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APRIL 2017

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Come what neigh

Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord is about as PC gaming as it gets: an entirely systems-driven, complex sandbox that generates its own fascinating stories – even it's slightly rough around the edges. Check it out on p38.

This month, the magazine loses a great writer: sadly, Chris Thursten is leaving us. I'm going to miss his words, and I'm certain he'll go on to do great things. You'll still see him in these pages sometimes, too. His love of BioWare and Star Wars, as well as his discerning attitude towards the games industry's hottest bullshit, will be sorely missed.

SAMUEL ROBERTS
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This month
Had the time of his life making jokes about print media vs YouTube on p90. Ho ho ho! Ho.



JOHN STRIKE
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Banners, so many
banners

This month
Had the unenviable task of stitching together daft, hi-res photos of the PC Gamer team pretending to do sports.



CHRIS THURSTEN
Specialist in
Farewells, the good times
Twitter
[@CThursten](https://twitter.com/CThursten)

This month
Chris leaves us this month after 5.5 years on PC Gamer, and joins us for one last daft team feature.

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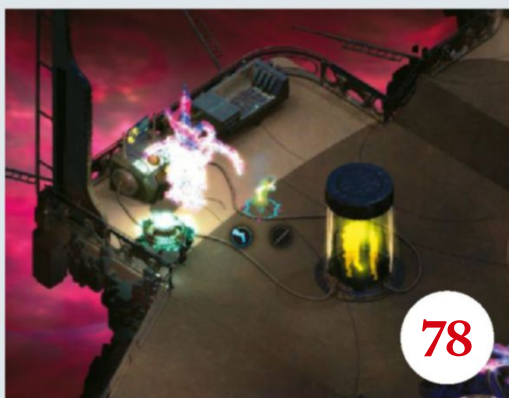
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MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Valve wields strict control over what news gets out.

THE TOP STORY

WHAT'S GOING ON AT VALVE?

The latest developments at the secretive company

Valve doesn't need to make any more games. *Dota 2*, *Counter-Strike*, *Team Fortress*, and *Steam* are enough to keep the company afloat. But for those of us who miss the days when it made other games, there may be some good news.

When asked in a recent roundtable interview at its Bellevue office, attended by PC Gamer, Gabe Newell revealed that the company is working on three full VR games, clarifying that they're not just experiments. Newell compared the company's work on VR across hardware and software simultaneously to that of Nintendo, which has always created its own games specifically to get the most out of its hardware. It's not exactly *Half-Life 3*, then, but it does mean there will be a point in the future where you can play new Valve games, providing you're willing to buy a Vive.

"It feels like we've been stuck with mouse and keyboard for a *really* long time and that the opportunities to build much more interesting kinds of experiences for gamers were there, we just need to sort of expand what we can do," Newell said, as reported by Eurogamer. "But it's not about being in hardware, it's about building better games. It's about taking bigger leaps forward with the kinds of games that we can do." They're apparently being created using *Source 2* and *Unity*.

Elsewhere in Valve land, *Steam Greenlight* is being ditched in favour of

Steam Direct. *Greenlight* currently lets players vote on which games appear on *Steam's* shopfront. But *Direct* will, for a variable fee that hasn't been confirmed yet, allow any developer to sell their games on the platform.

It won't be a free-for-all, though. "Developers will need to complete a set of digital paperwork, similar to the process of applying for a bank account," the company says. Games will also have to pass a compatibility test. Let's hope it's a strict vetting process, otherwise *Steam* will be even more flooded with broken games.

More developments at the company came in February, when it was revealed that *Portal* writer Erik Wolpaw had left the company. Wolpaw recently contributed to *Double Fine's Psychonauts 2*, having worked on the original. He also had credits on *Half-Life 2's* additional episodes and the *Left 4 Dead* series. ■
Andy Kelly

STEAM DIRECT WILL, FOR A FEE, ALLOW ANY DEVELOPER TO SELL THEIR GAMES

LEFT: Screens come at 1080p as standard, but 4K is an option.



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Some would say this is a big step forward for the brand, the perfect solution for gamers looking for something they can travel, work and consume media with, but who lack the budget (or desire) for a more advanced enthusiast-focused Alienware system. If you're looking to dip your toe into the PC gaming sphere, but don't want to shatter your bank account, Dell's Gaming Inspiron range ticks all the right boxes.

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yourself to a purely gaming-focused machine. And while the insides might look enthusiast, Dell's Gaming laptops are subtly designed with the kind of look that doesn't shout "gamer!"

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DELL'S GAMING INSPIRON RANGE TICKS ALL THE RIGHT BOXES

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WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

THE SPY



The Spy greenlit Die Another Day.

T

he Spy abides by few rules. The strictures of international diplomacy, the law, and the unspoken conventions of a late-night game of Twister all mean little when the safety of the world is at stake. Or, at the very least, the safety of somebody else's videogame secrets. It's always been very unclear what kind of spy The Spy actually is, even to The Spy.

One of the rules The Spy truly respects is 'never wear a floral-print trenchcoat to a funeral' – and yet events may conspire to undo all of The Spy's good intentions. Reborn into our lives in 2011, the *Deus Ex* series went from well-regarded-legend-let's-not-talk-about-Invisible-War to shining proof of the promise of next-gen stealth. **Square** **Enix** agreed, investing big in *Deus Ex Universe* – an ambitious plan to take the game we all loved and turn it into a capital-F Franchise where 'F' stands for 'fat stacks of cash'.

Alas, the stacks were not fat – or at least, insufficiently fat to keep Square Enix's dreams of a mass-market *Deus Ex* alive. Indeed, *Mankind Divided*'s anaemic stacks are responsible for the *Deus Ex* series going back in the box, and by 'the box' The Spy means a coffin. *Deus Ex* is dead, and it is time to break out the floral-print funeral coat.

It was a crime of passion, in the end: Square Enix's eye was drawn to another, and poor grumpy Adam Jensen never stood a chance. A flirtation with Marvel led to full-blown passion as the question 'how do we start our own franchise' transformed into 'how do we get in on the biggest bandwagon in entertainment this side of Star Wars'. The already-announced *Avengers* game is part of Square Enix's new deal, but rumour has it that it's working on a *Guardians of the Galaxy* game as well.

Capcom, however, is still determinedly doing its own thing. Fresh from the success of *Resident Evil 7*, a set of leaks suggests that the Japanese developer has a trio of new games in the works. First of these is *Lost Star*, a sci-fi adventure set on the

York. You play a new recruit in the Order of Aegis, mystical knights who protect the mortal world from monsters. You'll use a mix of guns and magic to defeat werewolves, demons, and angels. The single leaked bit of art makes it look like *Taxi Driver* starring a wizard.

PLANET BINGO

The leaks also revealed *Broken Horizon*, a mech combat game set on a hostile alien planet. What kind of hostile alien planet, you wonder? The sandy kind with two suns and big dragon ribcages sticking out of the ground. Early art shows a team of players taking on a giant worm. Will they succeed or fail? Either way, we're all winners in the great game of sci-fi desert planet bingo.

Broken Planet probably is a working title, mind – from the co-op focus to the monster-hunting, this looks a lot like a follow-up to the *Lost Planet* series.

Speaking of lost planets, data miners have uncovered information about new stuff coming to **No Man's Sky**. ATVs and other land vehicles will assist your travels across

Hello's procedurally-generated planets, though you'll need to build a vehicle terminal, hire a mechanic and complete a number of missions before you're allowed to drive one.

ATVs will boast vertical boosters, guns and a jet engine – a little like *Mass Effect*'s Mako. You'll be able to customise your ATV to make it faster, jumpier, or better at killing defenceless pastel dinosaurs. By the way, we're calling them 'ATVs' because nobody likes seeing 'buggy' in the same sentence as 'No Man's Sky'. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SINGLE LEAKED BIT OF ART MAKES IT LOOK LIKE TAXI DRIVER STARRING A WIZARD

fringes of space in which a gang of misfits come across an ancient map and reluctantly enter the battle between good and evil. Said space-people include a chap with two laser pistols and a cool trenchcoat as well as a small furry alien wearing a bandolier. *Lost Star* might be a working title, mind. A fitting alternative might be *Guardians of the G... Protectors of Space*. Let's go with *Protectors of Space*.

Knights of Aegis is another of Capcom's prospective projects, a fantasy adventure set in '70s New

This month in... 2007



1 *Command & Conquer 3* dominates, here, with special attention paid to the series' wonderful and terrible FMV. "He doesn't over-act," Tim Edwards claims of Kane, "he just kind of sneers his lines straight to camera."

ISSUE
173, April 2007
ON THE COVER
Command & Conquer 3
IN THE CHARTS
Acceptable in the '80s
– Calvin Harris

2 Kieron Gillen gives 87% to *Stalker*, despite its launch day wobbles.



3 A huge 'how to be good at games' feature includes a poorly drawn map of how to be good at football. The sheer hubris of it is mind-blowing. We never tried to explain sport to anybody ever again.



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DISCUSS

WHAT MARVEL GAMES DO WE WANT TO SEE?

PC Gamer tells Square Enix how to do its job

Samuel: Square Enix announced a multi-game deal with Marvel in January, with Crystal Dynamics working on an *Avengers* game and the *Deus Ex* devs at Eidos Montreal reportedly making *Guardians of the Galaxy*. How do we feel about this, as well as the fact that *Deus Ex* – also made by Square Enix – is now on hiatus? And what do we want from this deal in particular?

Andy: I love *Deus Ex* and have never really been into Marvel (except *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which I love), so this news has left me feeling a bit sad. I'm sure Crystal Dynamics will make a really solid and probably quite good action adventure featuring a famous Marvel character, similar to the *Batman Arkham* series. But it's not *Deus Ex*, is it? I just want *Deus Ex*, forever. I feel like Eidos Montreal's artists might be wasted making cities for superheroes to have big, long, boring fights in, instead of cool cyberpunk dystopias. Prove me wrong. Please.

Phil: I think I'd feel better about a *Deus Ex* hiatus if they'd bothered to finish *Mankind Divided*'s story. Still, the possibility of a Marvel series is intriguing. Games based on comics and films have a tendency to be bad, but Square Enix has access to some talented development studios. Will *Avengers* work as a game, though? That's a lot of different systems to dabble in. Presumably you'll be moving from the flying weapon suit level, to the big, stompy green man level, to the spy who does kicks level. Will that work, or do Crystal Dynamics have something more elegant in mind?

Samuel: Superhero games lend themselves so well to sandbox environments, that I don't think a linear game will quite do it. An

Avengers game should be more like a party-based action RPG set in Manhattan (but better than *Marvel Heroes*), where you can switch between characters at any time. I admit losing *Deus Ex* is a bit crushing, though. Phil, you're indifferent to Marvel generally. Is there any particular character or superhero team you have an affinity for?

Phil: ...

Samuel: Er, I'll take that as a no then, Phil. Superheroes are just wrestlers with more elaborate costumes. You should be all over that shit as a man who watches WWE on purpose.

Phil: OK, I admit, Iron Man is a much better character than Brock Lesnar. Then again, even Hawkeye is a better character than Brock Lesnar, so maybe I'm just wasting my life. It sounds like you're pitching a sort of urban *Dragon Age*, but are superheroes suitable for RPG combat? There don't seem to be consistent rules about how powerful they are – presumably it's flexible in order to maximise the drama of the moment. Maybe that's an unfair assessment, but, at the very least, isn't Thor a bit OP?

Samuel: Well, I'm picturing more of a game with *Dragon Age*'s individual character abilities and the way they can tactically slot together – but framed more as a third-person sandbox game with a lovely city to explore together. If you start bringing stats into it, then yeah, Hawkeye is just an embarrassment next to Thor. The logic is too daft. And yeah, Thor is just too OP generally. You can't start putting in stealth sections where Thor quietly sneaks up behind Thanos and twats him on the back of the neck with his hammer.

Andy: I reckon they should bring back forgotten Silver Age villain Paste-Pot Pete as a character. You could run around wearing a big floppy beret and firing sticky paste at people. Or how about bell-headed mad scientist and supervillain Doctor Bong, purely because it would look hilarious on the cover art? But seriously, superhero games are tricky to get right, and few developers have managed to do them justice. So it'll be interesting to see how Square Enix tackles it.

Samuel: While we're going deeper into the lore, let's have the main villain be especially comic booky. Maybe it can be The Maker, who is actually the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards from an alternative universe, gone mad, with an eyeball that's gone wrong and now he's travelled to our universe to raise hell. Or maybe Superior Spider-Man, who is actually Doc Ock downloaded into Peter Parker's brain and now making him do naughty stuff. Does that sound like good comics, Phil?

Phil: Forget everything I said, Square Enix is screwed. ■



SAMUEL ROBERTS

Loves this superhero crap, but only likes half the Marvel films.



PHIL SAVAGE

Has no strong opinions on Marvel one way or another.



ANDY KELLY

Hates all Marvel movies except *Guardians of the Galaxy*.



THE DISCUSSION IS OVER, BUT WOULD IT WIN IN A FIGHT
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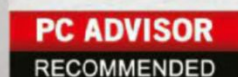


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This man is thinking about football.

PCG INVESTIGATES

NUMBERS GAME

A data analysis boom in the world of football has seen clubs develop a voracious appetite for information that can help them evaluate the condition of their players, identify weaknesses in opponents, and find the right signings to push their team to the next level. *Football Manager's* database is now helping to provide the data clubs are looking for, which means the management simulation is starting to have a very real impact on the beautiful game.

FINDING THE NEXT MESSI

How clubs are using **FOOTBALL MANAGER** to help them find their next star player

The touchline pretenders among us aren't the only ones scouring *Football Manager 2017's* database for the perfect signing. From the big dogs in the Champions League, to the relative pups of the USA's Major League Soccer, football clubs across the planet tap into the same database to help them make crucial decisions about the players that could take them to the next level.

"We have some clubs that will take every single aspect of data," Sports Interactive's head of business development, Tom Markham, tells me. "One of the Champions League clubs we are working with will evaluate the composition of teams. They'll look back at older data and see what is the actual makeup – I'm talking nationalities, I'm talking characters – and they will use the attributes in terms of their evaluation. There's another team in the Premier League that uses our data, and all they wanted was height and weight data. We've got clubs that will come to us and they're looking for player earnings and contract expiry dates. We've had Ray Houghton come in when he was working for the FAI, trying to find anyone who had an Irish passport who could potentially play for Ireland."

It's somewhat surreal that data collected to support a simulation has ended up influencing the reality it's based on, but it shouldn't be that surprising. After all, the 'big data' bandwagon has rolled through almost every industry over the last decade or so, making it one of the most valuable commodities on the planet, as apparent in the rise of data-hoarding juggernauts such as Google and Facebook. It is only natural that it should come to football too.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

Data analytics departments within clubs have grown exponentially in recent years and data-driven terms such as xG (expected goals) are starting to weave their way into the lexicon of the average football fan. The value of data remains a hotly debated topic in the sport, however, and even advocates like Markham think there are dangers in the data revolution. He gives the example of players who have told him that their decision-making process has changed because their clubs are too focused on evaluating passing accuracy. "Players that might have played, in the past, a through ball that might only have a 25% chance of coming off, but will result in a goal, now will just play a lateral pass because they know that their stats are being evaluated in terms of them giving the ball



This man is also thinking about football.



Can you guess what this man is thinking about?

Game changer

FOOTBALL MANAGER'S REAL-WORLD INFLUENCE



1 RAPID'S REVOLUTION

Football Manager helped Colorado Rapids build a budget squad that knocked cash-rich LA Galaxy out of the Major League Soccer playoffs.



2 INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT

Barnet goalkeeper Kai McKenzie-Lyle made his debut for Guyana's national team in 2016 after his eligibility was discovered through *Football Manager*.



3 THE LEGENDARY BAKAYOKO

Sports Interactive's founders have connections at Everton. Is it a coincidence that the club signed *Championship Manager* cult hero Ibrahima Bakayoko?



4 KICK IT OUT

Football Manager is being used by academics to help research how race might affect such things as pay and refereeing decisions.

away. They're not doing what naturally they should be doing and it could result in real problems in terms of their development."

Caution is warranted when it comes to how you collect and evaluate data, then, but few would argue against it having a role to play. You only need look to MLS in the US – where *Football Manager* has been embraced by a number of clubs – to see how just how valuable it can be. "They've got very rigid budgets," Markham points out. "You have your marquee players, but the difference between being successful or unsuccessful is the players you put around those. They're shopping in bargain basement markets – the likes of Central America, Costa Rica, Honduras – where there is talent, but they're very good value."

"The problem is that information on these players is very thin on the ground. Directors of football at these MLS clubs, they get a DVD from an agent and, let's face it, you can make anyone look amazing in a five-minute edit. So they've been coming to us; we have independent evaluations of all of these players, but we also have our scouts on the ground in these different locations."

NET WORK

To be more precise, Sports Interactive has an average of 1,300 scouts around the world compiling the data for the game. "To put that in perspective," Markham says,

"Manchester City, or the City Football Group as they're now known, with their four clubs and sharing intelligence with China, they've got 40 scouts globally. That really shows the depth of the network."

This network of scouts – mostly composed of professional scouts, but it includes fans who do it for fun – operates in 51 countries, collecting data on players that's fed back into a database with information on over 650,000 individuals. "When you're playing the game there's around 40 attributes that are visible, where you can see how a player compares to another in terms of 0

to 20," Markham says. "Behind that there's probably another 230 attributes that aren't visible. They'll evaluate even the mental state of a player; a lot of the stuff that's hidden, if we had it on display we could have a legal case on our hands."

Many of these stats, then, have an element of subjectivity to them. That doesn't mean they're

not valuable – as Markham points out, when a player spends a couple of years on the bench, subjective evaluation of their attributes is all you've got to go on. It does, however, highlight how data doesn't stop you from having to make a judgement call at some point.

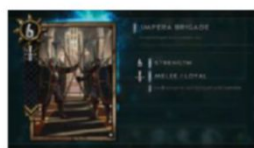
Data, and by extension *Football Manager*, does and will continue to provide clubs with valuable insights, but it will never eliminate the capacity for the sport and its players to surprise us. ■

Paul Walker-Emig

DATA COLLECTED TO SUPPORT A SIMULATION IS NOW INFLUENCING THE REALITY



Gwent: The Witcher Card Game



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

2017 (open beta)

DEVELOPER

CD Projekt Red

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

www.playgwent.com

GWENT: THE WITCHER CARD GAME

Is there life after *The Witcher 3* for CD Projekt Red's card game?

Card games aren't my thing. I don't enjoy *Hearthstone*, and *Magic: The Gathering* makes me sleepy. *Gwent* is different – not in function, but in conception. It's the Trojan Horse of collectible card games, having already infiltrated my consciousness through its presence in *The Witcher 3*.

Gwent is the perfect minigame for an open-world adventure – an entertaining pastime that encourages you to seek out fellow enthusiasts in order to expand your deck. I played it obsessively.

This standalone incarnation is more complicated, but not overwhelmingly so. At its core it's a best-of-three battle in which players take turns playing a single card. At the end of the round – either when both players pass, or when everyone has run out of cards – the player with the highest attack score wins. Unlike *Hearthstone*, with its mana pool, your only resource is the number of cards in your hand. When a round ends, your hand isn't redealt. Play too many cards in the first round, and your opponent will have the advantage over the next two.

At a basic level this is good design. When to pass becomes a crucial decision. Playing high value cards and passing early might tempt your opponent into overextending – giving you a card advantage in later rounds. Or they could accept the loss, leaving you with lower value cards for the rest of the match.

To further complicate matters, cards can have special traits. Each represents a unit, person or spell from the Witcher's world, and is played on one of three rows – melee, ranged or siege. Geralt, for instance, is a melee card. He doesn't do anything fancy, but he's a legendary –

making him immune to most types of damage and debuff. He's also powerful. Keep him around and his 12 attack score can tip the balance when both players are low on cards.

The Poor Infantry is a melee fighter with only three attack points. When played, he spawns a copy of himself. Strategies form as you play your cards in a specific order to maximise their impact. I stumbled on a powerful combination that paired the Poor Infantry with the Blue Stripes Scout, a mid-value ranged unit that adds four attack power to a card of your choosing. I'd play the Infantry, which would create a copy of itself, and then use Scout on one of the two cards. I'd then play Foltest, a leader card available to use once per match, regardless of your hand.

Foltest will clone any basic unit. Playing him on the Scout-adjusted Poor Infantry creates a copy of that card, which, when played, triggers its own innate ability and spawns yet another copy of itself – both at the buffed attack value. Two cards with a combined six attack power become four with a total score of 24. I felt like a genius for figuring that out, even if my win/loss ratio would suggest otherwise. Tragically, this strategy has already been nerfed. As befits a closed beta, CD Projekt Red is frequently tinkering with the balance.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS

There are lots of effects, all organised around the basic theme of each faction. The Northern Realms is all about support and reinforcement. The Monster faction can multiply rapidly, and is immune to weather effects. The Scoia'tael is a guerrilla force, causing damage to opposition units. Skellige is all about resurrection, and being strengthened by damage. The fifth faction, Nilfgaard, was only recently introduced into the standalone game.

Each faction functions similarly to its *Witcher 3* counterpart, but Nilfgaard was considered too similar to the Northern Realms and so delayed to receive a top to

PLAYED IT

PLAY TOO MANY CARDS AND YOUR OPPONENT WILL HAVE THE ADVANTAGE

PREVIEW

Gwent: The Witcher Card Game



bottom overhaul. For CD Projekt Red, it's a chance to prove that *Gwent* has the capacity for further expansion, and a life beyond *The Witcher 3*.

The new Nilfgaard is based around infiltration and reconnaissance. Disloyalty is a theme, with cards played to your opponent's side of the board. In *The Witcher 3's Gwent*, spies increased your opponent's score in exchange for drawing two cards to your hand. It was a powerful move, and one that had already been toned down for standalone *Gwent*. Nilfgaard's disloyalty options are more varied. Take Fake Ciri, who sits on your opponent's side, gaining power every turn. When your opponent passes, she flips allegiance, adding her points to your score instead. That might sound like an overly complicated way of getting a few points, but only a few debuff cards can target a player's own side of the board. For the recipient of a Fake Ciri, it can be a tactical as well as psychological disadvantage.

One possible Fake Ciri counter is Letho, a new legendary card. As an assassin, he'll destroy every card on the row he's placed on, absorbing their strength for himself. If you pop him next to a Fake Ciri on your side of the board, he'll take her out, and absorb any points she's gathered. Or, play him on an opposing row, and you can devastate your enemy's strategy for that round. For all the tactical satisfaction, it's also fun to see how specific figures of the Witcher's world have been interpreted for *Gwent's* rules. Letho's surgical carnage feels appropriate for his character.

Not every disloyal card is as intricate as Fake Ciri. The Ambassador is a low-value disloyal unit that buffs the attack value of a random unit on your side, while the Emissary plays the top card from your deck. And a special card, Treason, lets players coax back disloyal cards onto their side of the board. There's potential for an effective hand focused around disloyal play – full of decisions about how many cards you can play to your opponent's side while still maintaining an advantage.

BEHIND THE LINES

Disloyal cards cover the infiltration half of the Nilfgaardian attack, but reconnaissance can also lead to some

powerful combinations. Vattier de Rideaux, for instance, lets you show up to two cards from your own hand. For each card that you reveal, a random card from your opponent's hand is also unveiled. The applications here are twofold. Firstly, you can choose which of your cards to reveal. Pick those that aren't critical to your current strategy, and you're gambling for the chance to glean more useful information from your opponent.

More beneficially, other card traits can trigger whenever a card is revealed. Take the Mangonel, a potentially terrifying siege unit that removes two damage from a random opposing card whenever something is revealed. Given that Vattier can create up to four reveals, and that multiple Mangonels can be played, it's possible to do serious damage to any opponent unable to nullify the effect. It's potentially potent as long as you build your deck specifically for those traits, and as long as your opponent doesn't have a Letho waiting to roll up your siege row, or Mangonels of their own. In the latter case, the board comes alive, as multiple abilities fire off and both sides take a battering. Visually, *Gwent* is more muted and subtle than *Hearthstone*, but it still knows how to sell such moments of drama.

Revealing is a great early strategy thanks to another quirk of the Nilfgaardian playbook: resource control. Thier faction perk lets you replace cards each hand – discarding unnecessary cards and drawing new ones from your deck. Nilfgaard also has access to Xarthisius, a card that lets players see the top two cards from their opponent's deck, and choose to send one to the bottom. It's not a huge advantage, but the chance to poke and prod at both decks builds a feeling of control and manipulation that seems appropriate for the faction.

It's an enjoyable deck, full of new options that make sense within *Gwent's* existing systems. If anything, it makes some of the other hands – specifically Northern Realms – feel a bit vanilla. The Nilfgaard faction has a strong identity built specifically around the expanded ruleset of standalone *Gwent*. A faction like Northern Realms, which retains its ties to the less ambitious *Witcher 3* minigame, feels broader and less focused. Crucially, Nilfgaard proves that *Gwent* can be expanded in new ways, which will be vital if it's to have any longevity in the crowded card game market. Despite its origin, I'm hopeful that *Gwent* can make it on its own.

Phil Savage



CRUCIALLY, NILFGAARD PROVES THAT GWENT CAN BE EXPANDED IN NEW WAYS

REDRAW CARDS

Choose a card to redraw. [2 of 3]



SCORCH
Special
Destroy the strongest non-Gold unit(s) on the battlefield.



EMISSARY
Play the top Bronze unit in your deck.



AMBASSADOR
Add 12 strength to a random non-Gold unit on your side of the battlefield.



IMPERA BRIGADE
Gain 2 strength for each Spying unit on the battlefield.



BLACK INFANTRY ARBALEST
Remove 3 strength from an opposing non-Gold unit. If the unit's strength is higher than base, remove 5 strength instead.

Redrawing is a gamble, and the Nilfgaardians do it a lot.



6











5

































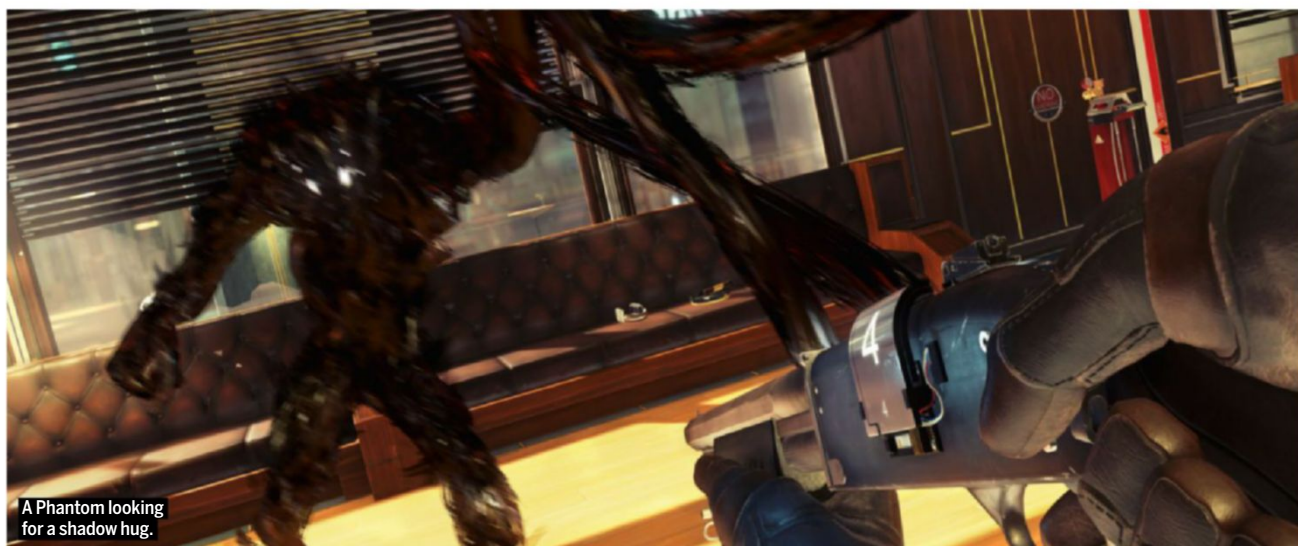


APRIL 2017 PC GAMER 19

PREVIEW

Prey

This guy has a hard face to trust.



A Phantom looking for a shadow hug.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May

DEVELOPER
Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
prey.bethesda.net

PREY

Hands-on with the first hour of Arkane's FPS

I'm Morgan Yu. It's my first day on the job with the TranStar research crew. Before work, I take a breezy helicopter ride over what appears to be a near-future San Francisco. A thumping synth track plays in the background. It's pleasant, really. I'm meeting some people from Human Resources to run a few innocuous tests. *Totally normal.*

Within a few minutes, I'm in Talos 1, a space station (yes, in space) smashing sentient alien spiders made of black goo with a wrench. How you get there and why is a clever reveal that's better experienced firsthand, but you can watch the first hour at www.youtube.com/pcgamer. You can't really trust yourself. Shit gets weird. Try to stay cool. Smash aliens.

In the most self-aware change for a *BioShock* immersive sim, the very trashcans you typically root through to eat hundreds of candy bars might spring to life and eat you. It's been talked about before, but rarely experienced firsthand. Mimics, one of *Prey*'s early enemies, can morph into any static object at will.

With enemies like Mimics, *Prey* establishes an omnipresent tension that encourages improvisational play. If any garbage can or book or agave plant has the potential to be a deadly sentient monster, then there won't be much time to react. With all the systems promised – hacking, shooting, super strength, and more – at your disposal, being hunted actually sounds like a pretty good time. But in the first hour, Mimics still behave

like fairly predictable videogame enemies. Most of the time, Mimics just skittered off, turned into objects, and then turned back whenever I got within a few yards. I hope to see more erratic behaviour from them, maybe even staying in object form while I pick up and read a book, or never leaving object form until I leave the room and hear them skittering around behind the door.

The AI may not be as advanced as I imagined, but stressful combat nearly makes up for it. Ammo is scarce early on and a single Phantom, the tougher bipedal monsters, required almost everything I had to take down. I'm curious how it plays with all the powers, security systems and advanced creatures thrown in together. Will I still feel horror and panic with access to superpowers and piles of guns?

GET LOST

Weapons have a nice heft and gorgeous models. The shotgun in particular may go down as a classic. But besides my shotgun lust, what really stuck with me was something a bit more old fashioned: *Prey*'s level design gave me serious *Metroid* vibes. After the linear intro bits play out, you're dumped into a massive lobby where you can wander off in any direction.

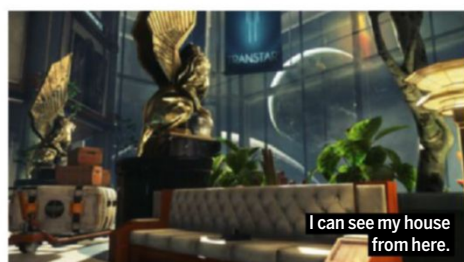
There are signs of what I might be able to do everywhere. Heavy objects have strength requirements to pick up, drones and security require high-level hacking, and the few weapons I had felt bare, missing all the mods and ammo I'd want to synthesise down the line.

The potential toolset and markers in the level design indicate that returning to areas regularly with new powers in tow is expected, as you might be able to slide through tiny crevices as an object or hack security systems that were impenetrable before. Eventually, you can even traverse the entire outside surface of Talos 1, which *Prey* writer Ricardo Bare compared to the "woods of *Skyrim*" in that it's a vast, dangerous membrane connecting disparate parts of the station together.

I didn't get to see the hull myself, but it's a promising concept, one that completes the illusion of Talos 1 as a real place with logical design and not just some complex arrangement of tunnels and doors hanging in a void.

James Davenport

PLAYED
IT



WILL I STILL PANIC WITH ACCESS TO SUPERPOWERS AND PILES OF GUNS?

Call of Cthulhu



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Late 2017

DEVELOPER
Cyanide Studio

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

LINK
www.callofcthulhu-game.com

CALL OF CTHULHU

“Suffering from a slight case of *Amnesia*, Mr Holmes?”

Horror games where you spend much of your time getting acquainted with the insides of cupboards are all the rage. Detective games where you make deductions based on clues you discover around you? Not so much. And yet this unconventional pairing seems oddly befitting of a game based on HP Lovecraft's world of cosmic horror.

Call of Cthulhu is a first-person horror/investigation hybrid, emerging from the murkiest depths of human comprehension by way of French developer Cyanide Studio. It's had a shaky development, and the DNA of original developer Frogwares (makers of the *Sherlock* series) is still evident in the footage I was shown, where troubled hero Edward Pierce breaks into an abandoned mansion to investigate an artist's disappearance. After a tense negotiation with an axe-wielding groundsman, in which the devs chose Intimidation over Small Talk to deal with the out-of-his-depth codger, we go in.

Things start off fairly routine, as Pierce interacts with objects that conspicuously twinkle so you definitely don't miss them – a family photo, a diary entry, a ceremonial dagger. As the clues start giving glimpses into the Lovecraftian world of interdimensional beings and Great Old Ones, we get introduced to a key game mechanic – the sanity meter.

In the short term, Pierce's sanity deteriorates *Amnesia*-style as he witnesses unearthly things not meant for

human eyes (if your sanity runs out, it's game over). As the plot progresses, Pierce starts succumbing to madness as he learns about the cosmic deity Cthulhu. This seems an apt way to capture one of the central themes of Lovecraft's work – that it's best not to get too curious about what lies beyond the curtain of reality.

After ten minutes of snooping around the mansion, dot-joining, and drawing conclusions (which, correct or not, have repercussions later in the game), things suddenly take a turn for the twisted.

UNSTILL LIFE

In a forlorn room filled with paintings, the largest one begins to shift, the canvas contorting as something from within pushes out like some unearthly newborn. A creature with a face of staggered, twisted teeth emerges from the painting, Pierce hides in the cupboard, and the game has suddenly switched to horror.

As you watch the creature through the slats, your sanity deteriorates, so the best course of action is to look towards other parts of the room for hints on how to overcome the beast. With a ceremonial dagger in your hand, the closest thing to a sensible solution seems to be to sneak up to the painting and plunge the artefact into it. Presumably to maintain the aura of mystery and menace around the eldritch creature, the Cyanide dev makes a hasty sprint for the painting, raises his dagger to pierce it, but at the last second gets pulled back by the creature, flipped around to face his executioner, and the screen cuts to black.

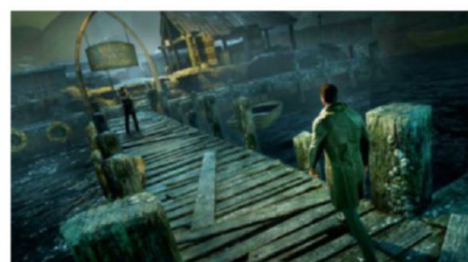
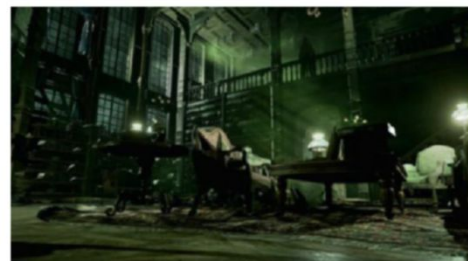
It's a harrowing moment, for sure, but of the sort that we've become accustomed to in recent years, and I'm not sure revealing the creature in a cinematic cutscene does justice to the Lovecraftian premise of unknowable horror, or plays to the medium's proven strengths at building up tension.

There's definite potential in the ideas of steadily deteriorating sanity and the rabbit-hole narrative; it's in these areas that Cyanide can capture the dark spirit of Lovecraft, rather than in over-exposed monster encounters that blend it into the mass of modern horror games. I'm intrigued to see which direction *Call of Cthulhu* will take.

Robert Zak

FIRST
LOOK

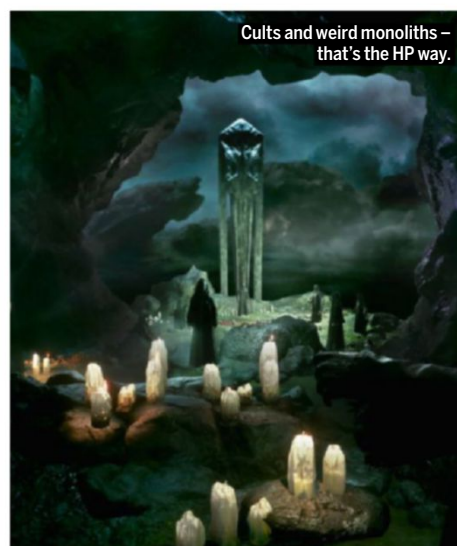
A CREATURE WITH A FACE OF STAGGERED, TWISTED TEETH EMERGES FROM THE PAINTING



There's always a lighthouse. Also, some blokes looking at a lighthouse.



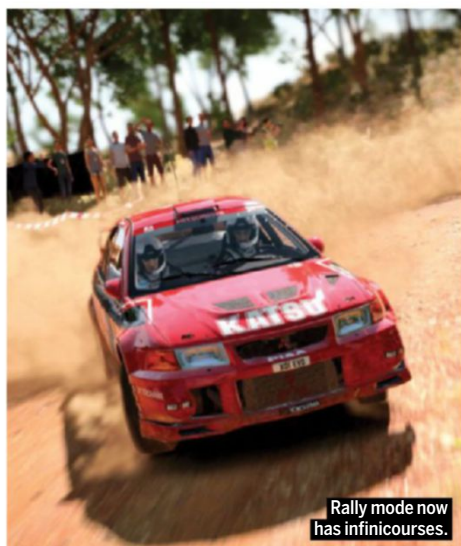
A screenshot that could have come right out of Frictional's game.



Cults and weird monoliths – that's the HP way.

Dirt 4

Dirt 4, living up to its name.



Rally mode now has infinicourses.



Has Codemasters thrown out the fun, or just the frivolous?



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 9

DEVELOPER
Codemasters

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.dirt4game.com

DIRT 4

Dirt Rally's success has strongly influenced the game's return

Dirt 2 was so cool that some players couldn't actually stand it. They complained that 'cool' wasn't actually cool anymore – and that it was too arcadey. Having hit the other end of the driving game spectrum with the ultra hardcore *Dirt Rally*, Codemasters' now presents its off-road racing series *without* fireworks.

The exemplary, hardcore handling model of *Dirt Rally* has been carried over to simulate those close-competitive 'Land Rush' races in *Dirt 4*, as if they were happening in the real world. That's still cool, but only in essence, rather than execution. This new, serious treatment is everywhere you look, too. The 'rewind' button – previously one of the series' most celebrated features – is nowhere to be seen, which means accidents are no longer trivial eye candy.

Amazingly for fans of the series, the rally mode (featuring licensed 2016 cars) offers an even *more* hardcore rally experience than *Dirt Rally*, since every single one of its hundreds of career stages is unique. That's thanks to procedural generation. In *Dirt Rally*, your memory started to come into play after even just a few repeat runs, and that's hardly true rallying. In *Dirt 4*, every corner you come to is a new challenge, forcing you to depend on your co-driver's pace notes.

This track generator is also available for you to use when making your own events or racing leagues with other

players. Dubbed 'Your Stage', it works on just two slider bars – one for complexity and one for length. So you specify how tricky you want it, how long you think you can last without terminally wrapping your car around a tree, and hit 'generate'.

You could tell a layman the results were hand-built by a crack design team, and they'd probably nod at the commendable job they'd done. Only the pre-race flyby hints that you're racing on a generated ribbon. On the road, you're immersed in a beautifully naturalistic and organic environment, full of trees, spectators and hazards to avoid. There are even RC drones hovering above, which are really off-putting when it's dark and they've got a little spotlight underneath. Is that a UFO? Oh I've crashed.

ALTERED STATES

There are five countries for rallying: USA (Michigan), Sweden, Wales, Australia and Spain, and you can choose weather and time of day. You get some real world tracks, but they're confined to the expanded Rallycross mode, which features RX Lites and Cross Karts to play with. The Land Rush tracks, however, have been designed by Codemasters, and made to look like real venues.

Even though the demo build is pre-alpha, the game is already playing beautifully. Unlike the standard pads and force-feedback wheels of the console pods, the PC version was only playable with Codemasters' favourite toy, the 'D-Box': a behemoth hydraulic set-up that tips and rumbles the entire cockpit (and you). The feel of the game is just gorgeous with a wheel and pedals, even more so when you're being shaken like you're driving your washing machine during spin cycle. It's perfectly playable with a pad too, thanks to both simulation and simplified handling options, both of which use the same base physics engine.

Dirt 4 is serious enough to please the hardcore crowd, but will it please those old *Dirt* fans who simply want to have fun? If you're longing for a new, bombastic Codemasters racing game with pyrotechnics, rivalries, insane jumps, erupting tyre walls and extreme crash damage, this isn't it. *Dirt 4* definitely has class on its side, though.

Justin Towell

THANKS TO PROCEDURAL GENERATION, EVERY CORNER IS A NEW CHALLENGE



FIRST
LOOK

Not a violent man by nature, our hero sometimes can't resist going a bit *Dishonored*.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Late 2017

DEVELOPER
Dontnod Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

LINK
www.vampyr-game.com

VAMPYR

How your bloodlust affects Dontnod's dark London

Since its announcement, *Vampyr* has been fluttering in the periphery of our collective vision like a bat at night. We know it's an action RPG set in London during the Spanish flu epidemic, and that it's as dark, wet and miserable as any pre-'60s depiction of the city, but not much more. I caught up with Dontnod narrative director, Stéphane Beauverger, to shine a paraffin fuelled light on the game.

PLAYED IT



You are John E Reid, a doctor trying to figure out how he became a vampire while working with Spanish flu victims.

In contrast to the busy streets we've come to expect from semi-open games, there are only about 60 citizens on the streets of *Vampyr*'s London.

"It's London during a deadly epidemic, so not many people are out at night," Beauverger tells me. "If you meet someone, you know they have a good reason to be there. Most of these people fit into one of the four archetypes – The



Saint, The Mad, The Desperate, and The Criminal – and you can interact with and kill any of them."

These citizens exist outside the main storyline, but can still have a profound impact on your game. "All the citizens have families, jobs and lives," says Beauverger. "And they're linked in unexpected ways. If you kill someone, their friends may decide to get revenge, join vampire hunters, or perhaps close their shops down. Or maybe a citizen will be happy that you killed someone they had a grudge with, and reward you with quests and items."

BLOOD SIMPLE

Beauverger stresses that you can go through the whole game without killing

anyone, though feeding on blood is a well-integrated way of regulating the game's difficulty. "The easiest way to level up is to kill a citizen. You can play without killing anybody, and the game will be more difficult, but there's less risk that your actions will come back to haunt you."

The story of the tortured vampire who needs to balance his sinful cravings with his innate good nature is nothing new, but the way your decisions impact the relatively small game world looks intriguing, and I suspect that it's the encounters with archetypes and citizens that will confront us with the most intriguing moral and narrative dilemmas.

I recently wrote for PCG about *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, and how its developers seem to be taking a 'One City Block' approach to design; a tight, interwoven world that goes on whether you're engaging it or not, and where each choice can count in unexpected ways. It sounds like *Vampyr* could be playing with similar ideas, but over two years on from its initial announcement, you'd hope these ideas might start materialising soon.

Robert Zak

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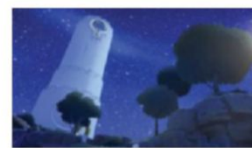
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PREVIEW

Rime

Rime's mysterious island is full of strange ruins.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May

DEVELOPER
Tequila Works

PUBLISHER
Grey Box and Six Foot

LINK
www.tequilaworks.com/en

RIME

Explore paradise through the eyes of a child

When you jump into water, you can make the game's cape-wearing protagonist do a cannonball. I spent a while looking for a lofty position to pull off the best cannonball possible. It was an aimless diversion that perfectly captures the spirit of this adventure.

Almost four years ago, Tequila Works unveiled their latest project. *Rime* was, at the time, a PlayStation exclusive being published by Sony. At first glance it evoked the likes of *Zelda*, particularly *Wind Waker*, and *Shadow of the Colossus*. And there were survival elements like the need to eat and drink. The world itself was going to be open, and the hero mostly silent. Now, only the last fact remains the same.

"We always had this vision for being able to see the world through the eyes of a child," explains creative director Raul Rubio. "When we announced the game in 2013, at first we were delighted, but then we had a panic attack. People compared it to *Wind Waker*. It looked like *Shadow of the Colossus*. It looked like *Journey*. At first we were like, oh, thank you! These are huge compliments. But then it was like, wait, do people expect it to be *Wind Waker*? They want a *Zelda*? Fuck!"

Bold comparisons were being made, expectations raised, but at the same time people weren't entirely sure what you did in the game. Another trailer was released and once again the reaction was positive, but Rubio still didn't feel they were expressing their vision of the game as well as they needed to. Tequila Works went radio silent, and since 2014 they've made some dramatic changes.

Now here they are with a new publisher, more platforms, and more importantly a bigger, clearer focus on the themes of childhood. The studio may have been quiet, but it's been busy.

PLAYED
IT

"Instead of adding, by 2014 to 2015 we were removing things from the game. It was more like a Bauhaus approach to game design, or design by subtraction," says Rubio. "At the beginning of the project, there was a heart, telling you how much stamina and health you had. You had to eat food. You had to drink. But it was distracting. We wanted you to explore and get lost, enjoy and discover... then it was all keep eating, drink, sleep, do all this or you're going to die. Where's the fun?"

Without the slog of survival, *Rime's* players are free to explore at a more leisurely pace, better able to wander, investigating the island's many striking ruins or hunting down its secrets. The game's first stage is an idyllic introduction, mostly free of danger, where obstacles are environmental or puzzles.

There are towers to climb, offering impressive views of the island; conundrums that require the adolescent adventurer's magical voice – he might not talk but he's adept at humming and yelling – to activate or break objects; and you can even chase pigs, or feed them, using fruit to make them charge toward thick brambles that need removing.

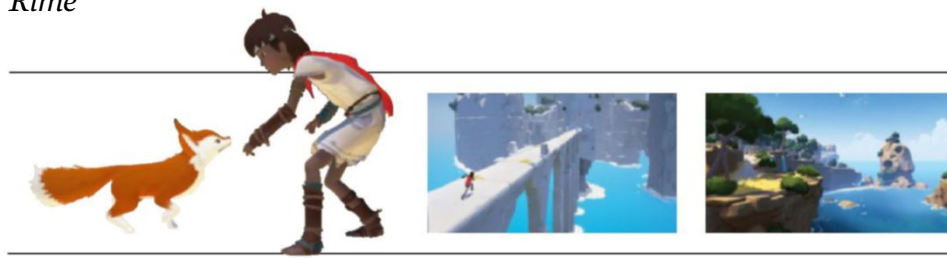
RIME AND REASON

Puzzles are a highlight, with solutions ranging from moving and activating statues to stage-wide adventures that require a spot of exploration as well as lateral thinking. The ones I encountered in the first two stages tended to be simultaneously simple and clever. Rarely did they involve more than a few steps, but solving them still felt like an achievement and required different skills.

Tequila Works wanted dangerous obstacles as well, which saw the studio once again thinking like a child, this time in a threatening situation. Combat was never on the cards, though. "I would run," Rubio tells me. "I wouldn't try to fight. But that doesn't mean I'm totally helpless. Like a child, I have my ingenuity, and I can find a way... a workaround."

CONUNDRUMS REQUIRE THE ADVENTURER'S VOICE TO ACTIVATE OR BREAK OBJECTS

Rime



➤ In *Rime*'s second stage, things take a dark turn. Before, the world was bright and almost whimsical. Cannonballing. Playing with pigs. Relaxing in the sunshine. Stage two starts in a hall where you're surrounded by strange spirits and statues, or maybe even corpses, made of sand. Their poses suggest pain, until you bump into them and they crumble.

The music, colour palette, architecture – everything changes. And there's a new threat: an avian monster who steals an important part of a puzzle. It patrols the sky attempting to eat the hero. Instead of fighting it, you've got to outsmart it. This, then, is not a battle but another puzzle, and a rather elaborate one. Yet it's made less daunting by being broken up into more manageable problems with fewer steps – such as how do you move around without the bird eating you. And when that's solved, the puzzle becomes more about defeating the bird.

Without dialogue or text, *Rime*'s art does a great deal of the narrative heavy lifting. The island is full of murals, statues and the detritus of a forgotten civilisation, hinting at a story that, in the early stages, always feels just out of reach. These elements frequently serve a more practical purpose, too. The statues are often used in puzzles, while murals can often hide vague solutions.

"If you ignore the beautiful visuals, the graphics, the layer below that is the visual language," says Rubio. "It's super practical because everything is defined by design. Like why are all the sound elements" – the stuff activated by the hero's voice – "made of jade? It's green, and the texture and material is different. If you're colour blind, you can still understand that material is different to the others."

This language, which most commonly employs colour, extends to everything from objects you can grab, which tend to be yellow, to ledges you can hang on or climb up, which are white thanks to seagull poo, unfortunately. These elements also act as subtle guides, nudging you forward. There's a fox who will often appear when you're lost, barking and calling for you, but she'll also vanish for various reasons, like the aforementioned bird, leaving colour and art to keep you on the right path.

Since nothing is explicit, the developers needed to reevaluate what puzzles would work well with these limitations. "As game designers, we had to go against our rules," Rubio explains. "It might be a good puzzle design, but is it a complete experience for someone who is going to get no tutorial, no dialogue, no explanation? Are they going to feel frustrated?"

With one early puzzle, a better solution appeared when a designer got frustrated trying to quickly carry a ball over to a pedestal before the platforms sunk into the ground. In a final moment of anger, they threw the ball, which then landed right next to where it needed to be.

"It was very childish. Like when you're a toddler and just hammering shapes into holes where they don't fit." Rubio smacks the table. "Now it fits. This is another case of ingenuity. Breaking the puzzle, in this case, is the way to solve the puzzle."

TO THE DARK TOWER

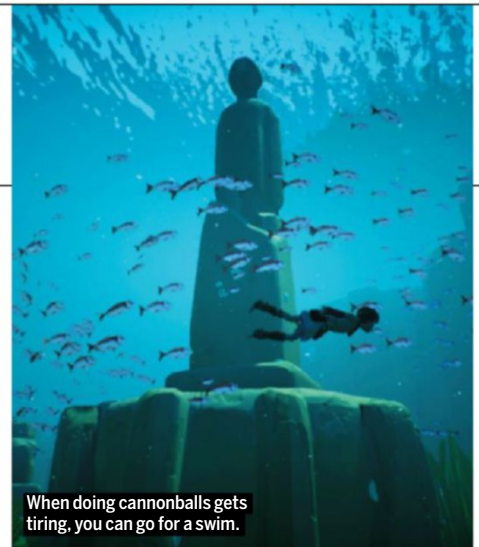
Demon's Souls and *Dark Souls* have proved to be an unlikely inspiration for Rubio and his team. Not in terms of challenge, however, since death in *Rime* has barely any consequences, and there's no tricky combat, but elsewhere FromSoftware's RPGs have left their mark on this project.

Rime was, at one point, an open-world game, but that caused a lot of problems for puzzles and subtly guiding players, so the structure was transformed. Now, it's got distinct stages, like *Dark Souls*, that are fairly open, all connected to each other by obstacle-laden paths that lead to the island's central tower. It's more orderly and linear than a true open world, but you can still perceive the bigger world around you, seeing things off in the distance such as new destinations or challenges.

There's the ambiguity too, a mystery that's open to interpretation. Rubio likens it to a fable, where it's up to the player to get the message. "You can take it in a literal way, but there are a lot of metaphors." So while the world is one we view through the eyes of a child, acting in appropriately childlike ways, there are themes at play that suggest a slightly more adult, or at least esoteric, tone.

Rime plays things so close to its chest that it's hard to get a clear picture of it after only exploring its early stages, but it sets up a potentially fascinating adventure in a lively and utterly gorgeous world, with puzzles and exploration that seem to be hitting all the right notes.

Fraser Brown

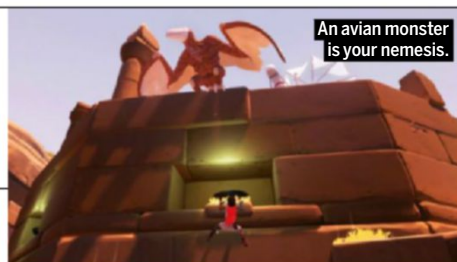
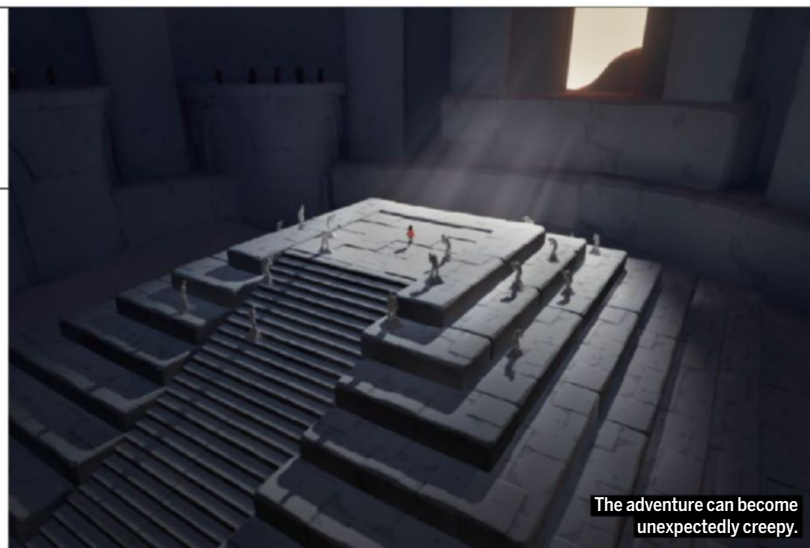


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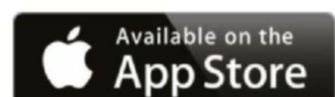
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Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

CASTLES

in the

SAND

Could **MOUNT & BLADE II: BANNERLORD** be
2017's best RPG? *By Phil Savage*

Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

Mount & Blade is an unlikely success story of the kind that only really happens on PC. Awkward, weird, and not particularly pretty, it's nonetheless a triumph of sandbox design. It mixes tactical combat, RPG progression and strategic simulation, all in a sandbox world full of possibilities. In *Mount & Blade: Warband*, 2010's standalone expansion and easily the best game in the series so far, players have free

rein to explore a massive, politically intriguing medieval kingdom.

Now, after years of waiting, a full sequel is on the way. TaleWorlds' sizeable, dedicated fan base has been clamouring for *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* ever since its announcement back in 2012. It's one of my most anticipated games of the year, and I'm excited to find out how it has progressed since the footage shown at last year's PC Gamer Weekender. TaleWorlds doesn't disappoint, and I get to watch as community manager Frank Elliott plays through an hour of a new campaign.

Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

➤ A new character, Yasmin, is created. She's spawned into the Southern Empire – a once mighty imperial power, now on the brink of collapse. *Bannerlord* is set 200 years before *Warband*, and depicts the early days of some of this world's great powers. Despite the fictional nations, this is no fantasy land. Weapons, armour and architecture are all designed to resemble historical equivalents from between 600 and 1100 AD.

Character creation is skipped in the demo – TaleWorlds has previously shown off the varied creation sliders, but isn't ready to detail the full extent of customisation. Needless to say, there should be plenty of options, including new builds that are part of an improved progression system. "*Bannerlord's* skill system builds upon what we had in *Warband*," says CEO Armagan Yavuz, "but it is vastly improved and in many ways much deeper and more fun. We have traits, skills and perks that work together in an interesting and unique way. Each skill has its own kind of XP category and is exercised individually. For example, you improve the Tracking skill by finding older and more difficult to find tracks."

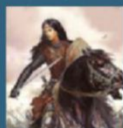
Entering the nearby city of Syronaea, Yasmin goes looking for a job. As in *Warband*, settlements can be traversed on foot, or via a menu. You're free to explore each town, village and castle, or, if you're in a hurry, can choose to instantly access essential services. New for *Bannerlord*, important NPCs can be directly accessed through the menu too, teleporting you to their location to instantly pick up a quest.

Settlements are also where you expand your army. This is an important part of *Mount & Blade*. You can travel alone, but you'll be at the mercy of bandits and rival factions. It's better to have at least a small band of troops.

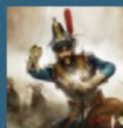
HARDCORE HISTORY *Your guide to the Mount & Blade series*



MOUNT & BLADE
Released: 2007
The original but not the best. Supplanted by *Warband*.



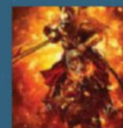
M&B: WARBAND
Released: 2010
This standalone expansion is the pinnacle of the series so far.



M&B: WARBAND - NAPOLEONIC WARS
Released: 2012
A multiplayer expansion set in the Napoleonic Era.



M&B: WARBAND - VIKING CONQUEST
Released: 2014
This expansion had a poor launch, but is better now.



M&B: WITH FIRE AND SWORD
Released: 2011
Proof that guns aren't a great addition to the formula.

BELOW: The question that changed the world: what if sharp sticks could go fast?

In *Warband*, you could visit villages and attempt to rally volunteers to your cause. In *Bannerlord*, troops are provided by important NPCs. The better your relationship with that person, the more soldiers you'll receive for your gold. Of course, each major NPC has different desires and allegiances, and working with one may put you at odds with another. *Bannerlord* isn't just about building alliances with the people you meet. In most situations you'll be picking a side, and that will have effects both on the specific people involved and the population at large.

ALLIES AND ALLEYS

As a new character with no notoriety, Yasmin is only able to acquire a single soldier per each 100 gold she pays. She nevertheless hires a few troops, and accepts a quest from Suterios the Sutler, a local merchant. He has a

faction can change based on your actions – it's even possible to take ownership of them yourself.

Yasmin's new troops can't enter the settlement, and so can't help clear the alley. Instead, Yasmin heads to the nearby tavern to find mercenaries for hire. These, as in *Warband*, are named companions with a backstory and special traits. Yasmin chooses Garitops the Golden, a heavy-set cavalryman, and Urios the Bull, a heavy-set swordsman. Less than ten minutes in, and she already has a type.

Companions are more expensive to hire than regular soldiers, but worth it if used effectively. Here, Yasmin has them follow her to the alley as backup. As she approaches, the smugglers stand up for their turf. It's the usual tough talk between two sides who are readying for a fight, but the smugglers reveal they are friends with the Oath Keepers – a local syndicate. They give Yasmin the option to switch sides – betraying Suterios and the merchants. "We are trying to make it so all quests have multiple ways to resolve them," Yavuz tells me.

Because of its sandbox nature, *Mount & Blade's* quests are procedurally generated around a number of set templates. They can have a great effect on the overall story of your campaign, but no individual quest ever felt like a compelling story by itself. Not only is *Bannerlord* attempting to increase the complexity of these scenarios, but their generation is now based on what's happening out in the world. That means you'll only get a quest to hunt down bandits if a settlement has a bandit problem.

YASMIN HEADS TO THE NEARBY TAVERN TO FIND MERCENARIES FOR HIRE

problem with a local gang of smugglers, who have taken over an alley that could otherwise be used for legitimate market stalls. Yasmin is tasked with clearing them out. This quest ties into what Yavuz describes as a desire to make towns more interesting by adding "opportunities for you to get into trouble." Towns and villages have back alleys and other areas of interest that are a point of conflict. The controlling





Everything is tied more fully into the sandbox. That's important, because the simulation is the story. The narrative emerges based around your actions. While there will be a more traditional story, it's mostly optional, and designed purely to get new players familiar with *Bannerlord's* world and systems.

SMUGGLERS' DOOM

Yasmin stays loyal and attacks the bandits. As in *Warband*, *Bannerlord's* swordplay is about directional strikes and blocks. It's not a complicated system, but does require some finesse. Your character's stats have an effect, as do your weapons and armour, but most important is your own ability. No matter your experience or equipment, you've got a better chance of survival if you can avoid being hit.

With the smugglers dead, Yasmin hands over control of the alley to Suterios. Not only is she given a reward, and the chance to steal and sell the bandits' loot, but the reputation increase means Suterios will now offer two volunteers per payment of 100 gold – doubling the basic rate. Pretty soon, Yasmin is leading a small army.

Getting to know an important NPC doesn't just confer a recruitment bonus. Later in the game, your friends will offer extra services. "For example," says Yavuz, "if you need to kidnap someone, that will be much easier if you have

ABOVE: Ah, but what if even bigger, sharper sticks could also go fast?



some friendly NPCs in the town. They open up opportunities for mischief." The service is based on the type of NPC you befriend. "Merchant NPCs give you an advantage in trading. A gang leader can give you advantages in 'special operations'," Yavuz says.

Before leaving the town, Yasmin joins a local tournament. Arena tournaments were a feature of *Warband*, but here they've been rebalanced so that each side is wielding the same equipment. In the first round, Yasmin, Urios and two other fighters

are up against a team that includes Garitrops the Golden. Yasmin wins, and, partnered with Urios, progresses through to a final round where they're pitted head to head. Yasmin walks out the victor, and earns some expensive-looking armour for her efforts.

Tournaments, as in *Warband*, are just a small part of the bigger game, but feel important for the fantasy. For me, *Mount & Blade* finds a captivating midpoint between *Skyrim* and *Crusader Kings II*. The former is reflected by your freedom, and the ability to choose any role, from noble lord to fiendish bandit. But instead of a linear progression around set narratives, *Mount & Blade's* story is emergent – a trade-off between your actions and that of the other AI characters. It feels grand in scope, but still lets you focus in on personal achievements and actions.

Victory achieved, Yasmin and her army leave the town. It's here, on the world map, that the sandbox meets the simulation. On the map, you can see traders, knights and bandits, all scurrying around to complete their task. One such group – a band of forest bandits – intercepts Yasmin as she journeys to a nearby castle. This triggers a dialogue scene in which the player can choose to fight, surrender or



Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

» negotiate. The bandits are tough, and the two sides are evenly matched. Not one to back down from a fight, Yasmin charges into battle.

You directly control your character at all times, whether fighting a handful of smugglers, or leading an army against a gang of bandits. The difference when fighting out in the world is the ability to command your troops. It's a simple system, letting you give basic orders and place markers to set positions. This is no *Total War* – the AI is much more autonomous – but it's still possible to set up cavalry flanking charges, or to move archers to a more advantageous position.

KING OF THE HILL

In *Bannerlord*, armies can be asked to attack or defend a location. This has a major effect on the behaviour of the enemy AI. A defending army won't necessarily charge at your position, and may instead move to higher ground. That won't always be the case, though. Even a defending army will hunt you down if they think they've a chance to quickly take you out. TaleWorlds hasn't yet decided on a unit cap for battles. It's possible to have hundreds of soldiers per side, but too many causes performance issues. This battle is composed of just 18 soldiers, and so there's little need for advanced tactics. The bandits are taken out with ease.

The battlefield is looted, and prisoners are captured. Both loot and

**ILATAR PROCLAIMS PEACE, AND ASKS WHO HE'S TALKING TO**

prisoners can be traded for money to buy new equipment and food to sustain the army. In addition, some of Yasmin's soldiers have levelled up. It's one thing to have a large army, but basic recruits are quickly dispatched. Here, too, there are advantages to having friends among the right locals. Certain NPCs can recruit more experienced volunteers of different specialties. Carrying out missions for the right people can lead to a more varied and effective army.

Eventually, Yasmin meets with Sanion, a lord of the house Mestricaros.

BELOW: Back to the small sharp sticks, but now they're even faster. This arms race is exhausting.

She's asked to train up a small band of his troops – leading them into small skirmishes to gain experience. Such missions can be more lucrative than those undertaken for a merchant, but have a greater impact on the sandbox. The danger is in drawing the ire of a rival lord, potentially leading to a deadly confrontation. With a bolstered retinue, Yasmin tracks down more bandits to test her borrowed recruits. A few battles later, and they've gained the necessary experience – although two were killed in the process. The outcome of the quest depends on how many troops survive. Just a few casualties, and the lord should be pretty pleased. But too many deaths could sour your relationship.

Yasmin returns to Sanion's castle, but he's not there. Lords are always on the move, leading their own armies on campaigns across their territory. It's possible to find the last known location of the lord through the quest menu, or by talking to the NPCs in their castle, but sometimes you just have to ride out and attempt to hunt them down. As Yasmin scouts the hills near Sanion's territory, she encounters a man called Ilatar. He proclaims peace, and asks who he's talking to.

Yasmin answers truthfully, and Ilatar reveals he's from a clan in



Khuzait. When you start a *Bannerlord* campaign, one of the other world powers will be openly hostile to you. The Khuzait – a nation of skilled horse archers – are Yasmin's enemies, and Ilatar prepares to attack. She's outnumbered; he's commanding 66 men to her 18. The battle is quick, and Yasmin is captured.

DISMOUNTED

That's how it goes in *Mount & Blade*. The simulation is always moving, and indifferent to your actions. Why Ilatar was in the Southern Realms doesn't matter – it led to a chance encounter that left Yasmin imprisoned and her army destroyed. It can be frustrating to run into such a powerful opponent so early, but gives the world a sense of unpredictability and danger. No two sessions are the same, and *Bannerlord* aims to heighten that variety.

This is where the demo ends, but, had it not, Yasmin's journey still wouldn't have been over. Prisoners will escape after a time, and, even when you're stripped of your soldiers and resources, the relationships you build remain intact.

It's clear from what I've seen that *Bannerlord* isn't revolutionising *Mount*



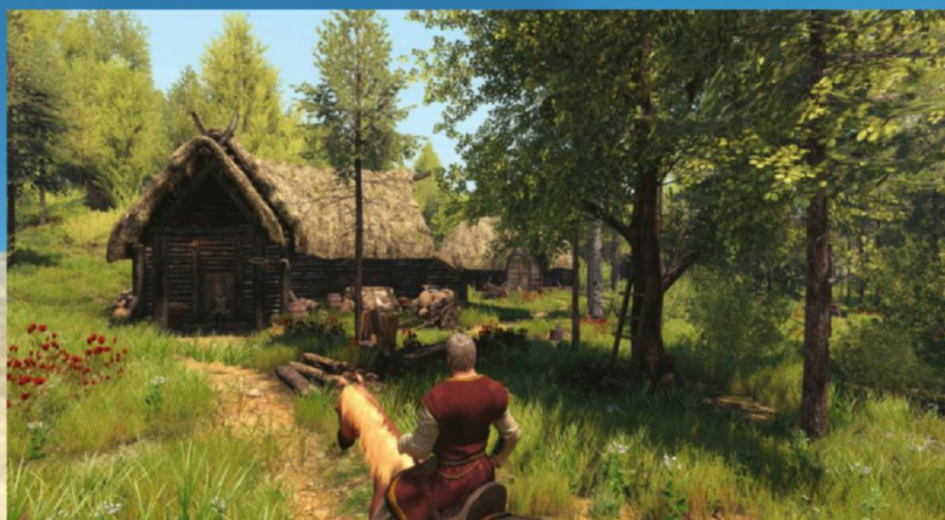
BELOW: One day man will have thrown all the sticks. At that moment, we shall know peace.

& *Blade*. This is a major progression of the series, focused primarily on tweaks and improvements. "We have been working on almost all aspects of the game," says Yavuz. "There are many other new features that we couldn't show in the demo such as the political and diplomatic system, better town management, a new and revamped character development, a crafting system, to name a few." Add to that multiplayer improvements and better mod support, and it's a significant overhaul of a familiar experience.

It explains why *Bannerlord* has been so long in the making. "We are trying to make the best game we possibly can," says Ali Erkin, TaleWorlds' managing director, "and this unfortunately has meant going back to the design board in certain cases, rethinking certain features, or rewriting a piece of code that doesn't perform as well as it

should." By way of an example, Erkin reveals that the character development system has been reworked three times from scratch. "When all is done and we see a system working really well, we feel that it was worth the extra time and effort," Erkin continues. "While we missed our 2016 target, we are confident we'll be able to get the game out in some form this year."

I hope so. *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* probably won't be the most polished game released this year, but, all being well, it will be a deep, varied sandbox game that welcomes new players and satisfies existing fans. TaleWorlds has made one of PC gaming's most endearing cult favourites, and the studio seems set to improve on it in almost every way. If this extra development time pays off, *Bannerlord* could well prove to be one of the year's best RPGs. ■



MOUNT YOUR FRIENDS *Meet the factions of Calradia*

CALRADIC EMPIRE

A diminished, once dominant empire, now locked in a three-way civil war. **Specialises in:** Armoured cataphracts and skilled archers.

ASERAI

Desert people who farm at oases, springs and the shores of the great southern lake. **Specialises in:** Fast-moving medium cavalry with spears.

VLANDIANS

Raiders of the Empire's western coast. Have now established a kingdom on imperial land. **Specialises in:** Knights wielding swords and lances.

BATTANIANS

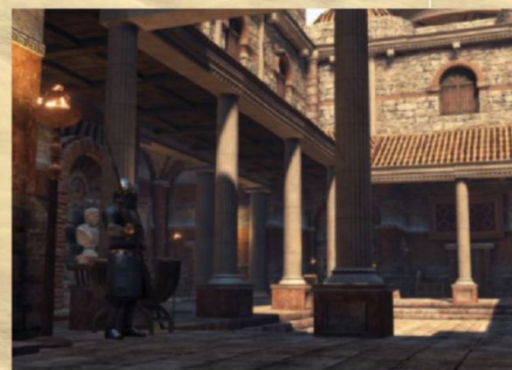
Inhabitants of northwestern Calradia, holed up in the mountains after imperial expansion. **Specialises in:** Forest warfare, and use of longbows.

STURGIANS

Natives of the northern forests, and traders and adventurers from the far north. **Specialises in:** Infantry fighters in shield-wall formations.

KHUZAITS

Swept out of the eastern steppes and seized a chain of frontier trading city-states for themselves. **Specialises in:** Deadly, fast-moving horse archers.





1

2

3

4

5

PC GAMER'S ARMA 3 WAR GAMES



Andy becomes Zeus in **ARMA 3: APEX**, and sets us a series of sporting-style challenges across Tanoa.

Set on the jungle islands of Tanoa, our first ever Arma 3 Sports Day will put the team through five brutal trials of skill and fortitude. These challenges, orchestrated by the almighty deity Zeus (well, Andy), will test essential skills such as

marksmanship, driving, avoiding lightning bolts, and hiding from a helicopter in a bush. The challengers won't know what each event involves until the chaos begins, and the mischievous Zeus will keep things interesting by throwing a few surprises into the mix, usually involving sheep. Who will be the champion?

MEET THE TEAM

1

ANDY KELLY (ZEUS)

I've played a lot of *Arma 3* and am well-versed in Zeus mode, particularly spawning sheep.

2

SAMUEL ROBERTS

I've only played *Arma 3* once, for a feature, and had to be taught how to climb over things again.

3

CHRIS THURSTEN

I've played a bit of *Arma 3*, but needed to replay some of the campaign to get up to speed.

4

PHIL SAVAGE

What's the crouch button? What's the get in car button? It's been a while since I last *Arma'd*.

5

TOM SENIOR

I've never really played *Arma* either. This hardcore war sim can't be that hard, right?

Arma is a very serious military simulator.



EVENT 1

DEATH KARTS

La Rochelle Aerodrome

Andy: I don't know why *Arma 3* has go-kart DLC. There's something absurd about a soldier decked out in full military gear skidding around in a tiny car. Which was the inspiration for my first event, Death Karts. The guys have to make three laps of the runway, which I've littered with wrecked vehicles and sheep. I'll also be flinging lightning bolts and maybe the occasional mortar strike, just to spice things up.

Phil: We set off. I dodge tanks, rusted boats and other detritus (is that a sheep?), and, as I approach the halfway point of the first lap, I'm in the lead. The shouting from nearby desks suggests that I might be the only one left moving. Then I explode. Er, Andy, what was that?

THE RULES

Race three laps, avoiding obstacles, mortar strikes, and other dangers. The challenger in first place, or the last man standing, wins.

Andy: Yeah. Death Karts was maybe a little too deadly. Rather than exciting obstacles to avoid, the mortar strikes were just annoyingly powerful. Halfway through the first lap, everyone's either dead or their karts are broken. So I decide to start again minus the artillery. And because it's taken us 40 minutes to get to this point, I decide that one lap is enough. Now it's time for Slightly Less Deadly Karts. Go!

Chris: I'm lagging behind Sam as we reach the end of the runway for the first time, but then he clips the side of one of our own ruined karts, does a forward flip, and dies. I thread a safer course, by which I mean I run over his head. I'm clear in the lead: Phil's lost his kart by this point, and Tom died early. But then I hear gunfire: Tom sprints back onto the track from the respawn point, takes aim, and kills me. Nobody wins.

Tom: Welcome to the senseless horror of Death Karts, Chris. If I can't win, everybody dies.

Samuel: My death was sudden and embarrassing.

Phil: Technically I'm alive, but I have no wheels. I can move, but slowly, and always to the right. If we had a few hours, I might make it a few metres down the road. We don't, though, so instead we persuade Andy

to give us another go.

Tom: I am officially disqualified from earning any points because of my previous unsportsmanlike behaviour. In my despair I crash into a downed helicopter and explode.

Chris: I manage a pretty clean run on our final attempt at this, pulling ahead and staying there because I know that you can hold down Shift to make cars go faster. Nobody else knows this, and I do not tell them until after I've crossed the finish line. I savour my gold medal, even though it comes with the silvery tang of betrayal. Mmmm.

Phil: What! I press Shift and, sure enough, I get a burst of speed. I would be annoyed, but the revelation allows me to overtake Samuel for second place.

Samuel: I'm just grateful to make it round the track, which I do. I'm furious that Chris didn't share this detail, but hopefully karma will get him back in a coming event.

WINNER - CHRIS



1st
Chris

2nd
Phil

3rd
Samuel



Tom breaks the rules.

EVENT 2

BIRD OF PREY

Comms Alpha

THE RULES

Challengers are trapped in a mountain base while Zeus attacks in a helicopter. Last man standing wins.

Andy: Comms Alpha is a military outpost on the precarious edge of a dormant volcano. I'll be assaulting it in an Mi-48 Kajman attack chopper. There are a few buildings for the guys to hide in, but I'll be able to flatten them with my missiles. I spawn the Kajman a few miles away then slowly make my way towards the base. I wish there was an option to play 'Ride of the Valkyries'.

Tom: Ah, the cowardice challenge – I've got this. At one end of the base there's a huge building shaped like a golf ball. I'm certain Andy won't be able to resist destroying that first. In fact, I think buildings are generally a death sentence here so I pick a largeish bush on the outskirts of the base, lie on my stomach and unceremoniously roll into the roots as far as I can. In first-person view I can see a wall. From third-person view I can only see leaves. I'm not moving.

Andy: I realise how bad I am at flying helicopters. Precise Gatling gun fire is out of the equation, so I just pummel the base with rockets and hope for the best. Of course I destroy the giant golf ball first.

Phil: Unbeknownst to me, I've hidden in the same bush as Tom. As Andy rains hellfire down upon the

buildings, I wedge myself further into my leafy sanctuary. This is a good plan! Suddenly, unexpectedly, I'm dead. I ask Andy if my movement had tipped him off. It turns out no. The downside to lying in the grass as an attack helicopter flies overhead is that there's nothing to protect you from a stray rocket. Writing that sentence down after the fact, it sounds really obvious.

Samuel: I get in the nearest building, because it's so obvious I don't think

"ANDY RAINS HELLFIRE DOWN AS I WEDGE INTO MY LEAFY SANCTUARY"

Andy will search there first. I see the smoke as Andy destroys the building next to me – this is like a survival horror game where the monster is a chopper. It's genuinely tense. Andy clips me with ricocheting bullets but I heal myself as he restocks.

Chris: I've got a plan. We can't shoot each other, or Andy, but there's more to a *Arma* character than guns. I hide in a building with a window

overlooking Tom's bush. I suspect he's safe down there, so as Andy passes over I ready a red smoke grenade and attempt to throw it down at him. It bounces off the inside of the window and goes off at my feet. Shit. Red smoke billowing from the window I'm at, I flee and enact plan B: hide from Andy by running directly beneath him. This does not work because helicopters are faster than people. As he fires aimlessly at the containers I'm hiding behind, I take a hit. I just about manage to heal and sprint away.

Tom: There is a lot of scary noise, but all I can see is the bush I'm in. Save me, sweet bush.

Chris: I hide in one of the perimeter huts for a while but Andy gets dangerously close, so I move to one of the bushes on the far side of the base from Tom. It's there that I get clipped by a stray round, crippling my ability to sprint. I'm not going to last long like this. I've got one last shot at revealing Tom: I've got to find Phil's body. I walk-crawl across the base, hiding in the ruins Andy has left in his wake. Miraculously, I make it from one side to the other in the gaps between several passes. There, in the bushes, I find Phil's bloody corpse. I loot it for grenades and turn, locating Tom by the faint squadmate indicator on my HUD. I throw first the red smoke and then the white smoke towards him. All I need to do now is wait. I take cover next to Phil... and am promptly shot to death as Andy strafes towards Tom's position.

Tom: I had no idea that Chris did this until I saw the replay later. It's a fitting act of revenge. We're all square, so I'm sure this will be the end of it. Yes, very sure.

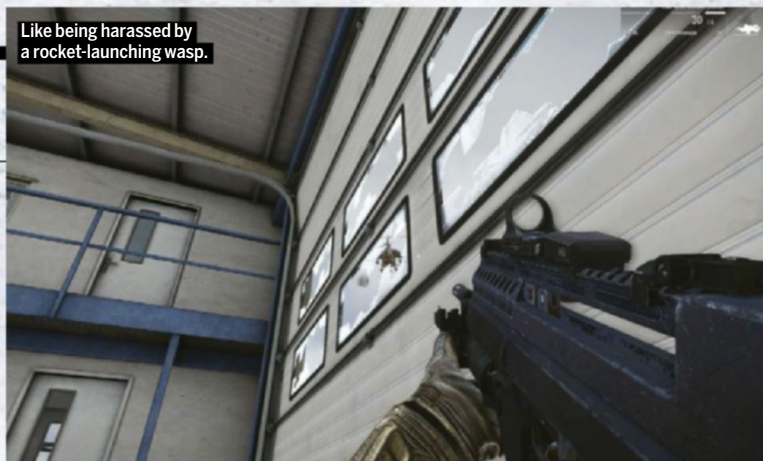
Samuel: It turns out the building I hid in was impossible to destroy, which is Andy's fault. So I win.

WINNER – SAMUEL



- 1st
Samuel
- 2nd
Tom
- 3rd
Chris

Like being harassed by a rocket-launching wasp.



Andy after an accidental collision with a radio tower.



This looks way more exciting than it was.

EVENT 3

DEEP TROUBLE

Nani

Andy: A simple race next. The guys have to drive a pair of 'water scooters' (basically non-copyright-infringing Jet Skis) from the tip of one landmass to another. I can't place obstacles on the water, so this'll be a lot less nerve-racking than Death Karts. Although I will be spicing things up with the occasional lightning bolt. And I also set the weather to stormy

THE RULES

Race from the tip of Nani to Muaceba on water scooters, avoiding Zeus's lightning bolts. The first person to reach the shore wins.

Waiting for something exciting to happen.



Zeus loves a good lightning bolt.

so the seas will be rough. I don't want to make it too easy for them.

Phil: We point ourselves at the target and go! And keep going. I don't mean to criticise – you're doing great work here, Andy – but where exactly is the trouble in this event?

Andy: Yeah, turns out Deep Trouble is very light on actual trouble.

"TURNS OUT DEEP TROUBLE IS LIGHT ON ACTUAL TROUBLE, BUT IT IS DEEP"

Although it is deep! It's basically very difficult to make a straight race across some water exciting, even when chucking lightning bolts around. So consider this a nice break before the drama ramps up again. It might have been more fun if the water scooter controls weren't terrible. There's a lot of things *Arma* does badly, including the handling of various non-military vehicles, but I won't hold that against

Bohemia. They probably didn't expect some idiots to use their game to stage a Jet Ski race.

Chris: I should not have gloated about the power of the Shift button. Use of the Shift button is all that separates winners from losers in this game of riding a Jet Ski in a straight line, and I do not win.

Samuel: I win! Probably because I had slightly more luck with the waves than the others did, or I guess I cheated and left the starting line half a second early. That event was... uneventful.

Andy: Zeus screwed this one up, but you try using an engine designed for military simulation to create a comedy sports day. I should have called in a few mortar strikes.

WINNER – SAMUEL



- 1st
Samuel
- 2nd
Chris
- 3rd
Tom



We fell off the crane, a lot.



Not the best gun for long range sniping.

EVENT 4

SHOOT TO KILL

Blue Pearl Industrial Port

Andy: And now for a test of marksmanship. I ask the guys to climb to the top of an enormous cargo crane at the Blue Pearl docks. It looks out over a long row of shipping containers, which I'll be zigzagging through. Each challenger will take it in turns to kill me. I was originally going to have them all firing simultaneously, but it was too

THE RULES

Zeus runs between shipping containers. Challengers have to kill him as quickly as possible from a sniping spot. Shortest time wins.

difficult to determine who killed me. So this way works a lot better.

Tom: I'm up first. I make sure I'm crouched, because that improves the stability of your aim in *Arma*. Then I make sure I'm shuffled up close enough to the safety rail for my weapon's bipod to deploy. That should make aiming even easier.

There are tense moments as I look down the range, then I spot a tiny figure booking it across open ground. I fire wildly. Dust kicks up behind the tiny dude as my bullets hit the dirt. This must be terrifying for Andy.

Andy: Being under fire in *Arma 3* is genuinely scary. I hear the whistle and crack of Tom's bullets around me, but I manage a few laps of the containers without getting hit. My guy keeps running out of breath and slowing down, because this is *Arma* and simulation governs everything. Eventually I keel over and die.

Tom: Andy's simulated asthma attack is the only reason I'm accidentally able to eventually take him down. Turns out a bipod and good combat posture are useless if you get a massive giggling fit halfway through the challenge.

Phil: My turn. I'm initially thrown when Andy adds a slight variation on his route, and later when Tom crawls onto the edge of the crane in an attempt to put me off. Soon, though, Andy is back on course and Tom is plummeting off the crane to his

death. It takes a couple of loops, but I bring Andy down in what I hope was a respectable time.

Andy: I was sticking roughly to the same route, but throwing in a few curveballs to keep things exciting. Fair? Not entirely, but this ain't the Olympics. If I was in charge of that it'd be a nightmare, and absolutely covered in sheep.

Chris: I feel pretty confident about this: I know the 'hold breath' key. As the others take their turns I daydream about lining up the perfect shot and dropping Andy with a single round, but I'll settle for a nice clean kill. It starts well: I tag Andy on his first pass, but the next two are a wash. I finally down him shortly after, about ten seconds faster than Phil and Tom. But I'm no Deadshot: that honour goes to the biggest fan of C-list Batman villains in the office.

Samuel: It feels like it takes me forever to even hit Andy, but when I finally connect he's down in seconds. It doesn't feel like I've won... but somehow I have, by just a few seconds. Now who's Deadshot, Chris?

WINNER - SAMUEL



- | | |
|-----|------------------|
| 1st | Samuel, 00:48:66 |
| 2nd | Chris, 00:50:70 |
| 3rd | Phil, 01:09:81 |

Ladders are notoriously dangerous in *Arma*.



EVENT 5

BATTLE ROYALE

Ile Sainte-Marie

Andy: And now for the grand finale. Ile Sainte-Marie is one of the smallest islands in Tanoa. The perfect arena for a fight to the death. There's a large rocky outcrop in the middle surrounded by thick jungle, which should give the team plenty of hiding spots. I give them a minute before the round starts to choose a starting position, then the chaos begins. The last man standing wins, and there are

THE RULES

A fight to the death on a small island. Challengers have a minute to select a starting point. The last man standing is the winner.

no rules. I'll also be randomly spawning civilians and animals, just so I have something to do.

Tom: The island is heavily forested, and foliage has betrayed me once already in this challenge. If I wander into the trees, spotting other players will be a matter of luck, so I come up with a different plan. I run until I'm out of sight of the others, then I wade into the sea and start to circle the

island. I keep my head just above the water so I can see.

Chris: Tom and I had the same plan, it seems. I know this because I can see him poking out of the sea, just down the shoreline from me. We look at each other awkwardly as Andy gives the 'go' command, but I've got time to bring up my sights and drop him with a single shot. It turns out there was a crucial difference in our positions: his gun was under the water, but mine wasn't.

Tom: Idea good; execution bad. I'm rubbish at soldiering.

Phil: I, like Iron Maiden before me, run to the hills. This may be a mistake. For some reason, I'm running out of stamina really quickly, even when walking at a normal pace. I think I may be over-encumbered. That'll teach me for stealing some of

Zeus manifested as a badly dressed mortal.



The jungle made for a tense final showdown.



"ANDY MAKES A FLOCK OF BIRDS ERUPT FROM THE BUSHES NEAR ME"

Chris's rockets out of his backpack.

Chris: I stalk away from the shore towards the undergrowth and soon spot Phil coming down the slope towards me, facing away. I manage to land a hit, at which point he scurries behind a tree. We trade shots for a while and then... an old man in a blue T-shirt runs past my gunsights. He runs around me in a circle, then stops in front of me. "Andy?" I say, stupidly. Of course it's Andy. I hear the sound of an RPG and Andy explodes.

Phil: Wait, that was Andy? In my panic, I fired on the first thing I saw moving, not stopping to wonder why it was dressed in a plain shirt and denim. I switch back to my rifle, but I'm exposed – I left the safety of the tree to get a clean rocket shot. I fire



Chris sinks into his watery hiding spot.



off a few bullets, but I'm an easy target, and quickly taken down.

Samuel: With just me and Chris left, I suppose I'd better leave the outcrop of rocks I've been perched on while the others sorted each other out. I head towards Chris, who hasn't spotted me yet – past the civilian's dead body, which is unnerving.

Chris: I loop around the hilltop. Sheep and chickens are spawning all around me and Andy makes a flock of birds erupt from the bushes at my position. It's not subtle. I spot Sam in the distance, and fire. I miss and hide behind a tree. Time to take some notes out of Phil's playbook.

Samuel: I fire at Chris and miss. He turns toward me, there's an explosion and Chris is dead! What happened?

Chris: I ready my RPG and lean around the tree just a few inches. There is a sheep looking at me. I place Sam in my sights and pull the trigger before he can respond.

...but here's the thing. RPGs, right? They've got a big scope, and it sticks out substantially from the actual rocket-propelled-grenade part of the apparatus. The big tube that blows things up. What I am saying is that while I am pointing the scope out from behind the tree, I am in fact pointing my RPG at solid bark. I fire. I blow up.

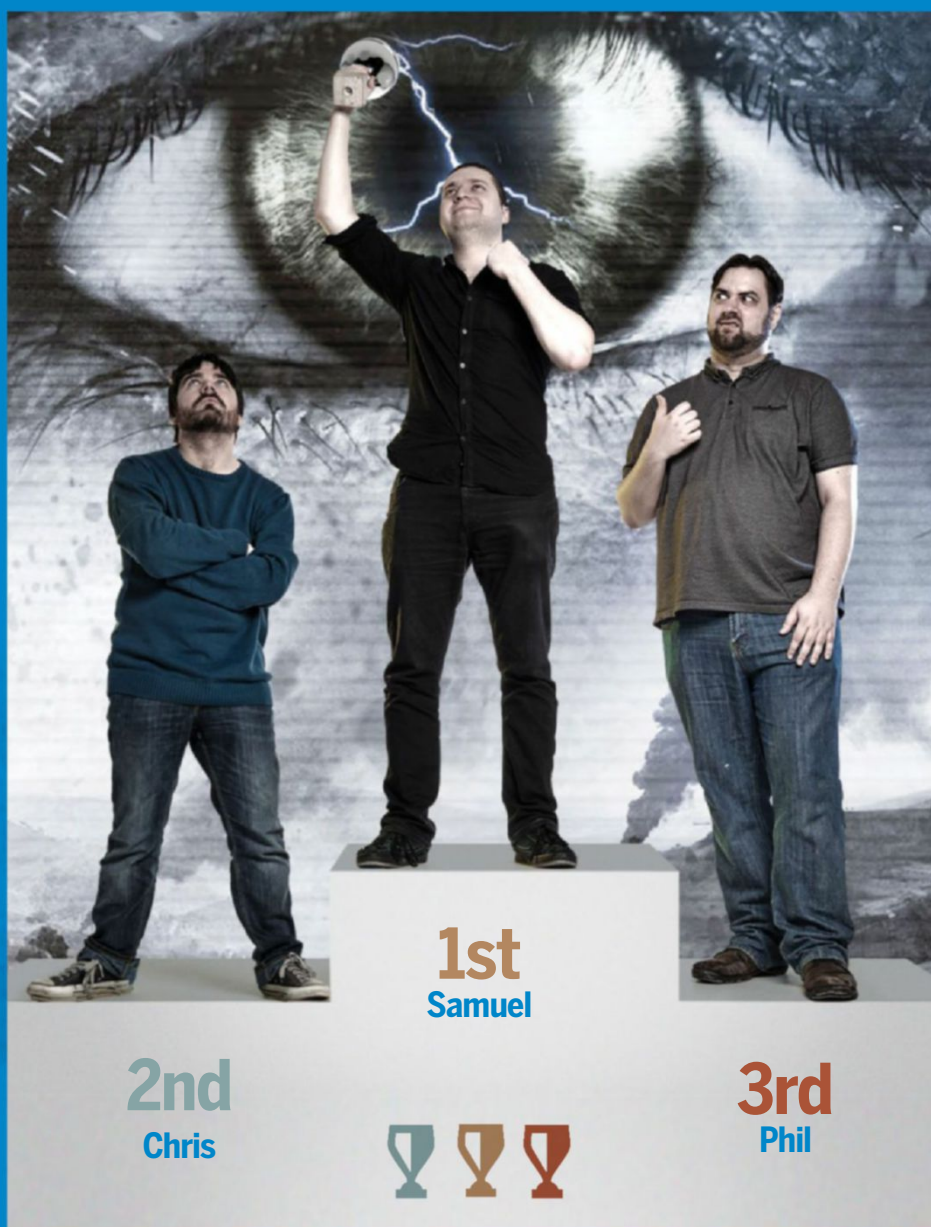
Samuel: In retrospect, I could have won this round without firing a bullet. Amazing scenes. I feel like luck has played a part in at least two of my victories, especially as someone who hasn't even finished the tutorial. But the important thing is, I won.

WINNER – SAMUEL



- 1st Samuel
- 2nd Chris
- 3rd Phil

THE RESULTS



THE

ESCAPE

How a scam in
EVE ONLINE turned
into its greatest
rescue mission.

By Steven Messner

GREAT



he moment the fleet of Svipul-class tactical destroyers crashed through the gates of Standing United's home system was the greatest moment of Circo Maximo's virtual life. Leading the charge was a man who had once tried to take everything from him. But today, *EVE Online*'s most notorious scammer Scooter McCabe would be his saviour. As the hundred-man fleet warped into the star system, Scooter McCabe sent a message in the local chat channel: "We are the Goonberets and we are coming to liberate the oppressed."

Though Circo didn't realise it, he had just become the target of *EVE Online*'s first humanitarian-aid mission.

Weeks earlier, The Mittani, leader of the massive Goonswarm Federation and Scooter's boss, asked him to settle a personal vendetta against another player. The mark was a small-time pilot who went by the name of Scottmw15 and had made a crucial mistake when he called The Mittani's personal friend a bitch. Scooter would teach Scottmw15 a lesson about making the wrong kinds of enemies.

In *EVE Online*, veteran pilots often play with multiple accounts at the same

time. This allows them to specialise in several key areas, such as having a powerful combat pilot and another who oversees complicated industrial production chains. For Scooter, each of his 'alts' is a suit of digital skin that he wears to become someone else. This time he'd become Neerah Otomeya, a quiet, likeable pilot. In a harsh sandbox MMO where trust is everything, people like Scooter are the very reason it's in short supply.

"The idea was that I would infiltrate his corporation, befriend him, get a leadership role, and then rob everything," Scooter says. Making matters easier, Scottmw15's corporation, Standing United, recruited only brand-new players. It seemed like a simple scam.

HEART OF DARKNESS

In November 2016, *EVE Online* launched a limited free-to-play option that allows players to explore New Eden without the intimidating cost of a monthly subscription. As fresh pilots spawned for the first time, they were bombarded by recruitment notices from corporations looking to capitalise on the population explosion. It was *EVE Online*'s own career day.

"I'd never played before and I'd been told *EVE Online* is really involved and complicated," Circo Maximo tells me. "I knew I wouldn't be able to function that well on my own." Scottmw15 recruited him within 24 hours.

"He took them out to Russian space where the only people who spoke English were the people in the corporation and him," Scooter tells me. "They were off and isolated, and once they were there he put them to work."

"SCOOTER MADE EVERYONE'S LIFE A LIVING HELL"

The tales of glory and wealth that Scottmw15 promised to recruits like Circo was a lie. Instead, he forced them to 'rat' – kill respawning NPC pirate ships to collect their bounties – every hour they were logged in. While hunting real pirates is an adrenaline rush, killing the AI variety is a monotonous grind.

"It was basically a '20s mining company," Scooter says. Scottmw15 had cranked up the corporate tax rate so that a massive portion of every bounty would go directly into his wallet. What's more, he'd force the recruits to sell him whatever loot they found at a fraction of the price so

that he could flip it on the market for double the profit. While Scottmw15 got rich, Circo and the rest barely made enough to survive. But Scottmw15's cruelty ran deeper than exploitation.

"He would yell at people if they did anything other than ratting," Circo says. "He'd make examples of them." On Standing United's Discord chat server, Scottmw15 would frequently humiliate and terrorise players. He even spammed links to weird dating sites he owned and forced them to click on advertisements to generate ad revenue. Those that resisted were cut loose and left to die penniless and alone at the hands of the Russians. Scottmw15 wasn't running a corporation, he was running a forced labour camp.

The moment that Neerah Otomeya – Scooter's spy alt – exploded into flames at the hands of her corpmates in Standing United, he knew his plan was working. For days, he had launched a one-man siege against Standing United, and the cracks were beginning to form.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Meet the major players



CIRCO MAXIMO
A days-old player lured to *EVE Online* by its new free-to-play programme.



SCOTTMW15
The mark. A small-time pilot with a reputation for exploitation and abuse.



ALEXYA FISULFATIA
An on-again-off-again newbie who decided to give the game one more shot.



SCOOTER MCCABE
A smooth-talking con artist sent to take down Scottmw15.



MARKONIUS PORKBUTTE
Spymaster in the Goonswarm Federation and KarmaFleet founder.



NEERAH OTOMEYA
Scooter's spy character he used to operate from the inside.



THE MITTANI
Leader of the Goonswarm Federation, the largest alliance in *EVE Online*.



LEFT: The region of space where most player-empires reside is called null-sec due to its lack of security and game-enforced laws.



BELOW: The Svipul tactical destroyer is capable of switching between three combat modes, including the nearly uncatchable propulsion mode.



on comms as Neerah, I took details I heard and belched them back out as Scooter," he says. It worked.

"Scottmw15 was super paranoid," Circo tells me. "He thought everyone was Scooter."

Players were screamed at and interrogated. But eventually suspicion fell on Neerah and Standing United ambushed her, destroying her ship in an attempt to interrogate her. But this wasn't Scooter's first rodeo. A carefully planned alibi in the form of a kill report that showed Neerah had killed Scooter in a past career proved they couldn't be the same person. "There's no possible way Neerah is Scooter because who would do that to himself?" A crafty scammer, that's who.

BREAKING POINT

However, the witch hunt was taking its toll. Many gave up *EVE* altogether, and those that persisted were miserable. Convinced that Neerah was his ally, Scottmw15 began to suspect everyone else and the pressure was causing him to crack. And then he crossed a very personal line. "I suffer from lung cancer," Alexya Fisulfatia, one of the recruits, tells me. Weeks ago, Alexya had told Scottmw15 this in confidence. But then Scottmw15 used Alexya's cancer as leverage. "He says, 'Hey leave us alone because this guy has cancer – we must pity the cancer kid,'" Alexya says. "I was humiliated."

"It was a really shitty thing to do," Scooter adds – and that's saying something for a professional scammer. "I'm talking to these guys as Neerah, and suddenly as they're explaining the situation to me, I realise all of them are

As Neerah, Scooter worked his deception from the inside while as Scooter McCabe, he piloted a strategic cruiser more powerful than anything Standing United could match.

"Scooter made everyone's life a living hell," Circo recalls. "It was awful. Nobody could do anything – he pretty much shut down the entire corporation just by himself." The moment anyone undocked, Scooter was there to destroy them. Circo lost millions of ISK to Scooter personally, and others lost much more. The threat of death meant Scottmw15's labour empire had ground to a halt. "He flat out told people that he was here strictly because of Scottmw15, and then Scottmw15 would tell us that he was full of it and that everything was a lie."

But more than physical damage, Scooter's siege was quickly eroding the morale of the entire corporation. Cooped up inside their station and safe from his missiles, Scooter began playing mindgames with them. "As I sat there





➤ nice fucking guys.” While burning Scottmw15 was still Scooter’s plan, he needed to find a way to make sure the innocent members didn’t get caught in the crossfire.

STANDING DIVIDED

Returning to The Mittani, Scooter told him everything. “We’re going, this is fucked up. This guy is actively hurting the game itself. I know in the past I’ve scammed people, but shit, those people have been in the game for years and should know better,” he says.

Together with Markonius Porkbutte, a Goonswarm spymaster, Scooter and The Mittani reached out to rival null-sec alliances to put aside differences and devise a strategy to liberate the trapped Standing United newbies. Over the next few weeks, each



BELOW: Scooter flew a deadly Tengu strategic cruiser that has modular components it can mix and match to suit a variety of combat scenarios.

alliance would seed spies into Standing United and foment a mutiny and get them into proper corporations.

And then everything collapsed.

While hunting Scottmw15, Scooter ran into a band of Australian soldiers known as the Swords of Damocles roaming into nearby regions looking for fights. As it goes in *EVE*, they destroyed Scooter’s ship. But their leader was curious, what was Scooter doing way out here? “I told him about Scottmw15, and it turns out he knew him from the past and knew he was an asshole,” Scooter says. Seeing an opportunity, he told them about a 100 million ISK bounty Scottmw15 placed on his head and asked if they’d do him a favour and collect it. They did one better.

In an in-game mail, Swords of Damocles’ leader informed Scottmw15

of their recent kill and their intention to collect the 100 million ISK bounty, except with just one twist: they demanded 20 billion ISK instead or Standing United was as good as dead. Everyone panicked.

“Now that we didn’t just have Scooter coming after us, Scottmw15 completely lost it,” Circo says. What they didn’t realise was that Swords had no intention of collecting. Scottmw15 bought their bluff all the same.

To Circo and everyone else in Standing United, Scottmw15 had cracked. While Circo tells me there was always something “weird” about him, he was now fully unhinged.

“He said God punished me with cancer because I deserve to die,” Alexya says. “I went berserk.”

Scooter’s idea worked too well. Within minutes, the Standing United voice server devolved into mutiny. Pushed to the edge, forced to endure verbal torture and monotonous labour in a videogame they played for fun, and now seemingly the target of powerful alliances, Circo and Alexya were done. They accused Scottmw15 of exploiting them for profit and lying about Scooter’s intentions in front of the whole corporation.

“You bastard, you made us slaves!” Alexya screamed at him. Before anyone could respond, Alexya was gone – Scottmw15 had banned him from Discord and booted him from the corporation. Soon after, Circo suffered the same fate.

One by one, Scottmw15 began kicking recruits from Standing United. Days old, barely able to navigate through space, and locked out of all



their ships, it was game over. "He kicked the entire corp and left them stranded in Russian space where they can't speak to the Russians and essentially told them to go fuck themselves and die," Scooter says. He watched everything in silence as Neerah and realised he couldn't wait.

"We got to get these guys out, we got to send a fleet in now because if we don't it'll be a bloodbath," he wrote in a message to Markonius.

"Let's roll," Markonius wrote back.

THE GOONBERETS

While Alexya made a run for safety, Circo stayed behind. For days he had secretly ferried what few items he had out of Russian space in anticipation for a collapse. Though only days old, he knew the route well enough. "I was telling everyone, 'Come follow me and I'm going to get you to [high-security space] and, once in Hisec, I'll lead you guys to the Goons,'" he says. "I was going to take my ship and scout ahead and if I blew up, I blew up. I was going to get those guys to safety."

Scooter couldn't maintain his disguise any longer. "Sit there and don't move," Neerah wrote to Circo. He didn't have time to explain because in a second window of *EVE Online*, he was guiding a fleet of Goons through the 62 jumps of enemy territory that sat between Goonswarm and Standing United. An hour later, Circo saw the biggest fleet of his life.

"We crash into the system with Scottmw15 and the Russians there," says Scooter. "The local population all of a sudden spikes, and I can see, as Neerah, the Russians going, 'Oh shit.' I'm telling everyone as Neerah that the Goons are coming and to relax. As Scooter, I write into chat, 'We're the Goonberets and we're coming to liberate the oppressed. Russians, if you undock we will fucking kill you.' Scottmw15, you had this coming."



ABOVE: In null-sec, pirates fly powerful brawlers like the Cynabal pirate cruiser to destroy unsuspecting players.

Scottmw15 would never see that message. Minutes earlier he received word of the incoming warband and logged off, presumably in terror. For all he knew, the whole galaxy was coming to kill him. Scooter tells me that, to his knowledge, he's never logged in again (Scottmw15 couldn't be reached for comment on this piece).

For Alexya, Circo and the rest of the recruits, the rescue operation was akin to being liberated from a virtual labour camp. "They don't know me, but they spent hours to come out and get me and bring me back," Circo says, amazed. "I lost all this money, and these people just met me and they showered billions [of ISK] on us. They just threw it at us."

But more important than the ISK, Alexya says that it was the realisation that *EVE Online* wasn't the cruel and abusive world he thought it was. "I was told by Markonius and Scooter that I was among friends right now," he says. "People were so friendly."

Markonius extended each member of Standing United instant admission into KarmaFleet, Goonswarm's own

new-player corporation. For Circo and Alexya, they could finally experience the real *EVE Online* – not the exploitation and harassment, but the sense of belonging found among friends in an unforgiving galaxy. In the end, over 25 players had been liberated.

Both were lured to *EVE Online* by its stories of war, intrigue, and scandal, but neither imagined they would become the centre of it. "I always wanted to join something big and have

my moment of fame, but I never could expect something like that to happen," Alexya explains. "It's just such a weird coincidence."

"It was awesome," Circo says. "After it happened I pretty

much loved the game."

For Scooter McCabe, it's a reminder that even after all these years *EVE Online* and its players can still surprise him. Scottmw15, he says, "is an awful fucking human being. Not just in the *EVE* way, but I mean this guy in real life is an awful human being. I didn't even make money off this but this was the most rewarding thing I've ever done in this game." ■

WE WANT YOU!

New-player corps that won't exploit you

1

KARMAFLEET

A member of the largest alliance, Goonswarm Federation, KarmaFleet is exceedingly well-organised with an impressive infrastructure aimed at helping new players.

2

PANDEMIC HORDE

The yin to KarmaFleet's yang, Pandemic Horde is a ragtag bunch of newbies for players who thrive by taking the initiative and making their own fun.

3

BRAVE NEWBIES INC

Though diminished from their former glory, this group pioneered the idea of a new-player-friendly corp and can still be found slugging it out against *EVE*'s biggest empires.

"THIS WAS THE MOST REWARDING THING I'VE DONE IN THIS GAME"

my moment of fame, but I never could expect something like that to happen," Alexya explains. "It's just such a weird coincidence."

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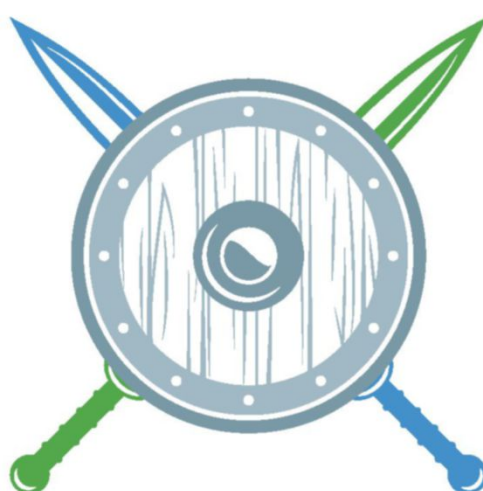
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FEATURE

The History of RPGs



The **HISTORY** *of* **RPGS**



The concluding half of our complete guide to PC RPGs, taking us up to 2017.

By Richard Cobbett

P A R T I I I

THE AGE OF INFINITY

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Baldur's Gate beckoned players in with beautiful graphics, a heavy focus on story, and some of the genre's most beloved characters. It looked fantastic, thanks to the Infinity Engine's method of displaying worlds. Huge rendered maps with overlaid sprites allowed for exquisite detail without the predictability of tiles. It wasn't just D&D reborn, but a new start for the genre. RPGs were finally cool again.

Replayed now, it's the complexity that jumps out. *Baldur's Gate* was based on AD&D Second Edition, and it doesn't hide the fact. It wants you to know its dice rolls. It wants you to know terms like THACO ("To Hit Armour Class Zero," aka,

the likeliness of a hit landing). It often pushes you to areas you're not ready for. Roll a mage and wander to the first real fight in the game – an ambush at the Friendly Arms Inn – and watch as a single hit lands like an anvil to the face.

It was still an RPG of its time, rooted, for all its attempts to welcome new players, in the designs of the past. It was BioWare's first RPG, and the company hadn't even formed with a plan to make them. The founders had intended to start a medical software company, before deciding games would be more fun. Previous releases were mech game *Shattered Steel* and comedy shooter *MDK 2*. Even Interplay, the publisher, had only moderate hopes for *Baldur's Gate*. Two million copies later, BioWare was the new cool kid in town.





Get to know...

DEUS EX

Do I really have to describe this one? *Deus Ex* is one of the strongest contenders for Best PC Game Ever Made, combining late-'90s conspiracy fever with FPS combat and RPG character building. It's a legend. It's a classic. And if you can't face its outdated engine, the new sequels are pretty good too. (Just not *Invisible War*.)



EXPERIENCING INFINITY

Usually, while *Baldur's Gate* struck a chord with players and became a huge hit, it was its engine, Infinity, that players came to love. When Obsidian ran its Kickstarter for *Pillars of Eternity*, it wasn't the prospect of a game like *Baldur's Gate* that excited people, but an updated Infinity Engine.

Exactly why Infinity became so famous is a bit of a mystery. There were only five games that used it – *Baldur's Gate*, *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, *Icewind Dale*, *Icewind Dale II* and *Planescape: Torment*. The likely answer is that, because both BioWare and Interplay development group Black Isle Studios were using the engine for different projects (BioWare on *Baldur's Gate*, Black Isle on the others), it was easier to identify the games by what unified them – the things that ensured everyone knew exactly what subset of RPGs was being discussed. Sprites over renders, pausable real-time combat, and so on.

Baldur's Gate was the traditional RPG of the set, with the sequel going even further to try to give the experience of playing the pen-and-paper game in all its glory. Both games responded to your character, alignment determining who would stick to your party and who would walk off in a morally upright huff. Both also offered lots of exploring, whole areas dedicated to optional side-quests. *Baldur's Gate 2* cranked it higher still, with vast amounts of dialogue, inter-party chat, a second act that was like seven full AD&D modules glued together, optional romances, and more. The plot was better, and hugely helped by bringing in voice talent such as David Warner as the villain, Irenicus. The writing was funnier and sharper. Instead of a million NPCs willing to join the party, most of them forgettable, it trimmed the cast down to just the team's favourites.

At the same time, *Baldur's Gate 2* didn't sit on its laurels. It took some dramatic risks, including setting much of the action in a city where casting magic is against the law. This might not sound like much, but compare it to later games like, hypothetically, BioWare's own *Dragon Age 2*. Few mainstream RPGs have the guts to enforce a rule that makes one of the most popular classes that hard to play: casting a spell in public summoning a Cowled Wizard to demand an apology or justice. *Baldur's Gate 2* did, forcing mages to keep the magic to a minimum until they can either afford a licence, or



become bad-ass enough to smack down the Cowled Wizards and convince them that you're out of their league. It's a shame too, because reaching that point of untouchability really is a wonderful feeling, versus simply being told not to use magic and having every guard you pass turn a blind eye to your firestorms in the name of game balance.

Away from *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale* and its sequel offered a different spin on adventure. While they still had a story, quests and so on, their focus was tactical combat. You had a whole team from the very start, and had to use them wisely. Between you and the final boss was a gauntlet of fights. The focus was on managing your team's firepower and tactics, rather than worrying about who liked who (or even who might be up for a tersely written sex scene.) They're

easily the most Marmite of the Infinity Engine games, but developed a huge following of their own.

REACHING THAT POINT OF UNTOUCHABILITY IS WONDERFUL



Get to know...

DIABLO II

You could argue *Diablo II* isn't really an RPG, though it shares some DNA. It did however give more overtly RPG games a new way to handle combat, with clicking and spell use taking over from complex character builds and pausable tactics. This made fighting less tactical, but considerably more exciting.



THE NATURE OF A MAN

Finally, there was *Planescape: Torment*. No introduction should be necessary. Despite what is often claimed, it wasn't a flop. It wasn't a hit either, though, which, along with the desire of the current owners of AD&D to move away from the Planescape setting as a whole, was enough to guarantee we'd never see a sequel. At least, not an official one. Thanks to Kickstarter some of the original team is working on a spiritual follow-up called *Torment: Tides of Numenera* that's due out in 2017.

Torment is the story of The Nameless One, an amnesiac immortal who has lived innumerable lives – some good, some bad, and one judged so terrible that even eternity is insufficient time to atone for his crimes. Along with a team of equally broken damned souls, including sarcastic skull Morte, a suit of armour animated by the spirit of justice, a chaste succubus who runs a brothel devoted to intellectual lust, and a man who is literally a doorway to a plane of fire, he has to find out the secret of his immortality before an unseen enemy finally destroys all the clues leading to the truth.

Torment is easily one of the best written games ever made, and a personal favourite. It's dark, it's funny, it's philosophical, and every line is as smooth as a master barber's razor. Not only is The Nameless One's story far more fascinating than any plot with the word 'amnesia' in it has any right to be, but the world of Planescape is unlike anything games had ever tried. It's a place where belief has power, with a central city, Sigil, full of doors to every conceivable world. If you're lucky, you find the one you want. If you're unlucky, you can simply cross a threshold and end up in Hell. Or worse.

One section in particular stands out as an absolute masterpiece of RPG design. The Nameless One begins the game as a fighter, but as he's been the pinnacle of literally every class in existence at some point over his tortured life, it's not hard to swap to another class if you can find a trainer to jog his memories. For mage, that's the village witch, Mebbeth. Before Mebbeth will teach him anything, she has a few odd-jobs down at the village. One is to fetch a herb which nobody has seen before, forcing him to will the seed into growth. Another is to get some rags, starched so often as to be useless. A third trip, at this point ignoring his and the player's irritation, requires him to go get some ink. All fairly standard fetch-quest stuff, with a little Planescape weirdness seemingly thrown in for flavour.

In this case, though, it's not. As the quest ends, Mebbeth essentially sits back and asks "So, what have you learned so far?" And if The Nameless One is smart enough, he realises –

Get to know...

DINK SMALLWOOD

One of the most famous, if not necessarily best shareware RPGs of the '90s. *Dink Smallwood* was the story of Taran Wanderer style pig-farmer Dink, and was notable mostly for catching the internet wave. Its level editor has now led to literally hundreds of additional missions, all on www.dinknetwork.com.



that in those quests he's been shown how belief works in the Planes and how to shape it to his will, the futility of ritual without reason, and finally that no matter how much a person knows, there is always something to learn. Magic has never been taught with such a practical focus; your first step not being to decide what kind of magic missile you want, but how to better see the universe.

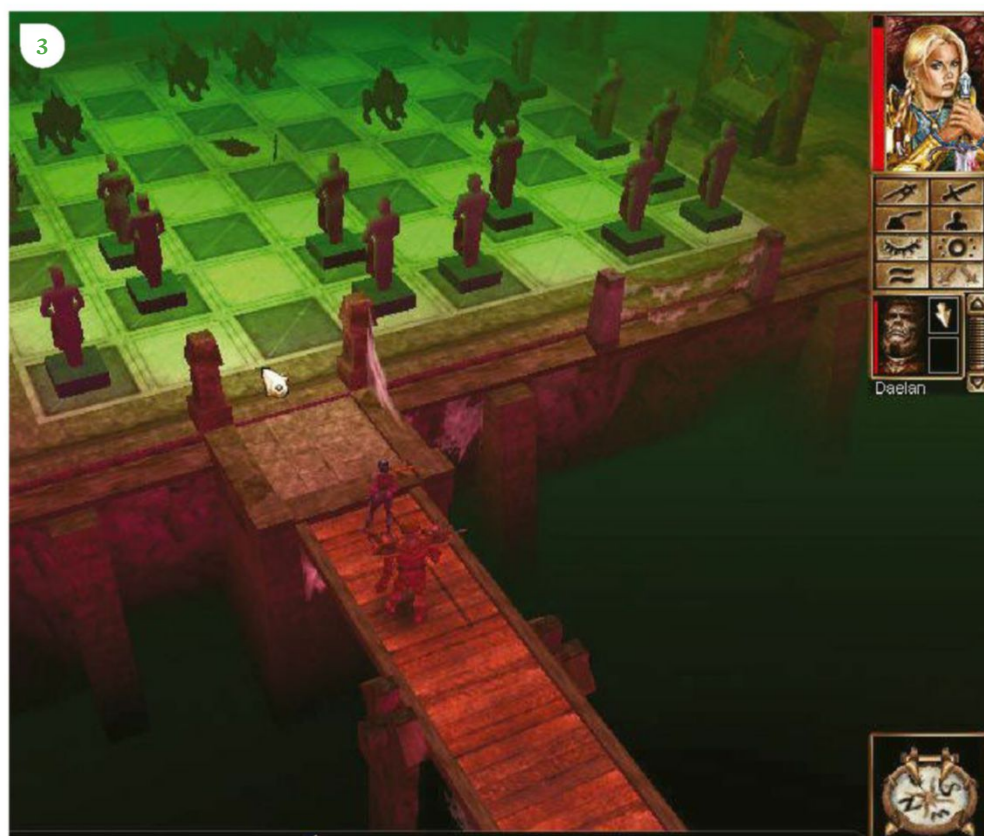
The whole game is written with this level of love and detail. The Nameless One can be a force of great good to the Planes, or true evil. You can heal your friends' broken souls, or sell them into slavery. You can use and abuse your immortality as you see fit, to get through a lethal tomb, or to manipulate a preacher into killing himself by offering to go first, respawning, and declaring "Your turn." The journey goes from the filthy streets of Sigil down to the abyssal planes, where the only half-friendly life is a pillar of the skulls of wise men whose advice sent others to their doom. Throughout it all, it's not a big villain that truly defines the story, but a simple question: "What can change the nature of a man?" It's a question *Torment* poses, but you have to answer.

The main complaints about *Planescape: Torment* at the time look amusingly trivial in retrospect. The combat isn't great, and there's never any tension because you can almost always respawn, wade back into battle, and win through sheer force of attrition. There aren't many companions compared to other Infinity Engine games – just seven, with two of those being secrets. It's not a difficult game either, happily exchanging raw challenge for rewarding exploration and telling its story. If that sounds familiar, it should. It would become the model for most of the next generation of games, even after the Infinity Engine became just a fondly remembered bit of gaming history.



1
Baldur's
Gate

2
Planescape:
Torment



ECHOES OF INFINITY

While there were only five games based on Infinity, its legacy lasted a little longer. BioWare's next engine, Aurora, was largely about bringing the experience into 3D. Its big debut was in *Neverwinter Nights*, which combined a pretty dreadful campaign with tools that players could use to create their own single- or multiplayer 3D adventures from scratch. These systems were fairly complex, but the audience soon rose to the challenge with everything from the comedic *Sex And The Single Adventuress* and the detective-focused *Maugeter*, to persistent online servers for full MMOs.

Already though, BioWare was tiring of the limitations of the top-down, old-school RPG, and looking for the next step. Aurora really only saw use in *Neverwinter Nights*, its sequel (made by Obsidian), and, out of seemingly nowhere, (though a heavily reworked version of the engine), the first of the *Witcher* games. Black Isle, meanwhile, didn't survive the Infinity era. Its final published – though not developed – game was a mix of magic and the Crusades called *Lionheart*, which started reasonably well but quickly pattered out into a disappointing mess. After that, it was intended to go on to a new game, *Torn*, as well as sequels to both *Fallout* and *Baldur's Gate* – *Van Buren* and *The Black Hound* respectively.

The Black Hound was going to be the start of a whole new series rather than a continuation of the previous games' story, with the tagline "You cannot kill guilt". It would have seen a new hero bound to its essence and growing stronger through dark actions, using a new engine called Jefferson. Why not Infinity? Because as popular as it is with fans, everyone who's

used it agrees that, under the hood, it's a mess. Much like BioWare's Aurora, Jefferson was going to be the same basic idea, but in 3D.

Financial problems at Interplay led to the entire team being unceremoniously booted to the kerb. Interplay would later try one of the more desperate crowdfunding campaigns, asking fans to contribute to the rebirth of Black Isle to create an online *Fallout* game – something allowed even after selling the main licence to Bethesda. Its only goal, however, was to fund a tech demo to try to attract investors, and none of the actual Black Isle staff from the company's glory days were involved. As expected (and deserved), it failed miserably and with much mockery.

PLAYERS COULD CREATE THEIR OWN 3D ADVENTURES FROM SCRATCH

3
Neverwinter
Nights

4
Siege of
Dragonspear



Get to know...

GENEFORGE/ AVADON

In 1994, Jeff Vogel founded Spiderweb Software, and has been cranking out some of the best under-the-radar RPGs ever since. They're ugly, with poor engines, but make up for it with deep storytelling, freedom of choice, and great world building that goes a good deal beyond the graphics.



Get to know...

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE: REDEMPTION

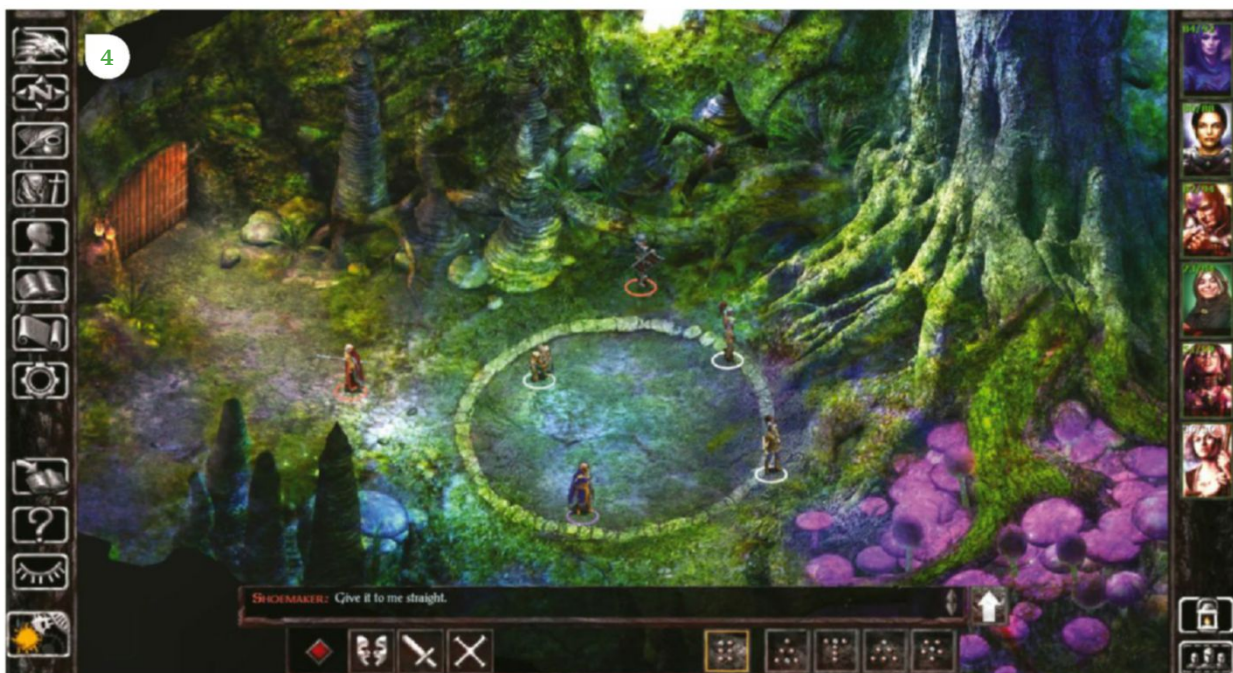
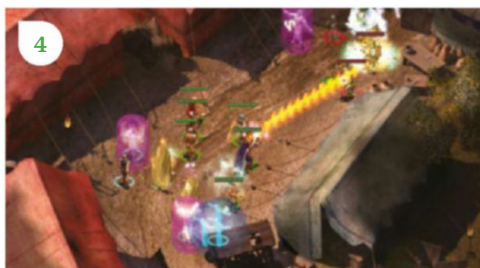
A failed attempt to bring pen-and-paper World of Darkness to PC. 'Storyteller' mode allowed one person to be DM, players adventuring in both medieval and modern settings. The limited sets and slow interface doomed the idea to failure, at least until *Neverwinter Nights*.



BEYOND INFINITY

Despite its importance to RPG history, Infinity's reign as both an engine and a style of game didn't last very long. Fast forward to now, however, and it lives on. As noted, Obsidian's *Pillars of Eternity* tries to replicate it using modern technology. Former BioWare member Trent Oster, however, is still using the creaky old thing directly, originally in the form of *Enhanced Editions of Baldur's Gate 1, 2 and Icewind Dale*, and then in the form of a brand new adventure called *Siege of Dragonspear*, which takes place between the two *Baldur's Gate* games. *Dragonspear* had a mixed response, for both good reasons and a few honestly very silly ones, but was a decent enough interquel on its own merits. It remains to be seen if the company will ever embark on the full *Baldur's Gate III* project that it's long talked of doing. If it does though, it'll be an original story rather than *The Black Hound*.

As for the rest of the industry, with the exception of a few indies, time has very much moved on. Since *Baldur's Gate*, RPGs have gone from a struggling genre to the home of some of the best AAA releases in the world, and a genre that it's cool to play... even if the transition to the mainstream has robbed it of much of what made it popular in the first place. ➤





Get to know...

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

After *KotOR* gave the world the Star Wars experience it wanted, *KOTOR 2* flipped it on its head. It's dark. It's depressing. It thinks the series' morality is trite, and isn't afraid to say so. If it hadn't launched half-done, it would have been the best Star Wars game ever.



P A R T I V

THE RISE & RISE OF RPGS

2 0 0 3 O N W A R D S



Something I've yet to mention is the role of console RPGs. The reason is, as far as the PC was concerned, they weren't as popular or influential. JRPGs such as *Final Fantasy VII* changed the game for consoles. But its PC version, released in 1998, was one of the worst produced ports most players had seen. *Final Fantasy VIII* didn't do much better.

One of the few games that really embraced the console style was Tom Hall's *Anachronox*, made by Ion Storm, which mixed Japanese RPG design with cool, imaginative science fiction to fine, if somewhat janky, effect. It was about the last real game to try to do so.

This all changed with the Xbox, the first truly successful Western console. Being a Microsoft product, it had a relationship with the PC, and afforded a chance for Western RPG developers to break away. The PC was struggling mightily at the time, to the point that many predicted it would burn out as a system. Many developers spat out cut-down, simplified, and ultimately much hated versions of their games for this new market. *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* (2004, and no relation to *Fallout Tactics: Brotherhood of Steel* – a more successful attempt to focus on *Fallout*'s strategic combat back in 2001) threw out all of the intelligence in favour of storming around with guns. *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* was another action heavy game, sharing little with its source.



KNIGHTS OF THE NEW ORDER

Enter BioWare once again, with *Knights of the Old Republic*. Unlike *Baldur's Gate*, this was a full 3D experience, capable of conveying the awe-inspiring flashes and clashes of lightsaber combat, while still being a 'proper' RPG. In fact, it was a bit too much of one, still using and pushing its D&D systems, THACOs and dice rolls into the foreground, even while pretending to have moved on from such things. It didn't matter. This was the Star Wars epic the world had been waiting for, the perfect antidote to the disappointing movies, and an amazing sci-fi adventure unlike anything we'd ever seen before.

If there was any doubt that BioWare was now king of the genre, *KotOR* obliterated it. Its best characters became as

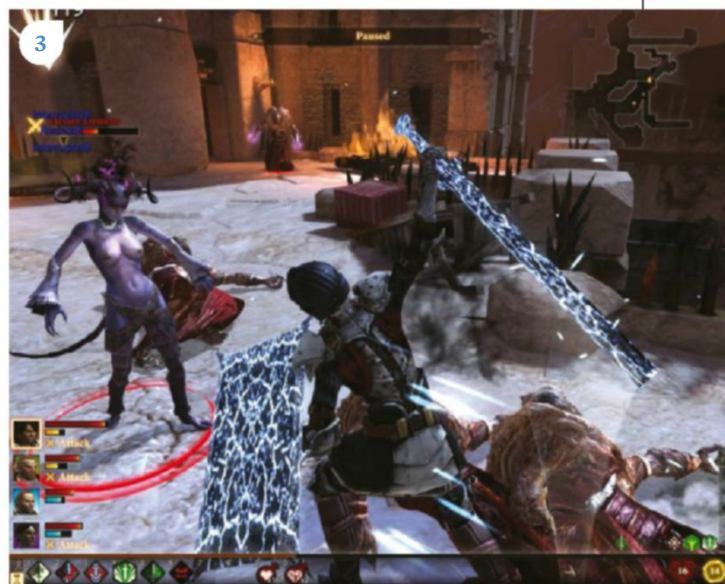
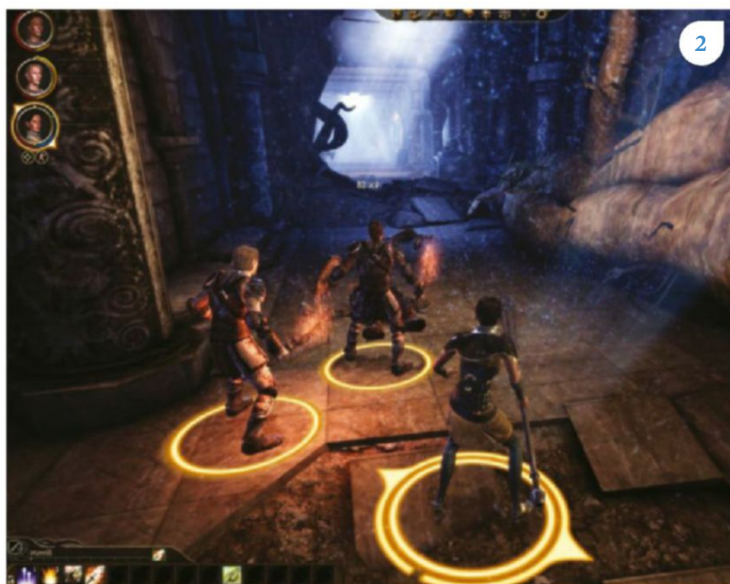


Get to know...

ALPHA PROTOCOL

Further proving that not every deserving game can be a hit, Obsidian's *Alpha Protocol* remains the most advanced social-focused RPG ever. You navigate a web of intrigue, and every player has a different story. The shooting was bloody awful, though making it a game that had to be described as "Brilliant... except--"





loved as any in the franchise, particularly snarky assassin droid HK-47, while the spaceship Ebon Hawk quickly reached Millennium Falcon levels of popularity. The story acted as a Greatest Hits of Star Wars, delivering trips to Tatooine and the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk, fights with evil Sith Lords and bounty hunters, the chance to be as good or evil as you pleased, and planets being blown up in failed attempts to destroy your team. It even had a twist almost worthy of “Luke, I am your father,” based on the reveal of who your amnesiac main character actually was.

BioWare used this success as a springboard. Aside from an early stumble with its first attempt to create its own world, 2005’s Chinese-themed *Jade Empire* – a solid game, but one that didn’t catch the market as well – it created two of the biggest RPG series around. *Mass Effect* paired RPG-style action with third-person shooting, while *Dragon Age* began as an attempt to go back to BioWare’s *Baldur’s Gate* roots, but soon, after the more traditional first game *Origins*, became another action-RPG hybrid. With the two of them, the company had a firm grip on both sci-fi and fantasy, and the cash to make them as polished as any other game.

BioWare also repeatedly fought for the industry over the right to include controversial content, including sex scenes in

the first *Mass Effect*. These days it seems strange that there could be such a major, mainstream media controversy over such tame cinematics, but it needs to be put into context. It wasn’t long after *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* had whipped up a storm over the ‘Hot Coffee’ scandal (where players found evidence of clothed sex scenes that had been cut from the game but left on the disc). Many a pundit or worse – for instance, angry anti-gaming activist lawyer Jack Thompson – were still sniffing around, eager for blood. Fox News, for one, castigated *Mass Effect*’s sex scenes – which consisted of

nothing more graphic than a glimpse of an alien’s blue bottom – describing them as “Luke Skywalker meets Debbie Does Dallas”. Needless to say, the expert brought onto the panel hadn’t actually seen these game scenes and was going purely on what she’d been told before coming onto the show, ultimately describing it as “a bit of a joke”. Still, the pressure on BioWare was real, and in

weathering that storm, the rest of the industry was able to push the boundaries – even if the *Mass Effect* crew did spend the rest of the series taking showers in their bras and pants. More recently, BioWare has committed to broadening the diversity of its casts, implementing bisexual characters in the first two *Dragon Age* games, and one of gaming’s few transsexual characters in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

FOX NEWS CASTIGATED MASS EFFECT’S SEX SCENES

1
Knights of
the Old
Republic

2
Dragon
Age: Origins

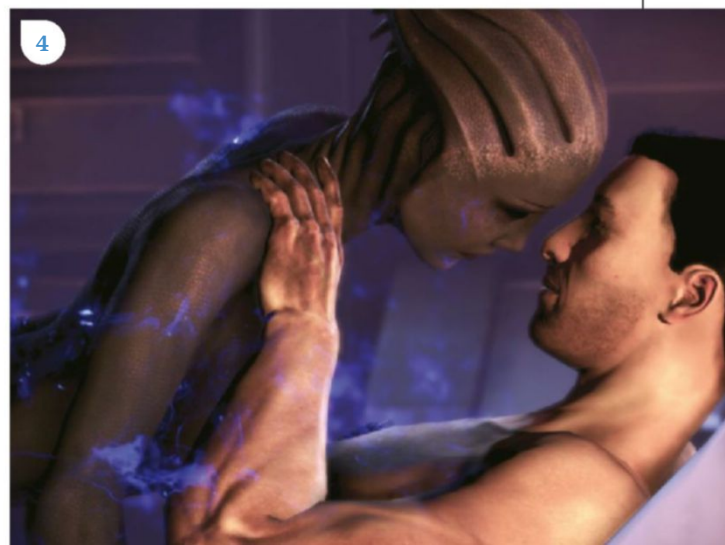
3
Dragon
Age 2

4
Mass
Effect 3

Get to know...

JADE EMPIRE

Undeservedly forgotten. *Jade Empire* combined basic arcade style martial arts with BioWare’s growing skill at creating a unique RPG experience. Unfortunately, despite following *Knights of the Old Republic*’s template, it turned out that players were drawn more by the Star Wars name than BioWare’s. Those tables would turn.





5

THE RPG GROWS UP

BioWare hasn't had the entire decade to itself of course. The 2000s saw Bethesda go from strength to strength with its open-world *Elder Scrolls* games, selling millions upon millions of copies of *Morrowind*, *Skyrim* and *Oblivion* to players looking for more of a freeform experience. It would also add a string to its bow by picking up the *Fallout* licence – along with a tangled knot of assorted legal issues – and restart the series with *Fallout 3* in 2008. Much like BioWare, having a leg in both science fiction and fantasy hasn't hurt, even if the best of the new *Fallout* games remains *New Vegas*, developed under contract by Obsidian Entertainment.

Many other companies started the new decade by going out of business. Origin's final chapter of the *Ultima* series, *Ascension*, took over from *Descent To Undermountain* as the new *Duke Nukem Forever* of the RPG genre, only worse, because millions of players actually cared about Origin. *Ascension* crawled out of development hell in a barely functional and not remotely enjoyable state, ending the once proud *Ultima* series with a flatulent note of despair. Other companies, like Interplay, which should have been in a position to enjoy the genre's resurgence, were too far into the red. On the plus side, many of the individual people involved were able to escape and form new companies. The *Fallout* team, for instance, re-coalesced as Troika Games, while other Black Isle employees formed Obsidian Entertainment and survived by focusing on contract work rather than creating self-owned properties.

This was a tricky time for RPGs. *Baldur's Gate* had become a huge success by going back to the genre's roots, but at the same time, players were expecting the next big thing. On PC, that was *Deus Ex*, which combined RPG and FPS in ways that should need no explanation here. Even then, it was easy to slip up, as was seen with *Deus Ex's* own sequel, *Invisible War*.

5
The Elder
Scrolls V:
Skyrim

6
The Elder
Scrolls III:
Morrowind

7
Arcanum: Of
Steamworks
And Magick
Obscura

8
The Elder
Scrolls IV:
Oblivion

9
The Temple
of Elemental
Evil



A big problem was that, while consoles offered a whole new audience, the gulf between Xbox and PC in terms of power was ridiculous, forcing any game that went for both to play to the lowest common denominator. In the case of *Invisible War*, that meant going from levels that modelled the whole of Liberty Island in New York, to levels that are literally ten seconds between load screens. The controller was also no match for a PC's keyboard and mouse, making it impossible to carry many of its best experiences across.

The consequence was that developing for both was a gamble, but so was focusing on the PC and ignoring the wider market. Troika quickly became the most high-profile casualty of this. Its first game tried to fuse what players loved about *Fallout* with fantasy, in a new Victorian-style world where magic and technology coexisted. Unfortunately they called it *Arcanum: Of Steamworks And Magick Obscura*, a title so relentlessly geeky that players reported their virginity growing back just from hearing it. It was a popular game with those who played it, though not a megahit by 2000s standards. Next, the company tried going back further to the genre's roots with a conversion and upgrade of the classic AD&D module *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. Unfortunately, its adherence to the mechanics wasn't enough to compensate for the lack of things like a plot, or how old-fashioned it felt. (For starters, the game's village is called Hommlet. Not Gary Gygax's most inventive moment.)

Finally, the company released one of the 2000s' most beloved and poorest selling games, *Vampire: The Masquerade: Bloodlines* – the second attempt to bring the World of Darkness universe to the PC. Best summed up as “Deus Ex,

BEST SUMMED UP AS 'DEUS EX WITH VAMPIRES,' IT BOMBED AT RELEASE

but with vampires”, it bombed at release, and Troika didn't survive it. Players kept it alive through word of mouth and fan patches, and it's still being updated and praised today as one of the few adults-only RPGs that earned its place through dark atmosphere and intelligence. It wasn't that it avoided the sexy vampire trope, but that its vampires were designed and written to be more than just that – pieces in a game that, among other things, punished you for trying to do the right thing by inadvertently condemning an innocent college girl to be your mindless thrall, dealing with the broken personalities of an abusive family, exploring a crazed mental asylum, and, in its most famous level, exploring a haunted house that's strangely effective at creating scares – despite the fact that you are a powerful vampire yourself.



Get to know...

DARK SOULS

Does it count as an RPG? Usually, the side that struggled with the game's legendary difficulty yell “No!”, while those who have moved onto the finer points of its world respond with silent blows from oversized hammers. Its combat system has certainly been important to the genre, setting the bar for arcade-style action.



10

WAKE THE WHITE WOLF

If one company really came into its own through all these challenges, it's CD Projekt Red, with the *Witcher* series. The *Witcher* is a hugely successful series of books in its native Poland – and around Europe as a whole – but was little known when an obscure development company bought a licence to BioWare's Aurora engine and tried to bring the stories to the world.

Skipping ahead, *The Witcher 3* is an amazing experience. It's a glorious-looking world. The writing is touching, detailed, nuanced, with varied characters. It's one of the best games ever made, never mind one of the best RPGs – cementing creators CD Projekt Red as being on the absolute top-tier of modern development, even above BioWare in most estimations. However, at least part of what makes it so impressive is having seen the stumbles and triumphs on the way to making it happen. The first *Witcher* game, for instance, was so poorly translated as to be nonsensical, requiring a whole *Enhanced Edition* to come vaguely up to standard. It also featured some deeply unpopular game mechanics, such as representing hero Geralt's many trysts as collectible cards – as if the ladies in his life were nothing but Pokémon to be captured and catalogued. Or, less socially relevant but just as annoying, having to collect increasingly expensive books in order to take on quests that Geralt should have been more than capable of doing on his own with just his sword.

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings, meanwhile, was proof that, more than any other company in recent memory, CD Projekt had read every single complaint about the first game and fixed it, and had the ambition to take the series further

than anyone could have expected. Of its three acts, there are two variants of Act 2 that take Geralt to opposite sides of the game's central war. It still had sex scenes, but here they're choreographed affairs designed to say something about the characters involved – parts of the story that contribute to, rather than distract from, the experience.

Looking back, the first two games are less *The Witcher 3's* predecessors as its betas – the games CD Projekt had to make first to be able to create the *Witcher* experience it had dreamed of so long ago. At the moment, it looks like there won't be another simply because the company has done what it set out to do all those years ago. Now it's working on *Cyberpunk 2077* – an RPG that's been in development for years now, and is likely still a couple more away.

THE FIRST TWO ARE LESS WITCHER 3'S PREDECESSORS AS ITS BETAS

10
The
Witcher

11
The
Witcher 3



Get to know...

ANACHRONOX

While overshadowed by John Romero's *Daikatana* at launch, this became a cult favourite. A party member that was a whole planet shrunk down. A comic book villain inexplicably flying around in his spaceship. A constantly shifting city. Even some dodgy JRPG-inspired game mechanics couldn't spoil the fun of this world.

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

The *Witcher's* path to greatness isn't unique to CD Projekt. As we approach 'now', it's worth highlighting a few of the other games that have slowly but surely become legendary over the last decade. Larian's *Divinity* series, for instance. It began in 2002 with *Divine Divinity* (the publisher's choice of name, the developer is quick to explain). It was popular, but still best described as a company attempting to make *Ultima VII* without first having made *Ultimas I-VI*. The series was constantly besieged by two factors. Financial issues on the outside led to the third game, *Divinity II*, being a "release it now or lose the company" affair. (To its credit, Larian later tried to fix up the mess created by such a rushed release.) But also, Larian had a tendency to let the cool, big ideas overshadow the foundations needed for a good RPG. Let's make the player character psychic! Let's have the player turn into a dragon! In the case of the strategy-focused *Divinity: Dragon Commander*, let's have the player be a dragon wearing a jetpack! You know? That kind of thing. With the Kickstarted *Divinity: Original Sin*, however, the company finally found its footing, and created one of the best new RPGs in years. It was an instant classic, which earned everyone involved the credit they deserved, and led to the even more ambitious but equally grounded sequel, *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, currently in Early Access over on Steam.

Many others have also found new life thanks to Kickstarter, both games that have found their due and those that deserved better. *The Bard's Tale*. *Wasteland*. The Infinity Engine, through *Pillars of Eternity*. *Planescape: Torment*, through *Torment: Tides of Numenera*. *Shadowrun*. *Shenmue*. *Underworld*. *System Shock*. *Pathologic*. *Outcast*. The list goes on, and is mostly filled with titles that did something so amazing that nothing else has come close in five, ten, sometimes even twenty years. It's not just the hunger for something familiar that's driven it, though. This isn't simply a plea to nostalgia. It's a combining of genuine classics with top quality developers – teams that do enough justice to the original idea that they stand up against any game you could possibly want. Their original stories may now be over, and the quests long since complete. But these are legends that live on. May they do so forever.



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions.

ALPHAS & BETAS

This means we'll review any released alpha, beta or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently buy. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time in their current state.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be hours-long new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. Either way, if we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little to no reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, The Division*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Life is Strange, Planet Coaster*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Doom*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Forza Horizon 3, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

It's small change

Regular readers will have seen the sidebar to my left so many times that it barely registers. This issue, there's a good reason to pay it some heed. We've spruced up our score guide, slightly tweaking things to make those numbers at the end of our reviews more useful.

For instance, we've clarified the language of the 70-79% bracket to more clearly explain that games in this range are recommendations. We've also expanded the lower end of the bracket, because we want you to know precisely how rubbish a bad game is. Visit page 82 for an example of this in action.

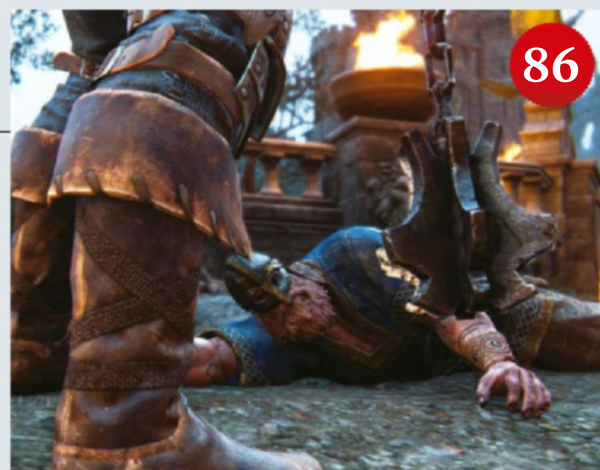
Also this issue, we're trialling the return of the half-page review. We want to continue to highlight smaller, weirder games you may have missed. Let us know what you think of the changes through the contact details below.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
DEPUTY EDITOR
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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via pcgamer@futurenet.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer





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- 93** Reigns

This month's lefty barsiders...



CHRIS THURSTEN
Specialist in
RPG, exits
Currently playing
*Torment: Tides of
Numenera*
This month
Left the PCG office,
but not our hearts. Or
our review pages.



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Sports, entertainment
Currently playing
WWE 2K17
This month
Turned heel and spent
the month taunting
OXM, despite them
being lovely.



HOLLY NIELSEN
Specialist in
Adventure, depths
Currently playing
Diluvion
This month
Considered escaping
in a submarine, but
was put off by the
shonky UI.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Fighting, fantasy
Currently playing
For Honor
This month
Played the videogame
equivalent of your
dad's embarrassing
historical fanatic.



DANIELLA LUCAS
Specialist in
MMOs, JRPGs
Currently playing
Final Fantasy XIV
This month
Realised it was
dangerous to leave the
house, so stayed in
and raided.



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
FPS, survival
Currently playing
The Division
This month
Stocked up on gas
masks and beanie
hats to return to NYC.



JON BLYTH
Specialist in
Retro, magic
Currently playing
*Thirty Flights of
Loving*
This month
Tries to preserve
your innocence by
writing about spoons.

VANCE MACABRE

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA invites you to start a new life in the Ninth World. *By Chris Thursten*

Planescape: Torment occupies a special place in the history of PC roleplaying games. It sticks in the memory: *Baldur's Gate's* stranger, sexier, smarter sibling, interested in headier stuff than swords and sorcery. The original *Torment* was highly regarded and its influence is felt throughout the RPG genre, from *Pillars of Eternity's* soul-reading to the warped denizens of *Fallen London*. Yet it's never, until now, had a proper follow-up.

Torment: Tides of Numenera is that successor. Following in the footsteps of Obsidian's *Pillars of Eternity* as *Planescape Torment* once followed *Baldur's Gate* – and based on the same engine – inXile has recaptured much of what made the original game special. This is a free-roaming, dialogue-heavy isometric RPG that places thought resolutely before action. Although combat features, the entire campaign can be played without participating in violence yourself.

The Planescape setting is gone, swapped for the Ninth World – the far-future background to Monte Cook's *Numenera* pen-and-paper roleplaying game. This is an unrecognisable take on Earth one billion years in the future, with the accreted technological detritus of innumerable vanished civilisations underpinning a medieval society that brings Clarke's third law to life.

There's magic, but it's really science – and the science is strange,

spanning time travel, the transference of consciousness, parallel universes, and nanomachinery. Michael Moorcock and Jack Vance are other prominent influences, from *Torment's* writing to its look: this is science fantasy done in the psychedelic pastel shades of a '70s paperback.

You enter this world as the Last Castoff, coming to terms with your new identity as you plummet to your death like the doomed whale in *Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. You're an immortal creation of The Changing God, a futuristic sorcerer who

transfers his consciousness into new bodies to unnaturally prolong his life.

His discarded former selves – the castoffs – spontaneously form their own consciousnesses when they're abandoned. After death you enter the Castoff's Labyrinth, a dimension within your own mind where your character's class and key traits are determined by a memory-probing personality test. And after that you awaken in the city of Sagus Cliffs.

This dialogue-heavy RPG places thought resolutely before action

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A text-heavy isometric RPG in an otherworldly far-future setting.

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

inXile Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Techland

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, 16GB RAM, i5-2500K, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

torment.inxile-entertainment.com

Castoffs like you are being hunted by a mysterious killer called the Sorrow, and finding a way to escape this seemingly inevitable fate motivates your first steps into the Ninth World. But quickly *Tides of Numenera* becomes more about discovering this new world and the people who inhabit it, with your own story intertwining closely with what would be considered sidequests in any other game.

The term fits less well here, because *Tides of Numenera* is cleverly designed to thread a diverse array of different plotlines together. Sagus Cliffs is relatively compact by the standards of RPG cities, but the game gets a lot of use out of each character and location.

DECISION CRITICAL

There are multiple ways to encounter each storyline, with the way you happen to discover a quest often proving as important as the decisions you make at its conclusion. Your decisions really do matter, too: a choice I made at the start that I felt fit my character but expected to result in a 'game over' screen meaningfully changed the way my adventure began. If you pick a trait like mind-reading for your Last Castoff, you can trust that this'll be incorporated thoughtfully throughout the entirety of the campaign.

Your choices also influence the titular *Tides*, an abstract expression of different aspects of the human psyche as colours. The red tide represents passion, for example, while selflessness is gold. The tides you align yourself with change how characters respond to you, and they form a crucial part of the Last Castoff's journey.

The pace of the game does struggle a little during its initial hours, however, particularly if the setting is new to you. I had an advantage – I've got a big pile of *Numenera* corebooks next to my desk and I've run multiple campaigns. *Tides of Numenera* has the unenviable

TIDAL WAVE *The personality-driven forces powering the Last Castoff*



BLUE

Reasoning, wisdom, and mysticism. Pursuing understanding for its own sake will see your blue tide increased.



GOLD

Compassion, self-sacrifice and empathy. By putting others before yourself you'll be associated with the gold tide.



INDIGO

Equality, justice, and the greater good. By managing to maintain a strict moral code, your indigo tide will be increased.



RED

Emotion, passion and action. Encouraging strong feelings in others – from anger to lust – makes you see red.



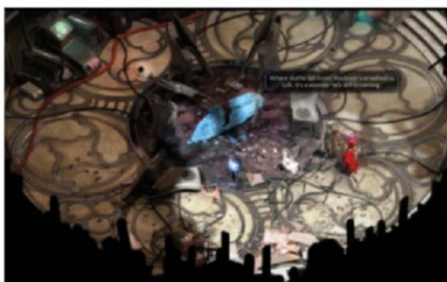
SILVER

Silver is associated with glory-seeking, admiration, and fame. Bigging yourself up in conversations advances silver.

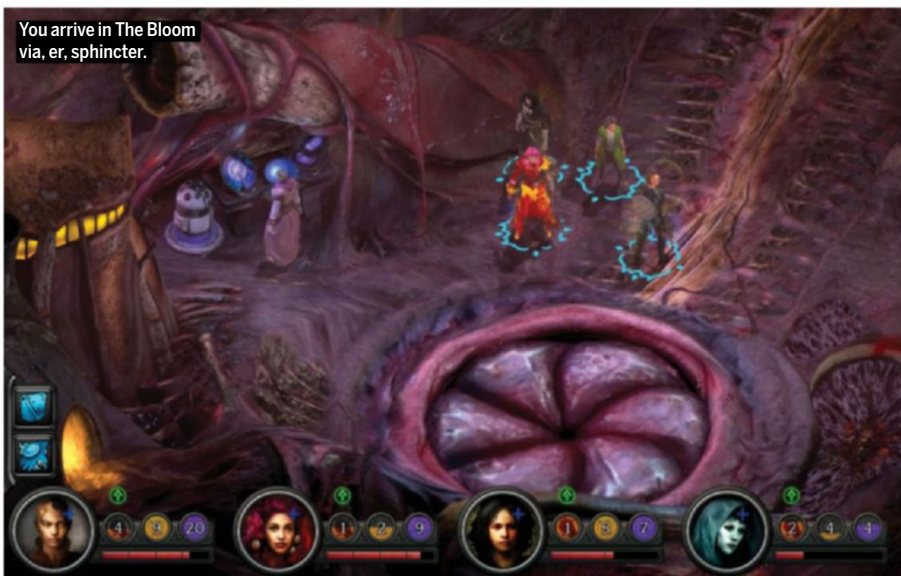
The Castoff's Labyrinth is inside your mind. And made of stairs.



Crises are turn-based encounters, but combat isn't mandatory.



You arrive in The Bloom via, er, sphincter.



Once you've left an area, there's no going back.



The Changing God's devices are key to the plot.



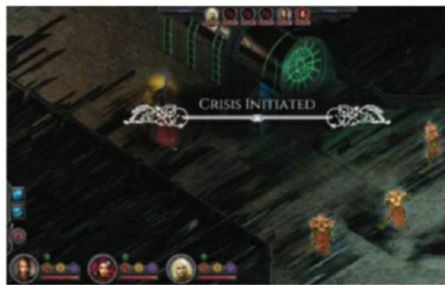
Some areas are more sci-fi than fantasy.



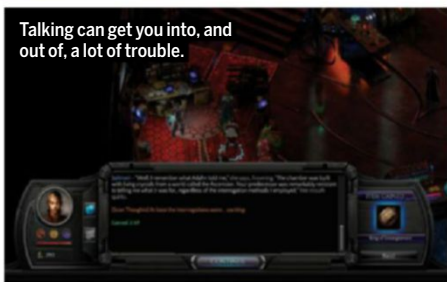
Solving puzzles during a crisis is very satisfying.



Sagus Cliffs features shops, inns, and transdimensional monstrosities.



Talking can get you into, and out of, a lot of trouble.



task of introducing the Ninth World alongside its own complicated interpretation of it, and this means a lot of picking through unfamiliar terminology for the new player. Things improve with both fluency and progress: by the time the plot really kicks into gear, you'll have all the knowledge you need.

This isn't your RPG if you want to spend a lot of time thinking about item stats and party strategy: that's *Pillars of Eternity's* domain, not *Torment's*. Instead, a relatively simple skill system dictates how you use might, speed and intellect points to achieve your character's goals – from climbing a wall to convincing someone to see things your way.

What's impressive about this system is the way it's adapted to suit different circumstances. Succeeding at a task works the same way whether you're having a conversation in the open world, working through a Mere – a fragment of a memory that takes the form of an illustrated choose-your-own adventure – or fighting a battle. During dangerous encounters, the game becomes turn-based and combat-specific abilities can be used: but your regular skillset is still there, and if you want to solve a 'fight' by talking or hiding or rewiring an ancient device then you have that option.

ALL GROWN UP

Although the Ninth World is weird it's arguably more grounded than *Planescape*: your companions are an unusual bunch, but they're people too. This new *Torment* misses out on the levity provided by having a flying skull for a best friend, but it also feels more mature: its designers have decided that busty rogues in bondage gear are best left to the late '90s.

Instead you'll meet an academic accompanied by the ghostly shades of herself split across infinite alternate timelines, a girl with a god in her pocket, and a glowing young man possessed – perhaps literally – by a manic need to turn every situation into an adventure.

A little bit more humour would help disarm some of the game's more self-serious moments, but I found the quality of the writing and the genuine philosophical complexity of *Tides of Numenera's* questions compelling in a

CRISIS MANAGEMENT *Solving problems in the Ninth World*



MIGHT

Smashing, lifting, and hitting things really hard – these are the tools of a hands-on castoff.



SPEED

Everything from climbing to grabbing a coolant tube from a transdimensional engine.



INTELLECT

Persuading others, assessing devices and uncovering latent memories all require smarts.



CYPHERS

One-use devices that can charm, conceal, and kill. Carry too many at once at your risk.



THE TIDES

Tap into the raw power of the Tides to enact your will, if you can brave the consequences.

way that RPGs rarely achieve. To say this is an RPG written in shades of grey is an understatement: in fact, given the multi-hued *Tides* of the title, you could say that it's written in shades of everything.

Where the writing is consistently evocative, *Torment's* art direction is mixed. There are moments when it really comes together: particularly the Bloom, a city that's been built into the bowels of a vast extradimensional creature. Yet a few areas feel like they could have done with a second pass – the Valley of Dead Heroes, supposedly a vast collection of memorials to all the world's dead,

is a little drab and underwhelming. It's here that *Torment* falls on the wrong side of 'show don't tell' – a challenge for any story like this, and one that *Tides of Numenera* doesn't always successfully negotiate.

Your imagination is always there to pick up the slack, however, and if this game wants to give any of your muscles a workout, it's that one. Those who'll get the most out of it will be the ones who do the reading, to infer their own connections between people and ideas, to roleplay as 'their' Last Castoff. When you've come to terms with the parameters of the Ninth World and internalised what type of RPG this is, the imaginative investment it requires becomes much lighter.

After *Torment* sheds its initial inertia, however, a few problems persist. Companions sometimes move erratically and get stuck on scenery, although this never really hinders your progress – it just looks strange. The most serious bug I encountered was a quest that seemed to become

impossible to complete with nothing left to interact with and no new dialogue to wring from the characters involved. However, this might have been a consequence of my actions elsewhere: *Tides of Numenera's* organic storytelling makes it hard to tell, sometimes.

LITTLE VOICE

I also found myself wishing that inXile hadn't recorded a voice for the Last Castoff. There's very little voice acting in the game as it is – only a handful of characters, chiefly companions, and even then only during key conversations – and the protagonist's own lines are limited to 'I'm on my way' and 'I just levelled up'-type barks. Yet the voice they chose feels completely at odds with the person expressed through the writing. In fact, you have so much freedom to determine the Last Castoff's personality that I suspect no one performance would be a good fit. It's far from a dealbreaking issue, but it was persistently distracting.

Despite these problems, I'm impressed by *Tides of Numenera* both as a follow-up to a beloved RPG and as the digital debut of a fascinating setting. I've deliberately avoided specifics in this review, but I feel confident that if you've got a part of your brain dedicated to clever sci-fi story prompts you'll find a lot to love here. There's no escaping that *Torment* is a strange beast – it's a game for readers, an adventure for people who don't necessarily want to fight – but it's great to have it back. ■

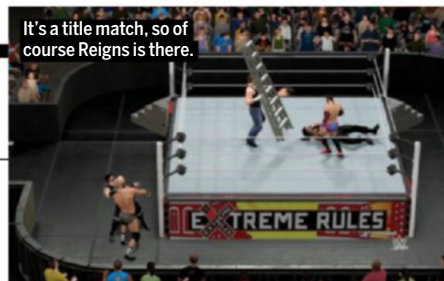
PC GAMER VERDICT

This thought-provoking adventure in a remarkable setting is a fitting follow-up to a beloved RPG.

89



My fantasy booking:
Neville wins everything.



It's a title match, so of
course Reigns is there.



NXT is present, but the
roster is outdated.



Professional chiropractic is a
surprisingly popular sport.



We've got all the moves.
Throw. Little throw. Big throw.

WHAT?

I am not sports entertained by **WWE 2K17**. By Phil Savage

WWE 2K17 offers a competent combat system. You initiate strikes and grapples through button combos, and watch the animations play out. The strategy of each match revolves around reversals, mimicking the back-and-forth of professional wrestling. The slow pace is an acquired taste, and feels more suited to lumbering heavyweights than the smaller, quicker end of WWE's roster. But it mostly works.

I also quite like the new rival system, which can extend over multiple pay-per-views. My custom Superstar got caught in a heated rivalry with Bulgarian beefcake Rusev that nicely escalated in intensity over a couple of months of the game's calendar. Also, there's a good character creator, always welcome.

That's about the extent of positive things I have to say. WWE 2K17 would be decent if all its core systems worked as they should. But they don't, and it isn't.

It doesn't look very good, thanks both to the outdated, flat graphics, and the pallid, sickly interpretations of the roster. The controls and animations feel sloppy. Context sensitive actions are misinterpreted. And if, during a suplex or slam, your opponent hits the ropes, both of you will be awkwardly repositioned.

Other problems include the way interviews and in-ring promos are delivered silently, your character just wordlessly mouthing subtitles. Those promos aren't well written, either – more Titus O'Neil than The Miz.

There are bugs, too. I've experienced a few crashes to desktop, and, in one instance, Neville's entrance music glitched out and wouldn't stop playing, even when I quit to the main menu.

It also feels out of date. WWE's past year has been dominated by the 'brand split' – the division of Raw and Smackdown into separate rosters, each with their own championships. None of this is reflected in WWE 2K17. The roster is missing some big names, too. You can only play as Raw's current Tag Team Champions, for instance, by buying the *Future Stars* DLC.

**Even trying to
meet it halfway,
WWE 2K17
undermines
the fantasy**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Officially licensed WWE action. It's not good, but at least you can be Chris Jericho.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Visual Concepts,
Yuke's Co

PUBLISHER
2K

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, 16GB RAM,
i5-6600K,
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
2-6 players

LINK
www.2k.com

Despite all of this, it's tempting to forgive WWE 2K17. It is, after all, the only major wrestling game around. There are no other options, and going up against the biggest stars in WWE is a compelling fantasy.

The problem is that, even trying to meet it halfway, WWE 2K17 undermines the fantasy. In one instance, I'm fighting an opponent when a long-term rival invades the arena. They attack me directly in sight of a referee, which should mean a disqualification. It doesn't, and I'm suddenly in an awkward handicap match, where my opponent and rival seem unaware of each other – getting in each other's way in their attempt to reach me. It might not sound like a big deal, but this is a licensed game that doesn't adhere to the rules of the product it's recreating.

Being the only wrestling game around doesn't automatically make WWE 2K17 good. Given the numerous flaws, it doesn't even make it acceptable. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The basic combat is fine, but WWE 2K17 botches everything, from performance to presentation.

45

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OCEAN FLAW

Bad checkpointing and a lack of polish let down the deep sea exploration of **DILUVION**. By Holly Nielsen

Diluvion is about drifting through the depths of the ocean in a dangerous, steampunk-inspired setting. In this RPG-infused exploration game, humanity now finds itself desperately surviving underwater, trapped beneath impenetrable ice after a great flood centuries ago. Settlements and towns are nothing more than a collection of haphazard-looking metal structures, clinging to glaciers and rocks in an attempt not to be lost to the deep.

You become the captain of your first submarine, and must build up your crew and upgrade your vessel to explore the mysteries below, while also having to fight off enemies with its guns and torpedoes.

While the watery depths you explore are a 3D space, the interior views of the submarines or cities you switch to are hand-painted 2D. These areas are where *Diluvion* comes into its own, and the inspiration of Jules Verne is truly felt. Taking the form of an interactive-fiction experience, they are some of the game's most appealing elements, and also a clever way of building out the fictional backdrop. However, while the crew you accumulate are a bunch of misfits with stories to tell, you, their captain, are just some kind of floating presence with little sense of place.

In the 3D ocean depths, there's a thrill to seeing mysterious distant shadows and gradually edging closer

to them. The combination of roughly constructed submarines, ancient buildings from before the flood and otherworldly, flowing shapes of deep sea flora make for engaging environments. Your discoveries do sometimes lack scale, however. By the time you've got close to one of these mysterious shadows, it often proves a bit too small in comparison to your submarine to impress.

The set-piece ideas are pretty cool – ancient freighter ships delicately balancing above the abyss, or an abandoned research post atop a giant crab

– but they often lack the visual impact that they deserve.

Exploration is challenging, with lot of things to consider before setting off. Your submarine uses scrap metal for ammo – run out and you may find yourself defenceless against pirates and creatures. Your crew also requires food: the larger the crew, the larger the stock of rations you need. The most important resource is

oxygen, which can only be refilled by docking somewhere. Managing your resources and manoeuvring your crew between various posts within the submarine, *FTL*-style, adds a satisfying urgency and level of threat. All this is marred by the checkpointing system, however.

POINTLESS

Diluvion's checkpointing misses the delicate line between tension and frustration, and can sometimes be infuriating. Checkpoints are indicated by green fish, and at first it seems like every large discovery or settlement has these creatures milling about, but that's sadly not the case. Nor does the game automatically save your progress after you've hired a new crew member or discovered something. Given the constant threat of death, that means it's easy to lose hours of progress.

The UI is unintuitive, and often unwieldy and ugly. That's a shame, because it detracts from the carefully crafted hand-drawn art. There's controller support, but it feels poorly optimised, flinging you to parts of the screen you had no desire to visit. The basic controls can also be fiddly.

There is a lot to *Diluvion* – you've got nine different kinds of submarine to collect and upgrade, and once you've improved your vessel with hull armour plates, you can reach new depths and areas that would previously destroy your submarine. You also get an upgradeable home base in which to house your submarines and standby crew. There are plenty of ways to extend the game's life. Its conspicuous lack of polish removes a little of the excitement of exploring the ocean's depths, however, as distinctive as its presentation of this backdrop is. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A Jules Verne-inspired submarine adventure.

EXPECT TO PAY

£15

DEVELOPER

Arachnid Games

PUBLISHER

Gambitious Digital Entertainment

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, 16GB RAM, i7 6800K, GeForce GTX 1080

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.diluvion.com/diluvion

Ancient freighters, delicately balancing above the abyss

FOUR JULES VERNE NOVELS TO INSPIRE GAMES

AROUND THE MOON (1870)

features people being sent to the Moon by being fired out of a giant space gun. Enough said.

OFF ON A COMET (1877)

has a comet touching earth and scooping a few people with it on the way. The involuntary explorers slowly figure out where they are and have to find a way to escape.

THE CHILD OF THE CAVERN (1877)

a town surrounding an underground loch, a mysterious orphan who has never seen daylight and a trained snowy owl. What more of a setup could a game need?

PROPELLER ISLAND (1895)

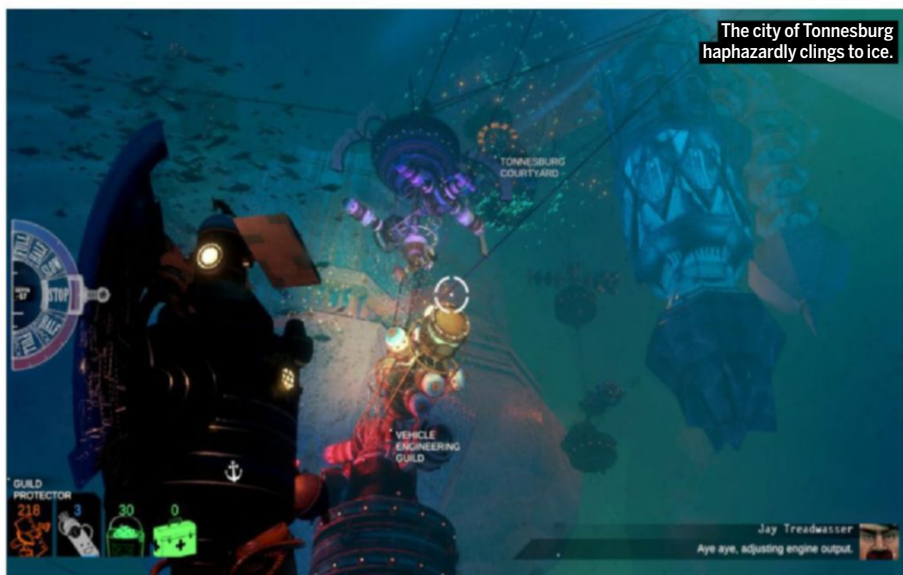
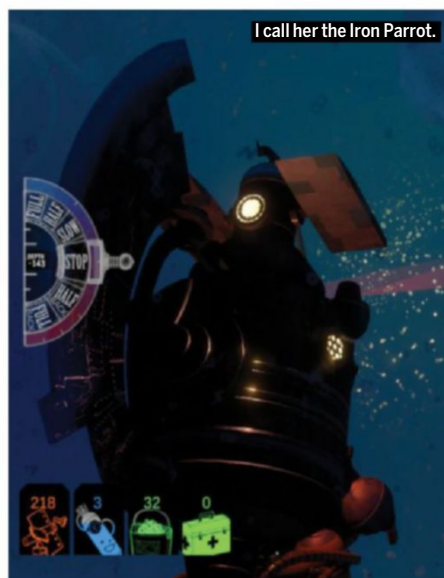
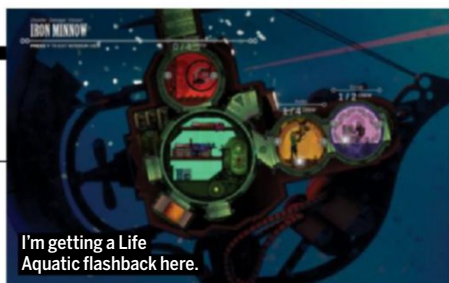
a string quartet find themselves playing on a huge man-made island in the Pacific Ocean, entirely inhabited by the incredibly wealthy. Two factions threaten the island's future, can the string quartet unify them?

PC GAMER

VERDICT

An interesting and atmospheric setting let down by frustrating checkpoints and a rough user interface.

72



HEAVY METAL

Violence solves everything on the brutal battlefields of Ubisoft's **FOR HONOR**. By Andy Kelly

If you showed a historian this game, in which samurai, Vikings, and knights fight each other, they'd spit out their tea and politely ask you to leave. It makes no sense for these people to be fighting for control of the same continent, but it doesn't really matter. They're fighting because it's cool, and there's something endearing about the way the game takes a gleaming broadsword to historical accuracy to make as enjoyable a celebration of medieval combat possible.

There's not a trace of cynicism in *For Honor*. You can tell the developers earnestly believe that burly warriors in ornate armour hammering each other with weapons is as good as it gets. There's a lot more going on, from a confusing faction war metagame where players work together to conquer territory, to modes such as Dominion where you fight to capture and defend points on a map. But, really, it's all just a flashy distraction from the game's true, beating, ironclad heart: the combat.

It's when you're locked in battle with a single adversary that *For Honor*'s blade is sharpest. Each fighter can attack and block in three directions: left, right, and high. If

your opponent goes for a high attack, an arrow indicating its direction will flash on the screen just before it connects, giving you a brief window to block. The skill lies in second-guessing your foe and waiting for precisely the right moment to block,

attack, or dodge. As you slowly circle your opponent, eyes fixed on their sword hand, wondering if they'll make the first move, it's genuinely tense. Especially when they're a real person.

You can play against surprisingly competent bots, but nothing beats the unpredictable thrill of facing another player online. And doing so forces you to dive deeper into the combat system, which goes way beyond mere strikes and blocks.

It demands time and patience that many players won't have

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A medieval brawler featuring samurai, vikings and knights, oh my.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1070, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to eight

LINK
www.forhonor.game.com

Advanced tactics include feints, where your opponent will see the arrow indicating a left attack and go to block, but then you quickly change to a right attack and catch them off guard. Fooling someone with this trick is enormously satisfying.

FIGHT CLUB

Parrying, stamina, throws, guard breaks, and class-specific special moves all deepen the game. Rickety bridges, cliff edges, and spike traps are particularly dangerous if you're next to one and your opponent transitions from a guard break to a throw. Strike too often without pausing and your stamina will drain, making your attacks slow and laboured, which an opponent can exploit. There's an impressive amount of depth and nuance, which demands time, dedication, and patience that some people just won't have. This may result in less committed players drifting away, leaving a small, impenetrable community of the hardcore.

Before charging headlong into multiplayer, it's worth playing story mode. These missions, flanked by largely forgettable cutscenes, teach you the basics of combat, as well as how to deal with certain classes when you finally go online. There are a few fun moments, but if you were thinking of buying *For Honor* to play solo, don't bother. The intricacies of the combat system only emerge when you're fighting a living opponent.

In multiplayer there are 4v4 deathmatches, the aforementioned Dominion mode, and 2v2 brawls, but it's the duels that kept me coming back. The purity of fighting one-on-one without any distractions – or other players stabbing you in the back – is where *For Honor* shines. ■

CLASS ACT *A warrior for every occasion*



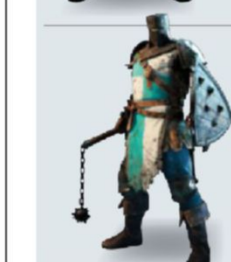
VANGUARD

Balanced, versatile, and easy to master, Vanguards are perfect for beginners and can hold their own against more powerful classes.



ASSASSIN

Nimble and deadly, Assassins make up for their weak defence with rapid attacks that can totally overwhelm an unwary opponent.



HEAVY

These burly tanks can take a lot of damage, but their attacks are slow and more obviously telegraphed than the other classes.



HYBRID

Hybrids mix traits from the other three classes. They're difficult to get to grips with, but extremely powerful in the right hands.

PC GAMER VERDICT

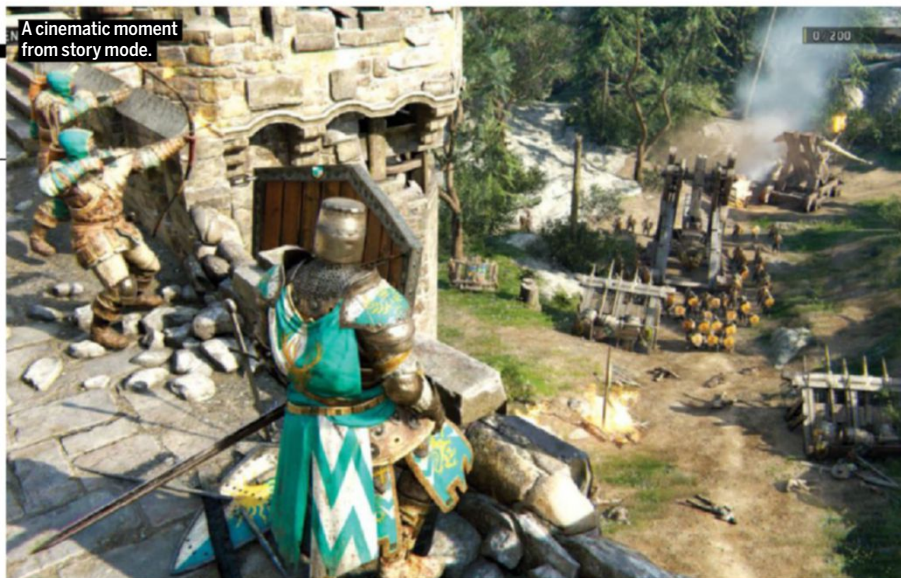
A tense, tactical medieval brawler that will reward anyone with the patience to master it, but don't expect an easy fight.

74

The height of knightly fashion.



A cinematic moment from story mode.



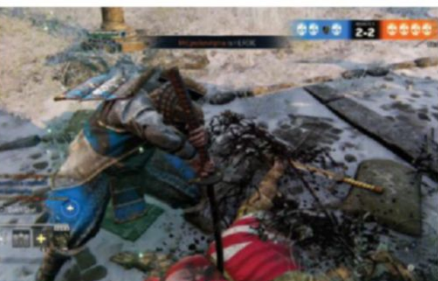
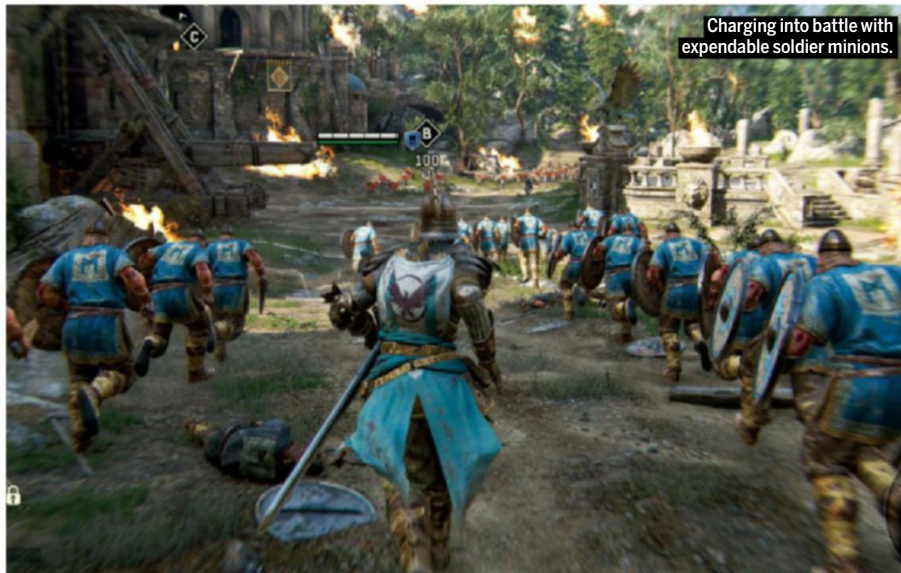
The Kensei has the longest reach of the Vanguard heroes.



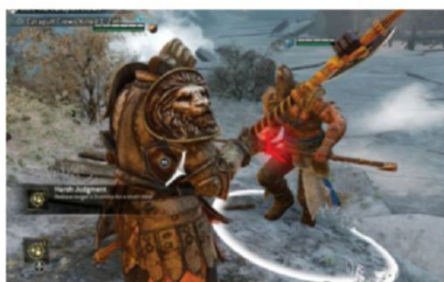
The story is daft, but has a certain charm.



Charging into battle with expendable soldier minions.



"Mffm mmfh mff mffh mffh?"



This Viking will pillage no more.

RED DAWN

TAKE ON MARS turns the Red Planet into a simulated sandbox of science and survival. *By Andy Kelly*

I've been playing *Take On Mars* on and off since it was released through Steam Early Access in 2013. This slow, strangely relaxing game about trundling around the Red Planet, taking soil samples, appealed to me the same way *Euro Truck Simulator* does. But over the years it's mutated into something else entirely. Understated realism has been quietly pushed aside to make way for manned missions incorporating survival, base-building, and advanced technology.

Admittedly this is more immediately entertaining than scooping up soil. The popularity of Andy Weir's novel *The Martian* has undoubtedly influenced the game's direction. So much so that the 1.0 release contains a singleplayer campaign in which you play Mark Willis, an astronaut with a background in botany stranded on Mars. It's a series of entertaining, varied scenarios that teach the basics of survival, building, and other parts of the simulation.

Waking on Mars, surrounded by flaming debris as the oxygen warning on your HUD shrieks, is a powerful opening. Your first priority is searching the rubble for supplies to replenish your O₂, and fixing the scary-looking crack on your helmet. It's a nicely produced series of missions, with some decent voice acting, but let down by the game's clumsy controls. Everything you do in *Take On Mars* feels incredibly laborious. Walking around in a spacesuit in low gravity is probably

pretty unwieldy in real life, but it makes the game needlessly frustrating. Not to mention the twitchy physics that send objects flying into the air or getting stuck in things. I was more willing to forgive this jankiness in Early Access.

If manned missions sound too exciting, you can play through the robotics space programme instead. This has you managing a budget and building vehicles to explore the planet. You start with basic probes with low-res cameras, but as the money rolls in you can create advanced

car-sized rovers like the real-world Curiosity. It's a very different experience, and there's something strangely tranquil about it. Especially given how atmospheric the game's realistic recreation of the Red Planet is. They've captured brilliantly the haunting, desolate feeling of what it might be like to be alone on another world. The red sand dunes, ancient craters, and ghostly sunsets make for

Manned missions incorporate survival and base-building

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A space simulation sandbox.

EXPECT TO PAY

£21

DEVELOPER

Bohemia Interactive

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Radeon RX 480,
Intel i7-5820K,
16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Up to ten

LINK

www.takeonmars.com

an evocative setting, whether you're rolling around as a rover, solar panels rattling in the wind, or settling in for the night in your new base.

TAKE ON MODS

If you'd rather create your own missions, or download user-made ones from the Steam Workshop, *Take On Mars* comes with an *Arma*-style editor. With this you can place objects, pre-built bases, vehicles, and whatever else is in the game's deep toolbox. And because these are the same tools the developers use, dedicated players have created some pretty impressive stuff. Some missions even take you away from Mars, to such places as Earth's moon and a replica of the International Space Station. So even if you've exhausted the bundled scenarios and campaign, there should still be plenty of additional missions to dive into, courtesy of the community. The quality will vary wildly, of course, but it's cool to have the option.

Take On Mars is still an unusual game, even if it has drifted into the increasingly populist realm of the base-building survive-'em-up, of which there are far too many on PC. Its Martian deserts are beautiful to look at, and struggling to survive on such a hostile world is an entertaining, often terrifying challenge. An overall feeling of clunkiness – which can make something as simple as loading a few oxygen canisters into the back of a buggy feel like a chore – tested my patience at times. But when you're out there among the craters, alone, growing potatoes or conducting experiments, there's a feeling of serenity that keeps me coming back to *Take On Mars*, despite its many faults and frustrations. ■

SPACE TOURIST *A few places you'll visit in Take On Mars*



CYDONIA MNSAE

This area of flat-topped mesa-like structures has been popular with scientists since the very first Mars landing.



ISIS PLANITIA

A desert plain located inside a giant impact basin. You might stumble on the wreckage of the ill-fated Beagle 2 here.



LOW EARTH ORBIT

Some missions take place above our own planet, including one where you visit the International Space Station.



NORTH POLAR REGION

The coldest places on the planet, with temperatures dropping to as low as -150 degrees Celsius. Wear a jumper.



VICTORIA CRATER

A vast impact crater that's 70 metres deep, and named after one of explorer Ferdinand Magellan's ships rather than the monarch.

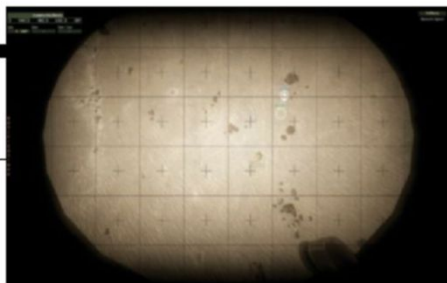
PC GAMER

VERDICT

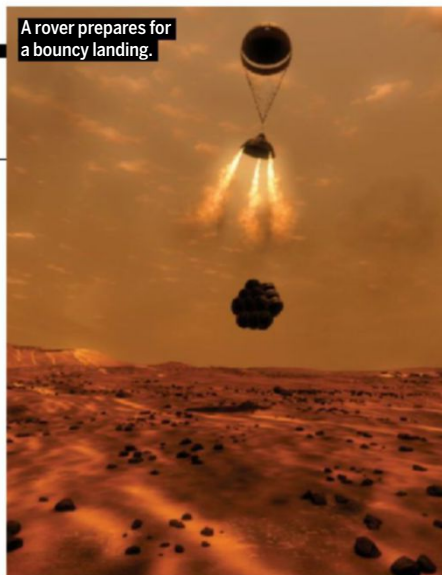
A varied, atmospheric space simulator with beautiful sunsets, challenging survival, and frustrating controls.

69

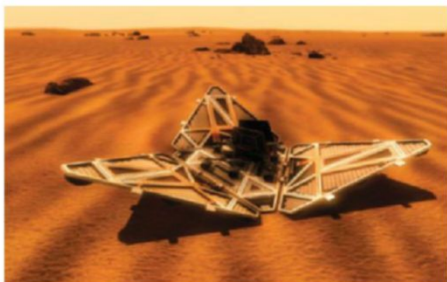
A replica of NASA's own Curiosity rover.



A rover prepares for a bouncy landing.



The HUD is built into your helmet.



The planet can be eerily beautiful.



An advanced rover touches down.

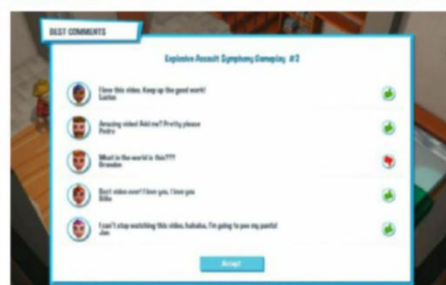
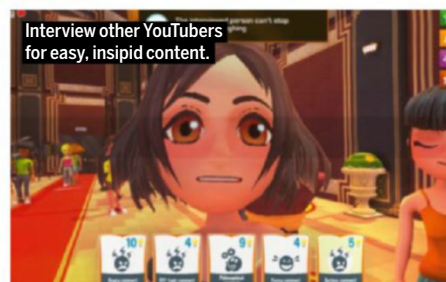


So many rocks, so little time.



No traffic on Mars at least.





GET A LIFE

YOUTUBERS LIFE is an unintentionally horrifying content dystopia. *By Phil Savage*

Sorry, jerkwads, but I'm out. People just don't want measured criticism, analytical features and interesting stories, all carefully written, delicately sub-edited and bound together in a 132-page magazine. It's all about YouTube these days, so I'm away to pursue a lucrative career pretending to be a Clarkesque blowhard, pontificating about everything that's wrong with the industry while doing nothing to actually improve the situation.

That's the fantasy offered by *Youtubers Life*. It's a light, quirky life sim, similar in style to Kairosoft's *Game Dev Story*, but focused around people who make videos for the internet. You pick a subject – games, music or cookery – and start recording. Your videos' quality is based around your reactions, which are chosen by selecting one of a number of cards. You're given the scenario, and must pick the response that best matches.

Earning an achievement, for instance, is best met by a 'celebratory scream'. A bug should elicit a 'murderous look'. It's not very nuanced.

Each response card drains your inspiration meter, which is recharged by eating and sleeping. As you play, you unlock new cards that improve your performance, but require more inspiration points to use. It's a

balancing act. Too many high inspiration responses and you may not be able to complete a whole video. Too few, and the quality suffers.

In between recording sessions, there's a variety of actions to undertake. You can study to improve your video skills, or socialise to meet potential collaborators. Or you can go to movie premieres, and pose for photos in the desperate hope of being recognised. You can

also earn extra money by spending a few hours working an actual job.

You'll need the extra cash, because for the first few months you'll only be earning a few pennies per video. But here, in this happy-go-lucky world, success is simply a matter of grinding through the lean years – churning out Let's Plays until the dollars start to flow. All it takes is persistence.

Earning an achievement is best met by a 'celebratory scream'

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A life sim that I am 16 years too old to be playing.

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
U-Play Online

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, 16GB RAM, i5-6600k, GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
N/A

LINK
www.youtuberslife.com

It's pleasant enough, but quickly becomes tiresome. You click on things to manage your sleep, hunger and money, all while making video after video. After hours of incremental progress, you'll get the option to unlock a new, bigger living space, incurring new costs and requiring more churn.

I don't think *Youtubers Life* is satire – it's too saccharine. But it is unintentionally damning. Its characters are vapid and obsessed by yachts. Its communities are demanding and judgemental. And its depiction of creating videos is deeply offputting. There's no passion or personality. The most you can aspire to is inoffensive banter and a dogged adherence to prevailing trends. Want to create a weird, alienating tribute to *Dragon Age 2*? Tough. That's not how it's done on the content farms, where success is more about being relevant than being good.

On reflection, I think I'm better off staying where I am. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A quirky, overly saccharine life sim that quickly descends into a dispassionate grind.

56

SWIPE LEFT

MOBIUS FINAL FANTASY taps out. *By Phil Savage*

You can tell a lot about a mobile port from the terminology it uses. *Mobius Final Fantasy*, for instance, opens with the advice that you can “tap” to disable the prologue demo in order to “save battery”. A swing and a miss, Square Enix.

Terminology aside, *Mobius*’s mobile roots show in other ways, too. It’s structured as a series of battles in which dealing damage requires nothing more than clicking on the screen. As you attack, you gain orbs, which are used to power abilities in the form of cards. Cast one, and you can temporarily break the shield of tougher enemies, giving you a set number of moves in which to inflict yet more damage.

It’s a pleasant enough way to pass some time, but rarely feels engaging. That’s despite the ridiculous number of systems, including weapons, jobs,

items, fusions, rentals, and more. *Mobius* adds needless complexity into its menus and loadout options, seemingly as a way to distract from the lack of depth elsewhere.

There’s a story – involving amnesiac warriors being drawn to the world of Palamecia – but it’s not very good. It’s packed full of traditional *Final Fantasy* nonsense about crystals and Warriors of Light. There’s nothing compelling about the mystery of the world, and no quirky party of misfit characters to become attached to.

As a free-to-play game it’s reasonably generous. Yes, progression is a grind if you choose not to pay. But here’s the thing: the grind is the entirety of the game. It’s a series of combat rooms; an endless procession of monsters to be clicked on. If that doesn’t appeal, there’s no reason to play, let alone to pay. ■

53



It's good of the monsters to attack in organised groups.



Timed events add bonus levels. This set is FFVII-themed.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

ORWELLIAN

MAINLINING is a voyeuristic mystery. *By Phil Savage*

Mainlining is a faux-hacking adventure about poking through fictional people’s fictional computers. As in the recent *Orwell*, you work for a dystopian state, spying on the personal lives of your citizens. Unlike in *Orwell*, you’re not particularly conflicted about this role (or, if you are, you can’t do anything about it).

The presentation is great. Your workspace is a pixelated Windows XP-era OS. You can open programs and files, drag and minimise windows. There’s even a notepad app.

Your primary tool is Mainline, a command prompt that lets you hack into a person’s IP, and read and download their files. Through this, you can collate evidence to build a case against your current target.

It’s a mostly linear story, in which the overall plot often feels more

important than the individual cases. Get something wrong and you’re shown a newspaper clipping of a wrongful arrest, but are free to try again without consequence. In situations where there are multiple possible arrests, you pick one, then move straight to the next case. There’s nothing inherently wrong with the structure, but it’s strange that you wouldn’t be able to arrest multiple people when you have evidence of multiple crimes.

More annoying is that elements of the plot only work because you’re unable to inform your superiors of certain information that you discover. At least in *Orwell* your silence is an inherent part of the system. In *Mainlining*, it feels negligent.

But *Mainlining* is mostly a success. Even though many cases are simple to solve, how to solve them remains satisfying throughout. ■

72



My actual desktop is also this messy.



Tip: don't try to alt-tab between applications.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
Rebelephant

PUBLISHER
Merge Games

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Jon Blyth



This image hints deceptively at "action". Sorry.



In love, or drunk? Either way, look at road please.



People float away without consequence!



You can push this goose!



Feel profoundly nonplussed for £5!

SHORT STOREY

THIRTY FLIGHTS OF LOVING is a fizzling magic spell you can finish on a fag break

As a baby, you drop your spoon from your high chair, testing the reaction of the big idiots around you. You note their actions and intricate honks, and make a memo to copy those honks once you're finished with your spoon experiment. By the time you're 35, the science is complete, and you can reliably predict the reaction of your peers if you drop a spoon and start screaming. You now understand the world better, but at what cost?

Now imagine I'm talking like one of those vicars on Radio 4's Thought For The Day, when I say "and when you think about it, that's a bit like the first time you play videogames, isn't it?" A new world, with astonishing new rules. You set fire to that pillar, and that door unlocks? You just learned door magic! Now the door is connected by a visible cable to a fuse box. You just learned door science! Now this room has eight doors, seven lit red and one lit green. You just learned that the developer is disguising the linearity of the game, but trying to respect your time by not asking you to approach every door! And just like that, doors have lost their magic. Doors, spoons – is nothing actually magic?

What I'm saying is, a fairy dies when someone describes a fireball as

"an area-of-effect ranged attack with a chance to inflict damage over time". And every now and then, I play a game that makes me squint, and think "wait a minute, what am I actually doing? Is this something else?" *Thirty Flights of Loving* lit that flame briefly. It's a red rag to the tedious breed who snipe about "walking simulators". Describing it feels like a spoiler, which is why I'm blathering about magic.

It's short. Straying from the path, on the rare occasions you can, doesn't offer any rewards, or even nod at you for being a clever boy. It's just not that sort of game, Mildred. This strange, jittery creature is telling a story, through a series of shattered scenes. Is it a touching story? Only if you can imagine backstory from familiar scenes you've seen before.

"She's gone, Jon, you're defibrillating a corpse"

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A small quantity of interest to apply topically.

EXPECT TO PAY
£5

DEVELOPER
Blendogames

PUBLISHER
In-house

MULTIPLAYER
None

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 246, 90%

LINK
www.blendogames.com

It comes bundled with its predecessor. *Gravity Bone* is similar in style, and a narrative prequel. But it has a platforming bit. Instead of teleportation on death, you have to reload from a save menu. *Gravity Bone* even lets you use the middle wheel to cycle through equipped objects. It's like those videogame defaults are so ingrained, that the developer, Brendan Chung, forgot to leave them out the first time.

If your metric for game quality is hours per pound, the minutes-long *TfL* will leave you with ratio-fuelled outrage. If you judge games on laughter, graphics, replayability, and a giddy climax, this won't scratch those itches either. I'm not selling this well at all, am I? Umm, it's like trying to revive that dead fairy I mentioned, only to have a doctor say "she's gone, Jon, you're defibrillating a corpse". Just cos it didn't work, didn't mean you shouldn't try. Tell you what, buy Chung's next game, *Quadrilateral Cowboy*. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The developer's commentary makes the price feel more reasonable, and Chung immensely likeable.

73

MAMA FEAR

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: AFTERBIRTH expansion discovered Isaac's elastic limit

So here I find myself, trapped in a world where chuckling, mindless turds bury me with their filth. A powerless and lonely boy, attempting to survive the onslaught of authority figures. And I haven't even started playing *Binding of Isaac* yet!

Look at that, an actual joke. Or at least, something that follows the pattern of an actual joke. I think it was about "politics today", or something. Anyway, I've gone back to this juvenile, morbid twin-stick roguelike a lot recently, and installed the second, *Afterbirth+* expansion. It appears to make the game slightly less enjoyable, with boring boss battles and annoying portals.

Ah well, back to vanilla *Afterbirth* – a phrase I never realised I'd have to write. Back to "what if a Roald Dahl book was co-written by a clinically depressed adult, a religious

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A morbid biblical journey to battle your monster mom.

EXPECT TO PAY
£7

DEVELOPER
Nicalis

PUBLISHER
In-house

MULTIPLAYER
None

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 235, 84%

LINK
www.nicalis.com

psychopath, and a giggling five-year-old". How am I supposed to react when a grinning turd lays a couple of smaller chuckling turds, while an anus pops out of the ground to fart a hornet? I'll tell you what you do: you smile wryly at the Goatse homages, and note their attack patterns.

It's everything I think I like, but in the context of a desolate, self-mutilating child trying to kill his evil mother in a world of tears and shit. Take a brief pause to wonder if you're doing a healthy thing. Then tell yourself to shut up. ■

85



I CAN'T ESCAPE: DARKNESS

Trying to reproduce 1987's *Dungeon Master*? Be warned: people no longer drop to their knees and grunt like eroticised oxen at the whiff of a 3D world. *ICED* eliminates most of the nuance of that 30-year-old game – spells, equipment, character progression, designed levels – and goes all in on scary darkness. But are rats scary? Is moss scary? Is the slow movement scary? Is the same eyeball in the wall, over and over, scary? Is the oddly anachronistic cigarette lighter scary? Do you know what, I'm not entirely convinced this game is scary. In fact, I'd go as far as to blow a long raspberry at it. Thrrrrrrpst. ■

55



MONSTRUM

Narrow corridors are scarier than darkness. There's always the fear that perspective is playing a trick on you, and the corridor is actually getting narrower. And the air is thick like custard, and you can't look back because you know doors are shutting behind you, none of your clothes fit right, jokes aren't funny and everyone can see exactly how stupid and scared you are. I'm assuming everyone else feels this way. Thirty words left, quick, review: procedural boat-based narrow corridor explorer that tries to be hide and seek, but is more running away. Atmospheric, but procedural generation leads to more frustration than timelessness. Opaque. Slow. Good sound. Not great. Monsters! ■

58



Nice Tinder RPG – now do a Grindr RTS.

REIGNS

I'm the Tinder King, swiping left on the requests of the Pope. Now I'm a fat ol' lover boy, swiping right on a neighbouring kingdom to marry their princess. I'm talking to a dog, and swiping either direction doesn't make much sense, but there's no way I'm swiping left on a lovely dog. You die regularly, and learn the effects of these swipes – but new decisions constantly unlock, completely exploring the limits of the constrictive Yes/No format. It's a system that was transparently invented for mobile, but it's still a unique and surprisingly varied RPG. And it's a quid. ■

88

HARDWARE

In Association With O M E N by hp



96

GROUP TEST

This month, Ed Chester reviews seven cutting-edge Z270 motherboards.



102

REVIEWS

Find a 92%-scoring fan and an £8,000 laptop in this month's roundup.

The Asus Maximus IX Code comes battle-ready in its heavy motherboard armour.



106

BUYER'S GUIDE

Whatever your budget, our guide has the best components for your money.

RANK UP OR BE FORGOTTEN

OMEN by 



The best Windows ever for gaming.



CHAMPIONSHIP-CALIBER PERFORMANCE

Quad-core Intel® Core™ processor¹
and NVIDIA® GTX™ or AMD R9 graphics.



EQUIPPED WITH THE BEST

Push your performance to the very
edge with optional liquid cooling.²



BUILT FOR THE PODIUM

With its brushed-metal chassis and
customizable lights, this tower is ready
for the arena.

© Copyright 2016 HP Development Company, L.P. ¹ Multi-core is designed to improve performance of certain software products. Not all customers or software applications will necessarily benefit from use of this technology. Performance and clock frequency will vary depending on application workload and your hardware and software configurations. Intel's numbering is not a measurement of higher performance. ² Not applicable on products that are "Fanless" or that do not have an accelerometer. Microsoft, Windows, and the Windows Logo are either trademarks or registered trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries. Screens simulated, subject to change; Apps sold separately, availability may vary.

[UPGRADE]

GROUP TEST

By Ed Chester



Z270 MOTHERBOARDS

Lay the foundation of your next gaming PC with one of the latest Z270 motherboards

Q&A

How much should I spend?

If you're not fussed about overclocking don't spend much more than £200. Already have a great soundcard and lots of USB hubs? Drop that to under £175. Don't care much about looks? Head below £150.

Is onboard audio worth it?

The pricier options are better, but if you're really concerned about audio quality you should get a separate soundcard.

What about overclocking?

All these motherboards

support overclocking of your processor and memory. The flagship Intel Core i7-7700K processor I've tested them with is relatively easy to overclock from 4.5GHz to 5GHz, resulting in close to a 10% performance boost for around a 20% increase in power consumption.

Dictionary

Chipset

Controls communication between the CPU and other features of a motherboard.

PCI-E lanes

The main communication interface for graphics and other expansion cards.

Although existing Z170 motherboards will support Intel's Kaby Lake CPUs, the Z270 chipset brings a couple of new features that make it the better option if you're looking to buy now.

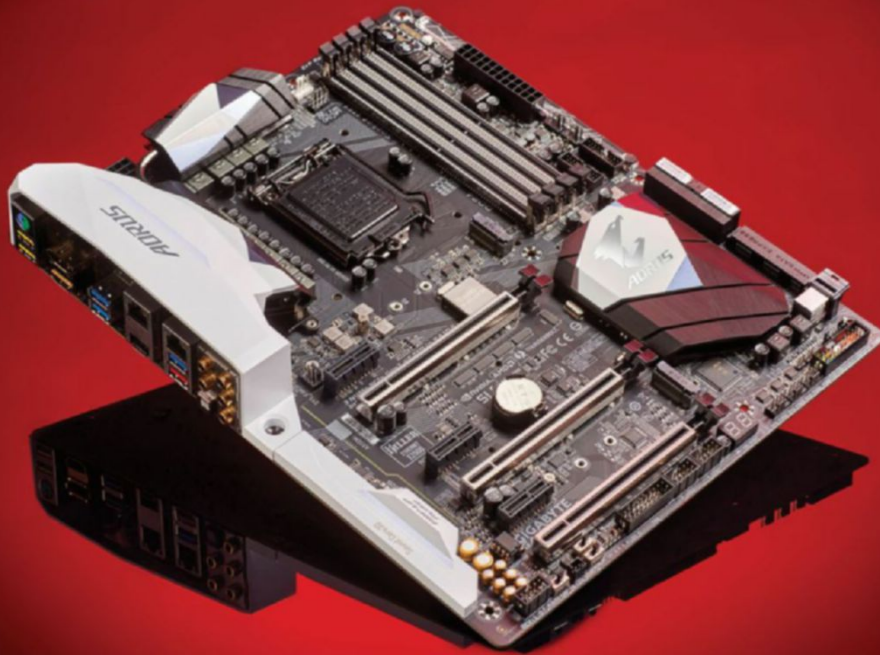
The first is support for 24 PCI-E lanes, up from 20 on the

Z170. This enables multiple 4-lane PCI-E M.2 SSDs, without impacting graphics bandwidth.

There's also better support for new Optane storage technology, enabling it to act as a cross between system memory and long term storage.

I've reviewed seven new Z270 boards on the following pages.





GIGABYTE Z270X-GAMING 7

www.gigabyte.com **£215**

→ This is a fully featured, powerful motherboard that comes with a few quirks but largely delivers. There's certainly little missing in terms of design. A matt PCB? Check. RGB lighting? Check. IO shrouding? Check. Full colour coordination? Check.

1

Not that the result is quite to my liking. It's smart and premium-looking but I prefer the darker shades of the Asus Code. It is packed with features, though. Two M.2 slots, buttons for power, overclocking, eco mode, turbo mode and XMP mode, a POST readout display, excellent hybrid fan headers, strip lighting headers and much more.

Connectivity is also excellent. There are six USB Type-A ports of various sorts, USB Type-C, two gigabit Ethernet ports and quality surround sound.

It's a different story when it comes to the UEFI. It was the only board on test that had a problem with mouse movement. I also struggled with manual overclocking, instead resorting to the quick "upgrade" options, which managed to push the CPU to 4.8GHz but not 5GHz. I'm sure this board could do better but it shouldn't be such a struggle. Also, it had by far the most aggressive non-overclocked settings, bumping the CPU to 1.32V at stock speed, when every other board hovered around 1.2V.

83%

ASROCK Z270 EXTREME4

www.asrock.com **£160**

→ This is one of the cheaper boards in this test but packs plenty of features and performance. Styling isn't its strong suit, but it's a step up from the Pro4 thanks to a matt finish to its PCB, more extensive plastic shrouding and RGB lighting.

2

Something I'm less keen on is the backplate IO, which has just four USB 3.0 ports, no USB type-C and too many legacy video connections – who needs DVI, HDMI and VGA on a board like this?

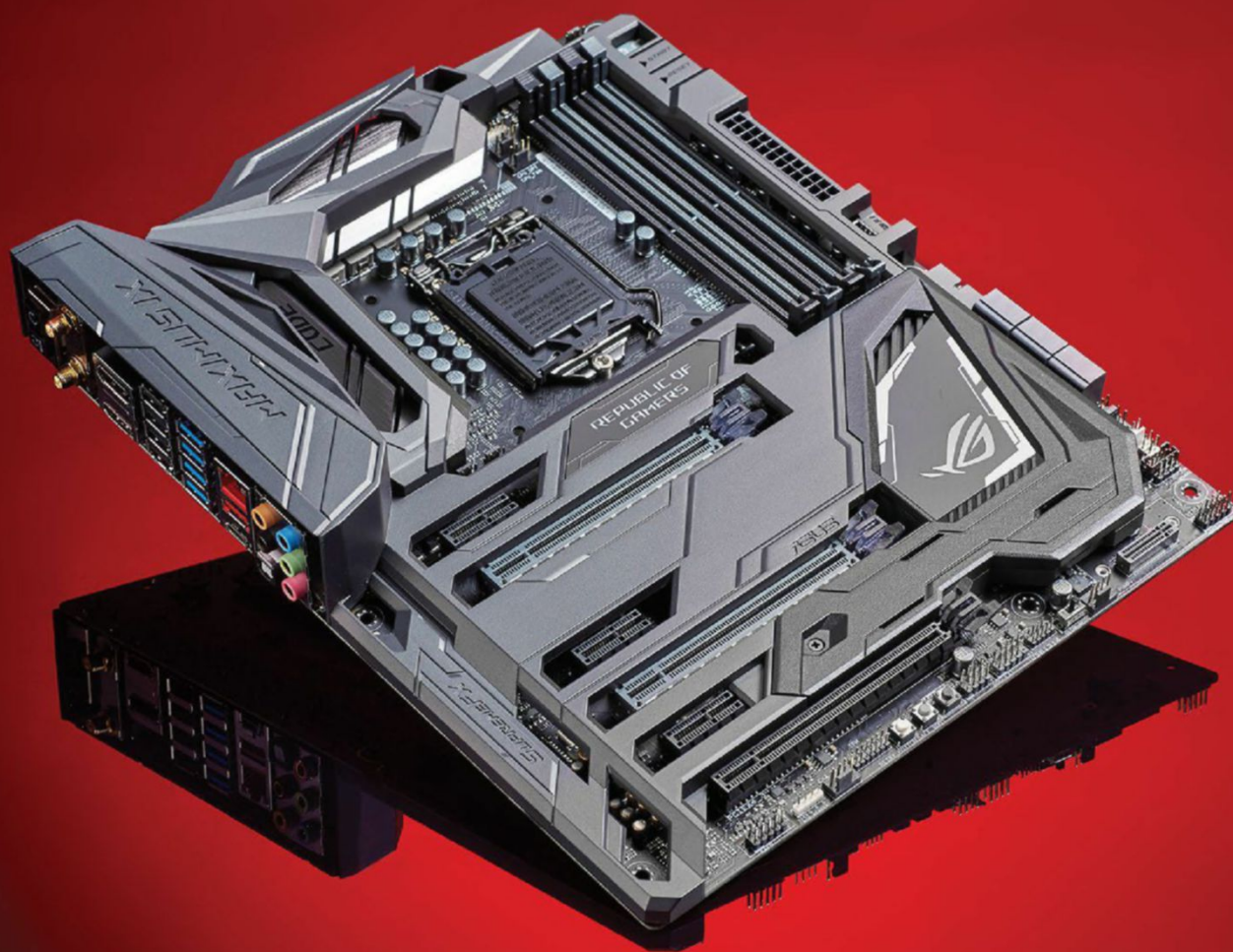
Otherwise the Extreme4 has a good all round selection of features with a layout that's easy to work with. The two M.2 slots are easy to reach while all the fan headers and other connections are conveniently arranged around the edges. Some of the on-PCB labelling of those features is a bit hard to read but you can get by.

What's more, the UEFI of this motherboard is great. It's nothing too fancy but it's logically laid out and easy to get overclocking.

Not that I quite reached my target of 5GHz for overclocking. The CPU wouldn't go beyond 4.9GHz through basic multiplier and Vcore adjustment. It was also quite power hungry once overclocked.

Overall, though, this board offers plenty and is well worth considering, if rear IO isn't your biggest priority.

80%



4

ASROCK Z270 PRO 4

www.asrock.com **£120**

→ This is the cheapest board on test, and in many ways it shows: a shiny finish, lack of cover for the IO, plain silver CPU mount and a lack of lighting. It all adds up to a board that immediately looks less premium than the others.

3

That's not to say it looks bad. The black and white design has its charm and most of the components are colour coordinated. More importantly, this board provides solid performance and overclocking, plus low power consumption.

You also get all the features you should need. Two M.2 SSD slots, an M.2 W-Fi card slot, plenty of connectivity and some basic onboard sound.

The only real stumbling block is the IO panel, which has too many legacy connections and too few USB ports, plus there are no USB 3.1 ports despite the presence of one Type-C connector.

If you're happy with the basic feature set, then the Z270 Pro4 delivers. It demanded the lowest power draw on test while having no problem running my fast RAM.

Its UEFI is also a doddle to navigate, though try as I might I couldn't get the 7700K up to 5GHz. I stuck with 4.8GHz instead, which still delivered performance within 2% of that of the fastest on test.

85%

ASUS MAXIMUS IX CODE

www.asus.com **£290**

→ This is just a couple of steps down from Asus's most expensive Z270 motherboards and as such it's packed with features and performance. The most striking thing about it, however, is that it's covered head to toe in plastic armour.

4

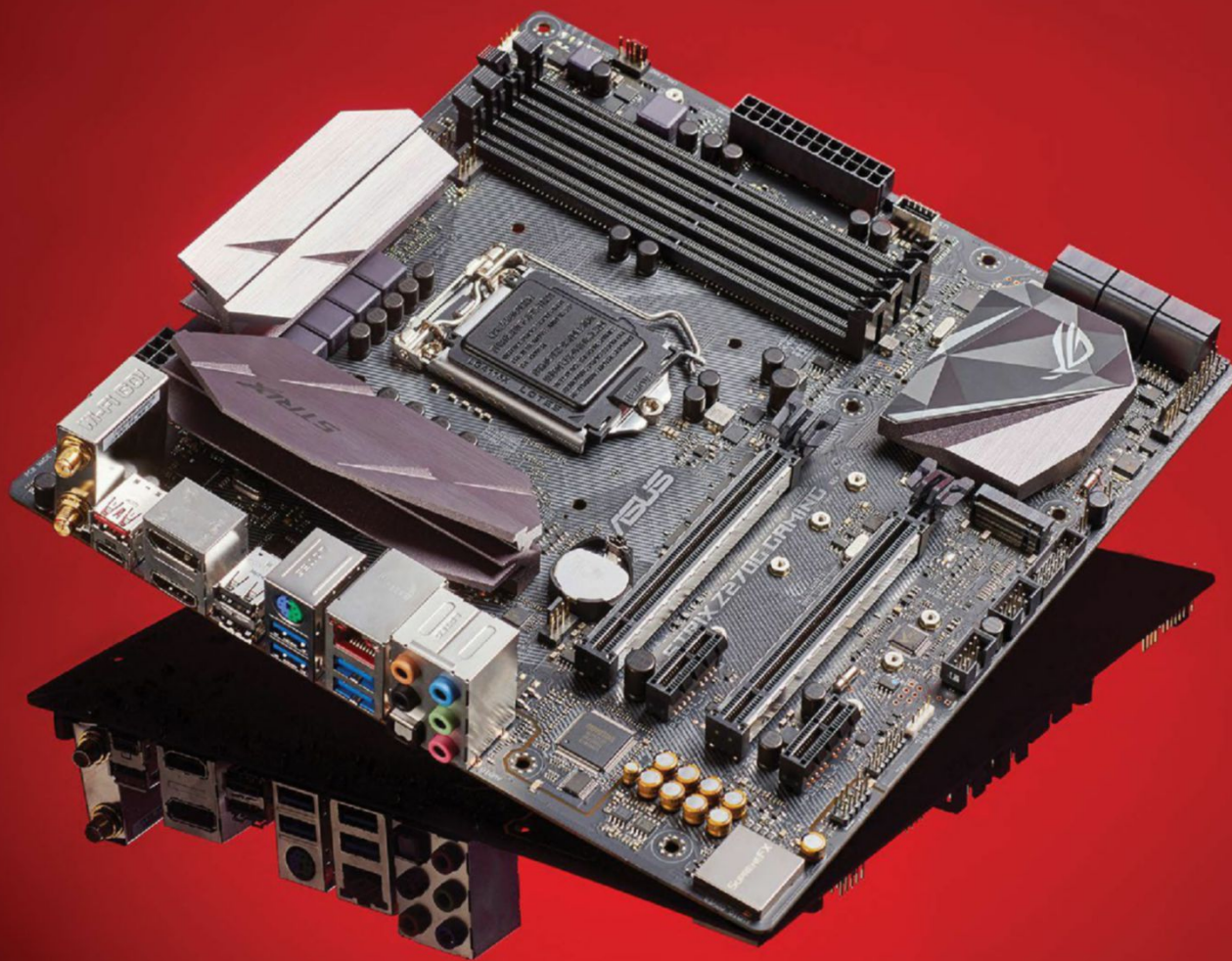
This protects the board and makes it look better too. On the flipside, it can be quite an inconvenience if you drop a screw and get it stuck under that lot.

There are also several RGB-lit zones, including a Republic of Gamers logo in the middle of the board. RGB lighting is getting a little out of hand at the moment but the balance here is about right and it can all be controlled from the desktop software.

It's a top-tier board, so you get masses of features including 2x USB 3.1 and 6x USB 3.0 ports on the backplate, with support for several more via headers. There are also two M.2 SSD slots, though their positioning is far from ideal. You also get top notch audio and inbuilt ac-Wi-Fi.

All this, and extensive overclocking options from a UEFI that's simple and quick to navigate. I couldn't get the memory to hit its XMP-defined 3200MHz top speed but otherwise the board overclocked the 7700K CPU to 5GHz with no problems. Its resultant performance took second place in our charts.

87%



5

ASUS STRIX Z270G GAMING

www.asus.com **£180**

→ This is only a micro-ATX motherboard but it wants for little compared to the big boys. RGB lighting, two M.2 SSD slots (one is on the back), quality audio, plenty of connectivity, it's all here. This is a great-looking board, too.

5

The single RGB Republic of Gamers light on the chipset adds just the right touch of customisation, while there are two headers for further lighting strips so you can fully illuminate your case without the need for any extra wiring.

Talking of headers, there are masses of these for further USB connections, fans and more, and they're all conveniently arranged around the edges of the board and clearly labelled.

It's more good news when it comes to connectivity. You get seven USB Type-A ports as well as a Type-C, plus gigabit Ethernet, ac-Wi-Fi, DisplayPort and HDMI, PS/2 and decent quality audio. The Strix Z270G Gaming doesn't let up when it comes to performance either. It easily keeps up with the larger boards, and you've even got space for a couple of graphics cards.

Overclocking worked well too. I had no problem reaching 5GHz, though I had to run the memory at a slightly slower 3000MHz to get the system to boot.

90%

MSI Z270 GAMING PRO CARBON

www.msi.com **£160**

→ Amusingly, the eponymous carbon fibre flourishes are the least appealing thing about this board's design. Otherwise it's a decent mid-range option with great performance. As the price indicates, some of the more premium touches are missing.

6

You get plastic IO shrouding, chunky colour coordinated heatsinks, a matt black PCB and some RGB lighting. The CPU mount is plain metal, there are no heatpipes to assist cooling, no cover for the audio section and you miss out on a power button.

But back to that carbon. MSI has managed to take the edge off what would've been quite a nice simple, sedate design by plastering all the plastic sections with faux carbon fibre. It's not my thing.

Otherwise there's a lot to like. You've got plenty of connectivity on the backplate, a neat metal cover for your M.2 drives and quality audio. All told, it's a well balanced selection.

What's more, this board had no issues with installation or configuration. Nearly every other one had a moment where a reset was needed or a setting-change failed. Here, it just worked.

The same was true when it came to overclocking. I dialed in 5GHz and 1.34V and away it went, and the resulting performance was class-leading.

88%



6



7

MSI Z270 GAMING M5

www.msi.com **£185**

→ The MSI Z270 Gaming M5 is, on paper, very similar to the Gaming Pro Carbon, but what a difference a little bit of design makes. It gets just the right balance of muted colours, little extras and that obligatory RGB lighting.

7

Dig a little deeper, and you don't find much extra for the price difference. A U.2 slot adds extra SSD support but it's a very niche feature. You also get a POST readout. You miss out on the raft of extras on more expensive models, such as power and overclocking buttons. You don't even get labelling for the front panel headers, leaving you to read the manual to know which cable to plug in where.

Otherwise there are few slip ups. The layout is tidy and intuitive and the M.2 shield a nice extra. When it comes to performance the Gaming M5 just pipped the Carbon in its default config, though it consumed slightly more power in the process.

As for overclocking, for some reason I couldn't push past 4.9GHz, even with quite a bit of extra voltage. It remained rock solid at 4.9GHz at 1.34V, though, and the resulting performance was within one percent of the Carbon.

This is a good board, but it doesn't excite as much as more expensive ones, nor is it a bargain.

80%

STACKED UP

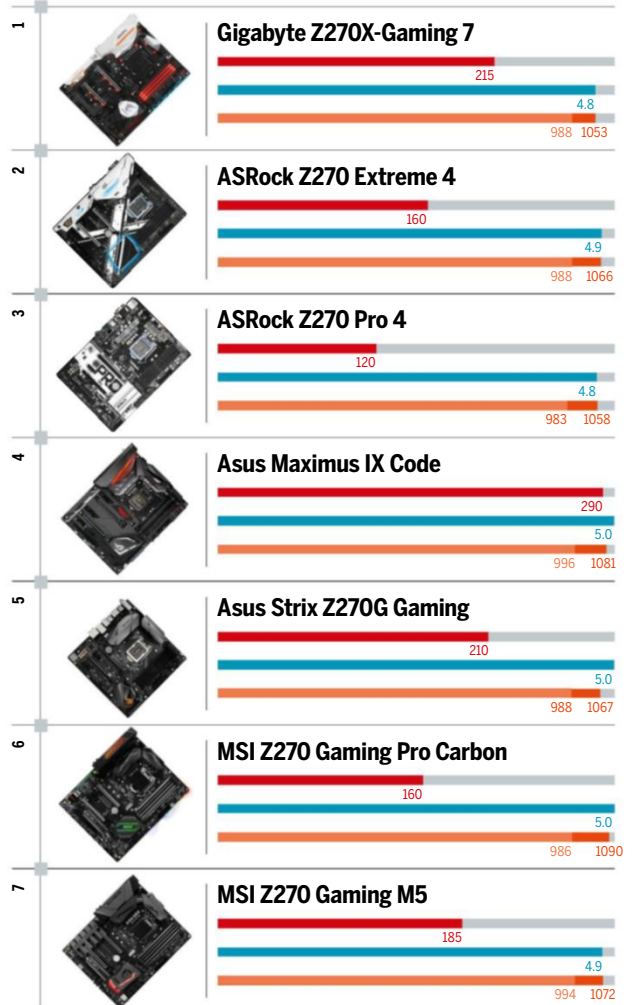
PRICE (£)

OVERCLOCK (GHz)

CINEBENCH R15 (points)

Not overclocked

Overclocked



ESSENTIALS

| | Form Factor | USB Type A | USB Type C | Wi-Fi | Surround Sound |
|---|-------------|------------|------------|-------|----------------|
| 1 | ATX | 6 | 1 | No | Yes |
| 2 | ATX | 5 | 1 | No | Yes |
| 3 | ATX | 5 | 1 | No | No |
| 4 | ATX | 9 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| 5 | mATX | 7 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| 6 | ATX | 7 | 1 | No | Yes |
| 7 | ATX | 5 | 1 | No | Yes |

[UPGRADE]

REVIEWS

The very best in gaming hardware, reviewed

By Zak Storey



1 DUAL PSU

The X21 is another one of those monster notebooks, requiring two dedicated power supplies to function at maximum performance.

2 TOBII TROUBLE

An interesting glimpse of the future, but Tobii eye tracking doesn't support SLI, so it's limiting in games.

3 COOLING

Impressively quiet, and steadily cool, the X21 comes with five fans and multiple pipes to transfer all that troublesome extra heat away from the chassis.

4 PORTABLE?

Whether the X21 is truly portable is debatable, but it does come in a reinforced, super-padded case to protect it on its travels.

ACER PREDATOR X21

www.acer.com £8,000 (approx)

GAMING LAPTOP

→ Just let that pricetag sink in for a second. £8,000. That's a horrendous sum of money. Beyond anything I've ever witnessed for a single product in the PC gaming industry. Is it justifiable? To some, maybe. To the majority, likely not.

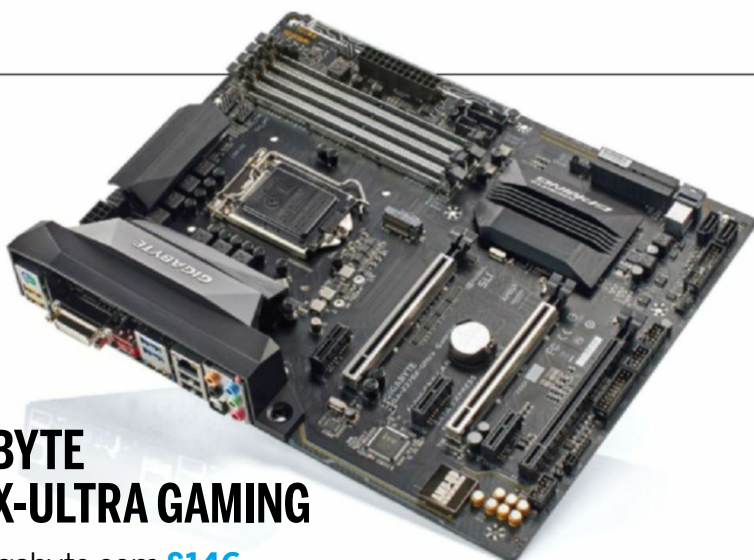
Acer's Predator X21 comes with the world's first 21:9 super-wide curved screen, featuring an impressive 2560x1080 IPS panel. There's a quad core Kaby processor, dual GTX 1080s, 64GB of DDR4, two Samsung PCIe SSDs in RAID 0, and many other additions including a full sized mechanical keyboard, and Tobii eye tracking.

You could build a desktop PC with the same specs, including screen, peripherals and speakers, for a little over £4,400. The X21 is designed with a very particular audience in mind: those ever-travelling esports gamers.

Performance is quite a mixed bag. In CineBench R15 the X21's i7-7820HK produced scores 200 points below the i7-7700K, and in Firestrike Extreme a score of 8,617 – which is just under half of what I expected. I'm going to chalk this up to it being a preproduction sample, but still. There's no doubt Acer's achieved something incredible here, but it's not refined enough for that price.

74%

SCREEN: 21:9, 2560x1080 IPS, G-SYNC AND TOBII EYE TRACKING / CPU: INTEL CORE I7-7820HK @ 4.3GHZ / MEMORY: 64GB DDR4 / GRAPHICS: 2X GTX 1080 / STORAGE: 2X 256GB SAMSUNG PCIE SSD IN RAID 0, +2TB HDD



GIGABYTE Z270X-ULTRA GAMING

www.gigabyte.com **£146**

MOBO

→ Motherboard performance tends to vary little between the lowliest all the way up to the most expensive overclocking specialist. Most of the time it comes down to how well you fared in the silicon lottery.

The feature set is king. Nowhere is this more apparent than here. With premium construction, LED lighting, and a whole arsenal of connectivity options, you'd be fooled into thinking this is easily a £200+ board. In testing it outshone everything I've tested so far, in benchmarks that should otherwise be near identical. This comes down to the 1.3-1.35

voltage the Z270X applies to the CPU. It raises the temps slightly, but also boosts stability and allows Gigabyte to optimise the processor.

CHIPSET/SOCKET: Z270 / LGA1151 / **FORM FACTOR:** ATX / **MEMORY SUPPORT:** 32GB DDR4 @3866 / **M.2/U.2 SUPPORT:**

1X M.2, 1X U.2 / **SATA SUPPORT:** 6X SATA 6GB/S, 2X SATA EXPRESS / **REAR I/O:** 2X USB 2.0, 5X USB 3.1 TYPE A, 1X USB 3.1 TYPE C, INTEL GIGABIT ETHERNET, 5.1 AUDIO, SPDIF OUT, COMBI PORT, HDMI & DVI-I

94%

VIEWSONIC XG2703-GS

www.viewsoniceurope.com

£694

MONITOR

→ Over the last year the PC gaming community has been inundated with this new popular high-end monitor spec. IPS, 4MS G2G, 165Hz, G-Sync, 27 inches and 1440p. Viewsonic, AOC, Acer and Asus all sport variants of this model.

The 27-inch screen size combined with that 2560x1440 resolution provides the right balance between pixel density and graphics card load. Add a relatively aggressive pixel response time, fantastic colour reproduction and G-Sync, and you're onto a winner.

The problem is that AOC currently offers its AG271QG at

an astonishingly low £550, for the same spec. The only difference is a slightly altered chassis. Ultimately if you're in the market for a screen of this spec, it comes down to brand loyalty, and what you're willing to pay.

SCREEN SIZE: 27" / **PANEL TECH:** IPS / **NATIVE**

RESOLUTION: 2560X1440 / **REFRESH RATE:** 165HZ / **RESPONSE RATE:** 4MS GTG / **CONNECTIONS:** 1X HDMI 1.4, 1X DISPLAYPORT 1.2A

82%



ROUND-UP



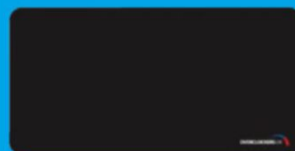
SP120 RGB

Corsair **£53** (Three pack + controller)

→ Corsair's SP120 series fans are a happy medium between the HD Pros and the more basic ML variants. Featuring smooth LED lighting and stellar performance they bring the bling while keeping your system cool.

www.corsair.com

87%



MEGA MAT XXL PREMIUM ELITE TACTICAL

OcUK **£22**

→ It's rare I go out of my way to compliment a mousemat. However, OcUK really nailed it on this one. This neoprene surface comes in a massive 89x45cm, perfect for any large desk, and with stitched edging. Great for any large desktop, and available at a decent price.

www.overclockers.co.uk

85%



XEK-VARDAR F1-120 (1150RPM)

EKWB **£14**

→ What if you just want a fan that does the job, and does it well? EKWB's Vardar may fit the bill. Perfect for radiators, these high pressure fans are ideally placed in a fully liquid cooled build, quiet as the grave. However you may want to chunk out for the 1650 version if using an AIO.

www.ekwb.com

92%

PROMOTION

OMEN Desktop Towers by HP



OMEN by 

Dominate with the Omen Desktop Towers

OMEN DESKTOP TOWERS – performance for serious gamers

→ The OMEN by HP range of gaming PCs is perfect for serious gamers – those who care about getting the absolute best out of their rig that they can. The Omen X and Notebook range cover a couple of aspects of this family, while the Omen Tower caters for the hardcore gamer who is a little more cautious about what they spend their hard-earned cash on.

FIND OUT MORE

ONLINE
hp.com/go/omenbyhp

TWITTER
@OMENbyHP

HASHTAG
#DominateTheGame

Built on a legacy of high-end gaming PCs, Omen has the DNA of the Voodoo PC brand coursing through its electronic veins. Or 'hardware', if you will. There's heritage behind what is otherwise a new range of gaming PCs, and that's something we know is important to gamers.

The Omen Tower is for the PC gamer looking for performance – those looking to take their gaming more seriously, but who are looking to top out their spending at around £2,000. If you still care about gaming as a lifestyle rather than a hobby, and want to spend hours practising your techniques and improving to become the very best – but at a lower cost than with the flagship Omen X – you're covered with the Omen Desktop Tower range.

Packed to the gills with high-spec hardware, whether you're looking at Intel Core i5 or i7 (7th gen CPUs), your Omen Desktop Tower will always keep up with whatever you throw at it. Backed up with GPUs up to the Nvidia GTX 1080 or AMD RX 480, as well as up to 32GB RAM, easy overclocking, optional liquid cooling, support for up to four monitors (at 4K in some specifications), VR ready, with at least one SSD for super-fast loading... basically you're set, whichever one you go for.

The fact that this is a tower system means you aren't just left with what you initially pick up – over the years you'll be able to tinker with and upgrade your system too, as we all love doing. Tool-less access to the hardware means you're able to get inside even without your screwdriver kit to hand, leaving you more able to take advantage of the addictive customisability of the Omen Desktop Tower range. Although be warned: any further tinkering could require a trip to your garden shed to find the appropriate tools.

That's not going to be an issue, though, because the Omen Desktop Tower range is already crafted to look the part. Nobody wants an ugly tower clogging up their gaming space. With a sleek, brushed metal chassis and customisable LED

lighting, the Omen Towers strike the perfect balance of sophisticated looks and raw, gaming attitude. But in the good, pretty way – not that garish way you often see in gaming machines.

The Omen Desktop Towers are a gateway to gaming in the best sense, enabling you to stop worrying about performance and anything impacted by less-than-stellar hardware. You can focus

entirely on what matters to you – the game. And you can do so without breaking the bank.

Find out more about the Omen Desktop Tower range, including how to buy one, on the official site at hp.com/go/omenbyhp – and check out HP and Omen's social media presence @HPUK / @OMENBYHP to keep on top of what's happening in the world of PC gaming's greatest range of machines. #DominateTheGame with Omen by HP. ■

THE OMEN DESKTOP TOWERS ARE A GATEWAY TO GAMING IN THE BEST SENSE



CUTTING EDGE DESIGN

The Omen Desktop Towers feature customisable LED lights that can change depending on your processing demands.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

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



BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL
£902

MOTHERBOARD



H270M Bazooka

MSI **£90**

Kaby Lake has landed and the 270 series chipsets with it. MSI's Bazooka H270M is a perfect fit for our new CPU.

PROCESSOR

NEW ENTRY



Pentium G4600

Intel **£83**

Two cores, four threads and a lot of single core IPC performance. This core performs just as well as an i7-7700K in games.

GRAPHICS CARD



RX 480 G1 Gaming 4GB

Gigabyte **£181**

The RX 480 is still our budget GPU of choice, making quick work of the vast majority of games at 1080p.

MEMORY



Fury Black 8GB @2400

HyperX **£59**

DDR4 packs higher speeds, better energy efficiency, and larger capacities. 8GB is still perfect for most games, too.

POWER SUPPLY



EVGA 500W 80PLUS Certified ATX12V/EPS12V

EVGA **£52**

A reliable PSU with enough juice to run your CPU and a reasonably power-hungry GPU.

SSD

NEW ENTRY



CS1311 120GB SSD

PNY **£40**

It's a budget offering, but for £40 and with sequential reads and writes of 550 and 520MB/s, it's hard to argue with.

HDD

NEW ENTRY



Caviar Blue 1TB 7200rpm

Western Digital **£43**

One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and AAA titles.

CASE



Nova

Bitfenix **£30**

Not the fanciest of cases, but for £30 you can't go wrong. There's even room for a 120mm AIO cooler inside.

DISPLAY



VS247HR 60Hz 1080p

Asus **£110**

1080p resolution, 60fps – it's a monitor made for PC gamers. Coupled with the RX 480, playing on this will be silky smooth.

KEYBOARD



Alloy FPS

HyperX **£99**

One of our favourite keyboards this year. A compact design coupled with lovely clicky Cherry MX Blue switches.

MOUSE



Rival 100

SteelSeries **£40**

SteelSeries' Rival lineup is ideal for those looking to get a quality gaming mouse at a respectable price.

HEADSET



HyperX Cloud

Kingston **£50**

Our favourite gaming headset, and it happens to be as cheap as plenty of inferior cans. A good buy for any gaming rig.

CONTROLLER



Xbox 360 Wired Controller

Microsoft **£25**

The king of controllers, and cheap at the price. When you're button-mashing, this USB device won't let you down.



MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
£1,645

MOTHERBOARD



Z270-A Pro

MSI **£112**

Despite the low price, the Z270-A Pro supports a single M.2 PCIe SSD, and memory with frequencies up to 3800 MT/s.

PROCESSOR



Core i5-7600K

Intel **£220**

Only a five percent incremental increase in performance on Skylake, but if you haven't upgraded in a while, now might be the time.

GRAPHICS CARD



GTX 1070 8GB Dual

Asus **£390**

Exceedingly powerful, this 1440p gaming GPU will keep your framerates high in all the latest AAA titles.

COOLER



Kraken X31

NZXT **£70**

To get the most out of a good CPU you need a cooler to match. The Kraken X31 is powerful, quiet and great for overlocks.

MEMORY



Savage Black 16GB @2400 MHz CAS 12

HyperX **£120**

Thanks to insanely low timings, these two 8GB sticks of DDR4 are more than enough.

POWER SUPPLY



RMx 650W

Corsair **£89**

Nothing like having a quality power supply. Get a decent cable kit for this one and you can easily spice up your rig.

SSD



850 EVO 250GB

Samsung **£89**

Samsung retains its top spot on the SSD pile with the fantastically priced, very speedy 850 EVO. Still the best price/performance.

HDD



Caviar Blue 1TB 7200RPM

Western Digital **£43**

SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you can handle.

CASE



Carbide 270R

Corsair **£63**

That sleek front panel coupled with a multitude of building features, including a PSU cover, makes this case a no-brainer.

DISPLAY



Q2778VQE

AOC **£208**

This entry-level 1440p monitor is perfect for those looking to upgrade from 1080p. It's cheap and still looks sleek.

KEYBOARD



K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£148**

Available in red, brown or blue switches, with a USB passthrough and all the features we loved the original K70 for. Almost perfect.

MOUSE



Deathadder 2013

Razer **£43**

There's not a huge range of price differences on great gaming mice, so go with the best for your mid-range build.

HEADSET



HyperX Cloud

Kingston **£50**

Even for our medium build, we still recommend this decently-priced headset. There's nothing better for the money.



ADVANCED BUILD

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

TOTAL
£3,520

MOTHERBOARD



Z270 Gaming M5

MSI **£185**

Both the M5 and M7 in MSI's latest gaming series look stunning and offer an expansive feature set. A solid purchase either way.

PROCESSOR



Core i7-7700K

Intel **£318**

Four cores, eight threads and the ability to turbo up to 4.5GHz make this CPU more than capable of gaming at the top of the range.

GRAPHICS CARD



GTX 1080 FTW Gaming ACX 3.0

EVGA **£633**

Slightly overclocked out of the box, cool and quiet – features that make this the perfect high-end 1440p and 4K killer.

COOLER



Kraken X62

NZXT **£144**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



Savage Black (4x8GB) 32GB @2666

HyperX **£236**

Take advantage of that CPU with some serious memory. 32GB of DDR4 should do it.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£134**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



960 Evo 250GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **£121**

A cost-effective OS drive delivering sequential read and write speeds of 3200MB/s and 1500MB/s respectively.

SSD 2



850 Evo 1TB

Samsung **£276**

Say goodbye to those slow old hard drives with this almost affordable 1TB SSD, perfect for all your games and media.

CASE



909

In Win **£330**

Composed of tempered glass and an aluminium chassis, this architectural feat tips system building on its head.

DISPLAY



PG279Q ROG Swift G-Sync

Asus **£700**

165Hz, IPS, G-Sync, 27 inches of pure perfection. Don't let the price put you off, for the money this is a dream come true.

KEYBOARD



K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£148**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



Rival 700

SteelSeries **£70**

Swappable sensors, back plates, 3D printed rear guards and an OLED display. The most comfortable, adaptive mouse we've used.

HEADSET



Siberia 800

SteelSeries **£225**

Our favourite wireless gaming headset, with great sound quality and a convenient battery swapping system for long gaming sessions.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"Don't worry, boy, we'll both be dead in less than a day."



“Could this actually be the saddest game ever created?”

Enjoying pretty-looking misery in **THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD**

It's day one of Scout's journey up the river with her dog, Aesop, and she's just been mauled to death by wolves in a forest after her raft got battered by rocks. I'm starting again.

While the colourful presentation of *The Flame in the Flood* and the presence of a dog suggest a warm journey across a flooded United States, it's actually one of the cruellest survival games I've played. There is a campaign mode with a presumably happy ending at the other end of the river, but reaching it requires hours of horrible deaths. Scout can die of starvation, thirst, cold, drowning, excessive bleeding or being mauled by animals. And these are just the ones I know about. It's as if *The Road* had loads of alternate endings, including one where Viggo Mortensen got battered to death by a bear for trying to craft penicillin.

SAMUEL ROBERTS



THIS MONTH
Took a raft upstream into certain death.

ALSO PLAYED
Resident Evil 7, Red Alert 2

On my second run, I learn my lesson: avoid wolves. *The Flame in the Flood* is broken into islands, each with a different icon indicating what you'll find there: shelter, a place to refuel and so on. My mistake was stopping at a wilderness icon. This is where you'll usually find wild animals, which you can't fight off unless you've crafted traps to keep them at bay. I try to stay out of their way.

The first island is fine. I find edible flowers and corn, and sleep in the back of a school bus. I leave and drift down the river some more, stopping at a settlement where I gather some

mulberries, which don't satisfy much of Scout's appetite but are better than nothing. Another island turns up a little way down the river, this time with rabbits scampering in and out of holes. Since I don't have the parts to set traps, I sadly leave the bunnies to their natural habitat and continue searching the island. I'd have cooked their asses in a second if I had the chance. Me and Aesop could've had a feast.

DON'T STARVE

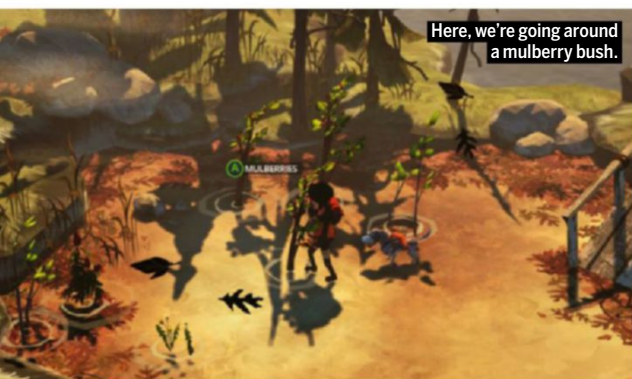
I find something called a mouldy lump in a crate. It doesn't sound too appetising, but it does keep hunger at bay. I'm carrying three, it turns out, so I decide to



UNFORTUNATELY THIS GIVES SCOUT PARASITES, AND HER HUNGER BAR STARTS DETERIORATING QUICKLY



Exploring is enjoyable, but I do fear every island.

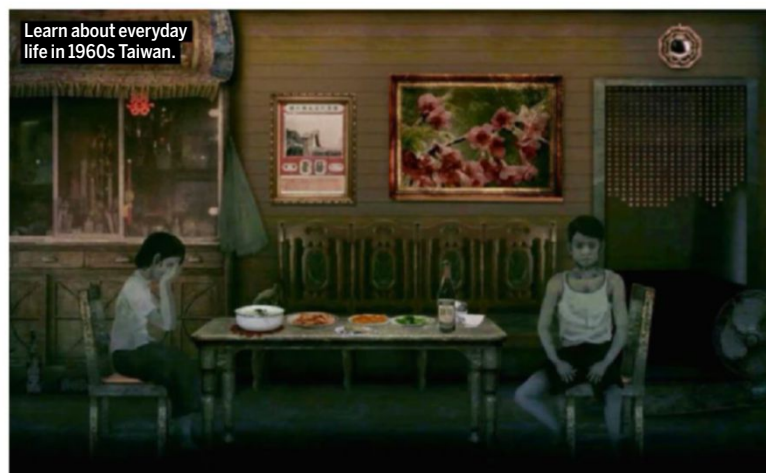


Here, we're going around a mulberry bush.

eat all of them. Unfortunately, this gives Scout parasites, and her hunger bar starts deteriorating quickly. I get back on the boat and panic slightly. I stop at the next island in the hope of finding food, but I've made a fundamental error – this is another wilderness stop. Aesop barks to indicate he's found some corn, and I get Scout to eat it quickly, but the parasites make her hungry again instantly. A hog suddenly jumps out and attacks, breaking one of Scout's bones. I scramble back on the boat, and reach another settlement. There are some scraps of food here but it's too late. Those parasites are fast.

Rather than watch Scout slowly starve, I decide to let her sleep through her hunger in a small nearby house. She dies in the middle of nowhere with just her dog for company. Crikey hell, how bleak is that? Imagine this was a film about a girl and her dog, where she sails to four islands in search of life then dies from eating some mouldy food out of desperation. I'm surprised they don't just go the whole hog (so to speak) and show Aesop munching on your rotting corpse because he's starving too.

I cheer myself up by eating a sandwich in real life, which is delicious. Could *The Flame in the Flood* be the saddest game ever? Back to *Stardew Valley*, I think, where the animals work for me rather than against me. ■



Learn about everyday life in 1960s Taiwan.

“It tries to unnerve rather than terrify”

DETENTION is a moody, beautiful indie horror game

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Held his breath and wondered where everyone went.

ALSO PLAYED
Owlboy, *Conan Exiles*

A boy falls asleep in class, and wakes to find the class empty and the school haunted by strange creatures. As far as hooks for a horror game go, that's pretty good. *Detention* is a point-and-click adventure developed by a small team based in Taiwan. It's set there in the 1960s, when the country was under martial law, an episode I don't think a game has touched before. The localisation does a good job of explaining some of the more obscure references, but really this is just a good old-fashioned ghost story with a sinister, subdued atmosphere.

You can't fight the creatures. To get past them you have to hold your breath, but can only do so for a limited time. Hold it too early and you might exhale right next to an enemy, often a deadly mistake. But it's the puzzles that really test you, recalling the obscure riddles from early survival horror games—particularly the first *Silent Hill*. The boy teams up with a partner and the pair desperately try to figure out where everyone is, why the river outside the school is running red with blood, and why the only bridge out of the grounds has been mysteriously destroyed.

The hand-drawn backgrounds and characters are beautiful, similar to the work of Japanese horror master Junji Ito. There's an understated elegance to them, and it's remarkable how much atmosphere the artists have managed to squeeze into a 2D plane. After a slow-burning first hour, things begin to get much weirder. Disturbing imagery, a haunting Akira Yamaoka-inspired soundtrack, and a rumbling sense of unease make it a disarmingly powerful horror experience. There are few, if any, jump scares, which is refreshing. It tries to unnerve rather than outright terrify.

SCHOOL'S OUT

Detention was released without much fanfare, but word has been spreading ever since, and the game currently boasts an “overwhelmingly positive” user rating on Steam – and for good reason. It's a fairly standard point-and-click adventure, but it does wonderful things with atmosphere, tension, pacing, and world-building. And of the many horror games I've played over the years, this is the first in a while to channel the distinctive feel of the early *Silent Hill* games. ■



A river suddenly turning blood red is rarely a good sign.



I got down on the dance floor a little too hard.



I'm never leaving my house again.



“I rally the party with a pep talk and some dance emotes”

Punching a series Eikon in **FINAL FANTASY XIV**

On the rare occasions I leave my ridiculous Paissa-shaped house I like to go all out. Frankly, doing fetch quests for Moogles or checking out yet another dungeon isn't worth stepping out of the door for. Thankfully, after making friends with some sky pirates a few months back they've started inviting me to their raves... I mean raids.

Their latest venue is this ancient city, Dun Scaith, which you can only reach by airship. Only the coolest adventurers can join the party and rub shoulders with the likes of Mrs Boombastic (yes, really). No matter how tight the guest list, there are always a few party crashers who just want to start trouble, but it's not often you find an old demonic nemesis and *Final Fantasy* series celebrity as the instigator of it all.

Diablos' classic devil design look is so iconic it's barely changed since his first appearance in *FFVIII*. He's also a major character in *FFXIV* lore – summoned by one ancient civilisation to destroy another and sealed away for thousands of years before being found again. Being the King of voidsent demons he's also got some serious anger issues and would like nothing more than to ruin all of civilisation as we know it.

▶ **DANIELLA LUCAS**



THIS MONTH
Left house, thwarted evil.

ALSO PLAYED
Stardew Valley, Tales of Berseria

After beating him up back in Amdapor, then kicking him out of that raid in Void Ark, he's not a very happy chappy. He's also brought along his mates who are hopped up on void magic and spoiling for a fight. There's the weird, big friend who wears a sheet and attacks your ship straight away, his best bud Ferdiad who reckons he's a bit of a clown, his feisty girlfriend's mate who wants to gouge your eyes out, and finally, his missus who is the toughest of the lot and a bit of exhibitionist.

After taking out all that trash and making a few mistakes everyone is on a downer and people start squabbling among themselves. Nerves are frayed, frustrations bubble to the surface, and

healers are blamed – it's not feeling like a very good party any more. Finally that prick Diablos reveals himself and starts gloating about what a hard man he is, and after taking all those beatings to get this far he certainly feels like one.

But something snaps. It's time to put Diablos in his place and show him *I'm* the final boss in this scenario, not him. I rally the party with a pep talk and some dance emotes – it's time for the final push. We've got this.

DIABOLLOCKS

The fight is long and hard, and at one point there's a bit of argy-bargy with his giant balls (ahem). It takes a lot of effort – desperately trying to dodge meteors falling from the sky and giant lasers while trying to land some punches. But something about how dire the situation is stirs up determination in everyone – we *can* do this. Somehow among all the chaos all 24 of us are working together as one. With one final hit he crumbles.

I killed a god and it feels *fantastic*. Best. Raid. Ever. That sense of accomplishment of so many people coming together to take down a giant of the *Final Fantasy* series in such a hard-fought battle is unparalleled. It's been the best night out in Eorzea an adventurer could have. Maybe I should get out of the house more often. ■

IT'S TIME TO PUT DIABLOS IN HIS PLACE AND SHOW HIM *I'M* THE FINAL BOSS IN THIS SCENARIO

“They say you can’t put a price on life, but here it’s a bargain”

Counting down the hours in **THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE**

I'm only 32. Based on average life expectancy, I'll be alive for another 433,620 hours. I can afford to waste some of them playing an MMO. But which one?

I pick *The Elder Scrolls Online*. I last played in the beta, and didn't enjoy it at all, but I've heard it's improved. I create a character aligned with the Aldmeri Dominion, and rush through the tutorial – stopping only to speak to John Cleese as he mumbles his way to another VO cheque. Escaping Coldharbour, I'm sent to an island. I run around picking up quests, then run around some more killing and/or collecting the things needed to complete them.

It feels almost *Elder Scrollsy*. Almost. But the similarities are mostly superficial, laid on top of what is unmistakably an MMO. I'm favouring a stealthy ranged build, which is how I play most *Elder Scrolls* games. In *Skyrim*, I'd stalk through caves, using a bow to instantly dispatch bandits or skeletons. In *TESO*, I can't do that. A single, charged up shot only takes off a small percentage of my target's health. Invariably, every fight ends with me spamming arrows and hotbar skills as a group of angry monsters run directly at me. It's not a great combat feeling.

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Ended a virtual life, and 0.0007% of a real one.

ALSO PLAYED
Overwatch, Elite Dangerous

I do the MMO thing of playing for hours despite not enjoying myself. I'm about to quit, then remember I own the *Dark Brotherhood* DLC. The Dark Brotherhood – part cult, part guild – is who I join whenever I'm bored of the main campaign in any *Elder Scrolls* game. It's only fitting that *TESO* should also recreate that experience.

I take a boat to Anvil, where, apropos of nothing, a shady figure suggests I murder an innocent in order to join the Brotherhood. I wasn't aware there was a system in place for killing regular NPCs, but I pick a target – an old woman on the docks – and fire an exploratory arrow at her. She turns hostile, but

doesn't die. One MMO fight later, and I have a messy murder under my belt.

A guard runs up and says that I'll pay for my crime. To be precise, I'll pay 29 gold. They say you can't put a price on life, but here it's a bargain. As I run to the Dark Brotherhood's lighthouse HQ, I pass more players stalking victims along the dock. Why do the NPCs keep coming here? I get that the Brotherhood is a local employer, but this seems like a counterproductive way to stimulate the local economy.

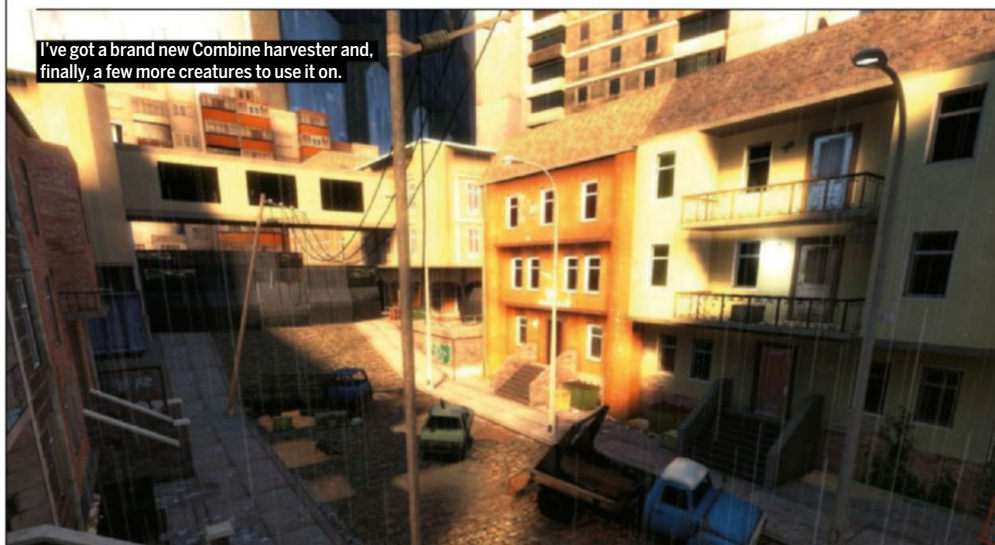
The Brotherhood wants me to kill some jerk in a mansion. To help, they give me the Blade of Woe, a special ability that instantly kills an enemy if I sneak up to them undetected. Suddenly, the game feels transformed. Having an instant kill option turns combat into a thing only necessary when you make a mistake – an appropriate punishment, albeit hampered by still-awkward stealth. Still, it's the most fun I've had in *TESO*, and, as I dispatch my target after creeping through his huge mansion, I feel a sense of achievement that's been missing from previous quests.

Is it good enough to keep me playing *TESO*? Not quite. I'm down to around 433,615 hours. I think I'll waste them somewhere else. ■

I PICK A TARGET – AN OLD WOMAN ON THE DOCKS – AND FIRE AN EXPLORATORY ARROW AT HER



I've got a brand new Combine harvester and, finally, a few more creatures to use it on.



1 MEGA CITY ONE

MOD A new, alternate-universe Gordon adventure

So Gordon Freeman has left early retirement, collected his gravity gun from the shed (it needed a going over with a wet wipe), and embarked on another adventure in Combine Country. *Mega City One* is a pretty sizeable mod based on an entry to the Source engine mapping tournament, The Hammer Cup. Its creator, Crowbar, has since revisited, expanded and otherwise improved his work, integrating it into a singular story set in an alternate timeline.

The difficulty has been rebalanced for *Mega City One*, and yep, 'rebalanced' is a euphemism here for 'made much harder'. *Half-Life 2*'s hardier enemies have migrated to the early sections of this three-hour-long journey, while your rusty first-person platforming skills will be put to the test as well. Inspired by the 2012 film *Dredd*, by *Resident Evil* and also by *Tomb Raider* somehow, the wide-ranging *Mega City One* takes you from old ruins and temples, through to mansions and little villages, and eventually to the imposing city environment that gives the mod its title. That last part is where the *Dredd* influence comes in most strongly, as you climb a gigantic tower in search of a lost Xen crystal.

That shiny gem is needed by the Combine so that they can complete the next phase of their Earth invasion, and if you're familiar with *Half-Life 2*, you'll know that would be a bad thing for all involved (except, perhaps, for Dr Breen). If you're still waiting for *Half-Life 2: Episode Three*, then first of all, please exhale, and then maybe after that give this *Mega City* a visit.



DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/MegaCityOne

2

LUDUM DARE

FREEWARE A room with a view

The theme of the latest Ludum Dare game jam was simply "one room". And even though the developers only had a weekend to put something together, the result was plenty of games that did wonderful things with such a wide-ranging brief. Here are some of the smartest of the entries: the ones that turn that one room into something special.



WALKIE TALKIE

This innovative game is part platformer and part chat room. You leave messages in an online forum, before taking control of a little character and running and jumping atop the typed missives themselves.

www.bit.ly/Ludum1



THE LAST ROOM

You wake up in a room that's doing its best to murder you, but handily you can restart, and restart again, retrying as many times as necessary to Groundhog Day your way to eventual success.

www.bit.ly/Ludum2



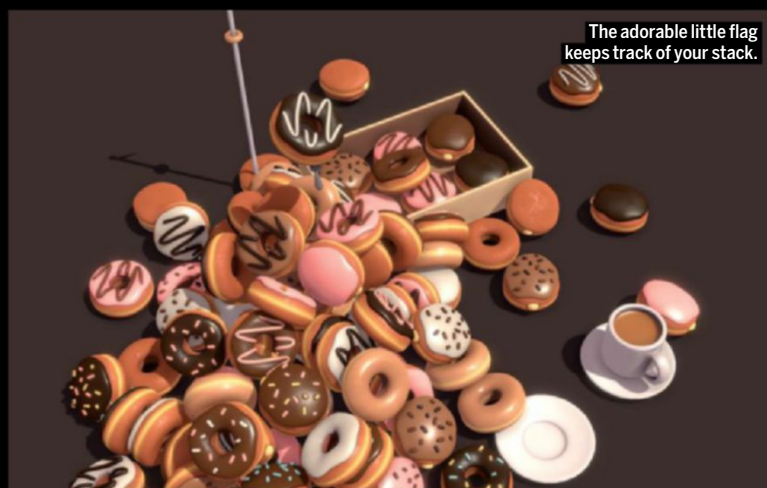
NEST

After walking around a simple maze in *Nest*, you're asked to do it again, this time by controlling a character *inside* a screen (see above). Things only get more complicated from there.

www.bit.ly/Ludum3

3 DONUT WRANGLER

FREEWARE Play with your food in this tasty freebie



The lip-smacking *Donut Wrangler* features the most realistic dough-based treats I've seen in a game – don't be surprised if you feel the urge to pop down to Krispy Kreme after you've played it. The cups of tea, also, look good enough to drink, and please excuse me for a moment while I stick the kettle on.

So what is donut-wrangling, exactly? It's the act of stabbing a bunch of doughy rings with a tiny metal fork, before piling the sugary cakes as high as you're able. In this physics-enabled puzzler, you *are* that fork, which means that to achieve an impressively teetering mound of treats you have to hop around in a slightly cumbersome fashion. That control awkwardness feels appropriate given the weight and momentum of the physics engine, however, and there's a lot of comedy value to be had as you compile your ungainly totem of tasty rings. Music and sound effects would have livened up the experience, but it's a delicious enough game even without them.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/DonutWrangler

4 RAFT

DEMO You're gonna need a bigger boat

Raft is a little different from the other first-person survival games clogging Early Access on Steam. It's not on Steam, for one thing, while the setting is a breath of salty fresh air. It takes place on, you guessed it, a raft in the ocean, patrolled by sharks and with little hope of escape. It's a bad situation, all told, but you're able to make the most of it thanks to your handy grappling

hook, and the piles of debris that frequently float by your makeshift ship.

You can reel in bits and bobs to extend your raft, to craft cooking utensils, fishing rods and other essential tools. Before long, you've built a home. By ditching the exploration element, *Raft* has revitalised a floundering genre. And, best of all, it's currently free.

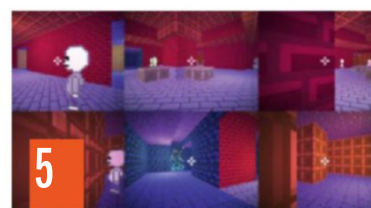
DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/RaftSurvive



A JAWS As in *Minecraft*, your creations will regularly be attacked by the local wildlife, which in this instance means a scary, bitey shark.

B CASTAWAY The community has been making some crazy impressive rafts, with multiple levels, trees, and nets to gather the sea's bounty.

C THIRSTY WORK Water, water everywhere, and thankfully it's also possible to drink the stuff with the aid of your handy portable stove.



5 10,000 AND YOU

FREEWARE Featuring more screens than a CCTV room

There's a big problem with split-screen multiplayer games: it's all too easy to glimpse your fellow players' screens, gaining the upper hand based on that purloined visual information. Of course, if *everyone's* cheating then the playing field is levelled, more or less, but surely there's a way to eradicate the problem altogether? Enter *10,000 And You*, an FPS that asks players first to figure out which screen they're supposed to be staring at. Depending on the setting, there are up to 35 screens to decipher here (and, once you've discovered which screen is yours, it's usually only a few seconds until your demise). Most of those will be controlled by AI characters, but there's still room for a couple of players to flounder about in the low-res chaos.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/10000AndYou

6 TINY HEIST

WEBGAME A procedurally generated sneak-'em-up

I don't typically have the skills to advance too far in Terry Cavanagh games, given my general ineptitude at platforming (VVVVVV), and the fact that I can survive all of seven seconds in his unforgiving arcade action game *Super Hexagon*. I've proved a little better, however, at *Tiny Heist*, Terry's latest freeware offering. That's probably because it's turn-based, and fairly slow, affording me plenty of time to plan out my stealthy approach.

Not that it's an easy game, of course – this was inspired by the classic roguelikes, after all. *Tiny*

Heist mixes procedural dungeon-delving with *Metal Gear Solid*-style sneaking, a combination that works alarmingly well. That roguelike label feels appropriate thanks to the randomly jumbled stages, the harsh difficulty level, and a control scheme that sends you bumping into guards, dogs and cameras with the cursor keys. (There's also the little matter of the protagonist, who is literally the @ symbol with a pair of arms and legs.)

Unlike *Solid Snake*, your goal here is to nick as many gems as possible, before grabbing the key and making your way to the stairs leading down. Patrolling guards and



roving security cameras will block your path at nearly every turn, and you can only knock them out for so long.

It's been a while since the last 'big' Cavanagh game, but this feels almost as hefty and as polished as *VVVVVV*. It's just a little smaller in scope.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/TinyHeist



7 WORLD OF HORROR

DEMO Mystery stories in a world of cosmic horror

Manga artist Junji Ito is responsible for some truly memorable horror stories: chilling tales that mix body horror with cosmic terror. His involvement with *Silent Hills* sadly came to nothing, but at least we have this Ito-inspired adventure to look forward to. *World of Horror* gives you a series of creepy mysteries to unravel: cases that pit you against eldritch monsters and ancient gods, beings who will leave your sanity in tatters, even if you manage to escape with your health intact.

This early demo already feels pretty complete, with stark '1-bit' pixel art and an interface that resembles those old Apple Mac adventures. In the very best way, it feels like a relic from a previous age.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/WorldOfHorror



8 REVOLTED

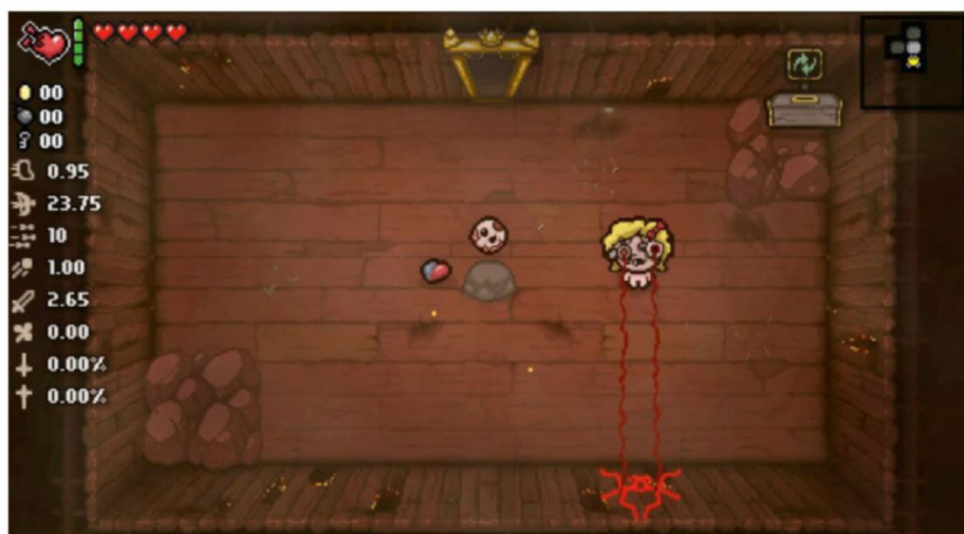
MOD Play a '90s FPS inside *Fallout 4*

For something set in the 23rd century (albeit in an alternate history timeline), the quality of *Fallout 4*'s in-universe games is a little... lacking. If you've discovered any of the playable holodisks, you'll know that they resemble simplistic arcade games from our 1970s and '80s: things like *Space Invaders*, *Pitfall* or *Zork*. How about this mod that brings *Fallout*'s games industry more up-to-date, then? Activated from a terminal in a Concord speakeasy, *Revolted* takes the form of a 1990s-style FPS, complete with chunky

low-res textures and amusingly dreadful voice acting, not to mention crude, *Duke Nukemesque* quips.

It's still *Fallout 4* beneath all that (modder Cohagen hasn't changed the game *that* much) but this short throwback should offer a nice change of pace, what with its boss battles, deliberately duff platforming sections, and old-timey colour-coded door keys. Playing as the Overseer of Vault 102, you have to wrestle back control from an evil professor.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Revolted



9 BINDING OF ISAAC BITS

MODS Slaughter Pokemon and cry ghost tears

The *Binding of Isaac* has become pretty bogglingly complex over the years, encompassing the original game and its expansion, the pixel art remake and its *Afterbirth* expansion, and now something called *Afterbirth+*, which grafts modding tools and a level editor onto the scatological action-RPG. As you might imagine, *Isaac's* thriving community has already inspired a bevy of interesting mods, including a playable *Solaire* out of

Dark Souls, marshmallow familiars, and the ten plagues of Egypt as additional power-ups. But before you get to those, and the three highlights I've picked out on the right, you'll want to search for 'External item descriptions' on the Steam Workshop. This arguably should have been in the game all along, as it adds on-screen information for all 510 of *Isaac's* potential items, meaning you'll no longer have to Tab out to check the Wiki every couple of minutes. Praise the lord.

OUT OF BOUNDS

Three liberating mods for *The Binding of Isaac*



1 BINDING OF POKEMON+

Gotta catch 'em all! And by "catch" I of course mean "explode them with your salty missile tears". This adds playable characters from the anime, and dresses *Isaac's* monsters up as Pokemon.

www.bit.ly/IsaacMods1



2 MEI

A new playable character who fits quite neatly into the existing roster, Mei is a psychic ghost girl who contorts her tear-based missiles into a spinning circle around her person.

www.bit.ly/IsaacMods2



3 LIL' DELIRIUM

Found in angel rooms, Lil' Delirium is all the game's familiars put together. Every ten seconds, he switches randomly into a different helper, which should keep things interesting at least.

www.bit.ly/IsaacMods3



10

A ROAD TO AWE

FREEWARE On the road again (and again and again)

Every day in 2017, developer Lectronice will add a new chunk to *A Road to Awe*, his first-person maze game seemingly set inside a psychedelic lava lamp. You explore a series of multicoloured, pyramid-like structures, navigating their circuitous alleyways to reach a glowing exit point, then load the next chunk of game. There's no real

challenge here, but just enough navigational ambiguity to engage your brain, while soft electronic music puts your mind into a Zen-like state.

But back to that first, astonishing bit: yes, the developer is expanding this every day. That's one hell of an endeavour and could make this the biggest puzzler you play this year.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/ARoadToAwe

GRAND STRATEGY

Get ready to stare at more maps than a cartographer. *By Fraser Brown*

If you're reading this, there's a chance you've just realised you're secretly very excited about securing lucrative trade routes around the Mediterranean,

fabricating claims on provinces, or sending armies marching across the globe. Yes, you've developed an appetite for grand strategy. The good news is that we're here to help, with this beginner's guide to strategy's grandest of subgenres.



START HERE

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

The *Total War* series has consistently been a solid entry point into grand strategy, offering light but broad faction management and gargantuan, exhilarating tactical battles. The best of the bunch for

beginners is *Shogun 2*. It's one of the most focused games in the series thanks to a comparatively small campaign map with geography that creates interesting limitations, as well as factions with a clear objective. It's also absolutely gorgeous.

FOR ARMCHAIR GENERALS

HEARTS OF IRON IV

➔ Kicking off in 1936, *Hearts of Iron IV* is a game of two halves. There's the pre-war grand strategy side of things, where you must shore up your nation's infrastructure, plan its research programme and guide it through the quagmire of competing ideologies. When the world around you devolves into war, that's when it becomes a wargame. Instead of managing trade and dabbling in politics, you'll be ordering airstrikes on factories in the dead of night and creating new fronts in war theatres across the globe.



PERFECT FOR ROLEPLAYERS

CRUSADER KINGS 2

➔ People, not empires, are the most important things in *Crusader Kings 2*. You play the ruler (and the subsequent heirs) of a dynasty from the Early Middle Ages, largely setting your own goals. Poison enemies, marry for wealth and connections, spread your religion, or maybe just spend your days riding, hunting and having saucy affairs. It's no surprise that *Crusader Kings 2* is also the foundation for the best *Game of Thrones* mod in any game ever.

NOT INTO HISTORY?

DISTANT WORLDS: UNIVERSE

➔ Grand strategy games typically deal with history, but they're not entirely shackled to the past. This is a real-time 4X game with a grand strategy scope, applied to the vast expanse of space. What makes *Distant Worlds* special is that it lets you give over control of any aspect of empire management to the competent AI, freeing you to focus on your favourite parts. You can even play a single scout ship exploring the galaxy, like Picard and chums.

AVOID THIS

EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

Wildly ambitious and unfocused, *Empire* gives players the world and AI opponents who really struggle with the scale; essentially it's *Shogun 2*'s opposite. This was also the first time, and unfortunately not the last, that Creative Assembly included naval battles, making a lot of people more careful about what they wish for. *Rome II* makes a lot of the same mistakes.



FEELING AMBITIOUS

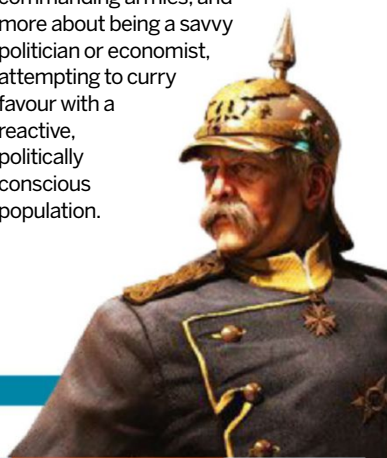
DOMINIONS 4

➔ *Dominions 4* is the ultimate power fantasy: become a god of your own making and then conquer the world. It's full of magic and supernatural warriors and is essentially a battle royal between an eclectic bunch of super beings intent on becoming the one true god. It's also stuck with an archaic interface and is probably the least user-friendly game here. Fascinating and a brilliant source of emergent stories, it's definitely worth building up to.

FOR BUDDING INDUSTRIALISTS

VICTORIA II

➔ Older and a little less friendly than *EU4* and *CK2*, *Victoria II* remains one of Paradox's most intriguing games. Set during the 19th and 20th centuries, it shines a light on the politics and industrial revolutions of the age. It's less about shifting borders or commanding armies, and more about being a savvy politician or economist, attempting to curry favour with a reactive, politically conscious population.



TOP TIPS

Three steps to victory



1 START GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH FAILURE

Complex systems and a challenging learning curve mean failure is just part and parcel of the experience, but it can be just as rewarding as victory.



2 SET YOUR OWN GOALS

Victory is just a distant, and frequently insignificant, objective, so it pays to set your own. Become a queen. Get disgustingly rich. Colonise a new land.



3 LEARN TO LOVE MENUS

You'll be seeing a great deal of them, along with a mountain of charts and lists. They are your advisors, generals, ships and enemies, and what you'll use to create your bold plans.



PURIST'S CHOICE

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV

One of the most sprawling, complex grand strategy games and probably the best. Take control of a country in the Late Medieval Period and nurture it to the 1800s, managing every facet, from armies to merchant fleets. Become a master of diplomacy and strategy to create strange alternate histories where Scotland ruled the Americas.



THE DIVISION

One year on, Ubisoft's Clancy MMO still hasn't found its own identity. *By James Davenport*

It's nearly been a year since I first reviewed *The Division*, and while I had fun, its attempt to tap into *Diablo's* and *Destiny's* endlessly replayable loot loop was misdirected and tiring. New gear was slow to acquire, characters looked the same between min and max levels, and the open world was an empty mob-killing chore hell.

Things started looking up with patch 1.4. The introduction of World Tiers made the entire game replayable on harder difficulties, extending the quest for better gear while making loot drop like candy at the tipped-over candy store. But it was still the same grind, just longer and kinder.

With the *Last Stand* expansion and patch 1.6, Ubisoft is making a big push to diversify *The Division* with enough hooks to keep everyone around. As the final mode coming to *The Division* as part of the season pass, *Last Stand* has the impossible task of pleasing everyone. It won't. For some, player-vs-player is alienating from the start, and in a game in dire need of new zones, enemy types, and mission design, I feel it too. As a response to the Dark Zone's impromptu free-for-all

encounters, *Last Stand's* team-based instanced PvP could be a direct way for players to theorycraft creative builds and test team compositions – if, that is, it gets enough time to bake in the Public Test Server.

Last Stand pits teams of eight against one another on a repurposed chunk of the Dark Zone, where the goal is to capture and hold as many terminals as possible. The team that holds more terminals builds up their score quicker, and wins the game. But a few variables add small bouts of PvE play and the potential for deploying defensive aids. Enemy mobs still roam, and players can take them out to earn a currency used during the match to build defences, such as turrets to protect a spawn point or scanners that detect enemy movement in a designated area. And gear is normalised, meaning item levels even out to make things as fair as possible.

PTS DISORDER

Right off the bat, *Last Stand* was incredibly unbalanced on the PTS. Transposing gear and buffs designed for improvisational Dark Zone PvP encounters and groups of dopey, bullet-absorbent PvE mobs doesn't work in a focused competitive PvP setting. With the right loadouts, players can soak up enough damage to force encounters into the open, and even endlessly spawn-camp the opposing team without issue thanks to high-level healing ability cooldown timers. Ubisoft is aware though, testing resilience and ability cooldown nerfs with new patches

every week up until (and beyond) release time.

But even if Ubisoft cracks the code and nails a perfect balance that makes developing a competitive PvP mode inside a larger PvE casing easy-peasy, players are still unhappy that there hasn't been a stronger focus on building out more zones and adding more missions.

In Year One of *The Division*, its identity hasn't solidified much. The *Underground* DLC sprinkled new missions and loot throughout an unremarkable setting, but the *Survival* DLC delivered an entirely new game mode. It's been well received, but given that this is another appendage to nurture, Ubisoft might be spreading itself too thin – extra thin with *Last Stand*,

THROWING SPAGHETTI AT THE WALL TO SEE WHAT STICKS TAKES TIME IN GAME DEVELOPMENT

supplying as it does another separate mode to bottle feed. Putting out mode after mode doesn't seem sustainable or a great way to build a strong player base, but it sure is fascinating. As baffling as the update cycle has been, I hope to see another year or three out of *The Division*. Throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what sticks takes time in game development, but surely something will dry up and stay. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 2016

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Massive

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.bit.ly/1S8J05d



A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE *A timeline for The Division*

MARCH 2016

The Division releases, players enjoy the setting, loot, and combat, but quickly get tired of the grind and aimless endgame.

AUGUST 2016

The Underground DLC releases, bringing the new PvE content and continuing the narrative.

AUGUST 2016

Ubisoft delays the next two DLC releases to fix bugs and address balance and quality of life issues based on player feedback.

NOVEMBER 2016

Patch 1.4 releases, adding World Tiers and showering players with a friendly loot system.

NOVEMBER 2016

Survival DLC releases, a new mode where players fight each other and the cold in a race to the centre of the map.

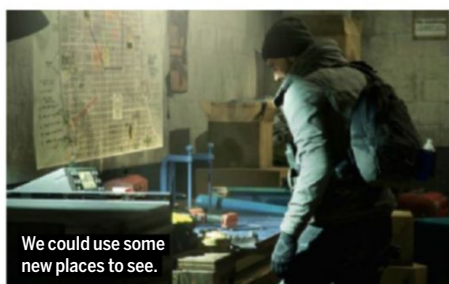
JANUARY 2017

Last Man, the last DLC of Season One, enters the PTS and accentuates the issues with PvP balance and clouds the future of *The Division*.

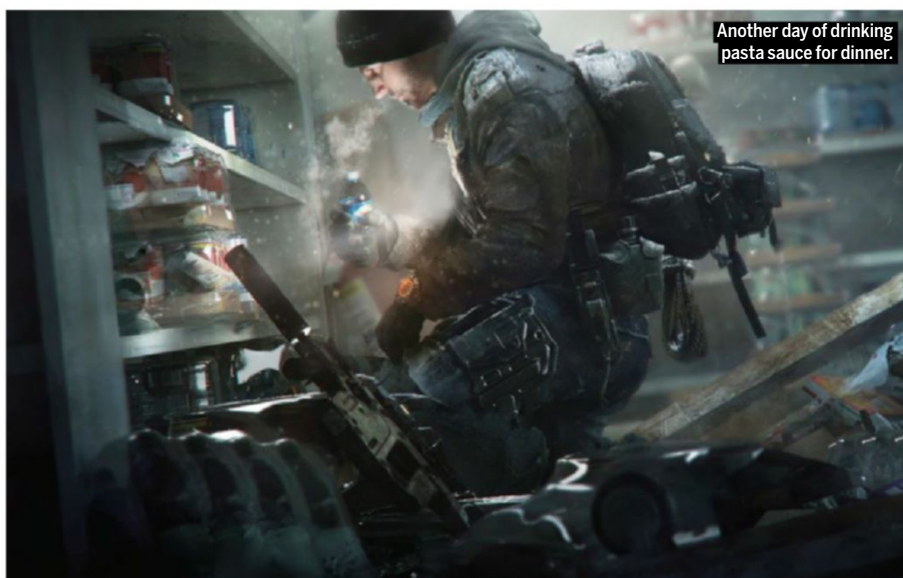
How is New York
this boring?



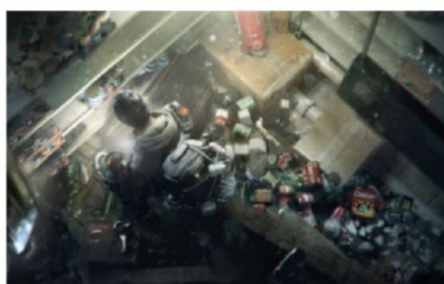
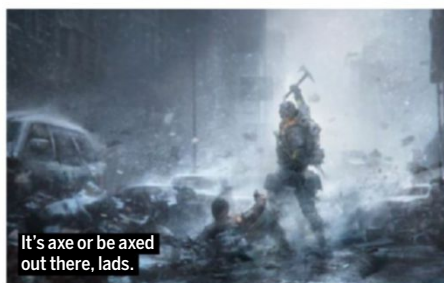
We could use some
new places to see.



Another day of drinking
pasta sauce for dinner.



It's axe or be axed
out there, lads.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



“You always feel like you’re on the
knife-edge of failure”

Order your squad to 'stack up' on a door before breaching.



SWAT 4

Revisiting Irrational's quiet masterpiece. *By Andy Kelly*

Before Irrational dragged us down to the briny deep in *BioShock*, it took us to the mean streets of fictional East Coast city Fairview. This is the setting for *SWAT 4*, the tactical first-person shooter the studio developed two years before its underwater epic took critics by storm. *SWAT 4* deserves just as much praise, and perhaps isn't as widely celebrated as it should be.

This oversight is not helped by the fact that, until recently, it was difficult to (legally) acquire digitally. But now the game and its expansion, *The Stetchkov Syndicate*, are available on GOG. The perfect excuse to revisit Fairview and rain down some justice.

It's playing as a law-abiding, law-enforcing boy in blue that sets

SWAT 4 apart from other tactical shooters such as *Rainbow Six*. They share similar disciplines, namely formulating and executing a plan to defeat the enemy as efficiently and safely as possible. But being part of (and indeed the commander of) a SWAT team brings a lot of dangerous new challenges to the table. You're a cop, not a soldier, and it turns out that means you can't just charge in and murder everyone. You can only fire if someone fires at you, and killing a suspect who was in the process of surrendering is a fast track to a mission failure.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2005

DEVELOPER
Irrational Games

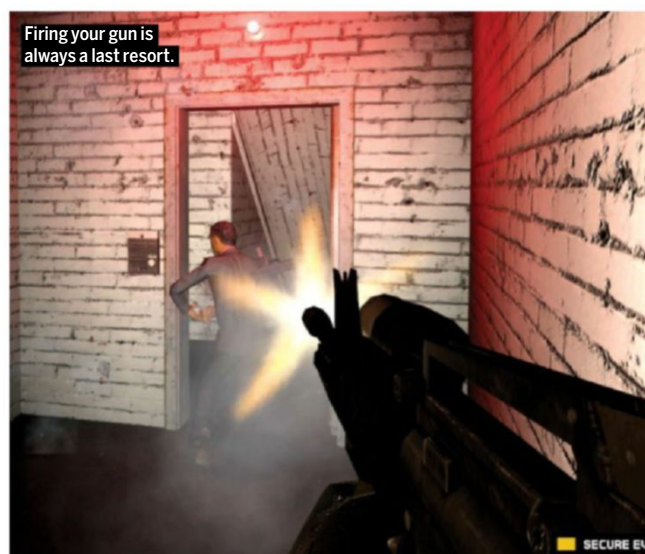
PUBLISHER
Sierra Entertainment

LINK
www.irrationalgames.com

SWAT 4's point system keeps you in check. Everything you do earns or loses you points. So handcuffing a surrendered suspect will increase your end-of-level score, while killing someone without first determining if they're a threat will reduce it. On normal difficulty you have to score 50 out of a possible 100 to unlock the next level, which forces you to play and think tactically. And if you kill a hostage, or fail to neutralise a suspect before they do, it's an instant mission failure. All of these elements combine to create a wonderfully tense game where you always feel on the knife-edge of messing it up.

NEVER THE SAME

The lack of mid-level saves only adds to this, but each map is relatively small, encouraging repeat plays to master your craft. One of the game's best features, however, is how the suspect and hostage positions are different every time you start a level, meaning you can't just memorise where everyone is. This keeps you on your toes constantly, and adds remarkable replay value. I must have played the gas station robbery mission a dozen times, and every time it's been a completely different



experience – because of the randomised suspects and also my growing confidence with the game's deep systems.

The variety of gadgets and weapons, the richness of the level design, and the fine control you have over your squad makes *SWAT 4* a powerful story generator. Even something as simple as opening a door and entering a room has multiple layers to it. You can quietly pick the lock or use an explosive charge to blow it off its hinges. You can toss in a variety of non-lethal grenades to incapacitate the suspects, including tear gas and flashbangs. Or you can use your optiwand (basically a high-tech mirror on a stick) to peer inside the room before breaching to determine the threat.

BREACHY HEAD

Breaching a room is always a nervous moment. As you enter you hit the middle mouse button to 'shout compliance', which means screaming "Police! On your knees! Drop your weapon! Down on the ground!" and other assorted demands. Some perps will comply, especially if you've hit them with a taser or a gas grenade.

LAW AND ORDER

How to play it by the book

ALWAYS

- ✓ Handcuff everyone, even if you're certain they're innocent
- ✓ Report all injured, deceased, and cuffed suspects/hostages
- ✓ Pick up weapons dropped by suspects who surrender
- ✓ Subdue non-compliant suspects with a taser/pepper spray

NEVER

- ✗ Use deadly force unless it's absolutely necessary
- ✗ Fire on suspects who have surrendered/dropped their gun
- ✗ Let a hostage die, or it's an instant mission failure
- ✗ Leave a surrendered suspect alone without cuffing them

But others will make a run for it or open fire. If a suspect surrenders, protocol demands you pick up their gun as evidence, cuff them with a

cable tie, then report their position to HQ. Failing to follow these steps will reduce your overall score, so it pays to play it by the book. And as for the suspects who open fire, well, they've just signed their own death warrants.

Some of the levels, particularly the rock club filled with trigger-happy warring gangsters, are maze-like warrens of suspects waiting to ambush you. This is when the door wedge gadget comes in handy, letting you control their movement by blocking access to certain doors. Just one of many examples of the strategic thinking that the game encourages and rewards.

One of my favourite things about *SWAT 4* is how each mission is a standalone event, so that there's no tedious story linking the campaign together. The early missions are, by your average SWAT team's standards, fairly simple jobs. A few gangsters holed up in a Chinese restaurant. A petrol station robbery gone wrong. Here the suspects are lightly armed and inexperienced, but later you'll be facing veteran criminals with kevlar vests, gas masks, and automatic weapons. The stakes rise with every mission, from bungled robberies to



YOU DESCEND INTO A BASEMENT STRAIGHT OUT OF DAVID FINCHER'S SEVEN

jewel store heists. And as the suspects get tougher and better-equipped, you have to constantly adapt and experiment with new tactics and gear to outperform them.

What's interesting about returning now is seeing Irrational's progression towards *BioShock* in the environment design. This is where the team really started to master using mise-en-scène to tell stories. The Fairfax Residence, widely regarded as one of the game's best missions, is a great example of this. The owner, a serial killer, has kidnapped a local girl. After moving carefully through his drab, unremarkable suburban house, you descend into a basement straight out of David Fincher's *Seven*.

There are bizarre messages scrawled on the walls, creepy masks hanging from the ceiling, newspaper clippings about his killings, and other disturbing imagery. This, along with a sinister, brooding soundtrack, makes

for an incredibly atmospheric, nerve-racking mission. And when you finally confront the shotgun-toting killer, there's a chance he'll be randomly placed near the kidnapped girl, resulting in a dangerous stand-off. His mother's in the house too, but won't comply, so you have to pepper spray and cuff her as she screams "He didn't do anything!" It's an incredible piece of level design, and not the kind of thing you usually expect to find in a tactical FPS.

JOB LOT

The Stetchkov Syndicate was released a year later, and adds seven new missions. It's a great expansion, and there's a noticeable increase in graphical fidelity. The environment design is even more detailed than in the main game, although nothing quite matches the eerie brilliance of the Fairfax house. The expansion adds new weapons and new suspect behaviour, which includes suspects being able to pick up weapons after they've surrendered and dropped them, should you turn your back and fail to cuff them. The 'gold' edition on GOG comes bundled with this, giving you many hours of quality policing.

SWAT 4 holds up, and I feel comfortable saying that because this 'reinstall' is really my first time playing it. My hopeless old PC couldn't handle it back in 2005, so I approached this playthrough with some caution. I'd heard a lot of good things about *SWAT 4*, but wondered if it was just blinkered nostalgia. People still get fairly misty-eyed over it, but not to the extent of some other classic games. And some of the most revered PC games are, honestly, a bit rubbish today.

So it was a joy to discover that it's a genuinely great game, and one of Irrational's finest moments as a developer. And it's worth returning to as a reminder of that period in the late '90s and early '00s when tactical shooters were at their peak on PC – a genre that has sadly faded away in recent years. They could take the systems from this game and transplant them directly into a new engine and it would totally work. *BioShock* is Irrational's all-time classic, of course, but from now on I'll regard *SWAT 4* with just as much reverence. I don't know who owns the rights to the series now, but it's time for a revival. ■





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

DOOM'S WEAPON MODS

When your standard FPS arsenal becomes a set of impossibly explosive toys. *By Samuel Roberts*



RIGHT: The combat shotgun's grenade launcher function is an improvement on the regular version.



You know how at Sony and Microsoft's E3 conferences, you can hear people actually whooping in the audience? I used to hear those people and wonder if they were for real, or the product of some kind of crowd hose used to spray generic NPCs onto real life venues.

At Bethesda's 2015 E3 conference in Hollywood, I was sitting next to one of those guys in real life. He'd brought his girlfriend. When the first footage of *Doom* was revealed, he screamed "oh my God!" When Doomguy chainsawed through a monster in first-person, I swear he grabbed his girlfriend's hand really tight and shouted "oh *shit*!" with a hysterically over-the-top cadence that I'll never forget. I rolled my eyes and thought, "cool your jets, pal, it's just a ruddy chainsaw." By the time the *Elder Scrolls Online* footage started, he'd obviously calmed down.

I wondered why he was that excited about what we were seeing on screen, which at the time just looked to me like a pretty shooter with recognisable *Doom* iconography. The 2016 reboot didn't really interest me until I had the game in my hands. That was when I realised this wasn't just a gory shooter that reheated old character designs, but a smart, logical extension of the earlier games, heavy on player expression. I was now whooping on the inside.

It was the weapon mods that made me fall in love. They essentially let you become Iron Man, employing a range of increasingly lavish military hardware against the game's array of schlocky monsters. Without upgrades, you have the standard firearms you'd find in any 7/10 FPS

– shotguns, rifles, rocket launchers and so on. With mods, the shotgun gets a grenade launcher. The heavy assault rifle can fire miniature rockets in bursts. Upgrade the rifle enough, and it can continuously unload rockets, so there's no reason to use it as a machine gun ever again.

Most weapons have two upgrade paths, too, so you can trade tiny rockets for a tactical scope on the heavy assault rifle if you wish. But who's playing *Doom* to land precision headshots, instead of spaffing rockets all over the shop? This person doesn't exist, and even if they did, they'd be ostracised from my social circles.

I AM BECOME DEATH

The heavy assault rifle's rocket rounds are incredibly cathartic. They latch onto enemies or the environment, then explode a second later, with a satisfying high pitched comic book sound effect. I love how they can combine with some of the other weapon mods as part of a strategy for clearing out waves of monsters. Another favourite of mine is the Heat Blast function of the plasma rifle, which unleashes a radius knockback attack, giving you the chance to chain a few melee kills together. When Heat Blast is fully levelled up, it can even shred enemies in your vicinity to pieces, which feels like a Sith power. It's spectacular.

My use of the word "strategy" in that last paragraph was disingenuous, actually. I never have a strategy in *Doom*, and I expect you don't either. I essentially unload every gun I have upon waves of enemies, in the order that I enjoy firing them, until I'm out of ammo for each. I assume other *Doom* players do the same. There's enough delineation between the weapon mods that I feel a certain level of attachment to my favourites – and I never get this invested in guns in other FPS games.

The mods collectively make *Doom*'s armoury feel more inventive than anything I've encountered in a shooter since the first few *Halo* games – they make other FPS devs

DAFT GUNS

Novelty weapons are always more fun



SHADOW WARRIOR 2

The tone (bad willy jokes, rather than good willy jokes) isn't for me, but I respect its armoury of over 70 weapons.



HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

The differences between the alien weaponry and the UNSC's more standard firearms is the lifeblood of *Halo*'s appeal.



GTA ONLINE

GTA gives you a ton of options for shotguns and machine guns, but the best of all of them is the silly firework launcher.



SAINTS ROW IV

The dubstep gun is probably the series' most famous weapon, and somehow it's already hideously out of date.

look like they're not trying. Why can't guns always be this fun? Who still gets excited about basic machine guns or laser rifles, no matter how good the sound design is? Videogame guns should be stupid, novel and indulge the whims of players who want to inflict as much mad shit as possible onto disposable enemies.

My final favourite weapon mod in *Doom* – and one that completes the fantasy of being Iron Man, if Tony Stark fought demons instead of Captain America – is the gauss cannon's precision bolt. This changes the heavy laser gun into an all-powerful charge beam, much like the core on Iron Man's chest. I'm getting endorphins just thinking about it.

If id makes a sequel to *Doom*, let's take it even further. How about a grenade launcher that you mod to fire black holes at enemies, pulling their limbs off through space and time? Or a sniper rifle that fires chainsaws? It will take this sort of daft, unfeasibly complicated weapon idea to provoke me into whooping at a future Bethesda E3 conference. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
May 13, 2016

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

OUR REVIEW
88%

LINK
www.doom.com



RIGHT: Arcade mode is the optimal way to replay *Doom* if you miss firing these daft weapons.



PHIL SAVAGE



Sure, I'll probably never own a house, but at least they'll never take my Steam library away from me. (Please Valve, don't take it from me.)



TAKE IT EASY

GUILD WARS 2

www.guildwars2.com

→ Every couple of months, I return to *Guild Wars 2* to play a new chapter of the ongoing 'Living World' update cycle. Each episode only takes five or six hours, and then I'm done – finished until the next set of missions arrives. It's not typical MMO design, but I appreciate when a multiplayer game doesn't try to ruin my life.

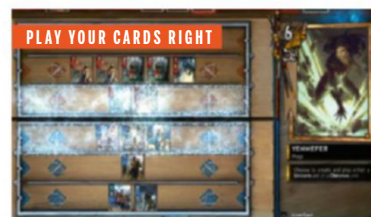


KILL SOME CRABS

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

elderscrolls.bethesda.net/oblivion

→ It's often seen as the disappointing middle child of the *Elder Scrolls* series, but I nonetheless recently returned to *Oblivion* and was reminded just how good it is. There's a mission that ends with flaming dogs raining from the sky. You don't get that in *Morrowind*.



PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT

GWENT

www.playgwent.com

→ It finally happened: someone made a multiplayer card game that I like. All it took was a developer to first make one of the best RPGs of all time, and then add a complex, tactical minigame that encourages exploration. Standalone *Gwent* removes the RPG, but enhances the strategic possibilities.



DESTROY YOUR CAR

DIRT RALLY

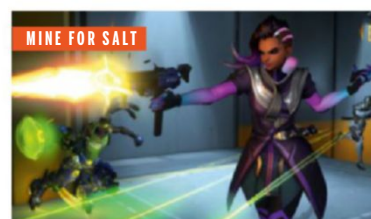
www.dirtgame.com

→ Codemasters has announced *Dirt 4*, which is probably more my speed. For now, I'm still enjoying the more hardcore challenge of *Dirt Rally*. Yes, I'm awful at it, but I still derive satisfaction from the few times I don't limp across the finish line, windscreen cracked, suspension shot and with two missing tyres.

MUST PLAY

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by Phil Savage



MINE FOR SALT

OVERWATCH

www.playoverwatch.com

→ I've just unlocked Competitive mode, which means I get to enjoy the *Overwatch* community at its most childishly petulant. Did somebody pop their ultimate too early? Better call 'em a noob. Is someone playing Sombra or Widowmaker? Get on the mic and start screaming. (Or, just have some fun in a cool, fun FPS.)

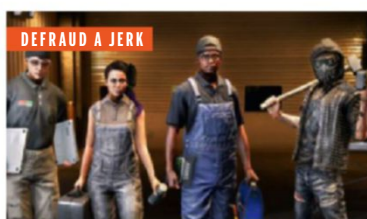


GET LOST IN SPACE

ELITE DANGEROUS

www.elitedangerous.com

→ At its worst, *Elite Dangerous* feels a bit like *American Truck Simulator* – only in space and not as good. At its best, it's a window into the mystery and majesty of the galaxy. Missions soon get repetitive, but travelling thousands of light years to see a black hole can make you feel insignificant and pointless. Neat!

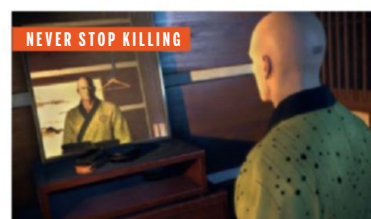


DEFRAUD A JERK

WATCH DOGS 2

www.watchdogs.com

→ There's a bit in this competent open-world hack-'em-up where you trick a man who is legally distinct from Martin Shkreli into donating millions of dollars to charity. I won't lie: doing so feels pretty good. More games should let you seek karmically appropriate retribution against semi-fictional arseholes.



NEVER STOP KILLING

HITMAN

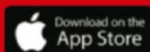
www.hitman.com

→ One day I will stop writing about *Hitman*. And yet, despite my seven reviews for PC Gamer, IO refuses to stop updating their assassination opus. The most recent patch added Professional difficulty, which tweaks NPC and item placement and restricts your saves. It's good. Now please just stop and let me rest.



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