive for centuries without drawing attention to itself. Were said vampire to lurk in the countryside, it would have to either outright dominate a village or

prey on it from the outside. Not unlike vampires, urban power is faceless. Citizens of Rome never expected to run into the Pope, and meeting the mayor or the billionaire residing in your city would be highly improbable, to say the least. Power in cities is represented by landmarks, whereas in small communities, it's more personal.

Civic governance can take all sorts of forms, not unlike the political entity of a city itself. Any combination of governing system and level of autonomy can be found through history's city states, free cities, imperial, national, or provincial capitals, autonomous urban regions, city alliance networks, and federalist towns. 🗺

“Revachol, despite its small size, felt part of a greater metropolis”

REGARDING STADTLUFT

During the Middle Ages, most Germans knew that ‘*Stadtluft macht frei*’ – the air of the city makes one free. And though originally this saying was meant to describe a principle of law, effectively freeing serfs from their lords after spending at least a year in a city, the saying also expressed the overall sense of political equality and freedom medieval cities enjoyed – at least when compared to the oppression of rural society and serfdom.

Make Splitgate-style portals in Unreal Engine 4

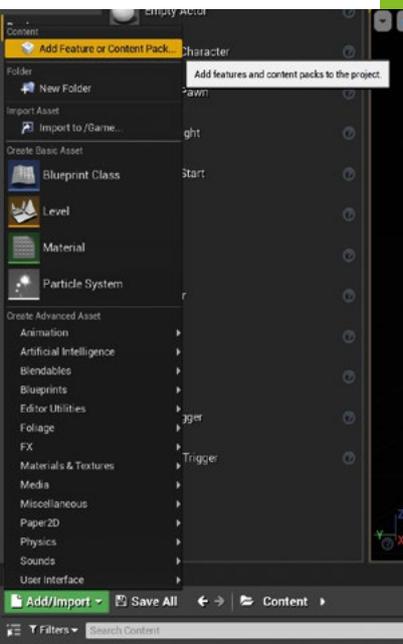
Recreate the teleporting mechanics of Splitgate – and er, Portal – by following these easy steps



AUTHOR
RYAN SHAH

An avid developer at The Multiplayer Guys with a strong passion for education, Ryan Shah moonlights as KITATUS – an education content creator for all things game development.

▼ **Figure 1:** It's important to note that before Unreal Engine 4.26, 'Add' and 'Import' were two separate buttons. More recent versions merge these buttons together.



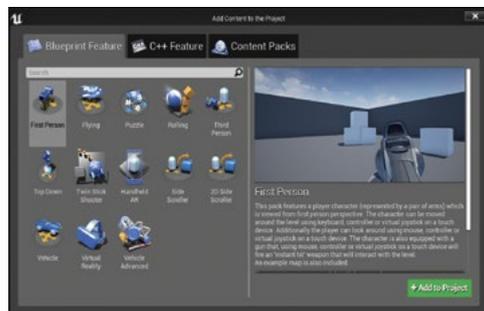
Valve's seminal action-puzzler *Portal* – and before it, the student project, *Narbacular Drop* – introduced one of the coolest concepts in gaming. It gives the player the ability to create pathways between two points in 3D space by 'shooting' an 'in' and 'out' portal onto a flat surface. It's an idea that was explored further in 2011's *Portal 2*, and more recently, the multiplayer indie hit, *Splitgate*.

Portals can be broken down into two distinct areas: how they look to the player and what happens to the player when they use it. We'll be covering each section in a logical flow that will cover the start-to-finish process of creating a working portal system in Unreal Engine 4.

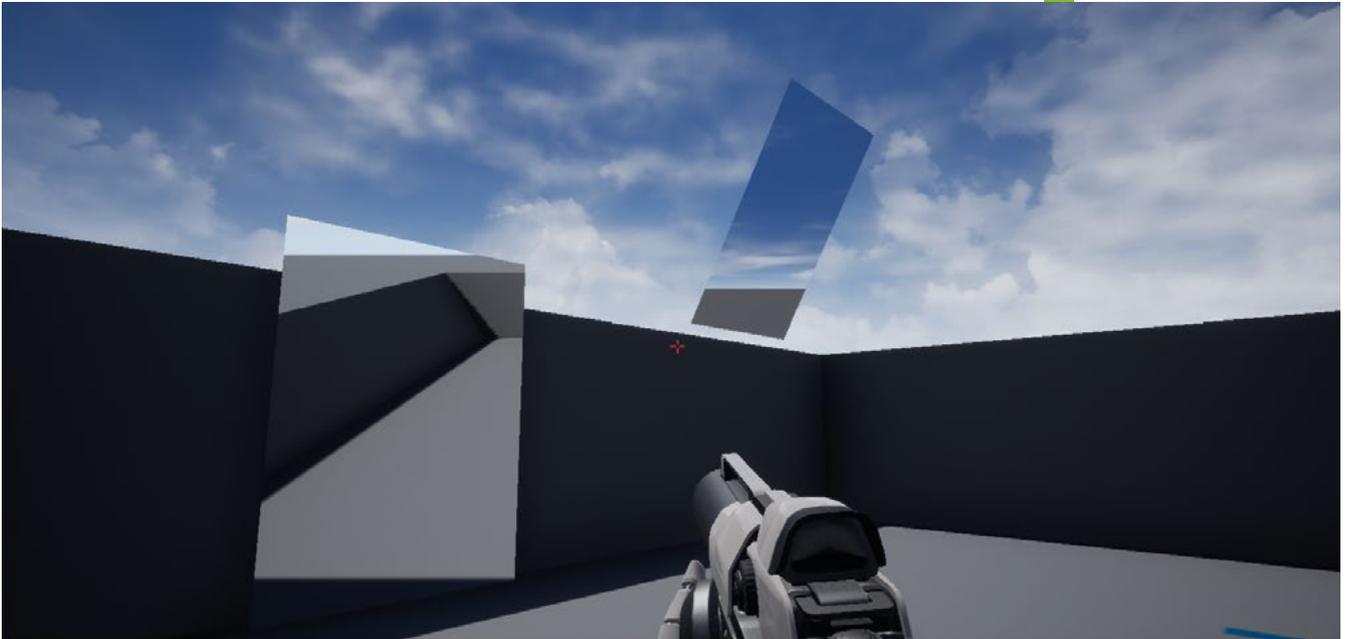
To begin, we're going to be using the First Person template as a base. This will give us our basic movement mechanics and also a strong base to build our Portal system on. If you didn't start your project as a First Person template, fret not: we can add it to an existing project using the Add/Import function. With your project open and on the main editor viewport, go to your content browser and select the green Add/Import button, and then select 'Add Feature or Content Pack' (see **Figure 1**).

You will now be given the option of importing a number of different templates. You should be in the Blueprint section (the active selection should be visible near the top of the modal window) and you should see the first entry is First Person. Highlight the First Person button and press the green Add To Project button on the bottom right-hand side (**Figure 2**). The content will then be imported into our project, ready for use.

Let's head to the provided example map. If you can't easily see the **Maps** folder, head back to the content browser and click the tabbed list icon below the green Add/Import button – you'll be able to see the folder structure of your project – allowing us to quickly find the files we need. Head to Content > FirstPersonBP > Maps and double-click the FirstPersonExampleMap to open the level.



▲ **Figure 2:** The 'Add Feature or Content' window contains some helpful examples and code snippets.



You can give the level a test if you like, but we're now ready to proceed to creating a Blueprint that will hold the main portal logic. Go ahead and create a Blueprint now – you can do this by using the Add/Import button and selecting Blueprint Class. In the dialog that opens, select Actor as we require an Actor Blueprint. When the class is created, name it BP_Portal.

This BP_Portal class is going to hold the logic for our portals. We need two portals to complete our effect, but from a technical level, both portals should function identically to sell the trick – because of this, both portals will be duplicates of this class.

To get started, we're going to add a plane, an arrow, and a SceneCaptureComponent2D (Render Target) to this class. The plane is so we can see the portal; the arrow is so we can easily see the correct orientation, and we'll use Render Target to capture what this portal sees for the corresponding portal. To add these, double-click the Blueprint in the content browser to open up the editor and make sure you can see the Components view (normally on the top left-hand side of the opened window). Click the green Add Component button under the 'Components' label and create a StaticMesh component and then an Arrow component, and finally the SceneCaptureComponent2D (see **Figure 3**).

Clicking the components in the hierarchy should open up the Details panel on the right-hand side of your screen, allowing you to adjust

values of the selected component. Here are the transform values that should be used for your objects:

StaticMesh:

Location: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 (Leave as default)

Rotation: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 (Leave as default)

Scale: 1.0, 1.0, 1.5

Arrow:

Location: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 (Leave as default)

Rotation: 0.0, 0.0, 180.0 (Yaw)

Scale: 1.0, 1.0, 1.0 (Leave as default)

SceneCaptureComponent2D:

Location: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 (Leave as default)

Rotation: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 (Leave as default)

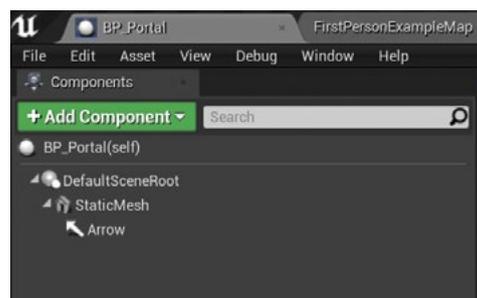
Scale: 1.0, 1.0, 1.0 (Leave as default)

The StaticMesh currently has no mesh reference set, so we'll need to set one to see our portal in-game. Select the StaticMesh in the Component →

^ Although the function doesn't exist in our build yet, you can freely move the portals around in the editor.

BLUEPRINTS

You can create all kinds of Blueprints with different parent classes. Actor Blueprints are the most common, but almost every class can be subclassed in a Blueprint.



< **Figure 3:** This is the correct hierarchy for your BP_Portal. The Render Target should be a child of the Arrow, which should be a child of your StaticMesh, and StaticMesh should be a child of your DefaultSceneRoot.

CODE CHECK

It's important to note that we expect the Other Portal variable to be valid in our code from the beginning, so we won't be adding valid checks to our code. In the future, if you have a situation where one portal exists and another doesn't, adding 'Is Valid?' checks will be important to ensure you don't run into problems or crashes.

▼ **Figure 4: View Options** allows you to select what can be seen in this drop-down. If you're finding it hard to see what you need, toggle engine content using View Options > Show Engine Content.

view, then on the right in the Details panel, find the StaticMesh option. Press the drop-down to the right of the option to select a mesh. Select 'Editor Plane' (press View Options > Show Engine Content if you can't see it) to set the correct mesh for our portal (**Figure 4**).

We need to create two render target textures that we'll feed into this class so that each portal shows the correct texture. Head back into your content browser and use the Add/Import button to create two render targets (Add/Import > Materials and Textures > Render Target), naming one RT_PortalA and the other RT_PortalB.

Slight resolution adjustments are required for these render targets, so double-click each one and set their Size X and Size Y to:

Size X: 720 Size Y: 1280

Once these changes have been made, save and close the assets. With them saved, head back into our BP_Portal Blueprint class. We need to create a bool (true/false) to check which portal this is when placed in the scene. With the Blueprint class opened up, if you take a look

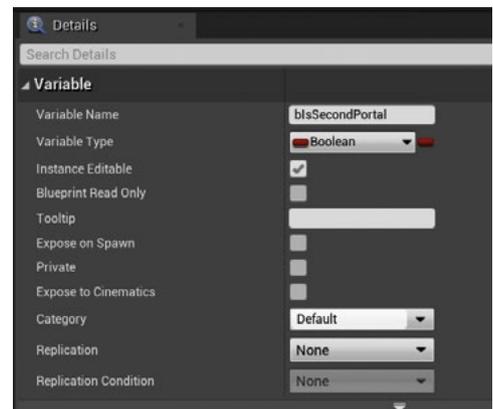
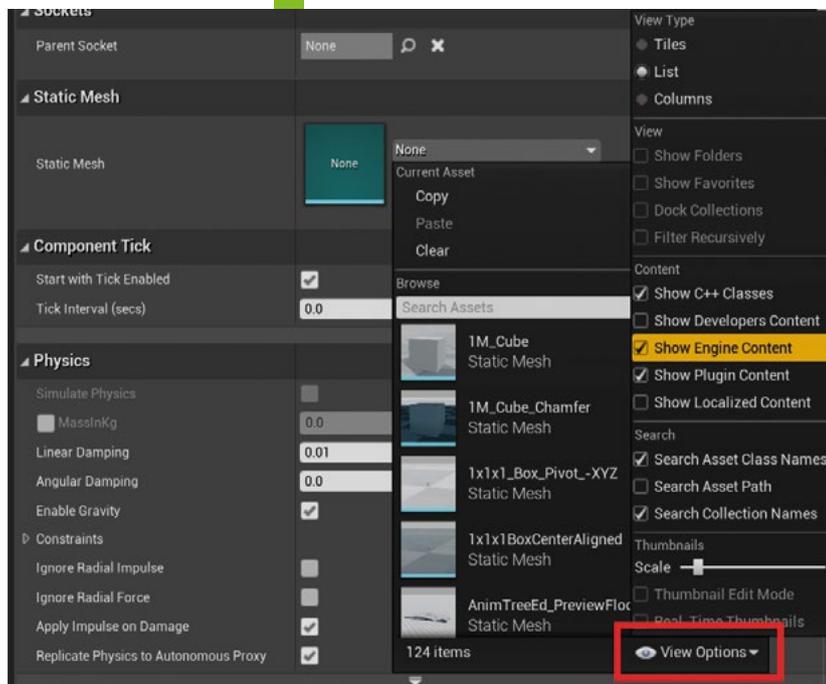
"We'll cover the process of creating a working portal system in UE4"

below the Components list on the left, below should be the Variables section. Press the + next to Variables to make a new variable, then click the new variable and check the Details panel. Make sure the Variable Type is Boolean (the identifier is a dark red colour) and name the variable blsSecondPortal. While you have the Details panel in view, set the checkbox Instance Editable to 'true' (**Figure 5**).

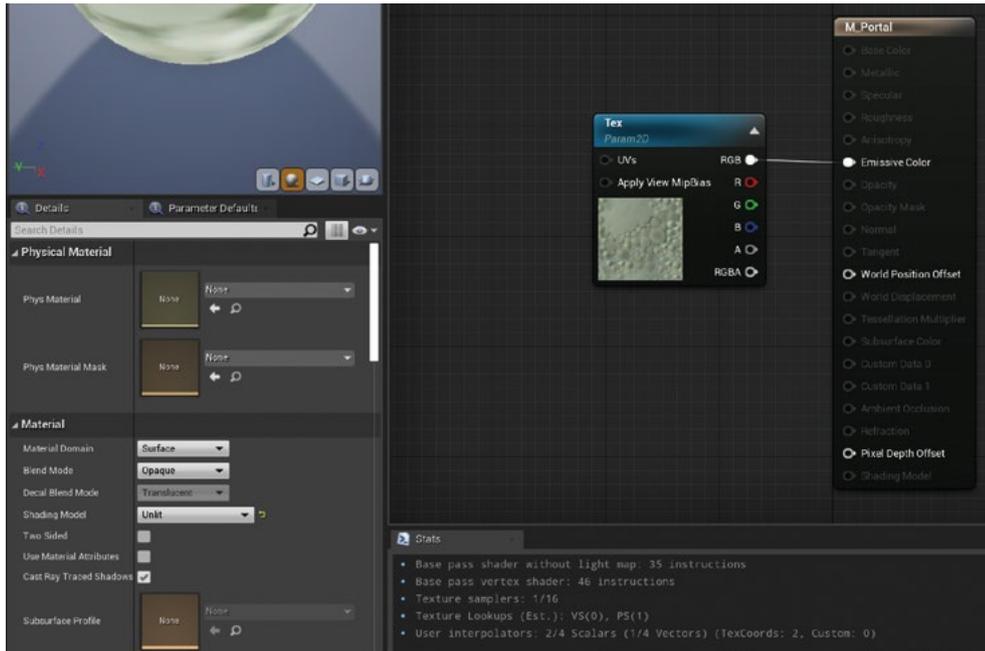
Before we continue, it's time to create a material to display on our plane to show what the render targets are taking in. Go to your content browser and using the Add/Import button, select Material and name this new material M_Portal. Double-click the asset to open it. The Material Editor is a massive beast that we don't have time to cover in depth here. For now, look at the bottom left-hand side of the window and find the Shading Model category.

This material doesn't need lighting information, so change the Shading Model to 'Unlit'. To finish this material, head over to the main Material editor in the centre of your screen and right-click, search for 'TextureSampleParameter2D', and create the node by dragging it into the main Material window. Name this node 'Tex'. Hook the RGB output into the Emissive Color channel of the material. Save and close the material (**Figure 6**).

Now that we have the material, we'll set it up on our plane. Open up BP_Portal and find our Portal plane in the Component hierarchy. In the



▲ **Figure 5: Setting Instance Editable to 'true'** allows us to edit this variable within the in-game viewport, meaning we can change the variable on a per-instance basis.



◀ **Figure 6:** If the material's correctly set to 'Unlit', only the Emissive Channel should be visible on the Material outputs.

Details panel, find the Material element slot and add the newly created M_Portal material. Now we have our material on the plane. You may notice that the material isn't currently showing either of the render targets, so let's fix that by loading them in at runtime.

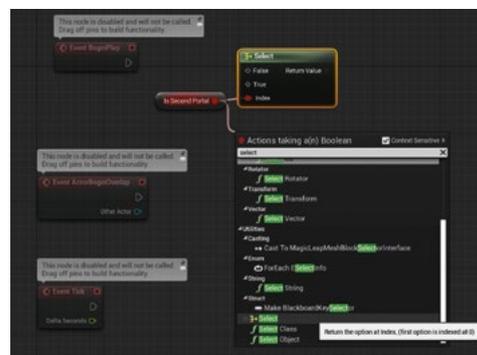
Go to the Blueprint Editor area of BP_Portal by pressing the Event Graph tab. Here, find Event Begin Play which fires when this object is spawned in the world. From the Variable panel on the left, drag in the bool 'blsSecondPortal' we created earlier and place it in an empty space near the semi-transparent 'Begin Play' event. Select 'Get blsSecondPortal' if prompted. We want to change the texture we're using based on the value of this bool, so select the red output pin of the newly created node and drag it into empty space. In the drop-down that pops out, type in 'Select' and scroll down until you see the option that has three yellow prongs to the left of it, click it to create a Select node (**Figure 7**).

Before we can tell the new node what it's selecting between, we need to get the material. In the Component hierarchy tab, click and drag our StaticMesh into an empty area in the Blueprint view to grab a reference to it. From the output pin of the generated node, type in 'Create Dynamic Material Instance' and select the corresponding selection to create the node. This

node creates a dynamic version of the material on the mesh that we can edit at runtime.

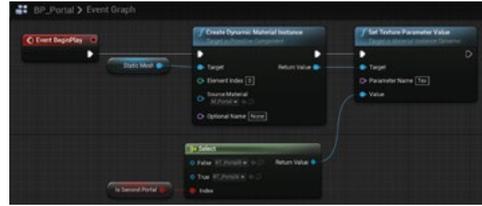
On the node, connect the top-left execution pin to Event Begin Play and set the Source Material to our created M_Portal material. From the blue output pin on the right of this node, drag it to empty space and, in the drop-down menu, select 'Set Texture Parameter Value'. It should automatically connect to the previous node on creation – if it doesn't, hook it together now.

On the Set Texture Parameter Value node, there's a text entry field titled 'Parameter Name'. Earlier, we set the Texture Sample Parameter name as 'Tex', so set the text in this field to 'Tex'. Below this field is an area to set the value ➔



◀ **Figure 7:** There are multiple different Select nodes, so be sure to select the correct one. The one we're looking for has an icon that resembles a yellow trident on its side.

▶ **Figure 8:** The node execution of BP_Portal should look like this. Notice how the texture is decided by if the bool is set to 'true' or 'false'.



EXPANDING THE PROJECT

Using what you've learnt here, take a look at the firing code in the First Person template. From what you have been taught, you should be able to extend this system by spawning portals with shooting. The next logical step after that would also be to look into moving the camera based on where the player is looking, to create a looking-glass effect. We've just covered the basics here, but you can now use your new understanding of portals to create interesting new mechanics in your next project.

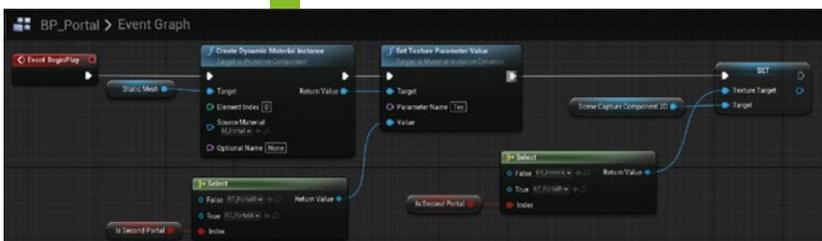
for the texture. Remember the Select node we made? Hook the grey diamond of that node into the input pin beside Value of this node. You'll notice the Select node's input pins transform into a blue colour and we can now select values. For 'False', set it to RT_PortalB and for 'True' set it to RT_PortalA (Figure 8).

The textures and materials of our portal system are nearly complete. Before we're finished with the BeginPlay execution chain of this Blueprint, though, create another Select node from the bool (remember to look for the sideways trident). Once created, drag in the SceneCaptureComponent2D reference from the Components list.

From the output pin of the spawned SceneCapture2D node, drag it into empty space and type in 'Set Texture Target'. Create the Set Texture Target node and hook the output of our newer Select node into the texture entry, as before. When filling the values for the Select node this time, swap them around, so 'False' should be RT_PortalB and 'True' should be RT_PortalA. This is because we're setting where the camera writes what it sees to; the idea is we write the data to the Portal A texture but display Portal B's texture on our actual portal (Figure 9).

Next, we need to set the collisions correctly on the portals so we can walk through. Within BP_Portal, create a new variable and in Variable Type, search for 'BP_Portal' and select it, making sure to select 'Object Reference' from the list that pops up next to it. Again, set it to 'Instance Editable' and name the variable 'Other Portal'.

▶ **Figure 9:** Your 'BeginPlay' chain should look like this.



When we place these portals in the world, you'd set the reference to whatever the Other Portal is with this exposed variable.

Now add a Box Collision component to your BP_Portal by clicking 'Add Component' on the top left-hand side of the screen. It should be a child of the StaticMesh. The transform properties to use are as follows:

Box:

Location: 10.0, 0.0, 0.0

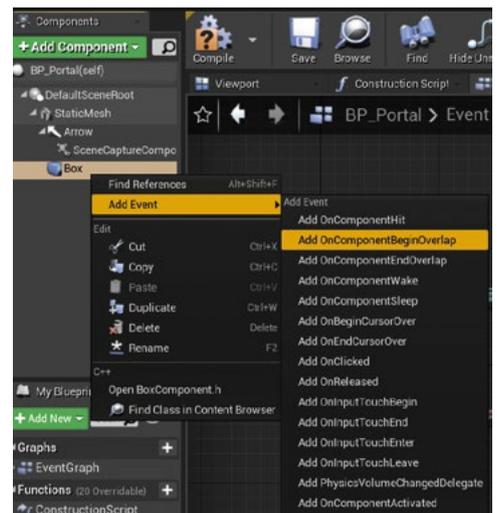
Rotation: 0.0, 0.0, 0.0 (Leave as default)

Scale: 1.0, 3.75, 3.75 (Leave as default)

With the Box Collision created, we need to check when objects overlap with it. Unreal Engine gives us a built-in event that triggers when this happens. To use it, right-click 'Box' in the Component drop-down, select 'Add Event', and then 'AddOnComponentBeginOverlap' (Figure 10).

By this point, you should be comfortable with creating new nodes. Create a Teleport node and a Get Player Controller node. From the blue output pin of Get Player Controller, drag and create a Set Control Rotation node. Connect the Teleport and Set Control Rotation to the Begin Overlap event (Figure 11).

Get the Other Portal variable we created, and from this, get the Arrow. From this Arrow variable, we need two nodes: Get Forward Vector (to get the direction of the arrow) and Get World



▶ **Figure 10:** Unreal has many built-in events exposed via the Add Event pop-out menu. You can create your own by using C++ – simply mark your UFUNCTION as BlueprintImplementableEvent.

Transform (to get the arrow's transform in world space). Go ahead and make them now. Right-click the output pin of the Get World Transform and select 'Split Struct Pin' to give us the Location, Rotation, and Scale values separately.

From the output pin of Get Forward Vector, drag out and type 'Multiply', selecting 'Vector * Float', as we want to get a position a little in front of the forward direction of the arrow. For now, put '350' in the Float entry field. After this, add a 'Vector + Vector' node and hook up the output of the 'Vector * Float' to the Location of Get World Transform. This gives us a position in front of the other portal in front of its Box Collider. Connect the output to Dest Location of the Teleport node.

Finally, connect the Rotation from the Get World Transform to the rotational input of Set Control Rotation and hook the Other Actor pin of the Overlap event into the Teleport target (which currently says 'Self'). Compile and save and head into the main editor view.

Place two of your BP_Portal objects against any wall on the map (Figure 12). Click on your first portal object (BP_Portal) and then, in the Details panel on the right, head down to the Default

“We need to set the collisions correctly so we can walk through”

section, and in the drop-down menu next to Other Portal, select BP_Portal2. Finally, click on the second portal object (BP_Portal2), and again under the Default section of the Details panel, set Other Portal to BP_Portal from the drop-down menu, then check the box marked blsSecondPortal.

Press 'Play' at the top of the screen, and you should now be able to correctly teleport between the two portals.

There are many ways you can extend this system: one cool thing to look at is storing the player's velocity prior to teleporting them, and apply it again on the other side.

To quote *Portal*, “Speedy thing goes in, speedy thing comes out!” 🚀

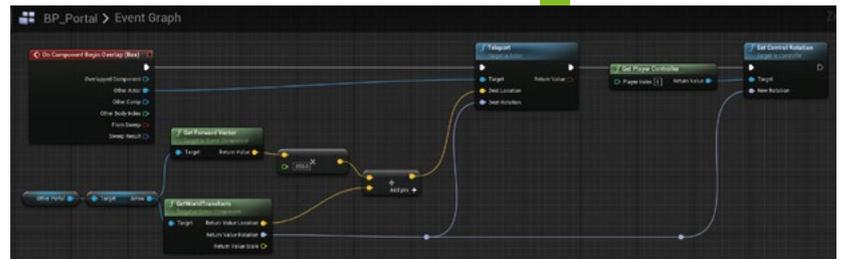
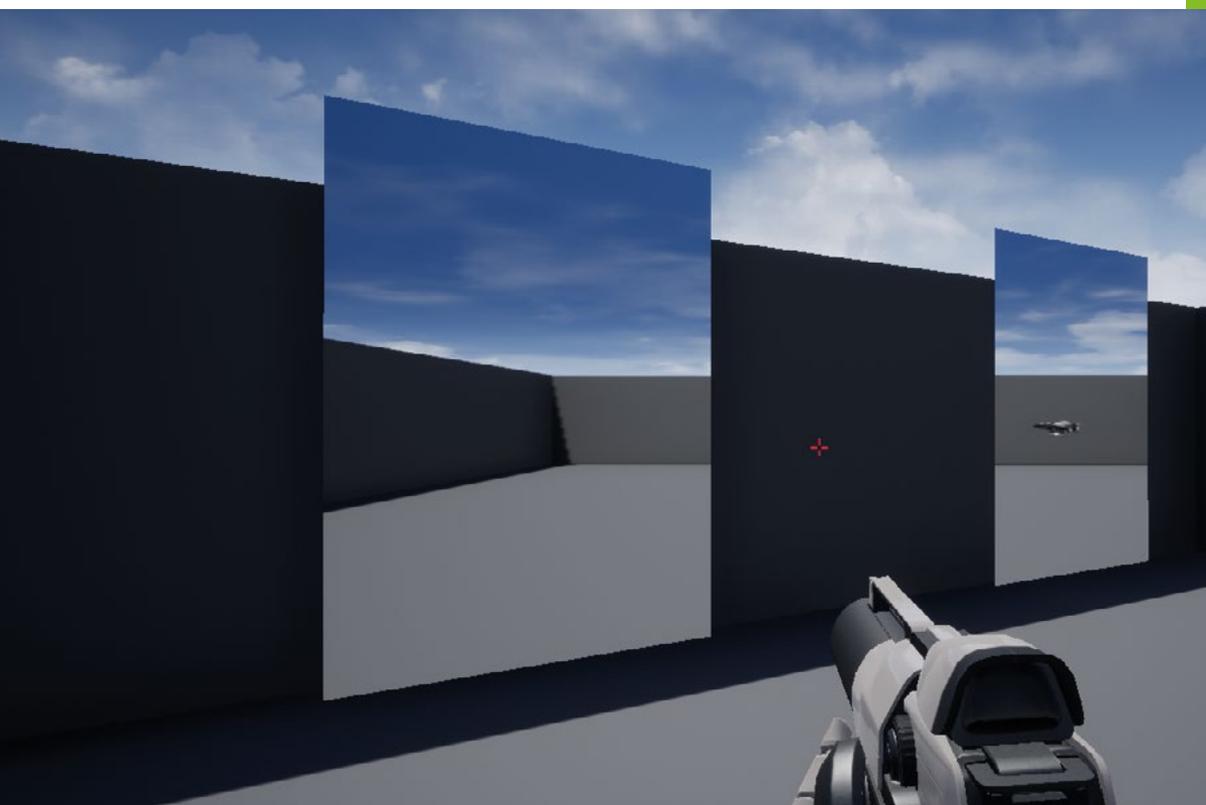
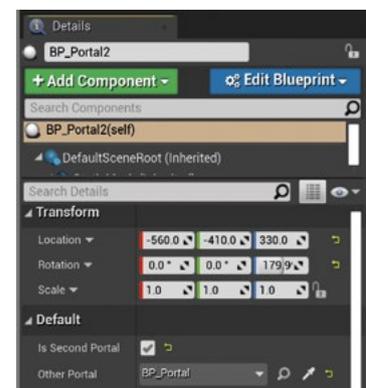


Figure 11: Here's what your finished Overlap code should look like in BP_Portal. By now, you should be comfortable with the difference between creating context-based and standalone nodes.



All being well, your finished project will look like this when you press Play. See what happens when you walk into the portal on the left...

Figure 12: In the Details panel, you'll need to set your BP_Portal and BP_Portal2 variables under the Default section. Don't forget to check the box for your second portal.



How Disco Elysium earns its ending

Disco Elysium's finale is incredibly satisfying, and its final twist is jaw-dropping. With spoilers, here's how it pulled that off



AUTHOR
ANTONY DE FAULT

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When we talk about foreshadowing in modern screenwriting, what we generally mean are the little teasers, the fun-to-spot narrative Easter eggs, which on playing or watching a second time make us wonder how we missed them before. For example, five minutes into 2018's *A Star Is Born*, we see Ally (Lady Gaga) sing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* to herself, then Jackson (Bradley Cooper) drives past a billboard featuring nooses silhouetted against a rainbow background. This is intended to foreshadow, subconsciously on our first watch, the fact that these characters' impending relationship will end in tragedy. But can foreshadowing do more than this, be more powerful? I believe *Disco Elysium* demonstrates that it can.

I was once told that "a truly great book spends several hundred pages priming the reader to be utterly floored by the final line". Taken with a

pinch of salt, I think this neatly encapsulates how to write a great ending; we want them to blow us away, but they can only do so if the writer has spent a great deal of effort creating a context in which that can happen. With this emotional and/or intellectual 'priming', unexpected plot information or a pithy final line will fall flat, unlikely to leave a lasting imprint.

SET 'EM UP

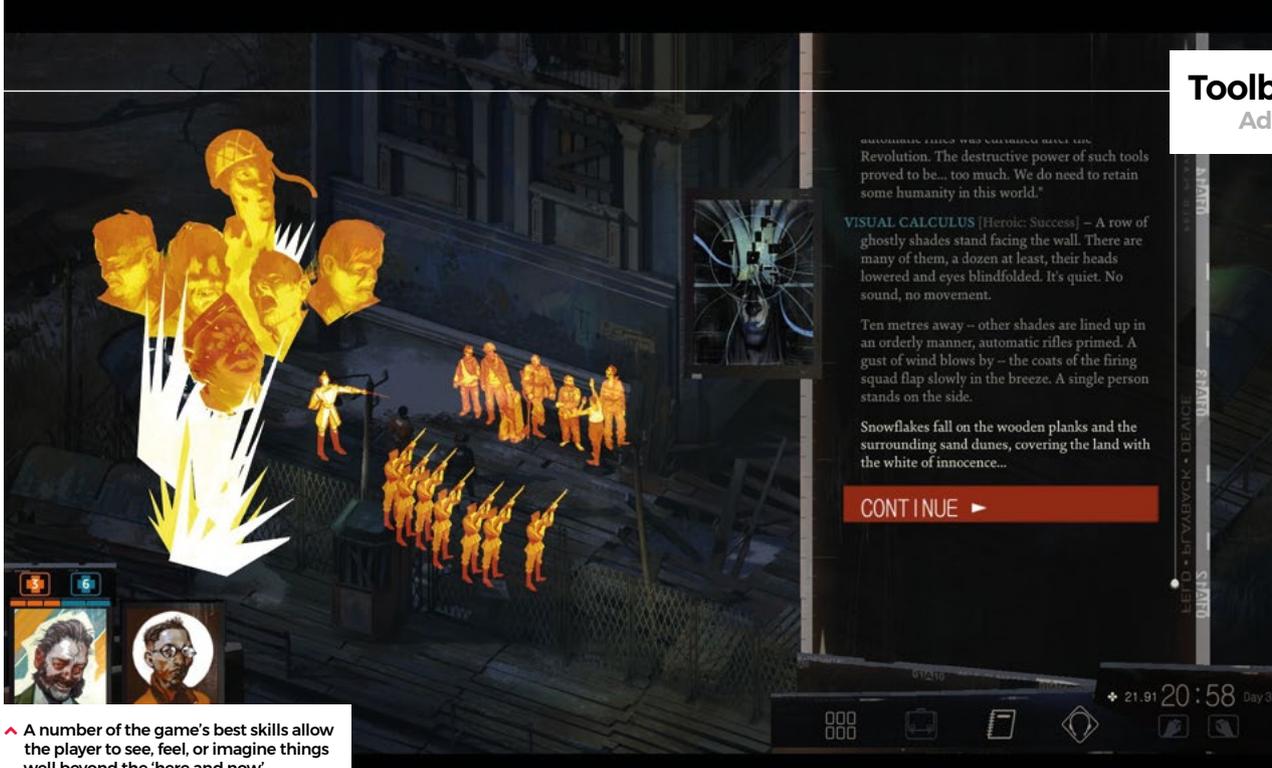
For most of *Disco Elysium*, you concern yourself with a local labour dispute. The dockworkers' union has entered open rebellion against their corporate employers, soldiers have been deployed to break the strike, and one of these henchmen has turned up dead. The game's setting adds contextual depth to this conflict, as historically, the neighbourhood was the site of a fledgling communist nation's defeat at the hands of a capitalist empire.

But (spoilers incoming), here's twist number one: the current dockside drama has nothing to do with the actual killer. After exhausting all other leads, the player discovers the last of the communist soldiers, still living in a dilapidated fort in a bay. The old man watches the play of people's lives through the scope of an old rifle. Occasionally, it is suggested, he pulls the trigger and executes those who embody capitalist rot.

The second twist is... he's addicted to the pheromones of an intelligent, undiscovered, near-mythological insect. They are both relics in their own ways, and this 'phasmid' creature seems to take pity on him, perhaps because it



► Embittered old royalist René (left) is a mirror of embittered old communist Iosef (right). Meeting René early prepares us to understand Iosef in the finale.



▲ A number of the game's best skills allow the player to see, feel, or imagine things well beyond the 'here and now'.

feels a kinship, and it secretly sustains his life with its psychic and chemical abilities. This has caused psychological instability over time, causing the communist, eventually, to enter a bizarre psychosexual and political frenzy and commit the murder the player has been investigating.

KNOCK 'EM DOWN

Of course, that's a lot to take in. If you're reading this without having played the game, you'll likely have struggled with that last paragraph. This is because, like any narrative climax, it is meaningless without context. So the game spends the literal entirety of the preceding 30 or so hours building you up to it, giving you oodles of framing information so that when you do encounter these living relics, the moment is unbelievably profound.

First, as mentioned before, the game's setting itself is deeply steeped in the communards' failed revolution. You play in the site of their most decisive, final defeat. The public statues, place names, and present petty squabbles all bear the mark of that history, and the game doesn't shy away from both showing and telling it to the player frequently. An old soldier from the other side of the conflict plays boules in the street in his full military uniform, and a bullet-ridden wall is evidence of a half-century-old firing squad. You know the communist's fight – and defeat – well before you ever meet him. The city's history wasn't the backdrop for the labour dispute; no, the labour dispute *is* the context, the present-day echo of the real killer's life story.

So what about that psychoactive insect? Well, almost all of the game's side quests brush up against the supernatural, from programmers searching for tears in space-time to the 'haunted' Doomed Commercial Area. At every turn, the

game demonstrates that there is always a mundane explanation. The haunting is actually a squatter, or capitalism, depending on how you look at it. The programmer's hole, in reality, is actually a spot of 'Pale', a scientific phenomenon in the world of *Disco Elysium*. You can even go hunting the rumoured phasmid creature, but the traps never catch anything, and eventually, the cryptozoologist admits she probably imagined her 'eyewitness account'. When the creature reveals itself, speaking archaically of aeons past, you must reconsider everything; the impossible *is* possible, the world can still contain wonder!

MIC DROP

In *Disco Elysium*, foreshadowing isn't just about adding flourishes, little opaque references to what's to come. A lesser game may have been satisfied with a few on-the-nose murals here and there. *Disco Elysium's* foreshadowing is about designing almost everything about what comes before to specifically prepare you for its final revelations. In practice, this means writing a story, finding a great ending, then rewriting everything that came before to perfectly set the stage.

When done thoroughly and correctly, this sort of excessive foreshadowing seamlessly becomes a more general thematic 'resonance'. The whole game is exploring the same few issues from a range of angles, so all weave together until they feel like a whole, a profound body of thought. And then, the game's ending will be such a natural yet unexpected evolution of these elements that, long after the credits roll, the player is left rethinking all the context they witnessed earlier in the light of these new revelations. This execution of an ending is what gives it that lingering aspect that we associate with the truly profound. 🗨

Doing it yourself

So, you want to write a killer ending too? In practice, this means writing a story, finding your way to a great ending, then rewriting everything that came before to perfectly set the stage. In doing so, you'll have discovered the parts of your story that really resonate. Great! Now rewrite it again, focusing on just those elements. Anything unrelated gets cut, or adapted so as to also resonate, and you discover an even better version of the ending. Dammit. You rewrite, rewrite, rewrite, and eventually, you have something beautiful.

Designing with gameplay loops

A powerful tool for understanding the way your game fits together and how players move through it, gameplay loops allow you to spot weaknesses and potential opportunities



AUTHOR
STUART MAINE

Stuart Maine has been a designer for 23 years, across PC, console, and mobile. He helped set up Well Played Games, and is currently working on an unannounced title.

If you're working in a team, you're going to need to document your game's design in some form. Even if you're working solo, you may need notes to remind yourself why you chose a certain direction over another. As weird as it may sound, how you document your design can have an effect on the game you end up with.

Games are built from a series of 'systems' and 'states'. Each system handles one aspect of your game – such as the camera or combat or progression – using the rules you create, and the interactions between those systems is your gameplay. Whereas your game's states are

the discrete 'activities' that your players move between as they play, and it's this topic we're focusing on.

MICRO AND MACRO PERSPECTIVES

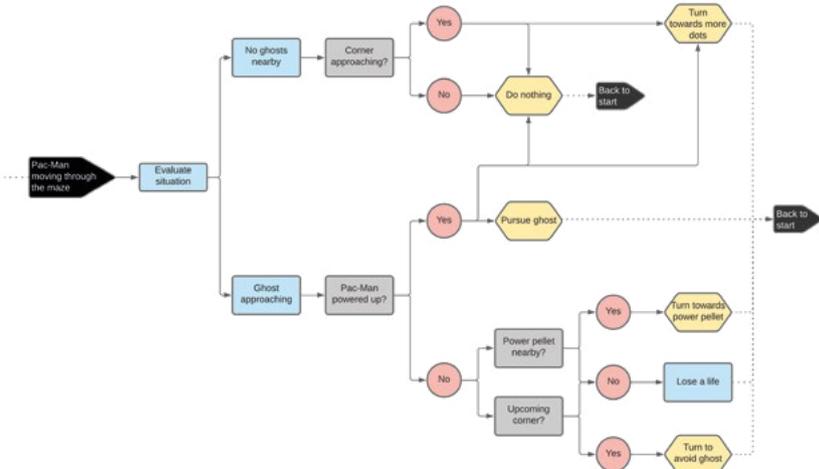
'Activities' are areas of your game that players engage with and then potentially move on to something else. You can look at these states close-up to study the micro, second-to-second detail, or from a distance to look at the macro way your game fits together. For example, at a micro level, you might want to map out how players move from an 'attacking' state to a 'blocking' state in a fighting game. Or at a macro level, how players move from a 'football match' state to a 'post-match results' state.

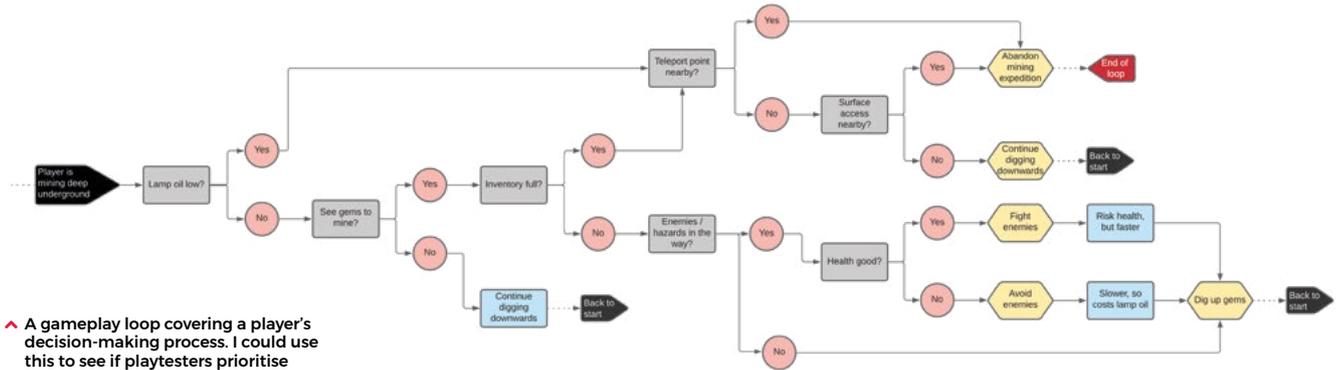
You can document these states by producing a gameplay loop diagram, and several of these can let you map an entire game. The reason gameplay loops work as a design tool is that they let you see how your game's states link together, with the player moving from one state to another and ideally flowing back to the start of the loop. This is why the way you document your game can affect its design, because if you keep your game's states compartmentalised into various separate documents or wiki pages, then it's difficult to see how it connects together as a whole.

LET'S BREAK IT DOWN

To produce a gameplay loop diagram, choose how much of the game you want to study

✓ A zoomed-in gameplay loop, looking at the decisions players are making in the moment. Note the use of colours and shapes for readability.





▲ A gameplay loop covering a player's decision-making process. I could use this to see if playtesters prioritise differently or make 'bad' choices.

and then break that into states and the paths between them. You almost always need to 'edit', however, because the scale you choose to work at dictates what you should include or leave out of the diagram. Let's say you want to understand the player's options after they've finished a race. Where can they go from here? Do they have lots of valid choices or really only one option? In this case, you're looking at a section of the game from a high level, so you need to leave out any fine detail. Don't worry about the specific screens they see or the buttons they press – that's too much detail and will result in a diagram that's hard to understand.

On the other hand, you might want to produce a diagram of the player's potential options when they're in the middle of a race and have just gone into a skid on a corner. Now you want to look at the possible actions they can take while they're in the 'skidding' state and which states their choices will cause them to move into. In this case, you'd ignore almost everything else going on in the wider race. Both detail levels are valuable, but they're for looking at different things, and understanding what you should include or just take for granted and ignore is one of the key skills of making a gameplay loop. Working in this way, you can produce a gameplay loop diagram of your entire game, or just study the snap decisions in one second, or what happens after 'game over', or any other time your player moves from doing *this* to doing *something else*.

PRODUCING LOOP DIAGRAMS

There are many flow chart tools available, such as diagrams.net (which is free) and Lucidchart. You can even use shapes in Excel or Google Sheets to make them, though they're not very

good at exporting the end result. Worst case: you can stick bits of card to a wall and run string between them, or draw on a whiteboard and photograph the results. A few points to note:

- Each node in your diagram should represent a state that players spend time in, something that causes them to exit from that state to another, or a decision that dictates where they move to next.
- Beyond that, you can include any detail you find useful, such as a timeline, or if a state shunts players out of this entire loop (and potentially onto another).
- Mark the 'start here' point in bold to let people know where to join the loop.
- Use different shapes and colours in your diagrams to help people parse them. →



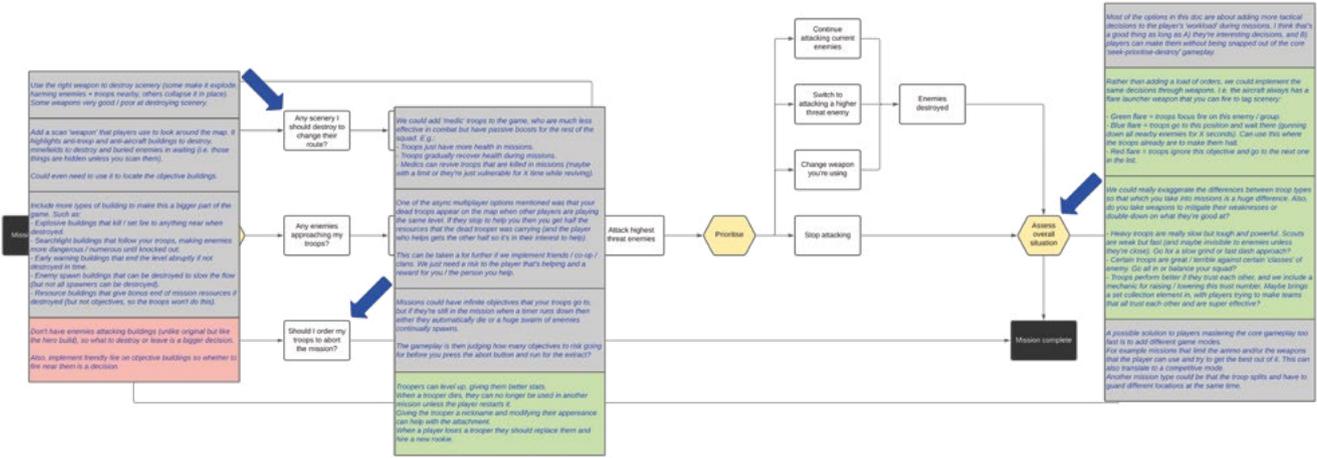
MATCHING LOOPS TO PLAYERS

I talked about audience types in Wireframe issue 39 (wfmag.cc/39), and your gameplay loops should be matched to your intended audience. For younger or more casual players, I'd recommend keeping the overall loop short, with players clearly able to see that A affects B and what they need to do next. On the other hand, short loops can make the game feel like a timewaster to a more 'hardcore' audience, with Ian Bogost's parody, *Cow Clicker*, the ultimate example of a blatantly visible loop.

- ▼ Blockbuster games can have enormous numbers of states, making gameplay loops critical for understanding which states players can move into at any given time.

Toolbox

Designing with gameplay loops



Another use for gameplay loops is to generate options for how to improve the 'weaker' states, rather than simply wedging more states into your game.

- Flag any states that have external documentation with a link so that people can go straight to them from here.
- Distinguish between lines that flow from point to point, and lines that simply say 'go back to the start'. Although this sounds small, it will really help when your diagrams get complicated, because you won't have to contort everything in your diagram just to get a line to wrap back to the start point. Remember, these diagrams are to help you think about your game's shape – they have no value to the player, so don't spend ages making them look pretty.

We could fix this by having the rewards lead to unlocking new content or abilities. The game's overall loop would be much more satisfying because now there was a reason to do well and get the rewards, which is probably why you see this type of progression loop incorporated into all sorts of genres.

CASE STUDY: FEEDBACK

At the other end of the scale, we looked at a competitive game's loop: specifically, at what happens after each battle. Interestingly, the loop showed that whether the player won or lost a battle had almost no bearing on what happened next. They earned more rewards if they won, but fundamentally the outcome was the same.

Seeing this led us to question why players would play more than one battle if nothing was really changing. Our conclusion was that players were enjoying learning about things like the battle rules and systems and how to exploit them, to recognise 'tells' in their opponent's attacks and what to do about them, and so on.

This led to us zooming in on the various states in our combat in fine detail, looking for where we could improve feedback and expose information to the player that was previously unclear or hidden. If winning or losing wasn't the outcome of our battles, but 'player learns' was, then we could focus on making sure players clearly understood what just happened, even if that was why they just lost.

CONCLUSION

With enough time, a designer should be able to work out if a game is suffering from poor flow or is weak in a specific area, but producing a gameplay loop diagram helps in that process by allowing you to keep asking 'What happens next?'

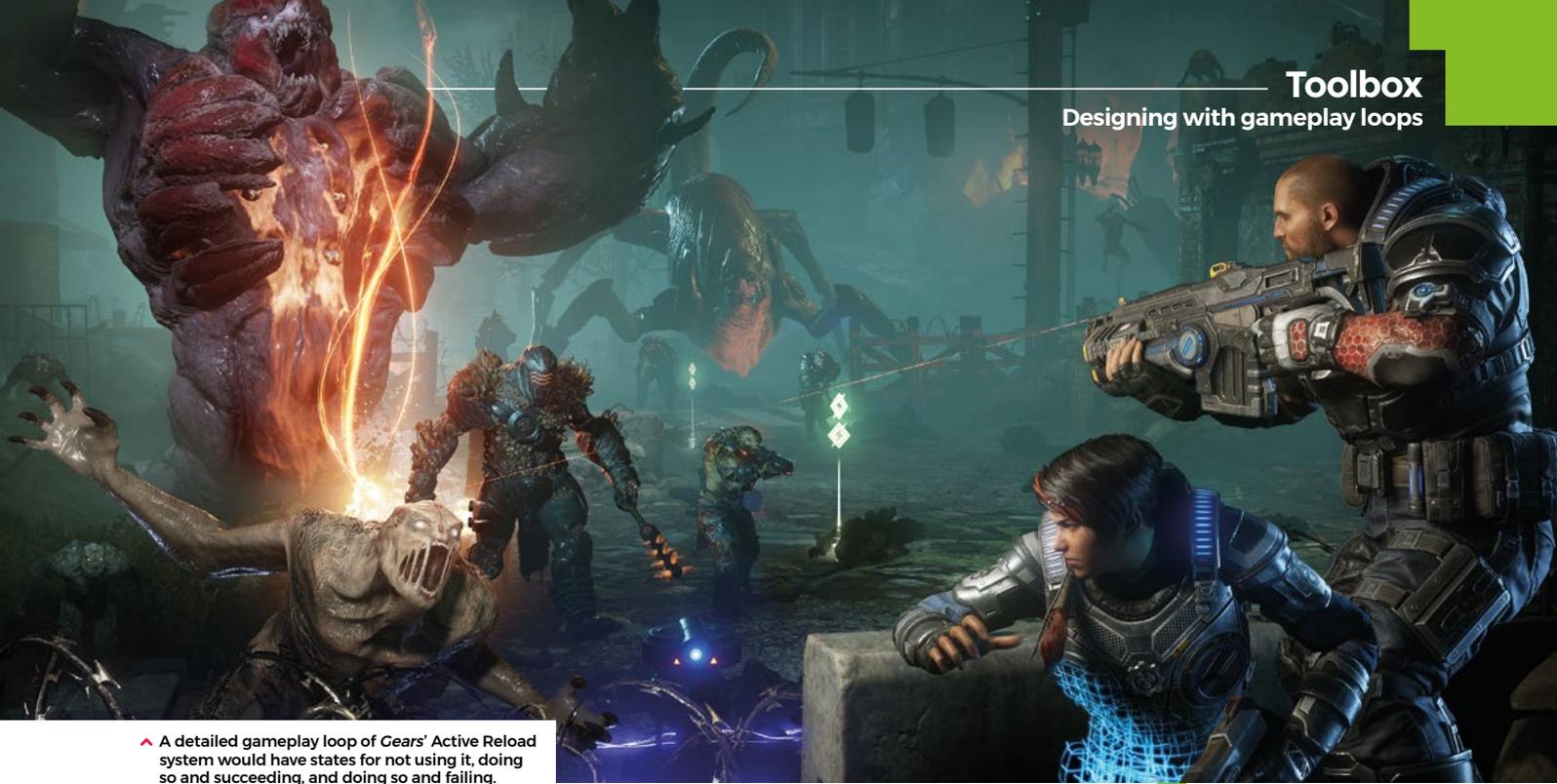
FIND YOUR CRITICAL STATES

Producing a loop diagram of your core gameplay can show if you have a single, key state that players always loop back to. In this case, it makes sense to zoom into that state with its own loop diagram to understand what's going on inside it, but also to dedicate a lot of your development budget on getting that key state as polished as possible. For example, if a state revolves around players making rapid decisions, then focus on helping that with clear information, plus making it rewarding to be in that state with cool feedback.

As mentioned before, the key is to think about the scale of your diagram and what to include or leave out. For example, if you're trying to describe how players can choose to upgrade after a battle, you probably don't need to include details of the gameplay – just have boxes with 'player wins the battle' and 'player loses the battle'.

CASE STUDY: DEAD ENDS

I was working on a game for young kids, which meant we had short loops that players repeatedly swapped between (so they could clearly see the outcome of spending time in each state). But while the core gameplay of each of those states was fun, the overall game flow wasn't working. By producing a high-level diagram of the gameplay states, we identified that players received rewards for doing well at each activity, but those rewards didn't do anything – players were just collecting them for the sake of it. While it was nice to receive the rewards, the fact that they didn't lead to something else meant the overall 'play activity – get reward' loop didn't go anywhere.

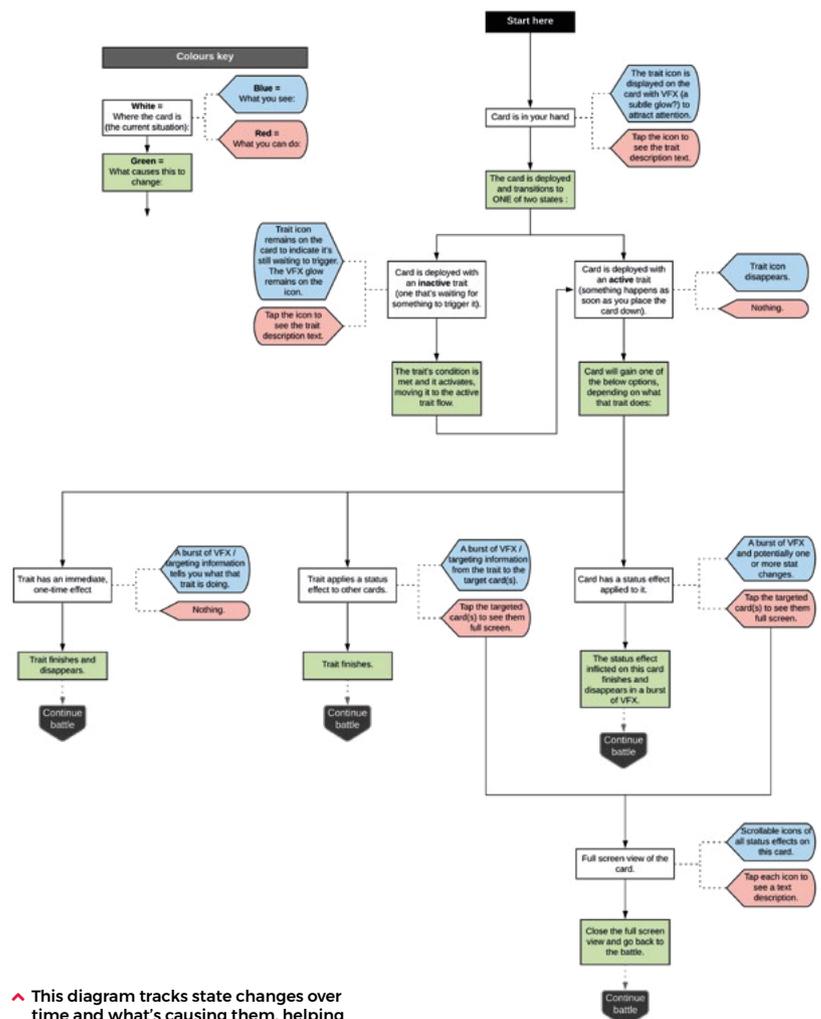


▲ A detailed gameplay loop of *Gears*' Active Reload system would have states for not using it, doing so and succeeding, and doing so and failing.

I've seen gameplay loops used in many studios in all sorts of different ways, so I've only scratched the surface here. Check out Game Developer or the GDC Vault for more on the subject.

Producing these loop diagrams takes time and effort, but here are just some of the ways I've seen them used:

- Look at existing titles to show major differences between their loops and yours.
- Make a high-level loop diagram the spine of your game's documentation, with sub-documents leading off from each state in the diagram.
- Really dig deep into a tiny area of your game and how it links to the greater whole, such as a loop for *Gears of War*'s Active Reload system.
- Understand which states are at the core of your game (with a lot of loops passing through them) and so need lots of time and resources focused on them.
- Track player decisions during playtesting and see if they really move between states in the way you thought they would.
- If you need to reduce the scope of your game, a diagram can show the areas that you can cut without disrupting the entire loop.
- Finally, a good flow diagram can show the team how a feature is important to the game's loop, answering the 'why' as well as the 'what'. 🗣️



▲ This diagram tracks state changes over time and what's causing them, helping ensure content added later follows the same rules that players have been taught.

What does a video game producer do?

It's a common job title in the games industry, but what is a producer? And what skills do you need to become one? James explains all



AUTHOR
JAMES DOBROWSKI

James is the managing director and founder of Sharkmob London, a new triple-A studio in the heart of the UK capital. It's currently working on a brand-new IP.

The role of a producer in the games industry is still poorly defined, and different companies have their own definition of what a producer does. In most cases, a producer is akin to a project manager, and ultimately responsible for the planning and execution of a project. In some companies, however, a producer is also product-orientated, responsible for tying together the various disciplines of game development – art, engineering, design, project management, and so on – into a single thread. They'll ultimately

make sure the right decisions are made, given the funds available and constraints in place. In other companies still, a producer is a team lead and people manager, with the responsibility of leading and coaching a happy and effective team.

There are varied definitions of the producer role (or development manager, as some companies title it), but there are three primary skill sets that are needed regardless of production flavour:

Project and budget management: The ability to scope, plan, and execute a project with control over schedules and budgets.

People management: The ability to manage people, including both team management and stakeholder management. A good producer needs to know how to build and foster good team dynamics, provide critical feedback, offer support when needed, sell a vision, and resolve all kinds of people-related challenges.

Product awareness: A knowledge of video games and the craft of making them well enough to support and challenge the creative process. Many producers in the industry would argue with me on this point, but I do believe that a passion for video games and an eye for quality will make you a better producer. I've worked with some exceptional project managers who don't have a passion for games, and their solutions to scheduling problems tend to be somewhat black and white: cut scope, raise budget, move timelines.

▼ A typical day at Sharkmob's offices in Sweden. The UK branch opened in London in late 2020.





By contrast, producers with a love of games, and an understanding of how they're put together, tend to find better and more creative solutions to problems. Learning to understand games is the easiest thing to achieve, in my opinion: play a lot of games, have opinions on what you play, and learn how they're built. You can do this through experience and curiosity on the job, and by talking to the creatives who specialise in different areas of development.

So with that out of the way, what does it take to be a good producer – and how do you become a good manager of people? Let's take a look.

BEING A GOOD PRODUCER

Over the last few years, talk of Agile development has become all the rage in video game management circles, and it's largely misunderstood. Similarly, there's long been a divide between people who follow Agile methodologies versus those who favour more traditional, long-term planning approaches (or Waterfall methodologies, as they're known).

I'm personally a fan of the Agile manifesto (agilemanifesto.org), and feel its principles are ideal for most situations. But I also think the 'by the book' approaches that have been built around the Agile manifesto don't work under the realities of most games projects. Similarly, traditional Waterfall methodologies seldom work, either.

“Producers with a love of games tend to find better and more creative solutions to problems”

On one side, you almost always have a fixed budget, a fixed release date, a publisher who expects an understanding of long-term milestone deliverables, or a complex web of long-term

interdependencies that many Agile frameworks just aren't set up to control. On the other hand, any creative endeavour requires change, iteration,

and experimentation, and traditional Waterfall methodologies aren't equipped to allow for this.

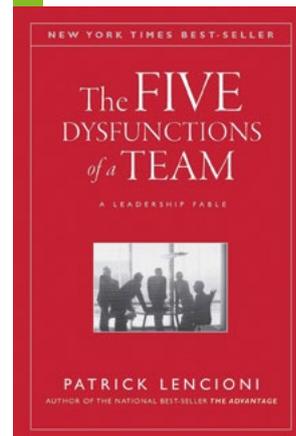
In my experience, a good producer isn't an evangelist for any one philosophy, and knows when to mix a little bit of both and to what degree. In nearly all game projects, you want to maintain a long-term view that keeps your stakeholders well informed and your dependencies well mapped out, while allowing for plenty of flexibility in the short term.

While each project is different, my philosophy for this has always been:

- Plan as far in advance as you can, with the information you have available, making assumptions where you need to. This is your baseline plan.
- Re-prioritise regularly based on current needs and adjust your long-term plan accordingly. This allows you to have good conversations with your team and stakeholders about how your short-term priorities are affecting your long-term plan, and why. ➔

▲ The toothsome battle royale *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodhunt* is the latest game from Sharkmob, with two other, unannounced titles still in the works.

▼ Patrick Lencioni's tome is essential reading if you're looking to become a producer or any kind of team leader.



Toolbox

What does a video game producer do?

➤ A good producer also knows how to skulk in high places, waiting for fresh victims. No, wait - that's vampires. Sorry.

READ THIS

When it comes to managing people, it's always worth gaining some experience with basic human psychology, particularly in terms of how it impacts a team dynamic. One book I'd recommend to any potential team leader is Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. It's one of the most useful books on team dynamics I've read, and demonstrates the critical importance of dealing with issues quickly. It provides a good lesson on why getting somewhat comfortable with providing difficult feedback is a critically important skill.

➤ One of the keys to getting on in the games industry? "Don't be an asshole," the studio advises on its website.



To manage this, I tend to advocate for the following three documents to be maintained throughout the life cycle of almost every project:

- **A project backlog (or scope document):** A list of all the features you have planned for your game, prioritised, with estimates from all teams. Where solid estimates can't be given, best-guess estimates should be provided. It's better to have best-guess information for planning than no information, and it's important to get your team comfortable with this concept (and not make it uncomfortable when best-estimates are inevitably inaccurate).

This backlog should also contain a calculation of developer time per team, split across your project's milestones. This should take holidays into account, accommodate some level of time for iteration or things going wrong, and carry an understanding that people don't sit at their desks

throwing out code for eight hours a day. It should also set time aside for bug fixing.

With both of these in place, you can draw a tide line through your features backlog, showing what is in-scope and what is out-of-scope based on priorities and developer time available. This should be re-evaluated at least once per milestone - once every four to six weeks depending on how you've structured your project timeline, with finished work closed down, estimates updated, new features added, etc, so you and your team can see how short-term realities have impacted your long-term schedule. This gives you the info you need to address any big issues, like critical features falling out of scope, as soon as possible.

- **A project schedule (or long-term plan):** A map of all milestones in your project, showing which features will be developed when, and dependencies between work where needed. This is critical to understand how milestone changes are impacting your long-term plan, and to properly prepare for any external work such as outsourcing. In line with your project backlog, this should be updated at least once per milestone.
- **A risk log:** A list of all risks you're tracking that could impact your long-term project schedule, or delivery of your upcoming milestones. It's important to discuss mitigation strategies for risks on a weekly basis, and put them into action to mitigate the chance of problems arising that have the potential to disrupt your plan.

As alluded to above, it's common to structure your project into milestones and sprints



– milestones providing a framework for a stakeholder review process and the closure of major features, and smaller sprints as a mechanism for teams to track and evaluate their own progress within milestones.

The framework outlined above is intended to maintain the best view on a long-term plan, even if it's based on uncertain information, and continue to update it as new info appears.

It's there to provide flexibility in the creative process, but with a mechanism for raising potential issues so they can be sorted out.

The big takeaway from all this? In my experience, people who stick to one approach tend to be idealists, lack hands-on experience, or don't understand the realities of making games. A good producer should understand a range of methodologies and when to bring the right methodology to bear for a particular team and problem. That said, the above framework is good practice for most projects where an unknown creative endeavour is being developed under fixed constraints or with stakeholders to manage (in other words: almost every project).

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

Managing people is another critical skill for a good producer. There are no set methodologies to recommend for this, other than the advice that it's important to practice empathy, be open, honest, and vulnerable with people, and additionally to get comfortable giving difficult feedback.

I practice a philosophy of honesty, as do most good producers that I know. I'll actively praise good work, I'll tell someone (with empathy and caring) when I disagree with them or feel their work needs improving, and I'll aim to be open about the decisions I make and why I make them. A producer is often seen as a leader, and a good leader is genuine, honest, and trustworthy.

One of the most important and most overlooked points here is the need to be honest with people when their work isn't good enough or their behaviour is negatively affecting the overall team dynamic. Most people struggle to give difficult feedback, but the timely feedback of poor performance is one of the most critical aspects of running a happy and effective team. Unfortunately, it's rarely done quickly enough or well enough. Getting yourself to a place where

you can do this, with empathy, is absolutely critical if you're going to run an effective team and save yourself and your team a lot of wasted time and pain in the long run.

To sum up, then: the production discipline in games can be a bit of a mess, and you'll find producers, project managers, and development managers whose jobs range from the hands-off to the thoroughly creative (I've done a fair amount of narrative development and writing in my time as a producer, for example).

Still, having a good grasp of project management theory and application, developing solid people, leadership and interpersonal skills, and getting to know and love games, are all critical skills, no matter which company you're at or the responsibilities that define your role.

My parting advice: take those who evangelise a single project management style with a pinch of salt (but learn them all and when to apply them!). Be aware of apathetic producers or leaders (giving difficult feedback requires empathy, but is still necessary), and take time out to fall in love with games. If you're improving your skills in these three camps, you're on the path to be a great producer, regardless of where you are in your career. Be passionate, care about what you do and the people you work with, and learn the art of long-term planning with short-term flexibility. 🎮

“Managing people is another critical skill for a good producer”

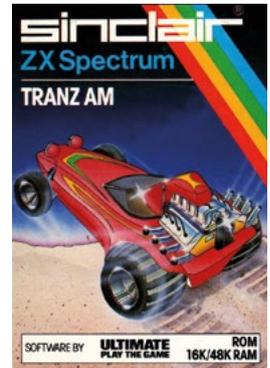
▼ More intense game development goings-on at Sharkmob.





Source Code

- ◀ Speed around the future USA trying not to run out of petrol.
- ▼ Tranz Am was available on cassette and also on cartridge format ROM.



Code a Tranz Am-style top-down racer



AUTHOR
MARK VANSTONE

Race around a post-apocalyptic US in our homage to an Ultimate classic

Tranz Am zoomed onto the ZX Spectrum in 1983. Published by Ultimate Play The Game, it saw the player drive around a future version of the United States in search of eight cups. Along the way, the player needed to visit petrol pumps to avoid running out of fuel, and just to make things more difficult, several other cars were racing around, trying to crash into our motor. There were plenty of other obstacles to avoid, too, which made driving at full speed a bad idea.

On the left of the screen, a mini-map of the United States could be found, along with counters showing time elapsed and miles travelled. A speedo, plus fuel and temperature gauges, were also on display so that you could keep an eye on your car's status. Like most of Ultimate's games, *Tranz Am* was well-received in 1983, and was one of the studio's more arcade-like titles, before it began its cycle of isometric adventures with 1984's *Knight Lore*.

To recreate *Tranz Am* in Pygame Zero, we need a system that draws a mini-map, which then translates to a much larger map

we can drive the car around on. In this case, the car stays in the centre of the play area and the map moves around it, depending on the speed and direction of the vehicle. For our example, we're going to have the main map 50 times the size of the mini-map, so one pixel on the mini-map will translate to 50 pixels on the main map. To do this, we'll make an image that will double as our collision and feature map, which will be the same size as the mini-map in the side panel. The main map features dots on the ground which show that it is moving if there are no other features in view, and these dots can be defined on our map image as random noise. We represent our boundary as white pixels, our petrol pumps as green pixels, and our cups as red pixels.

If we control the car's rotation using the left and right arrow keys, we'll need a bit of maths to calculate the movement of the map. We need to convert the angle of our car Actor to radians first, and then we can use sin and cos calculations to work out x and y increments based on the car speed (altered by the up and down arrow keys). As the map coordinates move, we redraw

the map in a 50x50 pixel grid based on the pixels we read from the collision/features image (`noisemap.png`). We need to detect if the car is over the top of a fuel pump, which we can find if the centre pixel we're reading for our main map is green. If the car's over a petrol pump, we increase the fuel level; if it's not, we decrease the fuel level. If the car's over a cup, we change the colour of the pixel to black and add one to our cups tally. The last thing to check is whether the car's over a boundary; if it is, the car will turn around 180 degrees.

We need to draw bars on the speedo and fuel and temperature gauges to show their levels and keep a count of time and number of miles travelled. We also need to display the number of cups collected in the left-hand panel. When the temperature goes too high, the speed is reduced until the temperature returns to a suitable level. With all that in the program, you have quite a playable *Tranz Am* clone. The only things you need to add are a few more obstacles and those pesky computer-controlled cars that try to crash into you. As always, we'll leave those for you to add in. 🎮

Tranz Am in Python

Here's Mark's code for a *Tranz Am*-esque racer. To get it working on your machine, you'll first need to install Pygame Zero. You can find full instructions at wfmag.cc/pgzero.



```

import pgzrun
from pygame import image, Color
import math

car = Actor('car', center=(500, 300))
car.angle = 180
car.speed = 0
car.fuel = 130
car.temp = 60
mapx = 100*50
mapy = 70*50
cups = 0
miles = 0
count = gameStatus = 0
noisemap = image.load('images/noisemap.png')

def draw():
    drawMainMap()
    car.draw()
    screen.blit("sidepanel", (0,0))
    drawMiniMap()
    screen.draw.filled_rect(Rect((60, 400), (car.fuel,
20)), (0,255,0))
    screen.draw.filled_rect(Rect((60, 349), (car.speed*26,
20)), (255,0,0))
    screen.draw.filled_rect(Rect((60, 450), (car.temp,
20)), (255,128,0))
    screen.draw.text(str(cups), center = (140, 548), owidth=0.5,
ocolor=(255,255,255), color=(0,0,255), fontsize=130)
    screen.draw.text(str(int(count/50)), center = (100, 108),
color=(255,255,255), fontsize=30)
    screen.draw.text(str(int(miles)), center = (100, 150),
color=(255,255,255), fontsize=30)
    if gameStatus == 1 : screen.draw.text("YOU GOT ALL THE
CUPS!", center = (400, 300), owidth=0.5, ocolor=(255,255,255),
color=(0,0,255), fontsize=80)

def update():
    global mapx,mapy,miles, count,gameStatus
    if gameStatus == 0 :
        checkInput()
        if car.fuel > 0:
            mapx += -car.speed * math.sin(math.radians(car.angle))
            mapy += -car.speed * math.cos(math.radians(car.angle))
            car.fuel -= car.speed/100
            car.temp = limit(car.temp+((car.speed-3)/100),60,130)
            if car.temp > 120:
                car.speed -= 0.1

```

```

        miles += car.speed/500
        flagCount = 0
        count += 1

def checkInput():
    if keyboard.left: car.angle = (car.angle + 5)%360
    if keyboard.right: car.angle = (car.angle - 5)%360
    if keyboard.up: car.speed = limit(car.speed + 0.1, 0, 5)
    if keyboard.down: car.speed = limit(car.speed - 0.1, 0, 5)

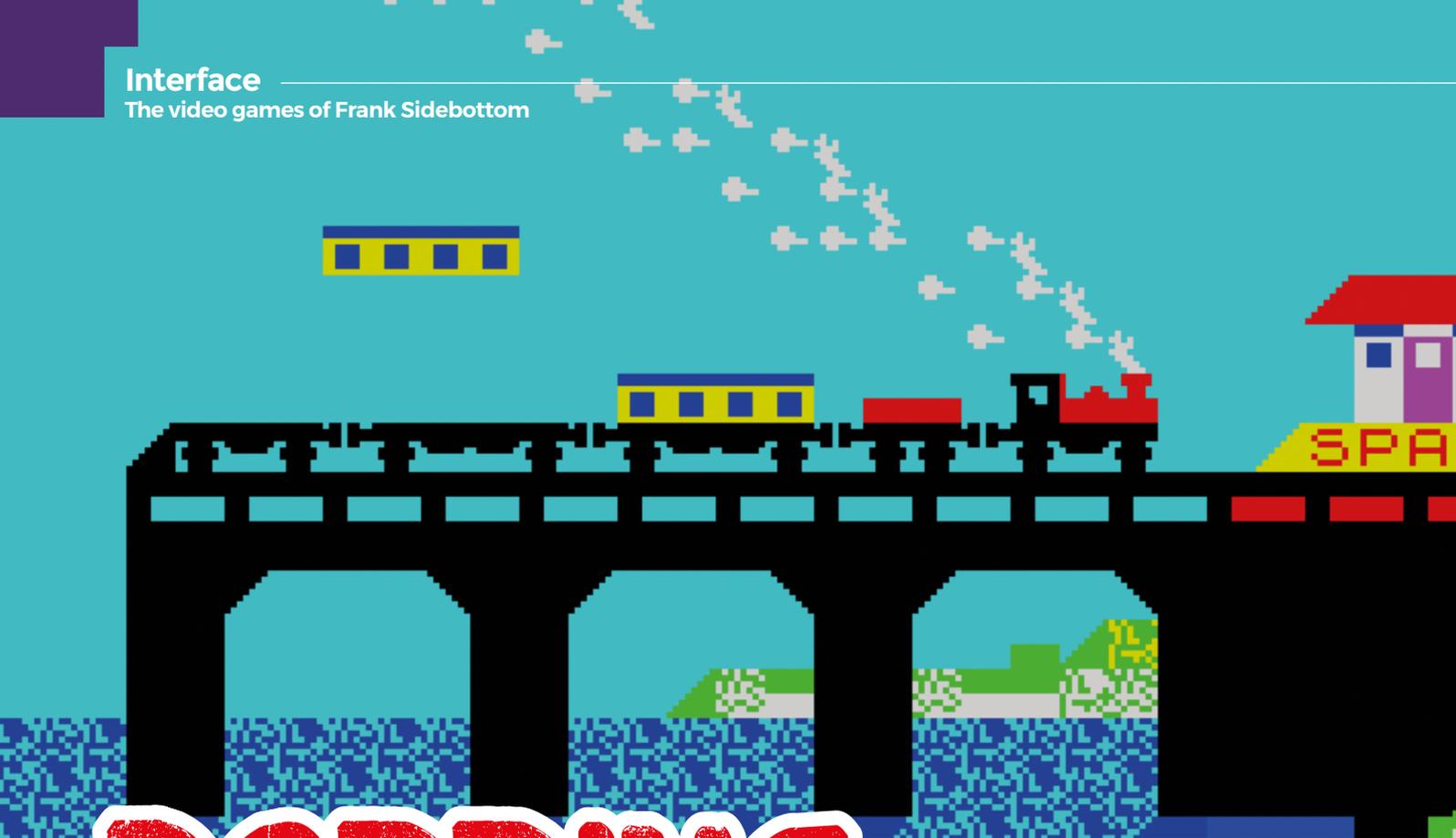
def drawMainMap():
    global cups, gameStatus
    screen.draw.filled_rect(Rect((200, 0), (600, 600)),(255,255,0))
    xoff = mapx%50
    yoff = mapy%50
    for x in range(-1,13):
        for y in range(-1,13):
            pixel = noisemap.get_at((int((mapx/50)+x),
int(mapy/50)+y))
            if pixel == Color('white'):
                screen.blit("boundary", (200+(x*50)-xoff, (y*50)-
yoff))
                if x == 6 and y == 6: car.angle = (car.angle +
180)%360
                elif pixel == Color('green'):
                    if x == 6 and y == 6: car.fuel = limit(car.
fuel+1,0,130)
                    screen.blit("fuel", (200+(x*50)-xoff, (y*50)-yoff))
                elif pixel == Color('red'):
                    if x == 6 and y == 6:
                        noisemap.set_at((int((mapx/50)+x),
int(mapy/50)+y), Color('black'))
                        cups += 1
                        if cups == 8: gameStatus = 1
                        else: screen.blit("cup", (200+(x*50)-xoff, (y*50)-
yoff))
                elif pixel.b > 200: screen.blit("dot", (200+(x*50)-
xoff, (y*50)-yoff))

def drawMiniMap():
    carRect = Rect((5+(mapx/50), 198+(mapy/50)), (4,4))
    if count%10 > 5: screen.draw.filled_rect(carRect, (0,0,0))
    else: screen.draw.filled_rect(carRect, (100,100,100))

def limit(n, minn, maxx):
    return max(min(maxn, n), minn)

pgzrun.go()

```



BOBBINS

THE VIDEO GAMES OF FRANK SIDEBOTTOM

Cult comedy legend Chris Sievey was also a programming genius. His family and friends share their recollections

WRITTEN BY JACK YARWOOD

Chris Sievey always wanted to be famous. The musician, who later became known as the papier mâché-headed comedy character Frank Sidebottom, released several singles in the seventies and eighties, both as a solo act and as part of the Manchester pop-punk group The Freshies, but he never quite managed to break the top 40. The closest he got was in 1980, when The Freshies' single, *I'm In Love With The Girl On The Virgin Megastore Check-out Desk*, reached number 54 in the UK singles chart. Top of the Pops booked the band to play on the programme, but a BBC technicians' strike cancelled that week's show. It was a huge setback, but Sievey never gave up. He continued making music, and even adopted game development as a unique way to promote his singles.

Sievey made his own music videos in BASIC on the Sinclair ZX81, and packaged singles alongside his games on record and cassette. It's an aspect of his career that has gone criminally underexplored



✓ Credit: Dave Arnold

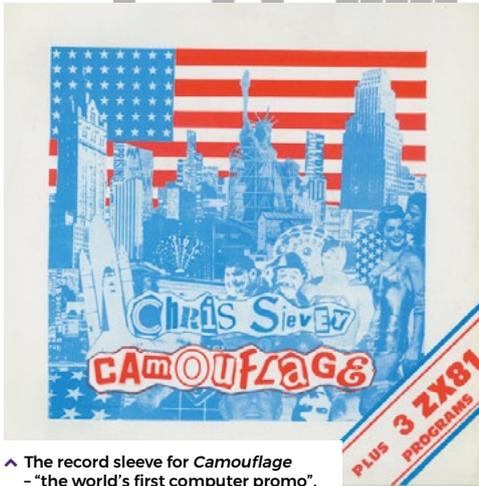


due to the shadow of his more popular creations, but it stands as a testament to an artist way ahead of his time. Sievey passed away in June 2010, but his fans, family, and friends are still hard at work keeping his legacy alive today. We spoke to them about the man behind the mask, how his career in music helped influence his video games, and how it led to the birth of his most popular creation, Frank Sidebottom.

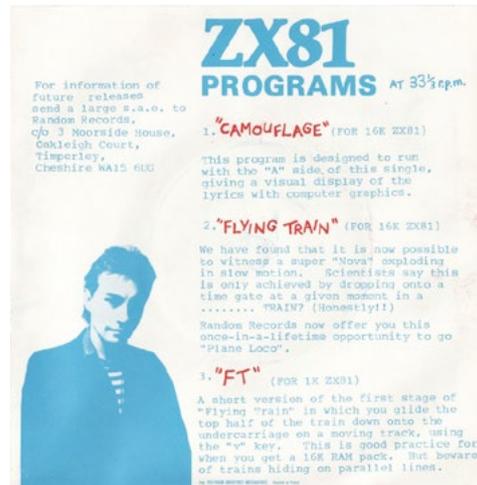
THE FIRST COMPUTER POP STAR

In 1982, shortly after disbanding The Freshies, Sievey took two of his children to pay a phone bill in his local town centre when he spotted a ZX81 in a shop window. Completely forgetting about the phone bill, he bought the computer and took it home, hoping to use it to make titles to superimpose over video.

"My dad went out of his way to get that computer," remembers Stirling, Chris Sievey's son. "When he put his mind to something, that was it. He was focused on it. When he got it home, he was



▲ The record sleeve for *Camouflage* – “the world’s first computer promo”.



determined he was going to learn how to make programs and stuff with it. He used to stay up at night tinkering away. When we were young kids, it just looked like a load of nonsense on a screen, but when he presented a game to you, it was like, “Oh, wow, this actually works.”

Over the next three weeks without a phone, Sievey learned how to code in BASIC. Then, one January day, he was writing a program of a bouncing ball when he had the idea to sync up the animation to a single he’d recently recorded with Joy Division’s producer Martin Hannett, called *Camouflage*. *Camouflage* was a love song that used the Cold War and the Berlin Wall as an allegory for a broken relationship, so Sievey took the bouncing ball and added some more complex graphics, including lyrics, an American flag, and a figure that danced to the music.

He released the music video in April 1982 with a short computer program teasing “Camouflage soon”. A year later, he released *Camouflage* as a single on his Random Records label, producing only 2000 copies for its initial run. The single came on vinyl and cassette, with one side of the record containing the title track, while the other featured a screeching wall of sound – the data for three computer programs. This included the music video for *Camouflage*, and two versions of a psychedelic video game called *Flying Train*, where you had to pilot a flying locomotive through a time gate in space. Sievey made the game as a joke.

“I think Chris was hedging his bets by putting a record out with the first computer promo on,” says his friend and former roadie, Dave Arnold. “He was hoping 50% would buy it because it was a music-related thing, and 50% would buy it because it had

a video game on the back. Win-win. But [like others have said], it didn’t really work because if you got a bit of fluff on the needle or it got a scratch, it slightly altered the sonics of the whole thing and then it was knackered.”

To get any of the games to work on vinyl was an ordeal. Players had to go through the difficult process of transferring the data from record to tape, with any slight defects capable of preventing the program from loading. If all went well, however, players could load the programs from tape, or in the case of the record, flip it over to side A on a record player and sync the beginning of the track to the music video.

The results were incredible – when it worked – and garnered positive attention. The record

label EMI picked up the single for a wider release, and commissioned a standalone colour version of *Flying Train* for the ZX Spectrum. Meanwhile, TV programmes like *The Tube* and *The Old Grey Whistle Test*

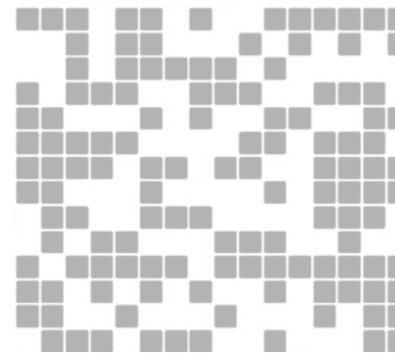
carried segments demonstrating *Camouflage*’s unique pop video. This wasn’t enough, however, to get the single to chart.

‘THE BIZ’

Sievey wasn’t deterred. Instead, he put his frustration with the music business and lack of chart success into his next game, *The Biz*, released by Virgin in 1984. It was a music industry sim that bore some similarities to Kevin Toms’ *Football Manager* series, one of Sievey’s favourite games. You created a band, played live shows, and appeared on TV, with the goal being to get your song to number one on the charts. Along the way, you’d have to deal with thieves, the perils of drug and alcohol addiction, and the economics ➔

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

EMI planned future programs with Sievey, including promos based on other songs such as *More Red Indian Music* and *Let’s Go Space City*. He even had the idea to do a video game album. But none of these ideas came to fruition, and Sievey’s first run with EMI ended before they could become a reality.



▼ A statue to Frank being unveiled in his home town of Timperley, where it remains to this day.



BEING FRANK

Frank Sidebottom has inspired two films over the last decade: the drama *Frank* starring Michael Fassbender and the documentary *Being Frank: The Chris Sievey Story*. The first took influence from the Frank Sidebottom character to tell a story about outsider art and mental illness, while the latter focused on the man himself and his various endeavours throughout a colourful career.

of making it in the music business. All of which made the game almost impossible to beat. Prior to releasing the game, Sievey held a competition offering a prize for whoever could beat it, but to our knowledge, no one ever did.

"The interesting thing about *The Biz* is that the [goal] was to get to number one in the record charts," says Steve Sullivan, director of *Being Frank: The Chris Sievey Story*. "This was Chris' own personal obsession in real life. But... it was [almost] impossible to ever reach number one in the charts. The game was rigged against you..."

"It's extremely difficult," says Martin Lyons, who Sullivan tasked with looking into the game's code ahead of the documentary. "It's like 'winning the lottery' levels of difficulty. I calculated all the probabilities and it was like 40 to 50 million to one. That is perfect as a kind of analogy. To win the game and get to number one, you basically have to win the lottery. It's not impossible, but it's extremely difficult, and you have to be extremely lucky because of the randomness that goes into it."

With these kinds of odds, you may be wondering why no one cheated, but as Lyons discovered, Sievey had made it difficult to see the end of the game without completing it legitimately. "[The program] goes to the end of the code and sets up some variables that equals some numbers," explains Lyons. "So T=10 or TT=100, but [the code] doesn't say TT=100, it just says TT=TxT. So it creates all these variables with numbers. Then all the way through the code, when using goto statements, [Sievey] doesn't say goto 2500, he'll

SECRET CODES

Sievey told many of his friends that MI5 had once approached him with a job. Most people thought he was joking, but he showed a keen interest in steganography throughout his life. As well as *The Biz*'s bizarre coding methods, fans also spotted a coloured pattern on most of his album sleeves and newsletters that reputedly contained a hidden message. No one knew what this pattern meant, until 2019 when GCHQ cracked the code, revealing the message, "Why does my nose hurt after concerts?" – a reference to the peg Sievey wore on his nose to achieve Frank's nasally tone.



say TT+Tx3+whatever. Every time he's creating a variable, he's making it in the most complex way possible, and so you can't cheat, because there's no way of knowing how to cheat. Thirty years later I can look at this code in an editor; I can easily replace and change things to make it readable. You couldn't do that in 1984. For somebody to hack this back then as a pen-and-paper exercise would have taken weeks of work."

As a result, most hackers would have simply looked at the code and decided that the prize wasn't worth the effort.

BECOMING FRANK

Besides a competition almost nobody could win, Sievey also promoted *The Biz* through other methods. The game came pre-packaged with his biggest hits from The Freshies, as well as an interview between him and his new comedy creation, Frank Sidebottom. Frank was an aspiring pop star from the small village of Timperley who still lived at home with his mum, had a cheery, often naive outlook on life, and boasted an enormous papier mâché head. Sievey conceived Frank as a way to promote his music with The Freshies, but he quickly took on a life of his own, and soon became more famous than his creator.

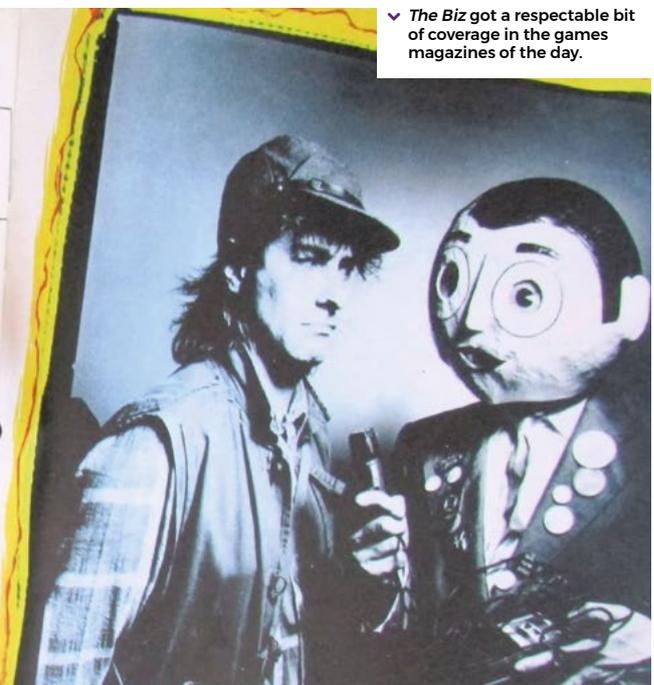
"I think there were 24 consecutive flop records," says Arnold. "He just got to a point where he thought 'Bollocks to it'. The whole Frank thing was a reaction to struggling so hard to be famous. He came up with this anti-pop star. Chris said to me, 'All Frank is, is how much of your time can I waste?'"

SIEVING THROUGH THE BIZ

THE BUNDERBLUSS FILE - We sent our intrepid interviewer Leslie B. Bunder into the depths of Virgin's HQ. Shooting straight from the heart, he sent us this Chris Sievey interview on a single paper...



✓ *The Biz* got a respectable bit of coverage in the games magazines of the day.





^ Chris Sievey talking with Tony Fletcher about his video game work on *The Tube*, a Channel 4 show for upcoming bands.

"I think he started to realise Frank was the famous one," says Stirling. "But he was still in the background recording music at home by himself. He had a couple of albums' worth of material that he was looking to release, but he never got around to doing it... I think he did the Frank thing to get a bit of money coming in, so he could spend time doing what he wanted to do, which was writing music."

After *The Biz*, Sievey vanished behind his comedy persona. He sent a letter to EMI and got signed to produce comedy albums, and started touring the UK. Though he had no chart success with Frank either, the character developed a cult following, and became a regular fixture on children's TV. But Sievey wasn't done with computers just yet.

"THE GAME WAS RIGGED AGAINST YOU"

In his new career under the head, Sievey started writing a Frank Sidebottom comic strip for *Oink!* magazine in 1986, which led to a crossover with *Crash Magazine*, where he published his two final programs, *Amoeba Rescue* and *The Charming Eggtimer*. While *The Charming Eggtimer* is fairly self-explanatory – it helped users boil the perfect egg – *Amoeba Rescue* requires a bit more of an explanation.

It involved holding your finger to the screen and guessing which pixel would appear. If you guessed the spot correctly, then you'd rescued 'the amoeba' and won the game. Interestingly, Sievey didn't credit these games to himself, but to Frank, taking on the persona not only in his music career but in his games too.

"He never made it big in the way he wanted to... but he was really good at everything," says Stirling. "I know the music didn't really take off, but he's done computer games, he's done comic books, he's done animation. It's like, people would be happy to do just one of [those things], but he's done them all."

After Sievey passed away in June 2010 from cancer, his family donated his archive to the Central Library in Manchester. It's hoped that this will help catalogue his innovative work across multiple mediums and ensure future generations can continue engaging with his art. Over the last few years, more and more people have started to look beyond Frank, at the man behind the mask, and have finally started celebrating the figure for his endeavours outside comedy. It's about time. 🙌



^ Credit: Dave Arnold

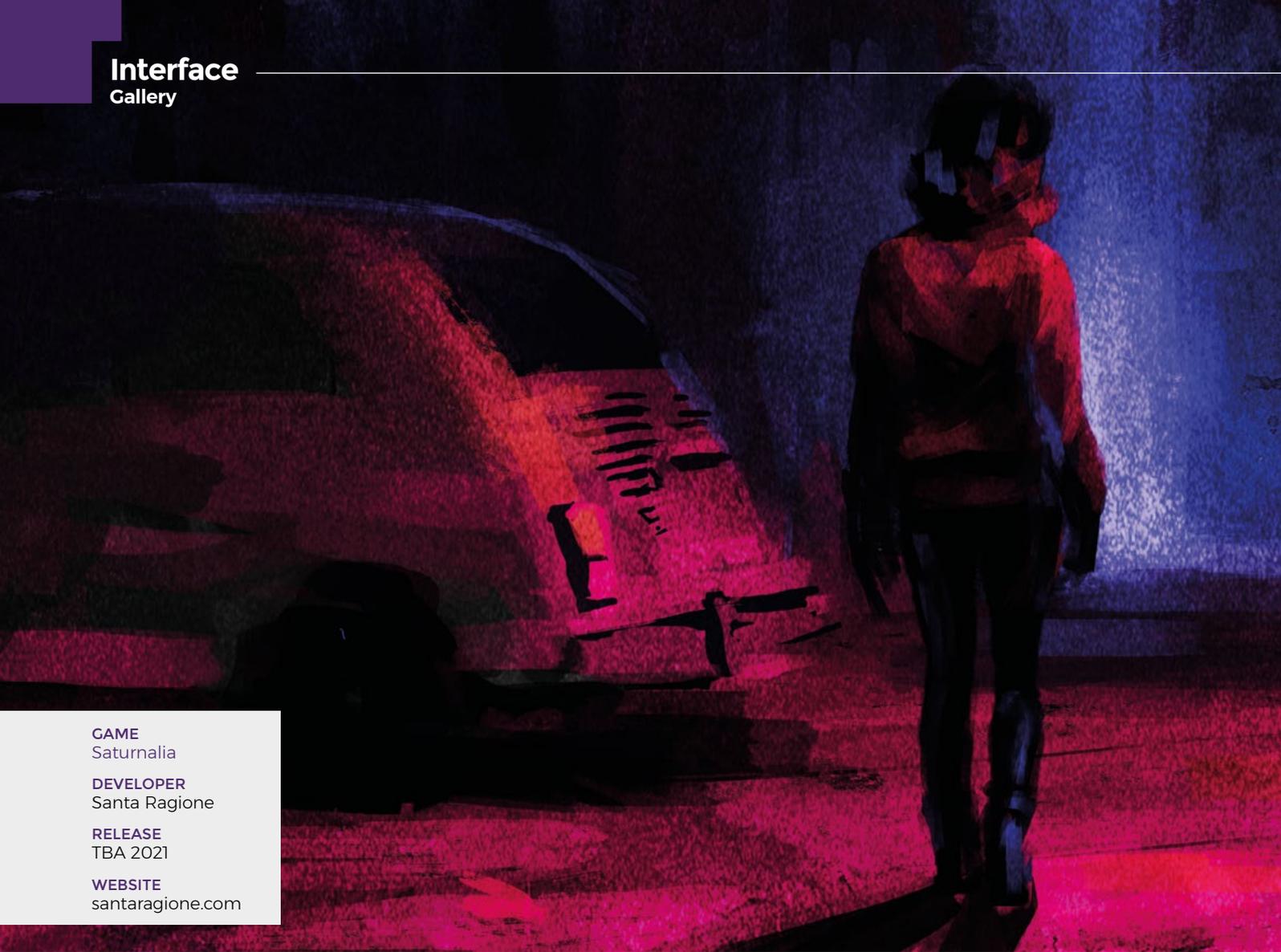


PLOK

In the early nineties, Ste Pickford of the Pickford Brothers remembers phoning up Frank Sidebottom to ask him to voice a character called Plok for his next game. Sievey agreed to voice the character, but the collaboration never happened due to a shift in platform and a change to an American publisher. Nevertheless, years later, when *Plok!* finally released for the SNES, there were a ton of potential references to the Frank Sidebottom character, including a boss fight with a duo known as the Bobbins Brothers.



^ After *The Biz*, Sievey signed with EMI again, this time as Frank. His first album, *Frank's Firm Favorites*, featured a bunch of covers, including a rendition of The Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the U.K.*



GAME
Saturnalia

DEVELOPER
Santa Ragione

RELEASE
TBA 2021

WEBSITE
santaragione.com

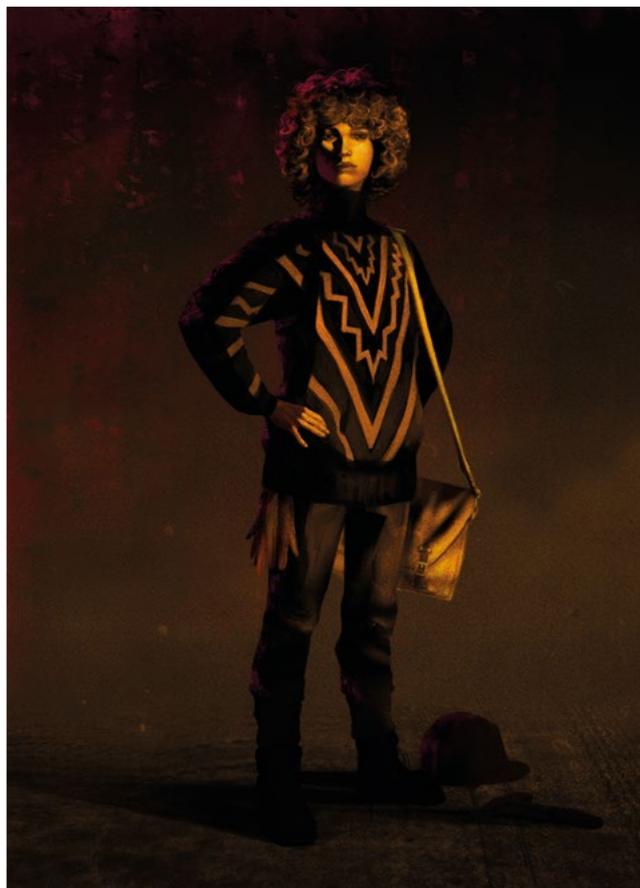


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Saturnalia

As you'll have seen earlier in this month's edition, *Saturnalia*'s a nail-biting adventure steeped in horror, from its island setting, redolent of *The Wicker Man*, to the striking use of colour, inspired by Italian film directors like Mario Bava and Dario Argento. It's a look that took a fair bit of experimentation to get just right, as director Pietro Righi Riva tells us. "We redesigned it two years in to achieve the etched, rotoscoped look that it has today," he says. "This was directed by Mike Ferraro, who was technical artist on a Unity demo called *Adam*, directed by Neill Blomkamp. Michael was the technical director for that, and he was experimenting with new rendering techniques, so we got in touch, and we developed this technique together to achieve the look the game currently has."

The resulting game looks remarkably close to the production sketches you can see here: this was achieved on-screen, Righi Riva explains, through a mixture of hand-drawn textures and post-processing. "The etching that you see in the background is actually multiple techniques – from a certain distance on, we do a more traditional post-processing effect, saying, 'This area is dark, so we'll paint more lines here'. But if you get closer to an object, you'll see the etches actually painted on the faces of the geometry, which means that we blend between this far-distance effect and this close-distance effect so that it looks like it's painted on, and you're not looking at it through a filter, so to speak. It's a combination of multiple rendering techniques, basically."





VHS

The future of game preservation?

Libraries, museums, and private collectors are joining forces to find the best ways of preserving video gaming's past

Since 1662, a copy of every published book has been deposited at the British Library. It's a legal requirement that preserves the works of authors for future generations, and Iain Simons would be happy if there were a similar system created for video games. "There's no systemic, structured way for games to be preserved – none at all," laments the co-founder and creative director of the National Videogame Museum (NVM) in Sheffield. "Unlike books, there's no legal deposit, so I could release a game today and no official structure would ever know about it."

This isn't a unique situation. There's no legal requirement for movie-makers to deposit their films nor musicians to hand over a copy of their every composition. Still, many people interested in video games are still keen to retain as much of its past as possible. "This magazine will be lodged with the British Library and my words during this interview will probably survive longer than the things I'm talking about," Simons continues. Yet rather than call for a single vault of software and hardware, he and others believe the answer may lie elsewhere.

Step forward, then, the Videogame Heritage Society, or VHS for short. Led by the NVM, it aims to bring together organisations and private collectors involved in preservation to discuss the best way forward.

"No one can collect everything," says Simons. "It just doesn't make sense for the NVM, or frankly any museum, to put its arms around huge amounts of items and put it all in one place. Today, there are towns and cities across the UK which have museums, exhibitions, and collections of their own heritage that plot individual local stories. So the answer perhaps lies in a national collection that's shared across a bunch of institutions rather than one trying to get everything, and what we're now starting to think about is how we might coordinate a distributed collection."

MANIC RUSH

In many ways, this is a different approach from one Simons pursued in the past – primarily with the National Videogame Archive (NVA), which he helped spearhead in 2008. Created as a partnership between Nottingham Trent University and what was then called the National



Media Museum in Bradford, it amassed a large collection and had the backing of industry figures before disaster struck just a few years later. “After the coalition government came to power, there was a massive bloodbath and loads of people involved in that project lost their jobs,” Simons recalls. “The collection still exists, but there was no capacity within the museum [now the National Science and Media Museum] to continue actively collecting. It was paused – although not formally – because there were simply no resources.”

To some extent, the NVA appeared to be the answer. As well as retaining the games themselves, the archive was amassing prototypes, early sketches, box art, advertising, and even mods and fan art. Aside from preserving, analysing, and displaying the products of the video game industry, it also sought to

place them with their historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. But there were many problems to solve along the way. The NVA was keen to archive *Manic Miner*, and it finally tracked down the game’s developer, Matthew Smith, for permission, only to discover he didn’t actually hold the rights. Other games the organisation wanted to include had long been wiped or lost because past publishers didn’t believe their commercial life would extend much past a year or so. Video gaming may be a relatively young entertainment industry, but preservation is already a tricky business.

“Video game preservation can only succeed in the long term as a really large group effort,” Simons says. “It’s a massive scale problem. Some issues are technical; some are legal. There needs to be a coordinated approach, even though I don’t believe the VHS will ever be the panacea.”

▲ It’s important to preserve video games so they aren’t lost to future generations.

▼ Iain Simons, co-founder and creative director at the National Videogame Museum, worries that we’re still in danger of losing gaming’s link to the past.



▲ The British Library has been archiving websites. Could it extend its powers to legally archiving digital copies of games?

ALL-EMBRACING

It certainly helps that the VHS falls under the umbrella of a Subject Specialist Network (SSN) ➔



PRESERVING THE MOMENT

Animal Crossing: New Horizons was released in March 2020 – just as Covid-19 was spreading across the world. It prompted the National Videogame Museum to record whether people approached the game differently during a pandemic, enabling them to preserve their experience. “*Animal Crossing* in a pandemic is a very different thing,” says Iain Simons. “Yes, you can take a boxed copy and preserve it and you can use it in the future, but that doesn’t tell you anything about the fact it was important during lockdown for millions of people. That stuff matters. How we play – and when – is part of preservation too.”

– the term given to a mesh of museums and membership bodies seeking to share advice and guidance about acquiring, preserving, and researching within specific areas. With the VHS, there’s a commitment to running online seminars, with one eye on an international conference about preservation somewhere down the road. There’s also a greater chance of talk turning to action.

“SSNs are a recognised structure and they allow knowledge of best practice to be shared,” explains Simons. “To be honest, I hadn’t heard of them before the idea of the VHS came into being – then I found out that there’d never been one for any sort of digital preservation, let alone video games, which was really surprising. We’re pleased to have plugged that gap!”

The VHS’ founder members include the Science Museum Group, The British Library, Museum of London, Centre for Computing History, and Bath Spa University as well as The Retro Hour Podcast and C64Audio.com. But what marks this

network as different from many other SSNs is its insistence on having private collectors involved.

“So often you’ll find these networks are for official museums and heritage institutions, but the big thing about this one is that so much of the deepest knowledge about games lies with individuals and people who are massively

passionate about a particular game or platform,” says Simons. He adds that VHS is free to join and has benefited from funding via the Art Fund. “This should be a place where you can easily go and find a bunch of other people who are interested and knowledgeable in that subject.”

To that end, an invite is being extended to “basically anyone who collects video games and wants to talk to other people who collect video games”, Simons tells us. “We all know there are so many people doing great stuff, but there’s not always a lot of coordination. That’s not a criticism. Everyone has just been busy and kind of getting on with it. But it’s good to bring people together.”

A BALANCING ACT

The hope is that the VHS becomes a “watering hole” of sorts, a forum in which ideas blossom and new projects take fruit. There’s a recognition

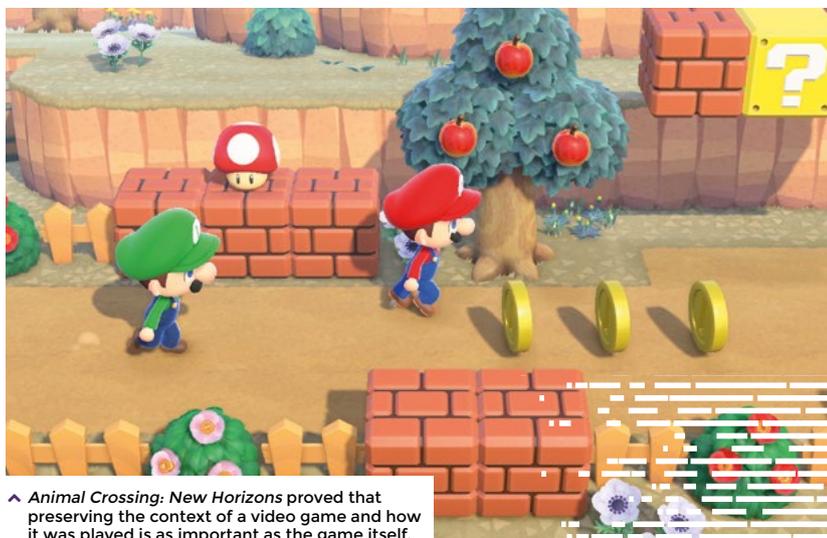
among those taking part that museum curators and collectors are pulling in the same direction; that everyone is keen

“Their mandate is to run servers profitably, not preserve old stuff”

to avoid the heartache of the past in which some publishers and developers have thrown away design documents and early sketches as well as original cassettes and floppy disks.

Stories certainly abound of abandoned games being erased; of obscure fanzines pulped. But then you learn there’s a prototype ZX Spectrum at The Centre for Computing History in Cambridge, and that perhaps the only Amiga CD12000 drive in existence is located at the Retro Computer Museum in Leicester. “You also have individuals such as Mark Hardisty, who’s done some amazing work in Sheffield charting the history of Gremlin Graphics,” says Simons.

And it’s not just about preserving the past, either. Simons stresses that future games will one day form part of history, too, and steps need to be taken to consider those today. “One of the things we are looking at is the possibility of creating a coherent legal framework for publishers to be able to deposit assets,” says Simons. “Discussions have to be on a level that isn’t simply about nostalgia or on the lines of ‘Isn’t it a shame that you can’t play *Table Top Tanks* again?’. It has to be a discussion with legal, corporate, and commercial angles to it, and there needs to be an understanding that



▲ *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* proved that preserving the context of a video game and how it was played is as important as the game itself.

the people who make decisions aren't the same people who make the games."

A key word there is "legal". We've already seen how some publishers react to ROMs old games appearing online. Nintendo, in particular, has taken some of the biggest of these sites to court: it recently won \$2.1 million in damages in a case against RomUniverse. It highlights the balancing act between the need to preserve versus the commercial concerns of big companies. On one hand, those making digital copies are saving games from being lost to degradation – a particular problem for titles originally issued on disk and tape. Then again, publishers and developers have every right to keep a rein on their own intellectual property. Discussions within the VHS may yet help to resolve this situation.

Simons points to the recent issue in which Sony Interactive Entertainment announced plans to shutter the digital storefronts for the PS3, PSP, and Vita, leaving as many as 138 games unavailable for purchase (a situation it later largely backtracked from doing).

"The people deciding whether or not to turn off the PS3 servers aren't bad people; they're not trying to destroy games and make everybody sad – that's not what is motivating them," Simons says. "Their mandate is to run servers profitably, not to preserve old stuff. But unless these things can be reconciled and joined up, quite understandably, those servers will be turned off because the numbers show they're wasting money.

"So this thing has to be reconciled. We've got to find a way to make things work that bridge two worlds. And I think it's important that the preservation community does that with consistency in the language we use. We often wring our hands a lot and talk about how important this stuff is. But that isn't going to answer the question being posed by a finance director who's asking why a deeply unprofitable service is being operated. We've got to be able to breach that conversation, and I think people are really trying to come to the table with that."

FINDING THEIR FEET

At the same time, museums are facing financial pressures of their own, which could affect public preservation efforts in the future. The past 18 months have been tough, and most have had to rely on goodwill and grants. Who knows where



the Retro Computer Museum would have been were it not for the generosity of an anonymous donor handing over £30,000 in May. "It was really touch and go for us too," says Simons, still thankful that the National Videogame Museum received a £400,000 grant from the Arts Council of England's Culture Recovery Fund last October. "We were at reduced capacity once we were allowed to reopen because of social distancing, and yet we've seen that the appetite for coming is there."

Simons is also hopeful that the government may get involved in game preservation, but he isn't holding his breath. "Their interest in preservation is yet to be declared," he says, "but, you know, they cared enough about what we do to give us money from the Culture Recovery Fund."

For now, the focus is on how to survive, then thrive, with a well-preserved collection that will benefit all. "A collector or museum should be able to find out where the design documents for *Zoo!* are located," argues Simons. "It would be good to see a sharing of catalogues, and the VHS will hopefully enable that to happen because everybody's already in a room and talking about it. We'll see how things progress." 🗣️

▲ Cross-platform games mean preservation isn't as simple as archiving a single copy of each title.

▼ Preservation discussions extend beyond the games themselves and covers the hardware on which they're played.

CREATING A DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Thanks to the Non-Print Legal Deposit Regulations 2013, the British Library is able to take a copy of websites and social media without first seeking permission. A similar arrangement for games would speed up the archiving of digitally distributed games by removing the need to negotiate with developers and publishers – but any such arrangement would have to avoid comprising commercial needs.



Interactive / CreatorCrate

Solo designer Jori Ryan talks us through the seven-year development of her slapstick sci-fi sandbox

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

› Once you learn the controls, there's a definite satisfaction to knocking out a guard with a bit of scenery, and then stealing their gun.

It's the distant future, and you're humanity's worst nightmare: a labour-saving device that emerges as the most deadly piece of tech ever created. In essence, you're a sentient, ambulating 3D printer capable of gulping down pretty much anything as a raw material – even people – and turning it all into weapons you can use against your own creators.

This is why you find yourself rampaging around a circular space station, avoiding or destroying soldiers and weapons systems, eating and creating useful items, all with the goal of finding an exit. It might sound a bit sci-fi horror, but developer Jori Ryan's game is so slapstick and wild that the tone is closer to a black comedy. "I have a very morbid sense of humour," Ryan



admits, "and *CreatorCrate* has always been tied to that. The funny part for me is the imbalance between what the *CreatorCrate* is on paper and what it actually does. As a kid, I absolutely loved *Jurassic Park*, and that has a similar dynamic: trying to turn the T-rex into a theme park ride blows up in the most horrible way imaginable. It's funny because we can understand why you'd want to make *Jurassic Park*, but we can also see how it's doomed from the start."

CreatorCrate's controls take a little getting used to, but prove versatile once mastered: while the keyboard takes care of moving your anti-hero's body, the mouse moves its grabbing arm, with its current direction handily signposted by an aiming reticule. Pretty much any object in the game can be grabbed with your arm and then turned into printing material, but you can also throw items to use as projectiles, while guns can be snatched from guards and used as – well, guns. Once absorbed, your raw materials can be used to repair damage to your *CreatorCrate*, or you can print out new items based on the most recent things you've picked up. It's a system that turns each session in the game into a chaotic sandbox, where you're throwing vending machines at crowds of guards one second, and printing out replacement guns to defend yourself against gigantic laser platforms the next.



◀ *CreatorCrate's* levels may look like conventional rectangles, but they're actually wedge-shaped – the map's circularity becomes more obvious as you reach the centre.

▼ As well as guns, there are knives you can use to disable security systems, while fire and acid can be used to create shortcuts and diversions.



In fact, *CreatorCrate* began life as a more complex RPG, before Ryan realised that the real fun lay in all that chaotic, physics-based action. "I decided to cut the skill trees and focus on refining the core game loop," she says. "It's a game where you grab, throw, whack, block, and devour your way to freedom."

Controls aside, one of *CreatorCrate's* most eye-catching ideas is the gigantic space station that serves as your prison and interstellar battleground. Its procedurally generated maze of corridors, platform-filled shafts, and atriums are arranged in concentric rings – a detail that might go unnoticed at first, but proved to be a hefty design challenge for Ryan to solve. "Before *CreatorCrate*, I'd never played a game that lets you explore this kind of structure," Ryan says.

"There's a good reason for this: a game with a circular world is so much harder to make. *CreatorCrate* uses 2D grids for maps and

level generation the same way that other games do. However, *CreatorCrate* is always stretching the grid around a circle, which needs all kinds of new systems to make it work. It requires many different shapes of blocks. It needs a coordinate system based on rotation and distance from the centre of the circle. It needs a way to wrap the grid around so that the game knows that room zero is next to room 127. It needs a way to stack one room on top of multiple smaller rooms in order to deal with the way that the circle's circumference increases as you travel away from

"A game with a circular world is so much harder to make"

the centre. The circular shape of *CreatorCrate's* levels added several years to development, but I'm so excited to have finally made a game where this kind of space station is a reality."

All told, *CreatorCrate* has taken Ryan seven years to create, with initial development taking place in GameMaker before it shifted to Unity – all the better to get that complex circular map working. Ryan isn't finished with *CreatorCrate* yet, either: she hopes to work on some console ports at some point, as

well as making other improvements to the PC version in the meantime. "In the near future, I plan to add an option to hold down a button to charge up a throw to make the game more accessible to controller players," she says. "If I have the chance, it would also be great to make an Endless Mode expansion. This would allow you to play through an unlimited series of levels that gets more and more challenging. I've also considered making a level editor where players can create new pieces of content for *CreatorCrate's* procedural level generator." 🗨

GETTING STARTED

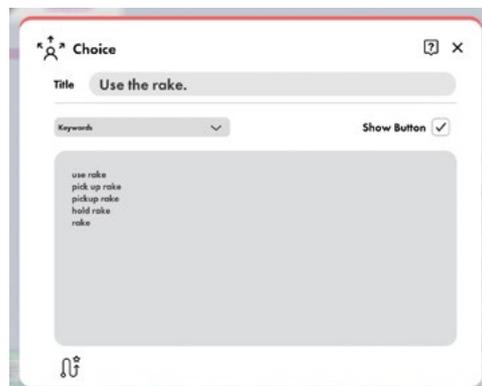
If the thought of making an entire game by yourself sounds enticing yet daunting at the same time, Jori Ryan has some useful advice. "Organisation is important, but really, the hardest part is ignoring your own anxiety," she says. "You just have to stop thinking about the scale of what you've taken on. I work by writing out a list of very small, concrete steps. Then I check off each task on the list and start the process over again. Working this way means that I can spend more energy thinking about the details of the project and less energy worrying about the big picture. I also find that listening to songs on repeat helps me feel calm and focused when I'm working. It takes so much time, but the work adds up if you just keep doing it."

Speakeasy

RichCast is an upcoming platform designed to let just about anyone make voice-activated, interactive experiences. Co-creator Philip Oliver tells us all about it

WRITTEN BY
RYAN LAMBIE

The explosion of creative, left-field indie games we've enjoyed over the past decade or so has been thanks in no small part to the growth of platforms like GameMaker, Unity, and Unreal Engine. Those tools have greatly lowered the barrier to entry for a generation of indie developers: without them, we may never have seen such games as, say, *Hotline Miami*, *Night in the Woods*, or *Hello Neighbor*. But what about potential storytellers who have no experience in programming? You may not need a computer science degree to make a piece of interactive fiction in platforms like Twine and Ink, but even those solutions require users to get to grips with their respective scripting languages.



RichCast's voice recognition isn't flawless at present, but you can help it interpret the user's various spoken inputs by providing lots of alternatives for it to listen out for.

RichCast's interface, on the other hand, is almost entirely visual. It allows users to create interactive experiences using simple tiles and connectors, so if you can understand and draw flow charts, you'll be able to make games in RichCast – specifically, voice-activated, narrative games. *Miami Heist* is one early example game built in RichCast: it's an adventure where your objective is to break into a dodgy billionaire's mansion and steal one of his prized possessions, and you navigate your way around by speaking simple commands ('use rake', for example) into your mobile phone or PC. Narration and actors are brought to life with synthesised voices, while captions on the screen give you a better idea of the commands you can use to interact and progress.

Open *Miami Heist* up in RichCast's editor (or 'Integrated Creative Studio'), and you'll immediately get an idea of how the tile-based system works. 'Speak' tiles contain the lines of script that the game reads out; 'Choice' tiles provide the branching paths that allow players to issue voice commands and choose their course through the game. Discrete areas in your project – whether they're chapters or individual scenes – are stored in separate pages, which can in turn be connected up to create the narrative flow.

With your tiles in place, you can then drag connective arrows between them, creating a sequential network of scene-setting images,



Watson Speaking

I burst into the cosy sitting room of 221B Baker Street, to find Mr Sherlock Holmes, hard at work on one of his experiments

sound effects and snippets of dialogue, player choices, and potential outcomes. In theory, it's akin to Unreal Engine's node-based Blueprints scripting system; in practice, it's much simpler, with its clean colours and chunky interface closer to the beginner-level programming language, Scratch. RichCast's system is a flexible one, though, and it's possible to create quite complex scenarios with the handful of tile types currently programmed into the platform – you can use Logic tiles, for example, to create conditions (“If the player's spoken to character X, then go to scene Y”, for instance), or strings that keep track of items in the player's inventory.

RichCast is the latest venture from Philip and Andrew Oliver – the veteran British developers who've brought us such classics as the *Dizzy* series of adventures, *Super Robin Hood*, and *Grand Prix Simulator*. According to co-creator Philip Oliver, RichCast began with the idea of creating a platform specifically for non-programmers: “From the original concept, we said we need creators and writers to be able to use this system easily,” he tells us. “We said, ‘The minute you go to a script-based language – doesn't matter what that language is – it puts people off.’ And so we were saying it has to be a graphic user interface, and the natural way to go then is to say, ‘It's got to be a flow chart.’”

“We need creators and writers to be able to use this system easily”

When work began on RichCast, the process of creating its visual language was, as much as anything else, a process of paring things down: keeping the interface as clean and simple as possible, with a grid-based system that allows the user to create complex game loops that, with the aid of connective tiles called Junctions and the odd comment pinned here and there, can

still be kept tidy and easy to comprehend. In design terms, Oliver compares RichCast to the Acorn's usage of the RISC (reduced instruction set computer)

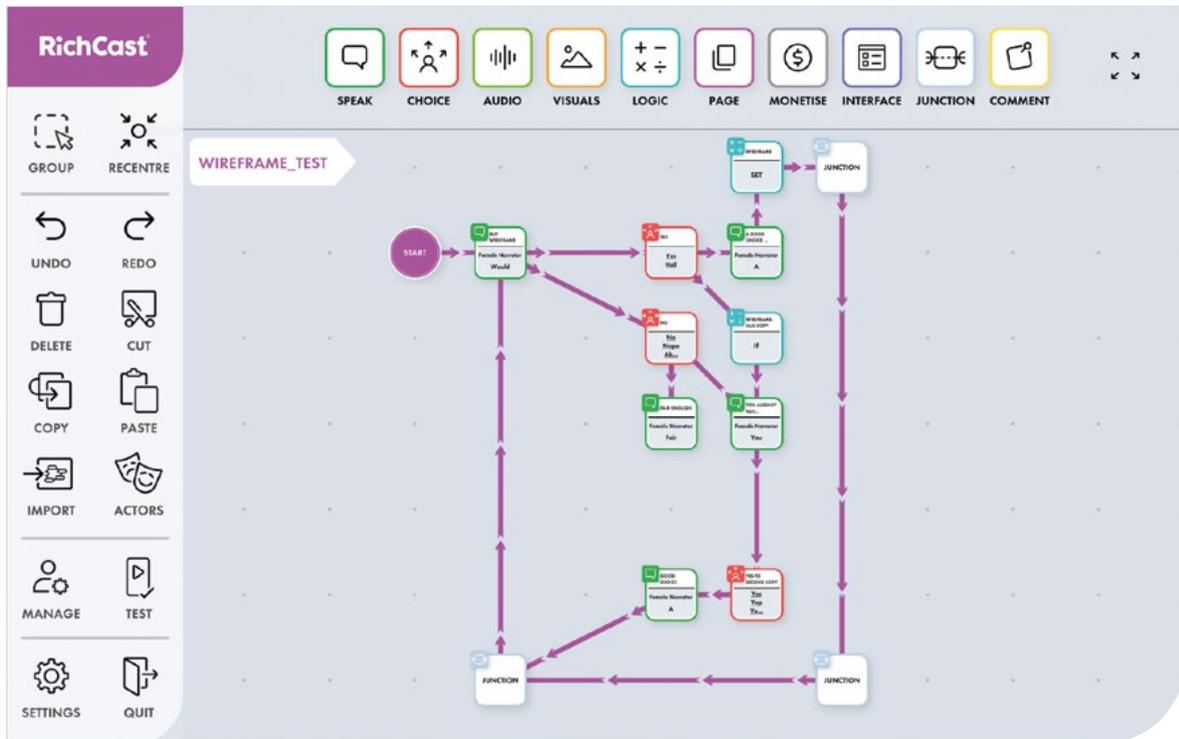
architecture in its computers. “Everybody was going more and more complicated, and then Acorn invented the RISC system and said, ‘Actually, why don't we go simpler, and you'll just use more of them?’. So, in our case, that's little tiles – we've simplified what's normally programming. Other people do flow charts, like in Unreal, but they've always had nested systems inside each node, whereas, in RichCast, one tile is only one function. You're either going through it or you're not – it's binary. We've made it really simple to use.”

Panivox, the company the Olivers and fellow industry veteran Neil Campbell formed to create RichCast, have big plans for the platform. They see it as an all-in-one system for voice-activated games and apps – an ecosystem where creators →

▲ *Sherlock Holmes and the Eminent Explorer* is an example of the kind of interactive mysteries that you could make in RichCast.

More than fiction

RichCast isn't only for making games. As its name implies, it could also be used to make interactive podcasts – with voice-enabled commands for selecting chapters, for example, as Philip Oliver explains. “Hopefully we'll eventually get something like that: someone does a podcast, they break it into pieces, drop it into RichCast, and then index through it. We haven't got an example of one yet, but it's something we might commission just to prove it can be done easily.”



SPEAK The text from your game's script is stored in Speak tiles, and will be read out by your chosen synthesised 'actor'.

CHOICE Player interactions, from simple 'yes' or 'no' responses to more complex commands, are created with Choice tiles.

LOGIC You can use Logic tiles to track and update variables in your game, such as whether a player has picked up an item.

JUNCTION These tiles are essentially empty, but are useful for keeping your flow of tiles and connections neat and tidy.



^ Voice-activated games are a relatively novel experience, though some may feel a bit self-conscious about playing them on a crowded train, say.

will be able to publish their work and earn money from it. The details surrounding RichCast's monetisation are still being nailed down, but broadly, there'll be a range of subscription options for creators, ranging from just a few dollars per month at one end to around \$50 per month for commercial developers, while players will either be able to purchase games using the platform's in-game currency (called RichCoins) or via a monthly subscription. There'll also be a free-to-use 'hobbyist' tier for creators, though this subset of users won't be eligible for any kind of revenue share; only subscribed creators will get a varying share of royalties from the sale of their game, depending on their chosen level of subscription. Philip Oliver compares RichCast to an entertainment platform like Amazon Prime or Apple TV, "where there's free content, but the majority of experiences have a price attached".

"What has been pointed out is how good it is for game jams"

Launching an entire creative platform does, of course, have risks attached to it, and Philip Oliver is cognisant of the challenges ahead. "First of all, there's lack of content," he says. "Hence why we have a content strategy, which is to commission people [to make games], then to do some competitions to motivate people to play with it and use it. We know that most of that stuff will be amateurish, but it will also be very random. And actually, random's good, because it might mean, 'Woah, you've done something really different and unexpected.' Then, hopefully, over time, there'll be a big enough user base, and we bring in monetisation, where writers will say, 'I want to write something serious [for RichCast] now, because there's an audience here for it.'"

It goes without saying, too, that RichCast is tightly focused on making a specific type of experience at present: it's not a platform like



▲ Panivox co-founders Philip Oliver (left), Neil Campbell (middle), and Andrew Oliver (right).

Unity where you could make anything from a 2D platformer to, say, a 3D, open-world horse opera.

“The limitations in the short term are that it’s not really designed to have lots of 3D models and sprites moving around the screen,” Oliver says. “It’s not a programming language to do that. It’s purely for fiction and non-fiction stories at the moment. However, now that we’ve got quite an interesting and unique programming system, theoretically in the future it could be taken to those areas. It’s a limitation at the moment, but we’ve made what we’ve originally envisaged – it’s just that now we’re going, ‘Hmm, we can do all these other things as well.’”

In its current form, RichCast will, its creators hope, attract the kinds of would-be interactive fiction writers that are looking for an alternative to platforms like Episode and Twine. At the time of writing, Panivox has started to contact potential designers for the platform, and has

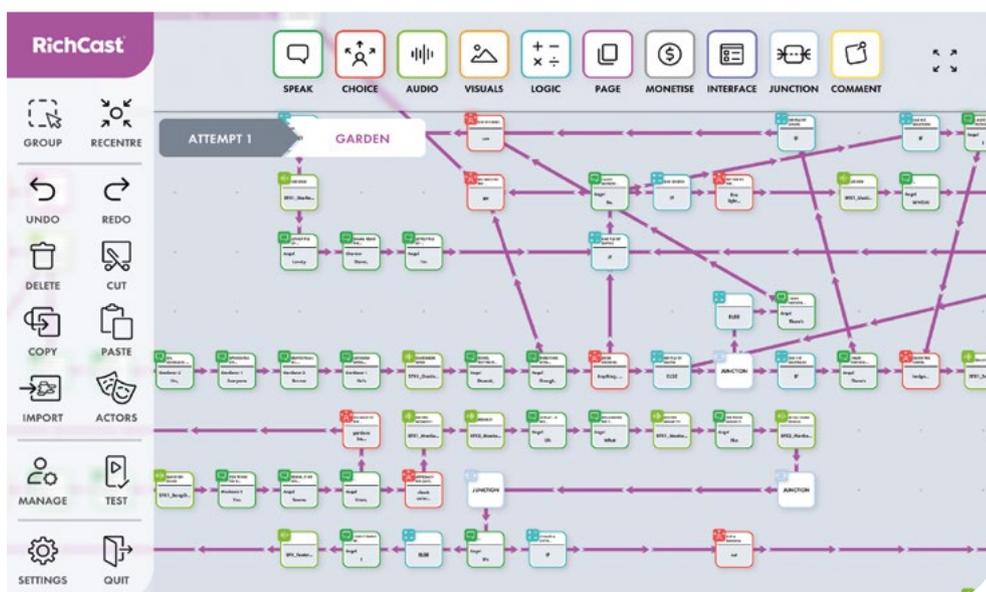
recently taken on three community managers to help shepherd what they expect will be a coming wave of creators and their content. “We’re reaching out to more writers, and as of last week, we’ve started contacting writing groups, and going out to university lecturers, all of whom have said, ‘This is the best programming language to get students into our games course.’ We knew it’d be useful for universities, but we hadn’t appreciated how useful... in fact, what has been pointed out is how good it is for game jams – in 24 or 48 hours, you can do a lot in RichCast.”

Ultimately, RichCast’s future lies with its users: if the platform can build up the ecosystem it needs to gain traction, then we could eventually see a diverse array of voice-activated games that go far beyond anything the Oliversons originally envisaged. “We want novices to get their stuff on the platform, have people look at it, and then realise they need to get better,” Oliver says. “All developers start that way – me and Andrew, our first games were pretty poor. We got paid very little for them – and rightly so, quite frankly – but then you say, ‘Ah, the way to get more eyes, more money, is to improve the quality.’ So with RichCast, I think we’ll see what we often do with user-generated content. Some people just blow your mind with what they create.”

RichCast will launch on PC/Mac in December, with iOS and Android to follow in early 2022. Sign up for Early Access at richcast.com. 

Improving Tech

According to Philip Oliver, the technology that underpins RichCast simply wasn’t there even a few years ago. “When speech recognition was introduced in the noughties, half the reason it was terrible was because microphones were bad – the actual input signal was appalling. Whereas Alexa is so good – you can stick an Alexa in a room with the TV on and music playing and it still gets you every time. The mics are getting so good, and the software’s better at filtering out noise. We’re using third-party libraries, so a lot of this is down to them to keep improving. I’d say it’s pretty good now, but it’ll only get better. The same’s true of artificial voices – in two to three years, it’ll give real voice actors a run for their money.”



◀ A lengthier adventure like *Miami Heist* requires a hefty network of tiles and links.

FULL DISCLOSURE

Wireframe editor Ryan Lambie suggested an idea for a RichCast game, and to his surprise, Panivox liked it. It’s currently a work in progress.

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Online Diary

GITTIN' GUD

They ain't paying me enough for this, but here's Aliens: Fireteam Elite anyway

WRITTEN BY IAN "HUDSON IS A VERY GOOD MARINE, ACTUALLY" DRANSFIELD

I'm not sure if we're ever going to get the right kind of co-operative *Colonial Marines*-based *Aliens* spin-off we need in the world. A game in which only one player has the motion tracker, as it's a big bulky piece of kit that needs holding and focusing on. A game where welding is the tensest, most important part of any encounter. A game where we all realise that, actually, Hudson wasn't a coward and an idiot but was actually one of the most effective members of the badass hombres sent down to LV-426. Basically, a game that was what *Aliens: Colonial Marines* initially planned before it all went sideways.

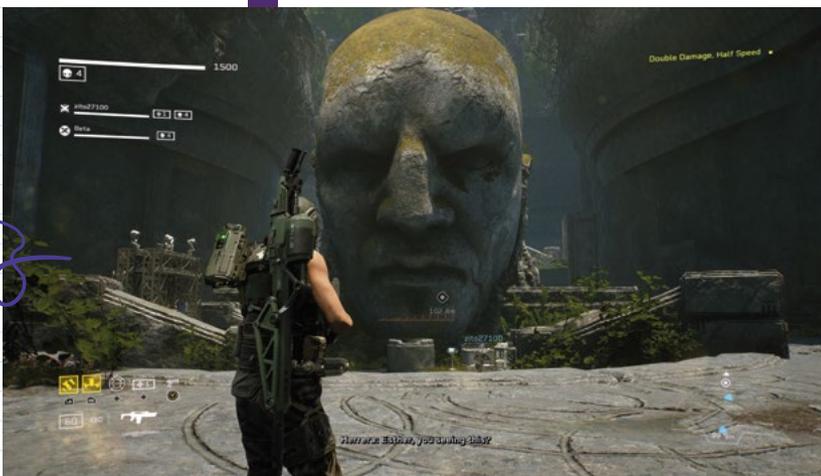
I've gone off-topic immediately, because *Aliens: Fireteam Elite* isn't something particularly good

at keeping your attention beyond brief 15–30 minute stints. And even in the time that it does have your attention, it's not doing a good job of entertaining you – rather just overwhelming the senses and hoping it can offer a passable experience by giving you, literally, hundreds of enemies per level to tear through with your pulse rifles, smart guns, and flamethrowers. It's... OK. Absolutely nothing more than OK. And even when played with other people – as it has been entirely designed around, naturally – *Fireteam Elite* doesn't actually rise far beyond OK.

At the same time this is a game that I managed to, after playing through six missions with a lower-level character, finish top spot in most playthroughs. Most kills, most accurate, most damage dealt, most revives, and so on and so forth. Meaning my extended quest to find an online game that I can actually perform well at might well have found a winner... in a game that's bewilderingly mediocre most of the time. Sod's Law in full effect.

The action just goes on and on – there are very few dips in the intensity, meaning you're running at high speed most of the time you're playing. This might sound ideal, but in practice, it's just a bit of a blur. Once you've seen one encounter where you have to press a switch but – wait! – first set up some perimeter defences because you're going to have to hold out against an onrushing horde for a few minutes, you've seen them all. Put sentry guns around your position, lay some mines, send up a drone that buffs your squad's abilities, make sure you have ammo, load

▼ It's disturbing to see references to *Prometheus* but not the much better bad *Alien* film, *Alien Resurrection*.





Smart gun-use, ironically, leads to some of the dumbest tactics in the whole game: hold down fire. That's about it.

in some pyro ammo too, just for fun, then press the switch.

And after that? Well, then you just hold down fire for a while until all the movement signals go away, periodically adjusting your aim or jabbing the dodge button to get out of the way of the odd warrior or pouncer unit that operates with a strategy of 'running at you and not stopping unless you hit it with a special attack'.

Honestly, I'm trying to find the lesson I learned in this - I'm trying to break it down into a few chunks and experiences so I can relay the story of my part in the exciting Colonial Marines' mission to LV-whatever-planet-it-is-now, where we encountered xenomorphs and dodgy corporations and synths and more. But I don't remember individual snippets. There's no story to tell, and no lessons learned from it all.

Some things I did learn from *Aliens: Fireteam Elite* -

it's better than I expected. Mechanically sound, it doesn't look *amazing*, but it's serviceable, there's plenty of unlockables to unlock, both impacting the in-game action (weapons and upgrades) or just cosmetic (*new hats*). I do also have to tip my own hat to the narrative - while I did largely ignore it, there's clear care and attention put into the back story here; whoever wrote the game had their nose buried deep in *Aliens* comics and novels.

But by crikey if it isn't frustrating to have an online game I can finally hang with the better players at - one where I can contribute significantly to the team effort and help us all

"Honestly, I'm trying to find the lesson I learned in this"



progress with those XP numbers getting bigger and shinier gear to grab after levelling up - only for it to be something I really just can't be bothered spending much time on at all.

I think the best bet for the future of *Aliens: Fireteam Elite* - the best bet for me and for anyone else interested in it - is to play it with

friends. Playing with random folks is absolutely fine, and I didn't encounter a single *bad person* in my few hours playing the game. I mean, I didn't exactly make lifelong friends either, but nobody got added to the ban list - we all just cracked on popping xeno heads with overpowered weaponry. But playing it with friends I can see lifting the whole experience significantly, even though that lift will surely be short-lived. There's only so much fun you can get out of endless, repetitive hordes of enemies rushing you with little variation or real skill involved in the process.

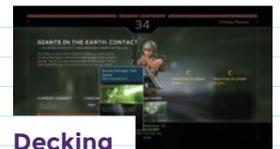
And so it is, game over man indeed, we head back to the drawing board to find an online game I can play successfully - but also one that isn't dull enough to make me feel like I've been in hypersleep for 57 years. ☹

Being boring



Accuracy

As they can indeed come out of the gosh darned walls, it pays to keep looking at the floors, walls, and ceilings to make sure you're not about to become xeno-chow.



Decking

Cards can be used as XP multipliers, usually with debuffs alongside them. That said, they can make things more challenging and - would you believe it - more fun, to boot.



Run so far

The game's one trick is for a certain type of xeno to ambush you around corners, so just let teammates run ahead so they can take the hit. Yes, it's mean.

2022 is the new 2003



STEVE MCNEIL

Come with Steve now on a journey through time and space...

“I’ve all but ceased buying console games and spent the lion’s share of my time on Xbox”



^ It might have been fun while it lasted, but bar *Bugsnax* and one or two other things, we haven’t had much else to shout about on PS5.

Like many other people who managed to secure a PlayStation 5 on day one, I’ve had very little call to use it since I bashed through *Astro’s Playroom* and *Bugsnax* with my kid, as an alternative to home-schooling in lockdown when we’d run out of Lego Mario sets.

The recent PlayStation showcase didn’t give me much hope I’d be dusting it off any time soon, given titles like *God of War: Ragnarok* and *Horizon Forbidden West* won’t be with us until next year. To be clear, I can’t wait to play both of those, but it’s almost impossible to ignore what a lacklustre first year the system has had.

At the time of writing, three of the top five PS5 games on Metacritic are *Demon’s Souls* (original release date: 2009), *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater 1+2* (1999/2000), and *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)*.

In addition, the showcase spent significant time on announcements for souped-up 2022 versions of *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* (2016), *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003).

Yes, I know there’s some other strong games on the platform such as *Deathloop*, *Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart*, and *Guilty Gear -Strive-* and, yes, I know ratings aren’t everything, but even the biggest Sony apologist would have to concede it’s not exactly a vintage launch. Many other ‘top’ titles are also available on previous-gen and rival systems, too.

Of course, Xbox is also guilty of this. A couple of the remakes mentioned are on the Series S/X as well, and their big ‘launch title’, *Halo Infinite*, is landing over a year late. But, as any Game Pass bore will tell you, that subscription offering at least force-feeds me a steady meal of new treats on a regular basis. As a result, without meaning to, I’ve all but ceased buying console games and spent the lion’s share of my time on Xbox.

Well, almost. I did go back to the PS5 recently to play *Borderlands 3* and, yes, pedants, I could have just played that on the PS4 I originally bought it for two years ago. But, at the risk of undermining my entire point in this article, the PS5 offers something which elevates that game over every rival version. The game only released in 2019, so it’s not benefiting from the same sort of massive step up in the remake stakes you see in the *Final Fantasy VII* or *Tony Hawk’s* do-overs, but... that controller. Sweet Jesus. The adaptive triggers, adjusting the tensions of the buttons to emulate the resistance of pulling an actual trigger, in a game with an infinite variety of guns... That – plus the rumbly-rumbles – almost makes the £450 I should have spent on a month’s food shopping worth it.

At least, that’s what I’ll keep telling myself. 🙄

* The other two, if you’re curious, are *Hades* and *Disco Elysium* – both of which you could play on PC a year before they landed on PS5.

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Reviews, retro games, and lots more besides

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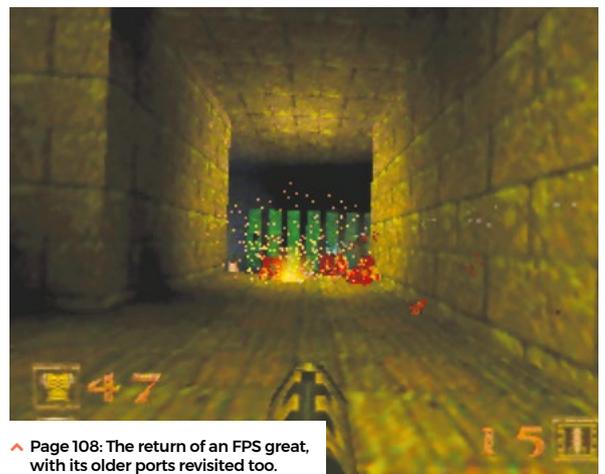
▲ Page 100: It looks the part, but does *The Ascent* have the substance to back it up?

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

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Going back to abandoned space adventures and other treats taking up our time



▲ Page 108: The return of an FPS great, with its older ports revisited too.

Info

GENRE
Metroid-'em-up

FORMAT
PC (reviewed) / PS4 / PS5 / Switch

DEVELOPER
Thomas Happ Games

PUBLISHER
Thomas Happ Games

PRICE
£16.19

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@AxiomVerge

REVIEWED BY
Ryan Lambie

✓ Moving around underwater is slow going at first, but you'll soon nab an upgrade that makes traversing the depths far snappier.

Axiom Verge 2

Samus it ever was

Lone developer Thomas Happ crafts his alien worlds with palpable glee. It's easy to imagine him hunched over his computer, happily pushing pixels about until his surreal,

unfeasibly detailed landscapes begin to shimmer back out of the screen. In *Axiom Verge 2*, there's a moment where a great crested grebe floats serenely over the surface of a lake. It's the kind of incidental detail that makes me smile each time I see it; *Axiom Verge 2* would've been fine without a grebe in it, but it's emblematic of a game made with infinite care and passion.

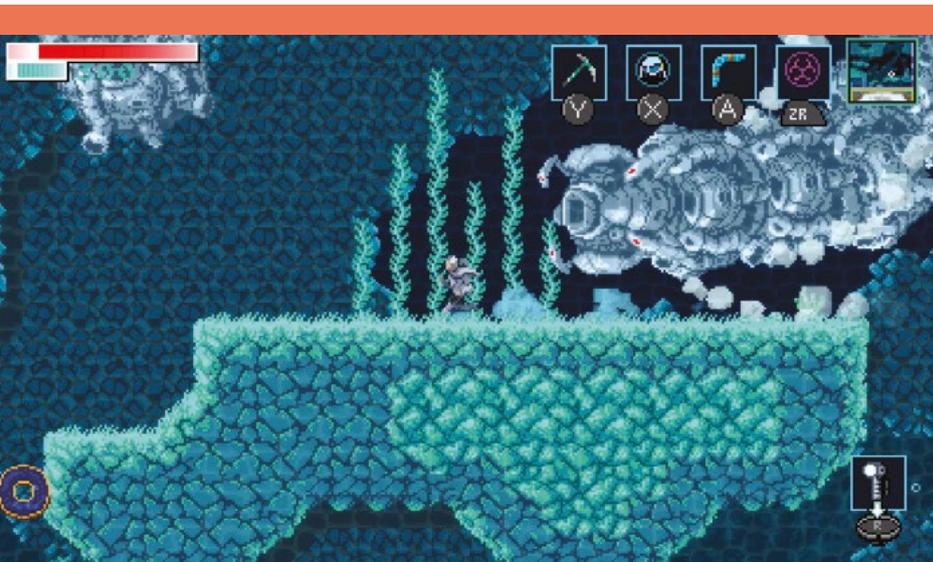
Certainly, *Axiom Verge 2*'s world is vastly different from the Giger-inspired murk of its predecessor. Where Happ's breakthrough original was all benighted atriums and pulsating, biomechanical monsters – with more than a passing nod to *Metroid* – the sequel offers far more variety. Icy tundra quickly give way to abandoned ruins; networks of caves are distantly connected to submerged temples.

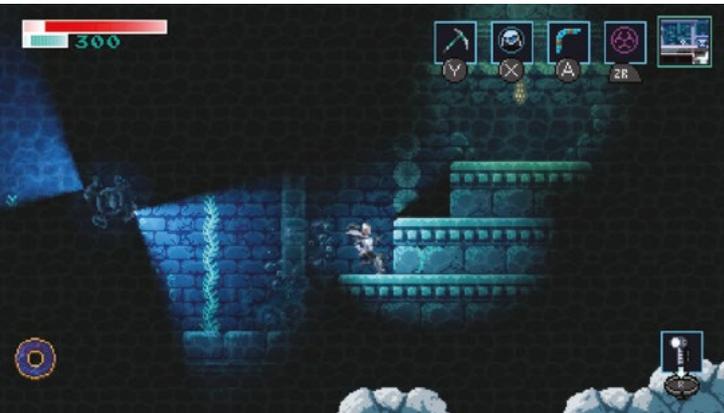
It really gives Happ a chance to stretch his design skills further, and the new world he's created here is a pleasure to explore – at least for the most part. More on that later.

Mechanically, *Axiom Verge 2* is a logical extension of the first game. Even as it puts you in the shoes of a new protagonist – the somewhat severe industrialist-genius-type, Indra Chaudhari – and beams you into another hazard-filled parallel universe, the scaffolding underneath the sequel is broadly the same. You run and jump around, acquire abilities that unlock new areas, which in turn lead to other new abilities that unlock still other new areas. It's like peeling the layers off an onion, but with the rule that you need to acquire a slightly different peeler for each bit of skin you want to remove.

Those powers really are neat, though: you can hack into devices and mechanical enemies to variously open and close them, turn them on and off, or switch them from irksome death-cannons to loyal companions. There's

✓ *Axiom Verge 2*'s new world, Kiengir, is markedly different from the last game's, but every bit as striking.





a robotic, crab-like creature you can cast and send scuttling into tight spaces to activate switches and so forth; there's a similar idea in the first game, but it's taken a step further here, with an entire separate layer of existence – a lo-res place called the Breach – that can only be explored with your crab-robot. Everything's upgradeable, too, sometimes to a captivating degree; eventually, your crab-robot will acquire the ability to ping itself into the air with a snap of its stretchy arm, like a slingshot.

Happ keeps the pace brisk, especially in the campaign's first couple of hours, which allows you to rapidly build your abilities from basic attacks to climbing, faster underwater movement, and more besides.

Your mileage may vary when it comes to the combat. Repeatedly battering enemies with an axe or boomerang doesn't feel quite as satisfying, at least for this writer, as the array of meaty guns Happ assembled for the first *Axiom Verge*. Nor are the rank-and-file enemies themselves much of an upgrade: mostly, they're small, drone-like things that attack on sight and won't leave you alone until they've killed you or you've beaten them into tin foil. One particular enemy – a clockwork owl that hovers in the air, pelting you with energy-sapping ordnance – is frankly annoying.

Much better are the larger foes that dot the rutted landscape. These were the most memorable parts of the first game, and while they're fewer in number in *Axiom Verge 2*, they have a similar impact here: some of the living

statues, mechanical sea-serpents, and other hulking abominations are fascinating to look at and enjoyable to fight, particularly as you use your hacking skills to disable their attacks, giving yourself a handy advantage.

Axiom Verge 2's map is considerably larger than the first game's, however, which means these moments of spectacle are more spaced out; this isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially if you thought *Axiom Verge* was too short, but the greater expanse also meant there were times where I was left staring at the map and wondering where to go next. Non-player characters and computer terminals will give you clues and coordinates, but if you skip over a line or don't take down the odd note, it's easy to lose the narrative thread.

There were also occasions where I'd unlocked a new ability, thought, 'Ooh, I wonder if I can use this back in that earlier part of the map', truded all the way to a particular spot, and realised I'd wasted my journey. (Fortunately, you can unlock a fast-travel ability later in the game.)

Not that any of this remotely derails the latest dark sci-fi yarn Happ has woven here. *Axiom Verge 2* introduces mystery after mystery, gently teasing you into its world of Mesopotamia-inspired architecture and inscrutable, god-like aliens. And once again, as Happ's ethereal synths wash over you, and his little pixel grebes float serenely across the water, it boggles the mind that such an immersive, absorbing game was made by just one person. 🗨

“Axiom Verge 2 would've been fine without a grebe in it”

▲ You'll need your crab-robot to enter discrete areas called the Breach, which have their own lo-fi graphics and music.

HIGHLIGHT

Happ gets the feel of his jumping and climbing so spot-on, it's easy to overlook how perfectly judged it is. From the very beginning, where she can barely jump over a crate, to the increasingly outlandish powers she acquires later on, Indra is never less than a joy to control.

VERDICT

An imperfect yet absorbing sequel made with evident care and attention.

76%

Rated
Review

HIGHLIGHT

While the Switch version may suffer from performance issues, it fortunately never puts a dampener on the cutscenes. Rendered in-engine, these all feel like they've come straight out of an anime and look fabulous, whether it's during moments of perilous drama or key story reveals that, when accompanied by the main theme, make your heart soar.



Review

▲ Like Pikachu, your Rathalos – or Ratha – is the starring monster, and you may end up prioritising it over other monsters. Its flying ability is especially useful later in the game.

Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin

Where monsters are your friends – well, some of them anyway

Info

GENRE

Turn-based JRPG

FORMAT

Switch (tested) / PC

DEVELOPER

Capcom,
Marvelous

PUBLISHER

Capcom

PRICE

£49.99

RELEASE

Out now

SOCIAL

@monsterhunter

REVIEWED BY

Alan Wen

VERDICT

A slower, duller take on *Monster Hunter*, though the story shows that its heart's in the right place.

62%

As big as *Monster Hunter* has become worldwide, there's still a couple of areas that will probably put off some players – the bloodthirsty loop of murdering countless monsters and the lack of a proper story. This anime-centric, turn-based JRPG spin-off, then, is more likely up your street. Starting as a low-key instalment on the 3DS, later ported to mobile, *Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin* – a full console and PC sequel – gives Capcom's spin on *Pokémon* another chance to shine.

You're still technically fighting monsters – albeit in turn-based battles with the game's own *Fire Emblem*-like rock-paper-scissors system – but instead of a hunter, your character comes from a village of riders who've learned to bond harmoniously with monsties, surely the twee-est of portmanteaus. That said, it still keeps the structure of using parts from defeated monsters to fashion more powerful equipment – it just conveniently glosses over any visible carving up after the slaughter.

Nonetheless, *Wings of Ruin* is ultimately going for a kid-friendly tone, as evidenced by its colourful, cel-shaded anime visuals, though the monsters themselves haven't lost their presence or ferocity. The gotta-hatch-'em-all vibe is strong, including the latest beasties from breakthrough instalment *World* like Anjanath and Paolumu, while optional 'royal' monsters and a meaty post-game will keep those up for a challenge going as long as any mainline entry.

In terms of turn-based RPG mechanics, it's familiar stuff, much of it carried over from the original handheld instalment, although you can pair up with another hunter or rider. As AI companions, they can prove a hindrance, not always choosing the optimal attack, and if they fall, it counts as a game over, punting you back to the last village (that said, having three hearts does make it somewhat more lenient).

Yet with two new *Monster Hunter* games out in 2021, it's hard to ignore *Rise*. It went to exceptional lengths to streamline its action, while *Wings of Ruin* feels sluggish in comparison, even for a turn-based RPG. Part of that is down to the choppy performance on Switch, even if the turn-based nature should make that less of an issue. More annoying are other mechanics that add up bit by bit, from the animations every time you have to change weapons against a specific monster attack, to the tedium of looking for monster eggs in randomly generated dens – and for these, you'll still have to hatch them back at the village to figure out what you've got, before grinding to get their stats up from Level 1.

The battles are still more thrilling than *Pokémon*, and there is actually a turbo button, but as I went through the repetitive quest-village-quest-village structure (which doesn't translate well to a narrative-focused game), desperate for the next cutscene to move things along, I kept thinking how I could've used my time better: by breezing through a few hunts to raise my hunter rank in *Rise* instead. **W**

HIGHLIGHT

Like an annoyingly perfect love rival, *Death's Door* is both stylish and funny. The character design is superb throughout – from a wonderfully amusing bloke with a pot for a head to a squid-wrapped sailor with some bizarre chat – and the giant-headed Witch of Urns will remain seared on your memory. That screen-filling 'DEATH' text as well – it's just so damn cool.

Review

Death's Door

A corvid test you'll thoroughly enjoy

My first impression of *Death's Door* is 'The Legend of Zelda, but meaner'. This is reinforced when I unlock a weapon lifted wholesale from Nintendo's franchise. But

where Link mostly gets an easy time, dispatching bosses in three hits and vacuuming up endless health pickups, the nameless corvid protagonist of *Death's Door* is thrown in the deep end. Said deep end contains a sentient walking castle with rocket turrets.

Considering *Death's Door* is from the makers of *Titan Souls*, its little surprise combat is on the difficult side. Although your weaponised attack crow can take four hits before carking it – three more than Acid Nerve's previous protagonist. Still, it's a world away from Link's ever-expanding heart collection, especially considering opportunities to heal your poorly crow are few.

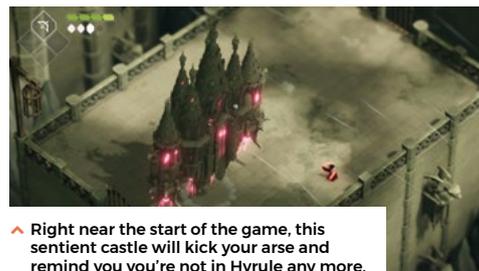
Our corvid friend is a Reaper working in a limbo-like processing centre for souls, its bureaucratic, black-and-white styling reminiscent of the 1946 fantasy-romance film, *A Matter of Life and Death*. But a routine soul-collecting mission goes awry, and suddenly our Reaper finds itself battling through creatures that have mysteriously avoided having their souls harvested.

Fights are simplistic but intense: you're armed with a sword and a ranged attack, the latter depleting a magic meter. Melee attacks replenish your magic, so there's no option to sit back and attack at range – you'll eventually have to get stuck in. And that's where the all-important dodge comes into play, as you'll inevitably be overwhelmed by enemies. A charged sword attack

rounds out your arsenal, though using it takes skill.

The stingy hit-point system makes for a thrilling ride. One moment you're on top, dodging attacks and slicing up enemies with ease. Then a lapse of concentration will see you lose, one, two hit points, and suddenly there's a bubbling panic in your chest. How far away is the next checkpoint? Do I take on the next room, or should I loop back to find a health-replenishing flower? Dying can be frustrating, often resulting in long trudges from a far-off checkpoint – but knowing the penalty you'll face for death makes combat all the more tense.

Boss fights bring to mind *Hollow Knight*, with imaginative designs matched to demanding combat, and the level design is wonderful, with myriad secrets to discover. Like *Zelda*, goodies will often be displayed tantalisingly out of reach until you can return with the necessary item. Unlike *Zelda*, *Death's Door* can be finished in eight to ten hours. Perhaps my only criticism – apart from the lack of a much-needed map – is that I wanted *more*. Yet the fact a tiny studio has created something that compares favourably with Nintendo's finest is nothing short of a miracle. 🗡️



^ Right near the start of the game, this sentient castle will kick your arse and remind you you're not in Hyrule any more.

Info

GENRE
Action adventure

FORMAT
PC (tested), XB S/X, XBO

DEVELOPER
Acid Nerve

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

PRICE
£16.79

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@acidnerve

REVIEWED BY
Lewis Packwood

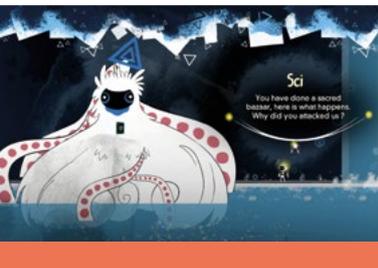
VERDICT

A thrilling, challenging take on the *Zelda* formula that mixes rewarding exploration with pin-sharp combat.

87%

HIGHLIGHT

The one neat link between the world of maths and platform games is that the shapes you use to solve conundrums are also physical objects in the world. At times, it's not only a case of finding the right number and types of shapes to activate a switch, but also stacking them into makeshift stepladders.



▲ Finding other characters hidden around the levels is a continuous secondary objective.

Info

GENRE
Platform-puzzle

FORMAT
Switch (tested) / PC

DEVELOPER
Souris-Lab

PUBLISHER
Tesura Games

PRICE
£13.49

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@ATaleOfSynapse

REVIEWED BY
Jon Bailes

VERDICT

An attempt to bring maths into platform gaming that's sadly miscalculated.

33%



Review

A Tale of Synapse: The Chaos Theories

Less than the sum of its parts

A *Tale of Synapse* has problems expressing itself. Most obviously in the English version of its script, with conversations and explanations damaged by wayward grammar and vocabulary choices. But more fundamentally, in the struggle it has with visual communication and the language of its puzzles. Never mind English, *Synapse* doesn't speak fluent video game.

The concept's an enticing one. Platform puzzles injected with maths, where gates are opened by hitting switches to change numbers to fit equations, levering platforms to align with points on graph axes, or activating pressure panels with polygons of specific dimensions. Yet most solutions are either strangely simple, or simply strange, based on the information you're given.

The maths itself is straightforward, either way. It's just that often it feels like there's a gap in the setup, some absent logic to connect the equation in front of you to a necessary course of action. In one case, for instance, it's clear the game wants you to make two sets of cubes and circles add up to 10, but only accepts 9+1 as an answer. Later, a solution is in the number of flowers located near certain symbols, when no such environmental clues have been in play before. At least early on it's easy to brute-force solutions, from which you might work backwards to comprehend what you did. But as the puzzles complexify, crowbarring off the padlocks turns into guessing their combinations.

It would help if the flowers and other pertinent objects were at least better defined, but this is the other thing. *A Tale of Synapse* is quite pretty, with backgrounds that graft symbols and geometric shapes onto natural formations of trees and stalactites. But that's a lot of muddle when you're looking for sharp parameters, especially when the camera forcibly zooms out to frame larger puzzles. And while you can consult a spartan behind-the-scenes view which displays the key variables, that often adds obfuscations of its own.

Visual hindrance is a problem in combat, too. Although the real mystery there is why there's combat at all. The dark, blobby enemies you encounter are trivial distractions with no bearing on the puzzles. They seem to exist merely to justify a skill tree of ability upgrades, which in turn exist solely to encourage a diligent search for currency. And then clumsy controls ensure both jumping around and hitting things are less fun than they might be anyway. Indeed, control issues even stretch to the game's menus, each of which obeys different rules. Sometimes an exit to the title screen is just a tap of the pause button away.

A Tale of Synapse has a friendly atmosphere, some pleasing sights, and a handful of intriguing puzzles – who doesn't want to win a boss fight with sums? But if the beauty of maths is in transparent, reliable logic, this is a game that betrays its subject matter. Much of its design just doesn't add up. 🧮



Review

HIGHLIGHT

No other recent game has such an amazing sense of place – from terrible pun shop names to pubs and Tube stations, *Last Stop* has all the details of a London suburb. It's also brilliant at portraying the stresses of day-to-day life – including calling a helpline, dealing with right-leaning parents, and enduring a 'cool boss'. Thanks to some brilliant facial animations, characters really get to express their dismay, too.

Last Stop

Adventure is just a Tube stop away

A car park near a chippy isn't a quintessential video game setting, and neither is the living room of a council estate flat. Yet those are the places that make *Last Stop* – anyone who's set foot in England for any amount of time is going to find its idiosyncrasies written all over the game. Meanwhile, its characters are as normal as its setting. You'll meet three different protagonists, who all live along a made-up version of a London Tube line: John Smith, an overweight single parent in his fifties; Meena Hughes, a woman working for a secret government agency; and Donna Adeleke, a high schooler who likes to hang out with her friends at the aforementioned chip-shop.

All three struggle with issues many of us will be able to identify with – John's perpetually caught between his mid-life crisis and the struggles of parenthood, Meena can't seem to cut back on either her affair or her work for her family's sake, and Donna is tired of her overbearing sister. These problems are exacerbated when

the supernatural enters their lives – Meena finds out in a very dramatic fashion what her job actually entails, Donna finds herself accidentally kidnapping a mysterious stranger, which is just as odd as it sounds. And John ends up swapping bodies with Jack, his hip game developer neighbour across the road. *Last Stop* is more of an interactive movie than a game, in the same way that games by Quantic Dream are. There are in fact several things Variable State nab from the French developer, among them going ham on camera angles and offering uninspired gameplay. The characters are well-realised, dialogue is spirited, and the voice acting is a joy – but when you get to do something, it's

“More of an interactive movie than a game”

likely rotating an analogue stick to shovel cereal into your character's mouth, or fumble your way through making a cup of tea. The rest of the interactive parts consist of deciding between conversation options, and here, too, *Last Stop* disappoints. Often, the choice descriptions don't clearly convey what you're making a character say, and a lot of the time, the three options amount to exactly the same thing.

Gameplay isn't everything, but when you do try to engage a player and that engagement feels more like arbitrarily moving your thumbs for the sake of it, things become especially frustrating. And the supernatural story elements hurt more than help – *Last Stop* doesn't seem to know how to use them effectively, culminating in an ending that feels rushed and makes little sense. A pity – its mundanity was *Last Stop's* unique strength. 

Info

- GENRE**
Adventure
- FORMAT**
PC (tested) / PS5 / XB
S / X / PS4 / XBO /
Switch
- DEVELOPER**
Variable State
- PUBLISHER**
Annapurna Interactive
- PRICE**
£19.99
- RELEASE**
Out now
- SOCIAL**
[@VariableState](#)

REVIEWED BY
Malindy Hetfeld

VERDICT

Last Stop looks great and boasts engaging character-writing, but stumbles over superfluous gameplay elements and a baffling ending.

55%

✔ A picture that says more than a thousand words about *Last Stop's* dialogue choices.



Info

GENRE

Mystery
adventure

FORMAT

PC (tested) / PS5
/ XB S/X / PS4 /
XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER

Modern
Storyteller

PUBLISHER

Dear Villagers

PRICE

£19.49

RELEASE

Out now

SOCIAL

@ModnStoryteller

The Forgotten City

The former Skyrim mod forges its own identity from the ruins of ancient Rome

The sense of mystery *The Forgotten City* creates is immediate. A minute in, and we're dropped into its ruins. There are upturned benches, discarded amphorae, and a degraded mosaic

beneath a film of water, scattered with fallen masonry. Most disturbingly, there are cowering figures frozen in gold. What calamity caused this?

A route through a subterranean chasm leads to an otherworldly portal. I walk forwards, and step 2000 years into the past. *The Forgotten City* is a mystery game set in an ancient Roman city. It is governed by a curse known as the Golden Rule. If one person sins, everybody is turned to gold. As a visitor from the future, our task is to reveal the source of the curse, or at least find a way out. Questioning locals and solving puzzles form the game's essential dynamics, which are easily understood if you recognise that *The Forgotten City* is actually a re-creation of a critically acclaimed *Skyrim* mod.

While progression follows a familiar multiple-choice dialogue system, investigations must be balanced with the city's moral code. When I impulsively steal a few denarii from someone's bedroom, I'm startled to remember that there are consequences in this world. The walls tremble, a voice booms damnation, and the golden statues that ornament the city start peppering me with arrows.

Fortunately, the portal lets you relive the day from the beginning. Knowledge acquired in previous days can inform your next day's tasks, which are painlessly logged for you. You can also keep the objects you pick up through successive time loops. So I retain the coins I steal, the poison remedy I lift from the price-gouging Decius, and I use the knowledge of a trap to counter a furtive assassin and acquire his bow. This cut-and-paste approach to puzzle-solving empowers your deductive reasoning, making the process of sewing together the various plots satisfying indeed. Yet until we happen on a solution to the Golden Rule, the day will repeat itself over and over again.

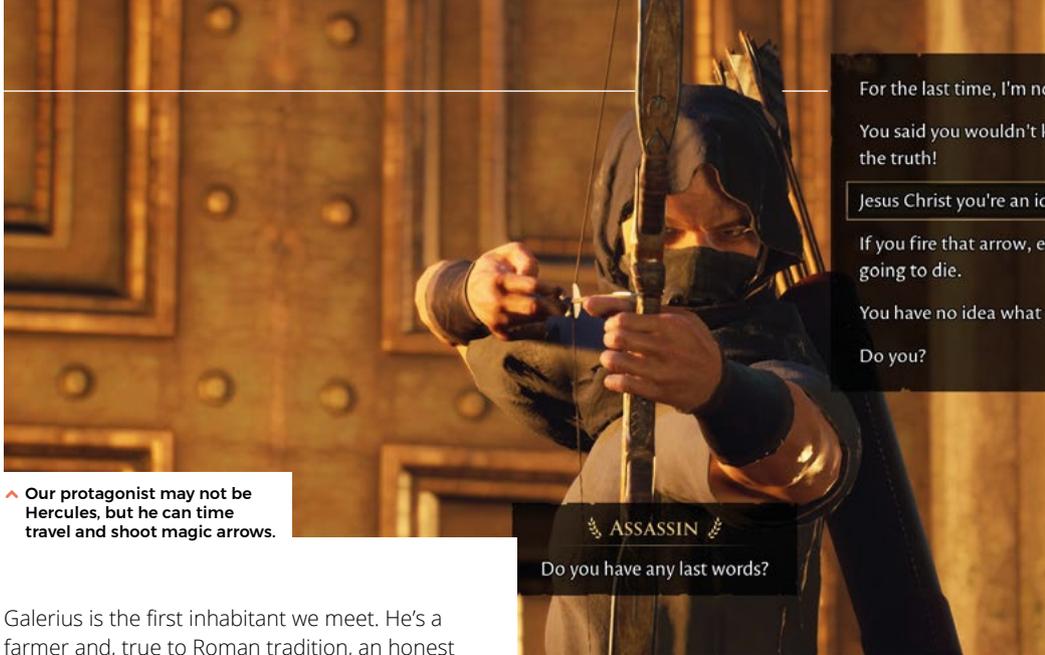
It's our prescient friend Galerius who likens our struggle to that of Sisyphus, condemned to the futile task of rolling a boulder up a hill.

REVIEWED BY

Kyle Hoekstra

▼ *The Forgotten City* may be village-sized, but it's full of inspired ancient art and architecture.





For the last time, I'm not a cultist!
You said you wouldn't kill me if I told you the truth!
Jesus Christ you're an idiot.
If you fire that arrow, everyone here is going to die.
You have no idea what you're in for.
Do you?

^ Our protagonist may not be Hercules, but he can time travel and shoot magic arrows.

ASSASSIN
Do you have any last words?

Galerius is the first inhabitant we meet. He's a farmer and, true to Roman tradition, an honest and dependable ally to whom we can assign tasks we've completed previously. Other characters include former legionaries and quarrelling merchants. There's the noble Sentia, who lounges in her father's villa and laughs at our 21st-century clothes, and the tormented soul Livia. They may be victims of fate and functionaries of a wider narrative, but their conversations are rich with flavour. Though they number around a dozen, they fill the forum with life.

Key to unpicking the city's mystery is learning how its residents arrived there. How did we arrive, for that matter? A hooded figure with a boat heaved on the shingle greeted us at the water's edge. Interrogating the city's inhabitants reveals similar tales: of being swept into Italy's Tiber River, and once rescued, stumbling into a shrine with a trapdoor resembling a spinning coin. Terrified of the Golden Rule, our fellow amnesiacs took up residence in a city they cannot escape, resolved to appeasing the capricious gods.

This is a fragile consensus, and tensions over the Golden Rule come to a head at an election. Is it real? Or is it a fable Magistrate Sentius exploits to frighten people? Early on, it's possible to ask for the election to take place immediately and observe the results. "No more shall you walk on eggshells!" declares the disbelieving victor. Of course, I already know what's coming. I head straight for the portal.

"If one person sins, everybody is turned to gold"

Tampering behind the scenes of this election was critical to my solution in the game, but it might not be for yours. The time loop supports a multi-track narrative, with four different endings. Along the way, there are side quests to be completed and stories to be spilled. This gives an exciting sense of possibility that lingers after the game is finished. There are leads I haven't chased, puzzles I haven't cracked, and questions that remain unanswered.

Meanwhile the caverns of *The Forgotten City* are stratified with enthusiastic references to

ancient history and mythology. It nods to topics like religious syncretism, the poetry of Ovid, and the Great Fire of Rome. Shelves are stuffed with bits of art and archaeology. We learn

that women were named for their fathers, that collective punishment took place in the legions, and we meet characters in debt bondage and others made suspect for straying from cultural norms.

Helping us traverse the city are inexplicable zip wires and the use of a magic bow which turns ivy into bridges and ladders. I'm ambivalent about the violence. At some point, the narrative pulls the player through a palace where someone has peeled gold from the statues, creating aggressive skeleton creeps. It's an unnecessary shift which displaces stimulating detective business with repetitive combat encounters.

Otherwise, exploring the depths of Modern Storyteller's underground neighbourhood throws up delight and surprise. *The Forgotten City* is a smartly plotted experience with an ambitious time loop. If it overreaches, it's in its conclusion which hubristically attempts to explain its own mysteries. Then again, you might love it. This is a unique and carefully crafted mystery game, brightened by smart writing and classical references that will charm many. 🗡️



^ You can spend your time checking off the number of mythological references.

HIGHLIGHT

Humour successfully infiltrates the writing. The merchant Decius warns of scoundrels operating nearby, and comically shifts his eyes side to side. The baker Fabia runs in flight from an intruder, directly into a shrine to which the note is attached: "WARNING: shrine may collapse at any moment".

VERDICT

An original sleuthing experience, enlivened by enthusiasm for the ancient world.

85%

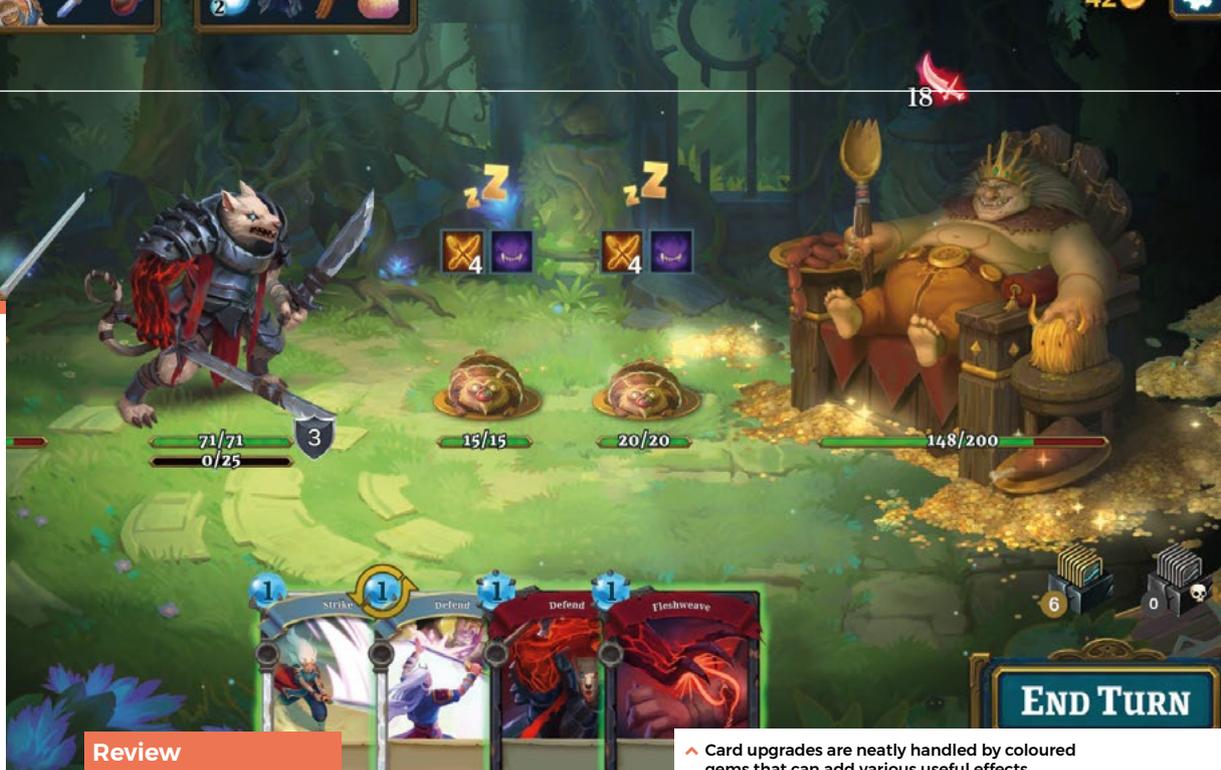


^ Character designs are consistently lively and detailed, even for the most minor NPCs.

Rated Review

HIGHLIGHT

Seifer, a rat-faced chaos warrior you meet first as a boss, becomes the most fun character to play with. Not least in trying to make the most of his 'rage' meter, which increases as he takes damage – and sometimes in other ways – dramatically boosting the effects of the next card he plays when it's full.



Review

Card upgrades are neatly handled by coloured gems that can add various useful effects.

Roguebook

Nothing like getting lost in a good book

Info

GENRE
Roguelike deck-builder

FORMAT
PC

DEVELOPER
Abrakam Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Nacon

PRICE
£19.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@PlayRoguebook

REVIEWED BY
Jon Bailes

VERDICT

A sumptuous and worthwhile deck-builder that's a little short of greatness.

70%

Roguebook aims to add girth to the roguelike deck-builder. As if someone brought pale old *Slay the Spire* home to a horrified grandma, who set about fattening it up until it bulged with a rosy-cheeked glow. The result is a satisfying plumpness of invention, discarding narrow paths and gaunt creatures for broad horizons where raccoon soldiers load catapults with miniature yak that look like Turkish candyfloss sweets, and a dragon-skulled monster attacks you by playing the drums.

The world of *Roguebook* itself spreads out across the pages of the titular tome, wider than it is long. A grid of hexagons that fills with content as you apply splashes of paint or ink. You don't follow roads with occasional forks, you ramble in the open, choosing when to engage foes, when to take a new card or visit the shop, restricted only by what you uncover with your limited supply of colouring-in tools. It's a proper adventure, in other words, where a little judgement and a little luck see you gather valuable treasures and upgrades before moving to confront the area boss.

As for battle, breadth comes from controlling dual characters, and an ongoing concern over their formation – one always in front, susceptible to damage, while the other tucks safely in behind. Heroes have unique decks that are shuffled together, and playing certain cards, such as blocks, pushes their owner to the fore. Other cards can only be played from one position, or

cost less when they are, so the order you play your hand can be crucial. It's *Roguebook's* most elegant trick, transparent yet full of implications, especially once you unlock all four characters and experiment with each combination of styles.

While battles are full of spicy micro-decisions, however, each individual deck isn't quite as diverse as you might expect. So there's less potential here than in *Slay the Spire* to improvise audacious synergies or build runs around single game-changing cards, and it's easier to fall back on distinct strategies that present themselves with surprising regularity. The 'bleed' status often available to Sharra, for example, never decreases in potency once applied and can easily be stacked. And Seifer can generate a similar effect with a handful of 'ally' cards that attack at the end of each turn.

Roguebook doesn't have that endlessly fresh feel, then, as it heads into its post-credits game, where you can choose to apply *Hades*-like difficulty boosters. And it's here that the length of runs also starts to drag – there's no speed-up option in battle and, as absorbing as strategic map painting is, it's inefficient to have to watch your characters trudge through every step.

So although *Roguebook* has a solid build, helped along with sparks of originality and personality, perhaps fleshing out the slight presentation of *Slay the Spire* takes a strength for a weakness. Next to the genre king's lean, marathon-runner fitness, that extra girth takes a toll when it comes to going the distance. 🐾



Review

HIGHLIGHT

This Time It's Virtual! also functions as a historical exhibition of all things *Sam & Max*. Gorgeous hand-drawn posters from the nineties adorn the office walls, and nostalgic Telltale-era music helps bring the more iconic environments back to life. Series veterans will adore the detail.

Sam & Max: This Time It's Virtual!

The best game about being a freelancer since Anthem

Playing *Sam & Max: This Time It's Virtual!* feels like digital archaeology. You can spend hours excavating a once-dormant point-and-click IP now revived as a fancy virtual reality (VR)

title. The results aren't perfect, but the game serves as a charming reintroduction to the series.

Firstly, it's a great excuse to bring back some characters that never really got old. The irreverence and eccentric referential humour doled out by the pair of oddball private investigators Sam and Max adapts easily to a new era; this time, there are jokes about cryptocurrency and Ted Cruz, alongside self-aware quips about the death and surprising rebirth of the franchise. A newspaper vending machine that read "Error 404, please refresh your browser" also gave me a lot to think about.

For the most part, *This Time It's Virtual!* is extremely funny and propped up by consistently superb voice acting. Some of the gags understandably lean on the duo's past adventures, but most of them are accessible to newcomers, as long as they're able to accept the absurd terms of the game's premise.

After Sam & Max find you under a bin, you're inducted into the Freelance Police and must engage with a series of ridiculous graded challenges to complete a report card. Most of these 'lessons' are exaggerated carnival games, the bread and butter of any reliable head-mounted experience. You'll take part in silly

shooting galleries and obstacle courses, but you'll also defuse the decapitated head of Thomas Edison by unscrewing his cheeks and playing his bonce like a Hasbro Bop It!

But most surprising is how well it adapts the old-school point-and-click gameplay of *Sam & Max* in between these disparate minigames. The escape room puzzles operate on challenging moon logic, and you'll spend time talking to quirky characters on the ground to find solutions. The beauty of virtual reality is that you can accent these sequences with an action-packed chase or a boss battle, which helps with the pacing.

It could do with a bit more polish, though. Some textures are grubby up close, and each movement style comes with compromise. The turning in Teleport mode (usually the most accessible option) is way too slow and disorienting, forcing me into the dizzying free walking mode. There should be options to manage the size of the enormous subtitles, too, given that Sam & Max (thankfully) never shut up. Half-decent VR players will probably cut off many of the game's best lines simply by progressing through the levels, so it's in your interest to take it slow.

Overall, though, *This Time It's Virtual!* is a thoughtful franchise revival and a compelling adaptation of a long-forgotten genre. It's a convincing argument that the immersion and physicality of VR could provide a future for adventure games. Next up, *Monkey Island...?* 🐼

Info

- GENRE**
Adventure
- FORMAT**
HTC Vive / Oculus
Quest (tested) /
Valve Index / PC / PS4
- DEVELOPER**
HappyGiant
- PUBLISHER**
Big Sugar
- PRICE**
£22.99
- RELEASE**
Out now
- SOCIAL**
@HappyGiantGames

REVIEWED BY
Jordan Oloman

VERDICT

Sam & Max: This Time It's Virtual! convincingly resuscitates an old-school adventure franchise with plenty of charm and some great jokes.

78%



HIGHLIGHT

The cyberpunk stylings may not be original, but when it comes to locations like the Highstreet and the Node, that can work in the game's favour. Touring these bustling districts of market stalls, dragon statues, and transparent umbrellas is as close as it gets to feeling like *Blade Runner*.

Review

The Ascent

The only way is up

Info

GENRE
Action RPG

FORMAT
PC (tested) / XBO /
XB S/X

DEVELOPER
Neon Giant

PUBLISHER
Curve Digital

PRICE
£24.99

RELEASE
Out now

SOCIAL
@AscentTheGame

REVIEWED BY
Jon Bailes

VERDICT

Stylish cyberpunk violence tainted by plodding missions and unwieldy back-end systems.

58%

You can almost see the list of priorities guiding *The Ascent* as you traverse its streets. Cyberpunk atmosphere. Big guns; lots of shooting. More cyberpunk and guns. And, you know, all the other stuff. Immense effort seems to have gone into nailing a basic experience, to the detriment of making a well-rounded one. But truly, this cyberpunk metropolis is a stunning piece of craft, rendered with such density it's a wonder anyone went to the trouble. It's all there: steam, holograms, stained metal, bars, nightclubs, litter, and misery. You strain to absorb the obscene detail, then the camera, like a tour guide, pans to reveal another layer of ant-hive life beneath your current position.

Yet like so much cyberpunk, it's merely an aesthetic, assembled from slices of 1980s canon, with a script and characters that imply no deep intention beyond mild edginess. Yes, that's because *The Ascent* is primarily a twin-stick shooter, and takes a dilettante approach to its RPG trimmings – conversations are context, skill points and currency mainly ensure you keep pace with your evolving enemies. Fine. But it makes the city less captivating. Just a set, after all.

At least the action is loud, aggressive, and busy. Cyber gangsters surround you or prise you out of cover, and in return you get hefty firearms and explosive recharging powers – like a leaping ground smash, or a squad of kamikaze robo-spiders. There are moments, when it all kicks off, that evoke the spirit of a John Woo marketplace shootout, minus the slow motion. If only that energy was marshalled by tighter structures.

Much of the game is needlessly spread out, forcing you to jog repeatedly through locations until they feel like part of your morning commute. Side missions, in particular, might send you across the map, only to usher you back again, fighting dozens of street battles on autopilot. Indeed, most of *The Ascent's* violence is mindless, not just nihilistically but tactically, until a few harsh spikes make you work harder than it's prepared you for.

Then there's all the other stuff. Like scattershot checkpoints and respawning – in one case, reviving us outside the facility we were trying to escape: mission complete. Or a map that's speckled with loot spots yet only shows one mission objective, and won't let you set waypoints. Or limited fast travel that forces you to pass through the central hub before jumping far afield. Or side missions that can't be completed until you've progressed through tougher main missions. Or basic tutorials that reappear every time you load the game afresh. Some of this should be solved with patches, turning *The Ascent* into a sturdy shooter, especially in co-op. That will still, however, leave the clichés and bland missions, and the sense that a remarkable feat of engineering has been sadly underexploited. **W**

✓ Performance on Steam is solid, although ray tracing wasn't working at the time of writing.



▶ STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Mayor Wertz joins for this month's streaming screaming ("talk")

What's your favourite game?

My favourite game would be *Bloodborne*. I was slightly bullied/encouraged to give the FromSoftware games a try from friends and followers, and I quickly understood why everyone enjoyed playing them. But *Bloodborne* stuck out the most for me.

And why is that? What is it about that particular game that resonates so much with you?

I think it's because the game offers a mix of satisfying combat, an interesting and engaging atmosphere, and challenging bosses that make you feel like you accomplished something when you beat them – like when I spent two days on stream trying to beat the Orphan of Kos. The second phase of that boss is the hardest thing I've had to overcome in gaming. It's a relentless onslaught and I get nervous and start button mashing. Needless to say, I eventually beat it and felt like I should throw myself a parade. Also, you have the ability to get some of your health back after you've been hit – I get hit a lot in games.

What game was it that got you into gaming to begin with? What are your enduring memories of it?

Duke Nukem 3D is a big reason I got into gaming. I remember logging countless hours into the game with my dad. The most enduring memory of it though was when I found out that I could give money to a dancer and I got to see some NSFW content. My dad learned that there was a parental lock within the game after that.

Has there ever been a point you've been put off gaming? If so, why?

I hate puzzles. Perhaps it's how my brain is wired, but I find them to be the worst part of gaming.



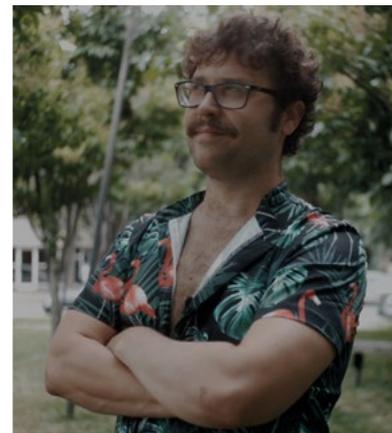
It feels like it slows down the momentum of a game when there are puzzles. I find no joy in solving them and will often ask chat for the answer or look it up. I'd rather keep gameplay moving than be stuck on a level for hours. I understand why people like them, but I know they aren't for me.

What's the appeal of playing games for an audience, whether that's pre-recorded or livestreaming?

There are a couple of benefits to playing a game for an audience – the main one being that it feels like we're all a part of something together. It brings me back to going to LAN parties at a friend's house. Trying to impress your friends while they simultaneously yell at you and tell you you're terrible. It's a shared experience in that moment that really can't be replicated. Another appeal is when I get stuck, I can rely on others to help me through a certain boss or puzzle.

You're living in the moment when you have that livestreaming audience with you. It reminds me of doing improv shows and that kind of energy is something I very much thrive on. 🗣️

Mayor Wertz streams Tuesdays (midnight UK time), Saturdays, and Sundays (6pm UK time): wfmag.cc/mayoral



“You're living in the moment when you have that livestreaming audience with you”

The Wireframe **HOTLIST**

The best PC games, according to Wireframe, catering for whatever your mood might be

The games for... **BIG ADVENTURES**

Assassin's Creed Odyssey / *Ubisoft* / **93%** (Issue 1)

Yakuza: Like a Dragon / *Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio* / **90%** (Issue 45)

Amnesia: Rebirth / *Frictional Games* / **87%** (Issue 46)

The Last Campfire / *Hello Games* / **86%** (Issue 47)

Resident Evil 2 / *Capcom* / **86%** (Issue 7)

Journey to the Savage Planet / *Typhoon Studios* / **84%** (Issue 33)

The Outer Worlds / *Obsidian Entertainment* / **84%** (Issue 28)

Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom

/ *Game Atelier* / **84%** (Issue 6)

Nioh 2 / *Koei Tecmo Games* / **80%** (Issue 38)

A Short Hike / *Adamgryu* / **80%** (Issue 22)



The games for... **REPEATED PLAY**

Hades / *Supergiant Games* / **94%** (Issue 44)

They Are Billions / *Numantian Games* / **88%** (Issue 20)

📌 **Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice** / *FromSoftware* / **87%** (Issue 11)

Streets of Rage 4 / *DotEmu/Lizardcube/Guard Crush* / **86%** (Issue 40)

Trials of Fire / *Whatboy Games* / **84%** (Issue 50)

Katamari Damacy REROLL / *Monkeycraft* / **84%** (Issue 4)

Spelunky 2 / *Mossmouth* / **83%** (Issue 44)

Hitman 2 / *IO Interactive* / **82%** (Issue 3)

Alba: A Wildlife Adventure / *ustwo Games* / **82%** (Issue 46)

Slay the Spire / *Mega Crit Games* / **81%** (Issue 45)



The games for... **SOLID STORY TIMES**

Disco Elysium / *ZA/UM* / **94%** (Issue 28)

Mutazione / *Die Gute Fabrik* / **86%** (Issue 26)

Whispers of a Machine

/ *Clifftop Games/Faravid Interactive* / **85%** (Issue 14)

Mythic Ocean / *Paralune* / **84%** (Issue 36)

Sunless Skies / *Failbetter Games* / **83%** (Issue 7)

Arise: A Simple Story / *Piccolo Studio* / **82%** (Issue 31)

Assemble with Care / *ustwo Games* / **81%** (Issue 27)

📌 **The Walking Dead: The Final Season**

/ *Telltale Games/Skybound Games* / **81%** (Issue 11)

The Procession to Calvary / *Joe Richardson* / **80%** (Issue 40)

Outer Wilds / *Mobius Digital* / **80%** (Issue 17)

The games for... **FIRING UP BRAIN CELLS**

Telling Lies / *Sam Barlow* / **92%** (Issue 24)

Kentucky Route Zero / *Cardboard Computer* / **90%** (Issue 33)

Slipways / *Beetlewing* / **90%** (Issue 53)

Heaven's Vault / *inkle* / **89%** (Issue 12)

The Pedestrian / *Skookum Arts* / **84%** (Issue 35)

The Legend of Bum-Bo / *Edmund McMillen* / **83%** (Issue 31)

A Monster's Expedition / *Draknek & Friends* / **82%** (Issue 47)

Total War: Three Kingdoms

/ *Creative Assembly/Feral Interactive* / **82%** (Issue 16)

It Takes Two / *Hazelight Studios* / **81%** (Issue 51)

Wanna Survive / *PINIX* / **80%** (Issue 42)

The games for... **HIGH-INTENSITY PLAY**



Tetris Effect / Monstars Inc./Resonair / **90%** (Issue 4)

Sayonara Wild Hearts / Simogo / **89%** (Issue 25)

Chivalry 2 / Torn Banner Studios / **88%** (Issue 54)

Star Wars: Squadrons / EA / **86%** (Issue 45)

Devil May Cry 5 / Capcom / **84%** (Issue 10)

Black Bird / Onion Games / **84%** (Issue 3)

BPM: Bullets Per Minute / Awe Interactive / **83%** (Issue 45)

Resident Evil Village / Capcom / **82%** (Issue 52)

Catastronauts / Inertia Game Studios / **82%** (Issue 1)

Olija / Skeleton Crew Studio/Thomas Olsson / **81%** (Issue 48)

The games for... **CURING THE INDIE ITCH**



If Found... / DREAMFEEL / **92%** (Issue 44)

Can Androids Pray
/ Natalie Clayton/Priscilla Snow/Xavier Nelson Jr. / **90%** (Issue 21)

Tales From Off-Peak City Vol. 1 / Cosmo D / **89%** (Issue 39)

Baba Is You / Hempuli Oy / **88%** (Issue 10)

Afterparty / Night School Studio / **86%** (Issue 33)

Witcheye / Moon Kid / **86%** (Issue 30)

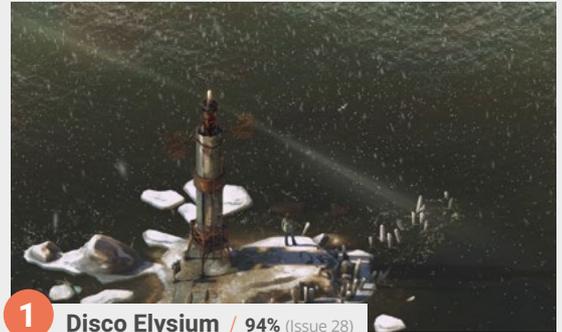
Hypnospace Outlaw
/ Tendershoot/Michael Lasch/ThatWhichIs Media / **86%** (Issue 11)

Haunted PS1 Demo Disc / The Haunted / **85%** (Issue 39)

Chicory: A Colorful Tale / Greg Lobanov / **83%** (Issue 54)

Xeno Crisis / Bitmap Bureau / **81%** (Issue 33)

PC Top 10



1 Disco Elysium / **94%** (Issue 28)

Smarter and deeper than anything else; truly an RPG in a class completely of its own.

2 Hades / **94%** (Issue 44)

Proving 'roguelike' isn't a dirty word, learning-and-dying is a joy from start to finish.

3 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
/ **93%** (Issue 1)

The point where Ubisoft realised over-the-top adventures were the right direction.

4 Telling Lies / **92%** (Issue 24)

This FMV mystery asks more of the player than most, with rewards to match.

5 If Found / **92%** (Issue 44)

A compelling and beautifully illustrated narrative, as moving as it is memorable.

6 Yakuza: Like a Dragon / **90%** (Issue 45)

A bold, brash, and joyous rebirth for the long-running gangster series.

7 Tetris Effect / **90%** (Issue 4)

The question is 'how do you better *Tetris*?' The answer is: like this. This is how.

8 Kentucky Route Zero / **90%** (Issue 33)

Abstract style meets concrete commitments in this fantastic magical realist adventure.

9 Can Androids Pray / **90%** (Issue 21)

A healthy dose of existential anxiety in a minimalist, bite-sized package.

10 Slipways / **90%** (Issue 53)

A focused puzzle game masquerading as space empire-based grand strategy.

Backwards compatible

WRITTEN BY RYAN LAMBIE

Masterful Gear

The Sega Game Gear's a good 30 years old now, but in many ways, there's never been a better time to own one. If you've been a regular reader of these columns, you'll know that it's becoming increasingly easy to replace the blurry old LCD screen with a sharper, modern panel, and that additions like RetroSix's CleanPower USB-C mod mean there's no longer any need to keep huge quantities of AA batteries around.

As we mentioned in another earlier edition, putting a modern screen in a Game Gear also makes the Master Gear Converter a far more useful proposition than it was 30 years ago. The device allowed handheld owners to play Sega Master System games on the go, but the lower resolution and sheer blurriness of the Game Gear's stock screen meant that a fair chunk of the Master System's library

was rendered borderline unplayable. Thanks to the clarity and higher resolution of the McWill or other replacement modern screens, though, Master System games now look, frankly, incredible on the Game Gear – crisp, colourful, and entirely blur-free.

If you've only recently gotten into the Game Gear, however, it's likely that you don't own a Master Gear Converter – they went out of production decades ago, and most of those that are left are fairly old and careworn. I own an off-brand version of the device, and mine was in such bad shape that I had to take it all to bits and clean the contacts before it would work properly.

Thankfully, RetroSix (retrosix.co.uk) has you covered if you want a modern solution. Its Master System Player is, in essence, the same as the converter that Sega was putting out all those years ago



– it's a pass-through adapter that hooks onto the back of your handheld and lets you plug in Master System cartridges. It even comes with the same little plastic thumb screw that stops the device from wobbling about (though, if I'm being honest, I've never bothered using these, so your mileage may vary here).

The build quality is sturdy – it's weightier, certainly, than my 'Gear Master' knock-off – and in terms of compatibility, it works exactly how you'd expect. Every Master System I tested with the device booted up perfectly, and once again, it opens up a huge library of additional games for the Game Gear. Titles with lots of tiny, fast-moving bullets – like *R-Type* and *Power Strike* – used to be unplayable in the 1990s, but now look terrific. Similarly, the Master System version of *Ninja Gaiden* used to devolve into a technicolor smear because of its fast scrolling – on a modified Game Gear, it's pin-sharp.

I'd even go as far as to say that, given the choice between playing these titles with an original, boxy Master System controller or on the far comfier Game Gear, I'd choose the latter route every time.



TinyGrafx

On the subject of handhelds, a Japanese hobbyist's website called NIWA Channel (niwachannel.square.site) came to my attention this month. Among other things, it specialises in hand-built, handheld iterations on NEC's classic PC Engine (or TurboGrafx-16, as it was known in the US). The first is called the PCEmicro, and basically turns the console's original controller into a self-contained device with a two-inch IPS screen (resolution: 320×240) and a USB-C mobile battery squeezed into the back.

If you're after something a bit chunkier, there's the PCEmicro Dual, which in terms of form factor is a bit more like a Nintendo 2DS: you get two screens, one 2-inch, the other 3.5, housed in a shell that looks like someone rammed a PC Engine console into its own controller. It's a bit less elegant than the PCEmicro, in other words, but still nifty-looking, in a retro sort of way.

Admittedly, these aren't PC Engines in the truest sense; it's a RetroPie emulator, essentially, and you'll be



playing PC Engine ROMs via a microSD card rather than an original HuCard, so don't expect this to be a modern take on NEC's own TurboExpress handheld from the early 1990s. These devices aren't cheap, either – prices range from 18,900 yen (or about £126) for the PCEmicro in kit form, right up to 34,800 yen (roughly £233) for a pre-built PCEmicro Dual.

And, to cap it off, there are only three units of the latter left for sale on the site. We aren't that likely to be getting one of these shipped over from Japan anytime soon, then, but still: we're glad there are retro geeks out there, making nutty little gadgets like these.



The MD Shinobi

The muted success of the Sega Game Gear meant that a relatively small number of people got to play one of the greatest *Shinobi* titles of all time: *The G.G. Shinobi*. Thankfully, a YouTube dweller named Pigsy is attempting to bring the game onto the big screen with a remake for the Sega Mega Drive. Rather than simply blow the game's chunky sprites up to fit the console's higher resolution, he's instead reusing assets from Mega Drive entries *The Revenge Of Shinobi* and *Shinobi III* (which *The G.G. Shinobi* often resembled) to build a new version of the game from scratch. That's no small undertaking, particularly given this is, by Pigsy's own admission, their "first proper coding project", but the results are looking pretty good so far. And, as if that wasn't enough work by itself, Pigsy's also decided to port *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* to the Mega Drive, too. Will his attempts be successful? Will he be slapped with a cease-and-desist notice from their respective copyright holders? You can follow the progress yourself at wfmag.cc/pigsyports.



Backwards compatible

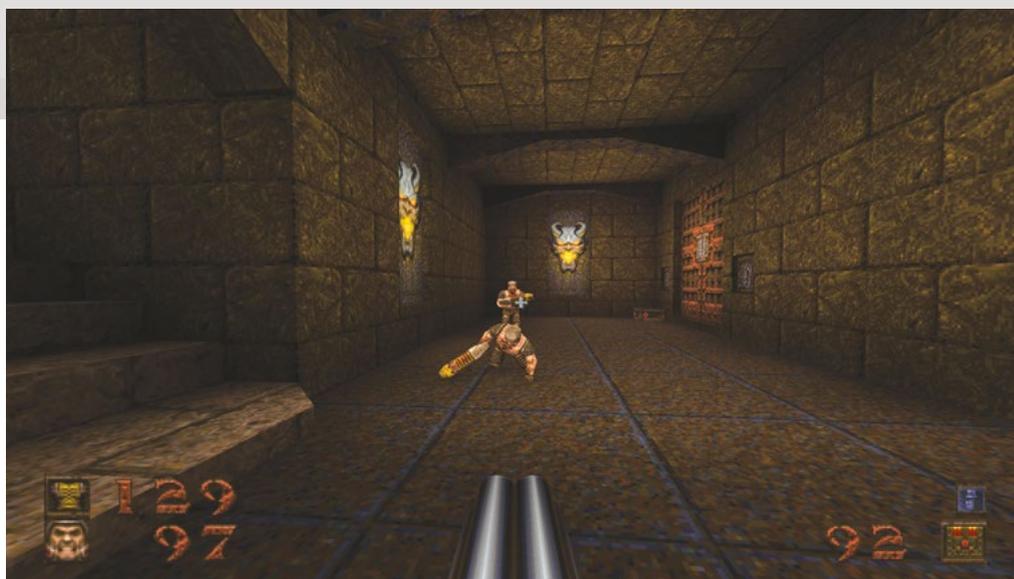
WRITTEN BY IAN "DOOMED" DRANSFIELD

Quaker

They've finally gone and done it then – 25 years after its first release, *Quake* has made its way to consoles in its original form. A quarter of a century for us to be able to play one of the best – and most impactful – first-person shooters ever, in the way it was meant to be played, but on console. Genuinely, it's something I've been waiting to happen. And it's even better than I could have hoped.

Quake is a legendary game – not everyone will rank it as their best of the FPSes, but everyone has to appreciate the things it brought to the table, either as firsts or as first-major-examples. Fully 3D levels and enemies, real-time lighting effects on projectiles, actual usable netcode for people on pathetic mid-nineties dial-up speeds, and more. You can trace the lineage of the likes of *Half-Life 2* and *Call of Duty* directly back to *Quake* when looking at engines used to power these things. *Quake* had *impact*.

But I was never privy to that impact at the time, because I owned a PlayStation. A port was, apparently, on the way but was aborted at some point. *Quake II* came to PSone and was genuinely great. But never the original. Don't get me wrong, I played *Quake* on PC a lot over the years, it's incredible and I love it – but I'm a console kid at heart, and not being able to play *proper Quake* on any console (at least not in any official way) has always irked me.

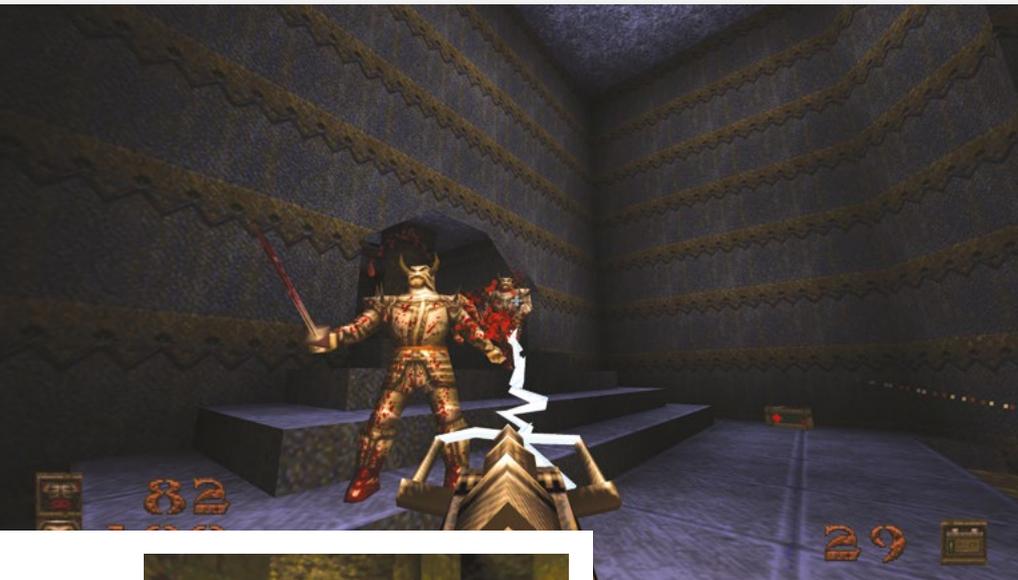


There were contemporary ports, and they were good. *Quake* on Saturn came from Lobotomy Software, which used the same engine it had used with *Exhumed* to cram a fantastic, fascinating facsimile of *Quake* onto Sega's console. On playing it before writing this up, it's just... bizarre. You can see the seams, you can feel the console creaking to hold everything together, it is absolutely not on a par with the PC original... but it's such a stellar porting effort, you can't help but be impressed. Even if I died on the first level *five times* before finally getting past it.

The N64 got the port treatment too with the lovely *Quake 64* – again stripped back from the original, there's a feeling of confidence and ability in this version

that you don't get with the Saturn game. Additions like coloured lighting and a new soundtrack by the (musically) ever-creepy Aubrey Hodges help give *Quake 64* a real sense of self, and while it isn't a unique experience like *DOOM 64* – despite coming from the same dev team – it does have more than enough of its own character to make it an engaging distraction, and something definitely worth playing for *Quake* fans.

Handily, then, the revamped *Quake* for modern machines (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and of course PC, with PS5 and XB S/X coming later) actually includes *Quake 64* as a downloadable mod. Some natty graphical filters bring out the real fuzziness of Ninty's soft-visualised console,



and the original soundtrack is included in what scholars are calling 'a neat touch'. But it's *Quake* – proper, delicious *Quake* – that's the real surprise here. Because it's absolutely brilliant, and playing it on a console in 2021, it feels as fresh as it ever did back in the mid-nineties. Is that a surprise? Maybe not. Even with the visual tweaks available – filters and texture upgrades and so on – it looks nothing like a new game. Especially when you see sense and turn all the bells and whistles off. So that's not what's important.

It's the design. The flow. The mechanics. *Quake* is so well designed it verges on the ridiculous. Every single level has a moment where you might think you've cocked up, only to realise there's a secret route you can take and, suddenly, your failure becomes an accidental success. Enemies feel overwhelming in numbers, until they don't and you realise you've

been wandering in relative calm for a time, enjoying what might be known as 'perfect balance'. Traps are – so much more than in modern games – both hard to spot *and* dangerous, meaning you're ever-cautious but still often surprised.

That *Quake* hasn't seen the same reverence from both id Software and Bethesda as *DOOM* has – which has been re-released in full-fat form on consoles for over a decade now – is a travesty. Relatively speaking, of course. That a game so utterly genre-defining, riddled with tech that changed the game, from a studio that's still so well-respected, took so long to get itself the proper modern re-release it needed... well, best not to focus on the consternation there.

Quake's back: let's hope it can have a similar influence on the genre once again.



Make it again XI

It's taking over a lot of my braintime recently, but Konami's move to *eFootball* – the death of *PES* – has me revisiting the old games in the franchise. And you know what? They're a bit clunky at times, and definitely more *video-gamey* than modern soccerball titles, but they're also phenomenal fun. As such, I want to put the call out directly to Konami: give us a remake of *International Superstar Soccer Pro '98*, complete with an updated front cover of Paul Ince and Fabrizio Ravanelli having a face-off – except in their 50-odd-year-old forms, rather than their late 1990s guises. Update the players, the teams, the kits, all that stuff if you want to, but give us a slight graphical enhancement of the original most beautiful game. A simple footballing title for simpler times, especially for those of us put off by this whole *eFootball* lark.





Lost in space

This month, Ryan becomes a creepy computer in the sci-fi thriller-adventure-puzzler, *Observation*

There's nothing wrong with jump scares and gore, but it takes real skill to make a game suspenseful. There are entire stretches in *Observation* where not much happens – or it does, but slowly – and those stretches are gripping. You might be peering around a room through a fixed camera in search of a missing astronaut. Then you find yourself gazing through the lens of a floating drone, roaming the corridors of a malfunctioning space station in search of clues.

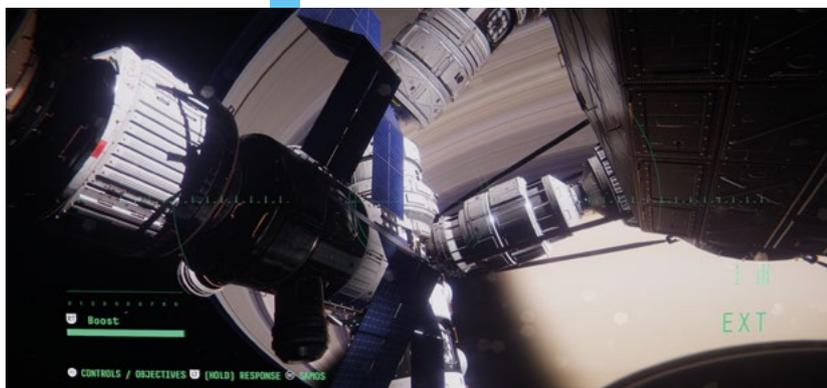
Observation is a sci-fi adventure that takes cues from such films as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Gravity*,

and possible even Disney's cult oddity *The Black Hole*, but with a twist that would only work in a video game: it's you cast in the role of the creepy AI computer.

You're SAM, the digital custodian of the near-future space station, *Observation*. You're able to unlock doors, turn various scanning, cooling, and other systems on and off, and interface with assorted computers and devices dotted around the station.

The game was made by several developers who'd previously worked on Creative Assembly's *Alien: Isolation*, and it shows: Jon McKellan (who also writes and directs) puts in the same loving, borderline obsessive detail into the station's various user interfaces. Some, like an interface you need to fiddle with to get an experimental fusion reactor back online, feel both retro and futuristic at the same time. Others, like the separate system that tracks the coolant network, looks like the GUI from a wireless router circa 2002, complete with broken graphics icons. It's all wonderfully nerdy, and only adds to the sense that you're interacting with a ramshackle craft built piecemeal over several decades by scientists from different parts of the world.

All of this is a long-winded way of saying: I'm embarrassed that it's taken me over two years to finally catch up with *Observation*. It's one of those





games I've had on my to-play list for months, but kept postponing because something else popped up that caught my attention. Having finally explored, pored, and shuddered my way through *Observation's* roughly three hours, I can safely say it's one of the most absorbing adventure-puzzlers I've played in ages.

It helps that developer No Code immediately establish such a compelling – if familiar – premise. A crisis has struck the *Observation*; almost all the crew is missing, leaving only beleaguered medical officer Dr Emma Fisher to find a means of scrambling to safety.

The game quickly makes it clear that, as SAM, you're Emma's sidekick and faithful protector; the only problem is, you're never quite sure if you can even trust yourself. SAM has no recollection of what happened before disaster struck, and there are suggestions that he may have had something to do with it all.

This overarching mystery makes *Observation's* often mundane tasks ripple with unease. Establishing connections with devices usually boils down to completing a minigame – draw a particular shape on a grid to unlock a door, hold down one key and press another to disengage the clamps on the exterior of a pod, and so on.

But like any decent adventure game, the plot makes these minigames feel more momentous than they would ever be on their own.

In many ways, *Observation* is a logical evolution of the traditional point-and-click adventure: there are even moments where you have to scan the environment for documents or PIN numbers scribbled on Post-it notes – a tamed, less

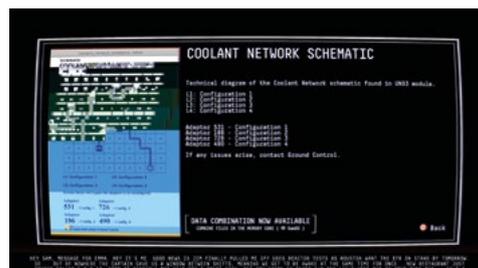
irksome nod to the infamous pixel hunting of old. Ironically, I found the faster-paced moments to be less gripping than the quiet ones. There are occasional set-pieces where some every-second-counts disaster will unfold, Robin Finck's (admittedly excellent) music will soar, and Emma will bark orders at you. But it's here where the

on-rails nature of *Observation* is laid bare – fail to keep pace with her in your drone, and Emma will wait patiently in a doorway for you to catch up. Suddenly, the moment of

crisis doesn't feel quite so critical anymore.

Much like *Alien: Isolation*, *Observation* comes to life – at least for this writer – when it's at its most prosaic. When I'm slowly panning and zooming a security camera around, hunting for signs of life. When I'm picking out scraps of data from old laptops and piecing it back together. Or when I'm asked to take the helm of one of those spherical drones and head outside the station, and I'm alone in the eerie silence of the void. It's here that *Observation* really hits on something rarely pulled off in video games: a sense of genuine fear and wonder in the face of the unknown. 🗿

“Observation comes to life when it's at its most prosaic”



Wireframe Recommends



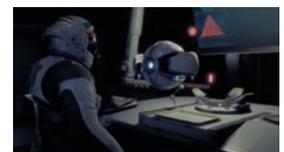
Alien: Isolation

PS3, PS4, XB 360, XBO
For my money, one of the best survival horror games ever made, at least of the space variety. Its attention to detail is frequently astonishing, its depiction of the titular beast truly menacing. *Isolation* is also incredibly stressful, so go easy on the coffee before playing.



Stories Untold

PC, PS4, XBO, SWITCH
No Code's dry-run for *Observation*, in essence, *Stories Untold* offers up four discrete episodes that contain a similarly unique mix of puzzle-solving and engrossing storytelling as their later effort. The first episode, *The House Abandon*, is brilliantly unsettling.



Deliver Us The Moon

PC, PS4, XBO, SWITCH
Although not quite as successful in its execution as *Observation* was, this adventure-puzzler, about an astronaut exploring a seemingly abandoned lunar base, has some solid sci-fi storytelling. The visuals in some of the nervier set-pieces are also superb.



Fallout

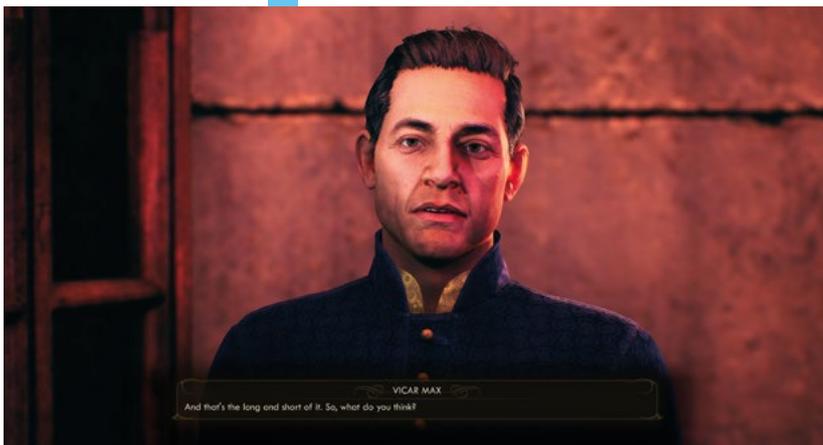
Ian's heading back for one more crack at the Outer Worlds

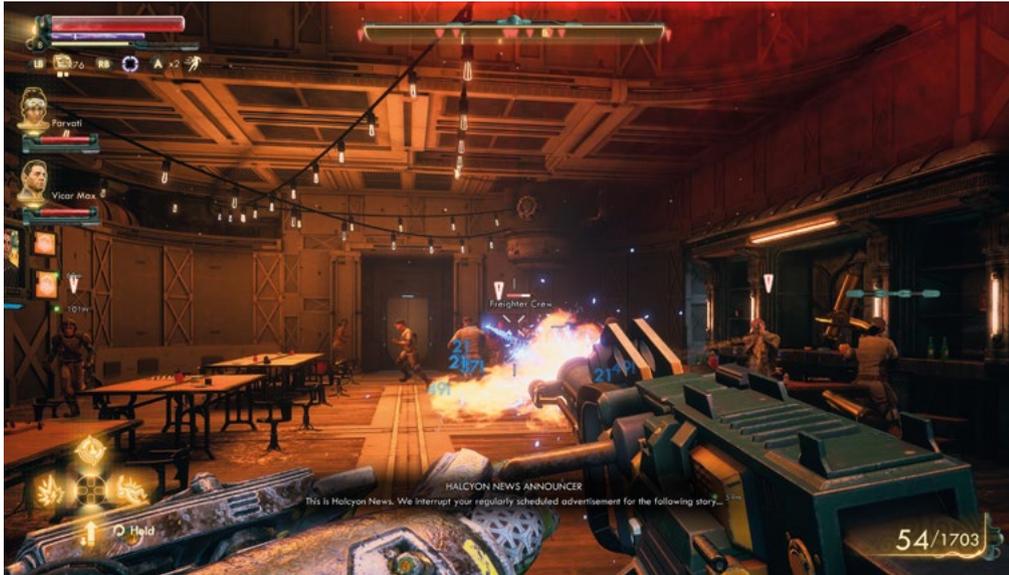
Maybe I was confused in myself – referring to *The Outer Worlds* as *Fallout: New Vegas 2*, it being an open-world, first-person RPG made by Obsidian, set in a sci-fi universe and featuring all manner of funny little digs and deep role-playing mechanics... well, it didn't help. I wrote back in issue 31 that if I didn't keep reminding myself that *The Outer Worlds* is *not*, indeed, *Fallout: New Vegas 2*, that I would end up running out of patience and scrabbling back to Obsidian's take on the Bethesda-

stewarded series. Alas, even though I started out on *The Outer Worlds* with all the best intentions in the world, it didn't go to plan, and I did just end up replaying through *Fallout: New Vegas*. Again.

But seeing *The Outer Worlds* on Xbox's magnificent Game Pass lured me back in. I'd kick it off from the start again, and try to run through more than just a few hours before losing interest and wandering back into the warm embrace of some other decade-plus old game instead. But this time around – at the time of writing, of course – it's working. *The Outer Worlds* has its claws in, I'm coming around to its way of thinking, and I've ploughed through that all-important ten-hour milestone on my way to... erm... I don't actually know what I'm doing in it, to be honest. Something about a ship full of long-frozen colonists. But I honestly don't care, because I'm too busy – would you believe it – *mucking about*.

Turns out *The Outer Worlds* is another one of those that aligns perfectly with my need to investigate every box I walk past. While I can't say this is a behaviour engaged in in real life, it's definitely something I have to do in many a game. Stuff to find, stuff to grab, stuff to steal – it's all there. And it's mixed in *The Outer Worlds* with a great system, whereby if you're seen or discovered stealing, you can talk/lie/bribe/intimidate your way out of trouble, rather





than going to jail over an accidentally nabbed sweet roll. Bloody *Skyrim*. So I can happily plod around, incredibly slowly, surely boring anyone who might happen to be watching me play half to death, picking up every pointless bit of crap I can.

And then when I'm not picking up tins of space-tuna, I'm usually diving deep into conversations. The things I normally skip through with some classic speed-reading have ended up being something I sit through – and enjoy – in *The Outer Worlds*. A combination of smart writing and solid voice acting makes for something that doesn't feel like it's padding getting in the way. Who knew? It's not a laugh-riot, it's not the Absolute Best writing I've seen in a game, but it's a fantastic mixture that manages to keep the attention of a seriously addled brain. So, kudos there.

And, of course, all of this is bookended nicely by the ongoing, genuinely rather funny satire of naked, unfettered capitalism that runs through the game's very core. It's not a manual on anarchism, trying to convert the young and impressionable to a thought process along the lines of 'What if no hierarchy' – but it does poke fun, throw hypothetical (believable) situations in your face, and put the consequences of end-stage capitalism in your way. The worker having to pay funeral costs for a colleague's

“It aligns perfectly with my need to investigate every box”

suicide as they were the closest living person to the deceased – that being *literally* the closest; the nearest person to the person when they died. The shunning of wonderful companion character Parvati for having the nerve to follow in her father's footsteps as a mechanic, rather than doing what her aptitude tests as a child told her she had to do. The chap with the moon head working at the Spacer's Choice emporium who, after a dozen or more questions around the subject of his personal happiness, *finally* breaks down a bit and shows some humanity, rather than another corporate slogan. I really like it. It's a pretty

straightforward concept, but Obsidian's writers run with it throughout, and it brings a lot of character to the game.

So it is that I've returned to *The Outer Worlds* and – third time lucky – got into it. I always knew it was a good game; it's just taken a fair old while for my headspace to align with what the game offers. It's a lesson we all need to remember (I'm sure most of us have already learned it): you don't have to play stuff just because it's new. You don't have to keep playing stuff if you're not getting on with it. And giving a game another chance can reap rewards. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've another 30 hours or so of mucking about to be getting on with. 🗣️

Wireframe Recommends



Fallout: New Vegas

PC, PS3, XB 360

I recommended it last time, so it's only fair to recommend it again. Play *New Vegas* on PC with a recommended set of mods and you've got yourself a stable, deep, engaging take on the wildest wasteland. A superb game.



Wasteland 3

PC, PS4, XBO

Another slow burn for me, I'm glad *Wasteland 3* did eventually get its claws in. Because otherwise I wouldn't have seen laser-toting robot Reagan. It's *that* kind of game.



Mass Effect Legendary Edition

PC, PS4, XBO

And if you want your sci-fi RPGs a little less silly, it's hard to go wrong with BioWare's epic trilogy, remastered and tweaked so it doesn't focus so much on a female character's backside. Great games, too.



Physics!

The case for gaming's greatest leaps: it's the rocket jump

VARIOUS DEVELOPERS / VARIOUS FORMATS / VARIOUS YEARS

The problem with learning things is that it often takes what you think is a good idea and ruins it a bit. Case in point: hey, *Quake* got a re-release – we're talking about it in the retro pages of this issue; why not have a look at rocket jumping too, the thing that *Quake* definitely invented and that it's famous for having definitely invented, because it definitely invented the entire thing? Except, it wasn't *Quake* that invented rocket jumping. Of course it wasn't.

In fact, you'd have to – somewhat surprisingly – go back to *Quake*'s antecedent, *DOOM*, for the first example of an FPS using rockets to propel the player across a large gap. OK, so it wasn't the vertical type of rocket jump we know and love today, where you fire a rocket at the ground immediately after jumping in order to use the power of the explosion to send your character to far greater heights. But it was the same theory: fire an explosive at a surface, have the explosion benefit you more than locomotion alone could. *DOOM*'s sixth mission of its third episode, Mt. Erebus, required – by design – the player to fire a rocket at a wall to knock them back far enough to land inside a recess where the level's secret exit was located. That was the birth of the rocket jump, not that anybody making the game really knew it.

The birth of the *vertical* rocket jump, though – the *proper* rocket jump – that's where we come to *Quake*. And that's where the justification for writing these pages comes into

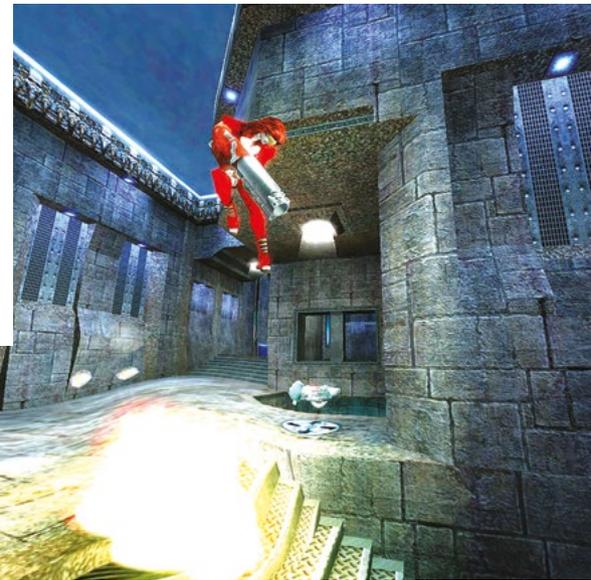
play... oh, no, wait, the first vertical rocket jumps came in two other first-person shooters, coincidentally both released on the exact same day: Bungie's Mac FPS, *Marathon*, and Apogee Software's would-be *Wolfenstein* sequel, *Rise of the Triad*. The latter was its shareware release, mind, so technically, we'd go with *Marathon* as the first full game to feature vertical rocket jumps. Though actually, it was mainly accomplished by using grenades rather than rockets, though rocket jumps *could* be done. Learning things!

Anyway, neither game required the player to use the technique to make it through the game, though players of *RotT*'s final level *could* use the technique to complete the mission. But it wasn't mandatory: it was still a glitch to be taken advantage of and break things with, rather than what it later became. So obviously, at this point, *Quake* stepped up and – while it wasn't the first game to feature the rocket jump, it was the game to make it an integral part of its core design.

Yeah, no, not that either. It was still a glitch, effectively, in *Quake*. Rocket jumping

is an element of the game that took members of id's team by surprise, with the likes of John Romero on record admitting that. Even though later in the game – mission four, episode four, the Palace of Hate – there was a secret requiring an explosive to propel the player up to an otherwise unreachable platform. That was a cool little one-off by the designers, with no thought given to the larger impact hurtling through the sky on a rocket-powered pogo stick could have.

“Rocket jumping, the thing that *Quake* definitely invented and that it's famous for having definitely invented”



But rocket jumping caught on; it became something players used not just to get to secret areas, but to navigate through levels in a significantly quicker fashion than id had intended. Then there was online play, where rocket jumping became a go-to move for advanced players, willing to take the hit to their health in order to be able to get out of Dodge speedily. Or rain down fire from above. Or just to look cool. Whatever the case, *Quake* made rocket jumping *cool*.

From there it became a trope in and of itself, featuring in plenty of first-person shooters in the years post-1996. *Quake III* fully leaned into rocket jumps as a feature, and it became near-impossible to compete against seasoned opponents without having at least a little grasp of super-propelled leaping powers. *Team Fortress 2* – a direct descendent of *Quake* – incorporated rocket jumping with such fervour that there were even specific animations created for the Soldier's feet to go on fire when using the boost.

And while rocket jumping is known in the most part for its relationship to the first-person shooter genre, it's a feature that has appeared (in differing forms) in plenty of different genres. The *Super Smash Bros.* series includes a similar ability for some characters and when wielding some explosive items – and in fact, 1995's 2D brawler (and sort-of-*Smash Bros.*) *The Outfoxies* featured rocket jumping. It's even something that has popped up in numerous *Zelda* titles over the years.

When you really look at it, there's arguments to be made that rocket jumping – or at least the direct precursor to rocket jumping – goes back even further than *Quake*, or *Marathon*, or *Rise of the Triad*, or even *DOOM*. The original *Metroid* for NES features bomb jumps in Samus' morph ball guise, meaning rocket jumps – of a fashion – may have first popped up all the way back in 1986. Let's say it one more time with feeling: learning things! 🗨

Real Talk

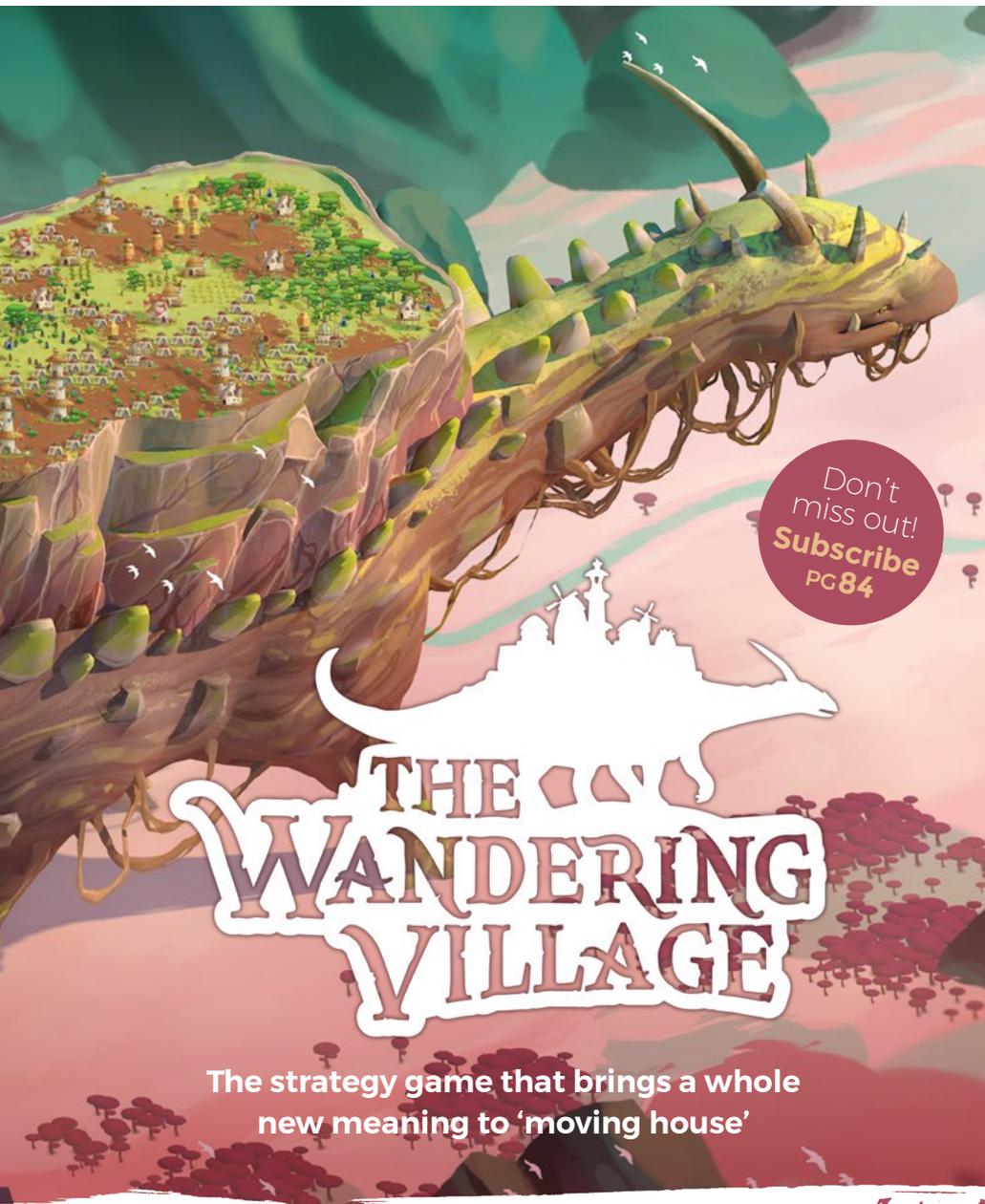
Look, harnessing explosive force to propel an individual is a thing – it exists. One of the best examples being something like a fighter jet's ejection mechanism, which does itself a wee explosion to throw the pilot (and their seat) out of the aircraft. Elsewhere, bigger bangs (of the nuclear variety) are being looked at to hurtle spacecraft through our solar system at an alarming rate – look up the 'Orion engine' for more on that.

But firing a rocket at your own feet, just after you've jumped – or setting off an explosive charge, dropping a grenade, whatever it might be – we just can't recommend it. For one, it absolutely does not work, and for two, you may stub your toe. Or worse. Wireframe cannot be held responsible if you do indeed try to get to the second floor of a building by avoiding the lift and instead wielding a weapon of war.



Next Issue

ON SALE 4 NOV



The strategy game that brings a whole new meaning to 'moving house'

ALSO

- ▶ The evolution of rhythm-action games
- ▶ The good and the bad of enhanced editions
- ▶ Portable pioneers: the lost art of handheld demakes
- ▶ Code your own Boulder Dash construction kit

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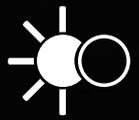
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