



ISSUE 199 APRIL 2017

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XBOX

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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WE RETURN TO
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INSIDER INTERVIEW!

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BRUTISH NEW INFO!

HALO WARS 2

XBOX ONE & WINDOWS 10 EXCLUSIVE

HALO WARFS 2



FEBRUARY 21

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A dramatic scene from Halo Infinite showing Spartan soldiers in combat against a massive, dark, and heavily damaged Covenant structure. A bright orange light emanates from a hole in the structure, and a small aircraft is visible in the background. The scene is filled with smoke and debris, creating a sense of intense battle.

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

343
INDUSTRIES



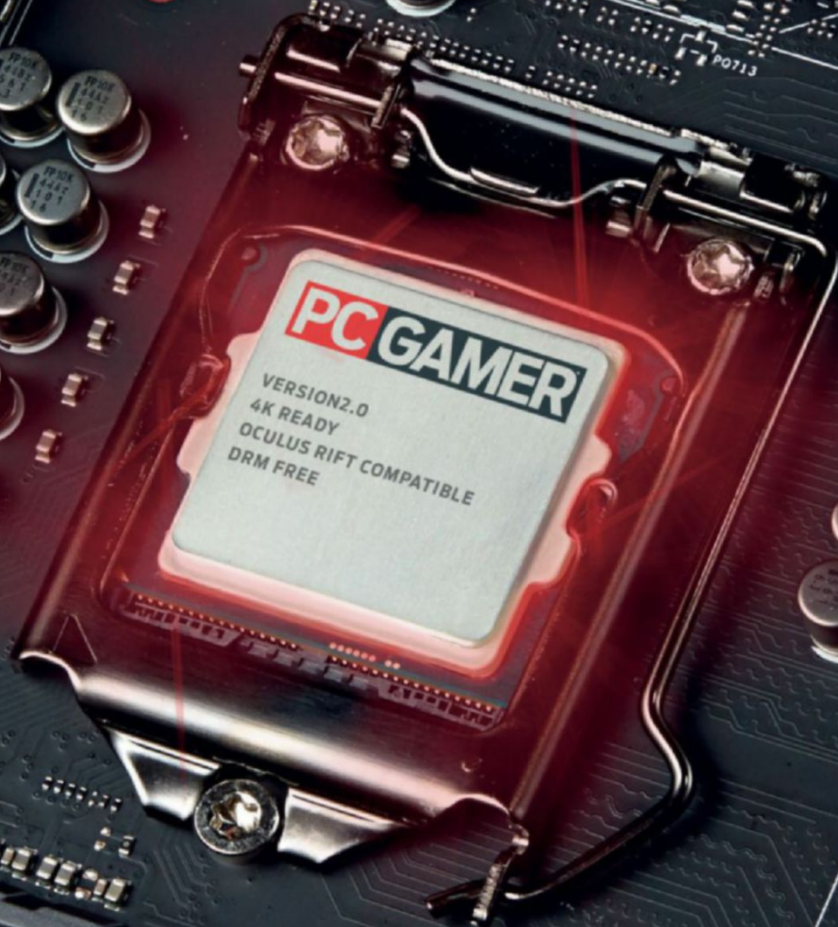
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Massive attack



■ Matt Gilman
Editor

Meet the Commander of the good ship OXM, although his job involves 100 per cent fewer sexy aliens and 25 per cent more scanning for minerals.

It might have felt slower than an Elcor doing his tax returns, but *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is finally at our metaphorical doorstep, and you are in absolutely the right place to get at every last bit of essential info before it touches down planetside. Not only have we gathered all the facts into one gigantic feature, but we've also got exclusive behind-the-scenes access to the dev team over at BioWare, with loads more to drink up like a fine Serrice Ice Brandy. The good times keep on coming, too, with another huge feature detailing our long-awaited return to Morrowind. If you know your Xbox history, you know that this is one of the most formative role-playing landscapes in modern gaming, so get on over to our *The Elder Scrolls Online* feature and get it in your face. Enjoy your OXM!

THE OXM TEAM



■ James 'J-pop' Nouch
Staff writer
It turns out collating a galaxy of Mass Effect information takes ages. James has a full beard now. Are you happy, readers?!



■ Kimberley Ballard
Production editor
Kimberley is in charge of the office plant, which we all forget to water when she takes time off. We only really have it to guilt her into not going on vacation.



■ Dave Meikleham
Contributor
Dave stepped in this month to fill a void in our mag and our hearts. Don't buy his "I'm not scared of Resi" line, though. We heard the weeping.



■ Samuel Roberts
Contributor
We learned more than we needed to about Samuel's high school days this ish. Don't worry, we edited out the most florid wedge descriptions.



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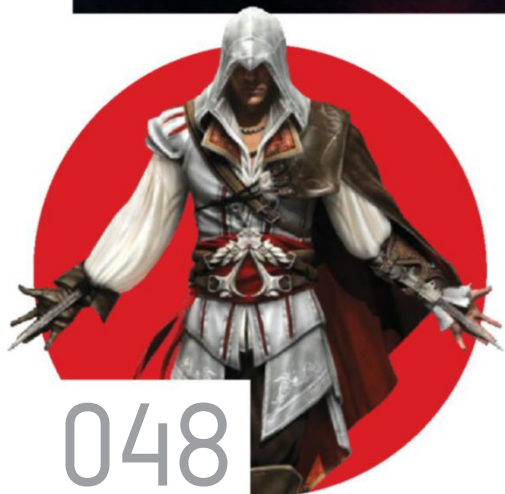
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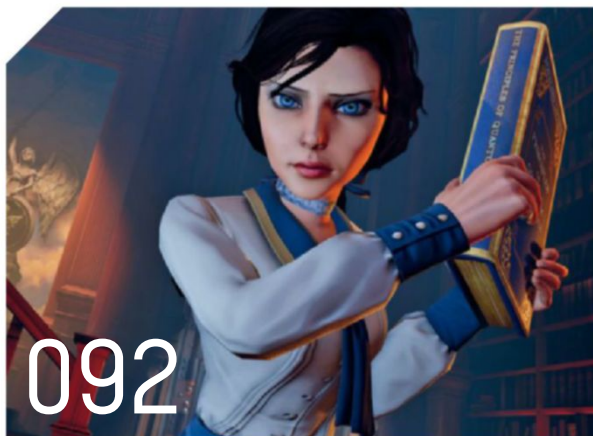
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insider



War is, as they say, “heck”. Actually, when it’s digitized warfare involving Spartans and whatnot, it’s not always so bad, especially if you’re talking specifically about **Halo Wars 2** (p10). With the latest Elite-bashing RTS out in stores this month, we visit 343 Industries for an in-depth chat about all aspects of the ambitious sequel, including the Blitz card system and the creation of new villain Atriox, the Brute with a taste for suffering. On to matters more prehistoric, and we meet with Studio Wildcard about its latest **Ark: Survival Evolved** update (p14). Ever had a hankering to stick a plasma cannon on a T-rex’s cranium? *Ark*’s new Tek Tier DLC has you covered. If you’re still feeling pumped, turn to our spread on the monster-bashing, side-scrolling game **Indivisible** (p16) from the creators of *Skullgirls*. Prepare for lots of pretty colors, strange beasts, and sword swipes. Even our columnists are feeling pumped this month, as Steve dissects the morality system in *Mass Effect* and *Deus Ex* (p18) while regaling us with ancient tales of turtles and scorpions.



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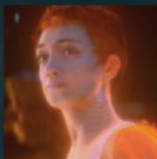


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TIPPING
THE HALO

Strat report

Halo Wars 2 is here to revive the console RTS, while plotting a new narrative direction for the main series



Strategy games have always been a bit of a boondoggle on consoles. Yes, there was a time in those intrepid days of the fifth generation when consoles were inundated with ports of RTS classics like *Command & Conquer*, *Dune 2000*, *WarCraft II*, and the wonderfully grungy *Krush, Kill 'n' Destroy*; there was even an N64 version of *StarCraft* and an official mouse for PS1 real-time strategists. Looking back, all these efforts look like a strange footnote in the history of gaming—arising at a time before it became common knowledge that RTS games on consoles just don't work.

Halo Wars 2 shares much of its DNA with those swarming, speedy titles of yore. However, speaking with 343 Industries' studio head Dan Ayoub, it's clear that while the game owes much to the RTS giants that kickstarted the genre, it's very much designed for the modern gamer. According to Ayoub, it has long-term ambitions to usher in a new era of console RTSs, while shaping the future of the Halo series.

Chaos theory

One of Ayoub's favorite '90s strategy games is *Total Annihilation*—an explosive, chaotic RTS that also contained innovations such as buildings that removed the need for resource-collecting, and 'true' lines of sight that meant you couldn't see through walls. He wants *Halo Wars 2* to capture some of that freewheeling, pioneering spirit. "My memories of playing *Total Annihilation* were a sense of total chaos—destruction, explosions, and huge collisions. Beneath it all, there's a lot of tactical

organization, but what you see is an explosive, chaotic free-for-all."

All of this makes Creative Assembly, developer of the methodical, macro-scale *Total War* series on PC, seem a curious choice to co-create *Halo Wars 2* with 343. Creative Assembly has dominated the PC strategy scene for years, but with a type of game that arguably sidelined the more traditional RTS model that Halo Wars harnesses. Ayoub acknowledges the irony: "Their games are a lot more

"How do we take RTS and make it more accessible, a little faster, and a little different?"

hardcore than *Halo Wars* was. But that's why I thought it'd be a perfect marriage—they're masters of that craft, whereas at 343 we'd focus on action, storytelling, things like that."

This unlikely couple has worked brilliantly so far. "There was instant chemistry between the teams, which was fantastic, because I wanted us to feel like one team on two sides of the ocean," says Ayoub. "It was two ways of thinking coming together for a common goal: 'How do we take RTS and make it a little more accessible, a little faster, a little different?'"

With *Halo Wars 2*'s beta done and dusted, and launch mere days away,



ABOVE 343 Industries' studio head, Dan Ayoub.







ABOVE Atriox is such a central figure he's featured in most pre-release artwork, more so than the game's heroes.

RIGHT It sounds like much of what's received well in *Halo Wars 2* could feature in future mainline series entries.

→ we now know the answer to that is Blitz—a new online mode where players build decks of cards instead of bases, spawning units as and when they are needed in a bid to control three capture points on the map. It's an experiment that takes cues from the *Rocket League* or even *Overwatch* school of thought—a sporty, accessible mode with a high skill ceiling that condenses a rollercoaster of emotions, reversals, and flashes of improvisational player ingenuity into five- to seven-minute matches.

Blitz it

Despite its forward-thinking and decidedly new-school feel, Blitz too is rooted in tradition. Collectable card game Magic: The Gathering is a long-standing pastime at the 343 studio, and the developers took inspiration from it. Ayoub says there's something special about not only the varied, adaptive strategizing that a game like Magic requires, but also in the artwork: "We have a lot of cool art in the game



and the Halo universe that would never have made it in otherwise," he says. In that sense, Blitz offers a charming bit of fan service, as well as an audacious mechanical variant on the real-time strategy formula.

Being a spin-off, *Halo Wars 2* could easily have existed in some nether region of the Halo universe that doesn't intersect much with the main series. But 343 saw an opportunity to

do something a little more interesting, focusing instead on making this an entry point into a canon that Ayoub admits can be "intimidating" for new players, on account of how established and cultish it is. He draws a parallel between the game's plot and reality: "Captain Cutter and the crew on the *Spirit of Fire* have been in cryosleep for 25 years and wake in the modern Halo universe, completely

OXM SAYS



Matt Gilman

"This is exactly what I want for the future of Halo: brave new ideas and a broader exploration of the universe through fresh genres. Give me a Halo RPG, a Halo stealth sandbox, or a Halo survival horror! Any and all new ideas get me pumped."



James Nouch

"2001's seminal *Halo: Combat Evolved*, stands as perhaps my favorite game of all time, so my vision for the future of the series is more of the past. Ditch the Prometheans, bring back the CE pistol, and I'll be overjoyed."



Kimberley Ballard

"One of my favorite things in videogames is seeing the genesis of a great villain and I think we could have that in Atriox. He isn't a crazed megalomaniac trying to take over the universe—he just wants justice for his people. Go, Atriox! [Sorry.]"



unaware of what's been going on—they're sort of looking at it through the eyes of the new consumer."

Committed to a fresh start, *Halo Wars 2* does away with long-standing antagonists—The Covenant and The Flood—and elevates the previously disposable Brutes to a self-emancipated, self-motivated species. There's something instantly likeable about the Brute-based Banished faction. When their leader Atriox rises up against his Covenant overlords, you feel a pang of (misdirected) happiness for him despite his destructive intentions. For all his savagery, Atriox is strangely wholesome; he's a wronged, indignant being, aware of The Covenant's autocratic evils and determined to carve out a piece of space for his species (which, unfortunately, happens to be populated by humans).

Brute force

"We knew from a story standpoint that we wanted Brutes, but a different take on them to give them some depth," says Ayoub. "This is actually the first time in a Halo game that we started building the story around the villain. Before we knew what we'd do

ABOVE Zoom out and you'll get a great tactical overview, but zoom in and you can see little design details on each unit.

BELOW Atriox looks scary but we bet he's a big softie, really. (Please don't kill us, Mr. Atriox, sir.)



"This is the first time in the Halo series that we built the story around a villain"

with the AI, the Spirit of Fire and the rest of it, we spent most of our time figuring Atriox out".

With so much of the narrative revolving around this compelling new antagonist, Ayoub doesn't hide his desire to see Atriox make a return in future Halo entries: "We created these new characters with the hope that fans would love them, and I'd love to see Atriox in one of the main games." Based on early feedback from players, he's optimistic about this possibility.

Free from the often overbearing weight of expectation attached to the main series, *Halo Wars 2* has been treated as a mood board for new narrative ideas by the 343 team. Ayoub admits that "you have less narrative flexibility on that main line, because people want Master Chief,

they want Cortana, they want that familiarity". What fans' responses to the game prove, however, is that they also "want more stories, and more characters in this huge universe".

On PC, the old-school RTS of resource harvesting, regimented base building, and chaotic battles is enjoying a bit of a renaissance (that *Halo Wars 2* is a part of), but on console it still feels like a genre clanging around in the Dark Ages. *Halo Wars 2* enters the Xbox One fray virtually uncontested, but Ayoub doesn't want the game to be king in a wasteland. "We have long-term plans for the franchise, and depending on how well the game is received, we'd love to continue doing that, and continue evolving RTS on consoles".

Could *Halo Wars 2* do for the console RTS what the games *Total Annihilation* and *Red Alert* did for the genre on PC? "I'd love to see it inspire more players and developers to come back and try out real-time strategy on consoles", replies Ayoub. "I think it's a magical genre on any platform and it deserves more attention". ■

Halo Wars 2 is out now and we'll have a full review in our next issue

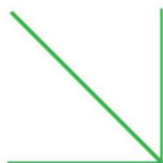
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→ TELL US WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE IN HALO WARS 2 AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK

GEARED
FOR WAR

Tek it back to basics

Ark: Survival Evolved's latest DLC adds new gear, underwater bases, and T-rex lasers



Jet Packs. Boots that make you sprint faster than a Velociraptor in heat. Oh yeah, and a friggin' helmet for your

T-rex that lets the Tyrant Lizard King fire plasma beams. It's fair to say, *Ark: Survival Evolved's* bumper new Tek Tier update is pretty darn exciting.

Studio Wildcard's prehistoric/sci-fi survival sim first launched on Xbox One's Game Preview program back in December 2015, and since then all you dino lovers have been treated to several tantalizing expansions. Now Tek Tier is shaking up the game's tectonic plates once again, with stupidly cool gear aimed at high-end players. "In this first phase one update, there's the full set of Tek armour, which is comprised of five individual pieces, and each piece does a unique thing," Jeremy Stieglitz, co-creative director and lead designer, tells us.

Killer clothes

He guides us through these new gizmos, each aimed at breathing new life into *Ark's* end-game for its most elite players. He's jazzed up about them all and it's easy to see why. "The Tek Gloves let you do a form of super punch's a dash combined with a punch that functions a bit like the energy sword/dash combo in *Halo 2*."

As for the rest of the gear, we can't recall the last time we were so excited about wearing a pair of pants or a chest piece. "The chest armor is a fully fledged jet pack," Stieglitz beams. "You can use the momentum to boost yourself quickly over the landscape... it also has a really powerful lift-off boost, which shoots you up into the sky like the Rocketeer." We bet your Guardian's fancypants chest plate can't do that in *Destiny*.

Those aforementioned Tek Pants are exciting, too... mainly because they "let you charge through

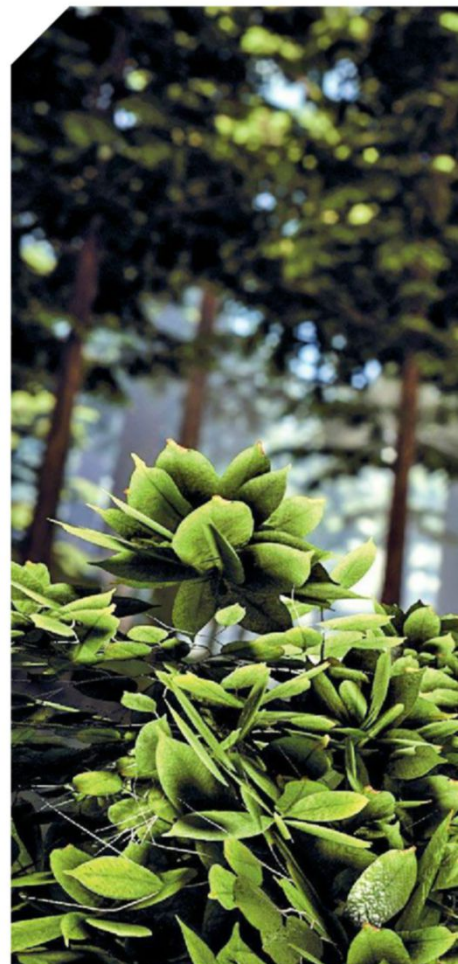
"We can't recall the last time we were so excited about wearing a pair of pants"

structures, houses, and creatures". Don't forget the Tek Boots, either. They allow you to absorb shocks from falls, while the Tek Visor outlines creatures based on their threat level. Neat, huh? Of course, none of this cool clobber can compete with the Tek Saddle: a killer piece of kit that "puts a dual plasma rifle/helmet on the

RIGHT To unlock all this new gear, you need Tek Engrams, which can only be obtained by beating bosses.

Water way to go

Phase two of Tek Tier launches at the end of February, and finally introduces underwater bases. "People can create persistent bases where they never necessarily have to visit shore," says Stieglitz. "We think there'll be strategic advantages to living that way, because you are more protected from natural predators." Clearly Jeremy and co have never seen *Jurassic World's* shark-munching Mosasaur.



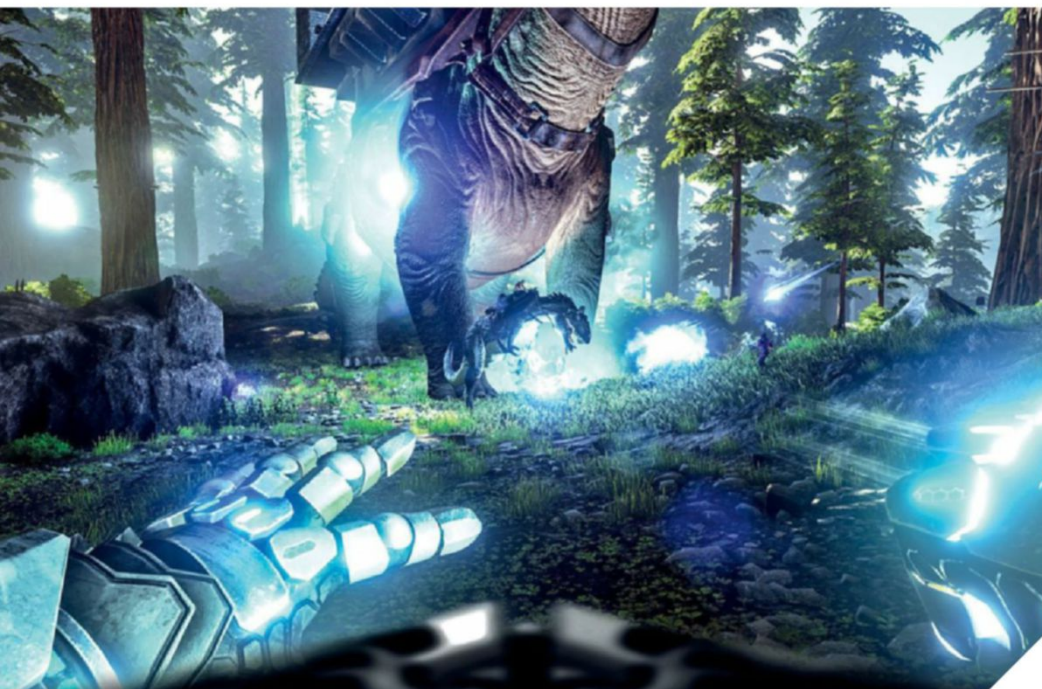
T-rex", which you can fire when you're riding Mr Teeny Chicken Arms.

Rather than merely providing dino power-ups, Stieglitz is focused on giving *Ark's* most dedicated players continued reasons to venture back into this prehistoric world. "Tek Tier is definitely going to provide long-term goals for advanced players to strive for, and ultimately we think it will take a very long time for players to earn all the Tek Engrams."

Ark's first Tek Tier update goes live any day now, and with the addition of water bases coming in a future update, Studio Wildcard is certainly keeping the content flowing. In the meantime, we're off to blast some fools with our tooled-up T-rex. ■

Tek Tier was released in mid-Feb and further updates are planned

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PLAY/EJECT

THE THINGS PUSHING OUR BUTTON (OR NOT)



New Xbox pads

Microsoft has launched two new Xbox One controllers: a green/yellow pad with a Halo vibe, and a red 'un perfect for *Resi VII*.



Mass Effect ditches season pass

BioWare general manager Aaryn Flynn confirmed *Andromeda* won't have a season pass. Hooray for saving pennies!



Pets in Ark: Survival Evolved

During our chat, Ark's Jeremy Stieglitz said "we don't have creatures you'd want to pet," then hinted at future DLC domestic cats. Yay!



Scalebound gets canned

After a long, troubled development, Microsoft cancelled Platinum Games' bromantic dragon tale in early January.



Resi's awful digit

When our review copy of *Resi VII* arrived, it came with a USB stick... shaped like a finger. Ugh.



NFL star sues over Gears Of War

Former NFL player Lenwood Hamilton claims the dev stole his likeness when designing Cole Train.

TEAM
SUPREME

Forever fiends

Indivisible transforms Skullgirls' slick scrapping into a team-focused RPG

If you're of a certain (rapidly aging) vintage, you probably spent an obscene amount of Saturday mornings in front of the TV watching *Power Rangers*. Weirdly, Lab Zero's 2D action RPG is a little like those early '90s, ever-so-shonky robo-dinosaur adventures. Well, kind of...

Indivisible may not boast metallic mastodons, but it is blessed with a combat system where your party heroes unite as one to ass-kicking effect. By tactically timing presses of your pad's face buttons, you can unleash Ajna and pals' magical

attacks in a flurry of coordinated carnage. "Our combat system is combo-driven," says Lab Zero CEO, Peter Bartholow. "Your party is essentially a single customizable fighting game character, and the depth comes from how you configure and utilize your party." Aside from tag-teaming powers for Megazord-aping monster murder, *Indivisible* also benefits from using the *Skullgirls* engine, which lends the RPG a super-vibrant anime art style.

Despite having a rocky start to the Indiegogo crowdfunding (the company

needed to raise an absolutely huge 1.5 million dollars), *Indivisible* looks to be in rude health. While Xbox One missed out on the demo that hit Steam last year, Bartholow is hopeful a beta will pop up on Microsoft's console later in 2017.

With celebrated animation studios Titmouse and Trigger working on the game's intro, plus those cracking combos, our inner Zordon can't wait to dive into *Indivisible*. ■

Indivisible is scheduled to slice up a storm on Xbox One in 2018



BELOW Renowned composer Hiroki Kikuta - of *Secret Of Mana* fame - is writing the score.



Steve Hogarty is... The Fixer

This month, Steve tackles the concept of **good and evil**

Hey, I've got a story for you. A story about morals. And it goes like this: A scorpion and a turtle stand at the bank of a mighty river, considering how they might cross it. "I shall swim across yonder river using yonder turtle tail as a cute little rudder," said the turtle, "as it is in my nature to be able to indulge such fanciful aquatic notions, yonder."

"Would you mind," interjected the scorpion, "if I rode across the river on your back? Because I'm a scorpion, and I think scorpions melt if they touch water." "Hmm," the turtle hesitated. "I read a book called *Scorpions Are Actually Absolute Bastards*, where a scorpion stung an airline pilot with his tail and the plane crashed into a nunnery. Aren't you fundamentally hardwired to be violent?" "Nah, dude," replied the scorpion, "you're getting me confused with bees. Let's go!"

Long story short, the scorpion ruins everything by stabbing the turtle with his tail halfway across the river and drowning them both. He had accrued far too many evil points on his way to the river that day by choosing mean dialog options and so every choice besides 'laugh and sting the turtle to death' was greyed out.

This fable is as important today as it was in 600 BC. It suggests that morality exists on a simple sliding scale, with scorpions at one end and turtles at the other, and that we can slide up and down this scale based on our most recent actions. This fable laid the groundwork for every morality system in almost every videogame (including *Fable*, actually).

The problem

Morality in games has been drastically oversimplified. In *Mass Effect* – a series about sexing aliens that features a side-quest about saving the galaxy – you can swing the moral-o-meter backwards and forwards by either punching or kissing the people you meet. Be consistently malevolent and you even unlock the



"Morality in games shouldn't be about being a good turtle or evil scorpion"

ability to push them out of windows mid-sentence. (The idea that bad guys have special powers has its roots in *Star Wars*, an old film in which the most evil person gets to shoot lightning from his fingers, but is cursed to look like a scrotum.)

Things get more confusing when you consider stealth series like *Dishonored* and *Deus Ex*, in which you're handed a bag full of grenades and warned not to kill



anyone if you want to see the ending that has confetti falling down the screen.

Games like this promote the dangerous idea that there are no real consequences to behaving like the rudest of boobs. If you're a jerk-hole in *Red Dead Redemption* you get chased around by a posse every now and then, while if you act the goose in *Skyrim* you get invited to live in a wet cave with some grumpy guys. We're left with less of a moral compass and more of a moral wet-finger-in-the-air. So we see men and women desperately trying to min/max their way through life—people like Donald Trump and the Pope—in an attempt to unlock all the best weapons.

The solution

Instead, games should better reflect the mind-boggling complexities of ethics and morality—subjects so difficult to grasp that even Socrates, an intensely clever Greek man famous for his marble head and shoulders, never figured out the answer. What we do know is that we are not evil scorpions or good turtles, but something in between (an ambiguous platypus perhaps or disinterested worm).

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series presents the player with genuinely complex situations about zombies, and asks tough questions about whether it's okay to cave somebody's head in if they're being a bit of a nuisance. By working with actions and consequences, rather than just totting up good points and evil points as it goes along, the series becomes a more cerebral and nuanced dissection of the human condition (with zombies).

Ditch the sliding scale, as Telltale and others have done, and you open games up to a far more interesting exploration of what is nice and what isn't. You can experience good people doing bad things, bad people doing good things, and other people standing on the riverbank, refusing to get in scorpion-infested water. ■

This column is brought to you by Steve's aversion to scorpions and water

Jordan Erica Webber is The Praiser

This month, Jordan explores the **underwater paradise** of *Abzû*

Recently I asked a friend, “So what’s the best thing about *Abzû*?” after he’d just finished the game. “There are loads of fish,” he replied. In other videogames, the ocean is more of an idea than an environment, a backdrop that often works like a physical barrier to keep you in the play space. But *Abzû* is the opposite, a game that barely bothers with solid ground and focuses on close-up exploration beneath the waves. While in another game the fauna would be a footnote, in *Abzû* it’s the main event.

This is a game about a kingdom of fish from an art director who clearly wanted to do something different from his previous work on the relatively empty deserts of *Journey*. One of these fish, the great white shark, is part of the narrative, but it’s the other creatures that make the game. And there are loads of them.

Remember the first time you saw the crowded coral reef in *Finding Nemo*, before you’d watched so many Pixar films you forgot how impressive they are? *Abzû* brings me back to that, except these creatures don’t stop existing when they hit the other side of the screen. Here I can follow the fish, or swivel the camera to try to take them all in: hundreds of creatures, from dozens of species.

They fill these underwater areas both horizontally and vertically, leaping from the surface above and swimming through rock tunnels below, highlighting the shape of the space. In areas that are often predominantly one colour—blue or green or orange—their different shapes and shades are always a visual delight.

Blue crush

Abzû’s creatures vary in behaviour too. This is no sealife simulation, but schools of fish turn together, predators chomp down prey, and dolphins jump and dive. The animation is apparently procedural (which explains how the world could be populated so fully with only an occasional



“The prehistoric zone has fish like the helicoprion and dolichorhynchops”

slowdown in performance), but it’s complex enough to look believable.

These creatures and your diver react to each other, too. Swimming in *Abzû* is already vastly better than in the dreaded water levels of old platformers, but it’s even more fun when you guide your diver through the middle of a school and it breaks apart only to close in again; you even get an achievement for doing that in



the jet stream. Sometimes fish will follow you, mirroring your movements like the light streaks that trail from your limbs.

The presence—or absence—of these creatures sets the mood, like when you follow a group of orcas through a turbulent jet stream and then up into the air only to fall back into suddenly still, dark, lonely water. And they show you where you can go and what you can do. This moment with the orcas teaches you how to leap from the water, perhaps the most satisfying action in the entire game.

A runner-up, of course, is that you can grab onto many of the larger creatures and take them for a ride, either letting them take you where they want to go or guiding their movement yourself. Choose the latter and it’s like you’re temporarily playing the game as a sea turtle or manta ray or great white shark. Ride a dolphin and a whole pod might follow you. You can even ride a giant squid, which is apt considering the developer’s name.

And even if you don’t feel like doing any of that, you can just sit and watch all of these different creatures moving through their environments in their different ways. Enter meditation mode and your diver will perch on a shark-shaped statue while the camera follows one creature after another instead. Choose whatever ecosystem suits your mood: load up the coral reef to watch blue surgeonfish or swim to the prehistoric zone and spot creatures with names like helicoprion and tiktaalik and dolichorhynchops.

Now that I’ve finished *Abzû*, it’s gone from game to incredible interactive screensaver, occasionally left running on my Xbox One while I go about my day. Thanks to all those fish and the talents of composer Austin Wintory it brightens up the room both visually and aurally, whether I’m reading a book or entertaining friends, or even writing my monthly column for OXM. ■

When Jordan emerges from beneath the waves, she writes for *The Guardian*

XBOX ONE & WINDOWS 10 PC EXCLUSIVE

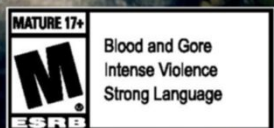


 XBOX ONE

Microsoft



Microsoft Studios



Windows 10



preview

022



The games we want the most

James got to play *Tokyo 42* in the dev's house while eating cream cakes and sipping chai—we hate him



OXM'S MOST WANTED

Matt's pick

Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite

I've got an eye on this fighter, not least because it feels like a lot is at stake for Capcom if it doesn't get it right.

Dave's pick

Prey For The Gods

Stabbing sad-eyed leviathans while exploring a lonely, desolate land? This little indie is insanely ambitious, and I want it right now.

Kimberley's pick

Vampyr

The combination of Gothic London, vampiric liaisons, and Dontnod has me frothing at the mouth like the blood-hungry hero.

James' Pick

Tokyo 42

This isometric indie combines striking visual design with streamlined stealth and bullet-hell gunplay in a crazy little open-world.

If you feel like going away somewhere nice this spring, Smac Games' **Tokyo 42** (p28) could be what you need. Sure it's set in a dystopian vision of Tokyo where rude dudes shoot at you across rooftops and corporations are up to some shady business, but just think of all the kooky, cute places you can visit, and all the cyberpunk mischief you can get up to. We'll teleport across the city and meet you anywhere you like. Elsewhere, we take our first look at the incredibly ambitious **Prey For The Gods** (p30), a giant-slaying indie that you need on your radar. Made by a ludicrously small team, this boss battle-centric affair pays homage to classics of the past with a contemporary survival-flavored angle. In a word: want. We also get a chance to sink our teeth into **Vampyr** (p32), the latest offering from *Life Is Strange* studio Dontnod. Its beloved episodic hit was all teen angst time travel, so an action RPG focused on a bloodsucker (who's also a doctor) in 1918 London is quite the departure. Any excuse to don a top hat, and impale people we don't like on spiky shadows. If only OXM could do that in real life. Plus, we revisit the cast of **Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite** (p24), which promises to be the best entry in the series. You can now equip each of your team members with an Infinity Stone (we just hope there's one that makes Iron Man shut up).



024



028



030



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023

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Of the six Infinity Stones, only the Soul Stone is still yet to appear in the Marvel Cinematic Universe



Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite

The fighting-game crossover returns for Capcom's riskiest game in years **Nathan Brown**

PUBLISHER CAPCOM DEVELOPER CAPCOM
FORMAT XBOX ONE ETA WINTER 2017

Capcom's fighting games have a history of not quite getting it right the first time round. The *Street Fighter III* series only took hold the third time, with the aptly titled *Third Strike*, and *Street Fighter X Tekken* only came into its own after a hefty balancing update.

Marvel Vs Capcom 3 was as good as broken right out of the gate, and it took the *Ultimate* revision—a full retail release just nine months after the base game launched—for it to survive.

It's no longer a luxury Capcom can count on. *Street Fighter V* hasn't had the best time of it on PlayStation 4 (*snigger*), but since Capcom has embraced the changing world of the game as a service—where titles are updated over time for free, rather than parcelled up into a series of full-price revisions—it has learned that, if you mess up at the first time of asking, you might not get a second chance.

As such it's vital that the company gets *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite* right first time. And happily for Xbox owners, it seems that Capcom is using the latest installment of its crossover fighting-game series to put into practice the harsh lessons it has learned since launching *SFV*.

That, at least, is our reading of the announcement press release, which

“Infinity Stones grant the wielder a new ability and the team a super move”

LEFT MVCI looks to be the most epic instalment in the series.

025





ABOVE Iron Man's been nothing special in past Marvel games. That may change now he's got a movie franchise.

LEFT Your glowy eyes aren't scary at all...



New single-player modes include Training, Mission, and Arcade Mode

“A team member struggling against missiles could gain the ability to throw them”

X-FACTOR

There's a big question mark over the fate of the X-Men in *Infinite*. They're part of the MVC furniture but are as yet unconfirmed, and the rumor mill is swirling with talk that they won't appear. Disney, apparently, cares little for Marvel characters it doesn't own the movie rights to, and Fox has the licence. Fair enough, if you ask us: Wolverine was really annoying in *MVC3*.

→ goes to great pains to stress that *Infinite* will feature a lengthy and cinematic story mode at launch—*Street Fighter V*'s was months late—in addition to a “a variety of exciting and accessible single-player modes”. Okay, okay, we get it.

Still, while the Marvel games have always been exciting, the promise of accessibility seems, at first, rather fanciful. *Ultimate MVC3* asked you to pick a team of three from a roster of 48 characters; each could also choose from three ‘assist’ moves, which could be performed by a team member offscreen. The possibilities for team-building were dizzying, and meant that while the game was simpler to play than *Street Fighter* and its ilk, it was just too much for the novice to get their head around.

Kicks and stones

Capcom's solution is to pare back team size—you now only take two warriors into battle—and do away with assists entirely. Partners can be tagged in or out at any time, even mid-combo; in previous games you've only been able to switch characters at specific moments. To offset any perceived loss of depth (and awkward comparisons with *Street Fighter X Tekken*), Capcom has added a new mechanic. After



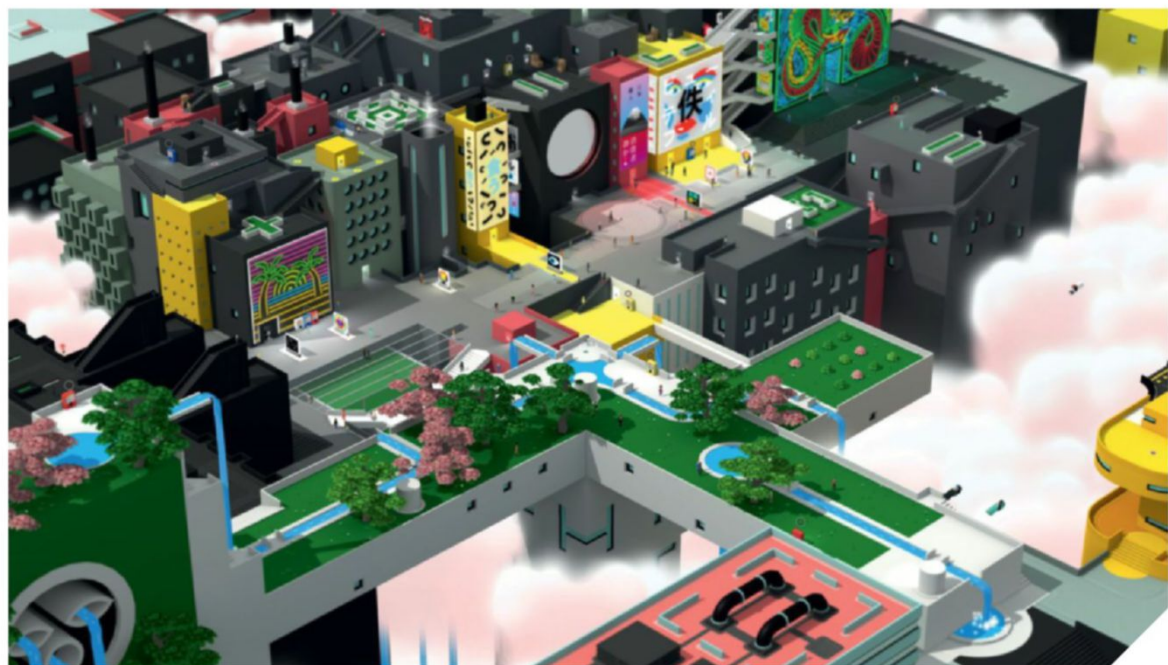
you've picked your team, you'll choose one of six Infinity Stones, lore-born artefacts which grant the wielder a new ability, and the team a damaging, cinematic super move. So a slow, heavy character might suddenly gain a zippy dash; someone who struggles against projectiles might acquire the means to pass through them, or even to throw out one of their own. It's smart stuff, ensuring there's enough scope for creative team-building, without taking things to extremes.

Still, will it work? Capcom's recent form may suggest not, but it's hard to see Marvel letting it fail. The Disney-owned outfit is a completely different company to the one Capcom worked with on previous crossover games—this series dates back to the 1990s—and 2017-era Marvel will want to see a much better return than the million-odd copies Capcom shifted of the *MVC3* games. Suffice to say the pressure is very on, and Capcom needs to get back to its very best—and right out of the gate. ■



BELOW Ryu can be a little slow but an Infinity Stone should sort that out.





LEFT With a pleasantly floaty jump and no fall damage to worry about, the field is clear for some acrobatic antics.

RIGHT *Ghost In The Shell* is an inspiration, and *Tokyo 42*'s police mechs pay homage to the classic cyberpunk anime.

The real Tokyo is a city with one of the lowest crime rates in the developed world



Tokyo 42

Grand Theft Auto meets Where's Waldo

James Nouch

PUBLISHER MODE 7 DEVELOPER SMAC GAMES

FORMAT XBOX ONE DUE FALL 2017



DINKY DUELS

Tokyo 42 started as a small-scale multiplayer based around social stealth, and those roots remain in the form of a dedicated deathmatch mode. These tense matchups take place on single-screen arenas bustling with AI pedestrians, and your task is to blend in with the crowd while identifying the other human players milling nonchalantly about. Once you've found your mark, you can make a dash for one of the stage's conspicuously placed weapons, and get blasting.

The two-man microstudio that is Smac Games hasn't been afraid to borrow liberally in the development of its first project. A case in point: at first glance, the game looks like nothing so much as a calico reimagining of *Grand Theft Auto 1* and *2*, an isometric open-world city in which puny pedestrians and dinky rival factions scuttle about their shady business.

"We drew as much inspiration as we could from everywhere," explains *Tokyo 42*'s artist and co-creator, Maciek Strychalski, as we chat in the North London kitchen that doubles as Smac's development studio. The PC classic *Syndicate* is another influence, evident in the game's single-player story of shady corporate conspiracy and cyberpunk intrigue. And then there's the crowded cityscapes of *Where's Waldo* and pixel-art collective eBoy which Strychalski cites as major influences on his visual design.

A hands-on session reveals all sorts of other little borrowings, but our first mission most readily brings to mind the adaptive blend of stealth and combat offered by the *Far Cry* series. Dispatched to assassinate a criminal bigwig, we find ourselves creeping from floor to floor in a pristine skyscraper, using the controller's bumpers to nudge the

camera around from one preset isometric angle to another, emerging from cover only to perform tactical shanks on patrolling goons.

Naturally, it isn't long before we bungle our way into enemy sightline, and the full complement of besuited baddies charges towards us. We retaliate with a barrage of twin-stick shooting, using grenades to thin the debonair herd before unleashing a burst of sonorous shotgun blasts and ratatat rifle-fire on the stragglers.

Summer in the city

Once we reach the roof of this fortified high-rise, however, things take a turn very quickly. Our target's security detail opens fire immediately, filling the screen with chunky bullet-hell gunfire. We dodge and weave our way through their opening volley, but panic soon sets in, and it only takes a few seconds for us to kick the brightly colored bucket. Thankfully respawns are instant, and once the game has performed its initial load, there are no pesky pauses to interrupt your spree slayings, even as you fast-travel across the city by way of future-Tokyo's nifty teleportation grid.

And even when you're getting shot to ribbons on a helipad, it's hard to be too frustrated, given the irrepressibly joyful color and energy of the world Smac's created. "If you look at games like *Syndicate* and a lot of these futuristic, cyberpunk games, they're obviously set in these *Blade Runner*-esque worlds that are dark and rainy with neon-lit nights. But we visited Tokyo and it turns out that there is daylight there and the sun does shine," laughs Strychalski. "So our world is very bright and colorful."

While Smac unashamedly cribs ideas, the studio is still dedicated to novelty and craft. Every single building in *Tokyo 42*'s open-world is a bespoke structure, and there are no copy-and-pasted creations to break up the near-future skyline. "That is a shit-load of work," deadpans Strychalski. "But we wanted every single thing in the game to feel like it had been touched by human hands." Stand back from it all, and *Tokyo 42* reveals itself as a bit of a mosaic. Its parts may be familiar, but the overall effect is vividly colorful and strikingly different. ■

"Futuristic games are set in dark, rainy worlds but ours is very bright and colorful"

A Kickstarter success, *Prey For The Gods* raised \$200,000 more than its original \$300,000 goal

Prey For The Gods

Standing on the shoulders of giants... and then stabbing them repeatedly

Dave Meikleham

PUBLISHER NO MATTER STUDIOS DEVELOPER NO MATTER STUDIOS
FORMAT XBOX ONE ETA 2018



BEAST MODE

No Matter Studios is aiming to make *Prey For The Gods* less linear than boss fight-centric games of the past. For one thing, you can eliminate its big bads in multiple ways. "You could come to a boss with just a bow and arrow, or you could come with no weapons," says Parnell. We do like variety in our monster murder.

We're gonna need a bigger boat... actually, keep your rickety fishing vessel. We'd be better off with a bazooka to battle the behemoths of this monster-slaying indie sandbox. It may not be the done thing to discuss beloved PlayStation classics 'round these parts, but in this case, it's impossible to ignore the 20-storey leviathan in the room. "There's no doubt we've been heavily inspired by *Shadow Of The Colossus*," admits No Matter Studios' Brian Parnell.

An action adventure built around titanic boss battles? Tick. A mysterious, forbidden land (in this case a frigid island) to explore in lonely fashion? Tick. Copious climbing mechanics? All the ticks. It may be following in the jeep-sized footprints of a masterpiece, but the *Colossus* comparison isn't something Parnell, or his two fellow founders of the teeny three-man studio are shying away from when it comes to *Prey For The Gods*.

"The sad thing is, I wish there were more games like *Shadow Of The Colossus*," says Parnell. For ten years no one made a game like this. We know why now... because it's hard as hell." And here we were sitting here thinking that making an open-world game built around battles with 100-foot beasts would

be a complete doddle. Still, despite Parnell's clear reverence for Team Ico's classic, *Prey For The Gods* is aiming to be much more than just a *Shadow Of The Colossus* clone.

For one thing, No Matter Studios has set out to craft an experience where player agency rules above all, in a quest where personal choice is central, and the road to the next enormous scuffle rarely follows a set path. Combine this exceptional sense of freedom and open-ended design with distinctly *DayZ* survival mechanics, and a comparison to Dean Hall's undead PC-based phenomenon makes a lot of sense.

Survival series

If anything, *Prey For The Gods'* frozen island is its ultimate boss. Howling blizzards that are so bitter they freeze the screen, obscuring your vision. Packs of hungry wolves to fend off. Endless clumps of knee-high snow to awkwardly stumble through. Campfires to build to keep the cold at bay. Fauna to hunt and cook over said fires. Wood to scavenge from the bodies of fallen warriors to craft arrows (these are a finite resource so each one fired will feel important). Merely enduring this harsh landscape is as challenging as downing any BFG-dwarfing boss.

Let's be honest, though, you're totally here for the mega bosses, right? Based on glimpses of a pre-alpha build of the game, they're not going to disappoint, even if there are only five of them. The two we've witnessed so far include a monstrosity that resembles a gigantic, clawed teddy bear (trust us, it's nowhere near as cute as it sounds), and a feathery dragon, with what appears to be a crow skull for a head—we're definitely going to need the game's grappling hook when that thing takes to the skies.

Considering it's being made by three people, *Prey For The Gods* is hugely ambitious. To create an island that's "totally, legitimately open-world", as Parnell describes it—starring amazing creatures and layered survival mechanics—is really something. If the final game matches this early promise when it hits Xbox One in early 2018, this could be a colossal insta-classic. ■

"Merely enduring this harsh landscape is as tough as downing any huge boss"





031



ABOVE Who says size matters? This guy.

FAR LEFT Cave paintings provide deliberately vague tips on how to conquer bosses.

LEFT As well as this brute, wraiths and wolves prowl the deadly island.

The game features a mutant strain of vampires transformed by the influenza epidemic called Skulls

Vampyr

A city tale with lots of bite from the makers of *Life Is Strange*

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

PUBLISHER FOCUS HOME INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER DONTNOD
FORMAT XBOX ONE ETA SUMMER 2017



DRAC ATTACK

Presided over by former *Metal Gear* animator Teppei Takehana, *Vampyr*'s combat mixes the branching ability upgrades of *Remember Me* with a little of *Dishonored*'s black magic. You can beef up a slam move to turn you invisible on impact, for example. Reid is armed with a bonesaw and shotgun, also upgradeable using resources from stores—providing you leave the staff in question alive.

Vampires may be creatures of stealth and shadow, but those we see in videogames tend to be pretty, well, showy. Think of *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s pirouetting Vamp, any given cutscene from the *Legacy Of Kain* series, and the entirety of *Bloodrayne*.

Jonathan Reid – star of Dontnod's latest action-adventure set in London, 1918 – is in comparison refreshingly subtle. Oh, he can wreak chaos where necessary – notable party tricks include a teleport dash and impaling people on shadows – and there's plenty of no-holds-barred combat, with fire-throwing undead hunters and rival bloodsuckers. But Reid is ultimately much more of a puppet-master than a fighter.

The heart and soul of *Vampyr* is its civilian community—there are some 60 named characters, from homeless kids through roaming cops to gangsters, rakes, and nurses, all documented on the inventory screens once you've met them. Each character is a distinct personality with haunts, habits, foibles, religious beliefs, and political inclinations. Many need your help in some fashion—this is the height of London's Spanish flu outbreak, after all, with bodies piling up in alleyways—and most are at least slightly deserving of sympathy, be it

the thug who's also a devoted father or the gentleman fraudster who's charmingly out of his depth.

The trouble is, civilians are also your greatest source of nourishment as a vampire. Drinking their blood is the only way you'll get enough XP to unlock the game's most effective (and snazziest) vampire abilities—it's possible to finish the story without harming an innocent, but still very difficult. So which lives will you take? And what will the knock-on effects be for society as a whole, as families find themselves mysteriously without a provider, or hospitals run short on essential staff? Where other vampire games encourage players to think of mortals as interchangeable cattle, *Vampyr* obliges you to sink your teeth into the details of their lives if you want to develop your character—and deal with the fallout, as an already troubled city sinks further into squalor.

Blood not-so-simple

In practice, this boils down to a tug-of-war between the third-person brawling of Dontnod's inaugural *Remember Me* and the branching dialog of its reputation-making *Life Is Strange*, plus a generous dash of the supernatural. While talking to people, you can pick different responses to achieve different outcomes, but you can also attempt to hypnotize characters with weaker minds, either to reveal secrets or steer your soon-to-be breakfast discreetly to a dark corner. You can't enter occupied buildings without an invitation, so winning people over is essential for exploration.

Whether you opt to spare your neighbors or eat them, *Vampyr*'s persistent urban setting is a delight to uncover. It's like a gigantic *Hitman* level decorated with survival horror assets—densely layered, winding, and packed with period touches such as old-fashioned telephones and tweed upholstery. But more importantly, it's a social sandbox made up of distinct individuals. The grottness and focus on bloodshed is a world away from the coming-of-age genre trappings of *Life Is Strange*, but in key respects *Vampyr* is a worthy successor—it's not just about murdering people, after all, but getting to know them. ■

“You need to decide which lives to take and what the potential fallout could be”





033



ABOVE Your powers include spiking people you don't like on shadows.

FAR LEFT You may be supernatural but using human weapons is still a viable option.

LEFT Ah, yes, a liquid lunch. Delectable.

ANZ

OF MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

BIOWARE'S LEFT SHEPARD, THE NORMANDY, AND THE MILKY WAY BEHIND. JOIN US AS WE EXPLORE THE NEXT GIANT LEAP FORWARD FOR THE SEMINAL SCI-FI SERIES JAMES NOUCH

PUBLISHER EA DEVELOPER BIOWARE ETA MARCH 21

Although the Ryders leave the Milky Way around the time of *Mass Effect 2*, it takes them 600 years to reach the Andromeda galaxy



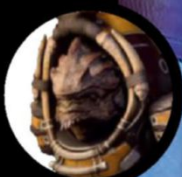
- A Aliens
- B Biotics
- C Crafting
- D Dialogue
- E Exploration
- F Family
- G Galaxy
- H Hyperion
- I Interrupts
- J Jetpack
- K Kett
- L Loyalty missions
- M Mako 2.0
- N Nexus
- O Open-world
- P Planets
- Q Quests
- R Reinforcements
- S Skills
- T Tempest
- U Under the hood
- V Vital statistics
- W Weaponry
- X X-rated
- Y Youth
- Z Zoology





aliens

Humanity may occupy a special place at the narrative center of the Mass Effect universe, but the series simply wouldn't be the same without a cast of lumpy extraterrestrials to chew the intergalactic fat with. Thankfully, a number of other Milky Way species have also made the long voyage to the Andromeda galaxy, so a peppy Asari named Peebee and a cranky old Krogan by the name of Drack will represent two early options for your fact-finding squad. A female Turian called Vetra is another possible pick, while your ship will be piloted by a jauntty Salarian named Kallo Jath. Andromeda's galaxy is also home to a number of brand new E.T.s, including several highly advanced alien races. As humanity's Pathfinder, it'll be up to you to make first contact with these curious creatures, but be warned—not every civilization will react with delight to the arrival of a smooth-skinned, humanoid outsider, and a hostile first encounter could have serious repercussions for your mission.



B

biotics

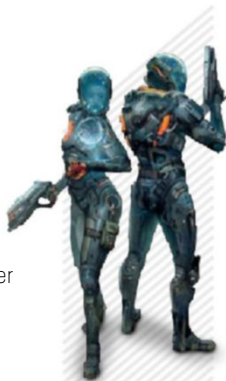
In narrative terms, biotic powers refer to the ability of certain organic lifeforms to create and manipulate mass effect fields. In gameplay terms, biotic powers are the justification for some good old-fashioned space telekinesis, pure and simple. Old abilities such as Charge return from games gone by, enabling you to barrel across the battlefield in the blink of an eye before colliding into some beleaguered alien chump with a screen-shuddering thump. When paired with Ryder's jetpack, the power enables you to zip around skirmishes with unprecedented ease, doling out pain as you zip from point to point. The biotic Barrier is another returning power, and this nifty shield has been upgraded to let players deflect projectiles at foolhardy foes. And since all powers now operate on individual—rather than global—cooldowns, you'll be able to chain abilities together one after another.

C

crafting

Crafting gear and weaponry has been a key component in BioWare's games over the years, but the system has never appeared in a Mass Effect game—until now. You won't just be able to forge whatever you fancy from the get-go, though; you'll have to do your research first. So, engage in a few bust-ups with Andromeda's resident meanies, the Kett, and you might be able to scavenge enough alien tech to figure out how their powerful plasma weapons work. At this stage you'll be able to craft and name your own Kett-inspired firearms and dole them out to your

Other squadmates include two humans: former police officer Liam and the sternly militaristic Cora



ABOVE There's even a new-look dialogue wheel, which takes its design cues from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

appreciative team. And, thanks to the return of melee weapons (last seen in *Mass Effect 3*'s multiplayer modes) you'll also be able to craft mighty Krogan hammers and fearsome space-aged blades with which to slice up your alien foes. That said, the *Andromeda* team has been keen to emphasize that crafting won't be a necessity for campaign success—it's more of an optional extra for especially intrepid explorers.

D

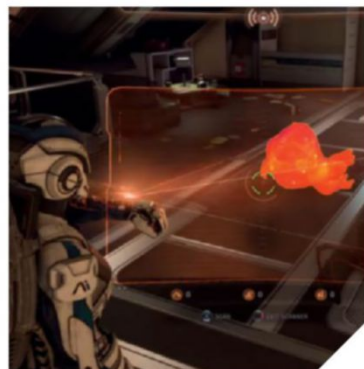
dialogue

While it might be the gunfights and alien vistas that steal the show in terms of pre-release trailers and artwork, dialogue remains a major focus for the *Andromeda* team, and conversation has been overhauled for this new chapter in the Mass Effect saga. For starters, the familiar blue and red hues of Paragon and Renegade dialogue options have been dropped in favor of a more nuanced system designed to let you voice disagreement without hurling an NPC out of a window. And while your morality won't be constantly charted on a binary scale, your choices will have an impact on how squad members relate to you, and could even cause tensions within your team. As for the question of how the heck you can understand every alien language and Andromeda dialect at first contact, BioWare reckons it's all neatly explained in-game...



E

exploration



As humanity's Pathfinder, your job is to explore the uncharted reaches of space and build a new home for mankind. That's a pretty big ask, but your handy handheld scanner will help, and making regular use of this space-age gizmo will provide access to fancy new tech and crafting tools, as well as environmental info that slots neatly into your expanded Codex. And while your mission may be important, it isn't quite as time-sensitive as Shepard's civilization-saving quest, leaving you ample time for a bit of cosmic sight-seeing or a string of optional side-quests. It's all part of BioWare's effort to revive that sense of wide-eyed wonder that accompanied the original *Mass Effect*, when the galaxy was still full of unfamiliar sights and a bevy of unusual faces.

037

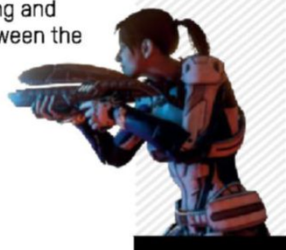
Stick with the default character names and NPCs may refer to you as Scott or Sarah in conversation

F family

Alec Ryder is the name of humanity's Pathfinder—a blend of intrepid explorer, seasoned soldier, and sciencey pointdexter leading mankind's search for a new home. But you may have already noticed that Alec Ryder isn't the protagonist of *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and you actually choose one of his twin children—Scott or Sara—to play from the game's outset. Our theory is that something pretty bad happens to papa Ryder in the game's opening act, and the mantle of Pathfinder is thrust onto whichever twin you select. The sibling you don't select will still show up in the game, but rumor has it that a malfunction with their cryochamber will result in a debilitating twinjury that leaves them unable to join you in battle. Fortunately, it seems that they'll still be on hand for sibling teasing and affectionate noogies in-between the various missions.



ABOVE Although we've got a good look at the Ryder twins, the fate of their Pathfinding papa is unclear.



BELOW Each Ark is specially adapted to carry a particular species and designed around their unique physiologies.

G galaxy

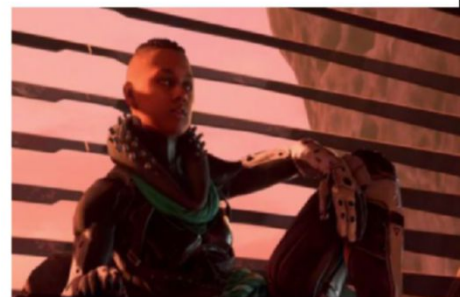
The original *Mass Effect* trilogy took place in the Milky Way, but that's set to change for BioWare's new saga, which represents a clean break from the Shepard story. The Andromeda galaxy is completely unknown to humanity and its allies, and you'll navigate it from your revamped, three-dimensional Galaxy Map, watching stars and planets fly past from your spot on the Tempest's bridge. You'll even be able to see your position in space reflected in the starfields from windows and viewing platforms.



H hyperion

Ferrying tens of thousands of adventurous souls to a brand new galaxy is no logistical trifle, and before the 600-year voyage to Andromeda could even begin, the Initiative's engineers had to build the Arks: four mammoth ships adapted to carry humans, Salarians, Asari, and Turians in peaceful cryosleep. These Arks are among the largest ships ever assembled by the Milky Way species, and the Hyperion alone carried 20,000 humans to their new home. It looks like these behemoths were separated on arrival, however, perhaps by some alien nasty. As such, you can expect to spend part of the game's opening hours attempting to re-establish contact with the rest of your Initiative allies.

I interrupts



Since its introduction in *Mass Effect 2*, the interrupt system has become a much-loved pillar of the franchise, enabling Shepard to take direct, physical action in a conversation whenever the telltale Paragon or Renegade icon flashed on screen. So while a Paragon interrupt might see you comfort an anxious NPC, a Renegade interrupt might prompt Shepard to punch out a journalist on live TV. The system has been retained for *Andromeda*, but rather than reserving these prompts for morally extreme interventions, BioWare will let players interrupt whenever the situation warrants it. You might see a 'disarm' prompt appear when approached by a gun-toting guard, for instance, but tapping that button isn't a moral choice—it's a strategic decision that will have repercussions.



J

jetpack

The introduction of a rocket-powered-backpack isn't just for show—it represents a seismic shift to the rhythm, pace, and flow of Mass Effect's usual combat encounters. Gone are the days of meekly hunkering behind waist-high walls; instead you'll be boost-dodging around enemy fire before leaping to a superhuman height, readying your weapon, and unleashing hell from a mid-air hover like a weaponized hummingbird. To complement this newfound mobility, BioWare has tweaked its combat arenas to be more open than ever, providing multiple angles for you to attack intelligent adversaries. You'll still need to seek cover to recharge your shields, but once your kinetic barrier is back online, you'll be able to boost back into the fray.



ABOVE That natty N7 armour suggests this is actually Alec Ryder. Perhaps you'll play him at the very start of the game?





K

kett

The Reapers may have been a scary bunch, but those genocidal robo-squids weren't exactly relatable. The Kett are a different kettle of space-fish altogether, and BioWare has very deliberately crafted a more nuanced brand of antagonist this time around. So, while you might not see eye to milky eye with these fearsome creatures, you'll be able to understand their motivations, at least. To that end, the Kett's visual design suggests formidable strength rather than unfeeling detachment, with their soft tissue concealed beneath an angular bone carapace that proves equally handy whether the Kett are trading bullets with Pathfinding pests or their Andromeda neighbours. Fun fact: BioWare originally designed the Kett to be completely nude, but scrapped the idea after realising that it felt really weird to have longwinded conversations with naked aliens.

Since there aren't any mass relays in the Andromeda galaxy, you'll mostly be exploring the Helius Cluster

L

loyalty missions



Loyalty missions were another feature that Bioware added to the series in *Mass Effect 2*, and these optional side-quests will make their return in *Andromeda* as a means for BioWare's writers to introduce a fresh-faced cast of characters. Each one sees a different member of your squad take center stage, and tasks you with pursuing a string of objectives that will flesh out their backstory while also strengthening the bond between Ryder and the relevant NPC.

RIGHT The Nexus serves a similar function to the Citadel from the original trilogy.

BELOW Loyalty missions will tell character-driven stories.



N

nexus

While each of the Initiative's Arks were built to transport a single alien race, the Nexus is a massive multi-species effort that will serve as a supply station and central support hub in the Andromeda galaxy. The title of a tie-in novel—*Nexus Uprising*—strongly suggests that this colossal craft might be in for a bumpy ride, and an early *Andromeda* trailer has already shown Ryder pointing a pistol at Sloane Kelly, who once oversaw all security operations aboard the Initiative's flagship vessel. Exactly what went wrong, however, remains a mystery...

O

open-world

With all this talk of wide-open planetside spaces, is *Mass Effect* turning into an open-world game? "I definitely wouldn't call *Andromeda* an open-world game," says producer Michael Gamble. "We like to use the term 'exploration-based game'. You still have the concept of tight story deliverance and all the great things you come to expect with *Mass Effect*. The layer on top of that is a layer of exploration. Sometimes that happens in open spaces, but not always. You can cruise around some of these planets in the Nomad, but it's not the traditional sandbox-type game."



ABOVE BioWare even brought in the Need For Speed team to consult on the Nomad's handling.

M

mako 2.0

The much-maligned Mako rover from the first *Mass Effect* is back, and this time it's not actually rubbish! This upgradeable, customizable craft is armed with a powerful boost and a jaunty little jump that will enable you to clear perilous planetside debris. The Nomad (as it's known) even features a mining computer that will find subterranean mineral deposits. The clever little car then deploys a mining drone to dig up the goods.



041

P

planets

Exploration is at the heart of *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, so the experience of touching down on an unfamiliar world has to be exciting and unpredictable. In an effort to achieve that, BioWare is constructing an expansive roster of explorable worlds, running the gamut from hazardous rocks to bustling population centres. These 'story worlds', as BioWare calls them, will host more than just mission markers and rival factions—BioWare is keen to imbue them with a bit of history, a sense that events have been unfolding before your arrival and will continue to develop once you depart. But just because a planet doesn't support advanced life doesn't mean that it's just some dull rock. Many worlds will feature environmental hazards, such as pools of bubbling sulphur or steaming lava, that you'll navigate from the insulated safety of your rover. And some will even host hidden dungeons, isolated colonies, or rich mineral deposits that can be mined for profit.



Q

quests

Your overarching goal in *Andromeda* is simple: survive in an unfamiliar galaxy and find a new home for humanity. Along the way, however, there'll be no shortage of side-quests to divert your attention, and BioWare promises that these optional missions will be more varied and interesting than ever. In particular, the developer is looking to move away from the Citadel fetch-quests that peppered the *Mass Effect* trilogy, in part by moving auxiliary adventures away from spaces where you have to keep your weapon drawn and folding them into the excitement and wonder of planetary exploration.

BELOW *Andromeda* isn't the start of a new trilogy, but further games in the same galaxy seem certain.



R

reinforcements

Space is a harsh old place, and sometimes you'll have to team up with others to succeed. To that end, a souped-up version of *Mass Effect 3*'s wave-based multiplayer mode is back, doling out rewards that can be spent in the campaign, but this time you're free to ignore the multiplayer modes without impacting your single-player success should you prefer a strictly solo experience. And then there're Strike Team missions—campaign objectives that you can either send an AI team to complete on your behalf or tackle as part of a networked Pathfinder posse.

Producer Michael Gamble has played *Andromeda* on Xbox One, and says it's already "running awesome"



S

skills

Remember the Mass Effect trilogy's class system? Well forget it right now, because it's gone forever. Now as you level up you'll unlock skill points that can be spent on any skill in any discipline you choose, unhindered by the constraints of a rigid class structure. That said, remnants of the old system remain in the form of 'profiles'. So, pump points into biotic abilities and you'll eventually unlock the Adept profile, which you can equip to gain a variety of biotic buffs. Similarly, if you want to focus entirely on unlocking tech powers, you'll gain access to the Engineer profile, which grants access to a handy combat drone. As you progress through the game, you can expect to unlock a variety of different profiles, and will be able to switch between them depending on the environments or enemies you're up against. As for the type of skills on offer, they're divided into passive and active, and many active abilities feature an alternate fire mode, activated by holding the relevant button. You can activate your Overload ability, for instance, to send a bolt of electrostatic energy chaining from target to target.

T

tempest

The Tempest, *Andromeda's* answer to the original trilogy's Normandy, isn't just a sleek ride—it's a technologically advanced stealth ship that more than makes up for a lack of heavy armor or gun emplacements by being far and away the fastest vessel in her class. She's well-equipped, too, featuring a research room for analyzing scanner samples, a meeting room for video conferences, and a bespoke cargo bay to house the Nomad rover. Thankfully, you're able to stroll from one end of the ship to the other without enduring a single loading screen. There's also the Pathfinder's cabin, which naturally features a swanky king-size bed.



ABOVE The new skill system is so flexible that dedicated players can unlock every skill in the game.

RIGHT You can also level up individual profiles, which then provide you with even greater buffs to your abilities.

BELOW You won't have to worry about fueling up your ship this time. Hallelujah.



U

under the hood

While the original games in the Mass Effect trilogy ran on Epic's Unreal Engine, *Andromeda* has made the move to EA's Frostbite, the engine used to render the settings and environmental destruction of Dice's Battlefield. As such, you can expect cover to crumble and break under sustained fire, as well as a very obvious visual upgrade over previous titles in the series.



V

vital statistics

∞

Andromeda's level cap. You can keep leveling until you run out of skills to put points into.

5

Different difficulty levels, including a mode for those who just want to enjoy the narrative.

130+

Kilometers per hour, the top speed of your Nomad rover.

13

Light years per day, the top speed of the Tempest.

March 21

The US release date for *Mass Effect: Andromeda*.

BELOW The Andromeda galaxy is home to some eye-catching vistas, but its planets are all grounded in the some sense of reality. There won't be any *Avatar*-style worlds here.



EA Access subscribers can sample ten hours of *Andromeda* on March 16, five days before launch

W

weaponry

Andromeda is promising the most radical shake-up of Mass Effect's combat since the series' inception, and while that may be in large part thanks to the addition of an honest-to-goodness jetpack, an expanded arsenal plays its part too. Familiar favorites such as the Omni-tool return, and you can upgrade this holographic blade to enhance your melee lethality. But this wrist-mounted gizmo won't be your only solution for close-quarters combat, thanks to the addition of craftable swords and hammers(!) to the franchise. Such is the importance of melee weapons that they now have their own slot in your loadout. But whether you're wielding a mighty Krogan warhammer or a jury-rigged Kett plasma rifle, BioWare promises more responsive combat controls and aiming than ever before.



BELOW You can order squadmates around in real-time rather than pausing the action to bring up a power wheel.



X

x-rated

Listen, we know your game. You act like butter wouldn't melt, but we know that 70 per cent of your motivation for playing a Mass Effect game is to see some steamy cosmic coitus. Well, you're in luck, because not only will *Andromeda* continue the proud BioWare tradition of enabling players to smooch a smorgasbord of organic life forms, but it features more romanceable companions than ever before. So, when a feverishly excited Twitter user asked who they could romance in the game, *Andromeda* producer Michael Gamble was able to reply: "So many. And the banging is pretty good." But just because you can romance a character doesn't mean that they'll be keen to engage in some of that good, good banging. As part of a wider effort to bring a greater sense of nuance and depth to characters, BioWare is adding a bit more variety to its romance system to ensure that not every relationship ends in a saucy bedroom romp. So, while some squadmates will want to jump in the space-sack at the drop of a space-hat, others will be looking for something more long-term, and another NPC relationship might culminate in a meaningful, but non-sexual, encounter. If that revelation has you worried that *Andromeda* is some sort of sanitized kid-friendly affair, then fret not—Ryder will occasionally swear!

Y

youth

While Alec Ryder occupies a near legendary status in ME, you'll be stepping into the pristine booties of one of his untested sprogs. Scott and Sara are in their mid-twenties, and while they aren't totally inexperienced, the events of *Andromeda* represent their first real trial. As such, the dialogue has a lighter tone, with more humor.

Z

zoology

Not every alien race you encounter in *Andromeda* is going to be an advanced civilization of poets—some will be hulking great dullards. Take the Fiend, for instance, which can gobble up any unwary Pathfinder that happens to stray within snatching distance of its monstrous mitts. But that's not even the worst of it, as certain planets will be home to towering super-bosses. Rush into battle with the behemoths and you'll be sorry, so you're better off taking some time to level up and craft some gnarly new weaponry before going in for the kill.



045



Walters worked on the original Mass Effect trilogy and also on the kung fu RPG *Jade Empire*

Q&A



SURVIVAL, MORALS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND ENEMIES – MAC WALTERS, ANDROMEDA'S CREATIVE DIRECTOR, IS HERE TO SPILL THE BEANS

The Mass Effect trilogy was a huge success, but *Andromeda* breaks away from those games and stands alone to a certain extent. What does that mean in terms of telling a story? Is it a bit of blank slate for you?

That's a good question. We were very intentional when we started this to make sure that this was going to be a fresh start, not just for our fans, but for the developers. I think for me, one of the things I really enjoyed about working on *Mass Effect 1* was the sense that anything was possible. The further we went into the trilogy, the more we had to stay aligned with the choices and decisions that we'd made earlier on.

And so we really wanted to create an opportunity for the developers of this game to get back to that sort of blue-sky place where obviously we're going to build on things that our fans love, and we're going to make sure those carry forward, but also being able to re-envision them in a way. And really get the story to a point where anyone playing it doesn't necessarily need to have played Mass Effect before. Everybody starts basically with the same objective: you're in Andromeda, your goal is to a) survive, and b) find a home for humanity in a really dangerous alien galaxy.

At the same time, if you are an existing fan, we wanted to be able to show a lot of the things you love in a fresh and new way. I think Peebee's a good example of that, in the sense that we knew we were going to have to teach new players about what Asari are, but rather than using someone who is like Liara, who is the archetypal Asari, we almost went in the opposite direction. So, we described Asari by creating one who's almost the opposite of what most Asari are [and] it allows us to tell those stories in fresh new ways. You can find yourself as a developer sometimes looking back at what worked really well, rather than at times looking

forward to what else is possible. I think that's something that was really important.

It's clear that the conversation system has seen something of an overhaul, and the Paragon and Renegade system has gone. Could you describe the new system for us a little, and tell us what you were trying to achieve by making those changes as well.

So, Paragon and Renegade is gone, the reason they're gone is because they felt very Shepard—they were very tied to the Shepard character, so they didn't really make sense if we weren't going to have Shepard as our protagonist. But part of it is also the fact that the core team that worked on the original Mass Effect was basically the *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* team, where light-side and dark-side decisions were a thing, right? And people really enjoyed that in *KOTOR* and that's why we picked it up in Mass Effect. But as we've progressed in the trilogy, we've found people seem to enjoy the more gray decisions. Not just the "are you evil? Are you good?" kind of thing.

What we have now is based more around agreeing and disagreeing. The reason I like that is because in the trilogy it's like, "I'm gonna play Paragon", and then you know which way you're moving the stick on every conversation. You don't have to think about it, because you're just going to hit Paragon every time. With agree and disagree it changes by the circumstance and it changes by the character you're talking to, so you have to actually be more engaged in what's going on, to know if you're going to do that.

And in addition to that, we've added in four tones and we'll talk a little more in the future, but they basically allow other types of characters to express them in one of four different ways, and sometimes one of two different ways. And I think that gets back to that more traditional role-playing sort





of feeling which is less about “do I want to be good or bad?”, and more about “how do I want to express myself?”

BioWare’s been talking a lot about the sense of adventure it wants players to feel in *Andromeda*. How do you implement that while preserving the high-stakes feel of a game like *Mass Effect 2*, for instance?

Andromeda is definitely meant to be somewhat more of an adventurous game. Your crew is a little bit younger, and the way I put it was, *Mass Effect 1*, in the first 90 seconds, you learn that every 50,000 years this entire galaxy gets wiped out. So the stakes are raised really, really high right from the get-go. And one of the issues with that

sense that we want people to feel like they have the opportunity to explore, we want them to feel like, you know what, there’s this whole planet that’s got its whole separate story which feels tied to the critical path, but it’s not crucial to my success in the critical path necessarily. I want to be able to enjoy it, I just want to go off and do that, and not feel like I’m turning my back on people or humanity or anything like that.

Loyalty missions are back this time around, which is fantastic news. Why did they go? Why are they back? And how will they differ from the ones we saw in *Mass Effect 2*?

Love it—precise questions. I can answer all of those. Why did they go? The easy reason

people to engage with those characters that they know and love. To me, the story is always important, but really without the characters, it all just falls flat. It’s what’s going on with those characters that matters. So, bringing it back worked that way.

As far as how they’re different: I think in a lot of ways they’re similar, obviously this isn’t a story about a suicide mission, so there’s that difference immediately, the narrative context for it, and also it’s less about conflict and more about getting to know the characters and their reasons for why they came to *Andromeda*, and what they hoped to find. And building more into the whole story of establishing a new home for humanity.

“Peebee is the opposite of what most Asari are, and this allows us to tell stories in fresh new ways for fans of the series”

is, we’d always fight this sense of “well, I’m supposed to be saving the galaxy, but this character over here wants me to help them with their relationship. How do I justify that in the grand scheme of things, when the galaxy is about to be wiped out?”

So we want to have high stakes, and there are high stakes in the sense that if you don’t succeed in your role, that’s it for humanity, and potentially every other species that came from the Milky Way in *Andromeda*. But we also don’t have to go right to raising the stakes to—you know, two hours in “hey, you’ve got this best friend and this best friend, which one do you want to die and which one do you want to survive?”

We don’t have to go that high, because the overall stakes are a little bit lighter in the

for that was that in *ME3* our goal was to bring back everybody who was a squad member ever, assuming that they were alive in your playthrough. To then wrap a mission around each one of those was just a no-go. It also didn’t feel like it meshed with the overall context of a galaxy at war. In *ME3*, it was that fighting of “hey, the Reapers are here, can you help me go deal with my Dad?” It just didn’t really make sense, whereas in *ME2*, obviously the entire thing was: build a suicide squad, and go on a suicide mission.

As for why we brought them back in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, well first of all, they were a fan favorite, but it also seemed like it fit more with that sense of adventure. But also we knew we’d be introducing all new characters, so this was a great way to allow

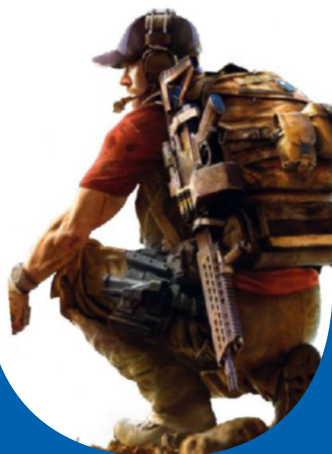
Last of all, we wanted to touch on the Kett. The Reapers were these uncaring space monsters, but the Kett seem a little more nuanced. Would you be able to introduce them to us a little and maybe give us an insight into what their motivations are?

Yeah, I’m not going to get too much into the details of it, but I will say I think that’s a good word, nuanced. I think what we wanted to do with the Kett was create a clear and obvious enemy. I think that was important for us off the bat, but as you—like many things in a *Mass Effect* game—dive into it a bit more, as you spend more time with it, you realize they’re maybe not all as bad as you thought.

Clearly there’s some bad apples here, and you have to deal with them, but what does that mean for the rest of *Andromeda*? What does it mean for the other Kett? And we even have a whole separate storyline, we have these things called ‘b-stories’, because they actually traverse multiple planets and follow you throughout the course of the game, wherever you go. And one of them is devoted entirely to the main antagonist in the game, and some of the conflicts he’s even been having with his own people. ■

The

Ubisoft



to



Before taking on his current role, Poix served as producer of the videogame version of Peter Jackson's *King Kong*



NOW THAT GHOST RECON WILDLANDS HAS FINALLY
HIT SHELVES, WE VISIT UBISOFT PRODUCER
XAVIER POIX AT HIS PARISIAN STUDIO **JAMES NOUCH**



049

The Raving Rabbids are called Les Lapins Crétins in France, where they enjoy a baffling level of popularity

Five brothers founded Ubi Soft Entertainment Software in a small town in Brittany in 1986. A modest beginning for a company that's now a household name. Today, the company (now called Ubisoft) employs thousands of people across the globe, and its gargantuan workforce produces some of the biggest franchises in gaming. These are games that have come to define action-adventure open-worlds; games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Ghost Recon*.

Despite its massive reach, however, Ubisoft still retains a significant French presence, and these studios are home to some of the company's most celebrated creatives. To find out more, we sat down with Xavier Poix, the man responsible for managing Ubisoft's entire French operation.

How would you describe your role and responsibilities within Ubisoft?

I'm the head of Ubisoft's French studios which are based in Paris, Montpellier and Annecy. I'm actually overseeing every project that we're creating on a production, design, and creative perspective. So, I manage the great talents that we have here, the creators of brands, and the developers of big and good games, I hope!

So, how many people does that encompass?

It's more than 900 people in France. We have around 500 in Paris which is the main studio, overseeing *Ghost Recon*, *Just Dance*, *Rabbids*, and some other titles. The Annecy studio is close to 200 people, and right now it's overseeing *Steep* and working on *The Division* as well. And the Montpellier studio—which is well known for the creation of IPs such as *Rabbids* and *Rayman* in the past—is working on multiple products right now. One of them is *Ghost Recon* as well, and this studio is around 250 people.

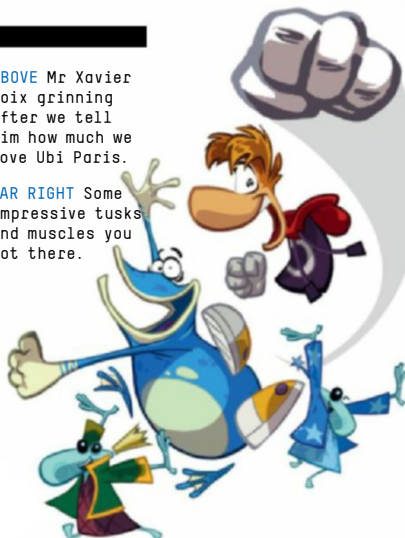
Right, so that's loads of people, obviously.
Yes, it is!

So, how do you collaborate across multiple studios, directing the efforts of hundreds



ABOVE Mr Xavier Poix grinning after we tell him how much we love Ubi Paris.

FAR RIGHT Some impressive tusks and muscles you got there.



main game, especially on the tech side which is vital to create a big open-world.

And we also get the help of other studios, such as *Reflections* in the UK, and we have a big partnership with Bucharest that lasts for ages, so we know how to work together. We also had a collaboration with Milan, a studio in Italy, that brought some help to the game as well.

Is it challenging to marshall all these people in different timezones and different parts of the world? It must be difficult to manage co-workers who are collaborating without ever meeting face-to-face.

Yeah, I would be lying if I said it wasn't. No, of course it's a big challenge, but it also brings a lot of strengths and advantages because I think we need this amount of people to create those great games in the time that we have. If those people would have been in the same place it would have been very challenging as well.

Because you know, even communication from one floor to the other is hard, and sometimes the fact that I know you're working far away means I will be more creative in the way that I communicate and know communication is key. You can often forget that when people are close to you.

"Wildlands is our biggest open-world yet, which gives players the freedom to play the game the way they want"

and hundreds of people? And indeed with input from around the world as well?

Yeah, so the collaboration between studios is a big topic and it's something that at the Ubisoft level we really wanted to nail, because we think it's true that with the convergence of different expertise we can really achieve big results. So when it comes to managing all the studios in France, and in the case of *Ghost Recon* for instance, we have all this expertise divided between the three studios. The Paris studio is lead on the game, on the design parts; Annecy's role is more on the online features of the game; while Montpellier is helping on the

So it forces us to be very communicative, but in the way we create this organisation we also know what works and what doesn't work. So, for instance, we've learned from past experience that whatever mandate we give to another team needs to have a certain amount of autonomy. We need to make sure people can feel owners of this mandate. So that's something that we have learnt in the past, and now I think we are quite efficient on this.

Even, of course, if it's in a big group of people you need to make sure that communication is fluid, that people understand when choices are made. And we



are creating videogames, and you know videogames come with a lot of iteration on the design itself, on the way we produce, so of course we need to communicate on that.

Across the thousands of people that work for Ubisoft around the world, would you say there's a philosophy that drives the company? Is there a Ubisoft way of doing things that's maybe different to the way other companies might do things?

I guess there are things that we are looking into in games that potentially other publishers don't. We really want to, at some point, enrich people's lives through our games, so we are trying to find this thing that will be unique to a game: it can be the history, as in *Assassin's Creed* for instance, it can be the emotion we give when we are creating the Rabbids for humor for instance, or—I was mentioning *Valiant Hearts*, which takes place in the first World War. We dealt with emotion, with sadness. So I guess we are trying to put something into our games that people will remember.

But in the way that we process and the way we produce, I guess even in our studios, things can be different from one game to another. I think for every game, there is one team, and for every team there is one way of doing that is better than

another one. Some games and some organisations are very organic, people talk and there's not much paper, and things that you visualize, some of us are really on the other side of the spectrum.

So there is no recipe—the good recipe is just to make sure that you know what you're doing and what you're aiming at. That's the best you can do. And of course you have to have the player in mind.

And I guess if there is one other thing to say that we're focusing on at Ubisoft [it's that] we have the player in mind. Even if we don't succeed 100 per cent in each case this is something we work on a lot with playtests, in our beta tests, in the phases that we release into the community. We try our best to follow what they have in mind.

So touching on *Ghost Recon Wildlands* then. Obviously Ubisoft's produced a fair few open-worlds over the years, so what's special about *Wildlands*? What's different about it compared to the Ubisoft open-worlds that we've seen before?

I would say that this is the largest open-world, and the other differences come from this size. When you look at the size in terms of production, the way we'd produce it, the design has to fit this size, otherwise there is no point in doing such a large world.

studio
spotlight



UBISOFT PARIS

The company's largest French studio is home to roughly 500 members of staff, many of whom are currently hard at work finishing *Ghost Recon Wildlands*. This isn't the team's first crack at tackling the Clancyverse, however—it's had a hand in every Xbox *Ghost Recon* game since *Advanced Warfighter* in 2006.

Greatest hits: *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*, *Just Dance*, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*



UBISOFT ANNECY

This alpine town in the southeast of France is home to almost 200 employees, who have frequently collaborated with other Ubisoft studios on big-name blockbusters. For a time, they specialized in *Assassin's Creed*'s multiplayer modes, but they're currently helping Massive Entertainment as it continues to expand *The Division*.

Greatest hits: *Assassin's Creed* multiplayer



UBISOFT MONTPELLIER

Among the 250 or so Ubi staff of this southern city, you'll find Rayman creator Michel Ancel, who has more recently served as director on cult classic *Beyond Good & Evil*. Since then, the studio's developed an engine it calls UbiArt, which is optimized for beautiful 2D gaming, and has enabled the creation of *Rayman Origins* and *Valiant Hearts*.

Greatest hits: *From Dust*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Rayman Origins*



IVORY TOWER

This motorsport specialist was founded in Lyon back in 2007 by three friends with an ambitious plan for an open-world racing game. It took seven years to finish, but the team realised that vision in 2014 with the launch of *The Crew*, which Ubisoft published and collaborated on before fully acquiring the studio the following year.

Greatest hits: *The Crew*, *Wild Run*, *Calling All Units*





ABOVE Rayman and his cuddley but kinda creepy elephant buddy.

RIGHT The new Assassin's Creed movie means we can all watch Fassy look moody on a rooftop.



So what we really want to push with this game, that comes with the size, is the freedom of choice. We say that if there's one difference with the other games, it's this one. The way that we have organized the game, you can really play it the way you want on the micro-level. So, how can I find a solution to this challenge for instance, using different ingredients.

And also on the macro size which is "do I prefer to do this part first, or do I go back-and-forth?" That's a freedom we want to give to the player. I don't know if you had the opportunity to play on the small technical test we did, but there was a feeling of that already with that technical test. We think we have achieved something, and that's our main focus—freedom of choice for the player.

In recent months, Ubisoft has committed to enhancing some of its games for PlayStation

The development of *Wildlands* is led by Ubisoft Paris with input from the driving specialists at Reflections

→ **4 Pro. Microsoft has its new console Project Scorpio launching later this year, so can we expect a similar level of enthusiasm and excitement and support from Ubisoft?**

Of course! And you know facts are—especially on *Ghost Recon*—I think the game that made this brand big again apart from the launch of the original game was *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*, which was on the Xbox 360, and at that time was considered a real next-gen title. So on every new platform we are very, very enthusiastic.

When it comes to power, then it comes to delivering more visual quality, more emotion, and on *Ghost Recon* we pay a lot of attention to the weather, on the different effects and we know it will be... I'm not saying because the *Scorpio* hasn't revealed



"With the marriage of technology and creativity, we can create new experiences and potential series"

all these secrets yet, but for sure there will be a lot of stuff that we could have been dreaming of having when we launch.

Ubisoft isn't shy about gambling on new games—we've had *Steep* recently and *For Honor* is due very soon, too. Do you feel that sometimes the games industry can be a bit conservative?

I don't want to judge the industry at that. I think you need to make choices and also investments, and you need to decide at one moment and the game will be released four years after that. You need to have that in mind, so you can't revolutionize everything all of the time, and we don't want that.

But it's true that we made this bet four years ago to really go to these open-world, full of freedom kind of experiences, because we thought the seamless aspect of it could really bring a new way to play. That's why it's arrived at the same year. They were bold choices, but ones we were very happy to have made. But in the case of *Steep*, it's the freshness of a new genre that existed in the



past, but brought to another level that we want, bringing creativity to the players and having features that can enable that creativity—that you can draw a line and send it to somebody as a challenge, for instance.

We are trying to be the most creative we can, and it's true that in the French studios it's part of our DNA, when you look at everything that we have created from *Valiant Hearts* to *Ghost Recon* to *The Rabbids*, *Just Dance* [and] *Zombi* for instance, and other titles. We love to mix the creativity that we are capable of with the innovation that Microsoft brings, or its competitors. And that's with this marriage of technology and creativity I think we can really create new experiences, and then new IPs potentially.

Lastly, I'd like to ask about *Assassin's Creed*, which took a bit of a year off in 2016. Was that a deliberate decision to give the series a break and reconsider it a little? What was the thinking behind that?

It was a real choice at a Ubisoft level, a choice because we could do it also, and we could do it because there are all those other games you mentioned: *Steep*, *Ghost Recon Wildlands*, *For Honor*, *Watch Dogs 2*. So all these games will be there. So this is a time when we could do it and it was a perfect year to give to the team the capability of bringing *Assassin's Creed* to a new level. But I'm not in charge of it, I just say it to answer your question. But 2016 was definitely an *Assassin's Creed* year, because we had the movie in December, so for sure it was also a way to focus on the movie. ■

Next month we try not to fawn as we chat to *Monkey Island* creator, Ron Gilbert

magic moments

2003

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

Ubisoft Montpellier is known for its risk-taking creativity, and this critically adored action-adventure is a brilliantly odd showcase of the studio's talents.

2006

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

A landmark GR which added a pinch of accessibility to the notoriously thorny franchise, but also for the incredible visuals.

2011

RAYMAN ORIGINS

Montpellier is also home to *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel, who relaunched the franchise with this gorgeous 2D jamboree. Look out for his new game, *Beyond Good & Evil 2*.



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE
MORROWIND

MAYBE TO MORROWIND?



SCRATCH THAT: *DEFINITELY* TO
MORROWIND. WE'VE BEEN BEHIND
THE SCENES AT ZENIMAX HQ FOR
THE INSIDE SCOOP ON THE
BIGGEST MMO ON XBOX. JOIN US
ON A JOURNEY BACK TO ONE OF
THE MOST INFLUENTIAL LOCALES
IN GAMING, AND DISCOVER WHY
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE IS
ABOUT TO BECOME MORE ESSENTIAL
THAN EVER...

MATT GILMAN

PUBLISHER ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS DEVELOPER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS RELEASE JUNE 6

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

The game will feature all new music, but there are plenty of familiar tunes for fans of the original Jeremy Soule-penned score



s a hardened veteran of Xbox gaming you might be familiar with the concept of youth ambivalence to your cherished formative gaming panoply. Let's say your thumbstick callouses were tempered in the flames of *Halo 2*'s online battlefields, or in the influential third-person gunnery of *Resident Evil 4*. It smarts when younger gamers, weaned on newer Halos or *Resis*, dismiss such good times as old tat, unfamiliar as they are with how game-changing such exploits proved back in the day. Remakes and re-hashes have gone some way in recent years towards educating and re-introducing such pillars of gaming good times, but some titles we've come to accept will always be lost to the ravages of time. Enter ***The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind***.

15 years ago it was the first sandbox RPG to hit consoles with its arrival on the original Xbox, and it completely rewrote the genre rulebook. It paved the way for everything from Bethesda's own *Skyrim* and *Fallout* games, to the





WITH ITS ARRIVAL ON THE FIRST XBOX 15 YEARS AGO, THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND WAS THE FIRST SANDBOX RPG AND COMPLETELY REWROTE THE GENRE RULEBOOK

big-budget behemoths of *The Witcher* series all the way to indie darlings such as *Minecraft* and *Terraria*. In the sharp, unforgiving light of 2017 *The Elder Scrolls III* is far too unwieldy to extract fresh enjoyment from. To enjoy the delights of *Morrowind* you just had to be there...

Until now.

It's sunny in Baltimore, despite warnings that a blizzard is inbound. We're sat in a small demo room, walled off in the corner of Zenimax Online Studios' sprawling warren of an HQ, the team outside is hard at work on *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s next massive chapter. The place is not unlike an actual dungeon, spread out over two floors and dotted with *Elder Scrolls* paraphernalia: swords, axes, armor, and even yellowed scrolls etched with calligraphy are displayed on ornate wooden desks here and there. A huge battered Glass Sword sits on one desk setting us to wondering what possible use it could have seen...

If you hadn't guessed it already, the next stop on the grand *The Elder*

Scrolls Online tour is Vvardenfell, the legendary landmass of *TESIII* reinvigorated for the contemporary MMO. The fact that this is an excellent idea is made apparent as soon as creative director, Rich Lambert, takes the reins of the game before us. His avatar steps onto the pier of Seyda Neen, the very same starting ramshackle port town that we stepped out into 15 years ago. Only now it looks glorious. Shadows drape underneath the hip-high mushrooms which line the dirt streets, dynamically shifting with the movement of the sun. Stepping from the pier into the town proper, we notice all at once myriad little details rushing in to fill our remembered mental image of this place from a decade and a half earlier. Familiar chimneys emerge atop thatch roofing, the trade house is in the same place as it was all that time ago and even the spacing between the buildings feels *just* right. Lambert takes his avatar into the nearby governor's hall and, yep, there's the

NPC (or an ancestor of them at least) that once upon a time helped us create our *TESIII* prisoner.

Morrowind is back and in full high-definition fettle, beaming forth from your Xbox One. This isn't a straight-up reboot, though. Instead what we have is the entire landmass of *TESIII* copied over into the existing world of *The Elder Scrolls Online*, and then completely re-tooled from the ground up with contemporary visual fidelity and then repopulated with a huge number of varying things to do and stories to discover.

Good morrow

"*Morrowind* was right there for us," says Matt Firor, producer of *ESO* and this new chapter, "and it hits a lot of really good beats. It's modern enough that a lot of people will remember it, and it's considered the gold standard of design in an *Elder Scrolls* game.

It was the first one that did the open-world, radiant quest AI stuff, and you can go in whatever order you want, so it's remembered very

ABOVE For anyone familiar with the old game, seeing *Morrowind* in 2017-o-vision is mouth watering.

BELOW Meet the lovely Matt Firor, producer of *ESO* and big fan of (mud?) crab cakes.



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

This is the largest landmass the ESO team has built at 30 per cent bigger than Orsinium



→ nostalgically by players. It's also modern enough that we could actually go in and dissect it and see how it would work in ESO."

For new players, ingratiated into the world of Elder Scrolls through the likes of *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, this is a chance to learn where it all really began without the risk of stabbing your eye out on a jagged texture or getting mauled into frustrated chunks by Cliff Racers. For those in the know, however, there's added spice. "It has that extra depth," says Firor. "If you played *TESIII*, you'll just start smiling."

Viv' le difference

The story is set 700 years prior to the events of *TESIII*, and so while many things are familiar, there's plenty to discover anew. Vivec City, for example, is not yet the nine canton-filled mega city, but still under construction with a much more manageable three cantons. The Red Mountain volcano sitting at the center of the island is not nearly as overwhelming as it will become in *TESIII*'s timeline, so there are lush areas of greenery and coastal regions to explore as well as ash-choked lava lands. The main campaign, lasting about 30-40 hours, will take us across much of the landscape in a



bid to cure the mortal god Vivec of a mystery illness, and will be playable to everyone the minute they buy the new chapter. The team at ZOS shun the term 'expansion', given that it implies a need to have ploughed through a ton of game already to enjoy this brand new stuff.

"Elder Scrolls Online is a virtual world, and there's one entry point to it through the original game and now there's a completely different entry point," explains Firor. "They all attach to the same world, so it doesn't matter if you came late to the game or not. You're gonna be a high-enough level to do anything else in the game."

You don't even have to leap into the more traditional Elder Scrolls story

TOP Fan-favorite NPC Naryu Virian will return from the base game, starring in her own sizeable subplot alongside the main story.

first if you don't fancy it. There's a new class as well as new PvP modes, new dungeons, and a new 12-player Trial (ESO's answer to large group raids) to get unsheathed for. 'The entire game is the end game' is a mantra that we hear uttered often while at the studio, and it's hard not to fall for the sentiment.

One thing strikes us as we see more of the game unfold before us: the ZOS team has been feverishly listening to, and acting on, fan feedback in the two years since the game's troubled launch. The new class, the Warden, is a prime example of this. An old whinge that we'd muttered during launch week was that the classes were too difficult to easily get a read on. All classes can wear all armor types, so a Sorcerer could easily come at you decked in heavy plate armor or a claymore-wielding Dragonknight could wheel in your direction in a set of silk-light armor pyjamas. In an MMO, knowing what your various team members, or opposing players in PvP modes, are capable of at a glance is a pretty integral ingredient.

There are no such worries with the Warden thanks to the delightfully accentuated animations of the hugely varied skillset [see 'The Warden']. While jumping into the



THE TEAM HAS BEEN FEVERISHLY LISTENING TO,
AND ACTING ON, FAN FEEDBACK IN THE TWO YEARS
SINCE THE GAME'S TROUBLED PC LAUNCH

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ABOVE The new map also features a bunch of new Delves: smaller public dungeons for you to crawl through with friends you meet in the world.

LEFT The new Battlegrounds PvP mode will have leaderboards, though no spectator mode is planned as yet.



THE WARDEN

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO YOUR NEW FAVORITE CLASS

GET YOUR BIROS AND GRAPH PAPER OUT: IT'S TIME TO PLAN YOUR NEW BUILD WITH THE WARDEN'S FULL ARRAY OF NEW ABILITIES, SPLIT UP OVER THREE BRAND NEW SKILL TREES

WINTER'S EMBRACE BEST FOR...

Taking the hits

SKILL 1

POLAR WIND

Use this to blast friends with soothing healing over time or to strike at foes with nasty frost damage.

SKILL 2

ICE FORTRESS

Get an icy shell over your torso with this skill and you'll get a meaty buff to your armor rating.

SKILL 3

IMPALING SHARDS

Need to move enemies around? This activates a snare so that you can yank to your heart's content.

SKILL 4

CRYSTALLIZED SHIELD

Summons exactly what you think it would, buffing your armour and making you even harder to kill.

SKILL 5

FROZEN DEVICE

Drop this rune onto the ground and any enemies that step on it will be teleported to you. Ideal for keeping monsters off your group's healer.

ULTIMATE SKILL

SLEET STORM

This spell covers a large area and buffs any party members caught in the blast with protection, perfect for opening a boss encounter. It also deals spikes of damage on enemies in the blast zone, so can be used to clear mobs of enemies or to draw threat to yourself and away from squishier friends.



GREEN BALANCE BEST FOR...

Healing your buddies

SKILL 1

FUNGAL GROWTH

Not nearly as awful as it sounds, this skill lets you heal friends in a cone in front of you.

SKILL 2

HEALING SEED

Pop these into the ground and the flora that grows will steadily heal nearby buds over time.

SKILL 3

LIVING VINES

This seeks out the team member with the lowest health for a dose of life juice.

SKILL 4

GREEN LOTUS

A lovely blooming flower visual effect, yes, but also a powerful damage buff.

SKILL 5

NATURE'S GRASP

Distant friend in deep doo-doo? This skill pulls you directly to them for timely life saving when needed fast.

ULTIMATE SKILL

SECLUDED GROVE

This billowing ability sees trees grow in a circle around you for rejuvenating friends.

ANIMAL COMPANION BEST FOR...

Dealing out tons of damage

SKILL 1

SCREAMING CLIFF RACER

Once upon a time these haranguing beasts were the scourge of our existence. Now they are our spike damage dealing beasts.

SKILL 2

SUBTERRANEAN ASSAULT

Summon an underground turtle beast (a Haj Mota if you need to know) and it'll arc forward in a stunning line of hurt.

SKILL 3

GROWING SWARM

Bees? Bees. Well, actually they are Fletcher Flies, but they hurt whoever you send them after so just picture bees and you're on the right track.

SKILL 4

BULL NETCH

Activate this and a floating Bull Netch will hover by your side recovering your stamina for you. Cheers, you disgusting ball of flesh, you.

SKILL 5

BIRD OF PREY

Gotta go fast? This skill increases movement speed, though whether that's for running away or for barraging into a fight is up to you.

ULTIMATE SKILL

WILD GUARDIAN

Unlike the timed spirit creatures that you summon with your other skills, this wild bear will stick with you until death. We're told to expect a streamlined control system which allows us to command it to attack things on our behalf.

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

With the release of the One Tamriel update last year, the number of concurrent ESO players tripled overnight



THERE'S A TANTALIZING SCOPE HERE FOR DRAMA AND TREACHERY, SPREAD OUT ACROSS DISTINCT MODES SUCH AS TEAM DEATHMATCH OR CAPTURE THE FLAG

→ game as a more druid-flavored class, spraying healing flora one minute and summoning giant bears the next, you'll also see throbbing blue ethereal glows hum off your weapons, butterfly wings sprout as you gain speed buffs or icy armor cover your body. You can spot the Warden a mile off and the class gains that much more identity for it.

Choose your battles

It's just as well you can read the classes that much better, as when *Morrowind* launches it'll come alongside a much more competitive series of PvP modes, under the new Battlegrounds system. Here three teams, each one with four players, will all compete in smaller-scale, heavily designed multiplayer scraps. Think gladiatorial arenas only with craggy ruined towers to pepper arrows from, line-of-sight blocking ramparts to sneak around and intense tactical co-operation required to



climb leaderboards. Previously the PvP offering of ESO was much broader, with a much higher player cap on each map making it hard to feel like you were contributing to a victory (or a loss). Here every team member is integral to the action and there's no place to hide. Why three-way fights? According to Firor it's because it's just that much more fun that way. The added spice of a third team means underdogs always have a shout at victory, as there's scope for sneaky team-ups between statistically weaker sides. There's a tantalizing scope here for drama and treachery, spread out across distinct modes like Team Deathmatch or Capture The Flag (here called Capture The Scrolls).

Firor explains, "Team Deathmatch is going to be a dogpile of people just killing and killing each other. But then you play Capture The Scrolls, sometimes it's not your best option to kill an enemy if you see that they're attacking the third enemy. The whole

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THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

The standard boxed edition of *Morrowind* costs \$59.99 if you pre-order it now



SOTHA SIL, AKA THE CLOCKWORK CITY, IS A LORE VETERAN'S DREAM LOCALE, WITH OMINOUS AUTOMATON GUARDS, RAPTOR-ESQUE BOSSES, AND UNNERVING VISTAS

→ point is you get points as you defend the scroll in your territory, so if there are two guys from the other two teams fighting, you just step back, because it's all time-based."

The Battlegrounds themselves are hugely varied and a delight to explore, from a Daedric ruin with a giant central pedestal of high ground to fight over, a lava-filled quarry near Red Mountain, all ash and open killing grounds, and a Dwemer fort, with four areas interlinked between narrow corridors prime for ambushes.

Trial and terror

But if PvP isn't your thing there's still a load more PvE to get stuck into once the main story's done (or before!). The new Trial is at the top of the pile, taking place in a lore veteran's dream locale: Sotha Sil, AKA The Clockwork City. For the uninitiated this is a huge automaton-filled city, all contained within a miniature orb construct. Inside the city is a cavernous metal



cave system, with huge open spaces woven with branching paths and vertical spaces. As we're taken on a development build whistle-stop tour of the area we see ominous automaton guards, raptor-esque boss fights, and unnerving vistas where the skybox is filled with whirring cogs. From certain vantage points you're given early teasers of what you'll explore later, too. We come away with a serious Dark Souls-ian vibe.

All this content to one side though, it's hard not to circle back to that

TOP ESO is already a hive of mororly intriguing stories waiting to be discovered. *Morrowind* continues that. One quest has you helping a 'former' save his 'crops' from 'bandits'. Yeah... he's growing drugs.

major, obvious initial lure. This is a new take on *Morrowind*, promising to be more relevant to new players while simultaneously nostalgia-baiting for returning visitors.

"Xbox fans, of course, will remember that *Morrowind* was one of the first RPGs," says Firor, "if not the first sandbox RPG, on any console and, in many ways we're about to release an homage to that game. If they want to see what all the excitement was about and they don't have an original Xbox, now they can check it out."

It also happens to be a touchstone for one of the more under-celebrated successes on Xbox. *The Elder Scrolls Online* has come back fighting after its console launch, and is now one of the most improved games to have hit the machine. And it's about to give us all an unavoidably attractive new reason to re-roll our way back in.

Get your party ready for *The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind's* release on June 6



SEYDA NEEN

Head into the building where your *TESIII* character was assigned their race and class back in 2002 and you'll bump into a familiar NPC – or his ancestor from 700 years prior at least. He'll even start asking you for your details, until he realizes you're not a prisoner from the boat. Feels good to be the Vestige!



BALMORA

It's in Balmora that we spot a returning *Morrowind* favorite: Silt Striders. These chitinous, impossibly long-legged insects act as fast-travel points, letting you travel to places the existing Wayshrine system doesn't necessarily reach. Though this will still involve loading screens, so we'll still not get to see how these things actually walk on those stilt legs.

VISIT VVARDENFELL

SEE IT BEFORE IT'S ASH!

JOURNEY TO SOME OF THE LITERALLY HOT SPOTS ACROSS THIS VOLCANIC LOCALE

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VIVEC CITY

Brilliantly, the further into the story you get, and the worse the Tribunal Vivec's illness becomes, the more dominating the view of the Red Mountain at the center of the island gets. To the point where it fills the air around Vivec City with ash. As if the denizens of these cantons didn't have it bad enough, the giant rock suspended in the air above the city will smash them all to pulp should the big V snuff it. No pressure, then.



SADRITH MORA

See those giant towers covered in mushrooms? Inside live a bunch of wizards who, like a pair of competing middle-aged dads with their annual Christmas light demonstrations, let the elaborate displays on their abodes represent their power. The dude in the middle? Not one to mess with judging by the size of his spore-ific accommodation. Insert your own joke about them sounding like fun guys.

A promotional image for the video game Dead Rising 4. The background is a dark, atmospheric scene of a zombie-infested city at night. In the foreground, a large, dark, textured arm of a zombie reaches out from the right side. In the background, several zombies are visible, some standing and some in motion. The title "DEAD RISING 4" is prominently displayed in the center. The words "DEAD RISING" are in a white, distressed, stencil-like font. The number "4" is in a large, red, distressed font. Below the title, the tagline "LET THE SLAY RIDE BEGIN" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the text "IN STORES NOW" is written in a large, white, distressed font. The Capcom logo is centered below the tagline. At the very bottom, there is a green banner with the Xbox One logo and text.

DEAD RISING 4

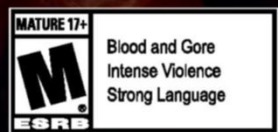
LET THE SLAY RIDE BEGIN

IN STORES NOW

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 **XBOX ONE**



Windows 10

Reviews



Your gaming month sorted with
our definitive reviews

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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...

B Titles with this symbol are on Game Preview, so while they aren't finished you can still find out if they're worth playing



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

Pssst. Want some free travel advice from your old pals at OXM? Of course you do. Don't visit Louisiana. EVER. Oh sure, New Orleans is a splendid city. It parties like nowhere else on Earth, keeps the bead industry in rude health and, above all, does absolutely killer Creole sea gumbo. But despite the best efforts of its sensational seafood, **Resident Evil VII: Biohazard** (p68) has put us off the Bayou State for life. That's what happens when you spend ten hours imprisoned on a sinister, swampy estate run by flesh-eating hillbillies. Resi's newest Big Bads may be horrendous hicks, but boy do the Baker family know how to cook up a cracking horror reboot. Capcom's latest is actually unusually light in the zombie department this time out, so if you're looking for a hearty helping of undead action, you'd better slip into the first two episodes of **The Walking Dead: A New Frontier** (p74), where we reunite with 13-year-old badass Clementine and see what she's been up to since the end of *Season Two*. In our humble opinion, Telltale is unquestionably the new master of virtual brain-biters everywhere. If all these grisly endeavours are bumming you out, then hop on over to our review of **Shantae: Half-Genie Hero** (p76). Shantae can turn into a crab or a monkey, shake her hair all over the place, and beat up guys who make women dress up as mermaids. Perfect.



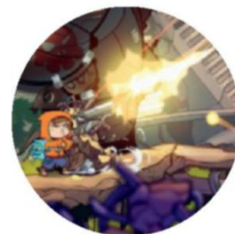
068



074



076



079

067

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Capcom PRs used VHS players to promote *Resident Evil VII* as old-school tapes feature heavily in the game





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

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

ABOVE The Bakers are cannibalistic sickos, no question, yet there's a deeper backstory that deftly handles how they came to be this way.

PREPARE TO MEET YOUR BAKER, AS HORROR IS REBORN **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

See that 'VII' sitting a couple of inches above? Hoo-boy, is it unnecessary. Chances are, the ever escalating number reminds you of all the heaving zombie baggage this horror franchise has been saddled with in recent years. What a pity, because while it makes for some clever iconography—the 'VII' cutely slots into 'EVIL' for the game's logo—this sequel firmly returns Capcom's spook 'em up to its origins. Brace yourself: real survival horror is back...

Before we can fully analyse *Resi VII*'s many considerable successes, context is required. Since the action-heavy *Resi 6* slumped onto shelves in late 2012 the horror

landscape has changed. And it's changed drastically. The reemergence of 'found footage' spooksters on the silver screen in the late noughties helped give birth to the likes of the terrific *Outlast*, before *Alien: Isolation* showed everyone (Capcom included) how deeply terrifying big-budget horror games could truly be.

Resi remix

Thankfully, Capcom was clearly taking notes. Be in no doubt: *Resi VII* is a proud return to form. This is a resplendent rallying cry, one that screams "proper *Resi* is back, baby!" at the top of its lungs, before plunging you head-first into a resolutely old-school, lo-fi serving of survival horror. In short, this is the game

you've been pining for ever since Leon went medieval on all that Ganado ass back in 2005's *Resi 4*.

Not that this is remotely like Mr Kennedy's seminal Spanish horror quest. No, this is very much a celebration of Spencer Mansion's spooky sensibilities. If you sheepishly crept around gaming's most famous haunted house in the HD remaster of the original *Resident Evil* that popped up on Xbox Live back in 2015, you'll have some idea of what to expect.

Gone are the gaudy theatrics of *Resi 6*'s ludicrous, globe-hopping excess. You'll find no trio of disjointed campaigns or *Gears Of War*-aping cover shooting here. Instead, prepare for a return to manually storing weapons in item boxes when your



The designers used actual pieces of raw meat as models for some of the game's enemies



ABOVE This jolly cop briefly aids Ethan... emphasis on the 'brief'.

RIGHT Jack is persistent, even when he's being barbecued by fire.



→ backpack gets full; managing inventory space; using strangely shaped, ornate keys to open locked rooms; saving progress on typewriters (technically, tape recorders here); solving kooky puzzles; and combining herbs to heal those boobos. If Capcom's main goal going into *Resi VII* was simply to recapture the spirit of the series' 32-bit glory days, then mission very much accomplished.

For a game that's so profoundly backwards-looking—and we mean that as a compliment—it's somewhat perverse Capcom has decided to pretend the last two main entries didn't happen. It's also absolutely essential to *Resi VII*'s success. There's no talk of Las Plagas, Uroboros, or the sort of 'tache-twirling, horribly convoluted plots Albert Wesker used to love. In their stead is a much simpler, stripped-down tale: one that manages to tap into the uncomplicated story beats of the very first game.

Winters' pain

You play Ethan Winters, a completely average dude with a not-so-average problem: his wife has been missing for three years. The game opens on a video message from Mia, Ethan's other half contacting him out of the blue, seemingly in strife, alone, and afraid. Cue a trip to her last known location, as Winters drives to a chilling homestead in the backwater bayous of Louisiana.

"The head of the Baker family is basically a hillbilly take on the utterly terrifying Nemesis"

Predictably enough, the owners of this eerie estate aren't a friendly bunch. In fact, they make Leatherface look like a downright accommodating host. Enter the Baker family...

Resi VII's main antagonists aren't shades-sporting Umbrella agents or a Tyrant riddled with the T-virus. Part of what makes this gang of terrifying hicks so insidiously sinister is they're less bombastic than the villains of the past. Jack, the head of the clan, is a bespectacled butcher, the kind of unflinching sociopath Rust Cohle would chase through the swamps in *True Detective*. Marguerite, his wife, is the fantastically unhinged matriarch of the family. Lucas, meanwhile, is their crazy offspring, and a man who revels in Saw-style, murderous parlour games. They're brilliant, *brilliant* baddies.

Going back to Jack, poppa Baker is basically a hillbilly take on *Resi 3*'s terrifying Nemesis. The dude is relentless. Sometimes he stalks the halls of his dilapidated, disgusting house, the resultant cat-and-mouse

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A grimy horror reboot served up in a distinctly unsettling Deep South setting.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Deliverance meets *Dawn Of The Dead*... with extra mutant hillbillies.

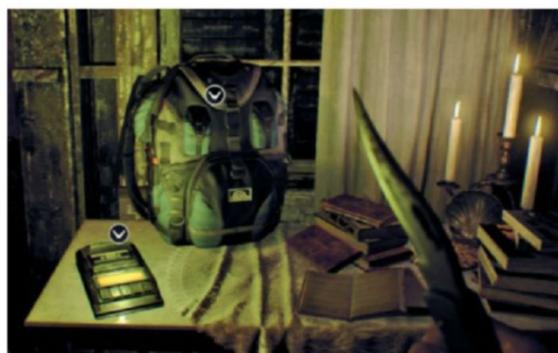
WHO'S IT FOR?

Lapsed *Resi* fans who are desperate to see the series return to its roots.

stealth sections reminiscent of *Alien: Isolation*... if the Xenomorph was a bearded southern psychopath fond of chowing down on offal. At other points you face him in full-blown boss fights, with a couple of choice skirmishes offering up the best battles since *Resi 4*'s El Gigante scuffle. He may well be the series' greatest villain ever.

Some of the game's best extended set-pieces revolve around your clashes with the Bakers, yet much of the barbaric bread-and-butter action eschews them entirely. This is where the Moulds come into play. These thoroughly unpleasant ooze monsters recall the BOWs infected with the T-Abyss virus in *Resident Evil: Revelations*. These horrible gloopy things stagger from side to side, and prove surprisingly tough to kill. Shooting limbs off a Mould won't overly deter it, and the beasts still pull themselves towards Ethan even when literally legless. The only way to put them away once and for all: shoot their heads off.

Are the Moulds a great addition to the pantheon of classic *Resi* foes? Not really. Their rather generic design pales in comparison to creatures like the wonderfully perverse Licker, or devilish Hunter. Yes, they're hard to kill, but once you master removing their slimy craniums from their shoulders, battles with Moulds quickly become a tiresome nuisance, rather than something to legitimately fear.



LEFT Find bigger backpacks to increase storage.

BELOW The handgun has two types of ammo. Switch between them with LT and Y.

SMASH-AND-GRAB

There are quite a few collectibles to be hoovered up throughout *Resi VII* for all you completionists. The most beneficial are antique coins: an in-game, hidden currency that you can splurge buying a magnum or health upgrades. Then there are the Mr Everywhere statuettes. Smash up all of these deviously placed little gnome-like trinkets for the Mr Nowhere Achievement.



In 2008, the original *Resi* was awarded the Guinness World Record for 'Worst Game Dialogue Ever'



ABOVE Mrs Baker's cooking makes us want to staple our mouths shut. Next time, eat out.

RIGHT Trust us, this house is a lot scarier at night.



→ Wisely, Capcom never overloads *Resi VII* with enemy encounters. There are large swathes of action where you won't see a monster for upwards of half an hour, and for the most part the game rations its nasties reasonably well. It actually shows great restraint on the developer's part, because gunplay is seriously good.

You probably weren't expecting us to say this, but *Resi VII* actually does a very passable impression of a decent first-person shooter when the time

comes to go weapons-free. The firearms Ethan scavenges all pack one hell of a wallop, and it's an arsenal that rarely disappoints. Using the guttural M37 to blow a Mould into sludgy chunks is always good for a chuckle, barbecuing Marguerite's guinea pig-sized mosquitos with the Burner flamethrower never fails to delight, while a brief, exhilarating chainsaw battle would surely have Doctor Salvador from *Resi 4* doffing his filthy burlap sack in respect.

ABOVE RIGHT We've already told you we don't want to see your 'special' axe party trick.

BELOW The shotgun is your best pal in a pinch. When Ethan gets cornered, whip it out as fast as you can.

As we said earlier, though, Capcom rarely uses guns as a crutch. *Resi VII* is confident enough in its own deeply unpleasant skin that it's happy to let those feelings of dread creep up on you over extended firearm-free sections. It's here the series once again rediscovers a love for puzzles. Conundrums were all but jettisoned in *Resi 6*, yet here they make a welcome comeback. Will the Baker mansion's selection of gentle switch challenges overly tax your grey matter? Probably not. Still, at least they make thematic sense, while also providing welcome breathing space from all the Mould murder.

Gore and more

It's clear *Resi VII* effortlessly eases past both Chris Redfield's confused safari, and Leon, Jake, and co's bafflingly bloated, crisscrossing horror. More than any other element, it's the game's intoxicating, entirely cohesive world which elevates it far above its predecessors. The Baker estate is both hugely convincing and splendidly grotesque. Whether sitting around the world's least appetising dinner table or squirming at the shrunk heads in Marguerite's hive-infested shack, these grounds are putrid, endlessly sleazy and cloyingly claustrophobic. Hell, *Resi VII* is such a gleefully disgusting abomination you can almost feel its phantom stench invading your nostrils.





Perhaps the biggest compliment we can pay Capcom? *Resi VII* honors its roots while serving up a fresh perspective of a horror icon. Yes, it owes a whole lot to *Outlast* for paving the spine-tingling way, yet at its decomposing heart this is still very much *Resi*. It may act as a hard series reset, a full stop on the off-putting excess of its recent history, but Ethan's adventure still wears the series' slightly camp heart proudly on its gore-slathered sleeve. Bottom line: this is one good first-person Resident Evil.

Fright lite

BUT... it's not a *great* *Resi*. Don't get us wrong, Capcom has categorically made the best entry in the franchise since *Resi 4*, but that doesn't mean its latest undead effort can match recent horror greats. The fundamental problem with *Resi VII*? It's just not that scary. Persistently unnerving, sure. But genuinely frightening? Not really. Despite its vulgar atmosphere, *Resi*'s trademark sense of silliness ultimately starts to seep through the cracks of this hideous mansion, robbing the game of truly terrifying moments.

Place *Resi VII* next to *Alien: Isolation*, and there's only one champ when it comes to jump scares. Being stalked by The Creative Assembly's unrelenting extraterrestrial is a nerve-shredding experience, and in spite of its homicidal hicks' best

STIM AND HERS

Many key story items, herbs and ammo caches in *Resi VII* can be hard to see – this is one literally dark game, folks. To assist Ethan's poor peepers, take **Psychostimulants**: a type of pill that heightens the senses, placing helpful markers over nearby goodies. Visibility in some areas (like the Bakers' pitch-black basement) is terrible, so look out for these handy drugs.

“Ethan's adventure wears the series' slightly camp heart proudly on its gore-slathered sleeve”

efforts, *Resi VII* never matches the sheer dread that comes from being stalked by the iconic Xeno.

Without wanting to declare ourselves the new Mayors of Town Spoilersville, there's a moment later in the game where Ethan essentially battles a giant, tentacled turd covered in eyeballs. It's in these instances, when *Resi* chases its overt, over-the-top B-movie origins, that it blows the chance to be a legitimately chilling survival horror game. Also, there's a deeply clichéd, super-evil little girl in here (because of course there is) who adds zero to the fright factor.

Problems with the RE Engine don't help matters. Capcom's proprietary tech was built from scratch with *Resi VII* in mind, yet it doesn't always perform as it should. There's a small rap sheet of tech woes on show here —everything from blurry image quality to ugly hair rendering. The chief offender is undoubtedly the game's inability to load textures quickly enough. Asset-streaming is a real

issue on our (admittedly unpatched) version, and it leads to many a moment where the surface of a door, or even the muzzle of your gun look like they've been cobbled together by a pre-schooler on MS Paint.

Pacing problems also raise their hideous head in the last third of the game. Our playthrough takes exactly nine hours, 40 minutes, one second —thanks, stats screen. The majority of the adventure plays out in pleasingly flowing fashion, yet towards the end a detour to [REDACTED] derails the ride.

But despite its issues, praise for the game's successes ultimately deserve to drown out any mumbling moans over problems that arise. More than anything, Capcom deserves kudos for stripping the series of its baggage to bring you its most focused horror title in a decade. Be in no doubt: *Resi VII* has carved itself a seedy, resolutely icky place in our cold, blackened hearts. ■



XBOX
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

OXM VERDICT

A leaner, meaner breed of *Resi* that, despite flaws, puts the series back on track.

8



PUBLISHER TELLTALE GAMES / DEVELOPER TELLTALE GAMES / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$4.99 PER EPISODE OR \$24.99 FOR THE SEASON

The Walking Dead: A New Frontier – Episodes 1 and 2

IT'S SALT, LEMON, AND CLEMENTINE TIME AS SEASON THREE BEGINS **MARTIN KITTS**

074

The Walking Dead doesn't do happy endings. *Season One* finished with eight-year-old Clementine having to choose

between euthanizing the man who had become like a second father to her or leaving him to become a Walker. Either way she ended up alone until *Season Two* provided her with some new companions and, of course, concluded with her condemning at least one of them to death.

Season Three gives the poor girl a break, at least for the opening few scenes. Instead, we're introduced to new leading man, Javier, a wayward son returning to the family home moments too late to be at his father's deathbed. His volatile older brother is none too pleased to see him, but in this flashback sequence, sibling rivalry is swiftly set aside amid the urgent matter of how to deal with dad, who has risen and is somewhat bitey.

Four years later we catch up with what remains of the family. Javier is

accompanied by his brother's wife and two children and no other entourage at all. This is remarkable when you consider that the countless brutal comings and goings of the TV show's seven seasons take place in a mere two years. But beware. They may have stayed together and made it this far with their full complement of limbs and eyes, but Clementine and her talent for misfortune await.

Sweet and deadly

Clementine at 13 years old is far removed from the vulnerable little girl we once knew. She's now a shotgun-toting, ambush-setting badass, bearing the scars of whatever outcome you selected for her in *Season Two*, and she's alone again. You have to wait until the end of the first episode to find out exactly how the future towards which you ushered her ended up being torn from her grasp, with four potential flashback scenes providing the gory details. You probably won't like it, but heartbreak lies at the very core of this series.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

An adventure in zombie hell, with minimal overlap with the TV and comic series.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

An assortment of agonizing choices that characters will remember in future episodes.

WHO'S IT FOR?

If you enjoyed the first two seasons, and want to know what happened to Clementine.

Whether it's the TV show, comic book, or game, The Walking Dead revels in teasing its characters with glimpses of safety and security before plunging them into new depths of misery, each situation more relentlessly horrific than the last. There's probably a limit to how far this formula can sustain the series, as the declining ratings for the TV show's depressing seventh season appear to be demonstrating. However, the games haven't yet brought us to breaking point in the way the TV and comics have, and having some semblance of free will as a player is preferable to watching everything play out as you sit there helplessly.

The grim tone of The Walking Dead as a whole is fueled by its unusual central tenet of 'total infection'. Every living person and everyone who will ever be born carries the zombie virus, and there's no hope of a cure. It doesn't matter if you've been bitten: the world is going to end and everybody is a zombie in waiting. As time passes in the various branches

This is the first game in the series where you play two characters instead of one



LEFT Clementine managed to hang on to her father's cap for all these years.

"The series teases its characters with glimpses of safety before plunging them into misery"

of The Walking Dead's universe and the characters who remain become ever more adept at not being eaten by the shambling herds, the biggest danger is posed by other survivors.

Friends in need

Season Three introduces a large-scale foe in the form of the New Frontier, a wretched hive of scum and villainy headquartered in the ruins of an abandoned city. After getting himself firmly entrenched in the group's bad books, Javier discovers that he has no choice other than to beg for their help in order to save a wounded member of his party. The final scenes of this double-episode opening salvo contain revelations that we never saw coming. After a slowish start it's set up brilliantly for something big and potentially quite nasty over the next episodes.

One thing Clementine mentions when she first meets, overpowers, and completely outsmarts Javier is that she can't believe he's survived as long as he has. We have exactly the

FAR LEFT Clementine could take the lot of them. Also, identical matching guns in *The Walking Dead*? Unlikely.

RIGHT Javier takes a break to listen to some teenage angst from his nephew.



GENERATION GAP

The first two seasons were available on Xbox 360, but this time the older console has been dropped. Luckily Telltale's new online save system means that you can continue on Xbox One if you have access to the completed *Season Two* save. Simply create an account on Telltale's website, load the first episode of *Season Two* on 360, and click a button on the website to link it back to Xbox One.

same impression of him, and his calm normality does seem at odds with the world he's living in. This isn't the demeanor of a man who, after beating down his undead father and watching civilization crumble around him, has spent four years surviving in post-apocalyptic zombie hell.

We've seen other survivors set up enclaves, we've encountered cannibal tribes and witnessed the rise and fall of dictators. One thing they've all got in common is that they're armed to the teeth and sufficiently battle-hardened to be capable of murder without hesitation. Javier isn't like that at all, content to get high in his camper van and lead his friends into obviously dangerous situations.

Perhaps having him as something of a blank canvas is beneficial to the game, and we wasted no time in trying to make him a little more of a bastard.

The shaky start is overwritten soon enough, and we can surely expect some exposition to explain Javier a little better. Both characters have flashback scenes but so far only Clementine's appear to be heading anywhere. The Javier cypher aside, if you made it to the end of *Season Two* then this third installment is shaping up to be an engrossing follow-up for those who can still stomach it. ■



OXM VERDICT

So far, a welcome and even more brutal return to Telltale's most successful series.

8

To make their first HD Shantae game, WayForward raised almost \$950,000 on Kickstarter



PUBLISHER WAYFORWARD / DEVELOPER WAYFORWARD / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$19.99

Shantae: Half-Genie Hero

DOES THAT MEAN WE ONLY GET ONE-AND-A-HALF WISHES? CHRIS SCHILLING

It would be easy to take this kind of game for granted. You don't have to look back too far to find a crowdfunded

classical action-platformer that got things—subtle clue incoming—*mighty* wrong. WayForward might be the most ironically named developer around, with its love for all things retro, but it's not often we get a game that does the basics as well as this.

Yes, *Half-Genie Hero* is more revival than reinvention—it's essentially a 16-bit game with a contemporary lick of paint—but for its six to eight hour duration it's both lovely to look at and very fun to play. As long as you're not expecting anything more than that, you'll likely find yourself thoroughly entertained throughout.

The story is little more than the flimsiest of excuses to send the titular hip-shaking, hair-whipping

heroine to a series of delightfully diverse settings. One invites you to investigate a raging town fire; another asks you to get to the bottom of a sudden outbreak of mass amnesia; a third sees you sourcing a zombie hamster to power a homebrew contraption (as regular hamsters would tire too easily, of course).

The dialogue is silly and self-referential, and the game's happy to poke fun at itself for the absence of a coherent plot in favor of these tenuously connected episodes with characters popping up and disappearing at will. WayForward is well aware that plenty of players won't be paying attention, and so you can hammer the A button to accelerate every line, safe in the knowledge that if you miss anything vital, you can simply visit a nearby hint-giver who'll tell you where you should be headed.

You won't always be going somewhere new, because a certain

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A cute action-platformer that harks back to the 8- and 16-bit eras.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Run, jump, explore, attack: the vocab is familiar, but still satisfying.

WHO'S IT FOR?

If you thought the SNES was as good as games got, you'll adore this.

amount of backtracking is baked into the design. At the end of each stage you'll be awarded with a different transformation for Shantae, from a monkey that can jump higher and cling onto walls, to a crab that can scuttle around underwater, and an elephant that can stomp and charge through solid obstructions.

Shantae shake

On every level you'll see people, places, and things you can't quite get to, and make a mental note to return later—though often you won't have much choice in the matter, as you'll need to retrieve specific items and abilities to progress. New enemies freshen up repeat visits, and there are plenty of extras to grab on your return.

You're never left wondering where to go next, even if the worlds are large enough that you'll have to search carefully, though in some cases you'll be able to grab objects before you

“Shantae needs to foil a guy who kidnaps women and sells them as mermaids”

RIGHT Keep the game on your hard drive after you've finished: WayForward is set to add new playable characters in future updates.



LEFT Negotiating these tricky platforms requires some well-timed jumps.



need them. If you've been especially thorough on your first run through a level, you'll have much less to do on your return. As such, even when you're revisiting familiar places, there's still a strong sense of forward momentum. And if you've not just unlocked a new ability, then you've probably earned enough to buy one from the item shop in the main hub town, whether you spend your gems on the speed of Shantae's hair-whip attack or giving her the ability to shoot fireballs.

It certainly helps that you're visiting places more interesting than your usual desert, ice, fire, and jungle worlds. One stage takes the form of a magic carpet race, where you leap between floating rugs; another sees you infiltrate a factory to foil a nefarious guy who's kidnapping women to slap fish tails onto them so they can pass for mermaids.

WayForward attempts to mitigate the inverse difficulty curve that

URN YOUR KEEP

As well as the village store, you can spend your gems at Tuki's shop. She can be found hiding in urns within certain stages, selling rare potions and transformations. Shantae can become a fruit-producing tree or assume the form of a jug of gems if she's low on health or funds respectively. Best of all, however, is the Blobfish transformation. In practical terms it's just about useless; for comedy value it's all but essential.

plagues so many games of this kind, whereby the further you progress, the easier the game seems to get. In the early stages of *Half-Genie Hero*, when you have just two hearts to play with, you'll find yourself playing much more cautiously than in later stages when top-ups are in abundance and enemy attacks deal half the damage. Its solution isn't always elegant, with one-hit-kill lasers, insta-death poison pools, and bosses that take an inordinate amount of punishment before they finally explode.

Date with death

But when 'death' only means returning to the last checkpoint minus a small chunk of health, frustration barely lasts longer than the mere seconds it takes to respawn. Besides, when you have the ability to toggle any of your unlocked buffs and abilities, you can pretty much tailor the challenge to your own individual needs.

All of which adds up to an adventure that's as breezy and likeable as it is safe and predictable. Still, what a joy to play a crowdfunded game that raised only a fraction of more heavily publicized campaigns, while looking (and sounding, thanks to Jake Kaufman's wonderfully hummable music) like a million dollars more. And as Shantae's part Jinn, it's only fitting that her game is released in the New Year: it's the perfect tonic for those post-holiday blues. ■



OXM VERDICT

An old-school adventure that lacks new ideas but is beautifully put together.



TowerFall Ascension

COUCHPLAY COLOSSUS TAKES ITS SHOT AT GLORY **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

Archery is badass. From Robin Hood (either the corny Kevin Costner one or Disney's fantastic fox) to Legolas,

fiction is filled with eagle-eyed bow masters who can cleave an apple in two from 500 yards away. Good news: you can add the cast of this intoxicatingly anarchic indie to that quiver-packing list.

For years we've enviously peered at friends as they enjoy *TowerFall Ascension* on other machines; countless lunchtimes filled with cackles, despairing cries, and blood-curdling hollers as the game's arena archery enraptures all who play it. And for good reason. Matt Thorson's pointy, single-screen battle royale is a modern couchplay classic that's as refreshingly simple as it is devilishly competitive.

Take a bow

At its best, *TowerFall Ascension* sees you and three pals battling to be the last archer standing, with each combatant dashing, jumping, and wall-sliding to avoid getting pierced by fellow players' arrows or being popped on the head. While the initial action screams simplicity, and may even have you believing skewering friends is all down to luck, there's actually a hell of a lot of hidden depth going on under those hoods.

The moment you realize you can catch rivals' arrows mid-flight by pressing the dash button at just the right second is exactly the sort of

RIGHT Levels are crawling with monsters, like flying eyeballs. Buzz off, freaks.

short
cut

WHAT IS IT?

An arena-based archery showdown where you try to shoot your friends.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

It's sort of similar to *Nidhogg*, if the swords were ditched for bows.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Xbox One-owning humans who enjoy the company of other humans.



"It's a refreshingly simple, modern couchplay classic"

air-punching revelation that makes *TowerFall* such a constantly surprising joy. Is it a tad disappointing it still lacks online matches? Sure. But when you consider this fabulously frenzied party game has been made by just one man, and that no online encounter could capture the intimate charms of besting your real-life buds, we totally understand the omission.

Of course, if you're Becky or Billy No BFFs, the heart of *TowerFall* is instantly pierced. Having physical 'in the flesh' friends by your side for this thrill ride is crucial. The smattering of single-player content is seriously light. Like, 'you'll be done with it in two hours' light. A skimpy set of tutorial trials (where you have to shoot dummies with a limited amount of gimmicky projectiles, à la the wall-burrowing Drill Arrows) offer briefly clever blink-and-you'll-miss-it entertainment value. Yet there's no getting away from the facts: this is an experience that has been designed to be cherished with others.

There's another big ol' 'but' waiting to puncture this marksman: the game's brilliant *Dark World* expansion

isn't included. It's a kinda stingy cut when you consider not owning said DLC limits the Quest survival mode to two players, rather than the four-player fun that awaits if you buy the added content pack. Oh, and it also means you miss out on the add-on's excellent bosses, including a creepy as hell giant moose skull. Tsk, tsk. Seeing as Xbox fans have waited three years for *TowerFall Ascension*, it feels like a missed opportunity that this tardy port isn't quite the definitive edition that it should be.

To get overly obsessed about what's not here would be uncharitable to the extreme, though. Despite arriving on Xbox later than we'd like, and a little threadbare as a package at that, *TowerFall Ascension* remains one of the great local multiplayer games of this generation. If you're even semi sociable, this deserves to fire its way onto your Xbox One. ■



OXM VERDICT

A multiplayer master that shoots to thrill and always hits. Pity about the missing DLC.

9

PUBLISHER ADULT SWIM GAMES / DEVELOPER SUPER MEGA TEAM / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST \$14.99

Rise & Shine

THE EARLY BIRD CATCHES THE RETRO SHOOTER SLAUGHTER **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

Do you ever wish you could sit down and play a videogame version of Disney Pixar's *Wreck-It Ralph* (no, of course

the rubbish Nintendo-only tie-in doesn't count)? Well, good news: this violent 2D shooter definitely has a little Ralph stored in its bullet-spewing chambers, if not any bits of the actual John C. Reilly.

For one thing, *Rise & Shine* takes place in the decidedly meta Game-Earth: a land of constant videogame nods, where zombified Goomba-aping mushrooms attack with fanged ferocity, or a distinctly Gordon Freeman-ish crowbar hangs like a cherished painting in the Louvre. The knowing winks aren't universally clever, but these retro Easter eggs go down a treat more often than they crack with smugness.

Guns 'n games

The headline duo are pretty charming, too. You're stuffed into the adorable parka of a stalwart, super-shooty boy called Rise, and his wise-cracking, sentient pistol, Shine—see what Super Mega Team did there? The pair combine to delicious effect in a tactile, if fiddly, side-scrolling hybrid.

Over 14 increasingly punishing levels, here called scenes, Shine and his pistol pal riff on cherished classics. They rain down fire from behind cover (à la *Gears Of War*), shoot, dodge, and double-jump Mega Man style and manipulate homing bullets through electric mazes like...

RIGHT *Rise & Shine* is laden with Nintendo references, especially Super Mario ones.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A gory shooter that combines a retro style with brutal bullet hell.

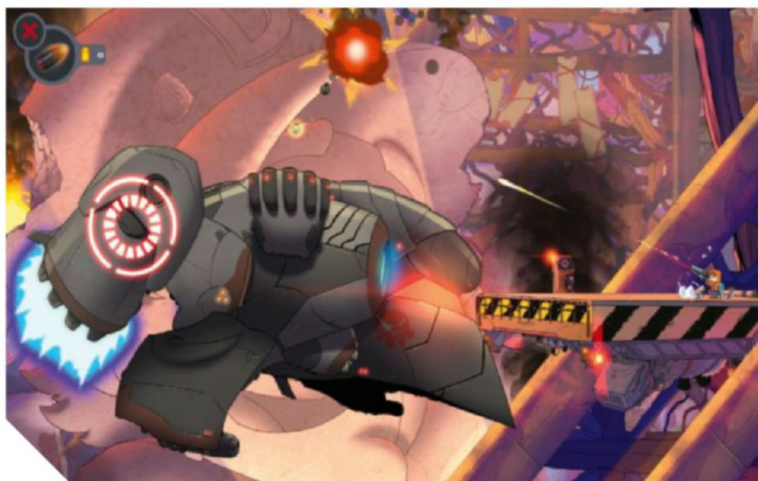
WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Silly, knowing, and a little frustrating. Still, it's mostly a good time.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Those looking for a stiff challenge and fans of '80s platformers.

BELOW Why can't these droids appreciate Rise's cool orange parka?



“Rise can have his head lopped off or be barbecued by a robot's lasers”

um, literally no other game we can think of. See, *Rise & Shine* does have some ideas of its own after all.

Influences from other titles aren't just mechanical. *Rise & Shine's* cuddly yet carnage-laden art style recalls Behemoth's beloved *Castle Crashers*, and many scenes revel in the sort of darkly comic, over-the-top deaths seen in *Limbo* and *Inside*. When Rise has his head lopped off or is barbecued by robot lasers, it's impossible not to think of the unfortunate child protagonists in Playdead's indie classics, or their array of kid-kabooshing puzzles.

While the core controls and gunplay have a satisfying oomph to them—in large part thanks to some terrific use of your pad's rumble motors—the action can exasperate. Example? How about snaking finicky homing bullets around armies of floating droids in order to flick switches as part of increasingly convoluted door puzzles. Indeed, many of *Rise & Shine's* biggest problems revolve around controlling the titular firearm's ammo.

Certain boss fights demand you swap between Shine's standard and electrified bullets while juggling his homing shot and explosive modifiers, and it just never feels intuitive. Hell, in some scenarios, it's about as natural as rubbing your stomach, patting your head, and reciting the Gettysburg Address... backwards... in a minefield of dead 1-up mushrooms—cutely, that last image is actually in the game. We love cute nods to classic games of old, but the constant faffing with ammo in forever frenzied battles? We have to admit, not so much.

Rise & Shine can be a seriously tricky customer, then. Awkward boss fights and sporadically fussy controls mean there's a serious challenge to be had here. Yet providing you can overlook the moments when this old-school throwback makes you feel like a plate-spinning gun-for-hire, it's a challenge (mostly) worth rising to. ■



OXM VERDICT

A gorgeous, often savage bullet hell that has the power to charm, thrill, and fluster all at once.

7



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extra

Get more from your Xbox





Sometimes, it's hard to keep the voices at bay. Shut up Mr and Mrs Inner Monologue, we will *not* set fire to the neighbors' rose bush! When the urge to embrace our internal demons arise, we always find videogames are a rather wonderful outlet for those baser violent urges. That's why we've hopped back into **Hitman** (p84), so that Agent 47 can act as a super-stabby cypher to help wash away our arsonistic impulses. There's nothing like pretending to be a yoga instructor, then booting an ex-Yakuza lawyer over a balcony to rebalance your Zen. Hey, don't judge us. We've been going through a lot this month. Revisiting **Bully: Scholarship Edition** (p88) has brought all those painful school yard memories flooding back. If, like us, you need a little help getting over those repressed high-school night terrors, going back to Jimmy Hopkins' jock-pummelling sandbox can prove oh-so-cathartic. Once you've reclaimed your virtual lunch money, you should be ready to play nice with others once more. If that's the case, visit our **15 best companions** list (p92). Whether it's a wisecracking Breegull or a megalomaniacal AI system who's had its operating system downloaded into a potato, you'll be hard pressed to find more loyal sidekicks than these kickass compadres. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're keen to pop back to Sapienza to poison a dastardly scientist's spaghetti bolognese.



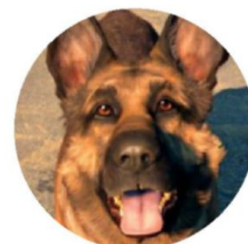
084



087



088



092

083



Keep an eye out for this badge over the next few pages: it indicates when a game of old can be booted up in shiny Xbox One-o-vision.

→ CHECK OUT OUR VAST LIBRARY OF XBOX FEATURES AT WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM



Pushing the boundaries of common sense reveals **Hitman's** true depth. It's time to take the rubber duck challenge

MARTIN KITTS

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER IO INTERACTIVE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE MARCH-OCTOBER 2016



From the hands-on fibre wire to the long-range sniper rifle and everything in between, a life of assassination is a playground filled with deadly

toys. Even something as basic as a screwdriver serves multiple purposes, as a diversion, a means to rig a trap, or simply as a substitute for a dagger. There are so many options, but today I just want to know one thing: how far can I get using only an exploding rubber duck?

When I first try it in *Hitman's* Paris level, I'm reminded of how thoroughly the game has been tested, tweaked, revised, and patched over the last nine months. I could have sworn that interesting items would be investigated by the nearest character, even if he was a protected target, but if that was ever true in an earlier version it doesn't work anymore. Unaware of this flaw in my plan, I stroll into the mansion, brazenly brandishing my duck, and find a space in the crowd. A spotlight picks out Viktor Novikov as he makes his grand entrance and I quietly throw the duck onto the staircase ahead of him.

I'd intended for him to pick it up and carry it around, which is surely not an unreasonable expectation. I was then going to sneak upstairs to find Dalia Margolis and do the predefined hit where I shove her off a balcony and she lands right on top of Novikov. My masterstroke for a killer video clip would have been to set off the duckbomb as she fell, killing them both and, with a little luck, blasting her skyward from whence she came.

Duck fails

Instead, Novikov immediately senses danger. He pauses and sends a bodyguard to investigate, at which point I start attracting attention from other parts of the room. To distract them I set off the bomb, which actually does kill Novikov, along



with his bodyguard and a handful of bystanders. Panic ensues as the crowd rushes for the exit and I leave the building among them. Then I remember that I need to take out Dalia, who is now locked in her safe room. Back to the drawing board I go.

Levels where it's possible to isolate the main character are easier. In Thailand, Jordan Cross rehearses in a recording booth with a trashcan in the corner. It seems like the perfect spot, and sure enough the duck can be completely concealed in the trashcan, so I hide it and wait for Jordan to show up. He arrives on schedule, and I stand right outside the window to ensure that the last thing he'll see is me.

This is when I discover that either Thai trashcans are massively over-engineered or a small rubber duck can't really hold enough C4 to form a room-clearing bomb. It makes a big enough noise to break the window but Jordan Cross is pretty much unscathed, and the last thing I see as his security men cut me down is the surprised look on his face beneath that ridiculous man-bun. Still, this is my *Groundhog Day* and I have the last laugh when I reload my save and plant the duck on the floor next to his microphone stand. He reaches down to grab it, and I can only hope that the guards who came to bag him up afterwards brought a mop and bucket.

Colorado proves to be a harder assignment, due to there being four targets and just two rubber ducks. Perhaps there's a way to get them at the precise moment their paths cross, but the bath toy's explosive power is clearly limited, and it's extremely hard to lay an ambush because of its high visibility and irresistible nature. Rubber ducks are like catnip in *Hitman*, which is unfortunate when dealing with the proximity-triggered variety.

In the end I settle for shooting pretty much everyone in the level, which is a super-cheap fallback technique that always delivers. With all four targets completely unguarded, all that's left is to knock them out, pile them up and throw in the duck. In Hokkaido, the challenge of performing a fatal quack attack on Erich Soders is compounded by the fact that he's right in the middle of heart transplant surgery. Yes, he's a bit defenceless at this moment, but how am I supposed to casually place a bright red squeeze toy (with glowing eyes) on the operating table, given that it's the single most attractive object in the world of *Hitman*? Even if I could put it there, one of the doctors, nurses or guards in attendance would surely run off with it.

Having Soders grab it himself is probably out of the question, what with the general anaesthetic and all that, so I'm reduced to knocking out a nurse in an anteroom, lobbing the duck through the open door and running for the exit as I trigger it. Not exactly elegant, but explosive assassinations are rarely ever subtle.

Weapon swap

While it is almost certainly possible to kill every target in the game using rubber ducks, as long as you bring a backup weapon to take care of the heat you'll attract while doing so, why would anybody want to? The answer

WHAT IS IT?

Stealth, disguises, blatant murder, and vast replayability. It's part puzzle game, part shooter, and all brilliant all the time.

"Rubber ducks are like catnip in Hitman—no one can resist them"

lies at the heart of what I love about *Hitman*, namely that there's no right or wrong way to do it. Everything IO Interactive has added to set you up with a perfect hit is optional, and no matter how bad a mess you make of it you'll never be told what to do.

There's no special person who needs protecting, no 'game over' for killing too many civilians. You'll never be forced to stay within a particular area and you won't have to go back to a checkpoint if you get spotted. Even the most liberal open-world games will make you replay a mission for failing some of those conditions, which makes *Hitman* all the more remarkable when you consider what a traditionally rigid genre it comes from. However hard you try, you can't break it. *Hitman* is the Tonka truck of stealth.

There are rules, of course, and exploiting the fact that *Hitman* is clearly and unashamedly a videogame is part of the fun. Anyone who's whiled away a few hours replaying a mission to unlock its numerous opportunities and challenges will probably have spent a good chunk of that time trying to lure troublesome characters to a particular spot. There are various approaches. Guards can be shifted

out of their routine by dropping contraband. Enforcers can be nudged into a halfway alert state by hanging around in their line of sight just long enough to get them to notice you.

Throwing a coin is the method introduced in the tutorial, and this can be exploited to separate a single character from a group. By dropping coins in precise locations you can even determine which way the character will turn when he comes to investigate and where he'll stand when he gets there. Finding these little windows of opportunity can make for some fiendish challenges when you come to create custom contracts.

I do wonder how many people are actually delving this deeply into *Hitman*. Most of the Achievements beyond the third or fourth episode, even the easiest ones, are currently the diamond-encrusted 'rare' type. At the time of writing, only four per cent of players had unlocked the Achievement for smuggling an item into the splendid Hokkaido level, which is almost a prerequisite of finishing it more than once. How anyone could get to the end of that level, and consider the game 'finished' is beyond me.

I think that ignoring the obvious and just trying to assassinate targets in improbable ways is actually the best way of discovering *Hitman*'s endless possibilities. Push it to the limit, embrace the chaos, and stay away from the restart button. It's how I got hooked on the series in the first place, as many levels in the early games were extremely difficult to complete 'properly'. As beautifully crafted as this new *Hitman* is, it's comforting to know there's no problem that can't be fixed with a rubber duck or two. ■

ABOVE A good assassin never goes anywhere without his rubber duck.



085

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



Going on a lazy Sunday cruise in **Forza Horizon 3** and soaking up the wonders of the Australian landscape **PAUL TAYLOR**

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / DEVELOPER PLAYGROUND GAMES / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE SEPTEMBER 2016



Benjamin Penrose, art director on both *Forza Horizon 3* and *2*, is a romantic at heart. This may seem paradoxical considering those

two racing games primarily encourage you to tear through cities and around the countryside at a rate of many somethings-per-hour in hypercars, wilfully smashing through fences and trees. Romance isn't so much dead as flattened and covered in burnt rubber.

Forza Horizon 2 is set in a squashed version of the Mediterranean, the French and Italian countryside warped and remixed to fit for entertainment's sake. *Forza Horizon 3* is set in an even squishier version of Australia. Each has a hit list of iconic settings, destinations, and landmarks to include as it aims to capture each location's unique nature. That's a lot to fit into an Xbox One game.

Being an art bod, it was Penrose's job to show all that off, wrapping the locales around an energetic racer with cars to die for and compelling reasons to mash the accelerator flat to the floor. He'd been poring over feedback from the Xbox 360's *Forza Horizon* and, in his words, "became obsessed" over a single-word description of the game: beauty.

Open-world *Need For Speed* spends its time careening around industrial yards and chemical works, the antithesis of what you see in any *Forza Horizon*. Treachery, Penrose said, wasn't what Playground Games was going for. Instead, the dev wanted "descriptions of lush verdant fields, different color hues of rocks," and "naturalistic representations of the landscape".

So when I spoke to Penrose in the weeks leading up to *Forza Horizon 3*'s launch, I asked him if 'naturalistic representations' were still his ethos. Yes, of course, and one image that



"A cache of cars like the Camry and Falcon will never be seen on the roads again"

the team captured of Australia and recreated for their concept art: the Twelve Apostles, a natural rock formation in Victoria which anchors the Great Ocean Road. No cars were in view, just the beach, rocks, and a seagull skipping across the sand.

Better red

All of the other imagery—the red centre, cities, and rainforest—flows out from there. Fire up *Forza Horizon 3* and the first drive you take rockets you down the Great Ocean Road, past the Twelve Apostles. What's incredible is that *Forza Horizon 3* has made me appreciate places I've travelled to even more, from the simple Coalcliff Bridge to the burnt hues of the Outback. (Sure, the map makes no sense but don't get hung up on that.)

Forza Horizon 3, more than other racers, is a time capsule for Australian motors. All three Australian car manufacturers—Toyota, Ford, and Holden—are shuttering this year. For many Australians this is still unfathomable, and yet the final hero cars of each—respectively the Camry, Falcon and, Commodore—have already rolled off each production line. While Toyota's family-sized shopping trolley holds as much cultural cache as your uncle's Vauxhall Cavalier, the Falcon and Commodore are mainstays.

I'm amazed it's taken this long for Australian cars to feature in racers, so it's bittersweet that it comes at a time when the local manufacturing industry is winding down. However, a recent patch accidentally pushed the dev-only build of the game out to PC owners, and it showed off a tantalizing clutch of upcoming DLC cars, such as the VK Commodore. It's boxy and ugly, but ultimately legendary thanks to its success on the racetrack in the '80s. I can't wait.

I'll leave you with a recommendation. Turn off everything in the HUD, kill the music, grab the Holden Maloo or Ford Falcon Ute, and go driving in the near chase cam. Skirt around the map and admire the shifting skies. Playground had a huge canvas on which to paint, and it's covered it spectacularly. ■

WHAT IS IT?

An open-world racer which shares a lot of tech with *Forza Motorsport*, and features the greatest collection of Australian cars you'll never see again.



Escaping real-life woes and taking refuge in the whimsical but still weirdly woeful **Stardew Valley**

KIMBERLEY BALLARD

PUBLISHER CHUCKLEFISH GAMES / DEVELOPER ERIC BARONE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE DECEMBER 2016

NOW PLAYING



Living on a farm sounds nicer than it probably really is. There are so many things that could go wrong—you get up in the morning

ready for a day of fresh air, daisies, and baby animals, and find yourself slipping in cow poo before it's even nine a.m. and breaking your back trying to lift hay bales in the barn. I've seen farms on TV and I'm pretty sure that kind of thing happens.

Let's cut to the chase: I'm a career girl who works in an office nine to five, has a mild (read: severe) social media addiction, and suffers from a slight case of chronic malaise. Every day is a cycle of Twitter notifications, new Tumblr followers, and agonizing over which Instagram filter complements the olive undertones in my skin.

This is why I was so attracted to *Stardew Valley*. Despite my knack for doom and despair, whimsy tickles me, and the game looks like a reprieve from my array of everyday worries. Just looking at its pixel art and listening to the sweet music makes me feel breezy. And putting aside my doubts over its idealized slice of rural living, I'm confident that growing parsnips will be a piece of risotto compared to mag deadlines.

Things don't start well. When creating my character, I spend at least 45 minutes wondering which sweater best represents me as an individual and going back and forth between two shades of dark brown hair. When that's done, I decide to call my farm 'Cherry Blossom Farm' except I miss out the M and accidentally call it Cherry Blossom Farm. I don't know how to change it and now everyone who meets me is going to think I'm a moron. Frustration sets in.

I also feel a little bad taking all of this land from my grandfather at the



"I have dreams where gigantic Venus flytraps sprout up and devour me"

beginning of the game. Like, did we have any kind of relationship? Did I sit on his knee as a child? I feel like my youthful entitlement and greed are what really killed him. I glance at a book my mum got me for Christmas, *Women Who Think Too Much*, and sigh.

I quickly fall in love with the game. My farm is cute despite the rampant destruction, and I like my little wooden house and its selection of soft furnishings. I mean, there is that weird mayor who leaves messages outside my house late at night, but every town has its resident creeper I suppose. The farm itself is a mess, but that's okay. I find that cracking rocks and cutting down annoying foliage is oddly satisfying, especially with the little swishy sound effects that accompany each action.

WHAT IS IT?

The debut game from one-man developer Eric Barone where you inherit and cultivate a farm. It's old-fashioned, soothing, and always delightful to play.

That night, however, I wake up with a hammering pulse. I realize that this farm is an overgrown paradise and I'm bending it to my own whims! It's so typical of humans to corrupt the natural landscape. I confess my worries to a friend the next day. "You're overthinking this," she says. "Shut up," I reply, bookmarking my place in *Women Who Think Too Much*.

Once my anxiety settles down, a lovely sort of repetition begins to kick in. I diligently remember to water my plants every day, toil the earth in neat little patches, and even begin saving up for some cows. Unfortunately I start having fever dreams where giant Venus flytraps sprout up and devour me, but that's typical of me I think.

Fortune's favor

There are so many things about *Stardew Valley* that I wish could apply to real life. Like that lady on the TV who tells you your fortune every morning. I can just imagine her saying, "Hey, stay away from the guy in the blue jumper who listens to Depeche Mode even though it's not the '80s anymore. He's cute but dumb."

Growing vegetables and foraging out in the forest is also the perfect pastime for a foodie like me. If only a crossover between *Stardew Valley* and *Overcooked* existed where I could make meals. I spend so much time fantasizing about this that 12 game hours pass and I realize that I'm standing in someone's garden in the middle of the night like a freak.

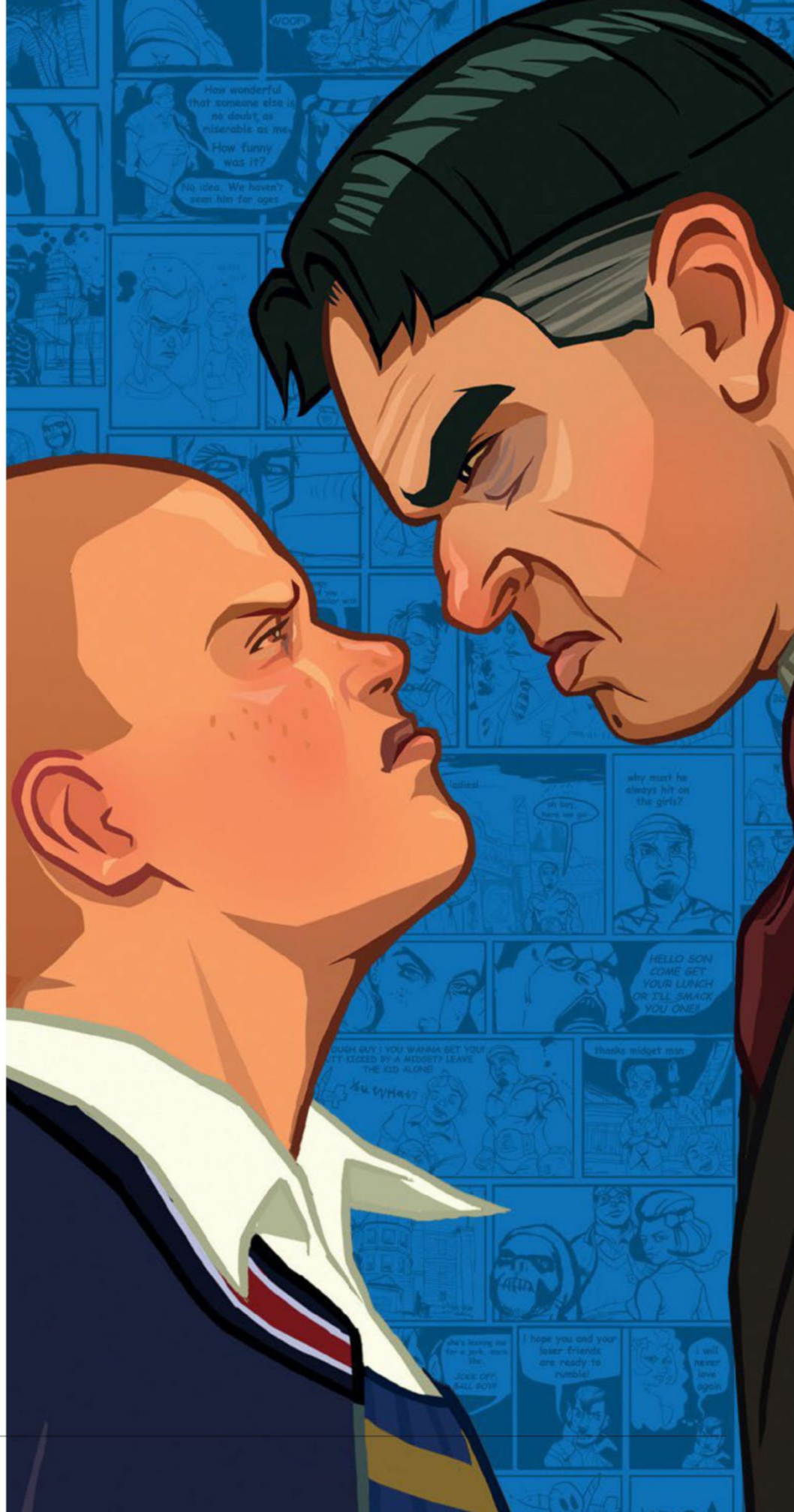
I love my farm so much I end up spending all my time there. I know we're supposed to visit the locals but everyone skeeves me out a bit. I keep expecting a twist where it turns out everyone's in a *Wicker Man*-esque cult and I'll be burnt alive. I miss all of their birthdays and am quite sure they hate me. Whatever. I'm that cute but weird recluse, just like in real life. Wait, wasn't this game supposed to be about escapism? I blink at the screen solemnly and decide to plant some more strawberry seeds before dark. ■

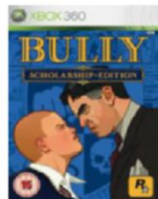
087

RETROSPECTIVE

BULLY: SCHOLARSHIP EDITION

088





The creators of GTA swap city streets for school beats in **Bully: Scholarship Edition** SAMUEL ROBERTS

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES / **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER / **FORMAT** XBOX 360, XBOX ONE



The Grand Theft Auto games are absolutely packed with bastards, and deliberately so. Even at their most affable,

protagonists like *GTA IV*'s reluctant gangster Niko Bellic or *GTA V*'s psychopathic man-child Trevor Philips can only win you over so much when they're blowing up cars with remote charges or running over countless civilians for their own sadistic kicks.

In *Bully*, which came to Xbox 360 in 2008 as an enhanced edition of the 2006 PS2 game, Rockstar finally got to show off how capable it was at making good-hearted underdogs. It's a bit like *GTA* but set in a school, in the way that *Red Dead* is like *GTA* set in the Wild West: the basic principles of exploring an open-world and hitting mission markers are there, but *Bully* very much has its own tone. It may not be Rockstar's best game, but the choice of setting and array of characters make it the most memorable.

You play young Jimmy Hopkins, abandoned at the gates of Bullworth Academy by his uninterested mother, and forced to fit into this school of clashing subcultures and total maniacs. The academy's crest says *canis canem edit*—basically, dog eat dog. The game is set inside the school's campus and the surrounding fictional town of Bullworth in New Hampshire. Unlike *GTA*, Bullworth isn't a condensed replica of a real place. It's a charmingly subdued American town that feels to scale, although the academy itself looks oddly like a British boarding school.

You're not stealing cars and running people over in *Bully*—you're

riding your BMX or skating through Bullworth's four neighborhoods. That makes it feel more intimate than most sandbox settings. The school's campus has a gym, a soccer pitch, and lodgings for the students. Downtown has a carnival, a shopping district, a weathered industrial zone and even a secret shipwreck out in the bay. It's a pleasant and relaxed locale to potter around in, helped enormously by an unusual and catchy orchestral score by Shawn Lee.

Culture clash

The mission structure is largely borrowed from *GTA*, and sees you performing odd jobs for the school's many students, and sometimes even its troubled teachers. Jimmy's goal is initially just to survive. At the

start, pretty much every bully shoves him or calls him names as you navigate through the grounds. Over the course of the story, this changes.

The school is divided into different factions. You have the '80s movie-style nerds, for example, or the greasers who have a James Dean aesthetic, or the insufferably posh preppies, who Jimmy perceptively describes as "massively inbred and completely brainless". There's a tension between each group, and depending on the mission you're doing, their respect for Jimmy will either increase or decrease. Doing a favor for the nerds can improve their opinion of you, but their opposing group, the jocks, are likely to hate you more because of it. This sells the idea that your place in Bullworth's food chain changes over the course of the school year.

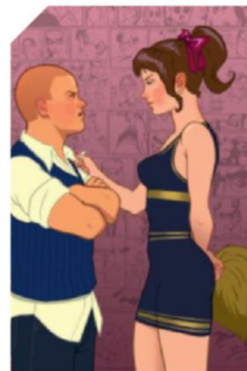
Bully is a funny game. It's not about how school actually was; it's a slightly fantastical alternate reality

NAME CHANGE

Bully was originally called *Canis Canem Edit* when released in the UK, but the *Scholarship Edition* release kept the *Bully* name.



089



ABOVE Whatever you do, don't mess with the cheerleaders.

→ where bullies always get their just desserts, or where posh kids get their houses egged for being dicks. The teenagers at Bullworth are a mixture of the ruthless, the overly sincere, the incredibly mean and the bafflingly insecure—they're real teenagers, basically. But it's all played for laughs. The kids that surround Jimmy are mostly charming or entertaining, even the badly behaved ones.

It's school life by way of American pop culture, with the exaggerated cliques and cartoonish personalities you've seen in countless films and TV shows, and it's a ton of fun as window dressing for an open-world game. This is a genre we now largely associate with crime, history, or fantasy, partly as a result of Rockstar's own success, so it's refreshing to step into something different. *Bully* is a true original, though it takes storytelling cues from '80s game *Skool Daze* on the Spectrum and Commodore 64.

The story spans the entire school year, including Halloween and Christmas. In the former case, that means the students dress up in costume for one night, including Jimmy. During winter, Rockstar Vancouver takes the bold step of covering the entire town in snow, which is an incredibly evocative way to show the passage of time. School lessons are represented by mini-games, which vary between slightly boring button prompt challenges and more inventive, novel asides, like English, where you're tasked with making as many words from a set of letters as you can within a time limit.

Completing lessons gets you extra abilities or items. Science unlocks firecrackers, which can knock out a student or prefect (Bullworth's version



"It's school life by way of American pop culture, with the cliques and cartoonish personalities you've seen in film and TV"

ABOVE The carnival is pretty much the coolest part of town, where you can go on the rides and explore the freakshow.

of the secret police), as well as itching powder and stink bombs. If school Science lessons had taught me such things, I'd have done more than stare at a wall for years. Collectively, it feels like you're actually a student living a year at school, which shouldn't be nearly as enjoyable.

There are plenty of reminders you're a kid rather than a typical game hero. You get detention for misbehaving (note: don't shoot potatoes at small children), and in a sweet touch, Jimmy has to go to bed by 2AM or he falls asleep on the spot. The most illegal

thing you can do in *Bully* is drive a scooter into someone, or knock over a portable toilet while the particularly vile gym teacher, Mr. Burton, is taking a poo inside. It's not exactly shooting a blimp down from the Los Santos skyline with a rocket launcher, is it? *Bully* is just a riot—the way the setting opens up keeps the missions varied, and it benefits from being significantly shorter than any GTA.

Slippin' Jimmy

Jimmy is also a solid underdog protagonist. You want him to triumph over Bullworth's elite because he's underestimated by everyone around him, including his mom and the school's self-important principal, Dr. Crabblesnitch. But a more interesting presence in *Bully* is that of Gary, a paranoid sociopath who Jimmy meets

early on and later becomes the story's main villain as he tries to take over the school. Gary constantly undermines the confidence of Petey, a timid kid in your dorm, and he gets an obvious kick out of causing fights between the school's different factions. He frequently taunts Jimmy, and when he asks Gary what his problem is, he responds with, "ADD, primarily, but also life, my parents, this school, Western civilization..." He's a brilliantly written and acted creation. Gary is on the fringe of the school's social strata, and while he loves being the arbiter of chaos, he does so by manipulating other people (including Jimmy, initially) into getting their hands dirty on his behalf.

It's rare for me to write about a game and find so much to say about the setting and characters. These are the reasons I still revisit *Bully* every couple of years, though—whenever I talk to a friend about this particular game, we usually discuss Jimmy, Gary or a part of the town we enjoyed exploring. I don't return to it for the melee combat, which is satisfyingly crunchy even if it feels a little outdated in the wake of the Arkham games, or the weapons, which can be

further reading

You won't find many other games set in schools that aren't just bad Harry Potter tie-ins, so here are a few other esoteric sandbox choices for you.



IT'S A DOG'S LIFE SLEEPING DOGS
In this open-world game set in Hong Kong, you can explore the vibrant setting at your leisure and look at all of the delicious food.



SAINTS AND SINNERS SAINTS ROW IV
Become a superhero and the president in the best of Volition's goofball series, which has a self-aware, silly tone.



DESERT BLUES MAD MAX
Avalanche's recreation of the Mad Max universe gets a surprising amount of pretty vistas out of a mostly sandy world.



awkward to aim but offer plenty of fun ways to mess with the other kids.

The secret to *Bully's* success is its surprisingly warm and sincere tone—you'll find moments like that in Rockstar's games, but they're fleeting, like John Marston's interactions with his family in *Red Dead Redemption*, or Trevor and Michael's rare moments of genuine friendship throughout *GTA V*. *Bully* is only ever cheeky rather than cruel. No one dies. The only stakes are getting expelled, or being forced to cut the grass after school.

Teen dreams

The reality of going to school is usually pretty crappy, but *Bully* casts you as someone with a strong moral compass who essentially rights all of Bullworth's wrongs over the course of the game. Jimmy can also spend time just enjoying his youth, as the developers allow the fleeting magic of adolescence to ebb into the game. Jimmy can give chocolates or flowers to different students in order to win their affections, which comes across as cute instead of super creepy.

In one mission, Jimmy goes on a carnival date with Pinky, another student who's been stood up, and they hold hands while you try to get the best score at all of the games. There's a pirate hidden away somewhere in the bay, too, and a comic-book shop where Jimmy can seek refuge. Collecting all the rubber bands around Bullworth gets you the brutal, crowd-demolishing



TOP Prefects patrol school grounds, while police nick you if you misbehave out in the town.

ABOVE Chemistry is a boring QTE mini-game, though it gives you access to fun weapons.

rubber band ball, which pretty much becomes Jimmy's ultimate weapon.

If you're playing it for the first time through the Xbox One's backwards compatibility, there's definitely no hiding this game's origins on ancient consoles. Compared to *Quantum Break* or *GTA V's* cutscenes, *Bully's* characters are very much meat puppets in the way they're animated, even though the voice acting is uniformly excellent. It's definitely where the game's age shows the most, and for some players it might just look too old to enjoy now. Likewise, the *Scholarship Edition* that came to Xbox 360 still has some

glitchy lighting and moments of slowdown. But it's well worth putting up with for what is the most offbeat game of Rockstar's back catalog.

The subject matter is just such an original choice. We're so used to heightened or impossible situations in the big games we play, that the idea of playing a kid in a school seems so tame. But this is what happens when Rockstar swaps the grandeur of enormous open-worlds for sleepier surroundings, and trades wisecracking murderers for mouthy teenagers—it showcases its ability to create virtual worlds, as well as the people that populate them. ■



BEST XBOX COMPANIONS



Whether they're sassy potatoes or dogs, non-player pals always make their videogames ten times better. Especially if you can smooch them, too. Not the dogs, though. That'd be weird **KATE GRAY**

15

LYDIA – THE ELDER SCROLLS

As my mother used to tell me, the best kind of friends are the ones who can hold all your junk when your pockets are full. Your mother did tell you that too, right? Lydia might not be the most fascinating companion—unless, uh, you married her, in which case, congratulations—but she's basically a human backpack, and the reason she's on this list is because she's better company than a regular backpack. Look, I'm not saying my standards are low for what makes a good companion, but... actually, no, I totally am. For the record: Lydia is the Best Human Back Videogames.



14

POTATO GLADOS – PORTAL 2

I love GLaDOS, and I love potatoes. The former is witty, cruel, sassy, and sarcastic; the latter tastes nice with salt. Maybe a little bit of paprika. My point is this: Potato GLaDOS is the best thing to happen to both the psychopathic AI and tubers, because it gives the former a sense of pathos that allows you to understand some of her motivations and feelings. There's also something thrilling about your enemy becoming a reluctant companion, especially as she's stuck inside a potato. Maybe 2017 can be the year we get more vegetable companions.

13

NAIEE & NAIA – BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

Is it cheating to pick two characters that you both control? No, because I make this list, and I make the rules, so if you have any complaints, please write them on a piece of paper and then EAT IT. The whole point of *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* is the companionship and the teamwork between the two brothers, even if they're both essentially you. The game wouldn't be the same if it wasn't for both characters, and it also wouldn't be at all playable—making these youngsters the ultimate companions. They literally can't get by without each other.



12

CLAPTRAP – BORDERLANDS

Yes, you might hate Claptrap, and yes, that might actually be the whole point of the irritatingly overenthusiastic robot, but you can't deny that he's actually quite endearing at times. Like Potato GLaDOS, he'll entertain you with wit, sarcasm, and jokes, but unlike Potato GLaDOS, he's actually quite helpful (and can move around without your help, which makes a nice change). Plus, it's nice to not be alone in the frigid wastelands of Pandora, even if your companion is basically a more upbeat version of Marvin the Paranoid Android.



11

ELIZABETH – BIOSHOCK INFINITE

BioShock Infinite's resident Disney Princess can be a total pain in the ass for most of the game—especially when she's founcing around somewhere when you're trying to get things done, or when she's constantly yelling "Booker, catch" when she finds a coin—but she is genuinely quite useful and quite good company some of the time. She throws ammo in battle, she opens tears to help you escape, and though you could probably do without her pet Songbird tailing you, her influence is positive. Without her, you'd just be another grumpy, middle-aged dude, after all.

10

DORIAN – DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

Dragon Age is all about the sexy—uh, *helpful* companions that you manage to recruit during your adventures. Whether you're more into your ten-foot BDSM beef-men like Iron Bull, or your quieter, friendlier, boring types like Alistair or Cullen, there's something for everyone. So why have I chosen sassy mage Dorian? Because, in case you can't tell, I like my companions sassy, and they don't come much sassier than Dorian. He's well-dressed, smart, flirty, and the kind of guy I'd be friends with in real life. (I'd totally have a secret crush on him, too. Shhhhh.)



093

09

ROACH – THE WITCHER

"How can you put Roach on this list?" you cry. "Saying Roach is a good companion is like saying a handful of salt is a nutritious meal." Okay, I get your point—Roach's flawed AI and apparent inability to avoid trees makes her possibly the worst horse in videogames. When you call her, she'll often magically appear halfway up a cliff. And when you try to ride her down mountains, sometimes she hovers, legs curled under her like a dead spider. In short, she's terrible. And I love her anyway, because at least she's a memorably bad horse. And there's nothing quite like galloping across the plains with her.



08

GARRUS – MASS EFFECT

If you liked Dorian, you'll love Garrus. Unlike my favorite mage, Garrus is quiet, shy, and nervous around you. He's a sweet boy. Well, he's a sweet cat-beetle-thing that, in BioWare's confusingly gendered world, counts as a 'boy' and, ah, let's just not get into what's going on in Garrus' space-pants, okay? It's not important. What is important is that he's absolutely adorable, and he made legions of Mass Effect fans fall deeply in love with a cat-beetle-thing, and that's one hell of an achievement. Space-marry us, Garrus!

07

ALYX VANCE – HALF-LIFE 2

Gordon Freeman must be a hard man to be friends with. He doesn't say anything, and though that might make him a good listener, it makes him terrible at almost everything else. What do you want for dinner, Gords? Nothing? Okay. Where should we go on holiday, G-Dog? Nowhere? Cool. His right-hand woman Alyx Vance deserves a goddamn medal for putting up with the taciturn crowbar boy, and she deserves a bunch of extra medals for actually being very good at her job (her job being taking care of Gordon). And what thanks does she get? NOTHING. Does Gordon even appreciate such a kickass friend?



06

DOGMEAT – FALLOUT

Brace yourself, the dog companions are coming. Oh, Dogmeat. Sweet, soft Dogmeat. You've been with me throughout Fallout, going from the dog that thought I was its owner in *Fallout 1* to the bouncy German Shepherd I fell in love with in *Fallout 4*. You fetch me wrenches, wear tiny dog scarves, and rip out the throats of my enemies before bouncing back to me all happy and blood-soaked. You are the best. I prefer you to (almost) every other Fallout companion, even though you can't talk. You are such a good dog with your sweet puppy eyes. Yes you are. Yes you are.



05

DOG – FABLE II

Another very good boy is *Fable II*'s dog companion, which you can call 'Dog' if you are devoid of any independent creative thought, or you can give a nickname if you are great. This dog is very similar to Dogmeat from Fallout in that he can fight and sniff out important treasure and other items. What gives him the tiniest edge over Dogmeat, however, is that he can sniff out condoms. Yep, someone in this dog's life trained him to be able to find plastic-wrapped, lube-covered genital socks. Why? We may never know. What we do know is that our dog friend is easily the cutest thing about *Fable II*.

04

CORTANA

Cortana: the companion so good that Microsoft put her inside your Xbox One. She's the Siri of your heart. I could yell, "Hey Cortana" in the office right now and it would probably... do nothing, but it might make people think about why Cortana is such a great character (after I've been told off for being disruptive). She's helpful like System Shock's Shodan, but less homicidal; she's caring like a mom, but less disappointed in you; she's sometimes in love with you, like the robot lady in *Flubber*, but not creepy. It's all we've ever wanted from a best friend-slash-mentor-slash-computer.



03

KAZOOIE – BANJO-KAZOOIE

Look, I might get in trouble with PETA for saying this, but I really, really wish I had a bird that could hang out in my backpack. *Banjo-Kazooie* wouldn't be the same without Kazooie (obviously, duh) because not only would Banjo fail every single level, but he also wouldn't have Kazooie's—ugh, I hate to have to use this word—banter. The two bounce off each other like friends who've known each other for years, and they've always got each other's back, despite Banjo actually being quite stupid and Kazooie being roughly 1,000 per cent smarter. She's an amazing addition to a game that could have just been about one character, but the bear-bird combo, while being a little unorthodox, makes *Banjo-Kazooie* a game to remember.



02

HANCOCK – FALLOUT 4

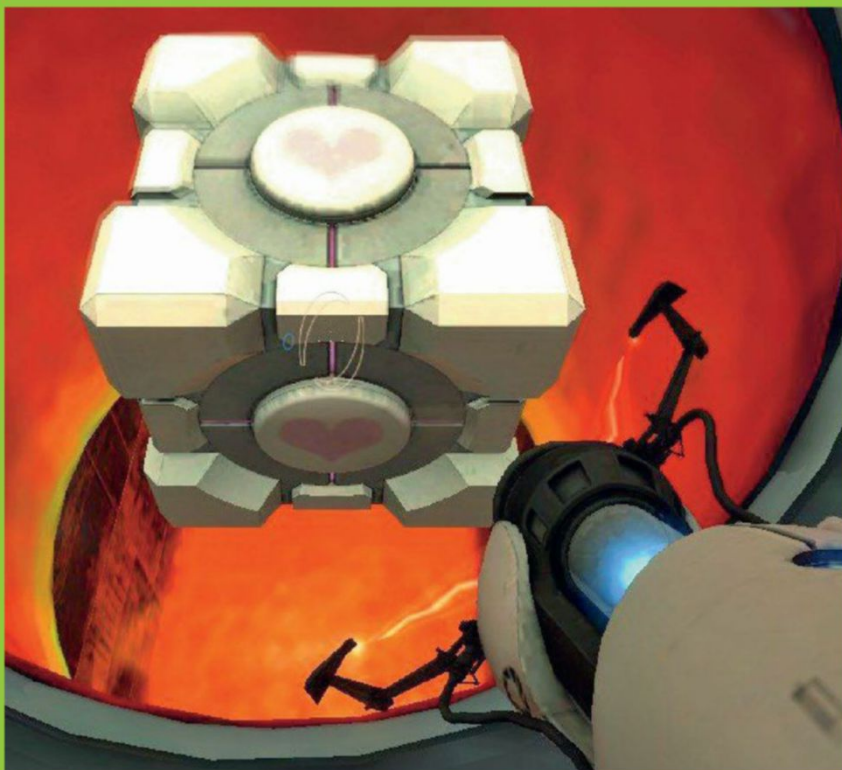
Okay, this one is favoritism. I'll admit to that. You won't see *Fallout 4* companion Hancock in many other lists of sidekicks, and even if you do, he won't be this high up. So why have I put him here, next to the throne? It's personal, okay. Sometimes, in the irradiated, post-apocalyptic wasteland that used to be your perfect life, you just meet someone who makes you forget all about your murdered spouse and stolen child. Someone who makes you want to roam around, shooting giant cockroaches, hand-in-hand, for the rest of your half-life. And sometimes you take the wedding ring that you prised off your dead partner's hand and you put it on that person in a not-at-all-creepy declaration of love. That person is Hancock.



01

WEIGHTED COMPANION CUBE – PORTAL

After all those jokes about poor, silent Gordon Freeman from *Half-Life 2*, how can I pick a not-even-sentient cube as my favorite companion? Because Valve made you feel something for a cube. I'm choosing the Companion Cube as our ultimate companion because it's a beacon of incredibly good writing. Through GLaDOS' taunts, the cube's adorable little heart and the eventual heartbreaking task of having to incinerate the poor thing, you fall in love with something that, in most other games, would be nothing more than a puzzle solution. A thing that holds down a switch or helps you get through a door. But Companion Cube was more than that. Companion Cube was my only friend in a hostile, empty test chamber, when I had no one else. I miss you, Companion Cube. I'm sorry for what I did to you *sniff*. ■



095




extra

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.

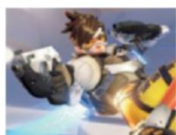


05 OVERWATCH

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 Getting your first Play of the Game!



06 TITANFALL 2

PUBLISHER RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT

This sequel to the ace (but multiplayer-only) game compensates with arguably one of the best solo FPS campaigns ever. It's a wall-running, double-jumping, mech-punching delight.

DEFINING MOMENT Scoring a kill and \$5,000 in Bounty Hunt multiplayer.



07 DISHONORED 2

PUBLISHER ARKANE STUDIOS

This supernatural stealth-em-up is a superb action game and a landmark work of videogame world building 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.



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 than the last. The best Hitman game yet.

DEFINING MOMENT Breaking into a high-tech hospital in Hokkaido.



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movies



GREEN ROOM

FOR FANS OF *Blue Ruin*, slasher films

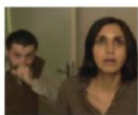
The most atmospheric, stylized slasher film of 2016, *Green Room* slams viewers into a grimy venue where a punk band is being held hostage by skinheads. Violent and unflinching, it's also oddly poetic, with a palette of faded colors and odd dialogue.



UNDER THE SHADOW

FOR FANS OF Old-fashioned horror

This critically acclaimed Iranian horror snuck onto Netflix with peals of joy from viewers. A fairground ride of nightmare and Middle Eastern myth, a Djinn (that's an evil spirit to you and us) is released into a family home after a missile breaks through their roof.



EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT

FOR FANS OF International cinema

Nominated for Best Foreign Film at the 2016 Academy Awards, Ciro Guerra's new film is a black-and-white opus, about a young Shaman in the Colombian Amazon who helps two explorers find a rare healing plant.



VICTORIA

FOR FANS OF Art-house cinema, Berlin

At the time of release, *Victoria* was known as the film that was shot in one continuous take. This alone is impressive, but it's the story of an insecure, lonely woman that's really affecting, as she walks around Berlin and meets a cast of eccentric people.



KNIGHT OF CUPS

FOR FANS OF Terrence Malick, artsy drama

The most recent film from American auteur Terrence Malick is just what you'd expect: a grandiose tale of identity and lost love as Christian Bale's washed-up screenwriter trails LA's sun-bleached vistas and meets women at a reel of skeezy afterparties.



A BIGGER SPLASH

FOR FANS OF Tilda Swinton

A jaded rock star (played by the kickass Tilda Swinton) takes refuge in her Sicilian hideaway until she's visited by an old friend and his seductive daughter. Having Swinton on screen is never a bad thing, and in this woozy, boozy tale she's so good it stings.



television



THE OA

FOR FANS OF *Stranger Things*, *Twin Peaks*

There are odd happenings in the new show from writer Brit Marling and director Zal Batmanglij, when a young woman called Prairie reemerges seven years after going missing. Abstract, ambitious, and often stellar, there's little else like this on TV.



A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

FOR FANS OF Tim Burton, Gothic stories

Everyone of a certain age will remember the delightfully dour Lemony Snicket books and the 2004 film of the same name. The new Netflix show puts its own spin on the story while remaining fun and freaksome.



SENSE8

FOR FANS OF *Heroes*, the Wachowskis

If you enjoyed the first season of *Heroes* (it was garbage after that, come on!) then you may adore the Wachowskis' divisive debut series. Featuring multiple characters with mystical psychic powers and interweaving stories, it's like *Cloud Atlas* in serial form.



TABOO

FOR FANS OF *Peaky Blinders*, bloody violence

Tom Hardy specializes in a particular kind of role: unpredictably violent and romantically tortured. His role in *Taboo*, which he created with *Peaky Blinders* writer Steven Knight, is a career high: playing a man out to avenge his murdered father in 1800s Gothic London.



SHERLOCK S4

FOR FANS OF Anything with Benedict C

A show that's experienced many highs and lows since its first episode in 2010, the fourth season of *Sherlock* is worth a watch just for the skin-crawling second episode. Watching Toby Jones transform into a ghoulous serial killer will make you recoil.



Z: THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

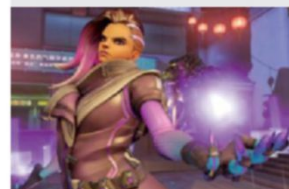
FOR FANS OF The swinging '20s

Everyone knows about the author of beloved novel *The Great Gatsby*, but his wife, Zelda Fitzgerald, is unsung. Just as talented, and as troubled, she's brought to life by a fierce and fey Christina Ricci.

OXM TEAM
CHOICETHE BEST GAMES
WE'RE PLAYING AND
WHY WE LOVE THEM**Matt's choice**
OVERWATCH

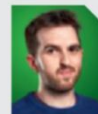
This month I tried to finally finish *Doom*, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*,

and *Titanfall* 2's single-player campaigns. All were shoved aside. Blizzard's competitive FPS is dangerously addictive.

**Kimberley's choice**
ABZÜ

Everyday life stresses me out, so it's nice to

have a game that's so soothing. What a delight to slip beneath the waves, exploring temples and finding new fish, soaking in the colors and ambient music.

**James' choice**
OVERCOOKED

This month, I introduced my housemates to

Ghost Town Games' co-op culinary experience released last year. We laughed, we cried, we argued, and now I need to find a new place to live.



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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 thier faves from Xbox history. This month: **Harvey Smith**



Harvey Smith

Creative director
on *Dishonored 2*

Although he's best known today for his work on supernatural stealth-em-up *Dishonored* and its superlative sequel, Smith also served as lead designer on the original *Deus Ex*. All that, and excellent hair to boot.



[3]

Inside [1] is on my personal 2016 GotY list for not only the art and audio direction, but for the understated narrative that mostly exists in the background or as environmental storytelling. As a fan of unnerving, half-sketched situations—like the film *Upstream Color*—*Inside* was delicious to me. I'll include one remaster on my list, since **BioShock** [2] is a game I believe I'll remember until my dying days. Having *BioShock: The Collection* available for Xbox One, and for new players in future years, is meaningful. It's still such a beautifully realised place, underpinned by hubris and flawed ideology, leading to a profound sense of collapse, of loss. (Relevant to global politics in 2017, perhaps.) I want to replay **Alien: Isolation** [3]. The game has stayed on my mind since its release. Whenever someone loves an original media work this much, and handles it so well, it's worth noting. (In that vein, I always wanted to work on a *Blade Runner* game, or something derived from *The Thing*.) For historical reasons, I'd love everyone to play Éric Chahi's **Another World** [4] and think about it in the context of games released in 1993. It stands as a favorite, ahead of its time in so many ways. **Titanfall 2** [5] is going on this list because it's the first thing I'm going to play, now that *Dishonored 2* is finished. I really wanted a campaign, and I want to see how they handled the time travel mission, in contrast to the events Emily Kaldwin (or Corvo Attano) experience in the *Dishonored 2* mission called A Crack in the Slab.

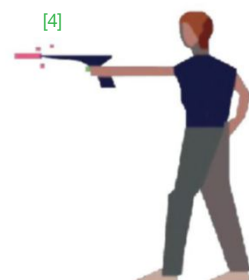
[1]



[2]



[4]



[5]



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