



XBOX



THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

2017 PREVIEW SPECIAL!



TOM CLANCY'S

GHOST RECON

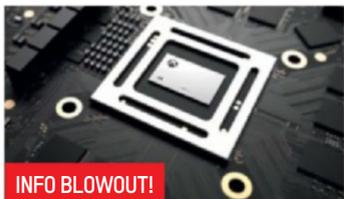
WILDLANDS

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS
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BLOWN APART!

25 ESSENTIAL GAMES

MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA PREY
SEA OF THIEVES CRACKDOWN 3

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PREVIEWED!

STATE OF DECAY 2

FRESH DETAILS ON THE BRUTAL
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CLASSIFIED!

TOP-SECRET GAMES

MYSTERY GAMES EXPOSED:
FROM DESTINY 2 TO TOMB RAIDER



ALL THE GAMES!

2018 AND BEYOND

CYBERPUNK 2077 AND WHY
XBOX WILL DOMINATE THE FUTURE

XBOX ONE & WINDOWS 10 EXCLUSIVE

HALO WARS 2



FEBRUARY 21

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 XBOX ONE



**REAL-TIME STRATEGY
MAKES AN EXPLOSIVE RETURN
TO THE HALO UNIVERSE**

343
INDUSTRIES



Microsoft
Studios



Windows 10



Ahead of the games



Matt Gilman
Editor

Matt plays the role of the Point Man in the OXM Ghost squad. No, we don't mean he takes the lead, we mean he runs around pointing at people.

Sssshhk Do you copy, OXM readers? We're at the rendezvous point and have eyes on the targets: every big-hitting game worth its salt is in one location this issue, ripe for your reconnaissance. Chief among them: *Ghost Recon Wildlands*. Far from replicating its stable mate *The Division's* grim mid-apocalypse New York, *Wildlands* whisks us off to Bolivia, where we'll have 11 vastly different biomes (environments, for non-*Minecraft* fans) to careen around. Once you've gathered all our intel from our studio visit, there's still *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, *Sea Of Thieves*, *Scalebound*, and a ludicrous amount more to keep on your radar. 2017 is going to be huge for Xbox and we'll be there to cover all of it from behind enemy lines. Suppressors on *circles two fingers in the air*.

THE OXM GHOSTS



Tom 'T-off' Stone
Games editor

Tom did some of his own Ghost-ing this month. He Ghost-ed out onto the street, then onto a plane and into a new job. We'll miss you, buddy.



Kimberley Ballard
Production editor

Kimberley plays the role of Spotter in the OXM squad, sitting on a metaphorical hillock calling out our spelling mistakes so we can snipe them down.



James Nouch
Staff writer

We told James he'd have to go undercover with a real-life cartel when putting together our *Wildlands* feature. "I'll be okay," he said. "I have addictionary".



Samuel Roberts
Contributor

Samuel is a cartel-busting machine, thanks to his Tom Clancy training. He nurses a hatred of drug dealers, too. Always sticking their business in people's noses.

ISSUE 198 MARCH 2017

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Everything you can look forward to over the next 90 or so pages

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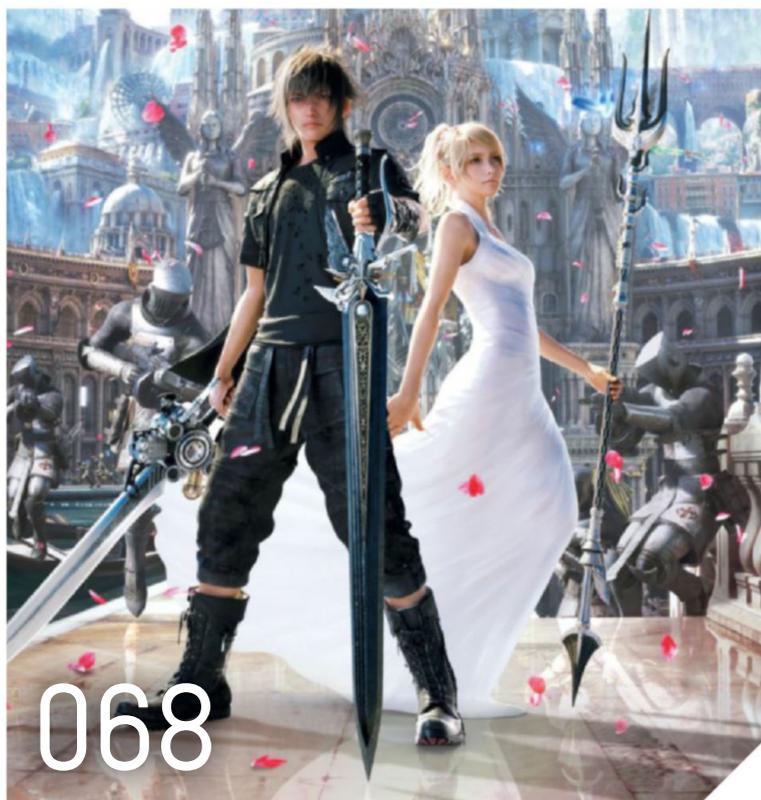
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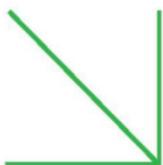


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→ HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? WHY NOT WRITE TO TEAM OXM AT [OXM@FUTURENET.COM](mailto:oxm@futurenet.com)

insider



Happy New Year! Hopefully! But as promising as 2017 looks, we've dedicated a lot of this month's Insider to 2016's under-appreciated gems. Like Titan's **Dishonored** comic (p10). Set between *Dishonored 1* and *2*, we've interviewed the artist to find out how he transformed a visually arresting game into graphic-novel form. Rumours that we got that interview by using Possession and forcing him into our interrogation dungeon are a matter for the courts. Then we've taken a closer look at **EA Access** (p16). What started as a promising but limited subscription service, now boasts a great library and low price that gives Games with Gold a run for its money. After all that looking-back, we take our first, amazed blinks towards the future, starting with the Lovecraftian, Gothic horror game **Call Of Cthulhu** (p14). Once you've escaped those inky tentacles, Steve Hogarty tries to fix the problem of shallow and clumsy videogame AI while confessing his love for the beautiful boys of **Final Fantasy XV** (p18).



010



014



016



018





COME ON!
HE'S ONE OLD MAN!
WHAT ARE YOU ALL
WAITING FOR?



...I GREW UP
DUBLING IN THE
STREETS...

...AT HALF
YOUR AGE, I WAS
FACING MEN TWICE
MY SIZE.

SURELY THE
DUNWALL CITY
WATCH ISN'T AFRAID
OF SOMEONE WHO
CUT HIS TEETH
WITH THE **GRAND
SERKONAN
GUARD?**

YOU'RE TOE
TO TOE WITH THE
ROYAL PROTECTOR
TO HER MAJESTY
EMPERESS EMILY
KALDWIN.

IF I LET
EVEN ONE OF
YOU TOUCH ME,
IT MEANS EMILY'S
NOT SAFE.
IT MEANS THE
NEXT ASSASSIN
MIGHT
SUCCEED.

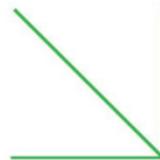
ABOVE True to form, Corvo begins by beating the spot out of Dunwall's city watch.



COMIC
TIMING

Graphic content

Comic artist Andrea Olimpieri gives us the lowdown on his [Dishonored graphic novel](#), and insight into turning pixels into pages



LEFT Originally published as four separate issues, *The Wyrmswood Deceit* features more than 100 pages of Olimpieri's full-color art.

There was a time, not so long ago, when narrative didn't seem to matter much in videogames. Our pre-adolescent brains would light up with glee as primitive bloop and blorp shuffled aimlessly around the screen, and we clapped and barked like idiot seals at paltry premises and threadbare narratives. Now, narrative is such a major focus for developers that their stories often spill out into other media, with comics leading the charge in terms of videogame adaptations and spin-offs.

Titan Comics specializes in exactly this kind of collaboration, working with a number of noted videogame publishers to build out game worlds into compelling comic-book collections. The latest game series to get this graphic novel treatment is *Dishonored*. *The Wyrmswood Deceit* provides fresh insight into the character and backstory of the game's protagonist Corvo Attano as he clashes with brutal gangs and uncovers mysterious magicks on the murky streets of Dunwall.

So, while Titan's take on the series may follow a familiar face, it relates an untold story, opening on Corvo's quest to recruit an apprentice who can ensure the security of the crown and the empire once he's gone. It isn't long, however, before the Royal Protector uncovers evidence of sinister sorcery in the city and finds himself looking down the barrel of a twisted conspiracy. To untangle this web of deception, Attano will have to look deep into his own history.

Set roughly three years before the tumultuous events of *Dishonored 2*,

The Wyrmswood Deceit represents a new chapter in *Dishonored* lore, but there's always an obligation to respect the source material and its fans. "I believe that to transpose the vision of a videogame in a sequence of still images, the most important elements are faithful atmospheres and settings," explains *The Wyrmswood Deceit*'s artist, Andrea Olimpieri. "In a comic, it is impossible to show the reader the whole development of an

"The important elements of an adaptation are faithful settings and atmosphere"

action, nor can they move the camera to look at the surroundings or zoom in or out on specific details. You have to be as accurate as possible to draw the reader into the story and to help them to imagine what is not on the scene."

Still game

Authenticity might sound like a straightforward-enough goal for Olimpieri and his colleagues to strive towards, but capturing the look and feel of a videogame in a drastically different medium is a challenging and time-consuming process that requires long-term planning to realize. "Usually everything starts when Titan's comics editor decides that it would

011



012

ABOVE "The biggest part of the work is in the storyboard and layout phase," says Olimpieri. Not only does the process demand close collaboration between artist and writer, but it's vital that every action is completely clear to the reader.

→ be amazing to realize the adaptation of a particular videogame, and then approaches its publisher with a project in mind," Olimpieri explains. In this particular instance, an agreement was reached and Bethesda provided the artist with a stack of reference images and documentation to draw on. Naturally, Olimpieri spent an awful lot of time playing Dishonored, too, acquainting himself with the visual language of the series as well as the themes and mechanics that he might be able to reproduce in his art. "[Playing the game] is important and it is great. I mean, to do my job I need to play? Who is luckier than me? In my heart, I am a gamer."

Research and planning complete, Olimpieri still has a long road ahead of him. "Every step of my work—storyboards, pencils, inks—passes first under the ever-watchful eyes of my editor, Tom Williams, who gives me precious feedback. It is then submitted to Bethesda and Arkane, who check the faithfulness

"The daunting detail of sinister close-ups shows Corvo's grinning, skeletal face"

of characters and atmospheres. If it is approved, it gets back to Titan and then to me to make any changes that might be needed. It is a long process, but we need to ensure that the reader has the best product possible—immersive and free of errors or inconsistencies!" The two-way stream of communication between game-maker and comic-creator continues throughout the entire production process, to the extent that Harvey Smith—director of *Dishonored 1* and *2* and co-creative director of Arkane Studios—is credited as an additional editor in the finished comic.

It's thanks to this painstaking process that the finished graphic novel isn't just a Dishonored lore dump, but also feels faithful to the world that Arkane created. As such, Corvo comes across as a secretive and suspicious character, hiding the Outsider's mark from everyone around him, including those he loves most. And, true to videogame form, he's able to Blink between rooftops, summon swarms of rats to attack his foes, and peer through walls with his powers of supernatural sight.

Face value

The comic-book medium even offers one or two notable advantages over its source material, since the first-person perspective of the Dishonored series has always prevented players from getting a good in-game look at Corvo's fearsome metallic mask. Here, however, you get a striking sense of how terrifying Corvo's grinning, skeletal face must be to the criminals of Dunwall, thanks to Olimpieri's use of

OXM
SAYS



▶ Matt Gilman

"There have been a couple of smaller short-story comics, but I'd walk over broken glass and Lego to get a full-blown *Overwatch* graphic novel. I would love a tome detailing the Omnic crisis backstory, or Hanzo and Genji's pasts."



▶ Kimberley Ballard

"I'm a huge comic-book nerd (and proud of it). The game I would love to see splashed out on paper is *Firewatch*. Just imagine the russet sunsets and verdant forest, plus the aching romance between Henry and Delilah, in a book!"



▶ Tom Stone

"*Fallout 4*'s characters are pretty forgettable, with the exception of Nick Valentine. I'd love a series of crime comics following his pulpy adventures. Do it, Bethesda! The world deserves better than my weird fan-fiction..."



LEFT Every single panel goes through multiple revisions, starting as a pencil sketch, then an inked outline before the final colours are applied.



OH YES, SOMEONE HAS CLEARLY TAUGHT HER WELL.



sinister close-ups drawn in daunting detail. "The most important thing is the fluency of the visual storytelling," he explains. "Many readers will know the characters from their playthrough of the videogame. Others will get their first glimpse of Dishonored's world with this comic." As such, it's vital that the narrative not only makes sense to both newcomers and veterans, but also that it's utterly engaging from the outset.

Remarkably, *The Wyrwood Deceit* actually marks Olimpieri's first experience of adapting a videogame, but the process has proven both enjoyable and enlightening for the Italian artist. "I never really thought before about the amount of work that goes into defining a design and developing a credible [videogame] setting," he tells us. Fortunately, it's this level of care and craft that ensures videogame worlds will remain ripe prospects for adaptation across all sorts of media. ■

→ ARE YOU EXCITED TO FIND OUT MORE? TELL US AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK

MAD
TO THE
BONE

The Old Ones are the best ones

Skirt the slippery brink of insanity in Cyanide's Lovecraftian nightmare: [Call Of Cthulhu](#)

When we talk about the roaring '20s, it's usually in reference to the economic prosperity and artistic energy of the time, rather than the bestial cry of an impossibly ancient and powerful god. But, according to the latest project from Cyanide Studio, the Great Old One Cthulhu was loitering on the fringes of all that Gatsby-esque excess, probably driving flappers mad with the sudden knowledge of their cosmic insignificance.

And it's into this decade of whirling cultural dynamism that *Call Of Cthulhu* drops you, depicting an isolated community on the fringes of Boston for your player character to explore. But it won't all be jazzy excess and scrumptious lobster rolls, because you'll be stepping into the serious shoes of war veteran turned private investigator Edward Pierce, who's investigating the mysterious death of a local young woman and her family.

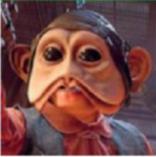
Cult of personality

Unraveling the circumstances surrounding this tragedy is your first priority, but true to Lovecraftian precedent, you can't count on much help from the region's creepy locals, or the crazed cultists that you notice skulking in the shadows. Getting to the bottom of this strange, unfurling case will require more than just sound deductive reasoning – you'll have to confront the limits of your own fragile sanity. ■

In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming, but he's moseying on over to the Xbox One sometime in 2017



ABOVE Cyanide's game is actually an official adaptation of Chaosium's enduringly popular *Call Of Cthulhu* pen-and-paper RPG.

ACCESS
ALL
AREAS

Need to know

One page, all the facts. This month, a reappraisal of the vastly improved game subscription service [EA Access](#)

1 THE LIBRARY IS MUCH STRONGER THAN WHEN IT LAUNCHED

"EA Access?" you're possibly screaming at this magazine right now. "What the HELL IS THAT?!" Calm down, friend. This is EA's subscription service, for access to a 'vault' of EA games on Xbox One. Always a good idea, EA Access was initially held back by a lack of great games. But a few years on, it's library now contains hits like *Star Wars Battlefront*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Titanfall* and, er, *Peggle 2*.

2 IT'S A GREAT WAY TO TRY THE GAMES YOU DON'T WANT TO BE CAUGHT BUYING

Hand over money for *Peggle 2* at your local games emporium and you risk being tarred and feathered, or at the very least being laughed out of the store for being a dirty casual gamer. Luckily, EA Access lets you indulge in games we wouldn't recommend at full price, but are definitely entertaining. *UFC 2* is a pretty niche 7/10 that isn't for everyone, but has the funniest character creation on Xbox. *Plants Versus Zombies Garden Warfare 2* is gaming Marmite—intolerable for some, joyous for others—so EA Access is a great way to try these games.

3 YOU CAN CATCH UP ON THE ENTIRE MASS EFFECT TRILOGY

Backwards compatible Xbox 360 games like *SSX* and *Dead Space* are now in the vault, but best of all is the recent inclusion of the Mass Effect titles. Though you won't need



to have played these games to understand *Andromeda*, there's really no excuse to not try BioWare's epic RPG trilogy, especially when you can do it at such a low price. The original is a fine game, *Mass Effect 2* might just be the best thing BioWare has ever made, and *Mass Effect 3*, sadly most remembered for a controversial ending, deserves a reappraisal.

4 MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST WAS AMAZING. SHUT UP, IT WAS

Look, we're not arguing that the characters were compelling (they weren't), or that it was long enough (it wasn't) or that the combat was a good idea (about as much fun as an actual punch in the face) but the first-person parkour was regularly astonishing. Get Faith on a good run through the city, sliding, dashing,

ABOVE *Battlefront* is just one of many titles. For a full list visit [xbox.com](#)



and leaping between shining white skyscrapers, and it's one of the most exciting moment-to-moment parkour games to be found on Xbox One. Low sales mean it's already in the vault, but the silver lining is you can now play one of 2016's most underrated leap-em-ups for under five bucks.

5 THE SUBSCRIPTION MODEL IS PERFECT FOR MULTIPLAYER SHOOTERS

Star Wars Battlefront is a bit too lightweight to score more than 7/10 in these pages, but the lack of a proper solo campaign doesn't matter so much when you can get it at this price. Likewise with the original *Titanfall*. Both are great multiplayer shooters, perfect for dropping into for a few quick matches, which makes them very well suited to a subscription-based games service. If you get bored of the games, you can cancel at any time and spend your precious \$4.99 elsewhere.

6 YOU CAN PLAY BRAND NEW GAMES BEFORE ANYONE ELSE

October 21 2016 was a great day for multiplayer shooting as it saw the release of the excellent *Battlefield 1*, which we gave 9/10. But that date was old news for EA Access members, who'd already been able to play a trial version for over a week. Throw in a ten per cent discount on all EA titles and you have a subscription service that's becoming increasingly essential. All the OXM team are signing up. ■

EA Access and its 'vault' of games are available now on Xbox One

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DEAD RISING 4

LET THE SLAY RIDE BEGIN

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Steve Hogarty is... The Fixer

This month, Steve wonders how to make **believable friends**

Topping the charts at the moment is a new friendship simulator, and its name is *Final Fantasy XV*. Developed in Japan by some people who've had at least 14 goes at making a game before this one (so you *know* it's good), it's about four boys with nice hair who ignore their destiny in favor of driving their car to industrial estates and stabbing the wild animals that they find there. Or at least that's what happens in my version.

What everybody finds remarkable about this fantasy RPG is the achingly believable bond between these four badly dressed men, and how quickly that relationship is established thanks to some straightforward character introductions and a frankly terrible cover of *Stand By Me*. You've got Tall Wise Boy, who you desperately want to impress; you've got Buff Biker Boy, who is the big brother you never had; you've got Cute Idiot Boy, who you did that thing with once in summer camp and sometimes you wonder if he still thinks about it.

And then there is you, Standard RPG Boy, whose moderately cool hair and generic emo-backstory invite you to see the world through his eyes. You can have these friends. They were made for you.

Exactly why this quartet d'amis works so well is part of the solution to this month's Awful Gaming Thing, which is artificial intelligence, which is bad.

The problem

In the real world, artificial intelligence is the ability of a robot to not malfunction and cartwheel into the nearest bush when asked what love is. It is also the ability of a robot to slide open the lower half of its face like a bread bin, revealing a pipe that emerges on a conveyor belt, which the robot proceeds to puff on twice before saying "indubitably".

In videogames, artificial intelligence is responsible for even more complex tasks. Characters must be clever enough to run



"Characters must be able to walk in a straight line while avoiding tar pits"

in a straight line while avoiding tar pits, crocodiles, and any jutting-out polygons. Soldiers must be able to hide behind statues in such a way that their foot sticks out a tiny bit, so you can still shoot them to death, and merchants must keep track of up to 256 different potions. Artificial intelligence is a measure of how characters respond to your actions and words. It makes them seem real.



Yet presently, artificial intelligence is in the doldrums. Characters routinely smear their faces against walls while running on the spot, or slowly recede into the floor while rotating and muttering, "Hmm, I could've sworn I just heard something". Coding convincing virtual behaviors is difficult in the extreme, and most developers simply get tired shortly after designing more important character attributes like boobs and shoes.

The solution

Some games have managed to overcome this challenge. *Alien Isolation* solved it by diverting all of its artificial intelligence processing power to its one hulking great scarsemith, the Xenomorph, which had the unintended side effect of making every other enemy look really dumb.

That was a fine solution, but it's *Final Fantasy XV* that's made real strides in creating believable friends who live inside your television. Square Enix constructed its characters using an abundance of predetermined detail rather than free-acting brain-algorithms. Each time you make camp you'll see different incidental animations. Cute Idiot Boy shares selfies of the gang while Tall Wise Boy serves up plates of vegetable stew. Standard RPG Boy quietly voices insecurities to a Buff Biker Boy on a beach at dawn, and sometimes you all team up to both stab *and shoot* a massive giraffe at the same time. The result is a truly meaningful exploration of young male relationships and largely needless animal death.

This is the way forward for games, using reams of hard-coded dialogue and motion-captured animation to create characters that are an inch deep and a mile wide. They're superficial on almost every level, but from an outside perspective, believable to anyone who doesn't think too hard about them. Much like real life, am I right, men? Hah, men! ■

You can read more of Steve's opinions on games and AI guys in *City A.M.*

Jordan Erica Webber is The Praiser

This month, Jordan celebrates Dishonored 2's literal **Heart**

There's an old saying that goes, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." This quote is often misattributed to Plato, but is thought to have actually come from a Reverend John Watson (under the pen name Ian Maclaren) in the 1800s. Meant to encourage empathy and remind you that other people are complex beings, it's one I could remember more often.

In *Dishonored 2*'s alternative 1800s, your protagonist—either Empress Emily Kaldwin or her father and Royal Protector, Corvo Attano—receives a visit from the supernatural Outsider, who hands over a magically adapted human heart that asks: "What if we could know the details of each one of those personal battles?"

The Heart, carried in your chosen character's left hand, helps to locate hidden runes and bone charms that you can use to upgrade their skill set. Get close to one of these magical objects and the Heart will beat, getting faster as you move closer. We're used to hearing our character's heartbeat in horror games, but this is stranger, in keeping with the grotesque world that Arkane has crafted. But my favorite thing about the Heart is a less functional feature: the way that it whispers when you give it a squeeze.

Sometimes, the Heart will whisper general statements that tell you no more than you can already see: "This city is a place of riches. But not all get a seat at the banquet table." But point it at a person, and it will whisper their secrets. Named characters get several squeezes, a more interesting way to learn backstory than to read an entry in a codex. But even nameless citizens, such as guards and beggars, get a line. "He was beaten in his youth. The bone in his jaw never set right. Yet he refrains from mistreating others."

These snippets have mixed effects. It makes nameless NPCs seem more real, until you reload and use the Heart on the same person only to find that the whispers

SPOILER ALERT!



"For every good person, the Heart reveals five who've committed murder"

are randomly assigned. Sometimes these secrets seem at odds with how the person appears from what they say to you or what you overhear them saying to others, but I suppose that's true to life.

Since this is *Dishonored*, the whispered secrets are weighted towards the bad. For every person who "sings to get through the day", there seem to be five who've committed murder. I don't like what this



suggests about the fundamental nature of human beings, but I do like how it makes it much more tempting to forgo mercy and just dismember these awful people. And it does make the occasional nice secret more moving; given the evil deeds of those around him, it's good to find a man who "raised the child on his own, even though he knew otherwise."

Heart and soul

I play as Emily, and these whispered truths make a stark contrast to her occasional comments. "It's a new thing, needing money," she says, as she enters a world populated by people who can't afford to keep their children alive. As I squeeze the Heart at every opportunity, I imagine Emily totally overwhelmed by what she's learning yet unable to stop herself from looking closer. I imagine her desperate to use this magical aid to figure out if there's anyone she can trust.

Of course, when you play as Emily there's an additional layer to the Heart: the spirit within is that of her mother, Jessamine Kaldwin. This hits you when the Heart speaks in the first person: "You ask too much of me—to look into his perverse soul. Too much." And it wrenches at your own heart when the voice of Jessamine tells Emily her regrets: "What I wouldn't give just to hold your hand in mine one more time."

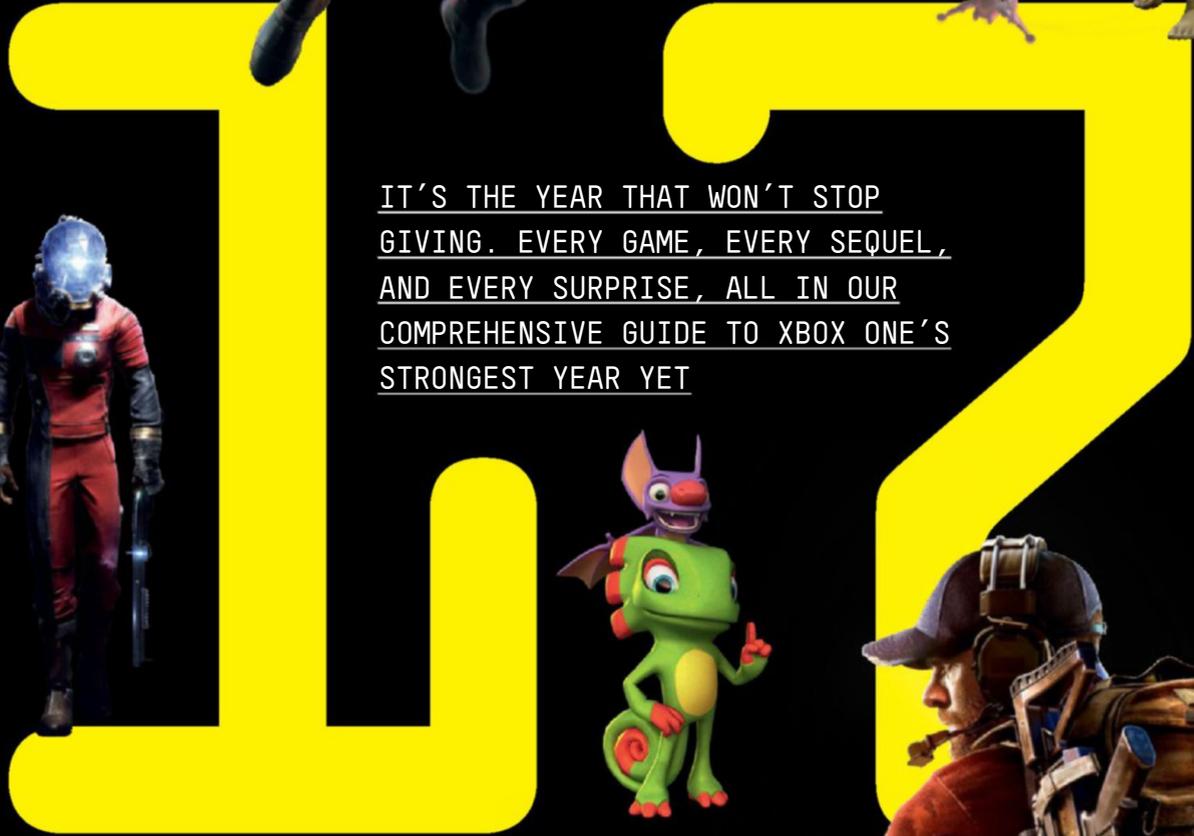
Towards the end of the game—spoilers ahead—the spirit of Jessamine does get to hold her daughter's hand, as Emily is forced to release her. We can gather from some of her whispers—"I am tired. How long, my dearest? How long must I endure in this shadow state?"—that Jessamine is happy to leave this world, but presumably it means that any sequel won't star the Heart, at least not with the same spirit inside. Still, I'm grateful that it made its way into a game at all, and that it gave me cause to wonder: what would the Heart have to say about me? ■

When not listening to others' darkest secrets, Jordan writes for *The Guardian*

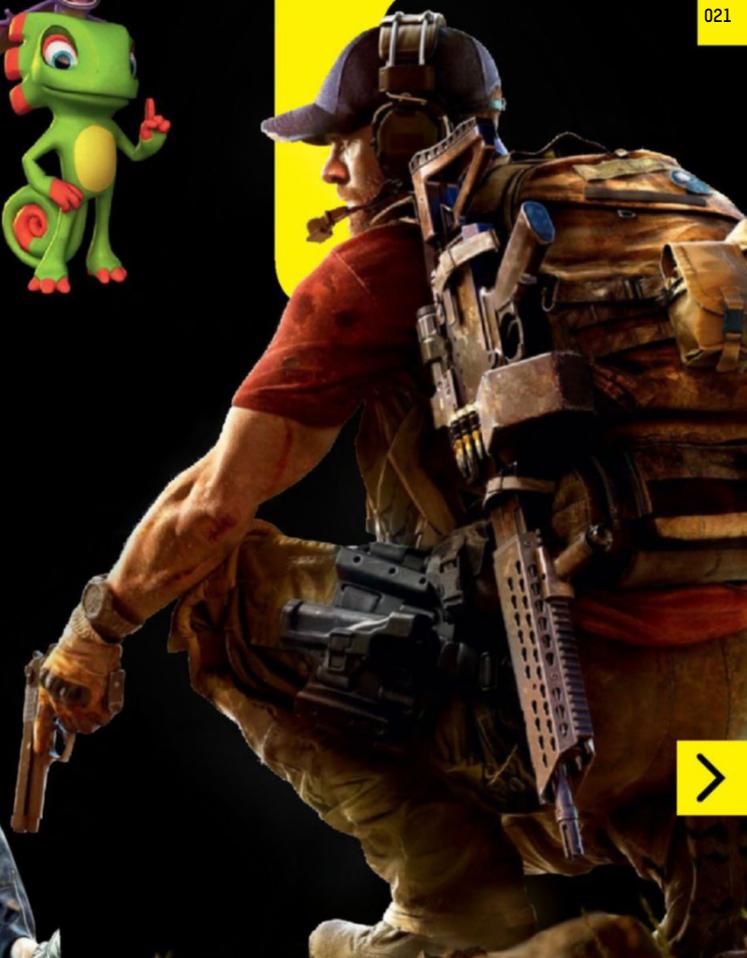
YOUR GAME PLAN



020



IT'S THE YEAR THAT WON'T STOP GIVING. EVERY GAME, EVERY SEQUEL, AND EVERY SURPRISE, ALL IN OUR COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO XBOX ONE'S STRONGEST YEAR YET





Tom Clancy's

Ghost

Wild

ETA
MAR 7
2017

PUBLISHER UBISOFT DEVELOPER UBISOFT PARIS

022



Recon lands

023

WE INFILTRATE UBISOFT'S PARIS STUDIO TO SNEAK A PEEK AT ITS SOUTH AMERICAN SANDBOX **JAMES NOUCH**





Ubisoft's developed more than its fair share of open-worlds over the years. It recreated Renaissance Rome in *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*. It squeezed a Himalayan nation onto a Blu-ray disc for *Far Cry 4*. And, more recently, the developer sculpted a virtual San Francisco for its sandbox hack-tacular, *Watch Dogs 2*. So, when the studio promises that *Ghost Recon Wildlands* will take place in the largest action-adventure world it's ever created, that's a claim with some substance behind it.

And this time around, it's the geographically diverse nation of Bolivia that serves as the setting for Ubisoft's near-future narrative, which presents a quintessentially Clancy 'what-if' scenario. "Bolivia's one of the biggest producers of coca leaf in the world, which is used for lots of different things like medicines, and Ritalin, and toothpaste, and altitude sickness," explains *Wildlands'* narrative director, Sam Strachman. "But a small minority of people are using it to make cocaine. And the idea is that a drug cartel moves into Bolivia, takes over a huge area, and creates a narco-state, and they start producing more cocaine than any cartel in history."

Not just any cartel, though. Santa Blanca is a truly ruthless organisation that rose to prominence running all manner of illicit substances on the mean streets of Mexico. Since moving

into Bolivia, these drug-slinging entrepreneurs have applied a careful mixture of money and threats to establish complete control of the country, paying off the government while meeting any local resistance with appalling violence. Playing as a four-person team of autonomous agents, your job is to undermine this criminal empire by taking down each of the cartel's 26 bosses, including its terrifying top dog: El Sueño.

The order and manner in which you choose to complete these operations is entirely at your discretion. Think *Crackdown*—but with fewer agility orbs



"Think Crackdown, with fewer agility orbs and more drugs, and you're in the right ballpark"



BELOW With tats like that, there's no doubt El Sueño's dedicated to his cause.

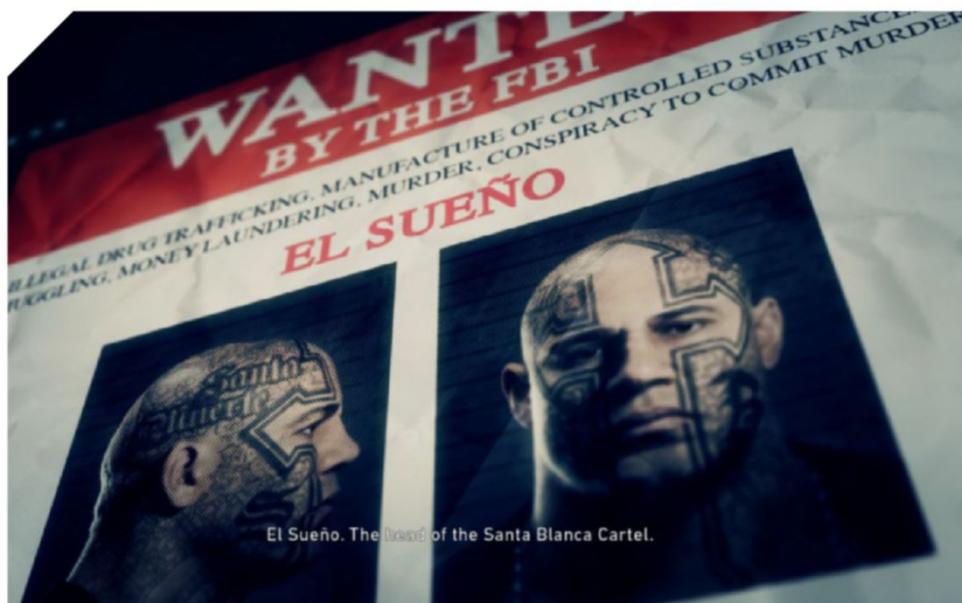
and more substance abuse—and you're in the right ballpark.

But you won't just be picking off Santa Blanca bruisers at random, since the cartel is organized into four distinct operations that can be destabilized and dismantled as you choose. The production arm oversees the cultivation of the coca plant, strong-arming local communities into growing for the cartel, before synthesizing the harvested leaves

into cocaine. But, as Strachman is keen to emphasize, local growers are by no means drug-pushing thugs. "Just because you're growing coca in another country it doesn't mean you're a terrible person, right? It's just what you do, it has this long cultural tradition. And this cartel comes along and they have this term called 'silver or lead' which means either you'll take our money, or we'll kill you. That's your choice." So, taking down Santa Blanca's production pipeline isn't just a matter of indiscriminately destroying coca fields or killing growers—it's a question of taking down the key cartel players who are make the illicit final product.

Border control

And then there's the smuggling side of the cocaine business. "It's not really worth anything unless you can get it to your consumers. The value of cocaine comes from crossing borders," explains Strachman. That being the case, Santa Blanca has set up a complex network dedicated to sneaking their product out of the



El Sueño. The boss of the Santa Blanca Cartel.



RIGHT The Gunsmith feature returns from previous Ghost Recon games, allowing you to customize your weaponry in detail.

country. "It includes cars, planes, boats, and they build their own submarines. In the game they even use silicon breast implants to hide cocaine." Destabilizing the operation means targeting these vehicles and the lieutenants that oversee them.

Of course, synthesizing and smuggling cocaine isn't much good if you can't protect it, and that's where Santa Blanca's sinister security forces come into play. Mostly formed of ex-police and ex-military, these ferocious henchmen don't just guard the drugs and money—they also function as roving death squads dedicated to eliminating any and all opposition to the cartel. Expect some stiff opposition from these highly trained and highly armed targets.





Last but not least is the influence arm of the Santa Blanca's activities. "Influence is fascinating because it's basically the propaganda machine of the cartel. It's how they win over the hearts and minds of the people, and also how they maintain that loyalty within their members," says Strachman. That influence can take a number of forms, from informal partnerships with local businesses to the preaching and promotion of a cartel-sanctioned brand of religion: Santa Muerte.

There's even a Santa Blanca radio station dedicated to broadcasting pro-cartel propaganda in between blasts of narco-corrido music explicitly written to glamorize the lifestyle.

Our introduction to the wide-open world of *Wildlands* begins with a strike on this influence organization, and we watch as the Ghosts are treated to a briefing from prickly CIA handler Karen Bowman. We learn the influence arm of Santa Blanca is headed by an excommunicated priest known as El Cardenal, a preacher and humanitarian who just

RIGHT The entire game can be played in single-player with AI teammates, or in a four-player squad.



happens to serve as religious advisor to El Sueño himself. But this shady shepherd isn't our target today, and in a cutscene Bowman gives us the lowdown instead on one of his lieutenants: famed musician El Chido.

Murder ballads

"If you don't listen to narco-corridos," she begins, "you're a pussy and you're off my Christmas list." Your target isn't just some cartel crony, you see, but a writer and performer of drug ballads, which Bowman enthusiastically describes as "gangster rap for the 21st century." For all El Chido's tough talk of Santa Blanca life, however, he isn't actually a cartel killer—he's simply an opportunistic musician. If you could snatch the phoney thug away from his life of sell-out shows, you might just be able to convince him to squeal on his employers.

How you do that is very much your call, but the first stage will likely involve gathering the intel you need to track down your target, figuring out when and

where he'll be at his most vulnerable. You might eavesdrop on a meeting between the cartel and El Chido's agent, sending in an unobtrusive drone to serve as a fly on the wall during their contract negotiations for a clue as to El Chido's whereabouts. Alternatively, you could beat the crowds and turn up to one of El Chido's concerts early to sabotage his equipment, diverting the Santa Blanca superstar towards a location with more slapdash security.

That might just be your opportunity to strike, but you'll still have to be careful—this is a high-value target that you've been instructed to capture alive. And while security is much lighter here than it was at the sabotaged stadium, El Chido's still surrounded by guards, and the venue is packed with fans chanting his name. Your objective may be clear, but your way forward is anything but.

"You might start to see a little bit of a pattern here" begins *Wildlands'* lead game designer, Dominic Butler. "We like to give you a simple objective—a clear idea of what you need to do. We want a particular outcome, but how you get to that outcome is completely up to you. Do you utilize all the





“Influence is the cartel’s propaganda machine – how they win minds and maintain loyalty”



using whichever combination of stealth, ingenuity, and unbridled firepower you so choose. Once you drag this sorry singer-songwriter back to your safehouse, Bowman is there to greet you and your target in another brief in-engine cutscene. “I know you’re not a cutthroat like these other assholes,” she begins, as a panicky El Chido struggles against his restraints. “You’re just a performer, singing about the Mexican working class experience.

Santa Blanca forced you, against your will to come to Bolivia.” Sensing an opportunity to duck the blame, El Chido perks up. “That’s right! They forced me! I didn’t want to come here!”

Bowman grins as he takes the bait. “I can protect you,” she purrs. “I can keep that buttery voice out of any nasty CIA black-sites. I can keep all the cartels away. I can even get you your car back. But you’re going to have to sing. You need to tell me everything you know about everybody in Santa Blanca.” El Chido slumps in his chair, defeated. “You’d better get a pen,” he sighs. “And a whole lot of paper.” And with that, another cog in the Santa Blanca machine is taken out of the picture.

El Chido may be a valuable collar, but he’s just one of 26 targets you’ll have to pursue in your assault on Santa Blanca, and you can rest

↓ BETTER STEW THAN ME

PLAY YOUR WAY CAPTURE THIS CAUSTIC CREEP

different tools we have? We have C4, mines, remote explosives, diversion grenades. We’ve got upgradeable drones, we’ve got more than 60 different vehicles types, we’ve got tons of different weapons. You can play with your friends, you can play with AI teammates. There are lots of ways to be creative and lots of different ways to play.”

What’s more, the path that led you up to this moment isn’t a linear series of missions. Whether you chose to spy on contract negotiations, blow up his amplifier, or even detonate a truckful of El Chido merch in the hopes of rattling his cage, these are all different but equally valid means of gathering info on your target. So, rather than being funneled through a series of missions or following a marker from one objective to another, you’re constantly making your own choices about which approach to take or which avenue of opportunity to pursue. That’s why, when you fire up *Ghost Recon Wildlands*, you’ll find more than 100 story missions open for you to pick and choose from.

But let’s get back to El Chido, and assume you manage to bag the target

Meet El Pozolero, also known as The Stewmaker. This nasty character is no gourmet, though. He’s the fellow the cartel turns to when it needs to make a body disappear, and he spends his days melting down corpses in hardy barrels of grim chemicals. You’re dispatched to bring El Pozolero in, but how you choose to proceed is entirely up to you...

THE STEALTH APPROACH

You skydive in from a helicopter piloted by a networked teammate, landing at the edge of El Pozolero’s compound under cover of night. You sneak through the camp, scrupulously dodging every patrol in your path. Once you reach El Pozolero, you creep in close and grab him, bundling the bastard into a waiting van before vanishing without a trace.

GADGET ATTACK

You linger on the outskirts of the camp and deploy a drone, making use of a thermal imaging upgrade to track down El Pozolero’s gruesome workspace. A broken window and some dextrous flying lets you get inside the building and mark every guard inside. You use diversion grenades to lure every sentry away from his location before grabbing this cartel nasty.

WEAPONS FREE

Stealth is for chumps and drones are for nerds. Without wasting the time it would take to attach a silencer, you rush into the camp, guns blazing. El Pozolero runs, of course, but you’re prepared. The team piles into a waiting Humvee and gives chase, gunning down the waves of cartel reinforcements that follow. You run Poz off the road and pile him into your vehicle. Job done.





MAP CHAT

Dominic Butler, lead game designer, on bucking the Ubisoft open-world trends

"While we want to make sure that we keep that freedom of choice to move wherever you want, one of the things that can be a little difficult, I think, is to find a way to keep a coherent narrative in that. How do you tell a story in a world where you are able to go wherever you want?"

We wanted to make sure that for these guys—they're Ghosts, they're special ops. They're not there to—I'm joking, but—they're not here to help the farmer's herd the llamas, or they haven't lost something and it's like, 'Let me go find it for you'. These guys are special ops and they're here with a very clear goal. So we want to make sure everything that you do is in aid of that goal.

And so when we had this big open-world, we looked at the way that it's naturally split in terms of provinces. Talking about the idea we had earlier about having smuggling areas and production areas and security areas, it's not a straight quadrant grid, but you find certain operations are more prevalent in certain areas of the country. So dividing that up into provinces, gave us an easy way to have essentially mini-story arcs that you could tell these stories.

But everything you do is always in aid of taking down Santa Blanca. There are side quests, but they're all in aid of supporting that major narrative."



assured that El Sueño won't take your interventions lying down. Each time you take down one of his lieutenants, you'll be treated to a glimpse of the cartel's inner circle in a cutscene that demonstrates not only how the organisation's drug-running operations are affected by your takedowns and arrests, but also how the bossman's personal network is disrupted by your antics. The cartel is like one big family, after all. A violent and deeply dysfunctional family.

50 shades of gray

This perspective is offered not only as a gleeful peek at how upset you can make a muscular man with a facial tattoo, but also in an attempt to explore what Sam Strachman refers to as the "gray zone". Not everyone in the cartel is categorically evil, while the Ghosts and their allies aren't straightforwardly saintly either. "So of course in the cartel you're going to have people that are genuinely monsters, right? But then at the same time, we also want to show that people who are regular civilians are stuck in this situation where there's nothing they can do," Strachman tells us. "We tried our best to show that it's not as simple as good guys versus bad guys."

And this gray zone philosophy often extends to the targets you'll be pursuing, too. "So, for example, you'll have the guy named El Pozolero. He's kind of a nice guy, he doesn't really want to hurt anybody, but he's kind of

ABOVE How you choose to complete the missions is up to you. If you prefer the stealth approach, skydiving in is a good way to start.



dumb, too. He's the guy that makes the bodies disappear." So, whereas some cartel operatives will prove formidable foes, El Pozolero is no fighter, and this ghoulish character is more likely to flee at the first sign of danger. "And then you have this couple who are very much in love, and they're perfect together. But they also have a medical background so their job is to keep people alive while they're being tortured, making sure they don't die before you get what you need to know."

So, Santa Blanca is a surprisingly diverse workplace, and you'll encounter all sorts of cartel operatives during your Bolivian sojourn. Some will be crazed killers, yes, but others will be desperate, opportunistic, or somehow able to separate their violent day jobs from the rest of their existence. They have different lifestyles, schedules, and personalities, and each will behave differently when confronted. How you adapt to each one is up to you.





Seeing a mission in motion really hammers home the adaptable nature of Ubisoft's sandbox, and our demonstration opens with the player staging an all-out assault on a Santa Blanca church. As per Ghost Recon tradition, bullets hit hard here, and a couple of shots is all it takes to drop a Santa Blanca sentry. That said, this isn't a game that forces you to inch forward while scanning the horizon for hyper-accurate threats, and the Ghosts adopt a frantic run-and-gun approach, dashing through gunfire as a four-person fireteam.

By the book

They're here to pilfer El Sueño's personal bible, a move that's sure to upset the big boss, while also undermining the local lieutenant that let it fall into enemy hands. Prayerbook in hand, the Ghosts pile out of the church and into a chopper, soaring over dense jungle and rainforest on their way to a neighboring province, chattering between themselves until Bowman chimes in with an update. Word of the bible-theft has reached El



BELOW You'll earn XP for skilled play, which feeds into a system of skills and upgrades for your Ghosts and their gear.

Sueño, and he's decided to make an example of the lackadaisical lieutenant whose territory you nabbed it from. She's to be publicly executed.

While the prospect of El Sueño offing one of his own might sound like a job well done, Bowman has other ideas. Stop the execution, she suggests, and you'll deal a major blow to El Sueño's credibility. Touching down on the perimeter of a Santa Blanca compound, the Ghosts switch up their tactics, attaching suppressors and creeping into the camp in the hopes of springing the condemned woman. What follows is a tense crawl through enemy territory, as the squad hunkers in shadowy alleys and underneath stilted houses while Santa Blanca

goons patrol the streets. The player character deploys a diminutive drone for an aerial view of this rickety township, only to be confronted with a downright scary density of gun-toting narcos and fortified machinegun-nests.

Exactly how the Ghosts will deal with such fierce opposition is unclear, but if there's one term that's cropped up time and time again, it's player freedom. The Ubisoft team seems determined to avoid enforcing a particular approach to any given mission. So, whether you want to scrupulously gather intel on every target or simply charge at them in a hail of gunfire, *Wildlands* promises an outlet for your preferred brand of Ghost-ery.

"It's that freedom to be able to just see something, spot something, see an opportunity and say, 'Hey, what about it, let's try it!' As much as possible, while we have a clear objective, it's about having no wrong answers," says Butler. "Everything's applicable, everything's up to you." So, while we're excited to see more of the game ahead of its March release date, it's clear that—more than most games—*Ghost Recon Wildlands* will really be whatever you make of it. ■

“Not everyone in the cartel is evil—it’s not as simple as good guys versus bad guys”





BIOME AWAY FROM HOME

WELCOME TO BOLIVIA

We break down the 11 environments awaiting your arrival



SALAR

A salt-encrusted depression. We can relate.



ARID MOUNTAINS

Best bring a canteen or two or else you'll be parched.



CANYON

Gunfire reverberates realistically in these deep gorges.



ALTIPLANO

Fun to say, fun to shoot drug dealers in.



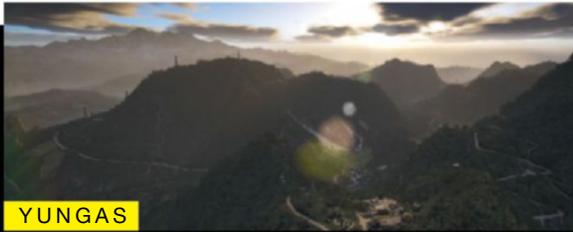
HIGHLANDS

These picture-perfect peaks prove perfect for sniping.



- More than 800km of road
- 7 million trees, bushes, and rock
- More than 150km of railway
- More than 120 settlements
- 21 distinct regions, each with their own landmarks, economy, and varying degree of cartel presence

030



YUNGAS

A rainy, humid, and warm band of elevated forest.



JUNGLE

Dense foliage provides excellent cover for covert ops.



LAKE AND WATERFALL

The Ghosts love nothing more than a nice paddle.



SWAMP

This uncultivated bog is tough to traverse. Best plan ahead.



GREEN LAND

No, not the country! A particularly verdant patch.



FOREST VALLEY

Bolivia's teeming with wildlife. Fortunately, it's not hostile.



BUILDING BOLIVIA

A WORKING HOLIDAY

Benoit Martinez, lead artist, on the importance of the little details

The promise of a huge open-world is all good, but size counts for naught if Ubi's digital Bolivia isn't packed with detail to pore over. Fortunately, lead artist Benoit Martinez and his team have been working on this sandbox for four years now, a process which began with an epic trek across real-world Bolivia.

"We organized four trips over weeks and weeks, to try to get into this reality. To know the people. To know the land," begins Martinez. The four teams covered thousands of miles with cameras and microphones in an effort to document this unique location as faithfully as possible.

By the time they returned to Paris, Martinez and his team were armed with more than 15,000 photographs for the creation of *Wildlands'* virtual world. "We were able to come back and say, 'Okay, what do we want to keep from the real Bolivia? How are we going to recreate all of that?'"

"When I think about it, I think we've been crazy to jump into this, but I'm amazed to see the result," he says. "But it's not the size that matters—it's about the diversity. And you can experience diversity only with a big scale. Even if our world was a third or a quarter of its current size, it would still be a very large open-world, but we wouldn't have been able to fit so many different environments together. It'd just look like mini-golf or something."

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS DEVELOPER RARE



Sea Of Thieves

EVEN MORE RUM THAN THE OXM NEW YEAR'S PARTY

ETA
WINTER
2017

"To me, *Sea Of Thieves* is basically every pirate show or every pirate film you've ever seen that you can actually

play," claims executive producer, Joe Neate, on one of Rare's illuminating development vlogs. "You can be immersed in—and you can be—the pirate you want. I think that's the promise of the game for me."

That's not the sort of promise Team OXM lets you walk back on, unless you fancy walking the plank. Luckily, Rare's nautical MMO looks set to deliver the essential pirate adventure we've always dreamed of. It's by far the most ambitious project the studio has ever embarked on (no offence *Grabbed By The Ghoulies*), allowing you and your friends to steer a ship across multiplayer oceans, seeking treasure, causing chaos, and terrorising the high seas. But only if you know how to work together.

"Our philosophy when designing the ship was focused on creating compelling cooperative mechanics that could bond players together," says Mike Chapman, lead designer. "Working together and sailing the ship cooperatively just feels completely natural. A great example of that is the wind in the game, which is this dynamic force within the world that players can take advantage of by raising and lowering their sails, and angling them into the wind. We consciously avoided things like crosshairs on screen because we wanted you to feel like you were on



ABOVE It's got everything you could expect from a pirate tale: storms, sea beasts, and shanties!

the deck, right there in the action." Early footage shows a remarkably clean HUD, bar the names hovering over other players. Otherwise it's a crisp, clean cel-shaded pirate fantasy. Endless summer, the game.

Salty singalong

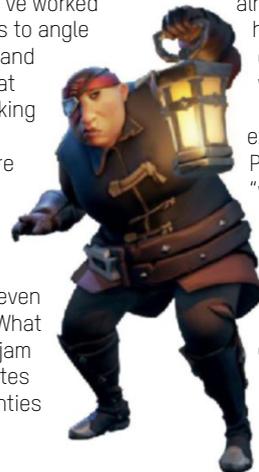
"We've had so many great play sessions at Rare where we've been adventuring on an island," Chapman adds. "We've seen another ship, we've all dashed back, we've got on the anchor together, we've worked together on the sails to angle them into the wind, and it's moments like that where you're all working together where you really feel like you are part of a crew."

But what if we don't want to help angle the sails or drop the anchor, or even polish off the rum? What if we're just here to jam with the band? "Pirates classically sing shanties when they're sailing

together, and we wanted to put instruments in, in a way that is light-hearted and fun," says senior designer, Shelly Preston. "We wanted instruments that were pirate themed."

"The closer you get to another ship, you're just going to hear that music getting louder and louder. So it allows players to create their soundtracks and influence the mood of the crew—for example, playing a really spooky song when night falls and you're entering a misty area. If someone is already playing a shanty with the hurdy-gurdy and I start playing my concertina, I'll dynamically join in with what they're playing."

"One of the most memorable experiences for me," says Andrew Preston, another senior designer, "was when we were all sailing into battle and we were all playing *Ride Of The Valkyries* while trying to catch up to another ship." Pirate-themed *Apocalypse Now*, only less philosophising on the moral pitfalls of man, more intense accordion playing? We're already jigging to its salty beat. All hands on deck, we say. ■



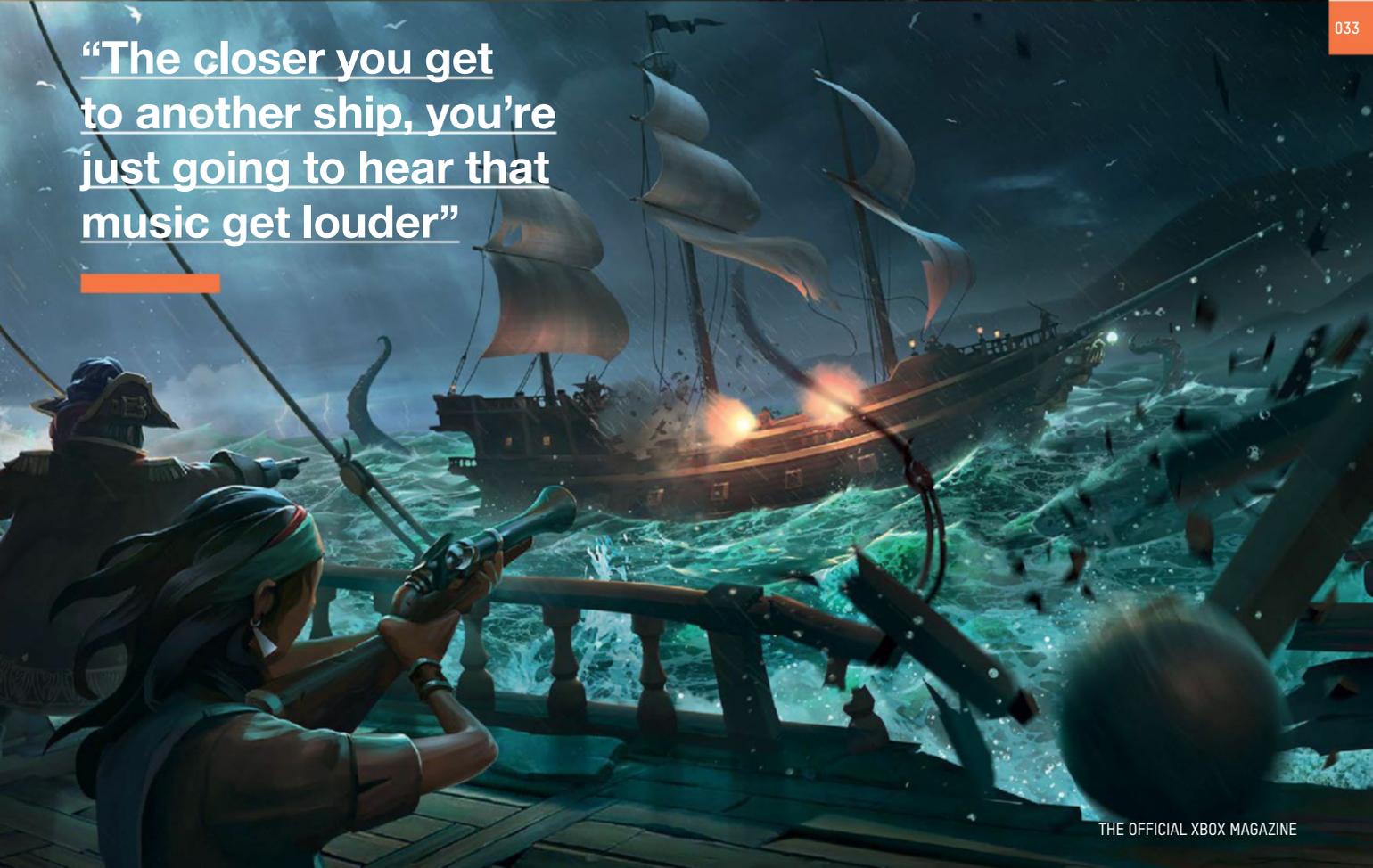
CLIMB ABOARD

So did you play *Sea Of Thieves* over Christmas? What was that... you didn't? Then you should have joined the *Sea Of Thieves* Insider Program, chum. 1,000 lucky players who signed up got access to the closed beta. If you don't want to miss the next one, go to seaofthieves.com/insider and sign up for free RIGHT NOW.

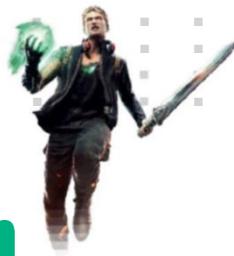




“The closer you get to another ship, you’re just going to hear that music get louder”



PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS DEVELOPER PLATINUM GAMES



Scalebound

MAKING YOUR EPIC FANTASY RPG 4-PLAYER?
NOW THAT'S DRAGON BALLSY

ETA
FALL
2017

Skyrim with dubstep. *Dark Souls* goes electric. *Bayonetta* but with the power to control a gigantic

dragon. If you're not excited about this action-RPG with *four player co-op* then we don't think we can be friends anymore. A game with such lofty ambitions has justified many a delay, but 2017 is the year the adventures of Drew and his dragon, Thuban, finally take flight. Game director, Hideki Kamiya, wants players feeling as in control of their dragon as possible, which means we can fully explore the eye-bleedingly beautiful Draconis.

This fantasy RPG isn't going for the dying haunts of *Dark Souls*. Draconis is a sun-soaked land of lush green glades and triumphant orchestral music blasting you along. Too old-fashioned for your millennial ears?



“Morph two classes of dragon and you'll see wings transform, horns sprout, and legs grow”

Drew's personal playlist should satisfy. We've already seen him blasting out Gomad! & Monster while battling a typically epic Platinum Games adversary. This ginormous crab-like entity enjoys opening its jaws to blast you with a lightning-flavored laser beam. Much as we admire Drew's bow and arrow, it's a worryingly primitive counter-attack. Luckily you have other options, such as using Thuban's tail to launch Drew in an elegant swing onto the monster's weak point so he can deliver a series of punishing punches (the whole time he'll be shouting things like “Why! Won't! You! Die!”). It's pulse-quickening stuff, and slaying the beast with three friends in

tow is enough to inspire familiar bouts of ‘the *Dark Souls* shakes’. Multiplayer also offers three base types of dragon that we can ‘morph’ to our liking. The Rex is the two-legged vanilla option, such as Thuban, the Tank is an all-fours dragon that can naturally take a beating, and the Wyvern is the best airborne option. Collectable gems let you upgrade your dragon's powers, which let you expand in its designated class or branch out to create weirder, much more creative hybrids.

A dragon of a time

So it's *How to Pimp Your Dragon*, essentially. Morph two classes of dragon and you'll see their hulking

ALSO FROM HIDEKI KAMIYA

Wondering why we're so keen to see the latest from Hideki Kamiya? Well aside from being an acid tongue on Twitter, he's the creator of some of the finest action games to grace consoles. Don't believe us? Try out the fantastic twitch combat masterwork *Bayonetta* on Xbox One backwards compatibility. Kamiya also worked on *Devil May Cry* and the *Resident Evil* series back when he was under Capcom's employ.

frames change before you. Wings transform, horns sprout from heads, and tiny arms suddenly become powerful front legs.

Each dragon has its drawbacks, of course, with factors like speed trading off for weaker defenses. But we can see each freakish change having us immediately rush back into Draconis to test it out. Any knight unfortunate enough to be taking a stroll through the meadows better have packed their flameproof armor. Drew shares his life-force with Thuban which means he shares this morphing ability, though in a slightly different form. You can press a button during play to activate this ‘Dragon Form’, covering Drew in scales and a nifty cape for a temporary high-damage boost. Thuban can be assigned similar boosts, like deadlier claws, sharper horns, and elemental abilities. Any chance of a time-travel move that puts a finished copy of this in our scaly mitts right now? ■



LEFT Drew's face, after finding out *Scalebound* had been delayed to 2017. Amen, brother. Amen.

BELOW This monstrosity could eat your average Dark Souls boss for breakfast.





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ETA
SPRING
2017

PUBLISHER EA DEVELOPER BOWWARE

Mass Andromeda



Effect: eda

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH BOWARE'S
RADICAL RPG IN A GALAXY FAR,
FAR (FAR) AWAY





We're deep in the Andromeda galaxy, getting a chance to sample the returning multiplayer mode for BioWare's incoming epic sequel. Unfortunately, it's not going well in the slightest. Stuck crouching down behind cover as a wave of alien nasties come charging at us, there's no time to admire the view of this oppressive space factory. You see, our foes are as smart as they are aggressive and it'll take some new toys to even these odds.

Fortunately, our new space suit is particularly handy for getting out of trouble, as the jetpack that's built into the back allows for eye-wateringly quick movement. We dash out of cover, leap up high, and then squeeze the Left Trigger mid-air. This lets us hover off the ground for a few glorious seconds, which is just enough time to pump the onrushing horde full of intergalactic lead. Now that's what we call a close encounter.

Although BioWare's changes to its legendary series sound pretty comprehensive, it's surprising how smoothly they fit. This is still *Mass Effect*, but a leaner and meaner version. By improving our options for movement, the combat gives us a thrilling rush from taking the fight to these aggressors rather than letting them come towards us.

This chance to sample the returning multiplayer mode also allows us to test out some of the games'



RIGHT There are two new companions in the form of Krogan Drack and female Turian Vetra.



ABOVE There's a deeper mystery at the heart of this galaxy that we can't wait to investigate.

new powers. We're the cautious type, so we plump for one that allows us to spawn a handy barrier in front of us. Now we can at least stem some of the flow from one side, with our teammates protecting the flank. Considering how fast combat can be—punishment for mistakes is mercilessly swift—how you utilize these powers provides a more dynamic tactical edge. While the multiplayer will be much quicker and more accessible by design, the already impressive combat is stronger than any other entry in the series. This bodes well for the single-player journey into the depths of this brand new universe.

COVER BANNED

In another huge shift for the *Mass Effect* series, going into cover is now automatic rather than done with the push of a button. Producer Fabrice Condaminas says, "You can take cover on anything that could protect you, like a rock. But there are scenarios where you can just have nothing." That jetpack keeps getting handier...

Effective detective

Let's not forget the main meat of any game from BioWare comes from the story. While the quest for a new home on Andromeda is our priority, there'll be plenty of worlds to discover that'll have their own stories to tell and these should prove to be just as memorable. Take the one where you have to solve the murder of a Krogan. Prowling the crime scene, you use a

scanning tool to discover footprints, alongside other evidence. A bit like a multi-purpose Swiss Army Knife, the scanner also allows you to discover information about your new home, but we like how its many uses could possibly enhance quests.

As you rightly expect, there are plenty of open spaces to poke around in and explore—just don't think the locals will take too kindly to your presence. One towering monster we spy Ryder fighting picks our new hero up, uses them like a chew toy, and thrashes them back into the ground. It's a brutal moment where the camera gets up close so you can see the damage and underscores just how dangerous this exotic universe really is. Well, if the dead Krogan you're investigating wasn't a big hint.

Marrying the depth of the original trilogy to blisteringly fast action makes *Mass Effect: Andromeda* feel as new as the galaxy you're venturing through. But don't worry, BioWare won't forget what makes the series special to begin with, and this confident mix should put this right at the very top of your 2017 wish list. ■





“This is still Mass Effect, but it’s a much leaner and meaner version”



PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES DEVELOPER ROCKSTAR GAMES



Red Dead Redemption 2



SCREW WESTWORLD: THIS IS THE SIMULATION WE WANT

ETA
FALL
2017

Like a mysterious man clad in black, booting open the saloon doors, and firing his six-shooter into the air,

Red Dead Redemption 2 knew how to make a spectacular entrance. It's also just as frustratingly enigmatic. Rockstar teased us all with a trailer that boasted an impossibly rich and detailed Wild West, then smugly ignored our shrill pleading for more.

But we do know this: it's coming to Xbox One *this year*. It'll have online multiplayer, and there's no going back after the ambitious tour de force that was *GTA Online*. *GTA V* truly sung, both in single-player and multiplayer, and in its daring team heists. Picture some of the most iconic Wild West scenes. A great train robbery. A smash-and-grab bank job. Caravan banditry... That'd also corroborate another popular theory—we're not in for just one protagonist, or even three, but the whole gang of seven featured in the poster *and* the parting shot of the trailer. Flashes of *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Wild Bunch*, and other posse-led Westerns are surely a source of Rockstar's inspiration here.

Sandboxing clever

Rockstar has cruelly covered up the faces of the gang (the kind of disguise you'd wear while committing a robbery, hint-hint) But more protagonists, a feature widely acclaimed in *GTA V*, would be the next logical step up, as every open-world game Rockstar's released has been more technically ambitious than the last. It's time for the crime sandbox king to show us what our Xbox One is really capable of. Our money's on a 4k-ed up Project Scorpio version, too... ■



REDEEM YOURSELF

With backwards compatibility you can play the original Xbox 360 *Red Dead Redemption* on Xbox One. If you somehow missed the cowboy classic, it's the tale of John Marsden, looking to rescue his family in the dying days of the Wild West. So much more than just *Grand Theft Auto: The Rootin' Tootin' Edition*.

"Every open-world Rockstar has crafted has been more ambitious than the last"



ABOVE It's the incidental details which make Rockstar's worlds stand apart. Check out the classic frame-within-a-frame here.

LEFT The potential for a seven player switch-a-thon mid mission is dizzying.



Injustice 2

IT'S LIKE BATMAN VS SUPERMAN, BUT NOT A TERRIBLE MOVIE!

PUB WARNER BROS DEV NEVERREALM

ETA
SUMMER
2017

The return of NeverRealm's superhero-infused fighter was a welcome surprise when it got announced. DC Comics' gallery of heroes and villains knocking the hell out of each other involves ludicrous pieces of interactive scenery and over-the-top special moves. A hands-on reveals a superbly slick affair, with a joyously celebratory tone. This time out the multiplayer portions will be much expanded upon, with cosmetic and stat-based gear upgrades and modes with additional progression systems to boot. Don't like Superman's traditional garb? Then change it! *Mortal Kombat XL* was the studio's finest work to date, so we can expect something very special indeed. ■

Tekken 7

LIAM NEESON'S FAVOURITE GAME

PUB BANDAI NAMCO DEV BANDAI NAMCO

ETA
SPRING
2017

Fighting games are in rude health right now and with everyone putting out new, brilliant entries in their respective series, we're still waiting on Bandai Namco to enter the fray with the latest addition to its ever popular series. *Tekken 7* has actually been out in Japanese arcades for nearly two years now and has even had a few updates, with the most recent—the brilliantly named *Fated Retribution*—being the one headed for homes in 2017. Because of this we already KNOW that *Tekken 7* is good, we're just waiting for it to show up and show off its new home-console features. This franchise has a long history of throwing up plenty of additional—and sometimes really bizarre—modes. The return of Tekken Ball, anyone? ■



LEFT We're more than ready to pound some dudes into a bloody pulp in *Tekken 7*.



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Killer Instinct

GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

PUB MICROSOFT STUDIOS DEV DOUBLE HELIX GAMES & IRON GALAXY STUDIOS

ETA
FALL
2017

Each of its 'seasons' of content has added loads of characters, modes, costumes, and most recently, a unique single-player mode: *Shadow Lords*. However, if (and we're in deep speculation waters here) Iron Galaxy wades in with a fourth season every character that appeared in the original games is now part of the roster. To date, the new characters the studio has created have been uniformly excellent, but there's usually a marquee name to get fans buzzing. This is where guest characters come in. We've had a *Battletoad*, *Arbiter* from *Halo*, and *General RAAM* from *Gears Of War*, but what other Microsoft games could be borrowed from? *Killer Instinct* is already hot property, so it's going to be interesting to see where the studio takes it from here on. ■

Shadow Warrior 2

HOPE YOU'RE OKAY WITH BLOOD

PUB DEVOLVER DIGITAL DEV FLYING WILD HOG

ETA SPRING 2017 Following 12 months that brought us some brilliantly re-energized FPS campaigns like the brutal *Doom* and the unexpectedly inventive *Titanfall 2*, *Shadow Warrior 2* promises to join them. Like the first game, expect a mix of low-grade but endearing banter (the protagonist is called Lo Wang, so if you find that funny, this is very much for you), as well as gruesomely detailed and cathartic melee combat. New to the second game is four-player co-op with larger levels to match, as well as more detailed limb destruction and a slew of additional weapons (feel like fighting with a katana chainsaw, anyone?). Even if the game's deliberately silly sense of humor isn't for you, decapitating waves of demons with a creative variety of tools perhaps will be. Count us in. ■

RIGHT Flying Wild Hog has gone all-out with the custom damage system.



South Park: The Fractured But Whole

HOPE IT'S NOT A BUM DEAL

PUB UBISOFT DEV UBISOFT, SOUTH PARK DIGITAL STUDIOS LLC

ETA SPRING 2017 The main draw for this superheroic sequel is bringing more complex RPG elements into the mix. New class systems and the ability for you and your enemies to reposition in battle adds a solid layer of strategy that was lacking before. Traditional fantasy classes have been replaced by 12 types of superhero, like speedy fighters or brawlers, and they each have their own abilities to unlock. The kids are having their own version of a 'Civil War' over silly stuff like superhero merchandising rights. A larger story about strange goings-on in the town at night will play out, too, and there will, of course, be fart jokes. ■



LEFT The superhero theme from the show is way more familiar than *The Stick Of Truth's* fantasy take-off was.



Agents Of Mayhem

HOPE ROADHOG'S LAWYERS AREN'T READING THIS

PUB DEEP SILVER DEV VOLITION

ETA SUMMER 2017 A weird, surprising sidestep from Saints Row creators Volition. It's set in the same universe, in a shiny, futuristic version of Seoul, but instead of playing as your own created character, you select from 12 pre-created agents who each have their own powers, dialogue, and personalities. You can then switch between them at any time mid-game. It's comfortingly familiar: it's set in an open-world, and there are colorful sci-fi enemies and OTT weapons. One character, Hollywood, can activate a Michael Bay-esque barrage of random explosions in his vicinity, while Hardtack is a big guy carrying a shotgun who can reel in enemies to do close-up damage (*cough* Roadhog *cough*). Can this roster help us move on from our beloved Saints? ■





PUBLISHER TEAM17 DEVELOPER PLAYTONIC GAMES

Yooka-Laylee



DOUBLE-JUMP FOR JOY, PLATFORMING FANS:
THERE'S AN ACTUAL RELEASE DATE

ETA
APR 11
2017

This love letter to the *Banjo-Kazooie*-style platformers that made Rare famous (Playtonic Games is made up of

Rare veterans) brings back cute characters, silly wordplay, countless collectables, and undeniable charm.

For some this might feel like clumsy game design. Yooka the chameleon can double-jump and Laylee the bat will hover you through the air, which is undeniably a lot of fun. Yet the platforming still feels more finicky than we'd like, not helped by a dodgy camera. But there are still a few months to tighten up the jumps, and it's definitely refreshing to feel challenged again. Trying to roll up a series of steep inclines is annoying, but successfully reaching the top reminds us how satisfying besting Banjo felt all those years ago.

RIGHT Could this be a genre comeback for the colorful platformer?

BELOW Maybe it's just us, but Laylee looks like she's about to chow down on some Yooka brains.



“In the mine cart section, you need to leap to collect gems and avoid flamethrowers”



We're also very keen on the newly shown level, Capital Cashino. Hey, if our Kickstarter had made two-million pounds, we'd be thinking about hitting the casino too. Here we get roulette wheels used as spinning platforms and Yooka using his extra-long, reptilian tongue to pull the lever of slot machines. (This hopefully isn't the beginning of a gambling problem.)

Feeling batty

Go behind the scenes and the platforming looks tougher. Enemies fire lasers from their eyes, exposed wires shoot jolts of electricity, and there's even a mine cart section where you have to leap to collect precious gems while trying to avoid flamethrowers. Maybe that research trip Rare planned to study a real casino got cancelled. If the studio can fix the camera and keep the level design set to weird, then this sassy bat-and-lizard action could see the resurgence of a long-gone genre. ■

GROUND BREAKING

Collect enough 'Pagies' (er, that's book pages with googly eyes, *duh*) and the world will literally expand, introducing more challenges. It's an interesting approach to difficulty settings, locking the trickier platforming behind a Pagie paywall, and good incentive to lose an evening to collecting hundreds of the darn things.





PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS DEVELOPER ARKANE STUDIOS

Prey



THERE'S NO RIGHT OR WRONG WAY TO SURVIVE
THIS HUNT. THERE'S JUST WHATEVER WORKS

ETA
SUMMER
2017

Splicing BioShock's FPS-RPG conceits with Dishonored's spiralling, dynamic systems, and no small amount of

festering, Cronenbergian horror, *Prey* is already looking to be 2017's most cerebrally exciting action game.

Your path through its sci-fi nightmare will be entirely yours. Your solutions to its obstacles will be yours and yours alone. The tools you'll have to create those solutions will be the product of nothing more prescribed than the chaos, cause, and effect of whichever powers and upgrades you choose to equip. Or not. Because the really exciting thing about *Prey* is that it's being designed with the same ethos with which its creators hope it will be played. Restrict nothing, suppress no idea, however outlandish, and otherwise say 'yes' to every possibility and see what happens.

Make your own rules

In *Prey*, you'll accrue the ability to do anything from throwing psychic missiles, to transforming into any in-game object. You might tackle a tricky ascent by launching yourself with a telekinetic gravity well, or painting platforms and staircases onto the walls with a fast-setting goop cannon. You might attack a monster head-on with a shotgun, or launch it at the ceiling with a kinetic charge, before gluing it there. Its story will guide you, but its sprawling, non-linear space station will accept any route you can survive, including those outside.

And while there are formal side-quests aplenty, you'll find far more generated by the gameplay itself, by way of a fiendish array of Fallout-style status effects. Anticipate your objectives shifting as you succumb to different ailments on the move. ■



LEFT There's a lot of humanity in *Prey*, with nuanced tales to be heard from the living and dead.

BELOW The Talos One station is gorgeous, with art deco clashing with industrial, dark corners.

IMPERFECT ORGANISM

Prey's dev process is as organic and freeform as its gameplay. As lead systems designer Seth Shain explains, "We're just going to go until we can't go any further. And there isn't a super-clear idea of how everything is going to interact at the outset. But there are mitigating factors. We're not afraid to cut things if they don't work".

"Restrict nothing, suppress no idea, say 'yes' to everything, and see what happens"



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PUBLISHER KONAMI DEVELOPER KONAMI



Metal Gear Survive

BRINGS A WHOLE NEW MEANING TO THE PHRASE
'BEEN THROUGH THE WARS'



ETA
SPRING
2017

Two things mark this one out as an essential gaming experience of 2017. The first: it's built upon the same engine and founding mechanics as *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, which is pretty much the best sandbox stealth outing ever committed to videogame. The second: this is the first Metal Gear game which has zero input from the creative mind of long-time series auteur Hideo Kojima (even *Metal Gear Rising* saw him fill the role of producer). Many have found cause to grumble (to put it lightly) in the wake of its initial reveal, but here are a few reasons why you shouldn't join the online hate brigade just yet...

Metal Gear Survive looks fantastic so far. The stealth mechanics we mentioned feel well-suited to the frantic nature of fast-moving mobs of onrushing enemies. These new foes also seem to bring out the best in the game's arsenal. In *MGSV* you could build up a huge gun cabinet of weapons, but given the focus on avoiding direct engagement, you could easily fall into a rut of using only a silenced pistol and/or sniper rifle. If you're spotted, you'll need to do more



"You need to do more than hide from enemies as they'll chase you until you deal with them"

than just hide until things calm down, as enemies will keep on chasing you until you can deal with them.

Ghouls rush in

The flow of the game has changed, too. There seems to be two phases to each mission. First you have to work as a team to infiltrate a base, with up to four players taking on the roles of customisable Mother Base soldiers. This feels like the more Metal Gear-y portion of the game, with tactile use

of surrounding cover, Fulton lifts, and lobbed distractions used to pull enemies out of your path. Once the base is yours you enter a defense phase, where waves of enemies rush in to take over the area. You'll need to hold them back, building fortifications, and communicating to team members.

Time will tell if all these elements come together into a sumptuous whole, but we'd suggest waiting it out to see if a new master can teach an old Foxhound new tricks. ■

PASSING THE TORCH

When Kojima left Konami, he left behind almost the entire *MGSV* development team. Whoever Konami puts in the hot seat will certainly be up for the challenge. These guys and girls have built great games in the past. Kojima may have been a central figure, but no game is built by one person alone...





Outlast 2

PLEASE DON'T KILL US

PUB RED BARRELS DEV RED BARRELS

ETA
SPRING
2017

It makes sense that this goes head-to-head with *Resident Evil VII* this year. Both, after all, focus on the fearful, macabre practices of backwater communities that have become a little *too* local. Taking on Capcom's epic horror franchise is either commendably brave or commercially ill-advised (perhaps it's both), but Red Barrels' self-made delay will give the studio longer to ensure its sequel lives up to the first game's brand of chilling, first-person survival horror. The studio even attempted to Kickstart some Outlast-branded diapers. While the campaign didn't reach its funding target, there are other brands readily available should you feel that Red Barrels' promising shift to psychological, creeping terror could have a negative impact on your bowels. ■

RIGHT As with most cults, the group at the centre of *Outlast 2* don't take too kindly to outsiders.



Little Nightmares

PLEASE DON'T COOK US

PUB BANDAI NAMCO DEV TARSIER STUDIOS

ETA
SPRING
2017

In the months leading up to the release of its first enigmatic horror game, Tarsier Studios has been careful not to give too much away. Six, the yellow raincoat-sporting kid at the centre of the game, is an utterly charming presence and she provides a striking contrast with the grimly exaggerated horrors that lurk within *The Maw*, *Little Nightmares*' grim, seaborne setting. In addition to Six and the bloated Chef pictured on the right, a character called the Janitor has been revealed: a blind, stalking child-catcher with strangely elongated arms. But while the variety of creatures is suitably grotesque, there's also an air of beautiful melancholy that enhances *Little Nightmares*' enticing, unforgettable atmosphere. ■



LEFT We'd prefer not to be served anything prepared by the corpulent Chef, much less become one of his ingredients.



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Vampyr

PLEASE DON'T SUCK

PUB FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE DEV DONTNOD

ETA
FALL
2017

In Dontnod's new game, just like in any workplace, you must choose carefully who you kill and who you allow to live. As Jonathan Reid, a recently turned vampire living in the Spanish flu-stricken London of 1918, you need to drink blood in order to maintain those healthy-looking nails and shiny hair. But if you cull too heavily it's the health of the city that suffers. The irony of our antihero's predicament is that he's also a physician, and had once dedicated his life to helping others. The flu pandemic might provide a convenient cover under which to kill, but you'll have to square that with your conscience. Thank goodness most of us don't possess one. Then again, kill off too many citizens and we'll have fewer people to comment on our great haircuts. ■



Monster Boy And The Cursed Kingdom

26 YEARS? SHOULDN'T HE BE 'MONSTER MAN'?

PUB FDG ENTERTAINMENT DEV GAME ATELIER

ETA SPRING 2017

Dark, gritty reboots are all the rage these days, and so *Wonder Boy In Monster World* becomes *Monster Boy And The Cursed Kingdom*. Okay, so it's more of a spiritual successor than a direct reboot of the 26-year-old game, but original creator, Ryuichi Nishizawa, is on board to bring this into the 21st century with style. Dark and gritty it ain't, though: there are colorful environments and cartoony enemies aplenty, with the graphics dodging the achingly clichéd faux-8-bit aesthetic. Whether that's enough to attract those not nostalgic for *Wonder Boy* remains to be seen, but it's shaping up to be a solid action-adventure platformer. ■

Sonic Mania

TEACHING AN OLD HOG OLD TRICKS

PUB SEGA DEV HEADCANNON AND PAGODAWEST GAMES

ETA SPRING 2017

It looks like Sonic might've enjoyed a mince pie or two already this festive period, as he's back in his podgy '90s guise for *Sonic Mania*, and we think he's rocking it. Combined with a distinctly retro style, plus a crisp resolution the Mega Drive could only dream of, he's looking fab-u-lous. After years of getting hyped about Sonic games, it's sometimes hard to trust that the little blue 'hog's got it in him anymore, but with a crack team of Sonic experts, who've been involved in recreating classic Sonic for iOS, there's a good chance this one could be the one. In particular, the retro-remix levels, which put a new spin-dash on old favorites, seem to promise a sure-fire success. ■



BELOW Sonic's starred in some great games! And 2006's *Sonic The Hedgehog* for which he shall go to Hell.



Starbound

FOR WHEN YOU JUST NEED A BIT OF SPACE

PUB CHUCKLEFISH DEV CHUCKLEFISH

ETA SPRING 2017

Those pesky PC gamers might have had *Starbound* in one form or another for a few years now, but as the old proverb goes: good things come to those who play Xbox. In this case, Xbox One players will have managed to dodge the buggy early access years and jump straight to a more polished, complete experience in which you guide a human/ape-lady/bird-man/glowing space cowboy across the stars. Taking inspiration from a bevy of solid sources, there's more than a hint of *Terraria*'s destructible worlds, while its intergalactic travel has a slight *Faster Than Light* flavor—this could be a sleeper hit next year, following a growing fanbase on other platforms. We're stary-eyed for *Starbound*. ■

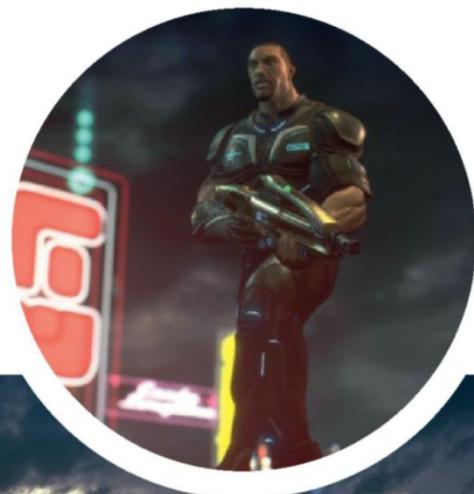




PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS DEVELOPER REAGENT GAMES

Crackdown 3

HOW THIS SUPERHERO SEQUEL IS ABOUT TO SMASH THE CITY SANDBOX GENRE APART



ETA
WINTER
2017

Certain members of Team OXM (Tom, basically) are a bit *too* excited about this upcoming three-quel.

The original *Crackdown* was a groundbreaking superhero epic. Director David Jones used his GTA experience to craft a crime sandbox where we could run at extraordinary speeds, leap buildings in a single bound, use cars that transformed, and throw criminals into the sky with our incredible super-strength.

Here in *Crackdown 3*, Solo mode looks like the traditional, brilliant *Crackdown* action, with David Jones returning to his director role. But it's the hugely ambitious multiplayer mode that has us salivating in excitement and beard-stroking in appreciation of Xbox One's tech heft in equal measure. Here the game utilizes

RIGHT This burly guy keeps getting in the way of our spectacular view!

BELOW Doesn't this city look so bright and pretty? Just watch us destroy it *evil grin*.



“Why shoot an opponent when you can send a skyscraper toppling onto him instead?”



Microsoft's Azure Cloud Servers to build a city that multiple players can completely destroy. Why shoot an opponent when you can send a skyscraper toppling onto him? The Cloud Servers effectively boost performance power higher than your Xbox One should ever be capable of. Just imagine you and your friends leaping over buildings then raining down destruction. *And* it has agility orbs. Gaming perfection.

Cracking on

You'll have to imagine it for a while, unfortunately, as *Crackdown 3* carries the dreaded "Holiday 2017" release date (translation: hopefully sometime around Christmas). This news was softened by the confirmation that the game will run at a 4K resolution on Xbox Scorpio. Hopping around a magnificent future city and then crushing James under a skyscraper in crystal clear 4K-0-vision... 'Holiday 2017' can't come soon enough. ■

CRACK CONFIRMED

A worried fan recently tweeted Xbox boss Phil Spencer, asking if the series still existed. Spencer replied, "Yep, saw a build the other day [and it] looked good. One thing I love about *Crackdown*, you know it from a single frame, [the] look is iconic." Phew! Thanks for that, Phil!

State Of Decay 2

TAKE A SLICE OUT OF THIS AMERICANA

ETA
WINTER
2017

The first game set Xbox Live Arcade aflame upon its initial Xbox 360 launch, out of nowhere becoming a breakthrough hit. The second game takes the single-player permadeath-infused groundwork and builds upon it with a multiplayer structure, with four players now able to join forces as they build up communities and attempt to survive in post-apocalypse America.

Imagine the scenario: you and three pals are scouting out a large, cadaver-rammed hardware store for supplies. With four players now involved, you can work together to figure out the best, or most fun, way to tackle this situation. Should you all go in guns blazing? Should one of your team keep a car ticking over for a fast smash-and-grab? Or perhaps two players can cause a handy distraction, while the other two load their packs in their own sweet time?

Anti-stealth

What we won't see is players being directly hostile to one another. Undead isn't building a PvP game here, so you won't be able to simply kill each other randomly. That said, it does sound like there is room within its simulation systems for players to make life unintentionally harder for one another. That bit we mentioned just now about making noise? Well it's possible for players to do this at inopportune times too. The wrong move at the wrong time could see a horde of zombies wheel in your direction, and it'll be up to players to figure out how to survive these encounters. This all sounds sumptuously intense, especially as the player characters you control, foster, and level up can still be killed off permanently. Zombie games keep on coming, but few scratch the itch that *State Of Decay 2* promises: to be a game of huge consequence. ■



MULTIPLE OUTCOMES

“State of Decay 2 adds the top fan-requested feature: cooperative multiplayer. The world is more dangerous and unpredictable than ever, so you can work closely with up to three other players to build communities and put your survival plan to the test. Your choices shape an interconnected world and will form a unique experience every time you play.”

Jeff Strain, founder, Undead Labs

“The wrong move at the wrong time could see a horde of zombies wheel in your direction”



TOP Sometimes there's nothing more satisfying than thwacking a Shuffler in the nut with a simple blunt instrument.

LEFT Team up with up to three other players to bring down quadra-pain upon those pesky zombie marauders.



RIGHT We'd gladly sell our souls for a copy of *Below*. Did you read that, Satan?



Below

PROCEDURAL PLUNDER!

PUB MICROSOFT STUDIOS **DEV** CAPYBARA GAMES

ETA
SUMMER
2017

An awful lot of videogames go to great lengths to make you feel powerful or earth-shatteringly important, casting you as some long-prophesied chosen one with the abs of an Olympian. As such, it's utterly refreshing to be cast as a character that's so small and vulnerable, and be tasked with traversing a world that makes you feel tiny and insignificant. To survive this prickly take on the roguelike formula, you'll have to explore, craft, and battle as the shadow of permadeath tragedy looms ceaselessly. And while the world itself is procedurally generated, it still retains an artful, authored look that lends *Below* a sense of sinister mystery—a feeling that's only accentuated by the sound of Jim Guthrie's suspenseful synthetic melodies. ■

The Sexy Brutale

SEXY SHENANIGANS!

PUB/DEV CAVALIER GAME STUDIOS & TEQUILA WORKS

ETA
SPRING
2017

If you've ever sat down to watch *Groundhog Day* and found yourself angrily bemoaning the lack of murder and casinos, then boy-oh-boy, do we have a game that will cater to your weirdly specific tastes. This time-bending whodunnit casts you as an ageing priest trapped in a single endlessly repeating day. And as if that wasn't enough of a hassle, you're also stuck in a palatial gambling den as crazed croupiers begin to slaughter the assembled guests. To escape, you'll have to conceal yourself in the gambling den's nooks and crannies, observing the murderous staff and interacting with your environment to save the petrified patrons. It's odd and beautifully stylized, fusing puzzle gameplay and murder-mystery intrigue. ■



BELOW Of course, the real mystery is why this masked dude is about to stab himself in the foot.



Ashen

NAMELESS DREAD!

PUB AURORA44 **DEV** AURORA44

ETA
FALL
2017

Fun escapism, vibrant color, and actual happiness are all well and good, but every now and then we need to spend some time topping up our stores of abyssal dread. Fortunately, the forlorn folks over at Aurora44 have you covered, and their desolate open-world role-playing game casts you as a sorrowful adventurer traipsing across a ruined landscape. But, as inhospitable as this world is, you won't have it all to yourself. Vast monsters roam the horizons, and combat is a terrifyingly risky proposition even at the best of times. Occasionally, you'll stumble across another player, at which point *Ashen* becomes brutally tense. You could bring them back to your campfire, sharing resources to survive this harsh world. But you should be very careful who you trust. ■



And the rest

SENTIENT CHINA! TALKING TREES! A DREADFUL CAPCOM PUN!

TACOMA

PUB FULLBRIGHT DEV FULLBRIGHT



ETA
SPRING
2017

This is the second game from Fullbright, the studio responsible for the rather excellent *Gone Home*. Swapping out an empty house for an empty space station is the first giant leap the team has taken, though there's also the ability to manipulate time. This skill was added after feedback from Fullbright's other developer friends. One for fans of *Life Is Strange*, and smart new storytelling techniques in games. ■

CUPHEAD

PUB STUDIO MDHR DEV STUDIO MDHR



ETA
SPRING
2017

This 2D platform shooter is filled to the brim with vintage-era animated charm. The most obvious touchstone is classic Disney fare, but there's a lot of darker, weirder imagery that's more Max Fleischer. The gameplay takes inspiration from older 8- and 16-bit era games, such as the *Contra* and *Metal Slug* series. This all sounds like a potent combination that will delight those with eyes and a penchant for challenge. ■

THE SURGE

PUB DECK13 INTERACTIVE DEV FOCUS HOME



ETA
SPRING
2017

The "hardcore action RPG" genre, to which *The Surge* belongs, according to developer, Deck13, was changed forever by *Dark Souls*. *The Surge* clearly owes quite a debt to FromSoftware's classic, but it's got plenty of ideas of its own, not least of all the futuristic plot, enemy dismemberment, and detailed weapon crafting. If you're going to steal, you should rip off the best. Also: sci-fi *Dark Souls*? Color us intrigued. ■

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

PUB TELLTALE GAMES DEV TELLTALE GAMES



ETA
SPRING
2017

The mystery Marvel project that Telltale has been teasing for some time now recently got an unveiling as *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, which is rather timely considering the movie sequel is due to hit cinemas soon-ish. Details are thin on the ground, but we're hopeful for wise-cracking, an '80s soundtrack, and a suitably epic plotline that expands the Marvel sci-fi universe. Hopefully 'I am Groot' isn't the only dialogue choice. ■

MARVEL VS CAPCOM INFINITE

PUB CAPCOM DEV CAPCOM



ETA
SPRING
2017

It's been a long wait since *Marvel vs Capcom 3*, but the series is back with a bang. Ken, Mega Man X, and Morrigan join the Capcom side, while Iron Man, Captain Marvel and Captain America are among the first to be revealed for Team Marvel. Unlike its predecessor, *Infinite* will be a 2v2 battler, and Infinity Stones make an appearance as ultra-dangerous power-ups. This is looking more marvel-lous than crap-com. ■

PILLARS OF ETERNITY

PUB OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT DEV PARADOX



ETA
SPRING
2017

If you've been eyeballing Obsidian's role-playing, strategic-combat gem, *Pillars Of Eternity*, on PC, then ogle no more, as it's heading to an Xbox One near you sometime soon. Just think of all those picturesque isometric scenes you'll get to explore, all those actually-quite-good side quests you can embark on and all that delightful party micro-management you'll get to do. Doesn't that sound like bliss? ■

053

2018

and beyond

THEY'D BETTER BE WORTH THE WAIT...

With the fantastic *Witcher* expansion *Blood And Wine* behind it, CD Projekt Red is moving on from Geralt's adventures to the distant future of **Cyberpunk 2077**, which boasts *Quantum Break* developer Kyle Rowley as its lead gameplay designer // Michel Ancel tweeted our hopes up with **Beyond Good And Evil 2** concept art, but we doubt we'll see the long-delayed sequel this year // Double Fine is taking its sweet time with **Psychonauts 2**. If that means a final level which isn't a broken mess this time, we'll happily pretend to be patient // With *Final Fantasy XV* finally in our hands, we're looking forward to **Kingdom Hearts III** being the game we can endlessly nag Square Enix about // The highly anticipated **System Shock** remake is aiming for a 2018 release // Respawn and Visceral have an Amy 'Uncharted' Hennig-directed **Star Wars game**, rumored to be an action-adventure starring Han Solo. This could coincide with the Han Solo prequel movie // **Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night** continues to keep *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* fans quivering // Finally, Brian Fargo is hard at work destroying civilization (again) for **Wasteland 3**. Good luck, Brian!



RIGHT With a platter of intergalactic warfare, Gothic landscapes, and anthropomorphic pigs, 2018 is looking hot.





Rumor roulette

SAFE BETS MEET OUR DRUNKEST GUESSWORK

Assassin's Creed is due a return from sabbatical with the next entry heavily rumored to be set in Egypt // Space! Not space! Wherever **Call Of Duty** goes next, we'll be there on day one // Remedy has two new mystery projects in the works. We'd certainly take more **Alan Wake** // Bethesda hasn't confirmed **Wolfenstein: The New Colossus** but the voice actor for B. J. Blazkovicz has let it slip // Expect a more substantial **Star Wars Battlefront 2** now Dice has confirmed a single-player campaign // Although the space-shooter we're all waiting for is **Destiny 2**, with *Skylanders* developers Vicarious Visions recently announcing it would be partnering with Bungie to 'further expand the award-winning universe' // Season 2 of **Hitman**, confirmed by dev IO Interactive, has one hell of an act to follow // Alex 'Burnout' Ward has confirmed via Twitter that work has started on a driving game // Gearbox is making **Borderlands**, with CEO Randy Pitchford calling it 'the big one' // Two completely new games from **BioWare** and **FromSoftware** are in the works // There will almost certainly be more **PES**, **FIFA**, and hopefully a **WWE 2K** game we actually like // Finally, some free advice for game devs—don't do your work on the Canadian subway, especially if it contains a logo for **Shadow Of The Tomb Raider**. Hang on, did we say *Canadian*? That'd corroborate rumors that Eidos 'Deus Ex: Mankind Divided' Montreal is helming the next game.



RIGHT Will we be traveling the world again with Agent 47? We're on board... but only if we get to fly first class.





Project Scorpio

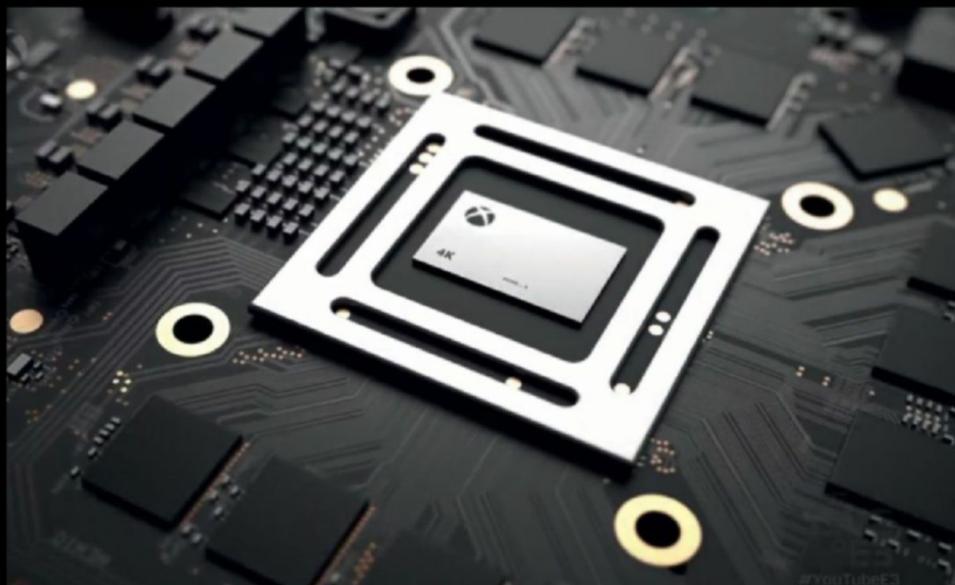
ALSO KNOWN AS THE GAMING EVENT OF THE YEAR

ETA
WINTER
2017

Six teraflops of GPU power! 320 gigabytes per second of memory bandwidth! Don't understand the

technical stuff? All you *really* need to know is that when Xbox Scorpio launches later this year, it'll be the most powerful games console ever made. It's also the first time we've heard Microsoft talking about VR. Given that Oculus Rift comes with an Xbox One controller, could a closer Scorpio relationship be on the cards? Bethesda's Todd Howard featured in the Scorpio reveal trailer, talking about the studio's desire to move *Fallout 4* into VR and his excitement for a console capable of supporting it. If after a tease like that we *don't* get VR, Howard's getting a non-virtual brick through his window.

The question now is which developers will use that power, and what they will use it for. Microsoft has been clear that Xbox Scorpio will have no exclusive games—if it works on Scorpio, you can play it on a standard Xbox One (with the obvious exception of VR titles). Already we've seen big developers talking about the advantages of having superior tech. The Coalition's Rod Fergusson was prominent in the trailer so *Gears Of War 5* will likely be a Scorpio



“When it launches, Scorpio will be the most powerful console”

showcase. Considering *Gears Of War 4* was the first game to take advantage of the Xbox One S, we wouldn't be surprised by a patch that shows the game looking even more bloody and beautiful on Scorpio. We'd have also

speculated, before Scorpio was announced, that 343 Industries wouldn't be sharing *Halo 6* with us until 2018. But with the most powerful games console ever launching later this year, Microsoft will want a big, established hit that can show off all that power. What would be bigger and better than the epic conclusion to the second Halo trilogy...? ■

ABOVE The mysterious machine boasts a lot of power under the hood.

BELOW LEFT Better-looking *Witcher 3*? Yes please!

BELOW *Gears 4* already looks amazing—a Scorpio version might make our eyes melt.



WHAT THE DEVS ARE SAYING...

WHAT THOSE IN THE KNOW... ER, KNOW?



HAJIME TABATA Director, *Final Fantasy XV*

"It'd be really great if we could have *Final Fantasy XV* something we can play on the current-generation Xbox One and also give [players] that choice when the new, stronger-generation hardware comes out, to have them play at that level as well. I'd really like to be able give them that."



MATEUSZ TOMASKIEWICZ Narrative designer, *Gwent*

"For sure [the Scorpio] will have better-looking games. If this was available when we were working on *The Witcher 3* I would expect similar quality that we have on PC right now or even better maybe."



MAC WALTERS Creative director, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*

"We have a strong service plan for *Mass Effect* which will continue past our release date. If we do a Game Of The Year edition or a future edition that's something we'd definitely consider looking at."

057

TEAM OXM Our dream Scorpio launch features



Matt Gilman

"If all goes to plan then Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption 2* will launch just prior to Project Scorpio's arrival. What a boon to Xbox it would be to know that the absolute best version of this hotly anticipated game was only playable on Project Scorpio..."



Kimberley Ballard

"I love my original Xbox One, but it's a little (read: massively) bulky. I'm really looking forward to seeing the Scorpio itself. What color will it be? Will it be more svelte (please) and will there be a picture of a scorpion on it? I need to know these things!"



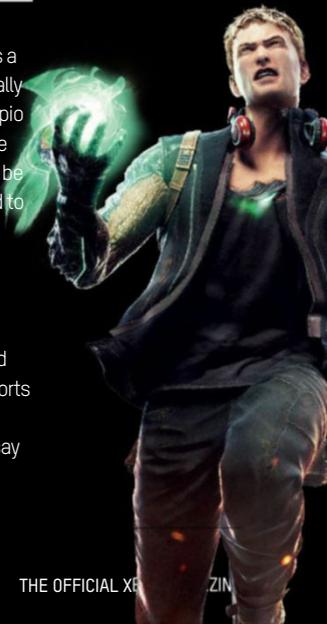
James Nouch

"Speaking as the owner of a 1080p display, I couldn't give a fig for ultra-high resolutions. I just want more detail in my games, pure and simple, so put that processing brawn to use on more realistic character models and enhanced lightning."



Tom Stone

"Virtual reality! While it's had its teething problems, this definitely feels like the future of gaming, and having an Xbox console that supports it right out of the box would be an amazing step forward. I wouldn't say no to 4K *Scalebound* either."



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Windows 10



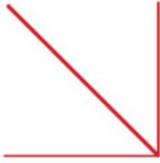
REVIEW

060



Your gaming month sorted with our definitive reviews

Disagree with our verdicts? Let your voice be heard on our Facebook and Twitter feeds



HOW WE SCORE:

Can't make sense of our out-of-ten rating system? Then see below for your at-a-glance guide.

- 10 A gaming masterpiece
- 9 An essential slice of brilliance
- 8 Give it a whirl and you won't regret it
- 7 Some minor flaws but still good
- 6 Solid, but not setting any loins aflame
- 5 Average. Not good, but not terrible either
- 4 Honks just a bit
- 3 Look away, lest ye be tainted
- 2 Angry-makingly bad
- 1 Just... no...



Irrespective of score, the Editor's Choice award is given to games with the quality, ambition or uniqueness to stand out from the crowd.

Snow really is awful, isn't it? Freezing-cold mush that slams out of the sky to make the world even more wet, miserable, and tricky to navigate drunk than it already is. Shivering in agony, we clasped our little gloved hands together and prayed for a way to see the fun side of snow *and* stay warm. Ubisoft answered our prayers with **Steep** (p66). Next time, remind us to be more specific in our prayers about not wanting any talking mountains. Then again, maybe snow isn't so bad. Had we not been frozen indoors all winter, we never would have managed to complete **Final Fantasy XV** (p68). We slaughtered every monster, cracked every side-quest, and endured every excruciating Prompto selfie to get you our comprehensive review. In fact, screw this premise—snow is *wonderful*, isn't it? A free icy treat sprinkling down from Heaven. The longer it sticks around, the longer we can throw snowballs at each other, pretending it's still Christmas vacation. Then, when our beloved, beautiful snow does inevitably melt, we can keep the Christmas spirit alive by playing **Dead Rising 4** (p62)—obviously one of the most Christmassy games ever, where you punch zombies with presents and crack their backs with Christmas trees. Come to think of it, that game's far more fun than snow. As is everything. Screw snow.



062



066



068



072

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Dead Rising 4

THE WEATHER OUTSIDE IS BITE-FUL **TOM STONE**

Nostalgia can be so cruel. Sometimes we'll remember a game being near-perfect ("it was the best thing since sliced God!") only to boot it up and start crying out in horror. Blinx the cat didn't always look like *that*, surely? We had a taste of this with the recently released Dead Rising collection. Colorful, wacky zombie-killing fun to be sure, but also a gross interface, irritating timer, cruel difficulty spikes and some of the worst scripts to leak out of Capcom's quills since we were almost a Jill Sandwich.

So we weren't looking forward to more of the same from *Dead Rising 4*. Turns out, we needn't have worried. Capcom Vancouver has delivered a gory and ridiculous throwback through a zombie-infected shopping mall. It's a streamlined, smoother Rising which finally fixes the

ABOVE The Blamrow (firework firing crossbow) is still giddy amounts of fun.



series' major flaws. And although it doesn't feel as fresh as it did in 2006, it's never been better paced or more consistently entertaining.

The first inspired touch is its take on 'Frank West'. He's not *quite* the Frank West we remember—the opportunist photo-journalist from the first game. Frank has become something of a loser in the years since, and his slightly pathetic shtick (think Bruce Campbell in *Ash vs Evil Dead*) is a perfect fit for a series where you can dress up as a reindeer and blast zombies with water pistols. His relationship with Vick, a hotshot West apprentice who's fighting with Frank to get the same story, is funny and engaging throughout.

Comedy of terrors

But we're not here to sit back and watch a sitcom—we're playing *Dead Rising* to get dark, gory laughs from slaughtering zombies in increasingly ridiculous ways. We're here to run around Willamette shopping mall

seeking out rakes, golf clubs, wheelchairs, garden gnomes, et al, to chop, slash, slice, crunch, and punch our way through a few thousand undead. Weapons can be combined, and logic wisely ignored for fun death-dealing implements, such as an explosive sledgehammer (made by strapping grenades to one end *obviously*). Experimentation breeds reward with the mall and surrounding town crammed full of deadly toys and shuffling cannon fodder. These zombies are (mostly) of the dull pre-28 *Days Later* shambler breed, so are barely a concern. You'll only ever be killed by a solo zombie if the batteries die in your controller.

Human enemies pose slightly more of a threat, with most of the people you meet just as happy to shoot at you as they are at the undead. Some are both really committed to killing you *and* full of Christmas spirit, as this outing is set during yuletide. Fiendish tough Psychopath boss fights have been a

The original Frank voice actor doesn't return, but Victor Nosslo does a fine job



The original *Dead Rising* was one of the Xbox 360's biggest hits, selling over two-million copies



ABOVE Bloodstains aside, Frank's doing okay for 52.

RIGHT Gift weapons! Great! Especially if you got *Rugby Challenge 3* for Christmas.



→ horribly executed series staple until now. Capcom Vancouver agrees, so they're replaced with Maniacs, the only real distinction being that they're far, far easier to finish off. They lack some of the inspiration behind, say, the chainsaw-juggling clown from the original, or *Dead Rising 2's* killer gourmet chef. But the creativity of these adversaries wasn't worth their fat health bars, unfair attacks, and incredibly tedious difficulty spikes. A Psychopath fight used to be like going up against a *Dark Souls* boss with a pad coated in butter and unfairness. If slightly less charisma in our foes is the price we pay for them not doing a number on the pacing, we'll gladly

cough up. One highlight comes when we drive towards a Maniac sighting and crash our car, sending Frank flying through the windshield. He ends up landing trapped in a barn, where bloodthirsty pumpkin-headed Maniacs emerge. All without a cutscene or pause in the action. That's the kind of seamless action that makes our zombie-loving guts go aflutter.

Time out

We were surprised at the sharpness of pacing, considering the controversial decision to drop another long-time series mainstay: the timer. Previously, you had a strict timetable for saving survivors and engaging in story

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

It's you, thousands of zombies, and tons of wild weapons. Glorious.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Previous games, but with their frustrating bits finally fixed.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Walking *Dead* fans who wish the apocalypse would stop taking itself so seriously.



LEFT Probably not the most subtle of ways to kill, but the Blamow certainly puts on a good display.

TOP RIGHT That police car won't stay that clean and shiny for much longer.

missions, with it being intentionally impossible to cram everything in. With the timer gone, there's more freedom to explore the mall at your own speed, with constant rewards of experience and weapon blueprints encouraging further meandering play. That might mean fewer repeat playthroughs, but Willamette is a charming place to explore, and one that's consistently rewarding to engage with. It involves a lot of backtracking, but that's not really an issue when you can hop into a car and see how many walkers you can run over on the way back. We poured all our in-game money into the more ridiculous combo vehicles, worth it so we could blast flames out of the wheels and launch zombies into other zombies with a built-in trebuchet. Cell phones and newspapers, such dull collectable busywork in *The Division*, work here because of the quality of the excellent writing. The *50 Shades of Grey*-style *Dead Rising 2* fan-fiction is particularly strong. Unsurprising really, considering this is essentially fan-fiction of the original *Dead Rising*.

We never tire of making an entrance by running down a few hundred undead, leaping out of the car, then chainsawing the surviving horde into chunks. Or shooting fireworks into them and watching them fly. Or lobbing pipe bombs at their delicate, squishy heads. Each weapon type (Ranged, Melee and Thrown) now has its own D-pad wheel,



making switching between them faster and simpler than ever. While no one sober is going to argue that weapon switching is perfect now, it's far easier to pull out what you need when you need it than in previous games.

Die hard

But that does bring us to a major new flaw: *Dead Rising 4* is too easy. Health items are everywhere and weapons are more durable this time around. We had some close calls, but still managed to best the campaign without dying *once*. We'll take that over the back-breaking difficulty curve of the first two games, but a harder setting wouldn't have gone amiss. The furious pacing is a highlight but it's worth remembering that the motorbike with chainsaw rims in *Dead Rising 2* felt so special because of the struggle to get it.

A lack of challenge is made up for with a keen eye for the epic. *Dead Rising 4* gets that this series is at its most satisfying when you're faced with a horde of undead and a ridiculous way to send them back to Hell. The Exo suit is a fun new addition, letting Frank wield stronger weapons for a limited time (the suit will eventually overheat and disintegrate). But our favorite was the drinks machine that Frank straps to his back so he can fire ice blizzards.

Frank's camera returns, letting us take snaps of zombies and even dumb

MULTISLAYER

You can slaughter the horde with up to three pals online. It's fun, but can feel weirdly solitary—there's little stopping you from just fighting zombies by yourself in your own little corner of the mall. Boss fights fare better as everyone works together, but it's competing for most killed that kept us coming back. Killing 369 zombies to some chump's pathetic 367 made us feel every flavor of smug.



“With fantastic characters and a genuinely funny script, this is a new series high point”

selfies. Not as neat a gimmick on a console that lets us take screenshots in any game, but the camera has other uses. Three filters, night vision, and a Spectrum Analyzer, are used in the story for conducting investigations. Frank will wander around a crime scene hunting for clues by switching between the filters and taking snaps. Not crazy intense, but it does a decent job of breaking up the zombie culling.

The Spectrum Analyzer can also show you which cars are set dressing and which are drivable. Handy when the horde is advancing and you're considering darting across the map. The Night Vision filter is the only time the game pretends at being horror instead of a dark comedy. Some locations are pitch black, forcing Frank to limit his view down the sickly-green lens to press forward. Somewhat tense, but nowhere near as scary as *Dying Light* at night.

Ah, the undead elephant in the room. In the three years since *Dead Rising 3* launched with the Xbox One,

Techland abandoned the glitchy hell of *Dead Island* to make *Dying Light*, a fine mix of first-person parkour and undead dismemberment. *Dead Rising* may have driven up first, but the car offered up in *Dying Light: The Following* (its excellent DLC) can splatter through a zombie every bit as satisfyingly as any of Capcom Vancouver's motors.

So is there any need for another *Dead Rising*? Perhaps not, but this is undoubtedly the new series high point, and still has its comic verve going for it. The timer, irritating interface and broken boss fights are gone, and a faster pace, good characters, and genuinely funny writing are in. It's too easy, perhaps more cathartic than ever, a place to smash zombie brains not pads. A smile was plastered on our face throughout the 14-hour run time. A more daring sequel will be needed if the series wants a life beyond this, but if this is the end, it's going out on a deliriously silly high. ■



OXM VERDICT

Doesn't reinvent the zombie-killing wheel, but it's the most polished *Dead Rising* yet.



The world record for the fastest wingsuit flight is 225.6mph, held by Shinichi Ito of Japan



PUBLISHER UBISOFT / DEVELOPER UBISOFT ANNECY / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$47.99

Steep

MILES WIDE BUT ONLY INCHES DEEP MARTIN KITTS

A slippery slope, an array of expensive-looking snowboards, and a bunch of chancers clad in day-glo puffa

jackets. This can mean only one thing: somebody else is having a crack at revitalizing the once ubiquitous extreme winter sports genre.

Although its core mechanics of score attacks and time trials are staples of this sort of thing, *Steep* has ambitions beyond those of your typical SSX-style race-and-stunt affair. It places great stock in encouraging exploration of its compressed Alpine open-world, and it records every part of your journey as you go.

The purpose of this is that if you're idly sliding down a mountain and you happen upon some particularly twisty ravine, you can call up the map and hop back to any previous point. From there you can refine your run until

you've got something worth adding to the permanent record. After posting an initial target score you can challenge your friends or the wider community, and the points you earn from taking on these user-created runs contribute to your character's progression, just as the game's predefined events do.

New challenges can be created for all four disciplines—skis, snowboards, paragliders, and wingsuits—allowing for a vast list of activities. From long cross-country treks to short stunt courses, from high dives off a cliff to gentle ascents, any challenge you set yourself can be saved and repeated. Alternatively you can just rewind your entire run and play it back while messing with the camera or changing the time of day, for screenshots and videos.

To facilitate the frequent rewinding, repositioning, and retrying, the game engine requires no pauses after the lengthy initial load. Once you reach the top of the mountain, returning to

short cut

WHAT IS IT?
Radical dudes doing extreme things in a large open-world.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?
A bit of SSX, a dash of *Pilotwings 64*, and a hint of *Just Cause 3*.

WHO'S IT FOR?
Everyone who needs to be reminded how good SSX really was.

the top of a run, changing event, or warping to the other side of the map are all pretty much instantaneous.

Steep has the infrastructure to support what initially seems to be a wide-ranging scope, but the lack of a clear focal point means it all collapses into predictability a lot sooner than you'd expect. Despite being able to level up your character in a variety of apparently opposing styles, such as extreme rider, freestyler or explorer, it's impossible to specialize and the novelty of scouting your own locations wears thin.

Peak-a-boo

The open-world might be big but its towering expanse of rock and snow conceals few surprises. One mountain looks much like another, a fact that swiftly becomes apparent when trying to find anything on the 3D map. Although attempting to ski, hike, and paraglide to a faraway drop zone in order to unlock it sounds like fun, it's

“The times when this is genuinely compelling are disappointingly infrequent”

RIGHT Sometimes you'll hear a monolog about mountain philosophy as you explore. *Steep* takes itself quite seriously.



LEFT Travel cross-country to those event markers if you must, but it's far less bother to simply warp there.

much less hassle to cut the distance by first warping to a closer area, of which there are usually many available.

Once you've unlocked a selection of drop zones, which doesn't take very long at all, the exploration becomes pointless. You could spend ten minutes paragliding to ascend a few hundred meters, and see absolutely nothing of note along the way, or you could just whip out the map and warp to the top of the highest peak.

At this point the game boils down to those score attacks and time trials, over and over again, and *Steep* doesn't have what it takes. The racing controls are sloppy, your board doesn't bite into the surface with any conviction, and although it's reasonably fast, it's strangely unthrilling. There's no sense of danger, and throwing yourself all the way down the side of Mont Blanc, the game's highest peak, is no more exciting than any other challenge. It just lasts longer.

FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

When you stop at a marked area you might notice other players appearing nearby. When they suddenly vanish from the run halfway down, it's either because they hit the retry button and returned to the top or they opened the map and warped somewhere else. It doesn't really create the impression of a populated world, just fleeting glimpses of solitary gamers. For a proper social experience you really need to party up with friends.

Stunts are similarly woolly, with a frustrating delay after releasing the jump button that makes hitting the edge of a ramp harder than it should be. Once you're airborne there are few tricks beyond some basic spins, and landing is all done automatically. Either you're in roughly the right position, in which case the game will land you upright, or you're totally upside down.

Paragliding is more a method of (very slow) transport than an actual sport, and so it's up to the wingsuit to provide *Steep's* best moments—hurtling through the air while sewn into an oversized sleeping bag certainly fits the bill of an adrenaline sport. Points are scored according to how close to the ground you dare skim, and if you play it safe you get nothing. There are some tough challenges that require you to fly through tiny hoops, and reaching for the instant retry button will soon become part of your muscle memory. It's good stuff.

But the times when this is genuinely compelling are disappointingly infrequent. Some organized races rather than all those lonely time trials would have been welcome. There are glimpses of what might have been, for example when other players congregate nearby and don't just warp away after ten seconds, but without anything particularly interesting to hold the attention it's a concept in need of a more focused sequel to put some flesh on its bones. ■



OXM VERDICT
Patchily enjoyable but the novelty of a return to the slopes soon wears off.



REVIEW

After being inspired by 2012's *Les Misérables*, director Tetsuya Nomura almost turned *FFXV* into a musical





PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$59.99

Final Fantasy XV

THE LONG-RUNNING JRPG FRANCHISE FINDS NEW DRIVE **KATHARINE BYRNE**

069



For a long time, *Final Fantasy XV* looked set to deliver on the title's promise and put the final nail in the series'

coffin. If changing name and console generation didn't petrify production, then its switch in director certainly didn't hasten things along. It's not surprising then that there are a few ruffled Chocobo feathers to be found in the final game, whether it's the rushed second act or the lack of cohesion in its overall world building.

It's also the weirdest Final Fantasy game to date. Reams of incidental boy banter and photo-realistic food models point toward a team that had the luxury of time to spread their wings and indulge in heady extravagance. But for every small detail lovingly pored over you'll find what should be quite basic elements clumsily executed. The storytelling jumps all over the place, fails to

ABOVE Prompto is often found taking photos of the party to document your journey.



introduce its ideas, and occasionally hacks out entire chunks, blatantly in the name of serving later DLC.

There's also the small problem of having its entire opening narrative locked away in the accompanying CG film *Kingsglaive*, and whole tomes of backstory resigned to its animated *Brotherhood* offshoot. In a series that lives and dies by its storytelling, these are the cracks that reveal *FFXV*'s troubled past for the poison-spewing Malboro it is, its many tentacles grasping to meld all its disparate strands into a single, coherent whole.

Stand by me

And yet, for all those moments of paralysis and hazy confusion, *FFXV* has emerged triumphant from its ten-year silence, resulting in a game that's far more charming and affecting than it has any right to be.

Key to its success is its central gang of four. Prince Noctis might be a rather more petulant protagonist than

franchise fans are used to, but in the company of the lively, selfie-obsessed Prompto, human beefcake Gladiolus, and sensible gourmand Ignis, he and his brotherly bodyguards form a captivating portrait of male friendship.

They're a constant presence in *FFXV*, and their regular bouts of chat both on and off the battlefield reveal a far more nuanced set of personalities than any other FF party to date. Even the most minor side quests have bespoke lines of dialog, and those who take a more leisurely approach to its ever-growing to-do list will reap the rewards of watching their bond grow over time. Saving the world is important, but finding that Noctis shares our hatred of bugs and beans? That's a character we can get behind.

Occasionally you'll even find them sharing late-night secrets round the campfire as they chow down on Ignis' home cooking, and the result is a cast of characters that feels refreshingly modern yet highly relatable. They have





→ their fair share of fall-outs, of course, but the way they bristle and snipe at each other feels far more mature than the teenage tantrums of heroes past.

They're so well-drawn that you'll want to spend as much time camping out with them as possible, especially as EXP gained from quests is only banked when you hit the pillow, so you'll need to take frequent pit-stops to level up. That might sound like a chore, but if we could take 18-hour naps we wouldn't be complaining.

Side-tracked

More grating is *FFXV*'s decision to tie all side quests to specific NPCs who must then be returned to in order to

collect your reward. Special shoutout to the toolbag who resides at the end of a pier 700ft out at sea. Fast travel is available, of course, as is the option to set the car on autopilot while you grab a drink and listen to classic Final Fantasy tunes blaring out of the radio. But your set of wheels will only take you so far, as many quest sites lie off-road. When so many other modern RPGs have streamlined these bad habits, it seems positively archaic that *FFXV* still forces you to spend a significant chunk of your time whittling down your shoe leather.

Fortunately, those famous yellow Chocobos are on hand to help ease the burden of travel. Once unlocked,

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

The 15th mainline entry in the long-running Final Fantasy series.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

An expansive tour de force, and the ultimate refinement of the series.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Final Fantasy fans both new and old, including Western RPG lovers.

a small rental fee will let you summon these overgrown chickens whenever you please, a move sure to please diehard fans as much as newcomers. They can be a bit fiddly to rein in when you're scrabbling through hedges and rocks, but most of the time the huge, sprawling playgrounds serve as excellent thoroughfares to let your birds run wild. With their delightful walks and galloping power slides, they're the perfect partner for off-road investigations, and quickly become our main way of racing around Eos, if only because we never have to remember where we parked them.

Admittedly, some quests are more rewarding than others. Collecting exotic frogs and picking mushrooms is hardly as thrilling as excavating mystical Armiger weapons, but most offer valuable rewards—whether it's power bracelets that buff your strength stat or super-strong car lights that allow you to drive at night unhindered by turbo-powered daemons.

If there's one major criticism to lay at *FFXV*'s door, though, it's that every last quest is essentially one more stop on Square Enix's grand guided tour of Eos, leaving few stones unturned for you to discover on your own. That's a step backwards compared to games like *The Witcher 3*, where every corner seems to reveal something new and unexpected, and



TOP The majestic Chocobo is a cheap and reliable way to make your way around Eos.

LEFT Gladiolus lives up to his name by packing quite a punch during combat.

Gladio, Ardyn, Biggs, and Cor share voice actors with *Overwatch's* Junkrat, Reinhardt, Soldier: 76, and McCree



LEFT These are the most impressive summons the series has ever seen.

it can leave Eos feeling a little empty as a result. Indeed, there were whole stretches of land where we rarely encountered even a single enemy, making off-road journeys all the more arduous for their lack of action.

Dancing mad

Luckily, when daemons do make an appearance, the thrill of the fight is more than worth the wait. *FFXV's* real-time battle system lends much dynamism to each scrap, amplified by some of the most rousing battle themes to ever spill from Yoko Shimomura's ivory-tinkling digits. Most monsters roam the world in plain-sight, but at night they'll bubble up from the surface, recalling the random encounters of yore. They come in all shapes and sizes, too, with smaller quadrupeds racing around you from every angle, while larger foes use their bulk to shunt you into submission.

Control is limited to Noctis, but his four weapon slots give him plenty of flexibility. You can be mid-swing of a hefty broadsword, for instance, before instantly switching to a fleet-footed spear, long-distance revolver, protective shield or devastating magic attack with a quick tap of the d-pad. Noctis also has the handy ability to warp across the battlefield, allowing him to instantly strike enemies from afar, or escape to higher ground when the tide turns against him. In a great

FURTHER FANTASIES

If completing *Final Fantasy XV* isn't enough lore for you, consider picking up *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV* on Blu-ray. It follows Kingsglaive soldier Nyx Ulric as he becomes mixed up in a ruse for the empire of Nifheim to invade the imperial province of Tenebrae. It's well worth taking in, especially if you become deeply entrenched within the narrative.



"After its ten-year silence, the game is more charming and affecting than it has a right to be"

touch, your damage is multiplied the further the warp distance, rewarding you for ricocheting around the battlefield with cinematic flair.

Your buddies largely take care of themselves, but as successive strikes fill your party-wide tech meter, you can call on them to dole out special attacks. Likewise, manoeuvre yourself into an enemy's blind spot and nearby allies will join you to deliver ornate combo attacks, sometimes even using each other's weapons for added showmanship. With so many options available to you there's plenty of scope to experiment, and the sheer size of your arsenal means you can more or less approach each battle in a different way every time. At their hectic best, in-game battles can outshine even *Kingsglaive's* CG choreography. It's very cool.

It's a shame, then, that *FFXV* essentially jacks in its gorgeous open-world halfway through the game, replacing your easy-going road trip with claustrophobic train corridors

and twisting imperial fortresses. Indeed, having spent forty glorious hours soaking up nearly every last treasure Eos had to offer, we whizzed through the last seven chapters in just over ten. You can still go back and visit Eos to mop up those last few quests whenever you find a rest point, but it's a clumsy transition that we wished had been better woven into the meat of the earlier open-world.

Ultimately, though, it's the strength of Noctis and his royal retinue that carry you through its second act slump, and the spectacular finale is a befitting end to their decade-long struggle. From those first screens of *Versus XIII*, these characters have truly been through thick and thin to arrive at this point, and you can feel it every step of the way. Give them the space to breathe and wallow in their own weirdness and *FFXV* emerges as one of the more charming and surprising blockbusters of the year. ■



OXM VERDICT

Its flaws and fun come from the same tangled history, but the latter easily wins the day.

9



PUBLISHER 505 GAMES / DEVELOPER GIANT SQUID / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$19.99

Abzû

THE SMELT AND THE SPRAT, THEY KNOW WHERE IT'S AT **BRITTANY VINCENT**

072

From the opening moments of *Giant Squid's* exploratory underwater adventure, it's clear this game is meant to be an atmospheric, solitary journey.

With this in mind, it's tempting to label *Abzû* an experience rather than a game in the traditional sense. Of course, given the fact that the team behind *Abzû* is comprised of several developers who brought the multi-award-winning *Journey* to life, this makes perfect sense. Rather than a game of interweaving characters, storylines, twists, and turns, *Abzû's* magic can be found in its simplicity. It's a gorgeous "swim-ulator" that you certainly need more than a few free hours to devote to, because once you dive into it, you'll take quite some time getting back to surface.

From your first dive, gasps will be plentiful and audible as you take in your surroundings. It's a beautiful sensory experience that brings to mind the thrill of free diving, and

the sense of weightlessness you might experience when submerging your entire IRL body underwater. The opening moments give way to a pulsating, seemingly endless abyss of water that stretches out before you. There's a subtle feeling of grandeur, like you're one small drop in the ocean of the universe. You're a lone diver in what's essentially an aquatic jungle, surrounded by the rainbow of life below the water.

Yes, yes, but what do you actually do, besides gawp? Well you bob and weave through the waters exploring the depths at your leisure. Rather than feeling like a slog as it might in most other games, here swimming or navigating water in any capacity feels like an absolute treat. Your diver is responsive, and brought to life via flowing, fluid animation. It's actually enjoyable to descend into a patch of coral to appreciate its allure or to cruise lightly amongst a school of fish, discovering their different names by swimming up and touching them. There are some areas you're initially

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A calming and often majestic journey through the ocean.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Journey but underwater; an atmospheric, design-led feast for the senses.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone looking for a chance to chill out in front of their TV.

roped off from, with coral occasionally blocking your way. This breaks the illusion of the limitless ocean ripe for exploring, especially frustrating when you find yourself funneled into a linear progression towards a solid end.

Ocean drive

That only slightly mars the experience, however. Your true purpose is to uncover the narrative unfolding around you. If the mere mention of 'abstract concepts' or 'passive storytelling' turns you cold, then you'll need a hot Thermos for this next bit: you'll only get out what of *Abzû* what you're prepared to put in.

While exploring, you'll get hands-on access to the various aquatic animals of the sea while exploring ruins, oceanic areas of the deep, coral reefs, caverns, and other hot spots you'd expect to see on nature documentaries. It's all in a bid to discover both the peaceful and predatory behaviors of the creatures of the ocean. It's all before you, but largely up to you to interpret.

Can't get enough of oceans? How come? They cover approximately 70 per cent of the Earth's surface



LEFT Schools of fish, coral, and other underwater sea life permeate each scene.

“There’s a subtle feeling of grandeur, like you’re one drop in the ocean of the universe”

This is due in part to your silent protagonist, the diver, who doesn't impart any wisdom or information as you make your journey through the sea. It's all up to you to figure things out as you solve strings of puzzles and take part in short action sequences that often involve the wildlife around you. You swim from area to area connected by mysterious portals, eventually reaching shrines and other themed locations that you have to decipher. Sometimes you might need to summon several fish at a time to join you at a statue, or you may even need to hitch a ride on one of the larger sea creatures to reach your next destination.

Play it cool

Meditation is an important theme in *Abzû* as well, as you'll be spending plenty of time with the stone statues scattered throughout the ocean. You can take a few moments to centre yourself amidst sea turtles, rays, and gorgeous fish that go zipping around you to and fro, which

FAR LEFT Your diver is only a small part of the sights and sounds to take in with *Abzû*.

RIGHT You'll often happen upon special treasures while exploring.



ABZÛ-WHO?

The title *Abzû* isn't just some nonsense that a marketing executive came up with to sound mysterious. In fact the title has very real roots when it comes to studying ancient Mesopotamian mythology. It's the combination of two words: "Ab," which means "ocean." "Zû" means "to know." Loosely translated, this can be taken to mean "the ocean of wisdom."

speaks to *Abzû*'s chill nature. You're never close to any fatal obstacles nor any supremely frustrating puzzles—it's all about going with the flow.

The loose plot and abstract gameplay in itself are two things that certainly won't resonate with everyone, and that's to be understood. *Abzû* is very much a title that requires time, patience, and an open mind. It is without a doubt one of the most patently beautiful journeys you're currently able to take with your Xbox One. The multi-hued ocean floor, spectacular wildlife, and flora of the sea are a sight to savor and behold. There's not as much to do with them as we might like, but there are moments in-game that will absolutely take your breath away if you let them.

Abzû is an undeniably singular game with important messages to share about harmony, finding your

centre, and understanding where you fit in the grand tangle that is life. Unfortunately, as with life, sometimes there are a few road blocks to break through before you're fully able to appreciate its beauty. But if you're willing to take the plunge despite a lack of true autonomy and a couple of other niggling issues, you'll find the seaweed actually is always greener on the other side. ■



OXM VERDICT

It hits choppy waters at times but this is ultimately an extraordinary undersea tale.

8

Telltale maintains that this is a complete storyline reboot, not tied to any other iteration in Batman's history



PUBLISHER TELLTALE GAMES / DEVELOPER TELLTALE GAMES / FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$19.99

Batman: The Telltale Series

THE DARK KNIGHT TALKS A GOOD FIGHT **MARTIN KITTS**

Having made such a huge success of *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us*, Telltale's latest graphic adventure is its most eagerly anticipated licence to date. But how do you squeeze an all-action superhero into a format that's decidedly slow-paced?

The answer the designers came up with is mostly longer and bigger quicktime events, and the game is strewn with fight scenes where you have to tap the correct button to keep the action moving. Given the nature of the character it's no surprise to see action sequences taking a much more prominent role than in previous Telltale games, but the studio still hasn't quite figured out how to make these scenes genuinely exciting and interactive.

During the most important battles there's a little bat logo that gradually fills with color after each successful

move. When it's full you're prompted to activate a finishing move, ending the fight, but it's hard to tell exactly how much control you have over this process. It doesn't seem possible to play it any more skilfully, and the button cues stay on screen long enough to allow multiple attempts if you keep getting your Xs and Ys muddled up. You'll have to try hard to fail one of these scenes, although there are a few moments where missing a prompt causes Batman to be killed by an environmental trap.

Batman's technologically enhanced abilities are featured prominently throughout. In battles against multiple enemies there's a pre-fight visualization stage where you can choose which bit of scenery to smash over which character. Do you kick him through the door or smack his head into a coffee table? Decisions, decisions... It's all entirely cosmetic, and the resulting slow-mo carnage

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A new Batman story of colorful, costumed lunatics and very long quicktime events.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Pick a previous Telltale game, multiply the action by ten, and divide by Batman.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Batfans who found the *Arkham Asylum* fight scenes a bit tiring.

plays out as the same sequence of button-presses regardless.

Bat scan

Upon encountering a crime scene Batman scans the area for clues which you then have to piece together via the Batcomputer. It's a feature that might have provided some good puzzles and even some alternative branches of the story—for example, if you could reach an incorrect conclusion and end up letting the bad guys go free. But you can't do that, as it's impossible to leave a crime scene until you've correctly paired up all of the glaringly obvious clues.

When it comes to dispensing justice, though, you do get a lot more freedom of choice, and this is where the game really shines. The villains are a vicious bunch of amoral murderers, and although Batman's no killing policy is always in effect, there's often a violence/pacifism choice to be

“Batman has a no-kill policy but you still choose between violence and pacifism”

RIGHT “Hmm, let me log in to the Batcomputer and analyse these spectacles in great detail.”



LEFT Catwoman knows Batman's true identity from the start. She's unimpressed.

made. We opted to brutalize Batman's enemies when possible, which turned out to be a surprisingly unpopular route among the wider userbase.

As ever, your key decisions are listed at the end of each episode, where you find out how many other players made the same choices. There's a perverse satisfaction to be had from learning that your play style was massively unpopular, although we've no idea how anyone managed to stop themselves skewering that smug crime boss on a protruding rebar in the first episode. Perhaps most people are role-playing as 1960s camp Batman instead of the post-*Dark Knight* hardcore version.

Friend or foe

Given that the action sequences are just for show and the crime scene puzzles basically solve themselves, the plot is where *Batman* stands or falls. For the most part it does deliver, with enemies worth hating

VOX POP

Crowd play is a new feature that allows spectators to log in to your game via Telltale's website and vote on the choices as they happen. One mode allows you to overrule them, which sort of negates the point of it, while the full-fat version picks the most popular choice in real time. It's currently recommended only for people in the same room, due to latency issues, but you can expect future games to support large scale crowd play over Twitch.

and friends who you won't realize have burrowed so deeply into your affections until you're faced with a choice of which one to save.

This being the first season of Telltale's involvement with Batman, an awful lot of familiar ground gets retrodren. It's hard to be surprised when you're being introduced to the likes of the Joker because you already know them so well from countless appearances in films, TV, games, and comic books. That said, we hadn't previously encountered Penguin looking the way he does here, and we did feel a brief pang of remorse when condemning Harvey Dent to lifelong disfigurement as Two-Face purely because doing Catwoman a solid was the other option.

While the revelation of the supervillain's true identity in the third episode is a high point that the game doesn't quite reach again, there are a lot of tough choices to make

throughout its 10-hour running time. It's hard to tell if the whole thing is just smoke and mirrors, but at times it really feels as if the story is being fundamentally reworked with each major decision, which is surely a hallmark of some expert interactive storytelling. Is it worth a replay once you reach the finale? We'd recommend not, as while the illusion of choice is strong, the time-honored Telltale formula, all flow charts leading in one direction, is at work in the shadows. ■



OXM VERDICT

A few action-related missteps don't stop this being a decent first season.





PUBLISHER CHUCKLEFISH / DEVELOPER CONCERNEAPE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$14.99

Stardew Valley

SEED IT AND WEEP (WITH JOY) MATT GILMAN

076

It's easy to forget, when you reside in a bustling city, just how much hard work it can be to live and work anywhere else.

If you see grey brickwork, overflowing trashcans, and the inside of an office cubicle for much of your waking life, contemporary existence might seem overly grim. Living in the lush greenery of the countryside must be so much easier, we assume, forgetting all the legitimate toil that goes into eking out a living off the land. Thankfully this pixelated indie darling from one-man developer ConcernedApe (AKA Eric Barone) wonderfully captures this idyllic rural existence, even the bits which involve actual labor. It allows for escapism of the most alluring kind: an idyllic snapshot of reality peppered with a dash of whimsy.

Stardew Valley starts on a sad note, though. As your grandfather lies on his deathbed your custom-crafted avatar is gifted a plot of land in the vibrant rural climes of the titular slade.

When you arrive you're faced with the monumental task of cultivating parsnips amidst a dilapidated wreck of a land parcel. Broken bits of wood, trees, rocks, and swathes of unkempt grass cover the potential farmland, and it's up to you, with a limited reserve of daily energy to get a shift on. There's no denying that this is work. You wake up each morning, go chop a few trees down or dink away at the rocks with your pick, before you become too exhausted and then spend a bit of time foraging for sellable goodies in the nearby woods or chatting with the locals. Then you'll tuck yourself in at night ready to do it all again the next day. Crucially though, *Stardew Valley* rarely feels like work. Everything you do is rewarding.

Grandad's farmy

There's always more to do and however you chose to spend your energy you'll always feel like you're making progress to some bigger aim. Once you're beyond mere parsnips, for example, you'll work through more and

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A top-down, retro farming simulator, with JRPG elements on the side.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Ever play the old *Harvest Moon* games? Like that but more polished and with some *Minecraft* bits.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone stuck in an office cubicle Monday-Friday, and anyone who misses 1995.

more ambitious crops, then, as time passes, you'll start setting up areas for animals, preserve-making stations, furnaces, and other farm-flavored endeavors. While *Stardew Valley* is a farming game at its core, this central cyclical system of planting, cultivating, harvesting, and selling, is surrounded on all sides by delightful distractions.

A nearby town is home to a cast of charming characters who you can chat with, all with fleshed-out personalities that become more prominent the more time you spend with them. Some you can woo with thoughtful and timely gifts, as each character has a birthday for you to remember and plan ahead for. There's a mine nearby for lightweight dungeon-crawling adventures, an archaeological museum to fill with discovered treasures, a blacksmith ready and waiting to upgrade all of your gear and tools, a beachhead to accommodate wannabe fishermen, and a devious plot to unravel as your ex-employer, a mega-corporation from the city, looks to take over the town.

To help fund the game before it was released, developer Eric Barone also worked part-time as a theatre usher



LEFT As well as keeping an eye on your energy meter, you'll need to keep half a mind on the time. Work too late and you'll be too exhausted to do much the next day.

“When you go to the egg festival, you can bag your yearly supply of strawberry seeds”

And the further in you get, the more and more seems to unravel. A mysterious apparition at the ruined old town hall building requires investigating one day, then it's off to the egg festival to bag your yearly supply of strawberry seeds the next. (Seriously, load up on strawberry seeds, they're basically *Stardew Valley's* equivalent of cocaine, judging by the price they fetch at market.)

Harvest boon

This all adds up to a very enticing whole, one which it's very easy to find yourself playing for hours at a time, even when you're not intending to session it. The sleepy quality of the music soothes all too easily over potential concerns that it's one o'clock in the morning and you'll need to be back at that legitimate office job first thing tomorrow morning...

But for all these magnificent little sparks of wonder and charm, *Stardew Valley* is not perfect. Not everyone who plays is going to enjoy the repetition involved in completing

FAR LEFT You can raise animals, but true to the whimsical tone, you won't be butchering any of them for their meat.

RIGHT Pro farming tip: clear your land of debris, but keep some grass, as this can be turned into hay later.



BARONE HOME

Amazingly *Stardew Valley* is Eric Barone's debut commercial game, and even more amazingly, he is its sole creator. It took him four years to craft, starting out as a project intended to help him hone his programming skills. Originally Barone planned for it to be an Xbox Live Arcade release, before it grew massively into what we have today.

the tasks and even with our hearts fully warmed to the notion, we found ourselves sighing as our watering can ran out of H2O just one bean sprout short for the 20th time. There are also some quirky interface hangovers, presumably from the PC version. Some menus are controlled with the D-pad, others with a cursor you move with the Right Stick, and the lack of cohesion can lead to a stuttering, niggly first hour or so.

But when you find yourself still hooked into the reward loop some ten to 20 hours later, with the possibility of starting a whole new farm across a choice of multiple scenarios still to come, this feels like a moot moan. These other scenarios are a masterstroke. One sets you loose across a series of farmy islands, divided up by a river to enforce some forward planning on veteran

players. Another throws beasties out into the world at nighttime, adding an extra dash of tension as the day's hours tick down.

In a world where, too often, we equate videogame escapism with lashings of ultra violence, *Stardew Valley* feels like a breath of fresh country air. Those looking for a lungful should roll up their sleeves, grab a hoe, and get stuck in. ■



OXM VERDICT

Essential for lapsed fans of *Harvest Moon* and anyone looking to just get away from it all.

8



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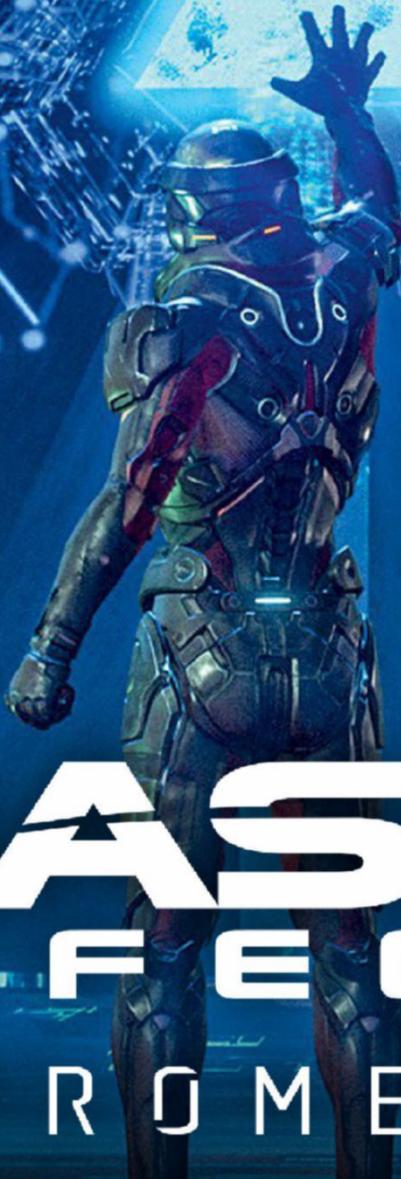
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079

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extra

Get more from your Xbox





“Pow!” “Biff!” “Oof!” “Crunch!” “Argh, my good eye!” Just a selection of the noises heard in OXM Towers as we put this issue together. Still, you expect a bit of violence when talking about videogames, the most violent cultural medium since ‘punching museums’ were banned. Our extra section gets off to a fittingly violent start with the head-on collision fun of **Burnout Paradise** (p82). Criterion was considered crazy at the time for trying to make a sandbox driving game. These days we’ll give any racer 1/10 that doesn’t have a map six times bigger than Belgium. The metal-heavy destruction isn’t limited to Burnout’s shenanigans. Some of **Titanfall 2’s** (p84) modes are more vacant than Tom’s farewell party, but a closer look shows a criminally underperforming FPS with some of the best multiplayer shooting Xbox One has to offer. The violence continues as we celebrate **The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** (p85) going backwards compatible by creating a furious orc who wants to go on a nice killing spree. Why don’t you join him? We were worried all that violence might turn this section into a bloodbath, so we asked Kate Gray to give us a list of the **15 best party games** (p92) to restore peace. She came back with the most violent, painful, infuriating, pad-smashingly, and potentially friendship-ending experience ever. Here’s to another glorious year of virtual violence. “Owch!”



082



084



085



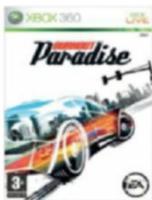
092

081

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extra



Nine years on, **Burnout Paradise** is an imperfect, but still thrilling and mega fun, open-world racer **TOM STONE**

PUBLISHER EA / DEVELOPER CRITERION GAMES / FORMAT XBOX 360 / RELEASE DATE JANUARY 2008



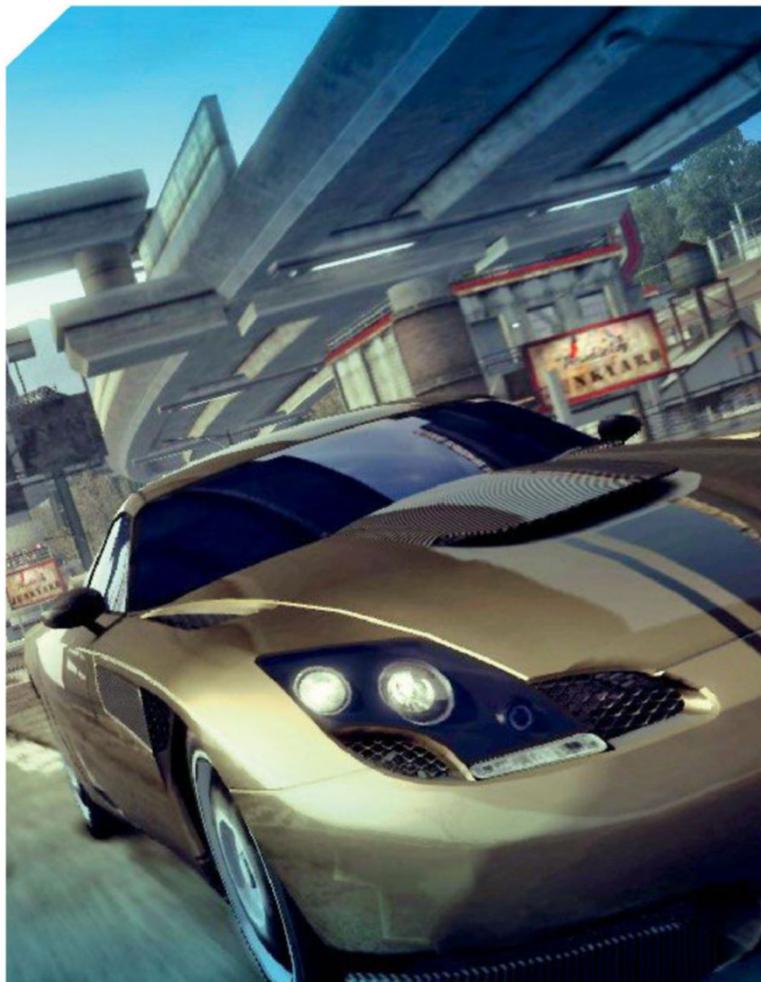
Break out the world's *largest* violin and set your emotional status to 'wreck' because this is my last contribution to

Official Xbox Magazine. I've decided it's time to move on to my true dream: driving from town to town, continent to continent, searching day and night for the inventor of the day-one 9GB update so I can give them a hearty slap.

The Xbox 360 was my first Xbox console and *Burnout Paradise* the first game I ever lovingly shoved into its disc slot. And in many ways, *Burnout Paradise* and I are actually very similar. We're both handsome, challenging, possess bizarre tastes in music, occasionally crash, get very frustrating to interact with, and are terrible in bed. Actually, I quite enjoy playing *Burnout Paradise* in bed. I guess we're not very similar at all then.

Nevertheless! Now that *Burnout Paradise* has been made backwards compatible, I couldn't wait to drive back into Criterion's open-world. It makes a delightful first impression, too, with the opening bars of Guns N' Roses' *Paradise City* welcoming you in, promising a racing game that prioritises high-speed fun and destructive action. I get behind the wheel, slam down the accelerator, marvel at how nice Paradise City still looks, and hum happily along. The handling on the cars, the thrill of hitting the boost, and satisfaction of crunching another vehicle off the road still feels wonderful.

But Guns N' Roses is almost too perfect a band to open with. Because just like waiting two hours for a fat Axl Rose to bother getting on stage and hopefully play nothing from *Chinese Democracy*, the full *Burnout Paradise* experience can be disappointing. *Burnouts 1-4* had great split-screen multiplayer—gone here. DJ Atomika, the nails on a chalkboard of videogame narrators, never seems to shut up, and sometimes even *pauses the game* to talk over it. As if that isn't



sinful enough, *Girlfriend* by Avril Lavigne is on the soundtrack.

Other flaws are less immediately irritating, but eventually sour the overall experience. The titular city looks gorgeous during the day, but gets tough to navigate at night. It's even worse whenever the weather turns misty. Suddenly a game all about preparing for corners and keeping an eye out for shortcuts is set in a city drowning in fog. This is presumably why Konami isn't making *Silent Hill Kart*. (At time of writing.)

The city is full of opportunities to unlock new cars but there's no quick

select option or fast travel. You have to search the city yourself, 'helped' by a mini-map so cramped you'll need a 50-inch TV and designated cartographer handy to get much out of it. This seems like a (semi) deliberate move to get you to learn the layout of the city. After all, having to drive repeatedly over its turf subtly trains you, reinforcing the best routes.

And it works! After an hour of 'this-ain't-as-good-as-I-remember-you're-an-idiot-Tom-of-the-past' grumbling, I feel old haunts and tactics bleeding back into my internal sat-nav. I start a stunt run, where

NOW PLAYING

you have to score thousands of points through ramp leaps, smashing billboards, drifts, and barrel rolls. I struggle, until I remember to make a beeline for the bridge next to the Lone Stallion Ranch, which has three consecutive ramps and billboards *begging* for my car to be smashed through them. I start a race to the Country Club and then ignore the suggested route in favour of one I've made up, because I knew it would get me there quicker if executed perfectly. (*Burnout Paradise's* often frustrating lack of guidance sings in moments like these.) Later I start a race to the Crystal Summit observatory and remember to cancel all my plans for the afternoon because it takes about three bloody years to get there. It's all worth it though, for the brilliant drifting opportunities. The racing, once the difficulty ramps up, still holds up today, even if some odd design decisions don't.

But I can forgive inane narrators and misty streets when the game introduced so many ideas we take for granted now. An open-world driving game sounded ridiculous in 2008. Now it's the standard. Playing online used to involve watching a menu screen until the race started. Criterion envisioned a model where joining an online game was all of three D-pad taps away. Suddenly you're in the same spot but now there are up to seven other players zooming around to take you down, all without breaking the action.

It's showtime

Going online also makes every individual road of Paradise City a competition. Get the best time on a road and you'll earn yourself a silver number plate. But 'best times' belong in more serious, boring driving games. The real mark of *Burnout* brilliance is getting the best 'Showtime'.



“A magical mess of a game can bring innovation to a stale genre”

Squeezing both of the triggers simultaneously turns your car into essentially a sentient wrecking ball, one you can bounce along the road, destroying as many neighbouring vehicles as possible. Each car you smash pours a few thousand more dollars onto your score and smashing a bus earns you a score multiplier. As someone who once had to take a bus to work, I wholeheartedly support *Burnout Paradise's* message of contempt for the smelliest, least reliable form of public transport. Each car you hit injects you with more boost and you keep smashing your way down the roads until you run out. Get good and you'll be able to bounce across the entire city.

Get the best time and showtime on a road and you'll 'rule' it, until someone beats your scores. At first I try ruling as many roads as possible. It's fun, but somewhat isolating for a multiplayer experience. Hundreds of completable challenges were more up my alley. These range from the straightforward (boost for more than 60 seconds!) to the silly (everyone barrel-roll over each other!). I enjoy ticking them off. But as a fan of this series since my first taste of Road Rage in *Burnout 3*, something felt odd.

Was *Burnout* all about camaraderie and working together now?

Then, on the way to another challenge, one of the other players takes me down. The game suddenly informs me that this monster is now my new 'rival'. Oh, it is *an*. The challenge is forgotten. All I care about is taking down Judas McTraitorchops, the scum who'd HUMILIATED me in front of the entire internet. I bash through other, weaker cars, determined to right this injustice. I slam down the accelerator and the boost, refusing to let up until the body of my nemesis' car is scrap. I even start rehearsing his eulogy and practising how I'd boot his vehicular corpse into one of those machines that turns cars into cubes. I've never hated someone more in my entire life. Not since some other dude had beaten me at *Rocket League* about 20 minutes earlier, anyway.

That's *Burnout Paradise* at its best. It's a great many positions away from perfect but its innovations were plundered by other developers to great effect. *Driver: San Francisco* would take the open-world racing game and give it a crazy plot, with the best script to ever feature in a driving game (that's barely a compliment, so I'll be more explicit—*Driver: San Francisco* is one of the best-written games I've ever played). Sometimes it just takes one magical mess of a game to bring innovation to a stale genre, laying the groundwork for other developers to build upon. And with that, I abandon OXM forever to work on my exciting new project—pitching *Silent Hill Kart* to Konami. Er, and if that doesn't happen to work out I can just come back, right? R-right? ■

ABOVE “Hey, hey, you, you, I don't like your girlfriend...”
Monster of a car, soundtrack, er, not so much.

WHAT IS IT?

An ambitious driving game and the fifth in the brilliant *Burnout* series of arcade racers. It encouraged and rewarded the most dangerous driving.



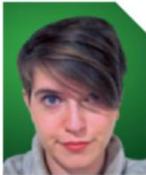
→ PLAYED ANYTHING GOOD RECENTLY? COME SHARE IT AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK



The single-player campaign in **Titanfall 2** is fantastic, but let's not forget its core function: multiplayer **SAM LOVERIDGE**

PUBLISHER EA / DEVELOPER RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OCTOBER 2016

NOW PLAYING



The excellence of Respawn's new single-player campaign was quite a surprise, so it's no wonder some people have

forgotten about its multiplayer. It turns out that this is a pretty significant oversight. Multiplayer isn't just a nice add-on: it was the entirety of the first game and the reason we're even here with a follow-up to jump into.

Titanfall 2's multiplayer might now only be half the offering, but that doesn't stop it being bigger, better, and more nimble than anything on offer in the original game. Although the overall ideas are the same, Respawn has taken that foundation and slathered on features that make it a much deeper experience.

It's in the pilots that *Titanfall* really separates itself from other FPS games. As before, they can double-jump, run along walls, and slide down floors, making for slick, fast movement that's occasionally even beautiful. But the difference with *Titanfall 2* is that the abilities and strengths of both the pilots and Titans have significantly broadened. Suddenly, you've got even more gameplay variety in addition to more levels of multiplayer progression.

Pilots now have a host of different abilities depending on the class you choose, meaning you've got more tactical options to consider and problems to solve. The grappling hook is a fantastic addition. It makes movement more fluid by allowing you to attach to buildings and even the Titans. But then you've got the cloaking ability, which regularly feels like a cheap shot, especially as it often leads to some irritating sniper camping.

But there's more to play with. Gain some on-foot aggression by using the pulse blade, or go with a more



"The multiplayer is bigger, better, and more nimble than anything in the first game"

defensive tactic with the A-Wall shield. Heck, you could even opt for a teleport or speed-boosting Stim shots. Whatever you choose, it's clear *Titanfall 2's* multiplayer has longer appeal than its predecessor,

keeping you coming back to discover what options you've unlocked and what tactics to employ.

The same has been done on the Titan side, with a new line of chassis options to devour. These make the game more accessible but allow you to feel more connected to your behemoth companions. The campaign teaches you that the Scorch is a close-quarters brute, the Ion is slow yet deadly, and the Northstar is perfect for a sniper. So you'll know what you're up against when one storms towards you.

WHAT IS IT?
The same great Titanfall multiplayer as the first, but now it's more personal, more refined, and has maximum staying power.

What you won't know, however, is what they've chosen to kit out their pilot or Titan with from the huge range of customization options. The vast array of weapons and perks may seem daunting, but it's really just an indication of how much more refined, and nuanced the multiplayer now is.

Bountylicious

Of course, new Titan and pilot classes are useless unless you've got mods and maps to use them in. This isn't a problem. The levels are expertly designed, with each taking advantage of the interplay between man and mech, and making sure the needs of both are balanced. Each window is a flanking spot, every corridor ripe for a perfect wall-run, and each wide-open space is dotted with cover.

In terms of modes, the new Bounty Hunter matches are the clear winner as they encourage more tactical play. I'm also fond of the Amped Hardpoint, which guards your hardpoints and nabs your team extra points. The result is a tenser and tighter match that's incredibly addictive.

It's great that Respawn didn't forget about multiplayer when creating an impressive campaign. What's here is bigger than ever, but also has enough depth and progression to make sure players stick around for a while. ■



Creating a brand-new class to perfectly suit a master criminal in **The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion** MATT ELLIOTT

PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS / DEVELOPER BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE MARCH 2006

NOW PLAYING



It begins as every Elder Scrolls game should. No, not in a prison but with a catastrophic crash. I spend 30 minutes creating a perfect

burly orc, named Mugrub gro-Mogg. I've almost finished the intro when the sound effects stop. Then the music disappears. Then everything freezes. Somehow, I haven't saved. That's not a good-enough anecdote for an OXM Now Playing, so I go back to the start and make a new Mugrub.

Now, there's one thing you need to know about Mugrub. He's a bad orc. In the Elder Scrolls world, the Orsimer are noble savages, fearsome in a fight but blessed with a kind of muscular honesty. They are misunderstood, but not necessarily evil. Mugrub isn't like that. Mugrub believes that the only good guard is a dead guard, and the only thing better than a dead guard is a dying guard who tells you where to find his mates. He is hatred, with tusks.

But before the frothing murder can begin, I have to escape my prison. My liberator, Emperor Uriel Septim, talks about prophecy, death, and destiny. Mugrub doesn't listen. He takes the Amulet of Kings, even though the giant, regal ruby apparently isn't worth enough to sell. Bah. As the Emperor lies bleeding at our feet, his bodyguard Bauros starts cheerfully asking Mugrub what class he is, presumably making small talk to dispel the awkwardness of personal failure. This is a forgotten element of the Elder Scrolls, and one that I miss. Granted, the ability to play *Skyrim* unfettered by class choices was easier for people unfamiliar with traditional RPGs, but I love the distinction that comes with adhering to a specific class. I look through the list and decide that none are quite right. Knights have many of the correct



BACKWARDS COMPATIBLE

PLAY IT NOW ON XBOX ONE

"The knights are too noble for an orc so I create my own class: the Warbastard"

skills, but seem entirely too noble for ol' Mugrub. I must create my own class. Thus, the Warbastard is born.

Mugrub the Warbastard leaves the cave, and sees the sky for the first time in what feels like forever.

Pale sun breaks through swaying trees, and the lake glimmers gently in front of me. This would be a beautiful place to kill a guard. Unfortunately, there aren't any here, so I and begin the long trudge to Cheydinhal.

Cheydinhal is lovely, but very stuffy. The first inn I visit makes some pointed reference to the 'finest clientele' in the town, so I assume she's an orc-racist. Mugrub will come back for her later. In the meantime, I cross the street to the Newlands Lodge, which is a Dark Elf inn far more to my tastes. Spitting

is allowed; fighting is positively encouraged. After making the usual small talk with the innkeep ("What's the best hammer for bludgeoning a guard?"), I'm reminded there's a Fighters Guild in Cheydinhal. If that's not a worthy profession for a Warbastard, I don't know what is.

Bientot mon armour

Mugrub joins up. His boss is another orc, so I expect favorable treatment and swift advancement, but apparently I have to do some 'contracts' first. My first task is to deliver some weapons to a goblin-infested mine. I take a fancy to one of the weapons—a shining steel warhammer, which I have no intention of handing over. I head to the mine, and meet the person I'm supposed to give it to. A plan forms in my head: my contact is another orc, wearing a full set of fine steel armour that would fit Mugrub handsomely. What if an accident were to happen?

Weapons delivered, we begin clearing goblins out of the mine. Mugrub tries to help, but he's clumsy, bless him. He keeps hitting his orc brother, until his ally sees red and attacks. This was not part of the plan. The goblins were supposed to finish him off. Instead, he chases me into the mine. We run to a gloomy passageway and I murder him in the dark, then steal his armour and burn the body. And by 'burn the body', I mean 'spend five minutes trying to balance the corpse on a tiny fire'. I like to roleplay.

I return to the guild master, safe in the knowledge that nobody saw my crime. One of the loading screens reminds me that you can't *join* the Fighters Guild with a criminal record—it says nothing about transgressions for existing members. It'll be fine.

I have been expelled from the Fighters Guild. People are surprisingly angry, and far more perceptive than I was expecting. Perhaps the armour gave it away. Perhaps it doesn't matter. *Oblivion* is a voyage of discovery, and I've discovered that being Warbastard is its own reward. ■

WHAT IS IT?

The predecessor to *Skyrim*, set in the Imperial province of Cyrodiil, freshly available for Xbox One thanks to backwards compatibility.

RETROSPECTIVE BLUE DRAGON





How a Final Fantasy box-office bomb led to the strangely charming **Blue Dragon** ALEX DONALDSON

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / DEVELOPER MISTWALKER / FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE



The recent release of *Final Fantasy XV* offers up a powerful reminder of the strength of the Japanese RPG. FF's star might not be as

high as it was in the late '90s, but the series is still an absolute powerhouse in terms of sales and brand recognition. At one point, it was considered a must-have for a console to have a Japanese RPG of its very own even in the West, and with *Final Fantasy* closely tied to its rival, Xbox had to look elsewhere. Enter *Blue Dragon*: an all-original game with an incredible pedigree.

How *Blue Dragon* came to be is arguably just as interesting as the game itself. Don't get me wrong: the newly backwards compatible RPG is a cult Xbox 360 classic for good reason and is well worth a play even today, but the game also represents a fascinating period in Xbox history: the battle for the Xbox 360 to conquer Japan.

This tale really begins in the summer of 2001—months before the original Xbox console would release. Riding high on the success of *Final Fantasy VII*, famed Japanese publisher Square was trying to reach another blockbuster moment—this time in the cinema. The result was the disastrous *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*.

Debates about quality aside, the movie failed to find an audience. It became one of the biggest box-office bombs of all time. The movie's failure was the catalyst that would lead *Final Fantasy* creator and movie director, Hironobu Sakaguchi, to eventually leave Square, which would later merge with Enix to become today's version of the company that's as well known for *Tomb Raider* as it is *Final Fantasy*.

Come 2004, Xbox had been out in Japan for two years and one thing was clear: it wasn't working. The huge 'duke' controller and oversized

box certainly didn't help, but most damning for the console was that it didn't have any Japanese games. Microsoft had partnered with Sega on the likes of *Jet Set Radio* and *Shenmue* but these weren't enough. In search of a fix, Microsoft turned to the master. Fresh from licking his Hollywood wounds, Sakaguchi was ready to set up a new company. With Microsoft's financial aid, Mistwalker was born.

After what then Xbox boss Peter Moore later described as ten months of meetings, Moore and Sakaguchi sealed their deal over "a very expensive bottle

"Xbox boss Peter Moore and Hironobu Sakaguchi sealed the deal over an expensive bottle of sake"

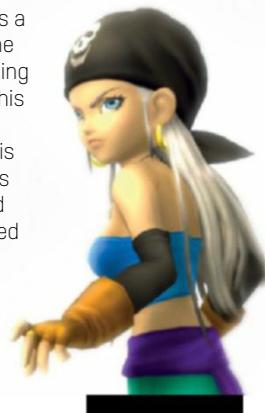
of sake". The agreement: Sakaguchi's new studio would produce two RPGs for Microsoft's as-yet unannounced second Xbox machine. These were mentioned briefly at an event

in February 2005, while the name *Blue Dragon* would first be uttered in Japanese magazines a few months later. One advantage of recruiting Sakaguchi was that his name held incredible power even in light of his cinematic misstep. Gamers in Japan and abroad recognized his vision and developers respected him. In this regard the Mistwalker investment was something of a coup for Xbox. In 1995 Sakaguchi put together what he termed a 'dream team' of Japan's five most prolific RPG developers to create the incredible *Chrono Trigger*.

In 2004 he reunited three members of that team—himself, musician Nobuo Uematsu, and artist Akira Toriyama—for Mistwalker's first project.

TURN THE AIR BLUE

Protagonist Shu is a likeable but standard-issue RPG hero – and sometimes has a bit of a potty mouth. Somebody think of the children!



ABOVE Combat is traditional turn-based stuff but has some decent depth.

→ While Mistwalker would oversee the project, heavy lifting on development was provided by a rare Japanese studio with Xbox history: Artoon, the creator of two games which featured maligned Xbox mascot, Blixn the cat. With music from legendary FF maestro Uematsu and art from Toriyama, who had previously worked on Dragon Ball and Dragon Quest, the game was already stacking up an impressive case for the Xbox 360 to carve out a stronger audience in Japan.

When it launched in the country in 2006, *Blue Dragon* did the seemingly impossible: it made Xbox 360 consoles sell. Pre-orders of an Xbox 360 Core and *Blue Dragon* bundle sold out and stores shifted 80,000 copies in the first week. In 2007 it went on to have modest success in the West as well, receiving fairly decent reviews. In this part of its mission, *Blue Dragon* was at least partially successful, and with good reason. It's a decent game.

Shadow boxing

At the core of *Blue Dragon* sits smartly designed gameplay built from the most enduring of traditional RPG tropes. *Blue Dragon's* lineage traces back more into Dragon Quest than Final Fantasy, and it's from that relation it gets its Toriyama art and its more traditionally skewed vision of turn-based combat. The result is more methodically paced battles. While many others pushed towards more cinematic fights, *Blue Dragon* features a simpler system that essentially offered a much prettier version of combat that had been perfected on 2D machines in the '90s.

Smart twists to the turn-based formula aim to make combat more interesting and strategic, and are



“You feel like a tactical mastermind as multiple groups of enemies kill each other and you mop up the scraps”

ABOVE The titular Blue Dragon is a powerful ally in battle and can crush enemies with ease.



largely successful. Characters can charge up their attacks and sacrifice placement in the turn order to power up their moves, while random encounters have been removed entirely with all enemies out in the field for you to see, manipulate, or avoid.

The most interesting of these options is manipulation thanks to the encounter circle, a ring that appears around the player that gathers the attention of multiple enemies. If you draw multiple foes into the encounter ring and trigger a battle, enemies will fight among themselves, essentially

turning what would be another fairly dry battle into something far more interesting. Dragging multiple groups of enemies into a battle is one of *Blue Dragon's* greatest delights; you feel like a tactical mastermind as enemies kill each other and you mop up the scraps, and engaging in multi-battles even hands over generous additional rewards and boosts.

The rest is the JRPG norm, with magic attacks and the titular Blue Dragon as one of several allied creatures that shadows each cast member and offers them their powers. It's all topped off with an equally traditional class mechanic that determines what skills each of your party members can use. There's a lot of choice to be had in terms of building a unique group of characters with an approach to combat that'll suit you.

It's all solid stuff, and though it does become a tad too easy, *Blue Dragon's* battle system is a real charmer. It's a relic of a bygone age, just a lot prettier and flashier—but that's no bad thing. I'd call it more respectfully reverent to past videogames than outright dated.

Sakaguchi's story treatment keeps things simple and stereotypical. You take on the role of Shu, an archetypal spiky-haired boy whose catchphrase is “I won't give up!”. Shu is joined by a cast of friends that each ticks a bunch of anime and JRPG checkboxes. As with the combat, *Blue Dragon's* story feels like a greatest hits package of the JRPG genre. It's not a sweeping drama but what you get instead is an adventurous romp that feels a little like you've stumbled into a Saturday-morning cartoon. It makes sense that *Blue Dragon* was adapted into two seasons of anime in Japan.

Combat is where *Blue Dragon's* heart lies, but players are also treated to an onslaught of gorgeous visuals and wonderful world design. This is where the game is at its absolute best: from landshark-plagued deserts to icy mountains and perilous dungeons, it's all a treat to look at.

Further reading



**MEMORY LANE
LOST ODYSSEY**
If *Blue Dragon* is Dragon Quest, *Lost Odyssey* is Final Fantasy. With adult themes and emotional stories, this is a classic.



**PICK UP THE PIECES
THE LAST REMNANT**
With an amazing combat system and solid world, this, while buggy, is one of Square Enix's most interesting 360 games.



**MUSICAL MALADY
ETERNAL SONATA**
A cutesy RPG with a dark twist: it's set inside the mind of composer Frédéric Chopin as he lies on his deathbed. No, really.

Blue Dragon wasn't the only attempt Microsoft made to capture the Japanese market with JRPG Xbox 360 exclusives. Here are our top three...



While now it's quite obviously a game from 2006, it still looks good thanks to crisp artwork and use of bright colors.

The visual splendor is underpinned by the wonderful musical score of Uematsu. The sweeping orchestral work offered here is up to his highly renowned standard and is the perfect complement for the visuals, at once moving and whimsical to match the game's melodramatic plotting and breezy sense of humor. There's also some fantastic and energetic synth-rock that matches the game's exaggerated vibrancy.

The highlight of the score is a perfect example of what happens when you pair Microsoft's first-party cash with the mad excesses of Japanese development. *Blue Dragon* features Ian Gillan of classic rock outfit Deep Purple, screeching out a series of nonsensical lyrics penned by Sakaguchi himself. The end result is one of the most gleefully mad, slightly bad, and completely memorable boss themes in the history of Xbox.

A second chance

Blue Dragon's legacy is strong. It provided a platform for Sakaguchi to helm another big-budget RPG after his disastrous attempt at filmmaking, and marked Microsoft's claim on the Japanese market. While the Xbox 360 ultimately didn't find success in Japan, this, alongside *Lost Odyssey* and other games, serves as proof that Microsoft gave it a damn good try. *Blue Dragon* was the first Xbox 360 JRP



TOP While they're a set of clichés, *Blue Dragon's* cast is still endearing.

ABOVE That big pink enemy on the right is a Giant Poo. No, really. There's an entire class of poo-based enemies.

to matter, laying the groundwork for several others like it and allowing the console to sell far more in Japan than anyone anticipated. In this regard this tale of stereotypically spunky heroes is a truly special title in Xbox history.

While by no means a perfect game, in general *Blue Dragon's* greatest flaw is one that proved difficult to look past on its initial release. The game is a slow mover by design but was made even more so by significant performance problems throughout. Slowdown in turn-based combat seems like a bit of a mad concept, but there it was: rearing its head frequently and seemingly at random.

It's here where Xbox 360 backwards compatibility for Xbox One is something of a marvel. The fact that games work is impressive enough, but *Blue Dragon* impresses further: it's vastly improved. It loads faster, and battles that would hitch and drop to 20 frames per second before now run at a near-solid 30.

In this, one of the game's greatest enemies has been slain. Here, on Xbox One, *Blue Dragon* has a much deserved second chance to charm a new audience without the chugging performance. It's a fascinating game; the most traditional of JRPGs to ever grace an Xbox platform. The game's second chance is well deserved. ■

WHY I LOVE... THE SUICIDE MISSION



The grand finale in **Mass Effect 2** toys with your emotions and makes death genuinely mean something **ANDY KELLY**

PUBLISHER EA / DEVELOPER BOWWARE / FORMAT XBOX 360 / RELEASE DATE JANUARY 2010



BACKWARDS
COMPATIBLE

PLAY IT NOW
ON XBOX ONE

RIGHT When they're gone, they're gone. Sorry, team, things aren't looking good for you right now.



Everything in BioWare's epic space opera leads to one thing: the suicide mission. After forming a crew of the galaxy's most

notorious mercenaries, criminals, and genetically engineered super-soldiers, Shepard has to fly his ship through the mysterious and feared Omega Relay.

In the Mass Effect universe, people use ancient devices called Mass Relays to travel between the stars. But anyone who travels through the Omega Relay, which glows a sinister red rather than the usual soft blue, never comes back. It's a cosmic Bermuda Triangle, and is said to lead to the home of the Collectors: a race of insect-like creatures that serve as the antagonists in *Mass Effect 2*.

The Collectors have been invading human colonies throughout the Milky Way and kidnapping the inhabitants. This inspires the powerful Illusive Man—the leader of a pro-human group called Cerberus—to hire war hero Shepard to investigate. But first Shepard has to build a crew for the Normandy SR2 that's tough enough to handle whatever lies on the other side of the Omega Relay—and brave (or foolish) enough to agree to even go through it in the first place. This search is the focus of most of the game.

Mass Effect 2 has one of the most diverse, fascinating casts I've ever encountered. Shepard is given a series of dossiers on each potential recruit, which paint the characters in one-dimensional terms. We have the master thief, the assassin, the warlord, and the professor. But when you meet these people, you realize that they're nuanced, flawed, and interesting, and getting to know them as you chase after the Collectors is a constant delight.

When I think about what I love about *Mass Effect 2*, it's not the missions or the combat or the endless scanning for minerals. It's the people. I always loved finishing a mission and returning to the Normandy to visit each crew member and talk to them. The way they slowly begin to trust you over time, revealing



“BioWare knows you’ve fallen in love with these characters but still puts their lives in jeopardy”

more about themselves and what they think about the suicide mission, makes you genuinely grow to love them. These relationships are the most intimate and meaningful I've ever formed with imaginary characters. Well, except Jacob, who has all the charisma of a supermassive black hole.

ABOVE Whether these people live or die is entirely up to you, so no pressure.

Dead ahead

The cruel genius is that BioWare knows full well that you've fallen in love with these characters, and then proceeds to shamelessly exploit your emotions. The suicide mission will, for most players, occur after around 30-40 hours of character development. You'll know the crew of the Normandy better than you know some of your actual friends. And then, suddenly, every single one of their lives is in jeopardy. And not the kind of jeopardy that means restarting from a checkpoint when one of them dies: the kind that means when they die, they're gone forever.

The first death can happen almost immediately. When the Normandy finally travels through the Omega Relay, you find yourself flying through an immense debris field of destroyed

starships, hunted by laser-firing Collector drones. If you didn't take the time to fully upgrade the ship, one of the lasers cuts through the hull and instantly kills a character. It's so brutally matter-of-fact that you can't quite believe it's happened. But it tells you, in the harshest manner possible, that BioWare really wasn't joking when it called this a *suicide* mission.

Shepard and crew arrive at the Collector base and you have to come up with a plan. A series of objectives are decided, and you must assign each one to a specific team member. And your choices here will determine whether someone lives or dies. I must have spent half an hour pondering these choices, carefully deciding who would be the best fit for each job. But that's not the only factor. If you didn't complete a character's loyalty mission, which gives them closure for something in their lives that was troubling them, their chances of dying actually increase. If you didn't, and you've already gone through the Omega Relay, you just have to live with your decision.

What follows is the most stressful hour I've ever endured in a videogame. You watch the suicide mission play out, and pray that you picked the correct person for each job. And if you didn't, you watch them die horribly. If a character, even one as prominent as Garrus or Tali, dies, they won't appear in *Mass Effect 3*. One of the bravest things BioWare did in the Mass Effect series is refuse to give key characters plot armor. No one is safe, and it makes death really mean something. More videogames should aim to raise the stakes so high. ■



PRESS PLAY

Mass Effect 2 now supports backwards compatibility on Xbox One. The perfect excuse to go through it all again—if you think your emotions can stand it.

→ WHAT GAMES DO YOU LOVE? SEND YOUR LUSTY THOUGHTS TO OXM@FUTURENET.COM



15

BEST PARTY GAMES ON XBOX



The cream of the multiplayer crop: ideal to play with friends and family without having to go online and get told that your mother looks like a potato **KATE GRAY**

15

RARE REPLAY

Perhaps not the most obvious choice, but *Rare Replay*, which comes with a selection of Rare's finest works, is full of nostalgic experiences that could turn your party into a big old reminisce-fest. These 30 games include wacky racer *R.C. Pro-Am II*, charming platformer *Banjo-Tooie*, stealth-shooter *Perfect Dark Zero*, and foul-mouthed squirrel game *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, which can be played by up to four players. There's also the possibility of taking turns on the devilishly hard challenges—like *Battletoads'* speeder bike level—until one of you wins, and is crowned Greatest At Old Videogames.



14

CHARIOT

Some party games are exercises in frustration and tests of friendship. *Chariot* is a two-player game that is exactly those things—you have to work as a team to get a coffin through increasingly difficult and treacherous platforming levels. It's deceptively pretty, but the main way you'll be lugging that coffin around is using ropes and physics, AKA the most ineffective way of doing anything. What makes it great for parties? It's quick to pick up and hilarious when you get it wrong, and you can swap in players when someone messes up so that everyone gets a turn.

13

OCTODAD: DADLIEST CATCH

Octodad can be played by up to four people at once—a usual gimmick for party games, except this time you're all controlling the same character, who just happens to be an octopus masquerading as a regular human dad. Two of you control his arms, and two his legs, and it's up to you as a team to help him do regular human dad tasks, like putting on a tie, picking up various dad-related objects, and going grocery shopping. It's a lot like a three-legged race, but with a lot more legs, and the outcome is usually more entertaining than a scraped knee and a crying child.



12

ROCK BAND 4

As an old staple of gaming parties, *Rock Band 4* is an obvious choice to put on when you have friends round. When you were younger, you always wanted to start a band with three of your best friends, right? Except none of you wanted to be on bass. Well, tough. One of you will have to be on bass. There are a number of ways you can do this—you can have fun just messing around, or you can go all-out by dressing up in your most punk-rock outfits, and thrashing around like you're on stage warming up the crowd before Metallica comes on. Wait, is listening to Metallica still cool?



11

LEGO MARVEL SUPERHEROES

"But Lego games are for children," you say. "And all you ever do in them is smash things up." Well, hush. *Lego Marvel Superheroes* is one of the best Lego games of all time. Actually, it's one of the best superhero games of all time. It's only for two players, but the levels are short, if you want to run through the story mode. What's even more fun, though, is flying around the city, finding secrets, seeing the sights, and just playing around with the game's physics. It's a more relaxed game, for a more chilled-out party, but if that's your vibe, it's excellent fun.

10

RAYMAN LEGENDS

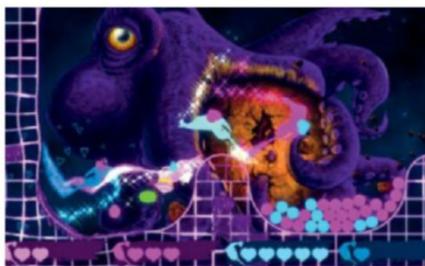
Up to four players can mess around on *Rayman Legends*, which is one of the most creative co-operative platforming games you'll ever play. Clever puzzles and level design will require top-notch teamwork, so maybe don't play this with people who don't take instructions well—look, you know your friends and family better than we do—or with people who don't work well in groups. In fact, maybe just ask everyone to submit a CV before you invite them to play this one. On top of the platforming, there's also the excellent mini-game, *Kung Foot*—it's basically soccer, but far more fun.



09

MOUNT YOUR FRIENDS

Yes, this game is as exactly as weird as it sounds. And we love it all the more for that. If you're not aware of it already, *Mount Your Friends* is a game in which men in speedos with full-on wang physics climb on top of a goat, and then each other, until one of them falls off. Sound like fun? It should. Even though the game is pretty simple, and weird to comprehend, there's still a certain charm to it. Whether that's because it's just difficult enough to encourage a sense of intense competition or because it'll make you yell things like, "PUT YOUR HAND ON HIS NIPPLE! HIS NIPPLE!" is up for debate. It's probably both.



08

STARWHAL

This game is all about narwhals in space, and has the aesthetic of an '80s-esque vapourwave music video. Also, the narwhals have hats! And you have to stab each other in the heart with your nose-horns! *Starwhal* is a little bit kitschy, but in a lovable way, and the almost impossible task of controlling a narwhal, which is about as difficult as trying to teach a slug to dance, means that no one's ever really good at this game. Everyone's just flailing about trying to not die, which means you all stand about as much chance of winning. Yay! Equality for you and all your friends!

07

STIKBOLD! A DODGEBALL ADVENTURE

How can you resist something that calls itself a Dodgeball Adventure? You don't, that's the easy answer. *Stikbold* is a '70s themed, arena-based dodgeball game, in which the aim is to take out your friends with your stunning dodgeball skills. Wait, dodgeball's easy-peasy though, right? WRONG. In *Stikbold*, it's not just about throwing a ball—it's about dodging, catching, aiming, and timing. If you get it just right, you can nail someone with a perfect, one-hit KO power ball, and that basically makes you king or queen of the party, even if you did forget to bring snacks.



06

MINECRAFT: XBOX ONE EDITION

A bizarre choice, perhaps—and it definitely depends on the kind of party and the right sort of crowd—but a bunch of people playing *Minecraft* together is just a lovely time. Maybe you collaboratively want to build a house, or perhaps you'd rather take on some enemies together, explore other people's servers, or even just see who builds the best thing in a limited amount of time. Okay, so there's always that one guy who wants to build a 10-foot-tall phallic statue, but that just means you know not to invite him to the next party.



05

PEGGLE 2

Fast-paced, uncontrollable, and infuriating: these are obviously all the things you want a party to be, right? GOOD. *Peggle 2* is all of those things, and more. You fire a ball into a bunch of pegs, and as it ricochets around the place, you gain points. There are points for hitting certain targets, hitting special pegs, or for getting your ball to go into the basket at the bottom. Did we mention it's uncontrollable? Because it is. Once you've fired, there's no going back. You have to watch as you and your friends gain points for basically no reason. It's maddening! Seeing all your points accumulate feels great, though.

04

LOVERS IN A DANGEROUS SPACETIME

What's that? Maybe you don't want to play something that makes you angry at all your friends. Ugh, fine. Try *Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime*—a sugar-sweet, neon-coloured co-op game in which the goal is to pilot a spaceship and rescue bunnies. Awww, sweet. Well, actually, it's pretty terrifying too, with waves of enemies, bad team decisions, and four people screaming at each other in a room. Shouting, "Man the cannons! Fire the laser! MOVE THE DAMN SHIELD!" can be pretty tense, even if it is super cute.



03

ROCKET LEAGUE

Soccer! But with cars! Okay, sure, it sounds like something an eight-year-old would write in their homework diary, alongside other drawings with captions like “what if dinosaurs had jetpacks” and “here is the English teacher on fire”, but *Rocket League* takes that concept and absolutely nails it. It’s so much fun. There’s nothing more satisfying than slamming in that goal, and then getting it played back in slow-mo as you make smug faces at all your friends. You might all start off being absolutely terrible at it—and that’s okay! Every soccer player/car/car soccer player had to start somewhere, and in no time you’ll have reached the, er, Soccer Champion Ball League? I’m not very good at soccer. Sorry. (I’m the boss at *Rocket League*, though.)



02

OVERCOOKED

Overcooked is a game that makes no sense, and it’s great. Up to four chefs in one kitchen—sure, that happens sometimes—having to make endless bowls of soup—yeah, okay, maybe it’s a soup-only restaurant—while the counters move, rats steal the food, things catch on fire, and sometimes you’re on a truck, or ice, or something equally ridiculous. Head-trip, much? It’s fast-paced and incredibly difficult to get right, but there comes a point where you and your team just click, and you’ll whizz through levels with the calmness and poise of whatever the opposite of Gordon Ramsay is. Soon you’ll have formed an unspoken, unbreakable bond between one another, to the point where actually cookery can no longer satisfy you.



01

JACKBOX PARTY PACK

If we’re allowed to include Rare Replay on this list, then we have to add Jackbox Party Pack to the mix. This includes trivia game *You Don’t Know Jack*, bluffing game *Fibbage*, fill-in-the-blank game *Word Spud*, fib-finder *Lie Spotter* and the all-time favorite, *Drawful*, which pits you against your friends in a hilariously difficult drawing competition. If you love this, there’s so much more to discover, as there’s also a Jackbox Party Pack 2 and 3. You can have a party almost every week and still have a new game to play with your friends! You’ll be the coolest person ever. (Or maybe the dweebiest, most manically obsessed one, I’m not sure.) Jackbox is everything you love about party games, but BETTER. Trust me on this one. Also, even though most of the games are for up to eight players, which seems like more than enough without swamping your living room with screaming, flailing friends, *Lie Swatter* can have up to 100 players! Who even has that many friends?!





Games, movies, and TV—everything you need for the ultimate Xbox One experience

THE TEN BEST XBOX ONE GAMES

games



01 THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO



Hearts Of Stone and *Blood And Wine* have made an already outstanding RPG unmissable. One of the most authentic, entertaining game worlds ever.
DEFINING MOMENT Geralt at a wedding; cue hilarity, menace, and light jiggling.

02 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES



Brutal and beautiful in equal measures, *GTA V* is so rich in size, scope, and spectacle it's hard to believe it was originally built for Xbox 360.
DEFINING MOMENT Warping into the skin of Trevor—only to find he's drunk-driving a helicopter.

03 DARK SOULS III

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO



Get over the initial difficulty hump and you're rewarded with a combat system that gives you unparalleled opportunities to express yourself.
DEFINING MOMENT Taking down a monstrosity the size of a state school using reflexes and ingenuity alone.

04 BATTLEFIELD 1

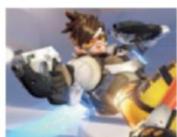
PUBLISHER EA



Alongside a surprisingly affecting single-player campaign comes one of the most robust and satisfying multiplayer offerings on Xbox One. Brave and unforgettable.
DEFINING MOMENT Your first, last-ditch bayonet-charge kill. Have it.

05 OVERWATCH

PUBLISHER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT



Blizzard decides to have a go at making a multiplayer shooter and somehow ends up creating one of the best since *Team Fortress 2*. Just beginner's luck? We doubt it.
DEFINING MOMENT Finally getting Play of the Game! Not that we ever have.

06 TITANFALL 2

PUBLISHER RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT



This sequel to the ace (but multiplayer-only) game compensates with arguably the best solo FPS campaign of the year. It's a wall-running, double-jumping, mech-punching delight.
DEFINING MOMENT Scoring a kill and \$5000 in Bounty Hunt multiplayer.

NEW ENTRY 07 DISHONORED 2

PUBLISHER ARKANE STUDIOS



This supernatural stealth-em-up is a superb action game and a landmark work of videogame worldbuilding wrapped up in a sumptuous art style.
DEFINING MOMENT Exploring Karnaca's shifting clockwork mansion and finding your way between the walls.

08 GEARS OF WAR 4

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS



A soft reboot that respects what made *Gears* great, then introduces new threats and surprises for the best game since *GOW 2*. An essential entry for Gear-heads and newcomers alike.
DEFINING MOMENT Fighting Swarm in the storm during the peaks of Act 4.

09 INSIDE

PUBLISHER PLAYDEAD



In this eerie, enigmatic side-scroller, a small boy must survive a strange world of robots, puppet-people, and worst of all: *adults*. Discover what happened to his world while trying to survive.
DEFINING MOMENT When our hero finds a head device that can control people.

NEW ENTRY 10 HITMAN

PUBLISHER IO INTERACTIVE



IO's flashy reboot adds mystery and menace to Hitman's bag of tricks. Each episode takes place in a different city, and each hit is more challenging. Easily the best Hitman game yet.
DEFINING MOMENT Breaking into a high-tech hospital in Hokkaido.

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films



THE HATEFUL EIGHT

FOR FANS OF Tarantino, neo-westerns.

Tarantino goes back in time again for this wacky western with frequent collaborator Samuel L Jackson. A lot of people moan about Tarantino's self-indulgent and talky approach to filmmaking, but fans will revel in his bizarre look at the Wild West.



INTO THE FOREST

FOR FANS OF Post-apocalyptic thrillers.

Patricia Rozema's new film gained rave reviews at the 2015 Toronto Film Festival but it didn't see a theatrical release. Simply presented yet brutally told, Ellen Page and Evan Rachel Wood play sisters trying to survive in the murky near future.



TALE OF TALES

FOR FANS OF Dark fantasy, practical effects.

The most striking film of the year arrives as a triptych of fairy tales set in a fantastical medieval kingdom. Salma Hayek plays a wicked queen, an orge falls in love with a princess, and a witch grants beauty. It's a perfect film for adults who love fairy tales.



GOODNIGHT MOMMY

FOR FANS OF *The Shining*, rural horror.

Forget devils and demons, gangs and ghouls, the scariest thing about horror films is usually the children. This atmospheric Austrian horror follows two twin boys (we're already shivering) who begin to suspect that their celebrity mother is an imposter.



ANOMALISA

FOR FANS OF Charlie Kaufman, animation.

After penning some of the strangest indie films of the '90s, the visionary Charlie Kaufman returns for his second directorial feature about lonely people meeting in a hotel. That doesn't sound strange at all. Wait: it's all acted out by puppets.



BONE TOMAHAWK

FOR FANS OF Anti-heroes, the Wild West.

The most eccentric entry in the spate of recent neo-westerns, *Bone Tomahawk* is a darkly humorous spin on classic western territory. Kurt Russell plays a sheriff who sets out with a ragtag group to rescue a girl from a land of savages and cannibals.



television



THE WALKING DEAD

FOR FANS OF All previous six seasons.

Even though we wish *The Walking Dead* would just end already, season seven bites back, with characters being offed and a savage villain in Jeffrey Dean Morgan. Twists abound, and we have no idea if our favorite characters will see the end of the season.



SUPERCIRL

FOR FANS OF DC comics, *Veronica Mars*.

It's a little twee compared to its edgier Marvel cousins like *Jessica Jones* and *Daredevil*, but *Supergirl* feels just like a comic book come to life. It's bright, it's brassy, and (sorry) super fun. Think *Veronica Mars* if she had superhuman powers.



RIPPER STREET

FOR FANS OF True crime, police procedurals.

Fact and fiction blur in this addictive crime drama set in 1880's Whitechapel. In the aftermath of the Jack the Ripper murders, two police detectives fall head first into London's warren of back alleys, brothels, and opium dens to find the murderer.



THE CROWN

FOR FANS OF BBC period dramas.

Following her impressive turn as the doomed Anne Boleyn in *Wolf Hall*, Claire Foy updates her queenly status as Elizabeth II in this stylish, sweeping drama. Anyone mourning the loss of *Downton Abbey* should binge-watch this over a lazy weekend.



HITRECORD ON TV

FOR FANS OF Joseph Gordon-Levitt.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt is known as the cute indie-boy-next-door, but you may not know about the collection of artists, writers, and musicians he's brought together under the banner of *HitRecord*. Now you can watch their cool creations come together.



THE FALL

FOR FANS OF Cat-and-mouse crime shows.

After three beautifully twisted seasons, this chilly crime drama comes to a close. It's dark and violent but fully immersive, juxtaposing two fascinating points of view: that of damaged serial killer Paul Spector and the frosty detective hunting him down.



OXM TEAM CHOICE

THE BEST GAMES WE'RE PLAYING AND WHY WE LOVE THEM



Matt's choice

GTA ONLINE
I picked this up again for the Import/Export update. It's all too

rich for my blood, though, so I ended up just running around being an asshole. No change, there then. Ahem.



Kimberley's choice

FINAL FANTASY XV

Did the ten-year wait produce the best Final Fantasy ever made? No, unfortunately, but it's still a fantastic achievement. Its vast scale, combat system, and friendships all make me melt.



James' choice

TITANFALL 2
Since finishing the single-player campaign, I've

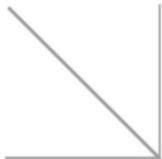
been looking for a robo-pal I could love as dearly as I loved the mech BT. So far, balancing a garbage can on a skateboard hasn't filled the hole in my heart.



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the disc slot

They make the games we love, but what do they play for fun? We ask developers to pick six from Xbox history. This month: **Dominic Butler**



Dominic Butler
Lead games designer
of *Ghost Recon
Wildlands*

The ghost with the most, Dominic spends his days toiling away on one of 2017's biggest multiplayer shooters. When he's not stealthing onto our back page, that is.

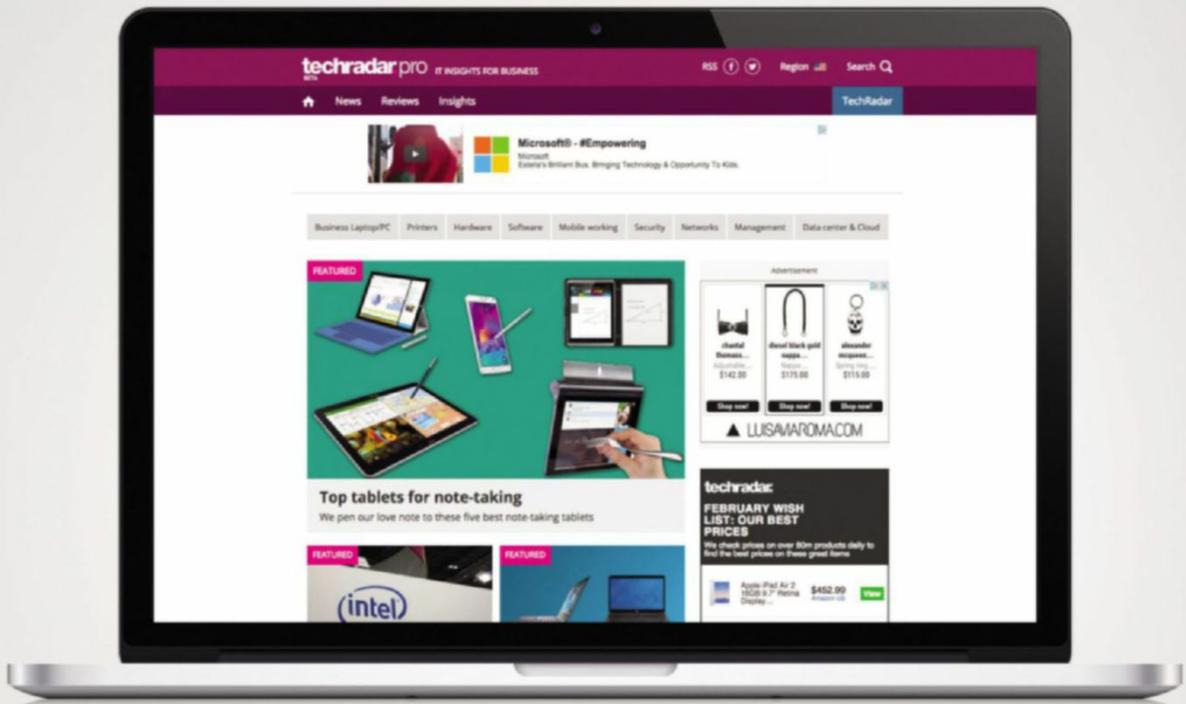
Red Dead Redemption [1] is an easy choice for my favorite game of the last generation. Seeing John Marsden's story through to its inevitable end was one of the most lasting experiences that I've had. Beautifully crafted moments, that felt as if they were just for me, will always stick in my memory. **Skyrim** [2] is a close second. Spending 100+ hours in a world, and still feeling like it had more stories to tell, was awe-inspiring. **Gears Of War** [3] was the game that came with my Xbox 360, but it wasn't until my best friend came over and we mainlined the co-op story, only to restart immediately after the credits finished, that I knew it was something special. **BioShock** [4] was a pioneer and the use of level design to tell stories. Even with the fantastical premise, it felt like a world that had been lived in, always adding to the feeling of lingering threat and claustrophobia that I felt throughout. I'm cheating a little here, but the amount of quality content we were given in the **Orange Box** [5] was unheard of – *Team Fortress*, *Half-Life 2*, *Half-Life Episodes One and Two*, and the incredible *Portal*. If I had to choose one title, it would be *Portal*. **Mark Of The Ninja** [6] is a small title that I spent countless hours with, a shining example of how simple parameter changes by the developer (through its enemies, its level design, or its level replay with game-modifying costumes) can drastically change the experience, challenge the player, and offer new ways to engage.



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