PC GAMER

PILLARS OF ETERNITY 2

REVEALED: THE SMASH RPG'S MASSIVE SEQUEL

GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

MGSV MEETS GTA?

Issue 290
APRIL 2017

Future

MASS EFFECT
ANDROMEDA

HUGE PREVIEW

INSIDE THE BIOWARE RPG OF YOUR DREAMS

ALSO INSIDE

RESIDENT EVIL 7 REVIEWED
THE HISTORY OF RPGS
MORROWIND RETURNS
& MUCH MORE!

HARDWARE

GRAPHICS CARDS RATED

WORTH THE UPGRADE?

Gamer Extreme XT

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7-6800K Processor
GIGABYTE® X99 Chipset Mainboard
16GB DDR4 3000MHz Quad Ch. Memory
240GB SSD + 2TB SATA III 6.0 HDD 7200RPM
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1070 8GB Video Card
Cyberpower Aula Gaming Headset
In Win 303 Gaming Case + 600W 80+ PSU
Asetek Liquid Cooling System

HD 7.1 600W | Cyberpower | Cyberpower

FROM
$1599

Liquid Cooling
FREE

VECTOR II 15-VR 600

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
Intel® HM170 Express Chipset
15.6" FHD IPS Non-Reflective 1920 x 1080
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1060 6GB
240GB Z410 SATA Solid State Drive
RGB Programmable Gaming Keyboard
8GB DDR4/2133MHz Memory
Gigabit LAN, HDMI 2.0m, MiniDP

15.6"HD

FROM
$1129

| DVD 8X DVD ±RW | 250 Mins | Bluetooth 4.0 | 1x USB 3.0 1x 3.1 Type C |
| HDMI 1.4 | HD 30FPS Webcam | Mini-DP 1.2 | 5.29 Lbs. |

VECTOR II 15-VR 800

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
Intel® HM170 Express Chipset
15.6" FHD IPS Non-Reflective 1920 x 1080
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1060 6GB
480GB Z410 SATA Solid State Drive
RGB Programmable Gaming Keyboard
8GB DDR4/2133MHz Memory
Gigabit LAN, HDMI 2.0m, MiniDP
Intel® 802.11 AC Wireless + BT V4.2

17.3"HD

FROM
$1235

| DVD 8X DVD ±RW | 250 Mins | Bluetooth 4.0 | 1x USB 3.0 1x 3.1 Type C |
| HDMI 1.4 | HD 30FPS Webcam | Mini-DP 1.2 | 5.95 Lbs. |

CYBERPOWERPC
UNLEASH THE POWER

ORDER TODAY! 800.707.0393
www.cyberpowerpc.com

Work easy. Play hard. Windows

Intel Inside®. Amazing Experience Outside.

intel CORE i7 7th Gen

FREE LIQUID COOLING

CPUs with standard fansinks can reach core temperatures as high as 130°C, however, liquid cooling can lower that to 59°C giving you better performance and longer lifespan on your CPU.

$54.99 VALUE

Gamer Xtreme 2000

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i3-7300K Processor
GIGABYTE® Z270 Chipset Mainboard (USB 3.1)
Corsair® 8GB DDR4 3000MHz Dual Ch. Memory
1TB SATA III HDD 7200RPM
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1050TI 4GB Video Card
Cyberpower Aula Gaming Headset
Phanteks Eclipse P400 with tempered glass
Gaming Case + 600W PSU
Asetek Liquid Cooling System

Liquid Cooling **FREE**

FROM **$799**

HD 7.1 · Cyberpower · Cyberpower

Gamer Xtreme 3000

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7-7700K Processor
GIGABYTE® Z270 Chipset Mainboard (USB 3.1)
Corsair® 16GB DDR4 3000MHz Dual Ch. Memory
240GB SATA III SSD Boot Drive
2TB SATA III 6.0 HDD 7200RPM
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1070 8GB Video Card
CyberpowerPC Aula Gaming Headset
Phanteks Enthoo Pro M Gaming Case +
600W 80+ PSU
Asetek Liquid Cooling System

Liquid Cooling **FREE**

FROM **$1469**

Blu-ray Disc 14x Optical Drive · HD 7.1 · Cyberpower · Cyberpower

Gamer Infinity 8800 Pro SE

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7-6800K Processor
GIGABYTE® X99 Chipset Mainboard
Corsair® 32GB DDR4 3000MHz Quad Ch. Memory
240GB SATA III SSD Boot Drive
3TB SATA II Data Hard Drive
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1080 8GB Video Card
CyberpowerPC Aula Gaming Headset
NZXT H440 Design by Razer Gaming Case +
600W 80+ PSU
Asetek Liquid Cooling System

Liquid Cooling **FREE**

FROM **$1999**

Blu-ray Disc 14x Optical Drive · HD 7.1 · Cyberpower · Cyberpower

Syber M Pro 200

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i5-7600K Processor
GIGABYTE® Z270 Chipset Mainboard with UBS 3.1
CORSAIR® 16GB DDR4 3000Mhz Dual Ch. Memory
240GB SSD + 2TB SATA-III 3.0 HDD 7200 RPM
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1060 3GB Video Card
Cyberpower Aula Gaming Headset
Syber M Series Gaming Case 600W 80+ PSU

FROM **$999**

DVD 24X DVD +RW · HD 7.1 600W · Cyberpower · Cyberpower

Order your *ultimate gaming system* today! **www.cyberpowerpc.com**

730 Baldwin Park Blvd., City of Industry, CA 91746

PC GAMER

Roleplayers

This issue accidentally became an RPG special, somewhere between our *Mass Effect: Andromeda* cover feature, our exclusive interview with Obsidian on *Pillars of Eternity II* and the first part of our two-part history of the genre. We even got a first look at a *Morrowind*-themed addition to *Elder Scrolls Online* this month. If you like numbers and beards, it's going to be a good one.

If RPGs aren't your thing, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*, *Resi 7* and *Elite* are just a few of this issue's other highlights.

SAMUEL ROBERTS
EDITOR
samuel.roberts@futurenet.com
@SamuelWRoberts

TALK TO PC GAMER
Have your say!
Tweet us
@PCGamer

Our team of writers

PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Space stuff, *Forza*
Twitter
@Octaeder
This month
Joined Sam in building the worst spaceship in the galaxy. Go to p88 to see how they got on.

ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Haunted houses, Venice
Twitter
@ultrabrilliant
This month
Rattled through the mansion of *Resi 7*, and only had to swap his underwear two times.

STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in
Space journalism, MMOs
Twitter
@stevenmessner
This month
Interrupted his birthday celebrations to write about *Pillars II* for us. Good work, Steven.

Contents #290

32

Monitor

Previews

Features

58

16
GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS

In our preview, Andy comes away a little cold from Ubisoft's open-world shooter.

32
MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

Samuel talks to BioWare about the singleplayer component of their long-awaited RPG.

38
THE HISTORY OF RPGS

Richard Cobbett's comprehensive history of the genre starts here, and concludes next month.

[THE TOP STORY]

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

The Thargoids are out there in **ELITE DANGEROUS**

Robert Bettig jumped into the Aries Dark System, a bounty hunter on his tail. **"I knew it was going to be a long, boring trip so I just settled in and grabbed a cold beer. I wasn't even really paying attention,"** he tells PC Gamer. This is routine stuff for a player with over 2,000 hours in *Elite Dangerous*. What happened next was anything but.

Bettig's ship flashed up "hyperspace conduit unstable" and he was ripped out of hyperspace. This was new. Being pulled out of a jump between systems was, until that moment, impossible.

"I had no idea what was going on," Bettig says. "My first thought was am I going to survive this? I have no idea what is happening. And then the first thing I see is that stupid bounty hunter in an Anaconda." The opportunistic hunter took a few potshots at Bettig, but was soon dwarfed by a new arrival—one that had never before been seen in *Elite Dangerous*. An alien ship.

The ship, a sort of angry chitinous space flower, fired a bright green beam at him. "I thought I was getting microwaved—that this guy was just going to eat me for dinner," Bettig says. "I had no control over my ship, all I could do was look around. At that point I just resigned myself to it. I was shaking so bad." The UFO shut off its beam and jumped away.

Since Bettig's encounter, many more sightings have been reported. The UFO is thought to belong to the Thargoids, an alien race last seen in 1995's *Frontier: First Encounters*. The presence of mysterious, unexplained artifacts had hinted at other forms of sentient life, but now they're here.

Frontier has kept mostly silent about the event, although it did tweet the video of Bettig's encounter with the message: "A report just coming through that a CMDR has experienced something... strange." In the most recent *Elite Dangerous* newsletter, Frontier wrote only that, "we are intrigued by the findings of these brave Commanders, and can't wait to see what the scientific community do with the information they've gathered so far." You can see Bettig's footage by visiting *www.bit.ly/Thargoids*. ∎

Phil Savage

"I THOUGHT I WAS GETTING MICROWAVED— THAT THIS GUY WAS JUST GOING TO EAT ME"

HIGHS & LOWS
THE MONTH IN PC GAMING
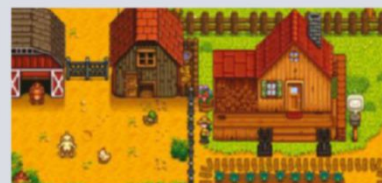
HIGHS

Stardew Valley
Our 'Spirit of the PC 2016' winner has now made an estimated $24 million. Less valuable, but still cool.

Enderal
The massive *Skyrim* mod is getting its own expansion, adding 10-20 hours of new quests.

Frog Fractions 2
The Kickstarter-funded experimental comedy game is found hiding inside *Glittermitten Grove*.

AGDQ
Speedrunning event raises $2.2 million for charity. Check out the excellent *Hitman: Blood Money* run.

Just Cause 3
The multiplayer mod is out now, and promises cooperative carnage.

Hitman
Only achieved Bronze tier in Steam's Top 100 top sellers of 2016. Agent 47 deserves better.

Dirt 3
Codemasters' rally racer disappears from digital stores, likely due to an expired licensing deal.

Landmark
Daybreak is to close the sandbox build-'em-up next month. It was once such a promising idea.

Scalebound
Platinum's action-RPG has been canceled by Microsoft. But I wanted to team up with a dragon pal!

LOWS

D I S C U S S

WHAT SHOULD BIOWARE DO NEXT?

Samuel and Phil sort out the devs' next game for them

Samuel: Things we know about BioWare: *Mass Effect* is out in March, they've been working on a new series in some capacity since *Mass Effect 3* came out, and the last, successful *Dragon Age* was released three years ago this year. *The Old Republic* trundles along, too. What would you like to see from BioWare, Phil?

Phil: If they had any sense, it would finally be time for a *Dragon Age* visual novel in which you play some young, lithe Inquisition initiate trying to score a date with Cullen. You know, the thing Tumblr has been crying out for. Personally, though, I'm excited by the idea of something new. I'd be interested to see how BioWare's writing works in a real world setting—the studio's strength has always been in characters, and so moving away from fantasy or sci-fi wouldn't necessarily be detrimental. Plus the real world has bears, so that's the sidequests sorted.

Samuel: It's weird, when I think of something set in the real world my mind immediately goes to 'military' and the likes of *Alpha Protocol*, but they're bound to do something more interesting and high-concept than that—EA is already pretty flush with guns and such.

Phil: You caught me. I mostly just want *Alpha Protocol*, but without the late-2000s Obsidian jank.

Samuel: Something we may hear about between full *Dragon Age* sequels is the proposed *Dragon Age Tactics* game in the vein of *XCOM* or *Fire Emblem*, which producer Mark Darrah polled the community on in early 2016. 22% of people said 'no' to

that! The internet is just the worst. Do you think they'll make that before another full *Dragon Age*, Phil? Or was that just hypothetical?

Phil: It's possible somebody got over-excited after *XCOM*'s success. *Dragon Age* is a weird series, because it doesn't feel like it has a strong identity outside of its setting. Each of the main games has felt completely different, and I'm not sure whether that makes it a natural playground for spin-offs, or if it's already too confusing to dilute further. Anyway, interesting diversions are all well and good, Sam, but we love BioWare for the characters and scenarios. Where would you like to see them go for a full, post-*Andromeda* RPG?

Samuel: They've done sci-fi, they've done fantasy. Both *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* are pastiches—they're familiar-looking and broad versions of popular genres. What other genre really fits them? What else have they

made? *Sonic Chronicles*? *Jade Empire*! That's it. Something more historical-based with a step into fantasy, too. I suppose I would love to see what BioWare's version of a superhero game might be, as well, a little like a modern *Freedom Force*. Assembling your own Justice League or Avengers—that's fertile ground for character creation, heightened storytelling and moral quandaries. I don't think that's the game they'll make next, by any means, but it would be a good fit. I would hope that at some point they'll make a modern Star Wars RPG, too—*The Old Republic* continues to grow in that singleplayer direction, but it's not quite the same as having a *KotOR III* in Frostbite with gigantic open worlds. What do you think?

Phil: You have uncovered my dark secret, Sam. I have not played either *KotOR*. But you raise a good point about BioWare's touchstones—all of them (except maybe *Sonic Chronicles*) are comfortable, well-trodden RPG settings. That's fine, because I think what I want from BioWare is for them to return to their most distinct, interesting RPG idea. To unlock the potential of a great idea imperfectly realized. I think you know what game I'm talking about, Sam.

Samuel: *Dragon Age II*. But instead of a *Dragon Age* set in a single city, it's set in a single room. Done. ∎

All Phil really wants to do is score with this guy.

SAMUEL ROBERTS
Romanced Ashley, Miranda and Isabela. A dull BioWare fan.

PHIL SAVAGE
One of the first to identify "the Hinterlands problem".

THE DISCUSSION IS OVER, BUT DOES IT DESERVE A 94% SCORE? LET US KNOW @PCGAMER

SURVIVING IN A NICHE

How three developers are handling the tricky business of creating adventure games in the modern world

THE STORY SO FAR

Adventure games have been back walking among the living for several years, but the so-called Golden Age of the genre, the days of LucasArts and Sierra, is a distant memory. Three developers share their stories of creating new adventures, and working for a niche audience on a small budget. It's difficult, they say, but thanks to bundles and an audience that craves interesting stories, they make it work.

The popular narrative for adventure gaming is that it died with the commercial failure of *Grim Fandango* before re-emerging a decade later, largely thanks to an explosion of indie developers as well as Telltale's new spin on the genre. Words like "renaissance" are thrown around a lot. The reality is a bit more complicated.

Who plays adventure games now? Wadjet Eye's Dave Gilbert, currently working on *Unavowed*, says that it's people like himself. "People who grew up playing games with a story or narrative bent to it; people who maybe don't have a lot of time to play a game. That's why our games tend to be on the short end."

These people make up the core, Gilbert tells me, but they're not the only adventurers. Owl Cave Games' Olivia White, whose latest project, *Oh Whistle And I'll Come To You*, is an adaptation of the famous MR James ghost story, believes that her audience is as diverse as they come. "A cross-section of pretty much anyone across society," she says.

A broad audience doesn't always translate to a big audience, however. When Gilbert released the final chapter of his well-received *Blackwell* series, before it

was in any bundles or sales, he sold 7,005 copies on Steam. It can be hard to get the word out.

"It's been a challenge, especially in the last few years, particularly after the Kickstarter bubble burst and when the Tim Schafer thing happened. It was really cool being me because people suddenly wanted to talk to me and get my opinion, I totally rode that wave. But then those games started to come out and people weren't really impressed, and writing about adventure games became a hard sell."

SkyGoblin's Theodor Waern, who is in the middle of creating the third chapter of his Afro-Caribbean adventure, *The Journey Down*, notes that a lack of previews doesn't help. "For a point-and-click adventure game to be able to make any sense, as a player you need to invest yourself in it. You need to pay attention for a while. Get the context. Without these things adventure games are crap. That's why previewing an adventure game is virtually impossible."

Other methods of engagement, like Let's Plays, come with their own problems for narrative-focused games. Waern and Gilbert aren't sure if they're a good fit, but White has a different perspective. "We've had some huge success from YouTubers and streamers; Cryaotic did a Let's Play of *Richard & Alice* very early on, and it

The Journey Down's masked characters certainly stand out.
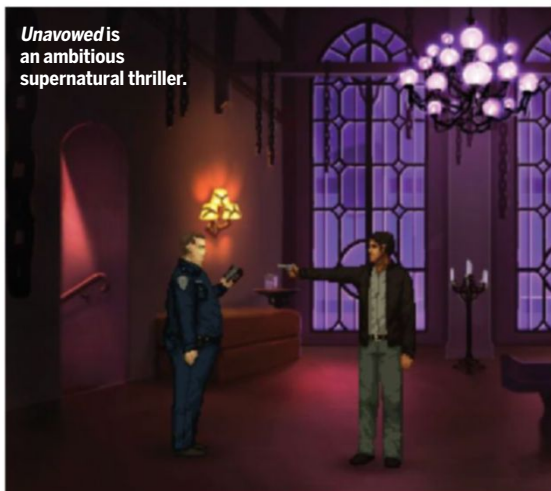
Unavowed is an ambitious supernatural thriller.

Old school appeal

DO ADVENTURE GAMES HAVE AN IMAGE PROBLEM?

1 THE ISSUE
The relatively low-resolution art style of adventure games tends to evoke comparisons with their predecessors from the '80s and '90s.

2 SAME BUT DIFFERENT
This is a pet peeve for Wadjet Eye's Dave Gilbert, who doesn't see his games as old-school or conventional beyond the pixel art itself.

3 IN GOOD COMPANY
Owl Cave Games' Olivia White, on the other hand, is comfortable with the label. They're classic adventure games mechanically, she says.

4 WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS
SkyGoblin's Theodor Waern likes the label, too. It's an unspoken agreement with the players to stick to a specific set of adventure game tropes.

made the game a lot more well known than we ever expected in the days before a publisher. Plus we quite regularly get a Twitch streamer or YouTuber who discovers the games, then get a burst of interest."

Aside from exceptions like Telltale and Daedalic, most adventure game developers are tiny, often independent teams. This can make them vulnerable. Waern explains that SkyGoblin generally lives paycheck to paycheck, while Gilbert became a publisher to spread some of the risk. "I wanted to hedge my bets and have more stuff to sell, because I knew that these games take so long to make that if I had one bad bomb, I'd be finished."

White partnered with the now defunct Mastertronic, which offered her a lot of support, and she hopes to find another publisher for *Oh Whistle And I'll Come To You,* and for the sequel to *The Charnel House Trilogy, Augur Peak.* The assistance was a boon, she tells me, especially since she is unable to take her games to shows due to serious back problems. Support for developers with disabilities is something she thinks needs to increase.

"The amount of disability awareness and support in the games industry is woeful. Event organizers could help by catering specifically to people who have mobility issues that prevent them from attending—some kind of funding or support for devs who need to pay extra for travel because of disabilities. Plus making sure the venues are disability-friendly is a must."

> ## "THE INDIE SCENE IS BUBBLING WITH BRAVERY AND CONSTANTLY PUSHING THE ENVELOPE"

Appearing on Steam used to be a coup for small developers, but changes to Valve's platform now mean that Waern, White and Gilbert must rely on bundles and big sales. "Bundling and putting the games on sale has been a quick and easy way to solve immediate financial shortcomings," Waern says, while White says that it's where she makes any meaningful money.

Although Wadjet Eye's games have benefited from being in bundles, Gilbert tells me that you've got to be smart about it. "If your game has been out for a long time, and it's been very slowly ticking along, why not put it in a bundle and get tens of thousands of dollars all at once? It makes a lot of sense for old games, but less so for new games because it devalues it. If you release a game and then three months later put it in a bundle, you're admitting defeat. Your sale cycle is pretty much done."

Despite the challenges, the developers remain optimistic and keen to continue evolving the genre. "I've come across a lot of experimental and very bold adventure games," Waern says, "both when it comes to experimenting with new ways of interacting with the game and also in tackling a lot of mature and sometimes very difficult theme. It's fun to see that the indie scene is bubbling with bravery and is constantly pushing the envelope."

Unavowed, The Journey Down Chapter 3 and *Oh Whistle And I'll Come To You* are due to launch in 2017. ■
Fraser Brown

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March	Ubisoft	In-house	www.bit.ly/grwildlands

GHOST RECON WILDLANDS

The Ghosts return to take on an evil Bolivian drug lord

The Santa Blanca drug cartel is rapidly expanding its territory in Bolivia, and the collapsing government is turning a blind eye. As long as there's no violence, they're free to manufacture huge quantities of cocaine and ship it around the world. Led by the cold, ruthless El Sueño, the cartel has turned Bolivia into the nexus of the South American drug trade. But where there's drug money there is, inevitably, violence, and the region is destabilizing. The government's soft touch has given the cartel space to grow to the size of an army, and it has no way of taking the country back.

In the middle of all this, a DEA agent is investigating Santa Blanca. But his cover is blown and the cartel responds by detonating a bomb in the US embassy and killing the agent. This is the flashpoint that sets the events of *Wildlands* in motion. The US sends in Ghost Recon, elite operatives whose mission is to covertly bring the cartel down. America can't risk an international incident by mobilizing the army to deal with El Sueño, so the Ghosts' presence in the country is top secret—and if they're captured or discovered, the government will deny all knowledge of them being there.

To reclaim Bolivia, the Ghosts have to deal with El Sueño's lieutenants and break his business down piece by piece. Production, smuggling, security, and influence are the four pillars of the cartel's drug empire, which you will bring crashing down. You also have to reclaim the country region by region, assassinating the powerful bosses who run them. This is a convenient way to give the game a structure, and over the course of your playthrough you'll slowly eat away at the cartel's forces until you draw El Sueño himself out of hiding and finish the job. But it's a long road to get there.

The Ghosts arrive in Bolivia at night in the middle of a raging storm. Undercover CIA handler Karen Bowman briefs them on the situation as bolts of lightning light up the mountains below. It's a dramatic introduction, with each flash giving you a brief glimpse at the incredible scale of the world. Your mission is called Operation Kingslayer, presumably because someone at the CIA is a big Game of Thrones fan. But despite the Ghosts' reputation as being the world's greatest covert ops team, they'll need some help from the local rebels to find their feet in this vast, violent country.

REBEL YELL

Bowman introduces the Ghosts to Pac Katari, leader of the Kataris 26 rebel army. To earn the trust of Katari, your first mission is to rescue his uncle Amaru, who's been captured by the cartel. Amaru is the heart of the rebel movement and rescuing him is the best way to get the rebels on your side. And it's here where the game finally hands the controls over to you. You find yourself gazing across a dramatic, seemingly endless valley. The world feels properly huge, and not just in a videogame sense—in the way the actual world does when you look out the window of an airplane.

I grab an off-road truck and the Ghosts pile in. The route to the village where Amaru is being held takes me along twisting mountain roads with dizzying drops on one side. The sun's low in the sky, casting an orange glow over the terrain, and I sort of wish I was just going for a nice drive in the country. But, alas, someone needs rescuing. I reach the village, which sits atop a high hill, and begin the mission. As their name suggests, the Ghosts are all about stealth, and going in guns blazing is almost always a very foolish idea. My priority, before I even set foot in the enemy-controlled area, is to scout.

I fling a flying drone into the air and buzz around the village. Enemies I spot are ➡

PLAYED IT
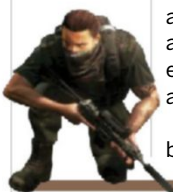
DESPITE THE GHOSTS' REPUTATION, THEY'LL NEED HELP FROM LOCAL REBELS

Ghost Recon Wildlands

marked on the HUD, and I like how my character mentions what weapons they have when I mark them. With an idea of the layout and enemy presence, I equip a silenced pistol and move slowly through the base, taking out guards, until I reach one of the cartel's lieutenants. He's throwing knives at a target, oblivious to the fact that I'm just about to grab him. I squeeze him for information and he reveals Amaru's whereabouts. He's being held in a nearby farm, so we pile back into the truck and head there.

Collecting intel like this is something you'll be doing a lot. To locate the boss in each region you have to determine their location by interrogating people, copying data from laptops, and other information-gathering. In the village I didn't need the other Ghosts' help, but here I will. The farmhouse is crawling with cartel heavies. I pull up the orders menu and position each Ghost, then I order them to open fire. The area erupts with gunfire and I use the distraction to flank the enemy and we make fast work of them. I find Amaru in the house bloodied, battered, but still alive. Mission accomplished.

I free Amaru from his cell and we escape in a helicopter that was handily parked outside. Katari is pleased, and to thank us he reveals the bosses of the first, and easiest, region in the game: La Yuri and El Polito. This sadistic couple control the cartel's interests in Itacu, and dethroning them becomes the Ghosts' first major objective. But finding out where they operate from will require intel. I pull up the map and see a scattering of missions. The ones in yellow reveal 'major intel', which means they're basically story missions. Complete enough of these and the bosses' location will be revealed.

But Yuri and Polito can wait until I get my hands on the finished game, because my time is limited and I want to explore some of this preposterously large world before I go. Despite being an expanse of largely remote countryside, I notice a few nice details as I drive around, including a village with some boys playing football. Then I steal a plane and fly over Bolivia's famous Laguna Colorada, a salt lake colored red by algae. I see thousands of pink

IT'S A GAME THAT WILL BENEFIT MASSIVELY FROM PLAYING WITH FRIENDS

flamingos, which fly into the air in a panic when they hear my engines. There's some good world-building going on here.

But I'm increasingly wary of developers who big up the size of their worlds, because size is, really, the least interesting thing about an open world. It's what's in the thing that matters, and I'd rather have a smaller, more detailed space than square miles of procedurally generated countryside. And from my brief flyover, it seems there's a lot of that making up this enormous chunk of Bolivia.

Wildlands is pretty much exactly what I expected it would be like. It's enjoyably tactical and rewards strategic thinking, but otherwise it's a fairly standard, by-the-numbers third-person shooter. Comparing it to other big-scale military/ stealth sandbox games, it doesn't have the variety or polish of *Metal Gear Solid V*, or the intricacy of *Arma 3*. It's a game that will benefit massively from playing with a group of friends who are all on the same page, communicating and making sensible decisions. Which is the total opposite of the co-op experience I had with three other journalists.

TEAM AMERICA

We tried our best, but every mission descended into chaos. Amusing chaos, sure, but useless when it came to completing objectives. Helicopters crashing all over the place, the alarm being raised at every opportunity, cars getting stuck in buildings. By the end we finally got our act together enough to infiltrate a huge enemy base and destroy four caches of munitions inside, but then all hell broke loose and we died escaping. This was a lot more fun than playing solo, but co-op always is. I'll need to play the game properly (and sensibly) to get a solid idea of its multiplayer potential.

When my demo ends I'm left feeling slightly uninspired by *Wildlands*. PC isn't short of open-world military shooters, and while this is clearly a well-made game, it's not terribly ambitious. It may also turn off some *Ghost Recon* fans who prefer the more focused, guided structure of earlier games in the series. This is another Ubisoft map littered with icons, and it remains to be seen whether the game can hold my interest long enough for me to conquer Bolivia and face El Sueño at the end. There aren't any really interesting systems, nor does it seem like there's much depth, which a game of this size really needs.
Andy Kelly

Interrogate cartel members to learn vital intel.

Take that, international drug smuggling operation.
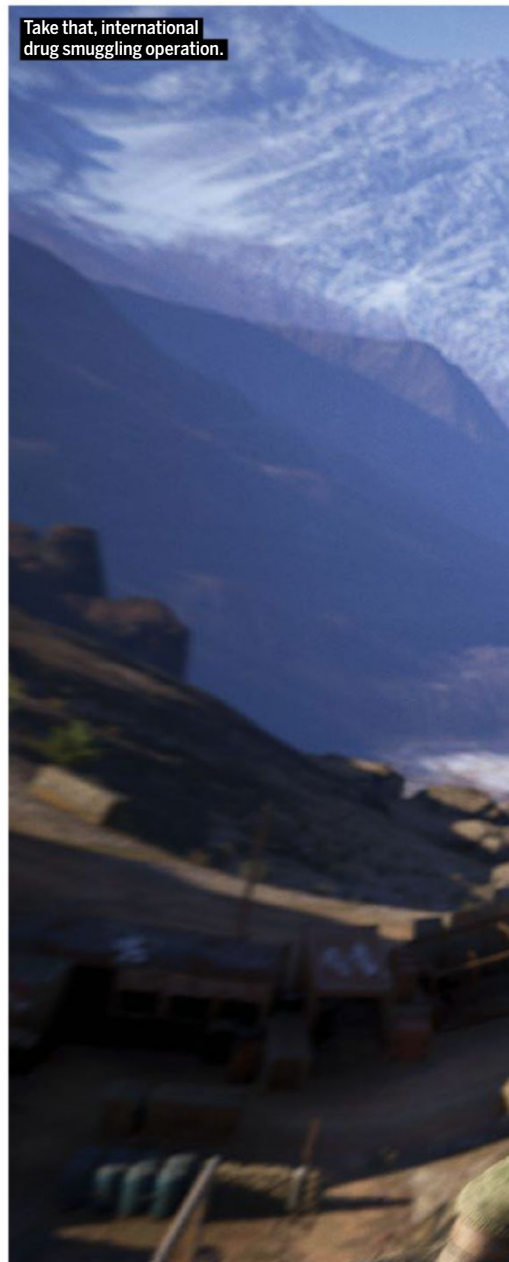
One of the bosses hides out in this abandoned silver mine.

D859

$1949

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7-6800K Processor
ASUS X99-E Motherboard
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1080 8GB
16GB DDR4-2400 Memory
256GB SSD + 1TB 7200RPM HDD
iBUYPOWER Noctis Blue Case
Asetek 550LC Liquid Cooling
Wireless AC Compatibility

GEFORCE GTX VRREADY

Z840

$1199

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i7 7700K Processor
MSI Z270 Motherboard
NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 1060 3GB
8GB DDR4-2400 Memory
240GB SSD + 1TB SATA-III HDD
24X DVDRW
Chimera 5 Flame Case
Asetek 550LC Liquid Cooling
Wireless AC Compatibility

GEFORCE GTX VRREADY

Z807

$899

Windows 10 Home
Intel® Core™ i5-7400 Processor
MSI Z270 Motherboard
NVIDIA® GeForce®GTX 1050 2GB
8GB DDR4-2400 Memory
240GB SSD + 1TB SATA-III HDD
24X DVDRW
Chimera Snow Case
Asetek 550LC Liquid Cooling
Wireless AC Compatibility

Work easy. Play hard. Windows

I've seen feistier feasts, to be honest.

Rurik

Ragnhildr the White

Nefja H[...]

Skule Skullcleaver

A traditional Viking party.

"What time is it, Mr Fox?"

The Feast

- [ ] Take a seat next to your mother.
- [ ] (Optional) Talk to the thegns. (0/3)

Nereidr Modolfsson

olmunardottir

EXPEDITIONS: VIKING

Run a village and get into scraps as a fresh-faced Viking noble

Gosh, my dad is rubbish. Not my actual dad, mind, who is lovely, but my videogame dad. He's only gone and got himself killed, leaving me to clean up the awful mess he made of our village while he still lived. That's how *Expeditions: Viking* begins—with a dead father, and a son or daughter shouldering a massive burden. It's more enjoyable than it sounds.

The old man died on an adventure in the west, after mismanaging the village for years. So now the place is poor, defenseless, and easy pickings. This leaves you, as the new thegn, attempting the same potentially foolhardy adventure in an effort to save your home.

Expeditions: Viking is both an RPG and a turn-based tactics game, but there's the hint of a management sim in here too, which places the fate of people and a settlement in your hands. On one side there's your party, called a hind. You get control over their inventory, must deal with their injuries or other maladies, and give them orders in camp to hunt for food or guard your sleeping warriors. You can control four of them in battle, not including your own character.

Fights are, at least in the first chapter, reasonably fast-paced, and though not difficult, a couple of mistakes can lead to defeat. It doesn't take much for an ordinary person to go down in battle. An axe to the chest isn't a minor problem. A broad range of abilities are available and while characters come with their own specialities, they can be developed as you

PLAYED IT

like. There's also a spot of magic, though it's historically grounded. Powder that blinds enemies. Battle cries that make them cower in fear. It's science and psychology masquerading as mystical.

Each member of the hind comes with their own baggage and attitudes, and decisions big and small will determine what they make of your leadership. When I confessed admiration for a man who seemed blessed by Odin, for instance, my more skeptical chums grumbled a bit. Eventually this can lead to friends being lost and new enemies gained, so it pays to get to know your party.

VIKING FOR SURVIVAL

Then there's the bigger picture. Quests and construction projects can help your people dig themselves out of the mire their last thegn left them in, and the whole impetus of the primary quest is the survival of your clan. But you don't have to care about that. Maybe you'd rather be a carousing warrior, smashing skulls instead of paying for the construction of farms.

Deciding what leader you want to be and then sticking to it can be tough. I wanted to be good, helping people and being a role model for little Vikings, but it was a struggle. When a group of men in the forest attacked my hind, we eventually realized they were escaped thralls. Slaves. From our village. I was left with three options: let them go, execute them or take them back with us. The first was the obvious good guy option, but what about the village? With so much work to be done, the loss of even a few thralls could threaten the already shaky ground we were on. The pragmatic option could save more lives.

More grounded in reality than your typical RPG, *Expeditions: Viking* doesn't shy away from the unpleasant realities of the Viking Age. It's not a glamorous, fanciful game. It might be better for it, too. Instead of wizards and dragons, it's sickness, greed, festering wounds and politics that present the greatest threats. By being more recognizable challenges, they are also more tangible.

It remains to be seen how far-reaching the consequences of your decisions will prove after the first chapter, but *Expeditions: Viking* is off to a good start. *Fraser Brown*

SICKNESS, GREED, FESTERING WOUNDS AND POLITICS ARE YOUR GREATEST THREATS

A cozy facade for a scary reality.

THE MANNEQUIN

Time is seriously broken in this haunted London house

The house, scene of a gruesome unsolved murder, has been left rotting for sixty years. Your family decides to sell it and sends you to see what state it's in. You explore the dusty, forgotten house by the glow of your phone's flashlight. There's furniture draped in white sheets, cobwebs in the corners, and piles of unread mail. Then you reach the attic and see a plastic mannequin, its head and limbs scattered around it. You pick up each piece, slotting it back in. And that's when things start getting scary.

PLAYED IT

The Mannequin is a narrative-focused first-person horror game being developed by a small team based in Oxfordshire in England. The first thing that strikes me when I play it is the stylish art style. Survival game *The Long Dark* seems to have been an inspiration, particularly how it mixes realistic lighting with textures that look hand-painted. Developer Two Tails says the game is about "terror and tragedy" as you try to uncover the truth about what really happened in the house, and I'm definitely intrigued to find out.

I turn my back on the mannequin I've just rebuilt, and when I turn back it's gone. This is a horror game, after all. Two Tails describes the creepy, dead-eyed thing as a "malevolent entity" and you'll spend the game being stalked by it. Things get interesting when I hear music playing downstairs, only to enter the lounge and find the previously abandoned, dust-covered room back in its prime. There's brand new furniture and a crackling fire. This time-shifting is a big part of the story, which moves you frequently between the present day and 1958.

Occasionally I walk into a room, only to find creepy posed mannequins acting out moments from the house's storied past.

I TURN MY BACK ON THE MANNEQUIN I'VE REBUILT, AND WHEN I TURN BACK IT'S GONE

It's a nice twist on the ghostly apparitions that usually haunt these games, and there's something unnerving about the way the figures just stand there with their blank faces. But, a sense of rumbling unease aside, the game isn't terribly scary at the moment. The mannequin's appearances are sudden and unexpected, but it has none of the intimidating presence of the creatures from games like *Amnesia* or *Soma*. I mean, it can't even walk. It just stands there looking at you.

DOLL'S HOUSE

But *The Mannequin* still has a long way to go, and while I can't say the titular plastic doll really terrified me, I do want to learn more about this creaky old house and the grim things that happened here. I love the visual style and the atmosphere, but it's the story that will ultimately determine whether this sits among the best of the genre. I do like the concept of a story focusing on a single location and crossing between time periods, and I hope the writers make good use of this to spin a suitably creepy, mind-bending yarn.

Andy Kelly

gamesradar+

The premier source for everything video games, TV, films, and more.

SQUAD GOALS

New weapons include flamethrowers, smoke grenades and mines. As in *XCOM*, your troops are specific people. If you lose any in combat, your overall strength will be weaker in the campaign.

INSERTION POINT

Maps are based on your squad's location in the city. These aren't predetermined layouts. Each is custom generated based on where you are, and the surrounding streets and buildings.

FROZEN SYNAPSE 2

NEW INFO

Turn-based combat in a city of intrigue

F *rozen Synapse 2* takes the simultaneous turn-based action of the original game, and enhances it with a sandbox campaign set across an entire, dynamic city. It's a two-tier approach that resembles *X-COM: Apocalypse,* albeit with more neon and a faction of bakers. The campaign draws together factions, political intrigue and procedurally generated missions.
Phil Savage

INFILTRATION
Arrive unseen and you'll catch the enemy unawares. This triggers a breach phase in which you're in stealth. If you're spotted or make a kill, the action reverts to traditional combat.

CAUSE AND EFFECT
The simulation is consistent across the combat and city layers. A gunfight on the street might annoy the city management faction, while conversely, if you see a faction claim an item on the map, you can trigger a combat mission to steal it.

Experience VR Anywhere

on the Most Powerful VR Ready Laptops

10 Series Desktop-Class Graphics

Up to Dual 1080s in a Single Laptop

EON17-SLX

EVO15-S

VR Ready

NP9172 Notebook
$2,399
FREE UPS GROUND SHIPPING*

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700K Processor
- 17.3" Full HD IPS Matte Display (1920x1080) w/NVIDIA® G-SYNC Technology
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1070 8GB GPU
- Opt. NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1060 or 1080 GPU
- 16GB Dual Channel DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 500GB Samsung 850 EVO M.2 SSD + 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Killer DoubleShot™ Pro with Smart Teaming (1000Mbps LAN + Killer Wireless-AC 1535)
- Thunderbolt Gen3 & USB 3.1 Type-C Ports
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera & Fingerprint Reader
- Headphone output w/ESS SABRE HIFI Audio DAC

NP9152 Notebook
$1,899
FREE UPS GROUND SHIPPING*

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700 Processor
- 15.6" Full HD IPS Matte Display (1920x1080) w/NVIDIA® G-SYNC Technology
- Opt. 15.6" FHD,120Hz 5ms Matte Display with G-SYNC
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1060 6GB GPU
- Optional NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1070 GPU
- 16GB Dual Channel DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 256GB SanDisk X400 M.2 SSD + 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Killer DoubleShot™ Pro with Smart Teaming (1000Mbps LAN + Killer Wireless-AC 1535)
- Thunderbolt Gen3 & USB 3.1 Type-C Port
- Headphone output w/ESS SABRE HIFI Audio DAC

NP8177 Notebook
$1,799
FREE UPS GROUND SHIPPING*

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
- Opt. unlocked Intel® Core™ i7-7820HK Processor
- 17.3" Full HD IPS Matte Display (1920x1080) w/NVIDIA® G-SYNC Technology
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1070 8GB GPU
- 16GB Dual Channel DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 256GB SanDisk X400 M.2 SSD + 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Intel® Dual Band Wireless-AC 8265 + Bluetooth
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera & Fingerprint Reader
- Headphone output w/ESS SABRE HIFI Audio DAC
- Slim design with only 1.18 inch thin

NP8157 Notebook
$1,699
After $50 Instant Savings

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
- Opt. Intel® Core™ i7-7820HK Processor
- 15.6" Full HD IPS Matte Display (1920x1080) w/NVIDIA® G-SYNC Technology
- Opt. 15.6" 4K QFHD or FHD 120Hz 5ms, Matte Display with G-SYNC
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1070 8GB GPU
- 16GB Dual Channel DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 256GB SanDisk X400 M.2 SSD + 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Intel® Dual Band Wireless-AC 8265 + Bluetooth
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera & Fingerprint Reader
- Headphone output w/ESS SABRE HIFI Audio DAC

NP8176 Notebook
$1,549
FREE UPS GROUND SHIPPING*

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
- 17.3" Full HD IPS Matte Display (1920x1080) w/NVIDIA® G-SYNC Technology
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1060 6GB GPU
- 16GB Dual Channel DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 256GB SanDisk X400 M.2 SSD + 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Intel® Dual Band Wireless-AC 8265 + Bluetooth
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera & Fingerprint Reader
- Sound Blaster® X-Fi™ MB5 Sound System
- Slim design with only 1.18 inch thin

NP8156 Notebook
$1,499
FREE UPS GROUND SHIPPING*

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
- 15.6" Full HD IPS Matte Display (1920x1080) w/NVIDIA® G-SYNC Technology
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1060 6GB GPU
- 16GB Dual Channel DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 256GB SanDisk X400 M.2 SSD + 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Intel® Dual Band Wireless-AC 8265 + Bluetooth
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera & Fingerprint Reader
- Sound Blaster® X-Fi™ MB5 Sound System
- Slim design with only 0.98 inch thin

NP8155 Notebook
$1,199
After $100 Instant Savings

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1060 3GB GPU
- 8GB DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 1TB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- Full Color Programmable backlight Keyboard
- Intel® Dual Band Wireless-AC 8265 + Bluetooth
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera & Fingerprint Reader
- Sound Blaster® X-Fi™ MB5 Sound System
- Slim design with only 0.98 inch thin

NP5855 Notebook
$799
After $100 Instant Savings

- Windows® 10 Home
- 7th Generation Intel® Core™ i7-7700HQ Processor
- 15.6" Full HD Matte Display (1920x1080)
- NVIDIA® GeForce™ GTX 1050 2GB GPU
- 8GB DDR4-2400MHz Memory
- 1TB 5400RPM Hard Drive
- Single Color White-LED backlight Keyboard
- Intel® Dual Band Wireless-AC 3165 + Bluetooth
- Built-in 2.0M FHD Camera
- Sound Blaster® Cinema 3 Sound System
- Slim design with only 0.98 inch thin

Customize and Instant Pricing at: SAGERNOTEBOOK.COM

The BioWare devs tell us how
ANDROMEDA will make **MASS
EFFECT** about exploration again.

By Samuel Roberts

N E W
H O R I Z

ONS

The Reaper threat loomed over the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy. You knew this deadly, ancient race of alien machines would arrive one day, and you knew Shepard and company would have to face them when they did. Their presence meant the third game was never going to be anything but a grim, bitter bloodbath. *Andromeda* doesn't have a big bad—at least, not in the same way. BioWare wants to get away from that idea of an overarching threat. Instead, this is about exploring new worlds and trying to find a new home for mankind, and a deliberate attempt to create a sci-fi story with a slightly more optimistic bent instead of barrelling towards certain doom.

Mass Effect Andromeda

"The Reapers had basically attacked and everything had all gone to shit," says producer Michael Gamble of *Mass Effect 3*'s story. "It's really hard to have a story about an individual, their struggles, their personal crises, how you can help and what you want to do with them under the umbrella of 'Oh, and by the way the galaxy is basically ending', right? For *Andromeda* we wanted to remove that a little bit so that we can tell stories of exploration, stories of a more casual nature. Now, it wouldn't be a *Mass Effect* unless there was this larger meta-story kind of going on in the background, and there certainly is for *Andromeda*. There is something going on that's larger than the game itself—that exists because I don't think it'd be *Mass Effect* without that. But we definitely want to take on a bit of a lighter tone, for sure."

Andromeda is set 600 years after *Mass Effect 3*. You play one of the Ryder twins, Scott or Sarah, assigned the role of Pathfinder when your father passes it on for as-yet-unknown reasons in the opening act. This means it's your job to find a new home in the Andromeda galaxy for the human colonists on the Hyperion, one of the huge 'ark' ships carrying familiar *Mass Effect* species from the Milky Way. (There are no Hanar or Elcor arks. Or maybe the Elcor haven't left yet because they were so slow to pack?)

The Andromeda Initiative, as it's called, isn't going as peacefully as humanity hoped. For one thing, there's the bumpy alien race the Kett. For another, our educated guess (a "good one", according to BioWare's Mac Walters) is that some of the Initiative broke off and formed factions—and some now operate as outlaws. That's why there are other settlements of familiar species to find in the galaxy.

The structure of the game is influenced by both the original *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. In place of the Mako is the Nomad, which is more fine-tuned for driving across planetary landscapes thanks to BioWare working with *Need For Speed* developer Ghost. In place of the Normandy is the smaller but slicker spacecraft, the Tempest. Planets will have enemy bases to clear out, drop points that can detail places of interest on the surface, powerful optional enemies, and areas to scan that can

"THERE IS SOMETHING GOING ON, LARGER THAN THE GAME ITSELF"

Additional pointy tiny wings always make spaceships look cooler.

The Kett are the only new species revealed so far.

open up crafting opportunities. There are also puzzle-locked vaults to uncover and investigate.

Each planet is its own distinct story, creative director Mac Walters says. "One of the things that was very critical for us early on was this saying that when we develop these planets, each one needs its own story and its own history, its own backstory and its reason for existing. It needs to be unique and memorable compared to all the other planets that are out there. Each of them has characters that are associated with it and its cultural nuances, but also, usually, its major decision points that impact that planet. Sometimes beyond that planet as well."

There are also over a dozen 'hubs' in addition to the planet areas, including the Nexus, a Citadel-like space station, and Kadara, a populated zone that looks like a more cyberpunk version of a Wild West town from Firefly. Walters describes the hubs as 'information centers' and a 'pitch point' before you're sent out into the greater galaxy.

"So the planets are interwoven throughout all of that as you play."

GALACTIC GRIND
One glaring issue with *Inquisition*'s open world was that the sidequests frequently felt like filler—collecting decorative gems, for example, or fighting bears. It's what we've unofficially dubbed "the Hinterlands problem" on PC Gamer, where the player gets stuck in one location, dutifully grinding through all the sidequests instead of getting on with the superior main story, dampening their enthusiasm to carry on. "I don't know if we're doing anything to 'discourage' people from doing that," says producer Fabrice Condominas. "But we are approaching the completionist aspect very differently, because we've done and learned a lot from *Inquisition*. But we've also observed what other games have been doing, like *The Witcher*. And it was very important for us that the quantity of scope doesn't downgrade the quality of

whatever you are doing there." Condominas describes all the game's sidequests as "meaningful".

Along with those and the main story, you've got loyalty missions, returning from *Mass Effect 2*. In almost all of those, Shepard had to resolve something in a squadmate's past, altering their relationship for better or worse. I think they yielded many of the moments fans recall when they deem the second game the best, so bringing them back was wise—particularly with such a radically different setting.

"It absolutely changes the type of stories that we can tell," says Gamble. "If you think about the setting, the initial setup for *Andromeda*—it is a pretty fertile ground to tell different stories on. You've traveled so many years to get here, not everyone arrives at the same time, there are things going on in Andromeda that you have no control over and you're the alien to that. There are local inhabitants of Andromeda; there are the aggressors in Andromeda, and you just kind of stumble upon all of this.

"The squad members that you have, whether they've arrived with you or whether they've come before or they'll come after—in addition to the kind of political game that's been going on already in Andromeda, that sets a cool ground for us to tell a lot of different side stories. The story is not only about the cast. The story is about settling, the story is about survival, the story is about the locals—and that's where the loyalties will definitely focus."

Five squad members have been revealed at the time of writing. There's

NEW COMPANIONS

What we know about the five squadmates revealed so far

PEEBEE
An asari and a bit of a loner—but very cheerful. A contrast to Liara.

LIAM
Chipper and supportive. Let's hope he's not this game's Kaidan.

CORA
Order-driven and militaristic human. You start the game with her.

DRACK
A Krogan and more of a mystery right now. Probably likes hitting things.

VETRA
Mass Effect's first female Turian squadmate. Has a cool visor.

Liam, a human who's part of your initial Pathfinder squad and apparently an idealistic presence. There's a krogan called Drack, and a female turian called Vetra. Then there's Peebee, an asari, and Cora, who's part of your initial team from the Hyperion along with Liam. Gamble says it was tough to create a party so different to that of the original trilogy—you had three games and five years' worth of investment in Garrus. As Gamble tells me, investment isn't something that's created overnight, it comes from going through some shit together, sometimes across multiple playthroughs. One character was reportedly even cut for being too similar to others from the trilogy.

"Some characters appeal to different people for different reasons," Gamble says. "And I think some of the beauty of *Mass Effect* is we have a number of characters, and because of the depth that we can build into them, we're allowed to appeal to everyone in different ways. So for example, Cora will appeal to a certain type … she's a type of character who I think is likely more militaristic and orders and rules based. Whereas Peebee will appeal to a different kind of person who is looking for someone who is more fun, adventurous and carefree and that kind of stuff. We try and have characters which cover a gamut of where we think players' heads are at."

Paragon and renegade have been replaced with an as-yet unannounced, less binary system—and interrupts return from previous games. BioWare has worked harder to deepen your non-romantic relationships, too. "The ability to express tone and different emotions to many NPCs in the game, and have different reactions from them based on that, is not just exclusive to your love interests anymore. It's kind of sprinkled more throughout the game."

IN PROFILE

Progression, combat and customization have received similarly intense overhauls. Your characters' class is assigned based on the abilities you choose to unlock. "Your first menu, you actually don't choose a class," Condominas explains. "The idea is that you will have access to all the skills from any class when you go along with the game, but depending where you invest, you'll actually unlock 'profiles', which are the equivalent of classes—so the Soldier or whatever—but you'll unlock them as you go based on where you choose to invest the different skills." You'll be able to swap those profiles as you go, too, if a particular situation out on a planet requires more of an Infiltrator approach.

The combat has also received a substantial overhaul. As detailed in last issue's hands-on preview with

Andromeda's multiplayer, you can jump, hover in mid-air while aiming and perform a melee slam attack. It's much more open. Instead of rolling, you use a dash attack, and cover is automatic. While BioWare says some of the story missions are a little more arena-like, combat in the open-world planets is a different deal. You can leave a combat zone if you want to, and the AI has been reworked for open spaces. Biotic abilities are expressed with more extravagant animations, and pleasingly it looks far more like an action game from 2017 than one from 2009.

You have the ability to build and name your own weapons, as well. Melee weapons have their own slots in your inventory, so while you start with an omni-blade, you can later swap this

"SPACE IS NO LONGER REPRESENTED ON A 2D PLANE"

HINTERLANDS IN SPACE?

Dragon Age: Inquisition's opening environment was notoriously dull—too many filler sidequests, and it was a bit unclear when you were allowed to go somewhere else. When *Mass Effect*

Andromeda comes out, put its planets and their associated sidequests to this test. Anything more than a one out of five means that you're in the Hinterlands—in space.

- ☑ You've been in the same environment for over four hours without seeing any new cutscenes.
- ☑ You're hunting some kind of creature or gathering some kind of mineral to make a thing, but you're not sure why.
- ☑ You've forgotten why you came here and you're not exactly sure when you're allowed to leave.
- ☑ There are so many icons on the map that you're genuinely stressed about where to go next.
- ☑ Ultimately you feel OK about all of this, though, because BioWare is so good at writing party banter.

Less flat planets means more moments of shouting "Wahey!"

for a krogan-style hammer. I ask Gamble if this an effort to an inject a more traditionally RPG-style system back into *Mass Effect*, because I know some players miss that stuff about BioWare games. "Yes ... I mean fundamentally, we just think it's really cool to be able to name your weapon, and call them what you want," he says. "I guess you can say in that direction with *Andromeda*, we're trying to build depth into nearly every system, and that's just one example of that."

That goes for space exploration from the Tempest, too—your new pilot is a salarian called Kallo Jath. I'm curious about the galaxy map on Ryder's ship, and how space is represented in *Andromeda* generally, but right now Gamble speaks in broad strokes instead of specifics. They've worked to make space travel feel more tangible, and less like a detached set of menus. "The fundamental difference really between what we have now and what we had before is that you are represented in 3D space. So space exists—space is a place that you fly around via the map—you don't actually control and this is not a flight sim. But it's no longer represented on a 2D plane, so that allows us to do a lot more cool things visually. That allows us to do some unique and interesting gameplay with it, but the immersion level of it is the key factor. You never now have to pop into this small UI and travel around. *Mass Effect* has always been a space game, but—in my opinion—we've never actually nailed the look of space. That's really what it adds, and that's really what I think we should be most proud of."

Mass Effect Andromeda should be a far truer representation of the original game's sense of exploration than BioWare was able to pull off in 2007, married to some of the deeper squadmate-specific characterisation seen in the second and third games. *Inquisition* gave us our first glimpse of what the new generation of BioWare RPG looks like—but *Andromeda* is its opportunity to get closer to what they're traditionally good at. It's not really about how many sidequests you can fit into an open world: it's about taking that journey into unknown lands with characters who you love, and becoming deeply involved in the stories of those you meet, whether they're friendly or total bastards. ■
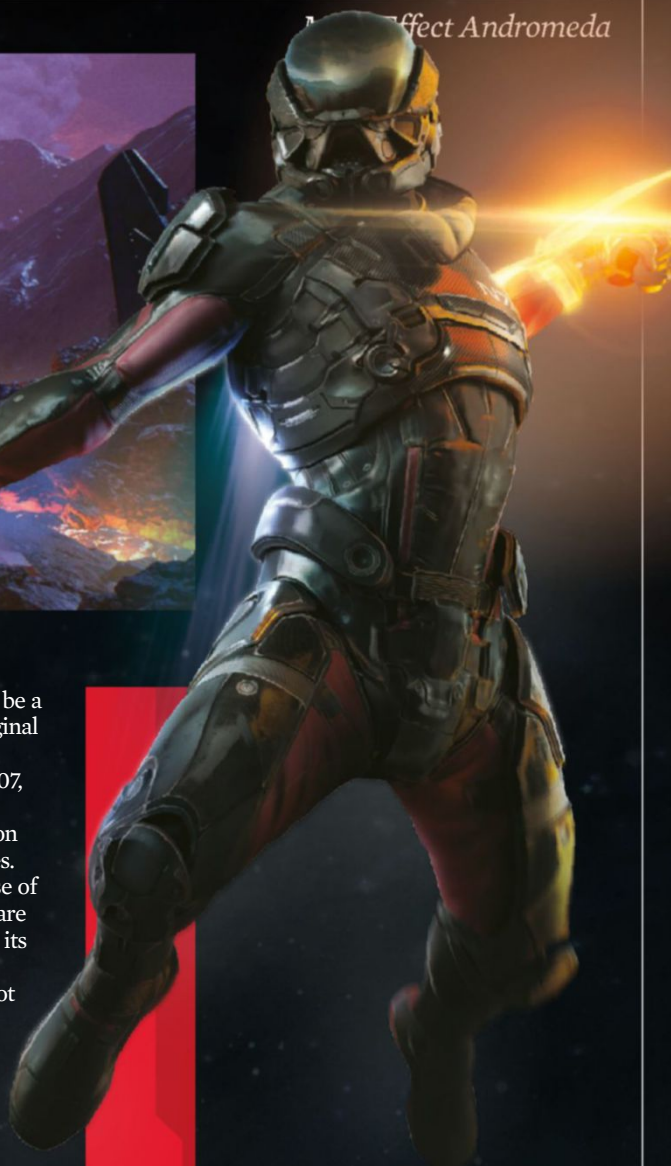
From this angle it looks like you're shooting up someone's living room.

The
HISTORY
of
RPGS

The first half of our complete guide to PC RPGs, from *Dungeon* to *The Witcher 3*.

By Richard Cobbett

PART I

THE QUEST BEGINS

1975 - 1990

Computers and RPGs have always gone hand-in-hand. Even when the best adventurers could hope for visually was a few letters and numbers on a screen, what better way could there be to handle stats, die-rolls and complex calculations? Soon enough, though, computer RPGs were capable of doing much more.

The original PC RPGs—such as MUDs, or multi-user dungeons—appeared in the mid-'70s. These weren't for home computers, but mainframes, typically found in universities. They tended to be based on either Dungeons & Dragons, which itself launched in 1974, or be variously disguised takes on Tolkien. These included *Dungeon*, *DND*, *Orthanc* and *Oubliette*. A few, such as *Oubliette*, had simple graphics, though most started out as just text or used ASCII's standard set of text-mode graphics.

Despite the primitive technology, these games often offered surprising depth. Don Daglow's *Dungeon* for instance, a 1975 D&D pastiche, offered control of an entire multiplayer party, mapping, NPCs with AI, line-of-sight-based combat, and both melee and ranged attacks. *Moria*, from the same year, served up wireframe graphics for its characters, and even featured rudimentary 3D views of its corridors. Small ones, with no detail, but let's not forget that even *Space Invaders* wasn't out yet.

```
on
Okay
plug
You are in a large room, with a passage
to the south, a passage to the west, and
a wall of broken rock to the east. There
is a large 'Y2' on a rock in the room's
centre.

A hollow voice says 'PLUGH'.
look
You are in a large room, with a passage
to the south, a passage to the west, and
a wall of broken rock to the east. There
is a large 'Y2' on a rock in the room's
centre.

A hollow voice says 'PLUGH'.
```

BRINGING IT HOME

For those outside universities, the genre really began around 1980. There had been games for home systems before that, including *Temple of Apshai* for the TRS-80 and *Beneath Apple Manor* for the Apple II, but few of them made real waves. 1980 saw the launch of *Rogue*, the first true dungeon crawl game, whose combination of randomly generated content and permadeath set the tone for today's 'roguelikes'. It would be a few more years before it and its clones would be available on home computers—the PC version landed in 1984—but the basics were here.

The most successful dungeon crawler of all time is, of course, Blizzard's *Diablo*. But *Rogue*'s longest-lived descendent is arguably a much more interesting game—1987's *Nethack*. Technically, it was based on a *Rogue* clone called, yes, *Hack*, but let's not quibble. *Nethack* takes the basic dungeon crawling concept and adds several decades' worth of development. Ever wondered if throwing a custard pie in a basilisk's face will stop its petrifying stare? *Nethack* not only answers that question (it will), but also implements blindness if you get hit by a pie yourself, causes you to break your code if a vegan character eats one (seriously), and ensures the attack doesn't count if you're on a pacifist run (it does no damage, no matter your combat bonus). This level of detail lead to the saying "The Dev Team Thinks Of Everything". Many versions are now available, from the original ASCII-based game to graphical overhauls like *Vulture's Eye*. All are free, as a condition of the distribution license.

As home computers became more popular over the '80s, they began to take over—and many of the big names are still with us. *Wizardry*, for instance, launched in 1981, and the series ran until 2001. It used simple graphics and played out mostly using menus, in a way that most western RPGs would soon try to move away from. However, its popularity in Japan led to it largely defining what that market thought an RPG was. Later games like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* still follow its lead today, albeit with those systems endlessly refined and prettified. *The Bard's Tale* followed in its footsteps in 1985, with three games, and returned last year courtesy of a $1.4 million Kickstarter.

1

THROWING A PIE IN A BASILISK'S FACE WILL STOP ITS PETRIFYING STARE
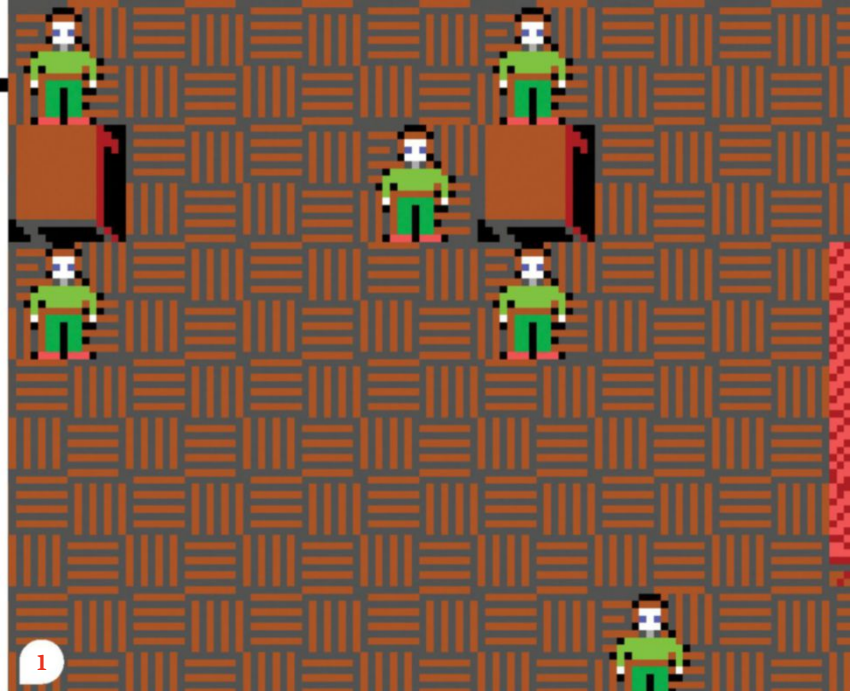
INTO THE DUNGEON

Almost all RPGs of this era were fantasy based, though there were a few exceptions like Origin's car-based *Autoduel* (1985, based on Steve Jackson Games' Car Wars) and *Starflight* (1986), which swapped the traditional party for the crew of a spaceship on a quest to explore the universe and find out why the stars of the galaxy are flaring and destroying everything around. (It would later inspire the wonderful *Star Control 2*, as well as be one of the linchpins for BioWare's *Mass Effect* series.)

This shouldn't, however, be much of a surprise. Fantasy worlds were easy to both produce and to understand—the difference between a shortsword and a broadsword being easy to parse. They also didn't require much in the way of story, which was good, because they rarely offered much more than 'go forth and slay the Bad Dude/retrieve the Golden Whatever/rescue the Generic Princess'. That wasn't their fault, and it wasn't simply that nobody wanted to tell stories. It was that doing so was difficult.

Most games of this era didn't have the disk space for text. A 5¼ inch floppy disk held around 720KB of data. Its more compact successor, the 3½ inch floppy, held about 1.2MB. The more floppy disks a game needed, the more expensive it was to produce. This is why, for example, the first *Eye of the Beholder* doesn't have an ending sequence. One was planned, but it would have required an extra disk. The publisher said no. Instead, your reward for getting to the end was a quick burst of text reading, more or less, "well done you won". (The Amiga version retained the cinematic, so you can find it on YouTube now if you still feel ripped off).

Some games found ways around this problem. *Wasteland*, for instance, released in 1987, came with a printed book that resembled a Choose Your Own Adventure. The idea was that when you reached a critical part, the game told you which paragraph to read. This saved space on the disks for more maps, graphics and other good stuff that RPGs really needed.

Most games got around it by shrugging and not worrying about it at all. Dungeon-crawling was what people expected

1
Wasteland

2
DragonStrike

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

Strangely, despite D&D's influence on the genre, the source made few waves at the time. This isn't because there weren't official games. Just about anyone who was anyone bid for the license when owners TSR finally made it available in the mid-'80s, before it was ultimately won by a company called Strategic Simulations Inc. This makes some sense. D&D started more as a wargame than a story-rich property, and wargames were what SSI did.

Its most prominent attempt at an RPG was called *Wizard's Crown*, which focused heavily on combat and character development mechanics. It had also dipped into the genre for the *Phantasie* series, and with *Questron*, a game so close to *Ultima* in design that *Ultima's* creator, Richard Garriott, filed a suit against it.

SSI's later AD&D-based RPGs became known as 'Gold Box' games, based on, quite simply, the design of their boxes. Examples include *Pool of Radiance* and *Death Knights of Krynn*. They were popular, but rolled out on a production line, featuring top-down worlds, menu-based combat and very similar graphics—despite whether the world was fantasy or, as with *Buck Rogers: Matrix Cubed*, 25th century sci-fi. Still, the series was better received than many of the spin-offs that SSI published, like the side-scrolling *Heroes of the Lance* and its instant deathtraps. Until *Baldur's Gate* came along, the Gold Box series was the defining AD&D experience, despite a great many games coming out using its settings over the next ten years. Of the others, one of the most interesting, though often forgotten, is Westwood Studios' *DragonStrike*—a 3D dragon-hunting game that combined fantasy and early graphics technology to let you ride your own beast and take on others in action combat. It was billed as a Dragon Combat Simulator, and there's no good reason why that didn't become a genre.

Overall, while these games were popular at the time, they didn't contribute a vast amount to the growing RPG genre. The source-material was much better picked through for ideas, rather than full conversions. Gold Box games were popular, but quickly outstayed their welcome and are now best remembered as a thing of their time, while most others around them are best forgotten.

Ironically, many of the fondest remembered are the ones not from familiar parts of the AD&D world (which in games, has tended to be Forgotten Realms and Greyhawk), like the Eastern themed *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse*. The big exception is the aforementioned *Eye of the Beholder*, which cemented future *Command & Conquer* creators Westwood as a studio to watch.

---

from these games, and dungeon-crawling is what they got. 1987's *Dungeon Master*, for instance, which offered a huge 3D viewing window on the dungeon (redrawn in chunks, step by step, not a fluid 3D engine), real-time combat, rune-based magic, and seemingly endless maps to explore. To put expectations into context, this was a time when anything 3D was impressive, and a game could make waves by letting you go outside—even when 'outside' meant painting the ceiling blue, replacing the dungeon walls with trees, and claiming it was a particularly dense forest.

The trick was still working by 1993's *Dungeon Master II: The Legend of Skullkeep* and Westwood's *Lands of Lore*, despite games like *The Bard's Tale* long having experimented with 'dungeons' that were, say, the streets of a monster-infested town, and even the UK TV show Knightmare, which went a couple of seasons inside computer-painted dungeons before 'upgrading' to location footage. The general rule was that dungeons could be first person, but overworlds were top down. We craved the day when a company like Origin would announce *Ultima Overworld*.

DUNGEONS COULD BE FIRST PERSON, BUT OVERWORLDS WERE TOP-DOWN

Get to know...

LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

Mike Singleton's epic fantasy was one of the big UK hits of the '80s, combining 3D graphics (actually bits of scenery stuck together) with two ways to fight the villain—as an adventurer, steal the source of his power, or as a general, raise armies to fight him the old-fashioned way.

LUXOR THE MOONPRINCE
He stands at the Tower of the Moon, Looking South to the Downs of Shadows.

THE ULTIMA EFFECT

Easily the most important series of the era was Richard "Lord British" Garriott's *Ultima*. The first game, not including Garriott's unrelated *Akalabeth*, came out in 1981, though it was re-coded and re-released five years later. It was an impressive game for the time, offering a top-down mode for exploring the world, a first-person wireframe dungeon crawling mode, and, for no particularly good reason except that he had space left on the disk, an outer space section where you shoot down TIE Fighters to be declared a 'Space Ace', and unlock a time machine that allows you to go back and kill the invulnerable villain Mondain before he has a chance to become so. This mixing of genres and throwing in random 'cool' stuff for the heck of it wasn't unique to *Ultima*—*Wizardry* quickly developed a taste for merging fantasy and sci-fi—but this was still pretty surprising at the time.

Still, *Ultima* was simply another popular RPG until *Ultima IV*. Tabletop RPGs were taking a lot of flak from the moral minority at this point, up to and including being accused of promoting Satanism (magic, demons, all that good stuff). PC RPGs were no different. Fed up with this, or so the story goes, Garriott decided to make *Ultima IV* about something unquestionably positive—the quest to become a better person. While there are monsters and dungeons, there's no big cackling villain. Instead, winning means coming to embody the Eight Virtues of Truth, Honesty, Compassion, Justice, Sacrifice, Spirituality, Humility and Valor, to become the Avatar of Virtue; a symbol to look up to. This meant, for

RPGS WERE TAKING FLAK, ACCUSED OF PROMOTING SATANISM

instance, not murdering peaceful creatures for their XP, or paying for goods with stolen gold.

This put *Ultima* on a fascinating path. Each new game not only offered a new engine, often stretching the limits of current PC power, but set about trying to tell a story that mattered. Having explored the Virtues in *Ultima IV*, *Ultima V* flips them. You return to *Ultima*'s world, Britannia, to find it under the control of a tyrant called Blackthorn, who is using the Virtues as weapons of moral absolutism. If you do not compassionately give half your income to charity, then you lose all of it. If you do not correctly support virtue, then you're a heretic. It's the

3
Ultima VI: The False Prophet

4
Drakkhen

BONUS XP

By necessity, I'm skipping over many games here—some famous, some not. By the end of the '80s, though, we were firmly in an age of innovation, with many obscure games that deserve a quick call-out. *Drakkhen*, for instance, released in 1989, offered one of the first fully explorable, real-time 3D worlds. It was a simple one, full of deathtraps, random encounters and poorly translated dialogue that made it tough to tell what was actually going on. But it still did it.

Then there was Sierra's *Hero's Quest*, also in 1989, which merged adventure gaming with RPGs to great effect. Unfortunately a licensing issue meant a swift rename to its better known title, *Quest for Glory*. They're more on the adventure side, and so I won't be covering them in any detail, but they have enough RPG in their DNA to still be worth a mention. There was also *Worlds of Ultima*, which took the *Ultima VI* engine and used it to create two spin-off games. The first, *The Savage Empire*, took place in a Doc Savage-style jungle world filled with tribes drawn from various historical periods. The second, *Worlds of Adventure 2: Martian Dreams*, was set on Victorian version of Mars. *World of Ultima* was going to finish with an Arthurian tale for good measure, had Origin not decided to focus on its core series instead of dabbling in spin-offs.

In short, after the first ten years or so on home PCs, RPGs still had to get over the hump of being complicated, often very hard, and geeky, even by gaming standards, but they'd established themselves as a genre to be reckoned with. All they needed was the technology to turn their worlds from things to imagine into places we could genuinely explore.

Avatar's job to depose him and the three Shadowlords who have perverted his thinking.

Ultima VI is arguably the cleverest of the set. This time you're recalled to find Britannia under siege by an army of demonic looking 'gargoyles' who are trying to destroy the Shrines of Virtue. Everyone, including 'wise' Lord British (that sound you can hear is every *Ultima* player laughing hollowly) wants you to sally forth and beat up these monsters. In practice, though, the whole story is an allegory for racism and the importance of communication—the gargoyles are revealed to not be an evil species, but one with their own moral codes and sense of honor. Most importantly, they have a valid grudge against both Britannia and the Avatar—the quest in *Ultima IV* having destroyed their homeworld. The next two games would pick up on the ease with which religion can be subverted, and explore the idea of the ends justifying the means—the Avatar is stuck on a world that he ultimately has to sacrifice in order to return home and deal with a bigger threat.

Ultima raised the bar of the types of stories RPGs could tell, and proved they could be *about* something. It didn't hurt that, along with this, the series contributed heavily to the growing genre—advancing what was possible with every new game. *Ultima VII* in particular stood as proof that an RPG could look gorgeous without sacrificing detail, (as long as you could actually run it). It brought dialogue trees and day/night NPC schedules to the series, and its simulation elements have yet to truly be bettered. Players could shear sheep, spin the wool into yarn and then weave it into cloth. Or combine flour and water to make dough, then cook it to make bread. The series proper sadly ended in shame in 1999, with *Ultima IX: Ascension*, but Garriott is currently working on what he hopes to be a return to the series' high points—*Shroud of the Avatar*.

PART II

TO INFINITY & BEYOND

1991-1997

T here's a reason the '90s are considered a gaming golden age. Everything seemed possible. Every game had the potential to be its own thing. **Is *Ultima Underworld*, released in 1992, an evolution of dungeon crawlers like *Dungeon Master*? Yes, but to call it so is to do it a huge disservice.**

Underworld wasn't about fighting through a dungeon, but experiencing it. You play as *Ultima*'s Avatar, falsely accused of a crime and thrown into the Stygian Abyss with nothing but the clothes on your back. What you find is a living community with its own characters and histories. Learning to survive is learning to be part of it, trading for supplies and making allies.

Creator Blue Sky Studios, later Looking Glass Systems, called it a dungeon simulator, pioneering a new way of exploring RPG spaces that would be refined in its sequel, in its spiritual successor *System Shock*, and in virtually ever other RPG.

This was the era where ideas and technology could go hand in hand, or so it felt at the time. In practice, there were obvious limitations—things like AI, the use of sprites, and low resolutions. The price for *Ultima Underworld*'s real-time graphics and 3D engine was a viewport that barely took up more than a third of the screen. Its sequel boosted that to three quarters. But that was fine. This was a jaw-dropping achievement. To put it in context, *Underworld* came out before *Wolfenstein 3D*—both appearing mid-to-early 1992.

BIGGER, NOT ALWAYS BETTER

Despite the potential, PC RPGs went into something of a slump in the early '90s. A few major franchises were immune to this, particularly *Ultima*, and developers who were willing to take the plunge and risk everything could still be rewarded for it. Innovation, however, was becoming more and more expensive by the minute. RPGs typically lagged behind other genres in terms of immediate look and feel due to their complexity, and the difficulty of having a great-looking game also provide tens of hours worth of entertainment. (In many ways this was the flip-side of adventure games, which shrank due to the graphics making it too expensive to have much game.) It's not too surprising that many RPG studios desperately stuck with what had worked, much like many adventure game devs tried to hang on when their own genre began to feel the pinch. LucasArts and Sierra at least tried to evolve, and survived for the decade. Most others fell away, outside of the core German market that generously kept the genre alive no matter how bad many of the games got. (They got very bad.)

For RPGs, the key market was composed of hardcore fans, and they weren't easy to please. The simplest approach for most companies was to do more or less what they'd been doing and hope to either sell enough copies to allow them to

RPGS LAGGED BEHIND OTHER GENRES IN LOOK AND FEEL

make another, or trim down in the hope of attracting a different audience. Origin's *ShadowCaster*, released in 1993, removed almost all the expected RPG elements that existing players would be used to, aiming to sell the experience on its shapeshifting gimmick—the main character being able to turn into creatures like a four-armed cat warrior or a not particularly awe-inspiring dragon. SSI got into this with *Al-Qadim*, a far more *Legend of Zelda*-style RPG than its usual fare.

These stripped-down PC RPGs didn't really work. New players weren't brought on board, and 'real' RPG fans wanted something with more oomph. The market also provided a steady stream of solid but forgettable AD&D games, including a couple of *Ravenloft* titles, full of vampires and other nasties.

Get to know...

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Time moved fast in the early '90s. *Eye of the Beholder* was a hugely popular game when it launched in 1991. By the third game in 1993, its tech was agreed to be obsolete and its basic game mechanics no longer up to snuff. It didn't help that it was churned out quickly, and by SSI, not Westwood itself.

1
ShadowCaster

2
Betrayal at Krondor

HUNTING FOR TREASURE

This isn't to say that there weren't popular RPGs, or RPGs worth remembering. Sierra's *Betrayal at Krondor* was a fun attempt at a heavily narrative driven one. *Jagged Alliance 2* combined strategy and RPGs like no other game before or since. Most big names, though, did eventually become watchwords for failure. Even *Ultima* blotted its copybook with the eighth game, *Pagan*, by switching to a terrible engine and a tiny world full of frustration. Interplay's *Stonekeep* largely nailed the coffin shut on dungeon crawlers, due mostly to taking five years to make and only having a generic-but-pretty game to show for it. By far the biggest failure of the era was *Descent To Undermountain*, a game that spent years in development, and used an already outdated engine—designed for 3D shooter series *Descent*—to make an RPG. This went about as well as could be expected. In the end, Interplay just shipped what they had and washed their hands of it. (A couple of years later, their far better game *Fallout 2* openly mocked it. One of the lines that could randomly pop out of a Magic 8-Ball, along with the likes of "Reply hazy, try again", was "Yes, we KNOW *Descent To Undermountain* was crap.")

Despite this, the '90s produced some amazing RPGs. 1994's *System Shock* was Looking Glass attempting to go beyond *Underworld* by thinking differently. The designers had been unhappy that, for all *Underworld*'s detail, much of it was artificial—like how conversations pulled you out of the game into a whole other interface. The solution? Kill everyone. That allowed the player to explore the devastated Citadel Station without ever being forced between interfaces, character interaction replaced by one-way communications between them and SHODAN, the evil AI controlling the station. It was done so well that the absence of people wasn't felt at all. The only catch was that telling the backstory by means of audio-logs—then a genius idea—is now overdone to the point of *South Park: The Stick Of Truth* not so much mocking as murdering the entire concept.

Even things that didn't work out are worth remembering. Just about everyone knows *System Shock*, but few remember Psygnosis's *Sentient* from 1997—a similar idea, only on a living space station full of characters who go about their lives both automatically and based on a complex conversation system that allows you to give orders. It's janky, it doesn't always work, and even when it does, it's not that much fun. But it's a great demonstration of '90s ambition in action. So too was *Robinson's Requiem* and *Deus*, from 1994 and 1996. Both are survival games, the first about surviving on a hostile planet and the second about being a very easily wounded bounty-hunter. Both are notable for their complex medical systems. Get an infected leg? You'd better hope you have the tools you need to sort it, or you'll swiftly collapse. You might find yourself amputating your own limbs, or having an eye pecked out—spending the rest of the game staring at the side of your nose.

YOU MIGHT FIND YOURSELF AMPUTATING YOUR OWN LIMBS

Get to know...

STAR CONTROL 2

It languished in semi-obscurity for a while, but a fan-made re-release and upcoming new episode by Stardock has given this space-exploration game its due. Hilarious, with a combat mode that provides hours of fun on its own, *Star Control 2* is well worth checking out. Google "The Ur-Quan Masters" for links.

VICTORY IN THE ARENA

Amusingly, the biggest RPG success story of the '90s was never meant to be one. Bethesda, then a largely unknown company despite a couple of Terminator and Wayne Gretzy games, was making a relatively simple gladiatorial combat game called *Arena* in which you'd take a team of fighters around the fantasy world of Tamriel in the hope of making some cash. During development, the ultimate feature creep set in. First a few RPG elements were added to the mix. Then dungeons. Then quests. And then the whole arena combat thing was ditched in favor of it just being a regular, single-character RPG. The title stuck around solely because the marketing materials had already been printed, the team handwaving it as Tamriel being so dangerous that the whole place was nicknamed 'the Arena'. To make it sound more of an RPG, they then stuck on the name *The Elder Scrolls*.

The Elder Scrolls raised many bars. Visually, it looked fantastic for the time. The map is about six million square kilometers in size, though almost all of it created using procedural generation. (Of its several hundred dungeons, only around 15 are actually connected to the plot.) It has day and night cycles. It's got weather systems. Unfortunately, Arena also has more bugs than a

lifelong entomologist, and a starting difficulty best described as psychotic. (Infamously, *Elder Scrolls III* designer Ken Rolston admitted to having started it over 20 times and only getting out of the tutorial dungeon once).

And for all of that, it bombed. Bad marketing led to just 3,000 copies sold out of the gate, which co-designer Ted Peterson later commented was less than the sales of his *Terminator: 2029* expansion. And *Terminator: 2029* was, putting it kindly, garbage. Word of mouth saved the day, and two years later Bethesda released *Daggerfall*. This one was *only* the size of Great Britain and no less buggy. While players looking for a deep story were disappointed, nothing offered close to its level of freeform adventuring—with guilds to join, several religions, the ability to create your own magic spells, and even to become a vampire or werewolf. Plus, it had box art that gave some idea of what the game was about, rather than being fronted by a sword-wielding lady in a poorly fitting bikini. Later games would radically shrink the size of the world to allow for hand-crafted design, at the expense of the freedom and range of options, but we all know how that story ends. Instead of killing Bethesda, *The Elder Scrolls* series now sells millions of copies, and is one of the most popular RPG series ever.

> ## *ARENA* ALSO HAS MORE BUGS THAN A LIFELONG ENTOMOLOGIST
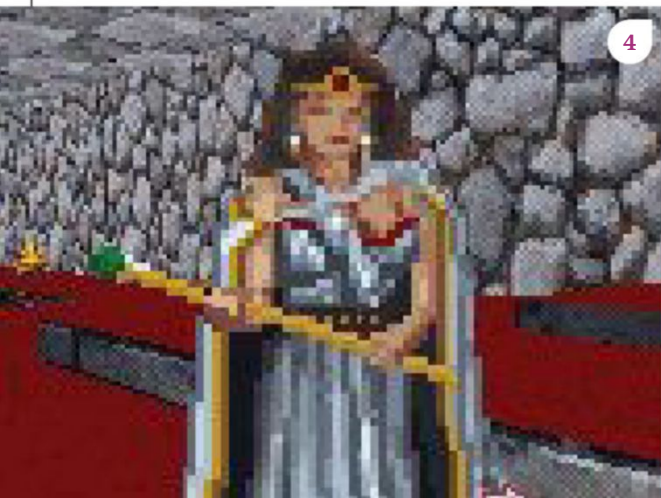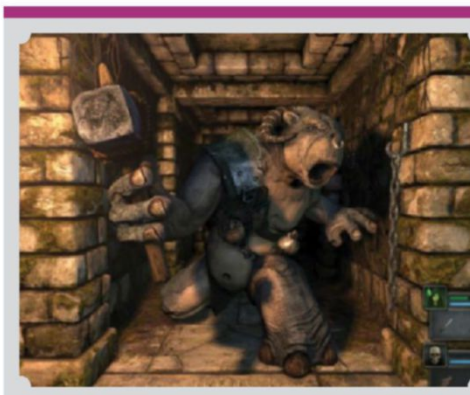
Get to know...

THE LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

Party based dungeon crawlers, or 'blobbers', reached the end of their life in the mid-'90s. Of late though, they've had a nostalgic resurgence. *Grimrock* even followed their pattern by setting its first game in a sealed dungeon, then heading outside for its bigger, better sequel.

WAR. WAR CHANGES DRAMATICALLY

Some games land softly. Others land with the force of a nuclear bomb. In the desolate year of 1997, *Fallout* was definitely one of the latter. It was the spiritual sequel to *Wasteland,* though the two were actually quite different takes on the post-apocalyptic world. *Wasteland* was more comedic and surreal, with Monty Python style killer badgers, as well as more futuristic and developed—the world had ended, but civilization had largely rebuilt. There was greenery. There was water processing. Your role was that of a Desert Ranger, assigned to keep the radioactive landscape safe from do-badders, and foil evil plots as time permitted. *Fallout,* meanwhile, used the 1950s as a jumping off point for a far more desolate, less reconstructed world of psychopaths, mutants, drug-dealers and all the other scum that you can imagine rising to the top. Your goal was simple—retrieve a water chip so that your protected Vault could continue hiding from the outside world. For you, hiding was not an option.

Fallout was the most adult, most brutal RPG around at the time, not because other RPGs hadn't had bad people in them, but because this time it was entirely up to you if you joined them. It's dark. It's cynical. It's also one of the most beautifully designed RPGs around. Create a low-intelligence character, for instance, and all your dialogue is replaced with little more than incoherent grunts. Follow the path it lays out for you and you get a great tour around the world, but it's so open that if you know what you're doing, it's possible to run to the end and just finish it in about ten minutes. Its Perk and Traits system allowed incredible character creation abilities, with skills ranging from Mysterious Stranger, which would sometimes spawn an ally in combat, to Bloody Mess, guaranteeing that every kill-shot ends as messily as possible. It was funny. It was challenging. It was huge and complex, despite the relatively small map. It was everything that players had been crying out for, with the exception, perhaps, of looking a bit prettier. And, like most of the best RPGs of the decade, it almost got killed. Interplay wanted real-time combat instead of turn-based, and favored multiplayer action over singleplayer—an obsession based on the runaway success of Blizzard's *Diablo*.

The shadow of *Fallout* still looms over the more recent games, which are part of the same universe, but very different in style. *Fallout 4* in particular is essentially a shooter strapped to a building game, where conversations inevitably end in bloodshed. This is a far cry from *Fallout,* a game where you can defeat the final boss by convincing him that his plans for a mutated wasteland simply aren't going to work. The sequel, *Fallout 2,* also features one of the most beloved locations in any RPG—the city of New Reno, where RPG design superstar and living Kickstarter stretch goal Chris Avellone first came to people's attention. New Reno is a gloriously seedy place full of feuding mobsters and opportunities for violence, as well as the memorable chance to have your hero become a porn star. (Complete with a porn star name, such as 'Arnold Swollenmember' for exmple.)

The main problem with *Fallout 2*, as well as it being rushed out and suffering from the buggy RPG problem that
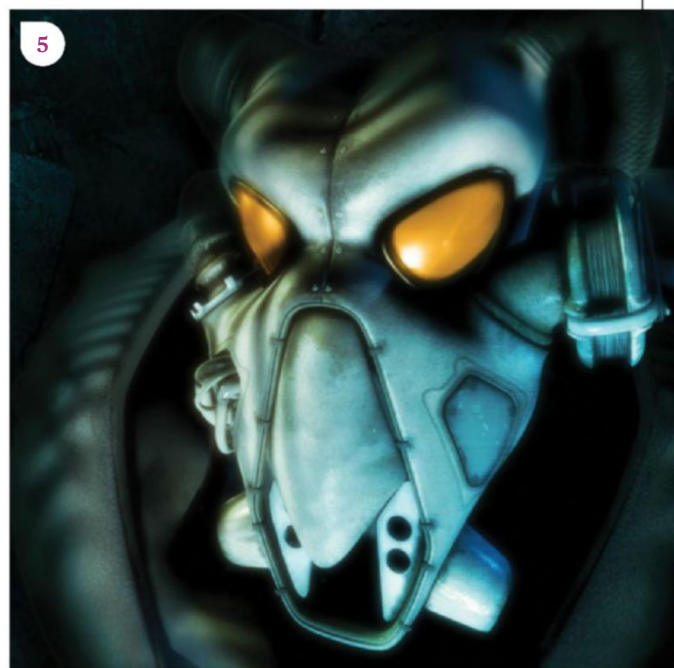
afflicted many a '90s game, ended up being a lesson to everyone. *Fallout* occasionally enjoyed a naughty pop-culture reference or two, which players appreciated. However, hearing that, and with every designer having their own section, *Fallout 2* often feels like nothing but shout-outs to everything from Tom Cruise and Scientology to Monty Python and the Holy Grail. It broke much of the sense of place, and proved that yes, you can indeed have too much of a good thing. It's not that later games would stop making pop culture references—*World of Warcraft* loves its little nods. After *Fallout 2,* though, most designers just needed to be told "remember *Fallout 2*?" to know when to tone it down a bit.

As the decade ended, it became clear that they would have the chance. Despite a few series riding high throughout, there hadn't been much for RPGs to laugh about during most of the '90s. That energy had to be spent on simply staying alive. With *Fallout* and *The Elder Scrolls* it finally had the shot in the arm it needed. And in 1998, the tables would turn.

IT WAS FUNNY. IT WAS CHALLENGING. IT WAS HUGE AND COMPLEX

SEA CHANGE

PILLARS OF ETERNITY 2: DEADFIRE sets sail for
frontiers beyond mere tradition. *By Steven Messner*

P

illars of Eternity represents two truths: that classic roleplaying games aren't dead, and that Obsidian Entertainment, a studio long defined by making games for other companies, is better off building its own. Following the cancellation of a project that left Obsidian in dire straits, *Pillars of Eternity*'s gamble hinged on a single idea: could what was old become new again?

One Kickstarter campaign and nearly $4 million dollars of crowdfunding later, Obsidian had its answer. Amid the *Skyrim*s and *Witcher 3*s of the world, players hungered for a return to the classic roleplaying games of yesteryear. Because Obsidian is known for its stellar writing, I have to believe *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire*'s nautical themes are at least partially metaphorical. The first game saved Obsidian from drowning, and *Pillars of Eternity 2* is ready to sail to a new world.

"I always thought it would be awesome to have our own world to tell stories in," Obsidian Entertainment CEO Feargus Urquhart tells me. "Now we can finally do that."

Like the Dungeons & Dragons mythos that inspires it, the world of *Pillars*' Eora is bigger than any one story told within it. For Urquhart and director Josh Sawyer, there was never any question of whether or not there would be a sequel. "This is our chance to grow something that we planted," Sawyer tells me. "We started off doing something that was an homage. There's a lot of stuff that we pulled over very intentionally from that bygone era, but now we want to grow this—not to betray the roots of it, but to say that this is our world and that we want to move it forward."

And *Pillars of Eternity 2* is certainly moving forward.

Years after the events of the first game, the Watcher, the protagonist with a supernatural ability to gaze into the Between and read the past lives of people's souls you played in the first game, sits in their castle at Caed Nua. Things seem comfortable and quiet, now that the curse that caused a generation of soulless babies to be slaughtered is finally broken and the cult behind it brought to justice.

Because you started the first game as a nameless vagrant and end it by personally treating with gods, I was curious how Obsidian could ever hope to expand the scope of *Pillars of Eternity*'s storytelling. Sawyer tells me that "the stakes definitely get higher," but it's not until he begins to elaborate that I realize exactly what that means. Beneath the castle at Caed Nua rests an ancient 600-foot-high magic statue that players only glimpsed pieces of in the first game. I imagine we'll get a much better look at it in *Deadfire*—what with it becoming the living vessel of the supposedly dead god Eothas.

"He animates it, destroying your entire castle and killing almost everyone in it," Sawyer says, somewhat gleefully. "You are left on the brink of death and discover that your fate is tied to that of Eothas. You need to pursue him and find out what he's up to as he marches off into the sea toward the Deadfire Archipelago."

Quite literally following in Eothas's footsteps, players sail to a treacherous thousand-mile long stretch of islands unlike anything seen in the Dyrwood. "People know of it as an untamed land filled with pirates, sea monsters, and storms," Sawyer says. "When we made

Pillars of Eternity, we were trying to make something that felt like [AD&D's] Sword Coast or the Dalelands. Something that felt very traditional— Mediterranean or central European. But we wanted to go in a different direction for *Pillars 2*."

For open-minded fans of the traditional RPG, abandoning the aesthetic influences that have dominated the genre since Gary Gygax first rolled a D20 is an exciting proposition. But players won't be strangers in a strange land, either. "There's still a colonial presence on the Deadfire," Sawyer tells me. "You'll see

SIX-MEMBER PARTIES ARE, FOR MANY, SACRED

familiar elements the same way that if you go into South America you'll see Spanish-style buildings."

Architecture won't be the only familiar thing about the Deadfire Archipelago, either. Players who completed the first game can import their saves, carrying over some of the bigger decisions they made. While Sawyer and Urquhart are keeping the details close to their chests, companions such as Edér will return – that is if you didn't murder them during your stay in the Dyrwood. "If you did, you have to live with it," Sawyer laughs. Of course, players can determine the events of the first game with a new save, so there's plenty freedom to see how various choices might have consequences that reach across the sea.

But there's more spice to *Pillars of Eternity 2* than a handful of exotic islands. If *Pillars of Eternity* drew inspiration from the bygone era of classic roleplaying games, the sequel is

Baldur's Gate never had lighting like this.

Palm trees? We're not in Dyrwood anymore, Toto.

a look at where they might have gone had the genre never faded away.

MAN OVERBOARD

"We don't want to take *Pillars of Eternity 2* in a direction that feels untrue to these games," Sawyer tells me. Minutes later he undermines that with news that one of the biggest changes involves dropping the party size down to five characters instead of six. "We know people are going to be upset by that," he says. "That's OK, we believe it makes the game better."

If you never grew up exploring the frigid wastes of *Icewind Dale*, one less party member to worry about might not seem like a big deal. However, traditions such as friendly fire and pausable combat, and six-member parties are, for many, sacred. "We had talked about it going all the way back to *Pillars of Eternity,*" Sawyer confesses almost shamefully. "But doing that to a spiritual successor of games that almost always had six party members didn't seem like a good idea." That's the difference with *Pillars of Eternity 2*: while Obsidian still has reverence for the genre's past, it's not going to stick to tradition where it no longer makes

sense. "It makes a significant difference in how easily you can process what's going on on-screen. As the party size grows, the number of combatants also grows. So with five party members, it feels just a little bit easier to manage."

While *Pillars of Eternity*'s combat possesses a lot of strengths, Sawyer and Urquhart are more than aware of its failings and one less party member isn't going to stand in their way of addressing those issues. Along with a smaller party, the class system is

completely overhauled, the speed slowed slightly, and the 30-odd afflictions reimagined into broader categories so that countering them is more intuitive and doesn't require a spreadsheet to track them all.

Sawyer also says that the AI governing companions and enemies has been "much improved," and that players can rely on their companions to make smarter decisions in combat without having to guide them at every stage. But the biggest changes are the

RPG RESURRECTION *It's a great time for classic roleplaying design*

WASTELAND 2
One of the first big Kickstarter successes, Brian Fargo's InXile brought back the almost 30-year-old series in pleasingly old-school form.

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN
We praised Larian's 2014 RPG for its freedom, simulation, depth and respect for player choice. The sequel's made a fine first impression.
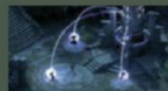
PILLARS OF ETERNITY
Scoring 92%, this successor to the Infinity Engine RPGs has a compelling set of oddball chums, intricate combat and a detailed world.

TYRANNY
Despite a well-developed fictional backdrop and an interesting angle where you play the villain, Obsidian's other RPG is no *Pillars of Eternity.*

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA
See how this stylish spiritual successor to *Planescape: Torment* is shaping up in our review next issue.

least traditional of all—if only because they've only become possible with modern game technology.

WINDS OF CHANGE

"We want to add things that feel like, if we went back in time and we made *Icewind Dale 3* or *Baldur's Gate 3*, they'd feel like very cool additions to those franchises," Sawyer says. He's speaking not just on a thematic level, but also on a technical one. Two of the biggest features of *Pillars of Eternity 2* are a fully dynamic weather system and a world of characters that don't just stand in one place waiting to be spoken to.

"The Deadfire Archipelago is this tempestuous wild land of violent storms, it seemed kind of weird to not have systems to maximize that influence," Sawyer says. Spurred on by feedback that *Pillars of Eternity* felt too static, its sequel promises to be bustling with a kind of life never seen in older RPGs. Vicious sea winds will bend

"LIVING UP TO BALDUR'S GATE 2 WILL BE ROUGH"

trees, ruffle clothing, and tussle objects in the environment one minute while rains will soak the earth and anyone caught standing in it the next. The boundary between the 3D characters and 2D background will be blurred, even more so than in the first game, keeping the aesthetic splendor of the

latter while also not looking like a screenshot half the time.

None of these ideas are all-new territory for RPGs. After all, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* tried to pioneer advancements in character schedules over a decade ago. But Sawyer says it's not good enough to just make the world feel lively, it's got to feel interesting too. "It gives us opportunities to make quests resolve in different ways based on how and when you approach them," he says. "It's more than people going to work and coming home. Guards might switch to other routines at a certain time which gives you an opportunity to do something in a way that you couldn't do normally."

It's these seemingly small changes that make Sawyer most excited. At one point, he spends several minutes talking about how characters now sheathe their weapons outside of combat. With the same level of enthusiasm he has for 600-foot-tall god statues, he then explains how even firing a gun will cause cloaks to billow in real time from the blast. Later, he and Urquhart get distracted enthusing over how the waves physically push boats and small objects in water. I begin to realize that, to Urquhart and Sawyer, *Pillars of Eternity 2* is as much about the little things as it is the big. For a series the richness of which is found in the little pockets of written context between dialogue, that only seems appropriate.

But even in all their excitement, both know that *Pillars of Eternity 2* is also standing in the shadow of a giant—and I'm not talking about Eothas. "Managing expectations is one challenge," Sawyer says. "I think a lot of people, whether conscious of it or not, will look at *Pillars of Eternity* as *Baldur's Gate* and *Pillars of Eternity 2* as *Baldur's Gate 2*. So, living up to *Baldur's Gate 2*? That's pretty rough." Not that *Deadfire* will be the same massive sequel that *Baldur's Gate 2* was. While Sawyer was hesitant to give specifics, he did say that it's "roughly the size" of the world of *Pillars of Eternity*.

If there's one thing that might help with regard to expectations, it's that player feedback will be a crucial part of developing the game. As with the first, Obsidian has turned to crowd-funding through Fig, enabling backers to jump into early betas before *Pillars of Eternity 2* releases for real in March, 2018. "Sometimes people can be really harsh," Sawyer says, "but it's better to hear it when it's in a beta phase than when it comes out."

"We never underestimate our own ability to screw up," Urquhart chuckles.

He goes on to explain that crowd-funding isn't just a chance to get players in early and to cover the cost of the trip to the Deadfire Archipelago, but also to revisit a defining moment in Obsidian's history.

"When we did the Kickstarter for *Pillars of Eternity*, that was an amazing thing for us to make the game we wanted to and actually own it," he says. "It's like people voting for what they want to play. That validates what we're doing and how we're doing it. What's been gratifying is that we love hardcore cRPGs and we've always wanted to be able to make them. To see that a whole bunch of people are willing to trust us to do that is amazing." ■

KEEP SPECULATING

Your keep, Caed Nua, is destroyed, but Obsidian says something will take its place. Here are our best guesses.

Legend: Plausibility ■ Awesomeness ■

- A 600-foot-tall god-infused statue you ride.
- The Lost City of Atlantis.
- Your own island paradise.
- Another castle but, like, with palm trees.
- Your own pirate ship.
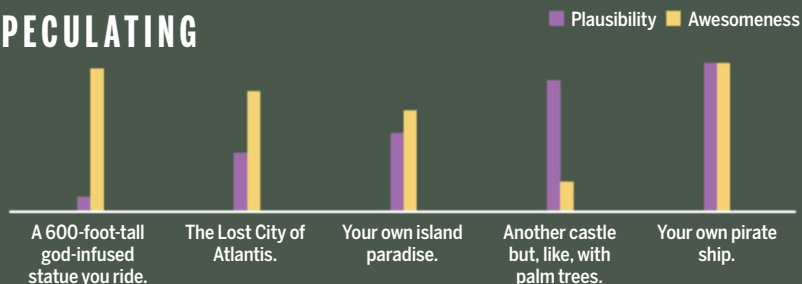
Bamboo is another indicator of a more exotic setting.

RETURN *to* MORROWIND

Back to one of the PC's greatest RPG settings in
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: MORROWIND. *By Matt Gilman*

T

he MMO genre is a hard one to review. A game launches, then we have to score it even as it shifts in shape and quality before our eyes. *The Elder Scrolls Online* had an especially tough start, as servers melted, quests bugged out and those initial weeks dragged into a merciless grind. And yet in the time since its arrival on my PC, a new justice system, vast story DLC packs and the abolition of level restrictions on exploration have changed *ESO* more than any other MMO I can recall. The next step will take us even deeper into gold-plated nostalgia territory.

I know it's going to work the first time I set eyes on *ESO*'s spanking new Seyda Neen. The opening section of the now 15-year-old *Elder Scrolls III* returns as a starting zone for the sizeable new landmass of Vvardenfell. The team at Zenimax took the height map of the 2001 original and placed it directly in the existing mass of *ESO*'s Tamriel. Gorgeously detailed, it's also hearteningly familiar, complete with NPC ancestors of memorable characters to chat with.

Rather than a straight rehash, this Vvardenfell is set 700 years prior to the events of *TESIII*, so while there are homages by the dozen, there's also a ton of new things to discover. Vivec City has only three cantons, the rest still under construction and explorable in their varying dredged-out states. The volcano isn't nearly as catastrophically encompassing of its surroundings. Get close and there's ash galore, but also lush mushroom-bedecked forests and coastal regions as yet unmolested by the choking air. ZeniMax has worked closely with parent publisher Bethesda in its bid to tickle our nostalgia glands.

"This is Bethesda's baby, right?" creative director Rich Lambert tells me. "*TESIII* is the thing that put them on the map. So we've had to work really closely with them to make sure that the things we're doing and the stories we're telling do *TESIII* justice, and work with what Bethesda originally envisioned."

Lambert is quick to emphasize that this is not an 'expansion' in the traditional sense. ZeniMax sees *ESO: Morrowind* as a fresh standalone entry point into its world, true to its One Tamriel philosophy that all content should be available to all players at all times.

Equally, Lambert doesn't want new players who climbed aboard the *Elder Scrolls* ship via *Skyrim* or *Oblivion* to feel left out. "The story we've written and the content we've got stands on its own," he says. "It's not just nostalgia. It's a really strong story and the writers have gone to painstaking detail. Even if you don't know any of the history you're gonna get a bit of a lesson." Perhaps this is where the true allure of a return to Morrowind lies. It's hard, in the sharp gaming landscape of 2017, to make those who weren't there understand just how formative

ABOVE: The height map from *TESIII* was just the kicking-off point; ZeniMax reckons the final landmass it's built is about 20-30% larger than the original.

TESIII was. The past 15 years have not been kind to it. While a full official remake is almost certainly off the cards, *ESO* seems the perfect place for new players to discover Vvardenfell without stabbing themselves in the retinas with the jagged edges of the ancient engine.

Whether you're new or not, there's a whole lot of game tucked away inside the Morrowind 'chapter'. On top of the new map, which is the biggest single landmass ZeniMax has ever built, 30 percent bigger than Orsinium, there's a new class, a new 12-person Trial, two new dungeons, and an all-new set of PvP modes and maps: Battlegrounds.

The Warden fills out a slot much sought-after in *ESO*'s preexisting

RIGHT: You can buy *ESO: Morrowind* as a standalone, or upgrade your copy of *Tamriel Unlimited* at a discounted price.

WINDY CITIES *Mudcrabs and mushroom manors*

1 ALD'RUHN
The manor district of Under-Skar returns, and it's much more ominous that I remember. 700 years were apparently not kind to its huge mudcrab cadaver, as here he's much more recognizable than the indistinct murky dome of 2002's *TESIII* take.

2 VIVEC CITY
Not nearly as annoying to navigate as it was back in the day, due to being much smaller. The main campaign (which should weigh in at 30-40 hours) centers on curing the mortal god Vivec, who holds a floating rock ominously over his namesake city.

3 SADRITH MORA
The wizard equivalent of dick waving, the towers of Sadrith Mora's mushroom growths indicate the relative power of the magus who resides within. It's more ominous than a simple signpost, though really I'm more interested in who's the most fungi.

been implemented, how many small design decisions have been reached, over the last two years. The mantra that any class can wear any armor, for example, initially made player avatars hard to read at a glance. Is that a knight barreling towards me over the hillocks of Cyrodiil, or is it a sorcerer with delusions of grandeur? Too many other games manage to avoid this readability problem for me not to whinge about it here.

The Warden, by way of contrast, is so very clear to read. Each of its abilities leaves a glowing blue aura around the character model. Whether it's huge butterfly wings, icy steam emerging from his dual daggers, or spiny tendrils poking out of his back, so many little touches have been added to the skills' animations and color schemes in order to make this dream of all weapons/all armor/all classes actually work and still be clear amid even the most chaotic of player masses.

I'm also shown the new PvE dungeon Trial. Its Clockwork City setting will be familiar as a concept to *Elder Scrolls III* veterans, being the globular mini-Nirn rebuilt by one of Vvardenfell's Tribunals inside a tiny orb. The new Trial takes us inside this tiny city, complete with alien half-metal half-flesh monsters, an unnerving cog-filled skybox and a lush interlocking verticality that brings *Dark Souls'* woven level design to mind.

CLOSE COMBAT
Those aforementioned PvP Battlegrounds complete the package, with additional plans for three new maps upon which to battle with buds. These smaller scale arenas offer the kind of elf-on-orc action that's currently missing in the all-out warfare of *Elder Scrolls Online*'s Cyrodiil PvP area. Here combat is limited to a more manageable 4 vs 4 vs 4 affair. Team Deathmatches and Capture The Flag (or Capture The Scroll) are two modes I've seen in action. Rather than featureless bowls for teams to duel it out across, each arena feels like it has been built to enable each class to thrive tactically. Daedric ruins feature plenty of line-of-sight blockers to help sneakier types get the drop on their foes, while a verdant Dwemer fort map has towers with better views of its surroundings for those with long-range skills to fight over.

For those with fond memories of the original, the allure of *ESO*'s Morrowind lies in that PvE experience. Since launch this MMO has reinvigorated its base game with the sense of discovery and exploration that the series' singleplayer efforts have thrived on. In *ESO: Morrowind*, I get the sense that ZeniMax finally knows what its take on the MMO is, and that it has found the perfect setting with which to demonstrate that to those who bounced off the game the first time around. ∎

I GET THE SENSE ZENIMAX FINALLY KNOWS WHAT ITS TAKE ON THE MMO IS

BELOW: Naryu Virian returns from the base game with her own sub-plot to follow.

range of classes, offering a druidic array of skill sets. You can opt to plow points into three new skill paths as you progress. Choose Green Balance skills and you'll earn a bunch of healing abilities, from actively aimed frontal cone bursts of heal-over-time buffs to a full area-of-effect ultimate skill that causes ethereal blue flora to burst from the ground around you and your allies. Over in the Winter's Embrace skill tree are the class's tankier moves, letting you summon icy armor and control the battlefield with snares that whip enemies around. The showstopper is the Animal Companion skill set. Here you'll find abilities that summon an array of spirit-form pets to deal out DPS. Most, like the infamous Cliff Racers, themed around Morrowind itself. Your ultimate ability on this path summons a permanent bear to tank damage for you. In the development build I was shown there were no pet control commands, but I'm told these are being worked on for the final game.

DPSED IN CLASS
For someone returning to the game after that initial rocky launch period, the Warden is a prime example of just how many small changes have

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

Wherever possible, we finish a game before finalizing the 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 the reviews section 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.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-10% A game of absolutely no value. Are you playing one of these games? Take 3d6 emotional damage.
Example *Big Brother*

11%-39% Yikes. Technically broken, or so fundamentally flawed that it's ultimately not worth any time or money. Bad.
Examples *Trials: Blood Dragon, Sonic: Lost World*

40%-49% This game is functional, but majorly flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Firefall, Star Trek, Armikrog*

50%-59% Mediocre. If it has any interesting ideas, they don't work well. Might suffer from bugs or technical issues.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% An interesting idea poorly expressed, or a derivative idea executed averagely. Comes with caveats.
Examples *SimCity, No Man's Sky, The Division*

70%-79% Good, but not a classic. This score is a recommendation, just not a glowing one.
Examples *Broken Age, Mirror's Edge Catalyst*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance.
Examples *Starbound, Overwatch, Doom*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Ahead of its time and important to PC gaming.
Examples *XCOM 2, Forza Horizon 3, Dark Souls III*

95%-98% This is far and away one of the best games we've ever played, and we recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program, Spelunky*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Life-changing. A masterpiece and more. Actively 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.

Welcome home

Despite what the first-person view suggests, *Resident Evil 7* is a return to form. You're back in a big house full of creepy horrors, conserving ammunition, managing inventory slots and snorting herbs. The series' emphasis on action, spurred on by the acclaimed *Resi 4*, has been dialed back in favor of a more traditional, slowburn pace. It's clearly worked its abominable charm on Andy, as you'll see from his glowing review over the page.

We, too, are looking to the past—albeit the more recent past of 2016. With the year off to a slow start in terms of new releases, we've gone back and reviewed some of the interesting gems we initially missed. Included in that crop is the excellent *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun*, which might secretly be the best stealth game of the last few years.

PHIL SAVAGE
DEPUTY EDITOR
phil.savage@futurenet.com
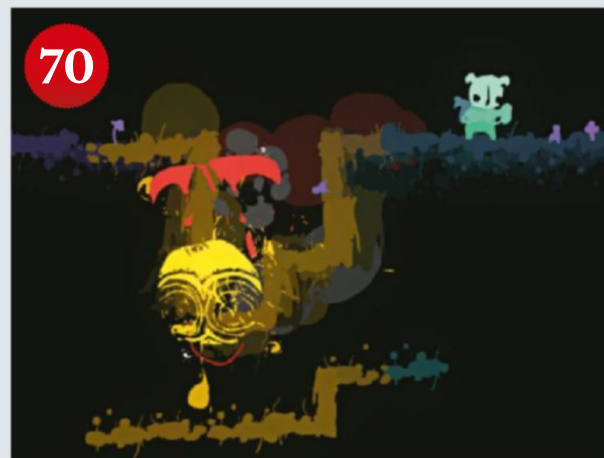
70

78

66

Contents

This month's resident evils...

ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Survival, horror

Currently playing
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard

This month
Entered a house full of creeps. The punchline writes itself.

PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Racing, topography

Currently playing
Forza Horizon 3: Blizzard Mountain

This month
Did sick drifts like a rad racer who doesn't play *Forza* in his briefs.

KATE GRAY
Specialist in
Visual novels, euphemism

Currently playing
Ladykiller in a Bind

This month
Tested the limits of NSFW by playing *Ladykiller* for work.

FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Strategy, tanuki

Currently playing
Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun

This month
Discovered the stealth potential of small, chubby canids.

CHRIS SCHILLING
Specialist in
Adventure, pathos

Currently playing
The Walking Dead

This month
Embarked on an adventure more deadly than 2016.

TOM SENIOR
Specialist in
Strategy, masochism

Currently playing
Long War 2

This month
Decided the brutal, deadly *XCOM 2* was neither brutal nor deadly enough.

SAMUEL ROBERTS
Specialist in
Horror, deadlines

Currently playing
Resident Evil 7: Biohazard

This month
Went into space with Phil Savage.

HAUNTED HOUSE

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD shifts perspective and goes back to basics, with impressive results. *By Andy Kelly*

Ethan Winters drives deep into the Louisiana bayou to find his missing wife. We follow his car from above, a tiny speck against a vast expanse of remote, isolated swampland. The setting sun casts a gloomy orange glow over the landscape, creating a sense of foreboding. If you get lost or go missing—or worse—out here, who would ever know? It's a beautiful, evocative shot, and almost certainly an homage to the Torrance family's yellow car snaking through the Colorado mountains at the beginning of The Shining. But *Resident Evil* has always been inspired by horror cinema, even if recent entries in the series have been more Uwe Boll than Stanley Kubrick.

This understated opening immediately sets the tone for *Resident Evil 7*. It's a return to the atmospheric, slow-burning horror of the original, with a few nods to contemporary games like *Alien: Isolation* and *Amnesia*. The shift to a first-person perspective might suggest it's a bold reinvention of the series, in the same way *Resident Evil 4* was, but it really isn't. It's classic *Resident Evil* through and through, with healing herbs, item boxes, elaborate puzzles, and shambling monsters. But the convoluted mythology, overripe melodrama, and absurd action set-pieces that plagued the last few games have been sidelined for something more subtle and refined.

To be fair, the first hour—before item management and weapons are introduced—is different to anything Capcom has ever done before. It's a brilliantly paced, cleverly designed parade of scares set in a dilapidated old house. The fear of what lies around each darkened corner, and your inability to defend yourself, gives you a powerful feeling of tension and unease. It uses jump scares and psychological trickery to whittle away at your nerves, and it's probably the scariest the series has ever been. But as soon as I had a 9mm pistol in my hand, and found myself juggling items in my inventory and using arcane objects to unlock doors, I felt right at home.

That's not to say the game stops being scary the moment you find a gun. Not only is ammunition a near-constant luxury, but certain enemies can't be killed at all, forcing you to sneak past them. You *can* attack them, and they disappear for a while, but they soak up so many bullets that it's often a poor trade. You always feel vulnerable, even when you're cradling a shotgun or grenade launcher, because you never know what the game's going to throw at you next. One of its greatest strengths is keeping you on your toes and second-guessing you, throwing in a scare when you least expect it, resisting when the moment seems obvious.

Confidence comes in waves. You'll find ammo and feel unstoppable. Then you'll find yourself locked in a small room with an enemy, waste all your bullets by firing at it in a blind panic, and suddenly feel helpless again. However, there are a few moments, mostly in the last third of the game, where you have an abundance of ammunition and can merrily shoot any monstrosity that crosses your path. These sections almost feel like a reward for your many hours of careful ammo conservation and patient sneaking, and are hugely cathartic. But just as you're delighting in your newfound power, it's snatched away.

HOUSE CALL
The early hours are spent in and around an old house owned by the reclusive Baker family. It's a disgusting, rotten place—a far cry

from the grand Spencer mansion—and rendered in astonishing detail. You can almost smell the moldering food and stale, dusty air as you explore, and the building creaks and groans like a dying animal as it's battered by the wind. There's a grimy, almost tangible realism to the visuals, and the audio design is sensational too. You can easily track the shuffling footsteps of an enemy by ear, gauging where they're based on sound alone. And the creaking floorboards and sinister sounds that echo around you only add to the rumbling sense of dread felt in every room of this dreary homestead.

But you don't spend the entire game in the house. There's a »

> **One of its greatest strengths is keeping you on your toes**

PC GAMER
EDITOR'S CHOICE

GUN SHOW
A few of the weapons

WEAK

PISTOL
The first gun you find. Weak and slow, but you'll rarely be short of bullets.

MACHINE GUN
As weak as the pistol, but the rapid fire makes up for it. Burns through ammo.

SHOTGUN
Has a wide spread, but will remove the head of most things at close range.

GRENADE LAUNCHER
Slow to reload and explosive rounds are rare, but it blows things up a treat.

BOMB
Plant it on the ground, wait for an enemy to walk over it, then enjoy the fireworks.

MAGNUM
You'll need ten antique coins to unlock this. Powerful, but ammo is rare.

DEADLY

The Baker residence is as scary as it looks.

Get your pistol ready when you see this black gunk.

I want to go home.

10 / 14
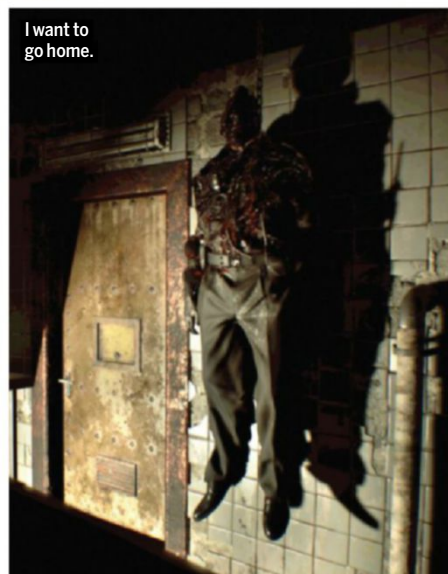
Not even the weirdest thing you'll see.

Think I'll skip dinner tonight.

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard

New pants, please.
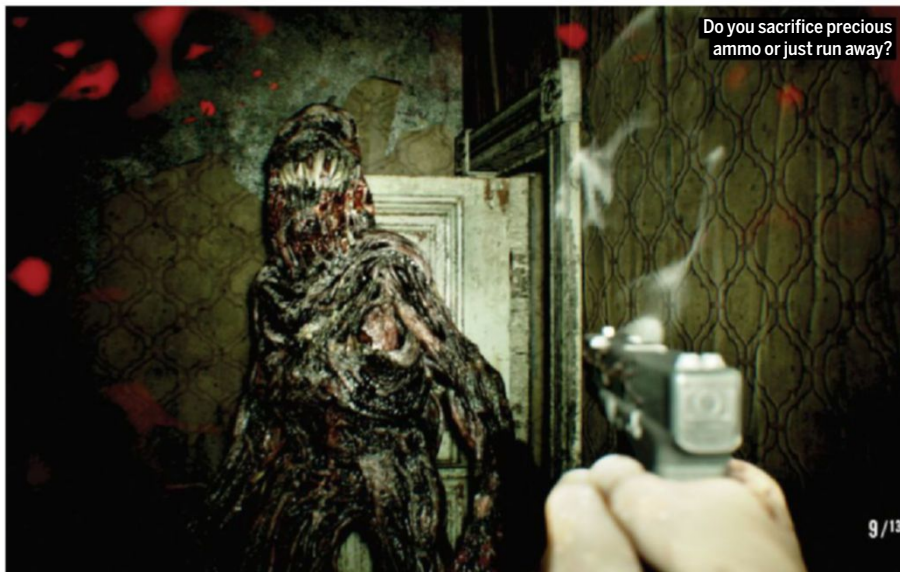
Do you sacrifice precious ammo or just run away?

9 /13

Not all the Bakers want you dead.

The Bakers' finger food contains actual fingers.
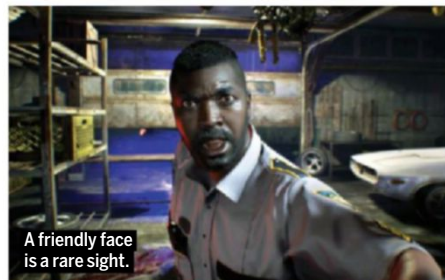
A friendly face is a rare sight.

You won't feel so brave when that shotty runs out of shells.

FAMILY UNIT *Meet the Bakers. They're horrible*

1 GRANDMA BAKER
The eldest member of the family never speaks or moves, yet always seems to appear in the most unexpected places.

2 LUCAS BAKER
The sadistic first son of the family, who enjoys tormenting trespassers by making them play sick games.

3 JACK BAKER
The father of the Bakers. No matter how many times you kill him, he always comes back, angrier than before.

4 MARGUERITE BAKER
Jack's wife seems to be able to command swarms of insects and can withstand multiple gunshots.

5 ETHAN WINTERS
You're the newest member of the Baker family, whether you like it or not. 'Not' being the likely answer.

surprising amount of variety here, and it never lingers on one location or situation for too long. Not once did I feel like the game was artificially extending its length with backtracking or filler—something even the best games in the series are guilty of. And during the nine hours it took me to finish it, it was constantly surprising me with new ideas, locations, and story revelations. I won't go into specifics, because it's a game that should be played blind, but there are some nice pace changes and shifts in rhythm that jolt you out of your comfort zone.

One of my favorite features, but one I wish Capcom had made more of, is the use of flashbacks. Find a VHS tape and slide it into a video player and you'll relive events from the past. In one tape you're part of a television crew filming a low-budget paranormal investigation show in the Baker family's guest house. These little standalone vignettes are wonderfully creepy, and I like how they sometimes reveal something that will help Ethan later on—like the location of a hidden switch. However, there are only a handful of them to discover, and I feel that they should've been a much bigger part of the game.

SHOT IN THE DARK
The move to first-person is not as revolutionary as you might think. The combat, which largely involves taking

> **It's the way it channels the older games that really makes it great**

careful aim at an enemy as they shamble towards you, is very *Resident Evil*. It's no FPS, thankfully, and the game has a nasty habit of making enemies creep up behind you while you're distracted by the one in front. But, curiously, there's no lean button, which makes those moments when you're trying to sneak around a hammer-wielding maniac slightly tricky. Some will miss the traditional third-person camera, but for me there's something more intimate about seeing things through Ethan's eyes.

For the most part, *Resident Evil 7* is a successful exercise in modernizing and reassessing a series that had become bloated and indulgent. But old habits die hard, and there are a few moments—especially the boss battles—that could easily be slotted into any of the old games. The careful, considered horror is occasionally nudged to one side as you find yourself fighting giant mutants covered in staring eyeballs, and you half expect Chris Redfield to show up and start punching rocks. But these lapses are infrequent, and do have some nostalgia value. Even though it's the most self-serious *Resident Evil* yet, it still has a sense of humor. After solving another ludicrous puzzle to unlock a door, Ethan says, "Who builds this shit?"

Even though it tries to distance itself, there are references to previous *Resident Evil* games. Some are subtle, like a newspaper article written by *Outbreak*'s Alyssa Ashcroft, while others are more overt. However, Capcom has managed to avoid dining out on the series' history too much, and overall it's a fairly standalone story. Ethan's search for his wife gives it a relatable, human underpinning—even when the story unravels towards the end and veers dangerously into B-movie territory. *Resident Evil* has always told big stories about toppling evil corporations, so it's good to play as a character with a simpler, more grounded motivation for once.

NEW TRICKS
Resident Evil 7 is a confident attempt at reinvention. But it's the way it channels the older games, particularly the first, that really makes it great. It takes an industrial pressure washer to the series, blasting off years of accumulated filth and grime. And you're left with a lean, polished survival horror game that borrows from its legacy, but isn't afraid to look to modern horror games for inspiration too. It loses something in the final act, and a few of the boss battles feel like a hangover from the bad old days, but otherwise this is comfortably the best *Resident Evil* game in years. ∎

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

90

Not the dramatic reinvention expected, but it's tense and refined with a brilliantly bleak, grimy atmosphere.

GoNNER

Your best friend is a whale, obviously.

These flying red guys explode, obviously.

You can find and wear a teddy bear head, obviously.
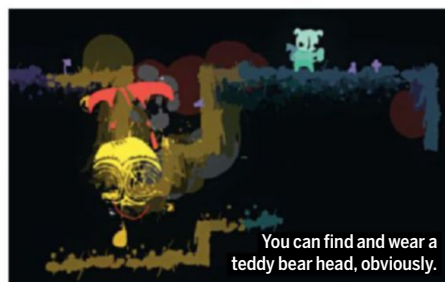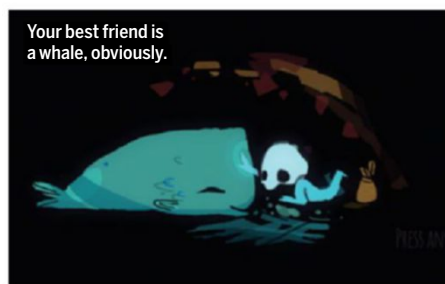
ROGUE GONE

Don't lose your head in the weird, challenging **GONNER**. *By Phil Savage*

What's with these glyphs? Whose skull is that? Why is there a hovering whale? *GoNNER* raises these and other questions, but explains almost nothing. It's up to you to figure out the world and its rules. Here's a clue: if it moves, kill it. *GoNNER* being a procedurally generated side-scrolling shooter, all you ever need to do is move, jump, shoot and—hardest of all—not die.

You spawn as a drop of water. Press 'A'—*GoNNER* is best played with a controller—and you'll grow arms and legs. Collect a head, a gun and a backpack, and you're able journey through the surreal corridors, chaining kills to earn glyphs and increase your score multiplier. *GoNNER* quickly transitions from eerie mystery to quirky action platformer.

The art style oozes personality, despite its crude look. The variety of enemy designs ensures each type is immediately identifiable—handy, as each behaves in a specific way. Bats chase, slugs move languidly across walls, porcupines roll up into an invulnerable state. Later, robots explode when damaged but not when they're killed—often leading to a deadly lesson in being aware of your surroundings.

The exact layout of each level is revealed as you progress. Floors and walls are initially invisible, only appearing if you or an enemy monster is in proximity. Screenshots don't do this effect justice. In motion, the abstract aesthetic feels wild and energetic. The floor turns red in the presence of enemies, who melt and deform as they're damaged. The backgrounds grow more vivid and lively as your combo builds.

> **Backgrounds grow more vivid and lively as your combo builds**

Paired with a strange, often sparse soundscape and exaggerated Vlambeeresque screen shake, *GoNNER* establishes a distinct style.

Along the way, you find new weapons, heads and backpacks—either as secrets, or bought with glyphs from a shopkeeper. The shotgun is powerful and fires a wide spread, but its low bullet reserve

means you're constantly looking for more ammo. The ant skull lets you drift, offering greater air control. The shark-fin backpack fires a barrage of bullets. My current favorite tactic is comboing the teddy head's triple jump with the laser, using it to propel myself across the level. It almost always ends in death, but it feels cool.

The campaign is short but difficult, relying on procedural generation to keep things interesting. Being hurt knocks off your equipment—head and all. You're defenseless until you retrieve it.

Despite *GoNNER*'s difficulty, aesthetic and mystery, there isn't a lot to it. It doesn't take long to work out an enemy's patterns, and there isn't much variety in the level generation. Nor is the range of equipment as diverse or significant as, for instance, *Nuclear Throne*. *GoNNER* doesn't offer the longevity of the best roguelike shooters, but it's nonetheless a stylish, weird and entertaining action platformer. ∎

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Fun and frantic, with plenty of challenge. *GoNNER* is weird and beautiful, despite its lack of depth.

71

KINK GAMING

For a game about sexual relationships, LADYKILLER IN A BIND shows a lot of restraint. *By Kate Gray*

The actual, full title of Christine Love's sexy sex visual novel *Ladykiller in a Bind* is *My Twin Brother Made Me Crossdress As Him And Now I Have To Deal With A Geeky Stalker And A Domme Beauty Who Want Me In A Bind!!*, which, uh, tells you pretty much everything you need to know. Basically, your twin brother has kidnapped you and is forcing you to pretend to be him on a cruise full of exceedingly randy teens from his school.

At the same time, a 'game' is going on in which you have to win votes for a chance at a $4 million prize. You have to balance two statistics: votes, and suspicion, which leads to Game Over if it gets to five points. Suspicion is earned by doing things your brother wouldn't do, like being overly nice, kind, or naked. Because your brother doesn't have boobs.

Unlike most visual novels, your dialogue choices are timed—you can choose the first one that appears, you can wait to choose something that might be slightly better, or you can ignore all options and just go with whatever the protagonist decides to say. This is an interesting dynamic: it makes conversations feel real and hides a lot of the visual novel framework.

The main conceit of the game is 'consent is sexy', though a clear slant towards 'BDSM is sexy' can't be ignored. The sexual relationships in the game all have some kind of power dynamic, whether that's you gently coaxing a shy girl into being more confident about her sexuality, or being tied up and suspended from the ceiling by a secret dominatrix. The topic of consent is handled well for the most part, with characters talking about safe words and making sure that every step along the sexy way is enthusiastic and agreed upon, but there's this weird, uncomfortable layer of non-consensuality that undermines it.

> ## Can consent be fully received if you're lying about who you are?

At the heart of it all, you are pretending to be someone you're not—you're a woman pretending to be a man, and a stranger pretending to be a classmate. Can consent ever be fully received if you're lying about who you are? It's also a bit weird that in one scene, you get given a safe word but seemingly not the option to ever use it. The character you play also imposes her own preferences on you, with 'Honest' choices popping up about things she enjoys, even if the player really, really doesn't enjoy them.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sexy, NSFW visual novel about kinks, manipulation and secret boobs.

EXPECT TO PAY
$30

DEVELOPER
Love Conquers All Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Surface Pro 4, 8GB RAM, Intel i7, 256GB SSD, integrated intel graphics card

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.bit.ly/2j18BBE

There's also the question of whether or not the game is actually sexy, although this is more of a personal thing. If you're not into power-play and words like 'groping' and 'molesting' used in a sexual context, this isn't going to make you tingle in your downstairs dancefloor. But even if you don't find that particular dynamic sexy, you'll still find other parts of the game pretty steamy. Ahem. Let's move on.

FORCED FEEDBACK

There are uncomfortable scenes, though there is the option to skip them, and there is a content warning ("transactional sex, degradation"). These scenes feature sexual acts that are implied to not be consensual, yet the character still seems to enjoy them (you get the option to confess that you enjoy being forced to do sexual acts against your will. Even if you don't). There's also the really creepy narrative framing, in which you're telling your twin brother about all the sexual acts you've been getting up to, in graphic detail.

Despite all this, *Ladykiller* is doing important work when it comes to the portrayal of consent and interesting sexual dynamics. Most sex games are pretty vanilla and written very much from the male gaze point-of-view, and while *Ladykiller* isn't all that diverse when it comes to its cast, who are mostly skinny, white and hairless from the neck down, it's still making leaps and bounds in other areas.

When sex games can represent the diversity of sexuality, fetishes, turn-ons and kinks while still showing that respect and care are important in any level of sexual relationship, then we'll have got somewhere good. For now, *Ladykiller* is a good start. ∎

SIDE CHARACTERS *Not everyone is there to help you score*

THE NERD
Angry, a little boring, mostly serves as a barrier for you when you're trying to sleep with pretty much anyone.
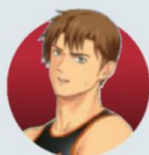
THE ATHLETE
Seems to be your cousin, so I guess you probably can't screw him. He also can't win you votes, so you may not talk to him much.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER
Manipulative, untrustworthy, kinda cute. Spoilers: you can get to a sort-of sex scene with her, but it's a bit of a dead end.

THE MAID
The only WoC in the game. She's cute, and makes a *Final Fantasy* reference at one point. NICE.

PCGAMER ■ **VERDICT**

Ladykiller is problematic in some areas, but overall a really good, thoughtful move towards better sex games.

78

For someone who gets all the ladies, your character is *quite* plain-looking.

THE PRINCE Let me put it like this: is there anyone in your life who cares about you a lot, who obsesses over your actions, who follows your every move...

You might learn something new about BDSM (if you don't know already).

Call him "The Dickhead", because he is one.

FUCK THIS ARROGANT JERK AND THE HIGH HORSE HE RODE IN ON

HENCEFORTH CALLED...

➤ THE PRESIDENT
· THE RIVAL
· CUSTOM

Consent is handled sensitively – but only sometimes.

THE BEAST I want you. That means I want you to be comfortable, not to feel like you're pressured into something you don't want.

THE BOY AAAAH! GOSH DARN FRIGGIN' HECK OW OW OW OW OW

The backgrounds are absolutely stunning.

WHERE DID YOU SPEND YOUR DAWN?

V of 4

SCENE V

POTENTIAL SUSPICION FROM —— TO |||||

POTENTIAL VOTES NONE

CW TRANSACTIONAL STRAIGHT SEX, DEGRADATION (RECEIVING)

VI of 5

SCENE VI

POTENTIAL SUSPICION FROM —— TO |||||

POTENTIAL VOTES NONE

CW TRANSACTIONAL STRAIGHT SEX, DEGRADATION (GIVING)

NO.

This game is going to do wonders for the holiday cruise industry.

SURPRISE ATTACK

SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN is secretly last year's best stealth game. *By Fraser Brown*

Two soldiers patrol a stretch of road. They see nobody. Then, a sound that can only be described as "adorable" inspires one of them to wander off. The source is an improbably cute tanuki, or raccoon dog. Entranced, the soldier doesn't notice the rock hurtling from above. As it turns him into a smooth paste there's the flash and bang of a matchlock pistol, and soldier number two goes down. I exhale. Two more foes fallen to *Shadow Tactics'* heroes.

This tale of an unlikely cadre attempting to stop a civil war consists of 13 elaborate and complex stealth missions where the odds are seemingly stacked against the player. Thankfully, the quintet, made up of a sake-loving samurai, three ninjas, and an old man with a gun-leg and pet raccoon dog, have all the tools they need to overcome the most insurmountable of challenges. Each has skills to distract and kill, along with more specialized tricks ranging from geisha disguises to explosives.

Every enemy encounter is one piece of a huge clockwork puzzle, orderly and repetitive, and the key to its solution is to disrupt the pattern. The fun part is creating chaos with the toybox of abilities. There's a lot of fun to be had playing with different strategies and stitching together the best parts until you have something that works. Making this experimentation a bit easier is the ability to save anywhere, complete with a timer that lets you know when

> **A sake-loving samurai, three ninjas, and an old man with a gun-leg**

it's been a while since your last save. Never leave home without one.

Sometimes a problem requires lateral thinking. Snow can make a well-planned attack fall apart when a foe spots footprints, for instance, but a snooping guard will also helpfully follow such footprints to their end, where a trap can be prepared.

A lot of obstacles can only be overcome through teamwork, and that's where the handy Shadow Mode comes in. It's used to set up more complex assaults, assigning each character a job and activating them all at once. That way, a large group of enemies can be swept away in one swift move. It's a thrill to just hit a button, sit back and watch my minions take out a room full of enemies in tandem.

Each mission introduces unique objectives and new game mechanics, and even the number of characters under your control changes. This rather effectively stops you from getting too comfortable with one

tactic. You're tasked with prison breaks, assassinations, burglaries and even stopping armies, in a whirlwind tour of Japan. These missions are designed to be replayed, as they're essentially sandboxes fat with possible solutions. Unlockable challenges such as speed runs provide additional incentive.

Just as much diversity can be found in the themes and striking art direction. Lord Yabu's ostentatious palace is painted dark red and orange when you infiltrate it, matching your heroes' thirst for revenge and their hope that the sun is about to set on the rebellion. It's in stark contrast to the rescue attempt in Suganuma Village, where the rain never lets up and the once lively fields are now accompanied by rows of corpses. It's a gray and dismal location for a desperate mission.

TIMELESS CHARM

Like the surprisingly strong art, the story has been given an unexpected degree of attention. It's a mostly simple, but well-spun, yarn that manages to explore its heroes and give them meaningful arcs absent of overbearing exposition or lengthy cutscenes. It's through the mid-mission banter that we learn the most about the band and see them grow, and even those conversations have the soul of wit.

Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun might evoke the stealth escapades of decades past, but it's an exceptional addition to the genre in its own right. It's tricky, complex without being complicated, and full of enough character and user-friendliness that even the stealth-averse might find something to tempt them into the shadows. Did I mention you get a tanuki? ■

PC GAMER — **VERDICT**

Impressive missions, laden toy box and likeable cast make this one of the great stealth games of the decade.

92

MEET AND GREET *Get to know your new pals*

MUGEN
The group's leader and samurai, deadly with a katana and strong as an ox. Use him for taking out groups and carrying heavy objects.

HAYATO
A mercenary ninja, Hayato hangs out on rooftops and isn't too shabby with a shuriken. Silent takedowns are his speciality.

YUKI
Despite being the kid of the group, Yuki's a dangerous ninja-in-training. Use her bird call to lead enemies into ambushes or into her traps.

AIKO
A master of distraction, Aiko can blind foes with powder, and even walk among them unnoticed when in disguise.

TAKUMA
Takuma's sniping skills are unmatched, and his explosives deadly. Stick him in a tower and watch him work his magic.

The best way to avoid leaving footprints.
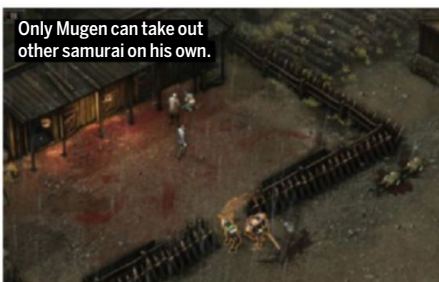
Only Mugen can take out other samurai on his own.

The level design is as elegant as a bonsai tree.
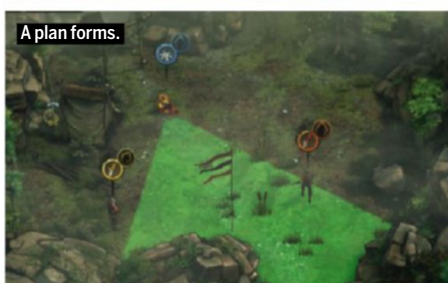
92%. Would infiltrate again.

A plan forms.

LIFE AFTER UNDEATH

THE WALKING DEAD: A NEW FRONTIER avoids third season syndrome with a confident double-bill in **TIES THAT BIND**. *By Chris Schilling*

Between the comic books, the TV series and the games, the cyclical nature of *The Walking Dead*'s narrative has become ever more apparent. Still, if a riff is catchy enough it can bear a certain degree of repetition, and though some of its scenarios are familiar, *A New Frontier* opens with a double episode that shows the game at its best, with characters you can care about, a couple of genuinely shocking surprises and a clutch of well-staged set-pieces.

It helps that Telltale's new engine finally feels fit for purpose. There's little to grumble about in *Ties That Bind*: everything runs that much smoother, and snappier transitions give the action sequences a greater sense of urgency. Press a button to jab a sharp object through a walker's skull and the only delay between tap and squelch is in the swing. Better lighting and superior cinematography enhance the visual storytelling: episode one's terrific opening offers a shivery reminder of the time the dead first started coming back to life, following a wonderful corridor shot with a jittery handheld camera to heighten the growing unease.

It's here that we meet new protagonist Javier Garcia, a disgraced former baseball star who quickly moves from absentee son to surrogate father as his story picks up a few years later. He's now on the road with sister-in-law Kate and her two stepkids, the sullen Gabe and the more immediately likeable, level-headed Mariana. Theirs is the kind of dysfunctional family unit we've seen before, but there's some solid character work here—and a winning line in gallows humor—that establishes the bond between them.

Then there's Clementine. A few years have passed since Season Two, and she's more hard-bitten and distrusting than ever. It's startling to see her like this, but we come to understand why, via two playable flashback sequences. The first draws a firm line under last season's events, and for at least two of the possible endings resulting from your pivotal choice in the finale, the outcome is especially grim. It's a reminder that your decisions can only shape your journey rather than its destination, but in a world where surviving is an act of defiance, there's something to be said for a choice that lets you spend a little longer with someone you care for.

A familiar face will delight fans of the comic and/or TV show

These moments are slightly more problematic in light of the main narrative. As players, we want to know what happened to Clem between then and now, so it makes sense for Telltale to fill in these gaps. But outside of these flashbacks, the story is told exclusively from Javier's viewpoint. Taking time out to explore the backstory of someone he's only recently met feels strange, and also leads to a certain disconnect in terms of your decision-making. We know Clem, but Javier doesn't: though Telltale steadily establishes an uneasy alliance between them, there are key decisions we're invited to make as Javier with knowledge he couldn't possibly have. Later, after arriving at a new settlement, it's not long before Javier indirectly causes a crisis, and yet characters are all too ready to trust him over companions they've surely spent a good deal longer with.

WALK ON

Otherwise, there's much to admire here, from a darkly amusing exchange between Javier and Clem about their different terms for the dead ("What do you call the ones that run?") to a torchlit tunnel escape that concludes with a tense confrontation and a choice that threatens to have serious ramifications for the next episode at the very least. An optional DIY surgery scene is every bit as squirmingly grisly as Clem's wound stitching in last season's opener, while an appearance from a familiar face will delight fans of the comic and/or TV show. It's clear that the "graceful exit" imagined by one character isn't going to happen any time soon for *The Walking Dead*, but *Ties That Bind* makes a surprisingly convincing argument for it to keep shuffling onward. ■

WALKER BAIT *Rating the chances of* A New Frontier*'s cast*

JAVIER
A likeable, decisive lead with rugged, easygoing charm.

Survival odds: 7/4
Season Three's hero should be safe—but then Telltale did kill off Lee.

CLEMENTINE
Tough, resourceful, no-nonsense teen, has Seen Some Shit.

Survival odds: 9/2
Second billing may suggest a shock, but surely Clem's too beloved to die?

TRIPP
Gruff mechanic with a heart of gold—a real gentle giant.

Survival odds: 20-1
Muscular and powerful, but has "heroic sacrifice" written all over him.

ELEANOR
Kindly doctor with strong bedside manner; potential love interest.

Survival odds: 100-1
Far too nice to live; will prompt an angry revenge subplot.

AVA
A wild card: rough-edged, enigmatic, hard to pin down.

Survival odds: 12-1
A redemptive death seems likely, but Ava could yet live to see Episode 5's credits.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Some internal weaknesses, but this is a promising, assured start, and a welcome return to form for Telltale.

82

Their first meeting isn't exactly a friendly one.

Both episodes balance action and downtime well.

The QTE sequences return, but they're generally more inventive and satisfying.

If you've not played previous seasons, you can recreate Clem's journey.

In The Walking Dead Season 1, Clementine met Lee after she lost her family and home. He protected Clem and taught her the importance of...

| Community | Justice | Survival | Self-Reliance |

The only hope people have for the future is to help each other.

Ⓐ Select Ⓑ Back

Save 3

Headshots are easy now.
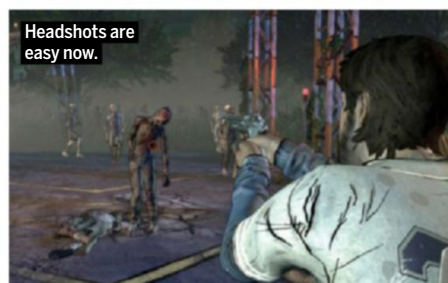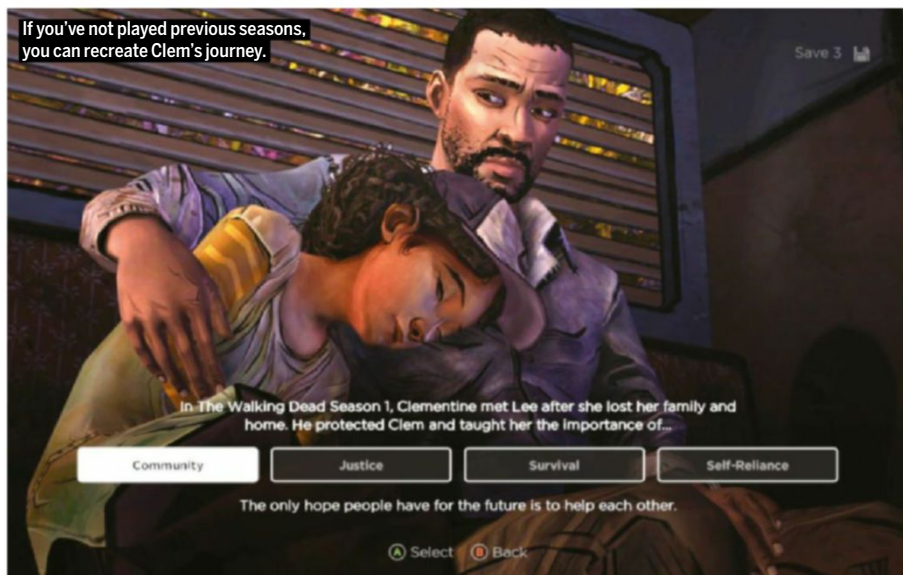
S'NO WORRIES

FORZA HORIZON 3: BLIZZARD MOUNTAIN is a clever addition
with a few minor issues. *By Phil Savage*

I'm a fan of Playground Games' no-nonsense approach to DLC naming. The (alas) Xbox exclusive *Forza Horizon 2* offered the *Storm Island* expansion, which brought players to an island beset by storms. Now, *Forza Horizon 3* presents *Blizzard Mountain,* set on a mountain onto which blizzards fall. Judging by the quality of both components, the combination of weather type and geographic feature is an effective formula.

Rather than integrate into the main map directly, *Blizzard Mountain* is accessed via Redstone Airport. This being *Horizon,* your introduction to the new region involves a helicopter and a Ford Focus RS, but, after the initial rapid descent, things soon settle into a routine. *Blizzard Mountain* features a tweaked progression system. Instead of fans, you collect stars—up to three from each race. You earn one star for finishing, a second for placing first, and the third for completing a challenge specific to that event.

I like the idea of challenges, but the implementation here isn't without problems. Many challenges require you to perform a certain number of a specific skill, meaning the difficulty oscillates between trivial and annoying. Doing 15 drifts in a race is easy. Doing 35 can be a chore. The best challenges are the ones that heighten the drama. In one, I'm required to earn a 175,000 point skill chain during a downhill point-to-point race. The combination of precision and peril works to create an exhilarating sequence across an already fast and tricky course.

The icy terrain highlights how forgiving *Forza Horizon*'s handling is. Cars are more slippery, but not especially so. While it's rare to spin out entirely, it's much easier to turn into a drift. That gives *Blizzard Mountain* a consistency of approach across its disparate events. This is a more specific experience than *Forza Horizon* proper—one that feels focused on using drifts to build massive skill chains. Alternatively,

you can remove your snow tires, forcing you to fight for control of your car. Doing so is arguably the most entertaining way to play.

The races are, as expected, great. *Blizzard Mountain* is ultimately more *Forza Horizon,* using the same AI and handling. That alone guarantees its competence, but this DLC adds new twists to the formula. More than simply the snowy terrain, it's the dramatic changes in elevation that have the biggest effect on the nature of its challenge. Hill Climb events are slow, twisty circuits full of awkward cambers and tight, hairpin bends. Descent races, meanwhile, are about careening down slopes at barely controllable, trouser-bothering speeds.

WINTER ATTRACTIONS
Throughout, the environmental design ensures a measure of variety—even within the fairly compact map. You race through a

> ### New modes and weather types add much to an already packed game

small village, around steaming hot springs and over a frozen lake. And while it's not a massive area, it does feel packed with activities—races, speed traps, drift zones and danger jumps. Unfortunately, there's little of *Forza Horizon*'s bombast here. There are no showcase events, and only a handful of fairly tame "Bucket List" challenges to tackle.

Forza's absurdity is a necessary part of the series. But, the opening helicopter airdrop aside, *Blizzard Mountain* feels strangely conservative. In *Forza Horizon 3* you get to race a VTOL jet. *Blizzard Mountain* has no such swagger, despite bobsleds being a thing our species invented. It's not just the wasted potential that disappoints me, but also what it means for the progression system. The base game tries to make an event out of unlocking new races—either through a showcase, or simply by making you drive to the festival site you're upgrading. In *Blizzard Mountain,* you automatically unlock a new chunk of stuff after every ten stars earned. As a consequence, progression can feel like a grind.

It's strange, because *Forza Horizon* is usually so good at keeping things varied—fostering the need to complete just one more race. That's missing here, and it's to the detriment of the overall experience. None of *Blizzard Mountain*'s problems are major, and much of what it does feels like a great extension of *Forza Horizon*'s amazing racing. The new modes and weather types add much to an already packed game. This is a worthy addition, to be sure. But, parcelled out, without the absurd, unforgettable moments of *Forza Horizon* proper, its limitations feel more pronounced. ∎

WEATHER OR NOT

Where Forza *could go for future expansions*

EARTHQUAKE VALLEY
Unfortunately, the constant force feedback will kill your controller within the hour.

HEATWAVE FOREST
It's like *Firewatch,* but with a nagging guilt over your contribution to global warming.

TSUNAMI STEPPE
Offers thousands of miles of Eurasian steppe, all flooded. No, you don't have a boat.

CLEMENT ATOLL
It's just… nice, y'know? Only features the one race course, so not particularly great value.

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Quality racing with lots of challenge. But it misses out on some of what makes *Forza Horizon* so audacious and fun.

78

The dedicated race course is a nice idea.

Here's the ice level. Will it be the lava or sewer level next?

Yes, there are snowy mountains in Australia. I checked.

This is also how arctic foxes hunt.

EXTRA+LIFE

The powerful demon hunter is a new hero class.

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"I get misty-eyed about the day I unlocked my first mount"

Taking a nostalgic trip back to **WORLD OF WARCRAFT**

I t's the winter of 2010 and *World of Warcraft*'s *Cataclysm* expansion has just been released. After years of resisting I finally decide to try Blizzard's MMO, and like many before me I fall hopelessly under its spell. I play it every evening for *hours*, amazed by the scale, hooked on the grind. Then I just stop. Perhaps another game came along or I just got bored, but the obsession mysteriously fades away, my subscription expires, and I leave Azeroth behind.

Over the years I'm occasionally overcome with a powerful desire to return. I reminisce about the winter of exploring and adventuring I shared with my troll hunter. I get pathetically misty-eyed about the day I finally hit level 20 and unlocked my first mount. Such speed! But as strong as this nostalgia is, it's never quite enough to make me reinstall—until now. The

ANDY KELLY

THIS MONTH
Returned to Azeroth and reunited with an old friend.

ALSO PLAYED
Astroneer, Total War: Warhammer

Legion expansion was released in August 2016, and after reading a lot of positive things about it, including our own 90% review, I fold and decide to dive back in.

I load the game to see my blue-skinned troll grinning on the character select screen, exactly how I left him. It's like reuniting with an old friend. But because Blizzard updated the character models for most of the races in 2014, he looks slightly more handsome. I enter the game and find myself in a goblin village nestled among the snowy forests of Winterspring. Then suddenly I have a

vivid memory of the precise moment I decided to stop playing this game.

SHAME
In a day I'd quested through the entirety of Ashenvale, Azshara, and Felwood, fueled by a revolting diet of caffeine and pizza, the very embodiment of the tabloid image of a gamer. A shameful practice former PC Gamer writer Owen Jones and I christened "poopsocking" after the urban legend of MMO gamers shitting into socks to avoid leaving their desks. But I must stress that we never, ever did that. Well, I didn't anyway.

As the sun rose and I arrived in Winterspring, I just couldn't go on. I was

---

AS MUCH AS I'M ENJOYING IT, IT'S NOT REALLY THE GAME I REMEMBER. IT'S TOO EXCITING

Getting your first mount is a big milestone.

I must have spent 100 hours with this guy.

Cheer up, Lewis, at least we're all on the property ladder.

It used to be the pride and joy of the town... always bustling with activity.

Lewis

"I live for petty passive aggression"

The odd magic of routine in **STARDEW VALLEY**
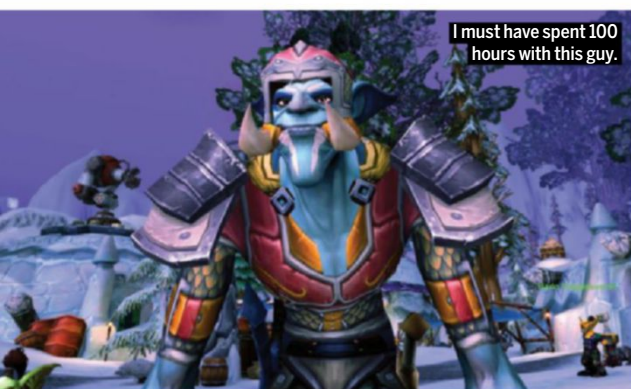
consumed by the guilt of devoting an entire day of the only life I'll ever have to an MMO. I'd devoured the whole gateau instead of just enjoying a slice, and I regretted it deeply. Bloated and ashamed, I shut my PC down, slumped to bed, and vowed never to return.

Here I am, seven years later, falling off the wagon. I go through my hunter's abilities, but feel like I'm trying to decipher an ancient Sumerian tablet. I've forgotten how to play the game.

Time for a clean slate. *Legion*'s new quests are supposed to be some of the best in the game, so I create a demon hunter and go through the starting area. It's incredibly dramatic, with big battles and stirring orchestral music. But as much as I'm enjoying it, it's not really the game I remember. It's too exciting.

So I roll a new character, a tauren druid, and start from level one. And as I run around Thunder Bluff performing menial tasks for giant bipedal cows, I feel at home. This is the *World of Warcraft* I remember. Those serene, slow-paced early hours where you have no worries and only a handful of abilities in your action bar. I'll return to my demon hunter later, but for now this is a more easygoing way to reacquaint myself with the game. I don't know how long I'll stick with it, but it's good to be back in Azeroth, even if it is just blinkered nostalgia. ◼

SAMUEL ROBERTS

THIS MONTH
Found robots too stressful, found farming too stressful.

ALSO PLAYED
Titanfall 2, Space Engineers

I completed *Titanfall 2* over the Christmas break, and I found it stressful. The demands of Respawn's mech shooter—that you sit up for extended periods of time, and pay attention to what's happening on screen—left me looking for lighter fare.

Stardew Valley's sense of routine and grindy harvesting of resources for cash is the opposite of the sort of game I'd normally play. You wake up every morning, check the TV for the weather forecast, and check the fortune teller to see if anything decent will happen to you. Then you go farm until you're sleepy, and hope you find a geode— basically a treasure egg—to crack open and sell the contents of. There's more going on in the town, but this repetitious labor is the thing I find the most compelling for some reason.

FARM LABORER

The sense of routine is oddly reassuring. I assumed the reason millions got into

Stardew Valley was the farming management side of things or the neat pixel art, but for me the appeal is getting up every day and doing the same thing. I chop down the long grass, bash through the rogue logs and shatter stone with no intention of ever improving the slightly crappy farm I've inherited. I'm raising funds by putting the stuff I collect in the box every day, but what am I going to do with the cash? I quite like my farm looking crap. Perhaps the other villagers will judge me? I hope they do. I live for petty passive aggression.

I spend one day going into town just to see what's around. Everything in Pierre's is overpriced, in my opinion, but hey, he's got a business to run. I speak to one girl in the shop, Abigail, who seems very nice. Seconds later, however, as I decide to investigate the bins outside, she catches me and freaks out. Jeez, so judgemental. I decide to work out the shame by smashing some rocks before going to bed at 4pm because I got tired quickly.

If I actually owned a farm, this is what my day would be. Wandering aimlessly around shops, shaming myself in front of someone I've just met, then only managing two hours of physical labor before needing 12 hours of sleep to recover.

I look forward to waking and finding more ways to embarrass myself. ◼

THE GAMES WE LOVE RIGHT NOW

And that's why the PC in PC Gamer is red.

Red Pipe Carburettor

Pipe design, delivers air and fuel into the engine to generate combustion. The Red color represents freedom from restraint.

27 to KM/L
2 kg in weight

STAY ALERT!

"I'd rather deal with a broken car than broken human beings"

Feeling nostalgic for the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in **JALOPY**

I grew up in '90s Yugoslavia, an Eastern European country that no longer exists. The year I was born, my family bought a Yugo—a metal box with wheels that was the embodiment of cheap communist cars. Against all odds, it managed to survive for 27 years. Its tenacity and stubbornness is a testament to the sort of absurdity that *Jalopy*, a lo-fi Eastern Bloc road-trip sim, attempts to recapture.

In the game, I'm introduced to my new car, the Laika 601 Deluxe. I have to put in the engine parts, tires and a new door. But it will run, I'm assured. The end goal of *Jalopy* is to reach Turkey, but I have my own mission in mind: to go back to Yugoslavia.

As I drive through procedural '90s Germany, I don't recognize any of the environments, but I still feel a sense of nostalgia. My car is slow and the roads are barren, without a single billboard in sight. The radio plays songs that sound like Eastern Europe in the '90s, (or Western Europe in the '60s, depending on your perspective). A few infant '90s tracks tentatively edge themselves in, not yet knowing whether they're electro or industrial.

After having to repair my engine twice, I no longer have the tools to do it a

■ MIODRAG KOVACHEVIC

THIS MONTH
Smuggled wine to buy a new roof for my car.

ALSO PLAYED
The Elder Scrolls Online, Guilty Gear Xrd Revelator

third time. Thankfully, a gas station is nearby. The turn from the freeway takes me through several twists until I finally reach the station in the middle of a forest. There's gas, and a few tires, but no tools. I wonder to myself what kind of gas station doesn't have spare tools, but as I throw another glance at the store, I notice there really isn't much of anything. The shelves are mostly empty, and the only thing that's cheap is gas. I'm reminded of the phrase "waiting in line for bread", when even getting something as basic as a loaf was a matter of uncertainty.

As I drive on, my engine still lets out puffs of smoke. I turn up the radio and ignore them. Somehow, I make it to the

AS I DRIVE ON, MY ENGINE STILL LETS OUT PUFFS OF SMOKE. I TURN UP THE RADIO AND IGNORE THEM

next town and pull off the necessary repairs. The brutalist architecture, the lack of life and the same almost empty stores unnerve me. I spend the night in a motel without a working toilet, then make my way across the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic.

ROAD BLOCS
The rest of my journey is plagued by broken bridges, puddles, flat tires and other inconveniences, but I prefer the open road to civilization. I'd rather deal with a broken car than broken human beings. I come across several crates that probably fell off the back of a truck. Cigarettes, wine and medication go for a lot of money, but my fortune is short lived as the Laika eats it all up in the form of upgrades.

When I finally reach Yugoslavia, the game shows off the coastal area— something I've never seen before. But the roads still feel familiar. They bend in weird and dangerous ways, while stone hills loom over them. It's nowhere in Yugoslavia; it's everywhere in Yugoslavia. I gaze at the sea and reflect upon my journey. Have I changed like my Laika has? Different on the inside, with only the shell still the same? The car breaks down again and I'm reminded that no, it's still the piece of garbage it has always been. ■

"This scrambled brainpan isn't going to get the best of me"

Going from skull-cracker to safecracker in DISHONORED 2

My playthrough of the first game was more disaster than *Dishonored*. At the time, I didn't quite grasp that slitting every throat I met in those early Dunwall levels would send me spiraling toward the dreaded High Chaos ending never to return. As the hours rolled on and the increasing swell of rats began to gnaw on Corvo's bootstraps, I thought that maybe, just maybe, I might be able to redress the balance by going full stealth, stifling the screams of my foes without shuffling them off their mortal coil.

Alas, Arkane's Chaos system was more severe than I'd anticipated. The rats continued to scoff their way through the mounds of decaying flesh strewn about the city, and poor Emily might as well have been crowned Queen of the Dunwall rodents by the end, her citizens having long since been digested in a million tiny rat stomachs. No wonder Corvo felt so sluggish when he possessed them—his hosts had been bingeing on the Great Dunwall Rot-off.

Fortunately, Arkane evidently managed to get the exterminators in before the events of *Dishonored 2*, and I finally got my chance to do things right. In a fit of madness, I decided to embark on a perfect, no-kill, no-detection run—a tall order for someone whose last attempt at stealth ended up elbowing

KATHARINE BYRNE

THIS MONTH
Swapped keyboard for pen and paper.

ALSO PLAYED
Dead Space

half of Prague to death in *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*.

Forty hours later, I finally succeed, but not without having doused my trigger finger in several vats of anti-itch cream first. Indeed, there were several moments during the Clockwork Mansion mission where I almost gave in. After five hours of quick-saves and hasty restarts (yes, five), I could have happily shot Kirin Jindosh in the face during our eventual confrontation, but the opportunity to strap him to his own electric chair and reduce him to a babbling idiot felt like better revenge. Even the Grand Designs team would struggle to piece his house back together, let alone someone who can't even spell their own name anymore.

> ADMITTEDLY, IT WAS IMMENSELY SATISFYING SOLVING JINDOSH'S LAST REMAINING MASTERWORK

Little did I know that Jindosh would have one last laugh, as just a couple of chapters later I encountered his infamous Jindosh Lock, a sealed door that you can only open by solving a riddle. I could have squeezed some hints out of the local neighborhood gang lords, but I was determined to solve it peacefully. So I sat there, staring at it. I don't know how much time passed, but even my monitor got bored waiting, going into sleep mode long before I cracked the combination.

PAPER CASE

Damn you, Jindosh, I thought. This scrambled brainpan isn't going to get the best of me. So I put my keyboard aside, grabbed a pen and reached for my dusty gaming notebook, something I haven't touched since scrawling my way through *The Witness* earlier in the year. I tore out several scraps of paper and made cards for every last variable, shifting them around until, at last, my brain whirred into life.

Admittedly, it was immensely satisfying solving Jindosh's last remaining masterwork, but it did make me wonder whether I should have been so merciful just a few hours before. I won't spoil the solution here, but I will say you should definitely start with the alcohol (both literally and figuratively). It helps. A lot. ∎
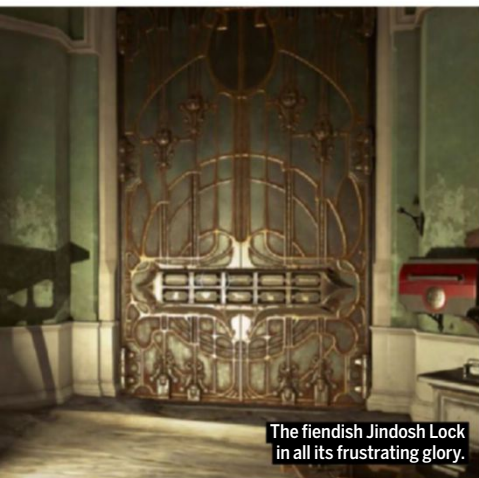
The fiendish Jindosh Lock in all its frustrating glory.

It was five hours in the making, but Jindosh got the fate he deserved.

> *Stalker* in a nutshell? Everything's trying to kill you.

1 CALL OF CHERNOBYL

MOD The call of the irradiated wild

The first version of this comprehensive *Stalker: Call of Pripyat* mod was released back in 2015, but it's been expanded massively since, culminating in an update that ensured its place as Moddb's 2016 Mod of the Year. *Skyrim*'s enormous total conversion mod *Enderal* placed at number two, which should give you some sense of *Call*'s ambition and scale.

The first thing it does is take the discrete chunks of wilderness found in the three *Stalker* games and shove them together, giving you a complete version of its radioactive Zone to explore in search of freaky enemies and loot. That would be enough for some modders, but it also ditches the default story, replacing it with the option to create your own character and align with one of the Zone's many squabbling factions. There's a new, optional campaign, along with a revised artifact system, and even a leaderboard so you can compare your scavenging antics with the other (NPC) stalkers.

Speaking of which, *Stalker*'s artificial intelligence has long impressed over the years, but *Call of Chernobyl* v1.4 makes a few tweaks to its "A-Life" system that should make enemies more realistic (and, sorry, more of a threat). In the overland, nocturnal mutants will now only come out at night, but will range farther from their nests during their active hours. *Chernobyl* takes *Stalker* and makes it bigger, more freeform and more dangerous; there's no better excuse to return to this landmark series.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/CallOfChernobyl

2 SAINTS ROW IV

MODS A few treats from the new Workshop

He Saints come marching into the Steam Workshop with this update, which enables players to more easily make and share mods for Volition's super-powered sandbox game. *Saints Row IV* wasn't originally built with modding in mind, so it's taken three years to make this patch a reality.
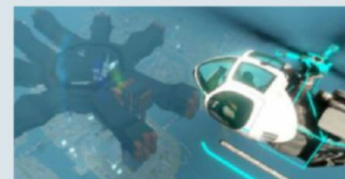
REMOVED SKY LIMIT
The sky's the… er, well, it's not any more, thanks to this mod that allows you to fly up above the oppressive clouds. It's a liberating thought, but unfortunately there's not much there.

www.bit.ly/SaintsMods1

MAD MOXXI
No prizes for guessing that this adds Mad Moxxi's colorful outfit from *Borderlands*. It's a good look, which fits surprisingly well with the over-the-top mayhem in Volition's similarly tongue-in-cheek adventure.

www.bit.ly/SaintsMods2

FLAMETHROWER GUITAR
For too long have flamethrowers and guitars been separate objects, so thank heavens for this fan-made weapon that mashes both together. Melt enemies with your solos, then melt their faces.

www.bit.ly/SaintsMods3

3 HEIR OF GRANATYKI

It's cumbersome, but with a pace and atmosphere all its own.

FREEWARE Plow into a new *King's Field*

King's Field fan MasterTaffer has created a prequel to the original game, which prompts you to investigate a mysterious darkness in the northern continent. You're not Columbo, so by "investigate" I of course mean "slaughter every monster you come across". Made using From's moderately creaky Sword of Moonlight engine—a tool specifically tailored to making *King's Field*-a-likes—*Heir of Granatyki* is pretty far from your typical FPS. WASD and mouse controls are out, and unintuitive keyboard/gamepad commands are in. It's worth putting up with all that, however, as this ethereal adventure captures the dreamlike spirit of the originals very well.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Granatyki

4 FERAL

FREEWARE The hunt is on in this gorgeous freebie

Feral is a game about hunting, but for once you're not playing a guy with a compound bow turning the animals he kills into a range of fetching wallets. You're one of the animals themselves: a big cat with a monstrous pair of claws and a ravenous appetite. Hunting from a first-person perspective, you use your feline senses to sniff out poo and follow animal tracks, made by creatures that look only vaguely similar to those found in the real world. In the unlikely event that your catty nose fails you, you can also put your ear to the ground and listen out for subtle footsteps. But beware: another predator stalks this ancient forest.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/FeralGame

1 KITTY LITTER
This icon represents your stance. Judging by the image of a cute little kitty, you're not yet fully grown.

2 GLORIOUS FOOD
As with any survival game worth its salt, you'll need to manage your food and water levels, displayed here.

3 PAWS FOR THOUGHT
My, what big paws you have, mysterious cat-thing from *Feral*. All the better to render wildlife limb from limb.

5 KITH–TALES FROM THE FRACTURED PLATEAUS

FREEWARE Don't let this one fall through the cracks

There's a small planet riddled with cracks, and in one of these cracks lies the strange town you explore in this isometric adventure. It's the first part of a free, episodic point-and-click series, and with its fantastical setting, giant dialogue bubbles and halftone visual filter, it looks a lot like an obscure European comic book brought to life. In this first chapter, as you get to know the various characters and wander about town solving simple puzzles, you'll come face to face with the setting's inherent mystery: what lies at the bottom of the fractured abyss?

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/KithGame

6 CHANGING WEATHER

MOD *CS:GO* is in for a spot of stormy weather

Revitalize your game with a surprise thunderstorm.

If you're looking to complicate your games of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, download this impressive meteorology mod. *Changing Weather* takes *CS:GO's* celebrated Dust map and adds, appropriately, dust, in the form of random sandstorms.

Sand not your thing? Play enough games and you're likely to see the full range of weather.

Various types of fog, rain and even a thunderstorm are included, the latter blasting the map with a torrential downpour and the occasional dash of thunder and lightning. Dust is a classic you're probably highly familiar with by now, but *Changing Weather* will let you appreciate it in a new light (or under a whirlwind of sand).

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/ChangingWeather

---

7 STANDBY

DEMO Stand by for something special in 2017

Super-slick *Standby* is a game about chaining jumping, slamming, sliding and shooting—it's a little like a mech-less, 2D *Titanfall*. That's purely in the movement sense, as *Standby* is also a minimalist sidescrolling platformer, the kind you'll restart again and again until you perfect it. Your little running man has to scamper towards the exit of each stage, and the key to doing so is Z—it makes you slide over hazardous terrain, slam straight down vertical gaps, or shoot obstacles from your path while you're sliding about. It all depends on *when* you press it, and mastering this timing is no mean feat. This short demo is a tease, but a tease for something that could be special.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/StandbyGame

Your gear now runs around the level like a headless chicken.

8 RUN FOR IT!

MOD Get a leg up on the demon invasion

This is a mod with legs—and I mean that literally, as its raison d'être is the addition of dangly gams to every object in the game. Barrels now boast lower limbs, armor power-ups sprout shapely pins. Ammo is newly mobile, guns have legs to die for, and invincibility orbs took one look at moody DoomGuy and ran the other way.

What this means in practice is that you have to catch your weaponry,

ammunition and other bits before you can use them, chasing them around the level like a pretend ghost spooking Scooby Doo. I would never have thought *Doom* and Benny Hill to be natural bedfellows, but it turns out Yakety Sax is the perfect accompaniment to this absurd mod—a MIDI version is included in the download. The *Doom* modding community is the gift that keeps giving.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/RunForDoom

9 TRIENNALE

FREEWARE Five freebies exhibiting signs of greatness

This bundle of arty oddities was put together for the Triennale exhibition of design and art held in Milan last year. It's nice to see our hobby get a little recognition at such an event.

The collection comprises five works from the likes of *Kentucky Route Zero* developer Cardboard Computer, and *Sunset* creator Tale of Tales, who apparently haven't left the gaming business after all. Cardboard Computer's *Neighbor* is the more traditionally interactive experience here, and easily the most beautiful, taking the form of an isometric adventure set in a strikingly colorful desert. You direct your little cowboy around by clicking on the screen, inviting them to meddle with a workshop bench, a swimming pool, and other items that serve no apparent purpose. Tale of Tales' *L.O.C.K.* is a sort of celestial kaleidoscope: an ever-revolving toy that allows you to zoom outwards from an earthly scene and into the heavenly realms above it, and beyond. Both games are fascinating, but the other parts of this bundle are worth a look too.

1 IL FILO CONDUTTORE
A tactile game where you control a bouncy ball on a bit of string. The story advances as you play with the toy—a story that feels like an interactive Pixar short.

www.bit.ly/TriennaleGames

2 A GLASS ROOM
Grasp at fleeting, fractured memories with this virtual divination tool, by tuning it into psychic radio frequencies. Enigmatic images and sounds suggest a story.

www.bit.ly/TriennaleGames

3 THE WORM ROOM
An endless series of glass greenhouses, randomly generated as you move from one to another. Each room is different, and they never repeat.

www.bit.ly/TriennaleGames

10 TANKITA

FREEWARE Tanks for the memories

Terri Vellmann's games remind me of the early days of the PlayStation. They're blocky 3D worlds with minimal texturing, and a camera filter that apes the fuzzy, low-def TV sets of yore. You'll want to play *Mundo Lixo* first—a game about wandering an atmospheric trash heap—while this is Vellmann's more gamey follow-up. It's a simple shoot-'em-up where you pilot a low-poly tank through an enemy-filled desert, on a mission to blow every one of those baddies to smithereens. There's no music yet and only two missions in this ongoing project, but the controls, physics and the level of challenge already feel just right, and I loved exploring the chunky, charming cartoon world.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Tankita

Choosing to go to the Moon in
SPACE ENGINEERS

Samuel and Phil build a spaceship.

I n a Steam sale long ago, on a whim, Samuel picked up the sandbox and construction game *Space Engineers*. For this feature, he and Phil teamed up to build a spaceship in it, to leave Earth in that spaceship and to fly it to the Moon—all without knowing how the game actually worked, or paying any attention to its tutorials.

LEFT: Sam's long journey to find Phil ends when he finds his HELP sign.

FINDING EACH OTHER

Phil: I launch a creative mode server, spawning in a base on Earth. Samuel joins, and… Sam, where are you?

Samuel: I'm 66km away, Phil, having spawned in the Earth's atmosphere, and I'm in a landing craft which means I'm essentially falling with style rather than actually controlling where I'm going. You can't just spawn next to a co-op partner in this game straight away, which is a bit annoying. But damn it, I want us to build a spaceship together.

Phil: I create a new faction, the PCG Space Boys, in the hope of getting a permanent waypoint marker for Samuel's location. That doesn't work. Instead, because I had to leave my original faction, my entire base becomes hostile to me. I flee to a nearby hill, set a manual GPS marker and wait. Then I build a sign, because what else are you going to do when you're stranded alone on a hostile planet?

Samuel: Phil fiddles around until he finds out how to set a waypoint, and now I have to get to him. This means fitting atmospheric thrusters to my landing craft, which makes it just about fast enough to leapfrog across the world to where Phil waits for me. It's fast enough to get me there, but not so fast that I can actually take off from the ground for more than ten seconds. When I reach my destination, I see a HELP sign very cleverly made out of spaceship parts. "I'm on top of the E," Phil tells me. We meet at last.

BUILDING A SPACESHIP

Phil: We need a flat location to construct our ship, but we'd be building around machine gun fire if we did it back at my base. Instead we head to the valley below, and hope the ground is even enough to facilitate the construction of a spacefaring vessel. I bet NASA never had to deal with this shit. Another problem is that I don't know how to play this game. Even building that HELP sign took longer than I'd care to admit. I plop down a cockpit, but sideways, embedding it in the ground. This won't do at all.

SAMUEL ROBERTS

Buys games on a whim then makes his team do features about them.

PHIL SAVAGE

Veteran of *Kerbal Space Program*, so knows about pretend space.

Samuel: This is a PC Gamer ship, so damn it, we will build it out of red and black bricks. Phil's cockpit is purple—and sideways. I start by placing a new cockpit and attach it to a block, so that the vague shape of a spaceship begins to take form. We agree that the ship needs two cockpits, because there are two of us, so we stick those together. I add two reactors, so the ship can actually take off, and then we start fitting thrusters onto it, which should—in theory—allow us to touch the stars. I also attach a couple of gyroscopes. I don't know what they do, but they should probably be there, because science possibly.

Phil: While Samuel builds an impressive looking frame, I muck around in the background figuring out how things work. I place a couple of massive floodlights near our build to improve nighttime visibility—both to learn how electrical systems function, and because it sounds like the sort of thing a helpful, knowledgeable co-op partner would do. Samuel is fiddling with power sources and gyroscopes—all things I don't understand—so to further mask my incompetence, I jump in and add thrusters. Lots and lots of thrusters.

Samuel: To be honest, during the quick exploratory play of *Space Engineers* I had before this, I basically just taped loads of thrusters to a cockpit and hoped for the best. So really, Phil and I are just as incompetent as each other. Who better to reach the Moon than us?

Phil: The ship isn't very aerodynamic-looking, but the sheer number of thrusters should count for something. As a final touch—because I appreciate the majesty of space travel—I strap a couple of seats to the top of the ship, creating an ad-hoc viewing platform. Again, it's not scientifically advisable, but we seem to be invulnerable in creative mode, so what's the harm?

Samuel: These seats, I should point out, are not in a contained or shielded environment, so humans probably shouldn't sit on them on a moving spaceship. I sit down anyway and prepare for lift-off.

LEFT: Our spaceship is basically just a wall of thrusters with two cockpits. Which are the wrong way round, it turns out.

TO THE MOON

Phil: The view from inside the cockpit seems weird, making it hard to get my bearings. I press W and nothing much happens. I press the spacebar, and we start to build some momentum. We reach an impressive height, but I'm navigating entirely with the altimeter because I can't tell what's happening outside my window. It almost looks as if the atmospheric engines are at the bottom of my viewscreen. But that would mean I was upside down, *and* perpendicular to the bottom of the craft. Surely not.

Samuel: Hmm, what design error could possibly have caused that? I'm not sure. It feels oddly rewarding to see our piece-of-crap spaceship break out of the Earth's atmosphere, though, and to see the world behind us vanish. Hang on a minute. When I started the ship, did I accidentally attach the cockpits so they were looking upwards instead of forwards? Is that what I did, Phil?

Phil: I think that's what you did, Sam. That would explain why pressing the up key makes us go forwards. On the plus side, we're 10,000 meters up in the sky—that's basically space. On the down side, getting to the Moon would mean doing the entire journey looking 90 degrees away from the Moon. I don't think I'm that good of a pilot.

Samuel: How did I not notice this during the test flight? I did wonder why you kept saying "the ship's upside down!" when from my perspective in the cockpit it was clearly the right side up. You can't muck about when it comes to the Moon. I decide to get off my chair in the middle of space and sort it out. It turns out this is a terrible idea—I float away uncontrollably.

Phil: I know it seems like I'm leaving you stranded in space, Sam, but this ship doesn't have brakes. I turn off the engine and we both plummet back to Earth—me in the ship, Samuel in nothing but the astronaut suit he spawned in. Fortunately, we land only a couple of kilometers apart. We fix up the cockpit so that it points in the right direction, and, now that I can see where I'm going, we make it easily back into space. The Moon is quite some distance away, though, and even after we stop on an asteroid to add yet more thrusters, reaching it looks like it could take some time. I press W and wait.

Samuel: I have to go to a boring real-life meeting, which lasts for ten minutes. The Moon seems miles away when I leave. The second I come back, Phil is about to collide with the thing. We did it! We went to the Moon! What happened while I was away, Phil?

Phil: I alt-tabbed out to do some work. Space travel is pretty majestic.

Phil: Sam, I've found a thing in the construction menu called a 'jump drive'.

Shit, this thing doesn't have seatbelts.

Phil celebrates a successful mission in a silly spaceship.

THAT WOULD EXPLAIN WHY PRESSING THE UP KEY MAKES US GO FORWARDS

If it works, I reckon we could reach Mars. Either that or it'll go horribly wrong and we'll be stranded forever in deep space. Either way, it could be a laugh.

Samuel: Originally, I wanted us to reach the Moon, and even that seemed unlikely to me about 30 minutes ago. But we did it! Fuck it: let's go to Mars. It's right over there. How far away can it be?

BEYOND THE INFINITE (MARS)

Phil: I suspect that *Space Engineers* doesn't model most of the forces that would prevent our ship from getting off the ground. Plus we're on the Moon now, and there's basically no gravity. What I'm saying is let's just awkwardly bolt the warp drive to the bottom of this ship. We use about six nuclear reactors to power it all, but it seems to work. This is exciting! I punch the warp drive. "Jump drive is only 11.26% charged." This is going to take a while.

Samuel: Crikey. If the other bits of the ship are space Lego, this is space Duplo. It's gigantic. This is one ugly-ass vessel, and I'm still sitting on top. Will going into hyperspace not destroy my body?

LEFT: We stop off on an asteroid to add a few more thrusters.

RIGHT: We make it to the Moon. It's OK.

The view is great from this impossible viewing chair.

Phil: We fell to Earth and survived, so you'll probably be fine.

The power charges, I point at Mars and punch that drive. I'm told off by the game for trying to warp into a gravitational body. Why does breaking physics have this many rules? I aim off to the side, and try again. A box appears asking me to confirm the 'blind jump'. Yes, dammit! Don't question my orders. Finally, we jump, and arrive... not on orbit around Mars.

Samuel: I'm alive! Mars is bigger now, but no, we're not exactly there yet. Going there manually could take forever. Can we jump again to get closer? Phil's been in the pilot seat for a while now, so I'm basically a passenger, beholden to his expertise.

Phil: We could always swap seats, but this thing still doesn't have brakes. Anyway, I've found the button for decreasing our warp distance. We can't jump into a planet's gravitational pull, but I can reduce the distance until we're at the point closest to its gravity field. After that, it should be a reasonably short trip to the surface.

I do, and it is. We're on Mars!

Samuel: It's a surprisingly impressive version of Mars, too—the texture of the planet looks very realistic as we enter the atmosphere. We take pictures of each other in front of our crappy-looking, house-shaped spaceship, like rubbish astronauts. I celebrate the freedom of being on Mars by spawning some gigantic wheels in an effort to build a big space car, a surefire sign that I'm procrastinating and that we need to switch the game off and write about our journey to Mars. Kudos, Phil! I feel like I was slightly useless for basically the entire back half of that trip.

Phil: Your moral support was an invaluable contribution, Sam. And so were your screenshots. ■

RIGHT: Screw it, let's do Mars, too. Phil installs a jump drive and takes us there after two attempts.

LONG WAR 2

This is a must-play reinvention of *XCOM 2*. *By Tom Senior*

The word 'mod' undersells *Long War 2*. Mod implies an aesthetic tweak, a UI correction, a new weapon perhaps. In fact, this is *XCOM 2* as developed in a parallel universe. *Long War 2* does add lots of new weapons, classes and skills, but all these service a set of bespoke design aims that turn *XCOM 2* from a survival strategy game into a gradually paced army and territory management sim with expanded combat encounters.

For players who have mastered *XCOM 2*'s story and power arcs, or now find them predictable, *Long War 2* is an essential download. The mod forces you to break out of your habits and re-engage with the game again at the most basic level. Even soldiers are valued differently. You can field up to ten in a mission, and you start with a large roster. Consequently, losing agents isn't the body blow it can be in traditional *XCOM*, and you have more room to experiment with ability and weapon combinations across your force.

Your whole stance as a resistance commander feels different to ordinary *XCOM 2*, which forces you into a reactive position with must-fight emergency missions. In *Long War 2* missions are more like leads that you can choose to spend time and resources to follow up. Ordinary missions are preceded by an infiltration period that asks you to devote a squad to a location for a variable number of days. If they achieve a high degree of infiltration (represented by a percentage marker that ticks upwards daily), they face weaker forces in that mission.

This introduces some new concepts to *XCOM 2*. Firstly, you can take a pass on missions. Secondly, it's entirely viable, and often useful, to send an under-strength squad to a mission, because smaller squads can infiltrate more quickly and effectively.

This creates an interesting separation within your roster, between large teams of newbies and small teams of highly leveled, well-equipped crack special forces operatives. Moving between sub-squads introduces more variety to combat encounters as well. In *XCOM 2* you're likely to develop a small team of precious warriors. In *Long War 2* you nurture a broad, diverse stable over a longer period.

BUSIER COMBAT

Even if you decide to deploy a small squad, combat encounters tend to be busier. Enemy reinforcements can drop in while you're waiting for extraction. If a mission is going badly and you choose to extract, you have to wait longer for your ship to arrive, and thus fend off more enemies. There are new enemy varieties too, such as color-coded versions of ordinary Advent soldiers with different loadouts and behaviors.

THE MOD FORCES YOU TO BREAK OUT OF YOUR HABITS AND RE-ENGAGE WITH THE GAME AGAIN

These expanded firefights have an interesting effect on the way chance operates. By growing the number of chance rolls the game makes, the effects of variance are reduced over time. You will still see massive swings of good and bad luck, of course, but the length of the campaign and the reduced value of soldiers softens the harshest elements. The extra bit of ablative armor that recruits wear also helps.

The extra soldiers and the glut of missions give you more room to enjoy the new classes. The sword-wielding Shinobi shares some similarity to the assault class, but with a much greater emphasis on

"It's just a scratch, sarge. I didn't need that intestine."

No wonder they're knackered, they just fought 20 giant alien snakes.

Look out for the latest alien threat—evil mirrorballs.
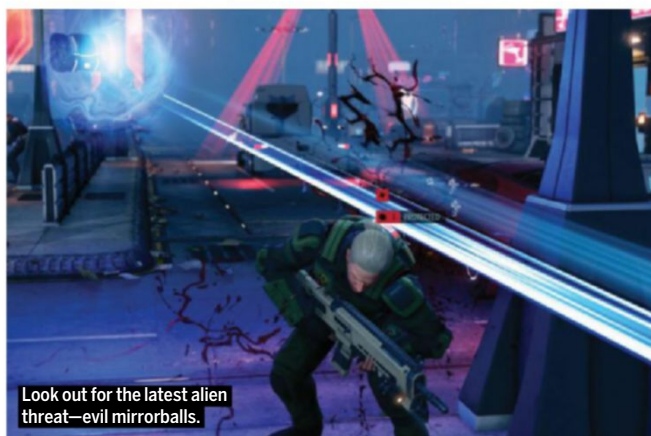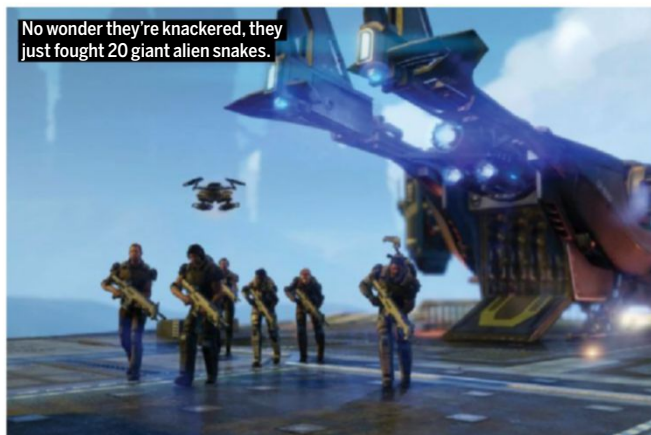
stealth and ambush tactics. At high levels, with the right skills, Shinobi can break stealth, attack multiple enemies and re-enter concealment, or mitigate damage with buffed evasion rolls (dodging an attack means you take a small amount of 'graze' damage, far preferable to the full-whack when fighting mid-tier enemies or higher). They are supported by knives and swords, and benefit from the new SMG weapons, which let you sacrifice mid-range accuracy for speed. There's also a new Technical class, members of which wield a wrist-mounted flame-thrower/rocket launcher secondary combo weapon, which is as amazing as it sounds.

There are plenty of new mission types for these new soldiers to tackle, including prison breakouts and enemy base assaults. The rewards for these missions have been redesigned to affect the heavily reworked map layer. You still fly the Avenger around the globe to camp on spots and suck up resources or activate missions, but *Long War 2* introduces an additional layer of territory management. Once you've made contact with the resistance in an area, you can assign resistance members based there to different jobs that generate supply and intel. You can assign engineers

and scientists to regions to supply additional boosts. Resistance members can also fend off alien influence in an area, and Advent moves troops around on the map in an effort to install new alien bases and move the Avatar project forward.

PACE CHANGE

The changes bring a dose of 4X strategy to *XCOM 2*. This slows the pace considerably—this is *Long War*, after all. This dilutes the impact and drama of an *XCOM 2* campaign to an extent. The way the core game gives you a narrow stream of high-stakes decisions is one of the reasons I loved it so much when I reviewed it last year. However, I've found it fascinating to see how *XCOM*'s core mechanics work in this new context. *Long War 2* is a thoughtful and effective reworking of the *XCOM 2* formula, and the new weapon, class and mission additions are slick and well-integrated—they could have come from Firaxis.

Speaking of Firaxis, it's great to see studios work with modders, particularly in instances where the mod team wants to substantially rework the studio's original vision. The result is a neat Earth-B take on the concept that unlocks hundreds of hours of extra playtime. ∎

It still feels like your soldiers miss 90% of the time.

ONE PERFECT SHOT
A rocket ambush is a beautiful thing

1
Eight enemies, one roof, one rocket. Ridiculous amounts of damage.

2
Shortly after impact the roof collapses, killing any survivors.

3
Enemies then swarm in from the shadows to investigate.

4
Fellow soldiers in overwatch mow down every last one of them.

ELITE DANGEROUS

Frontier's space sim continues to expand its Horizons. *By Phil Savage*

I'm on a pilgrimage to the Maia system, jumping between stars in the hope of experiencing an alien encounter. It's the *Elite Dangerous* equivalent of that rooftop party scene in Independence Day, where, faced with a powerful and unknowable force, some choose to rush towards the ship, folksy greeting placards raised high above their heads. Admit it, you smiled when they were obliterated.

My own encounter is less eventful, in that it doesn't happen. There are lots of rumors about where to find the aliens and how to tempt them into intercepting your ship, but nobody really *knows* anything. That's a cool place for *Elite* to be in. It's a sim that has been extensively catalogued through wikis, forums and third party databases. UFOs bring a much needed sense of mystery.

Perception is important, because much of the action is—to be blunt—a bit tedious. It's the pleasant, whiling-away-a-lazy-Sunday kind of tedious, but *Elite*'s more sedate activities are best tackled alongside a boxset of something bingeable. It's not so much the moment-to-moment interactions that make it compulsive, as the overall fiction of you, alone, thriving in a hostile universe.

For me, the fiction is enhanced by the 2.2 update and the introduction of passengers. Most space stations now have a passenger lounge full of civilians. Some want transport, some are sightseeing, some want to study some galactic oddity thousands of light years away. Ultimately it's a way of delivering new missions, and offering bigger rewards for players who want something more involved. While the conceit is hardly romantic—you're space Uber—it makes *Elite* feel less clinical.

Previously, the only real characters were in other ships, and so being a pilot felt normal. Passengers create the sense of a life that isn't always on the move. For the people on a space station, you represent a chance for adventure—because what you do is inherently adventurous. It's a small but meaningful shift of perspective. Introducing something mundane highlights the ways in which your experience isn't.

Passengers come with quirks. Secretive passengers don't like it if your ship is scanned, criminal passengers can lead to your ship being attacked in systems where they're wanted, and demanding passengers make extra requests along the way. It all adds extra wrinkles to the way you play. It's not too demanding a process, but if your passengers become too unhappy they'll jump ship, failing the mission.

As a mission type, passenger transport currently lacks variety, leading to repetition as you grind your way towards towards *Elite*'s nebulous endgame. *Elite*'s update process tends to favor new systems over fleshing out existing ones. Even now, 13 major updates after release, the basic mission system suffers from the same lack of variety.

If *Elite* lacks depth, it makes up for it in breadth. Returning for the first time since the launch of *Horizons*, I'm surprised by how much extra there is to do. Engineers, added in 2.1, make use of a new crafting system, letting you gamble materials for a chance of beneficial upgrades to your ship's components. It's not just an upgrade system, but one of discovery, as engineers only make themselves known after you prove your competence at specific activities. And in 2.2, a new Crew system brings ship-launched fighters—NPC pilots who can be deployed from your hanger,

> **MOST SPACE STATIONS NOW HAVE A PASSENGER LOUNGE FULL OF CIVILIANS**

increasing the combat potential of solo players.

Elite Dangerous still feels like a work in progress. Often, that's exciting—it means enhanced systems, new features, and, of course, aliens. It also means the flaws are, over a year after release, still readily apparent. Judging by recent events, Frontier is still committed to *Elite*'s continued expansion. That suggests great things for the game's future, even if some limitations still rankle today. ■

MANIFEST DESTINY *I'll be your pilot for this journey*

DIVYA MOONEY
Profession: Famous Explorer
Trait: Secretive. Being scanned will reduce satisfaction. Wants to collect data from a system 12,000 light years away. Better stock up on Ramen Noodles.

JAYLINN HARRISON
Profession: CEO
Trait: Time sensitive. Delays will reduce passenger satisfaction. Wants transport. Clearly her company isn't doing great if she can't afford a space limo.

ELDON DELEON
Profession: Rich Tourist
Trait: Demanding. Likely to make requests while onboard. Wants to see visitor beacons throughout the galaxy. Not actual landmarks. Just beacons.

RUDOLPH CANTU-HARTMAN
Profession: Criminal Mastermind
Trait: Criminal. If scanned by authorities, you'll be attacked. Wants transport. Wrote 'criminal mastermind' on the manifest.

The logical endpoint of gentrification: you need a permit to enter Sol.

Station biomes include 'nice', 'less nice' and 'craptastic'.

Making a 'sunroof' joke is the first sign of space madness.

Planetary activities still feel underdeveloped.
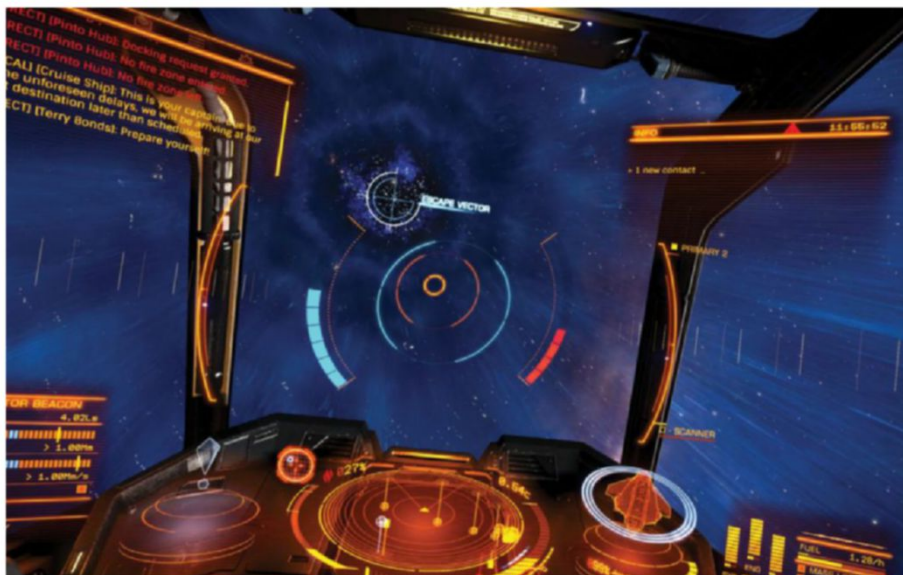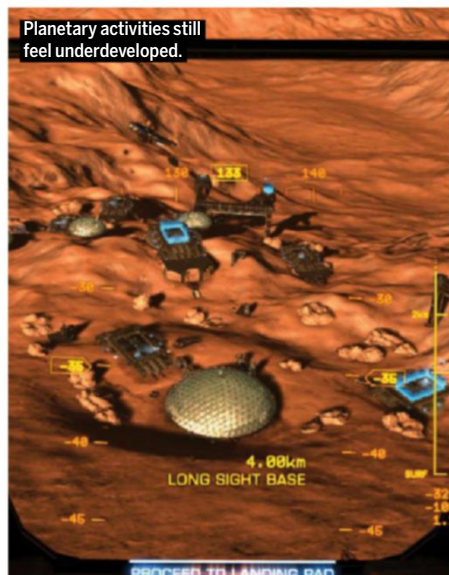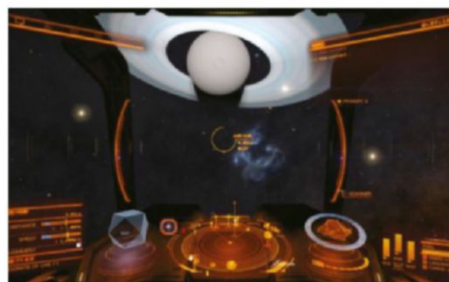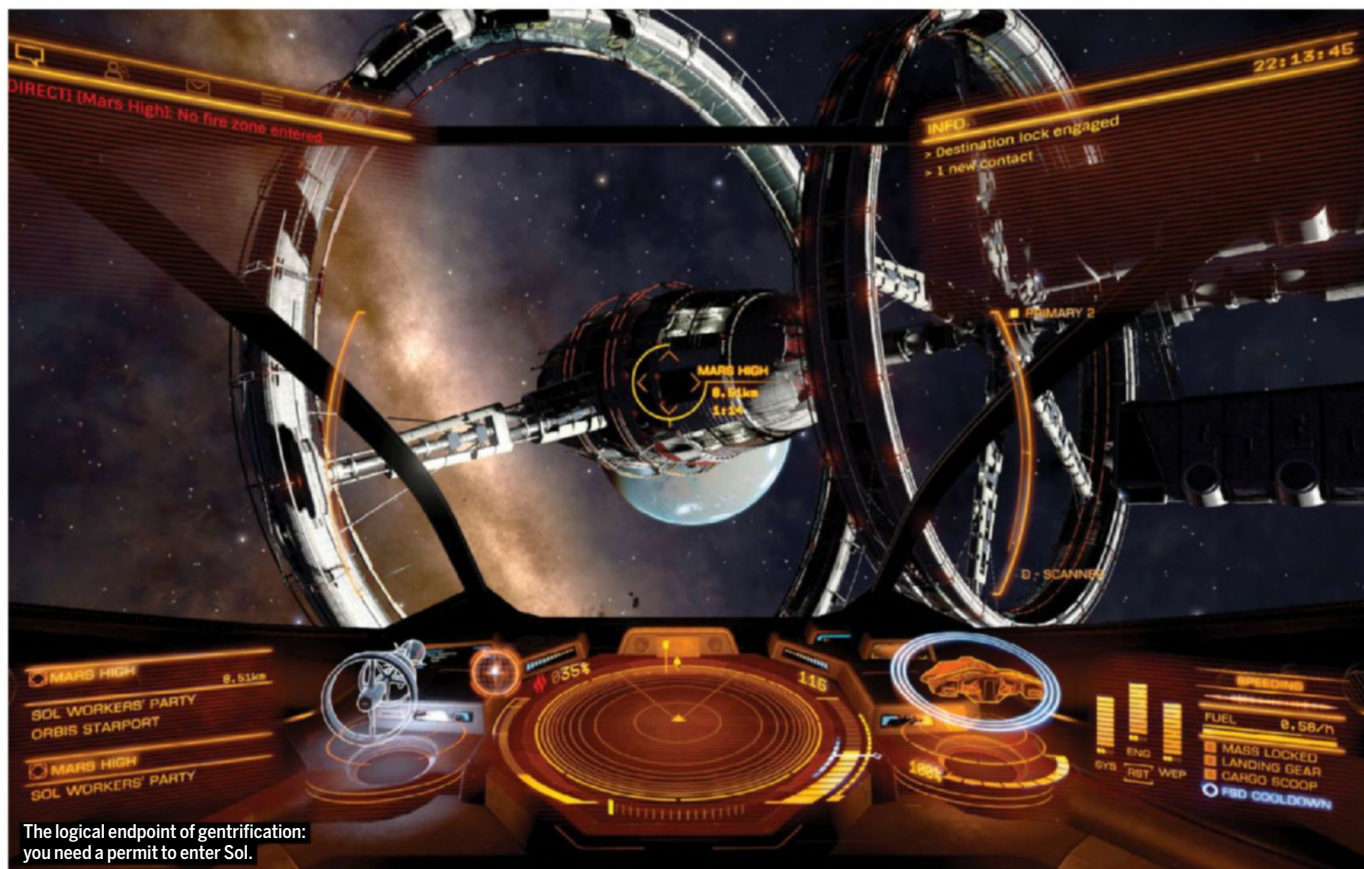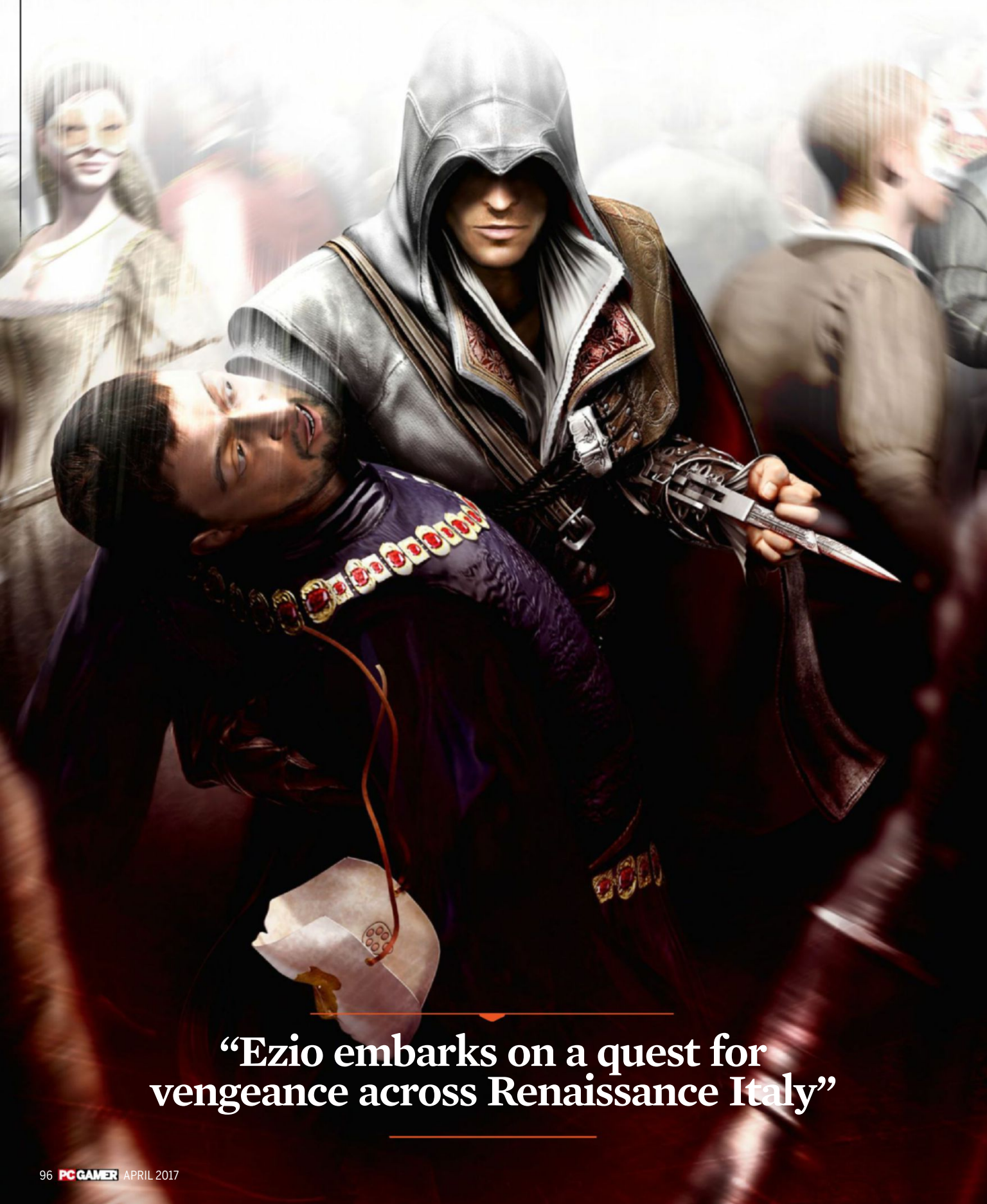
"Ezio embarks on a quest for vengeance across Renaissance Italy"

If all else fails, hit them with a big stick.

ASSASSIN'S CREED II

Back to the Renaissance. *By Andy Kelly*

We're introduced to Ezio Auditore da Firenze, the historical protagonist of *Assassin's Creed II*, the moment he's born. He pops out of his screaming mother and, in a truly bizarre tutorial, the game urges you to wiggle his arms and legs. Then we skip forward in time to his unruly teenage years, brawling and shagging his way around Florence. This could have easily been an indulgent, ponderous way to begin the game, but it's actually brilliant. Too many games hurry you into the action, but this one takes its time and lets you get to know its hero before tragedy inevitably strikes.

Ezio's father is framed for treason and executed by a corrupt magistrate,
which inspires Ezio to join the Assassins and embark on a quest for vengeance across Renaissance Italy. Back in the present day, Desmond Miles is reliving these events through the Animus, an absurd machine that can download the past from your DNA and turn it into an open-world action/adventure videogame.

Assassin's Creed II opens with a dry recap of the original game's story, which at this stage in the series' evolution was only a fraction as madly convoluted as it is now. The new narrative jumps back and forth between the past and present

▸ NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED 2009	**DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montreal
PUBLISHER Ubisoft	**LINK** www.assassinscreed.com

throughout, but you spend most of your time as Ezio, thankfully.

Ezio was a direct response to criticism of the first game's hero, the sullen and forgettable Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad. When designing *Assassin's Creed II*, Ubisoft Montreal first looked at reviews of the original to determine which areas needed to be improved. The two main objectives for the game, according to a GDC talk given by designer Patrick Plourde, were to "answer every criticism of the first game", and to repeat its commercial success. And so, based on the lukewarm response to Altaïr, they brought in the charming, witty Ezio, who remains the series' most likeable and charismatic hero.

Work began on *Assassin's Creed II* in early 2008 and, thanks to the tireless efforts of 300+ developers, it was released in November 2009. This is astonishing when you consider how big the game is, with multiple cities, a lengthy cinematic story, and new features including revamped combat, a notoriety system, and the ability to hire factions. In the first six months the studio produced 200 design documents for new features, only one of which received a revision. "The production cycle meant we had

Rooftop guards are a constant pain.

Tombs provide fun platforming challenges.

If you have the coin you can hire mercs.

zero time to polish the game," says Plourde. "The save system was implemented just two weeks before the first code submission. It was really tight."

NEW HEIGHTS

Given this merciless schedule, it's remarkable how well *Assassin's Creed II* turned out. The running and climbing feel a little stiff compared to recent games' slick free-running, but otherwise it's a polished, confident sequel with a sense of fun the series occasionally seems to forget. Climbing the Duomo in Florence for the first time and seeing the sprawl of the city, although not quite as impactful as it was back in 2009, is an evocative moment—made extra special by composer Jesper Kyd's superb score. It's such a good sequel, in fact, that it feels like the real beginning of the series. The first game had some good ideas, but was ultimately a failed experiment. In terms of design, at least: despite mixed reviews, it still sold eight million copies.

Florence is Ezio's birthplace—that's what the "da Firenze" in his name means—and the game's opening hours are spent here. Bumping into historical figures is something of a running gag in *Assassin's Creed*, and the second game is no different. Ezio befriends Leonardo da Vinci in Florence and the famous polymath supplies him with weapons, upgrades and gadgets, including one of his famous flying machines. As far as history knows these were never built or tested in real life, but in the game Ezio uses one to glide over the rooftops of Venice and infiltrate the heavily-guarded Palazzo Ducale. Other historical cameos include Niccolò Machiavelli, Lorenzo de' Medici, and Rodrigo Borgia, who serves as the main antagonist. The Renaissance was a fascinating and vibrant period in European history and the game uses it well, albeit with some artistic liberties taken.

THE BOOT *Ezio's travels in Italy*

1 FLORENCE
Birthplace of Ezio and, many historians agree, the Renaissance itself.

2 FORLÌ
An ancient city Ezio defends from a Templar assault led by Rodrigo Borgia.

3 VENICE
Ezio joins the Thieves Guild here and plots to assassinate Emilio Barbarigo.

4 MONTERIGGIONI
A town in Tuscany ruled and protected by the Auditores for generations.

5 SAN GIMIGNANO
Ezio travels here to spy on a Templar meeting and to assassinate Vieri de' Pazzi.

6 ROME
Ezio travels to the Vatican for a final showdown with Rodrigo Borgia.

More games in this time period, please.

EZIO USES DA VINCI'S FLYING MACHINE TO GLIDE OVER THE ROOFTOPS OF VENICE

Later Ezio escapes to Tuscany and meets his uncle Mario Auditore, whose first line is, amazingly, "It's-a-me, Mario!" The walled town of Monteriggioni, which still exists today, becomes his new home and can be upgraded to generate money. It's an enjoyable distraction, and returning to the peaceful town after a mission is a nice way to decompress. Ezio also visits the cities of Forlì and San Gimignano. Neither is as vast or detailed as Venice or Florence, but it's still amazing that they're in there at all considering the pressure Ubi Montreal was under. You also briefly visit the Vatican, although we wouldn't get to explore Rome itself until *Brotherhood*. In summary, it's bloody enormous and I'm not sure how they managed it.

Assassin's Creed has always suffered from repetitive mission design, but recent games—

particularly *Syndicate*, which is arguably the best one since *Black Flag*—have taken steps to make them more varied and interesting. Which makes returning to *Assassin's Creed II* occasionally frustrating. There are a lot of tedious tailing missions with instant fail states, and chase sequences where the person you're pursuing will comically wait for you catch up if you fall behind. It's when you're actually assassinating people that the game shines brightest, giving you some— but not a huge amount—of agency to observe your target and decide how exactly you want to kill them. The game was designed to be streamlined and accessible, which does negatively impact the complexity of its systems and your ability to think creatively.

DRAWN OUT

Assassin's Creed II was horribly optimized for PC on release, but these days any reasonable gaming PC will be able to run it without breaking a sweat. For my revisit I played in 4K, and it still looks decent in places. But a frustratingly short

draw distance does sour the experience. Scenery and NPCs constantly pop in as you move around, and shadows are badly pixelated just a few meters ahead, magically sharpening as you approach them. It's more distracting than it sounds, and it makes me wish Ubisoft would release its console-only, slightly remastered *Ezio Collection* on PC to iron some of these niggles out.

But when I reminisce, I don't think about the weak stealth, abundance of dull missions, or dodgy tech. I think about that ludicrous, exciting holiday I had in Renaissance Italy, hanging out with Leonardo, exploring ancient tombs, flying through the air and kicking people off Venetian rooftops, upgrading my villa, and buying fashionable new capes. It's a game that'll always hold up in my mind better than it does in reality, and that's fine. Sometimes good memories of a game are all you need. However, if you do feel compelled to return, there's still fun to be had. You just have to pick through a lot of old-fashioned open-world design to find it. ■
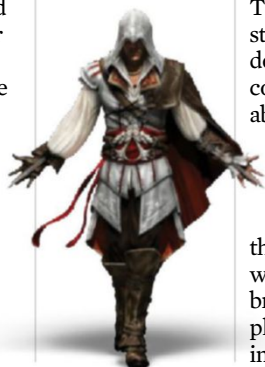
ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION'S IMPERIAL CITY

Seeking peace and quiet in a tumultuous world. *By Lorna Reid*
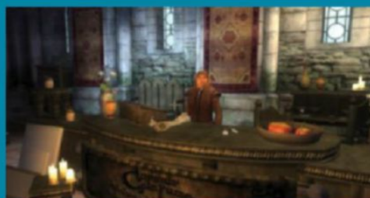
LEFT: The Imperial Market District is a lifeline for those with a folded cloth addiction.
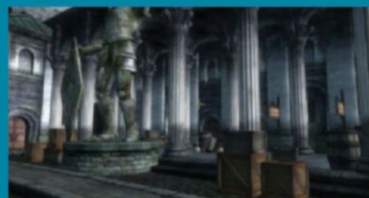
From the intro to the dying moments of the main quest, the Imperial City dominates *Oblivion*, and it's little wonder. This grand place can be seen for miles across the map. It's the jewel of the empire. No matter where I wander, I always make my way back there. It's my safe haven.

Constructed by the long-dead Ayleid, and boasting the characteristic white stone and smooth lines of their striking architecture, the city is a circular hub, split into concentric districts. Each of them oozes wealth, only the outlying waterfront area and occasional beggar's bedroll lying forlornly in odd corners hints at the city's poorer undercurrent. Nothing is perfect, even this iconic place.

As a game city it has its flaws. It's woefully underpopulated, something especially noticeable now, more than ten years after *Oblivion*'s release. The emptiness risks being jarring, but I find it conspires with everything else to lend the city a restful, even fading feel. It adds to the melancholic feeling of time marching away, echoing an empire in its last days.

The sedate pace of life and the regal architecture encourage quiet meandering rather than breakneck adventure. So much so that, at times, I feel guilty about being the most raucous thing in sight. I bounce in vast circuits of Green Emperor Way in order to build my Acrobatics skill, while simultaneously conjuring a dagger to increase my paltry Conjuration ability. And when the door of the Mystic Emporium decides to lock itself in daylight

▶ NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
March 20, 2006

DEVELOPER
Bethesda

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
elderscrolls.bethesda.net

NO PLACE LIKE HOME *Some of* Oblivion*'s other memorable places*

FROSTCRAG SPIRE
This *Wizard's Tower* DLC was one of the tastiest additions to the game, offering stunning views and a wealth of vital features, from altars and a lab to teleportation portals.

CHEYDINHAL
Nestled beneath the mountains, close to the Morrowind border, this city is home to not only the Dark Brotherhood, but *Oblivion*'s infamous missing painter quest.

SKINGRAD
One of Cyrodiil's most prosperous towns, and chock full of character, it has the best house available in the game—Rosethorn Hall—but it won't come cheap.

hours, I find myself committing the tamest, most mellow crime in the world of breaking and entering, just so I can legally buy gear. I always feel on the verge of being expelled for shattering the peace.

It may just be that I've succumbed to all the harp music, but even I eventually slow down. The whole city is infused with an atmosphere of serenity, a perfect foundation for the chaos of the final battle, in which the last of the Septim bloodline is spectacularly immortalized in stone.

STREET LIFE

Nostalgia plays a huge role in why I love the city—it was my first port of call and supported my idle wanderings for a long time. With little money and a lightweight (read: flimsy) character, I spent much of my time in the Imperial Market district, looting crates and barrels for cloth, silverware, and whatever else I could sell. Those early days, scraping by and gathering enough cash to buy arrows or upgrade a piece of armor, were formative and the bedrock of my fond memories of a superb game.

The same nostalgia shields the place from harsher criticism, especially as far as the scarcity of quests goes. Despite the various guild missions, there isn't much to do. Nevertheless, I enjoy what few quests

do exist, especially the early challenge of investigating crooked merchant Thoronir. Vanilla, yes, but who cares when you want an easy life and a free house?

The city's rich, well-decorated interiors and architectural flourishes are just too much of a draw for the snob in me. Desiring somewhere plush and relaxing to lay my head, I always shun the crappy waterfront for richer pickings among the city's elite. With a few lockpicks and even fewer morals, a lavish home in the posh part of the city can be yours. Thanks to the aforementioned quest, you get the chance to bump off a grave-robbing pal of Thoronir and keep his swish house for yourself.

The beauty of *Oblivion*'s sandbox world is that there's a nook for everyone—a place to return to, whether out of a desire to recapture the magic of earlier memories, to fill your hard drive with near-identical screenshots, or just to play Sim Cyrodiil in one of the houses. Maybe even to discover an answer to that age-old question: just how many magical battle-axes can you fit into one jewelry box?

In a game where you can do everything—even throw shoes on rooftops—sometimes the most enjoyable thing is to have somewhere peaceful in which to do nothing. ■

LEFT: Dragons, what a great idea, Bethesda should put those in a game.

SAMUEL ROBERTS

If I didn't have videogames, all I'd have is my friends, family and cheeses. Which would essentially be an empty existence.

VISIT NEW PLACES

80 DAYS
www.inklestudios.com/80days

→ This densely packed, very loose adaptation of the Jules Verne book uses just a few words and pictures to bring steampunk versions of real-world cities to life in extraordinary fashion. You'll feel like you've traveled the world and lived a life, and then you'll go again to visit those places you missed.

RULE AND/OR RUIN

REIGNS
www.reignsgame.com

→ Govern a kingdom by selecting binary choices dealt by cards. Swipe left or right to balance the happiness of your people, military and church. When one of these eventually turns against you, start again as your successor and see how long you survive. My record is 50 years so far. I'm sure you can beat that.

WALK THROUGH PRETTY PLACES

VIRGINIA
www.virginia.game

→ This first-person narrative uses film-style cuts to tell a mystery story in a Twin Peaks setting. There's something supernatural going on, but with no voice acting, *Virginia* relies on the player to pay attention and keep up. A divisive game, as anything story-focused usually is, but worth talking about.

SLOW DOWN, SPEED UP

SUPERHOT
www.superhotgame.com

→ Control the flow of time in this first-person game where you punch, shoot and slash your way out of a bunch of deadly scenarios in the most efficient way possible. My personal pick for 2016, partly because I found it to be of an almost perfect length at about three hours—try to grab it in a sale.

MUST ★ PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Samuel Roberts

PUNCH OTHER ROBOTS

TITANFALL 2
www.titanfall.com

→ I wasn't quite as enamored with *Titanfall 2*'s campaign as my colleagues—it has a boring sewer level and could do with more banter with your mech buddy, BT, in my opinion—but there's a suite of cool ideas worth checking out in there. It feels like an FPS jam in blockbuster game form.

GO RENEGADE
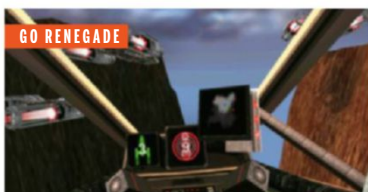
STAR WARS: ROGUE SQUADRON
www.bit.ly/1WObyz2

→ Pilot an X-Wing, Y-Wing, Snowspeeder, A-Wing or Naboo Starfighter (!) in this warmly remembered arcade-style planetary combat game from 1998. It's nowhere near as hardcore as *X-Wing*, but it's a breezy way to get Star Wars kicks in the old Expanded Universe. Definitely play it with a controller.

TRAVEL THE STARS

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT
www.ftlgame.com

→ Most of the PC Gamer team participated in a group version of *FTL* on New Year's Eve, with every decision made by committee, including which systems to target. We never finished the game because we got too drunk, but it remains a dependable favorite combination of strategy and narrative.

FIGHT GODS AND MONSTERS
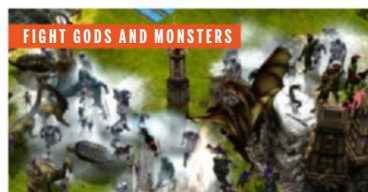
AGE OF MYTHOLOGY: EXTENDED EDITION
www.ageofempires.com/games/aom

→ *Age of Empires* but with cyclopes instead of... the French, this is the sort of RTS you don't see around very much these days, but which is helpfully available on Steam for when you crave seeing a hydra attack a fishing ship. Which was rather recently, in my case.

techradar.

The home of technology

techradar.com

GROUP TEST

By Ed Chester

GRAPHICS
CARDS

Our pick of the best mid-range graphics cards

Q&A

AMD or Nvidia?
Yup, it's that question again. Nvidia has held the top-end performance crown for years but AMD competes well further down. Nvidia still has an edge for efficiency but AMD has some performance advantages elsewhere.

AMD Freesync or Nvidia G-Sync?
An extension of the AMD/Nvidia battle is which tear and stutter-eliminating adaptive sync technology to go for. Both work as well as each other but the more expensive G-Sync tends to be used on the best displays. There are some great Freesync displays, though, and it's definitely the better value option.

How much video memory?
The basic rule of thumb is that the higher resolution and graphical fidelity, the more memory you'll need. So if you've a high resolution screen and want your games to look their best then go for more memory. If you're about getting the highest FPS and are happy to compromise on resolution and detail then a fast card with less memory can be a good buy.

Dictionary

GPU—The Graphics Processing Unit is the central intelligence of your graphics card, just as the CPU is for the rest of your PC. Its hundreds or thousands of tiny stream processors power through the highly parallel workloads that are required to render each frame of your game.

Stream processors (SPs)—Tiny processing cores like the cores of a CPU but far simpler. The more of them and the faster their clock speed, the faster your framerate. Architectural differences mean you can't directly compare AMD SPs to Nvidia SPs, though.

Video memory—Otherwise known as VRAM, this is the high-speed memory on a graphics card that allows the GPU quick access to all the data it needs, such as textures, polygons, and so on. Not enough means having to access much slower system memory.

AIB—Add In Board partners are the likes of Asus and XFX who take the chips designed by AMD and Nvidia and build them into the graphics cards you can actually buy. Overclocking, custom coolers and other extras allow each AIB to differentiate its product.

Bang for buck (BfB)—The cost per frames per second of each graphics card. Calculated by taking the average fps in our tests divided by the cost of the card. It's a raw indication of value.

The graphics card is the beating heart of any gaming PC and the most expensive component in any build. Nvidia's latest performance champ, the GTX Titan X, costs an eye-watering $1,200.

However, there's still plenty of choice for far less. Aside from the Titan X and GTX 1080, every other card from both AMD and Nvidia is under $500, so that's where we're focusing our testing this time.

Whether you're after the most basic step up from integrated graphics, you've not upgraded in a few years or you're just looking to take your gaming to the next level, there's a card for you here.

ZOTAC GEFORCE GTX 1060 AMP EDITION 4GB www.zotac.com **$270**

→ It's a modest card in appearance but this petite powerhouse packs a punch. Second only in this test to the much more expensive GTX 1070, it's the top choice for those budgeting up to $300.

1 Manufacturers can often be tempted to pump up their graphics cards to make them look bigger and more powerful. There are no such shenanigans here, as Zotac has used a modest-sized PCB and a twin-fan cooler to create a card that should fit happily in all but the tiniest of cases. Just watch out for its height, though—at 117mm it's taller than a standard PCIe card expansion slot. And despite the modest card size you'll still need an extra power cable to provide the 120W required.

Otherwise, the twin-fan cooler does an excellent job of keeping things cool and quiet, and is switched off when the PC is idling, making it completely silent.

As for performance, it's ideal for 1440p monitors. It hit 72.8fps in *Titanfall 2* with everything set to max and with 8x MSAA, while at 1080p and set on high detail in *The Witcher 3* it managed 77.1fps. This card has plenty enough power to play the game at 1440p too.

Overall, it offers great value in a compact and well-built design.

90%

EVGA GEFORCE GTX 1050 TI 4GB

www.evga.com **$150**

→ The GTX 1050 Ti may only be $70 cheaper than the RX 470 but its modest performance is more higher-level budget than mid-range. That's reflected in the card itself. It's just 152mm long and sports just one fan, drawing all its 75W from its PCIe slot.

2 Peer at the heatsink and other cost-saving is evident. There are no heatpipes in use, nor are the cooling fins the fine bent sheet metal of more expensive options. Instead, it's just a solid piece of extruded aluminium.

However, with such a modest power output the one fan is sufficient for cool and quiet operation. Plus the whole card is nicely color coordinated, with a black PCB, fan shroud, fan and heatsink. But you miss out on the protective metal backplate and lighting of the more expensive cards and the fan shroud itself is a slightly cheaper-looking plastic.

In the end, what really matters is performance and the GTX 1050 Ti still holds its own. It struggled in *Titanfall 2* compared to its more expensive siblings—the GTX 1060 is 65% faster—but held up well in *The Witcher*.

Overall, though, there's not enough extra performance here to really justify the extra cost over a GTX 1050. For 1080p gaming that's the better card.

75%

MSI GEFORCE GTX 1050 OC 2GB

us.msi.com **$110**

➔ **Although lacking in extras, this GTX 1050 still puts in a solid performance for the price. If the EVGA card was basic, this MSI is positively barebones. You still get a black PCB but otherwise there are no adornments, just a metal IO plate and heatsink.**

3

Meanwhile the plastic fan shroud is a rather clunky combination of black and white, plus it commits the cardinal sin of unnecessarily overhanging the edge of the back of the card in an effort to look bigger and more impressive. Like its more expensive sibling, though, one of the big boons of this card is that, unlike the GTX 950 that it replaces, it doesn't require any extra power cables.

When it comes to performance, the 2GB of memory on this card, plus its relatively small 128-bit memory bus, mean that it struggles even more than the EVGA card with the 8x MSAA and extreme settings of *Titanfall 2*, though it still just about delivers a playable set of results.

As for *The Witcher*, the lower resolution and lack of AA mean that it takes proportionally far less of a hit compared to more expensive Nvidia cards.

As a result, despite its modest appearance, this is the best value card on test, with a bang for buck score that far exceeds any other card. For 1080p gaming it's ideal.

85%

ASUS RADEON RX 480 STRIX OC EDITION 8GB www.asus.com **$300**

➔ **The Strix line is Asus's flagship when it comes to graphics cards and this RX 480 shows what it's all about—premium quality and oodles of extras, including a protective metal plate covering the whole back and a three-fan cooler.**

4

This makes it reassuringly hefty but you'll need to make sure your case has enough room for this oversized 118mm-tall by 300mm-long card.

Into that backplate is set an illuminated Republic of Gamers logo while the fans are backlit with RGB lighting too. There are also two four-pin fan headers on the edge of the card, providing a potentially convenient power point for other case fans. Talking of power, you'll need one eight-pin power cable to provide the 175W this card needs.

All those add-ons don't come for free—you can pick up 8GB RX 480 cards for $250—but the $50 premium for this one seems good value for such a wealth of extras. However, when it comes to overall performance the AMD RX 480 GPU at the heart of this card struggles when set against the GTX 1060. That card has a comfortable lead in our tests and, in fact, it's nearly 50% faster in *Titanfall 2*. With it being essentially the same price, it's the clear choice, especially as it does all that while consuming 50W less power.

70%

SAPPHIRE RX 470 NITRO+ OC 4GB www.sapphiretech.com **$220**

➔ Like Asus's RX 480, Sapphire's RX 470 features a host of extras, but here you also get better value and a smaller card. Where the Asus is a triple-fan affair, Sapphire makes do with two, cutting the length to just 242mm and the height to 113mm.

5

And those fans don't buckle under testing either—they do a perfectly fine job of staying reasonably quiet while keeping the card from roasting.

The fans are also removable and clever venting on the backplate means they help to push heat through the card and to the top of your PC, rather than having it circulate round the bottom—a genuine problem once cards with this style of cooler are installed in a PC. There's a sturdy metal backplate as well, which, along with a matching fan shroud and RGB backlit Sapphire logo, makes for a very tidy-looking card, even if the pattern on the backplate isn't quite to our liking.

Like most of the other cards on test, it's overclocked out the box, with the default RX 470 clocking in at 932MHz, while the Nitro+ version is 1260MHz. That overclocking combined with solid starting performance means this card provides decent bang for buck, sitting comfortably between the GTX 1060 and GTX 1050 in terms of price and performance.

80%

XFX RADEON RX 460 CORE EDITION 2GB xfxforce.com **$120**

➔ Other budget cards offer more, but AMD's 400 series offering will get you playable framerates in most games at 1080p and offers reasonable value. You'd be forgiven for thinking this was a far more powerful card than it is, though.

6

XFX has employed two fans to keep it cool and up top there's a six-pin power connector, even though the RX 460 is supposed to only draw the same 75W as Nvidia's GTX 1050 cards. In fact, the reference AMD design doesn't include the extra connector.

The fans also appear at first to be the company's Hard Swap type, which can easily be unclipped and replaced. However, while the fan unclips, its cable doesn't, so in effect all you get is easier access to clean the heatsink.

As for the RX 460 GPU itself, it has less than half the stream processors of the RX 470 and has half the memory bus width too, plus it's only equipped with 2GB of RAM. The result is it's the slowest card on test by far, with it failing to hit 30fps in *Titanfall 2* and only hitting 33fps in *The Witcher 3*. It's mostly fine for 1080p gaming but only if you drop to medium-to-high detail settings. All of which means that while it's the best pure value out of the three AMD cards, in terms of bang for buck it's miles behind the GTX 1050.

67%

ASUS GEFORCE GTX 1070 STRIX OC EDITION 8GB www.asus.com **$455**

→ Although this particular GTX 1070 severely stretches the definition of a mid-range card, others can be had for under $400, and when it comes to performance the GTX 1070 is a great indicator of what paying the extra will get you.

7

This was the only card on test to break through 100fps on either benchmark and, in fact, it did it on both. As such you'll know you'll get smooth gameplay on the latest games at 1440p and it'll handle many games at ultrawide 3440x1440 or 4K resolutions too. All that and you still only need one eight-pin power connector to provide enough juice.
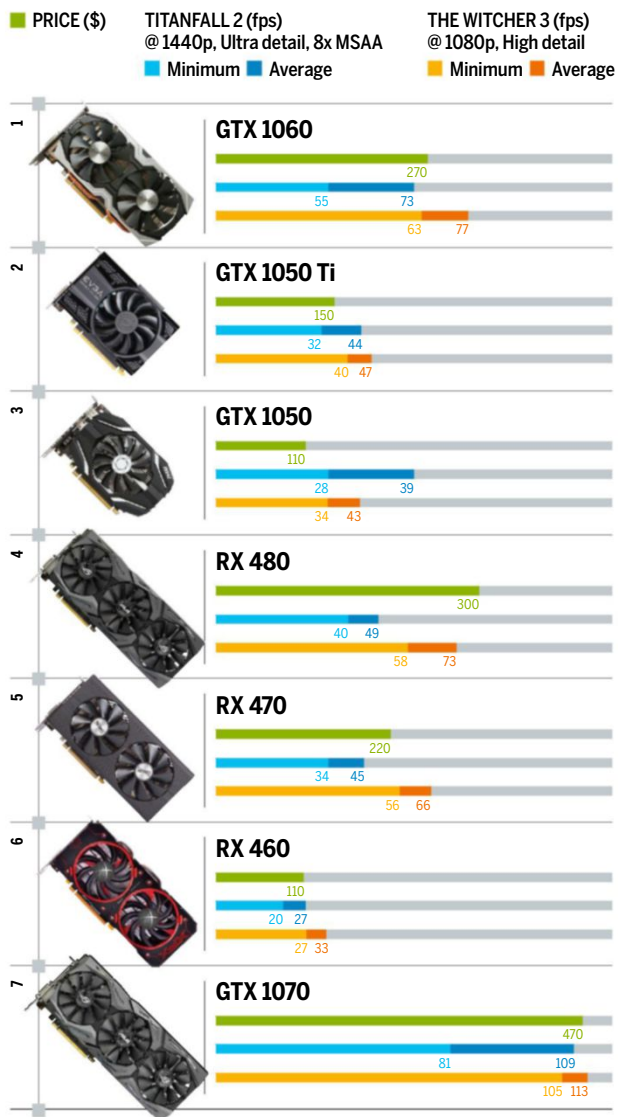
Like its Strix RX 480 sibling, this card is solidly built, has RGB-lit fans, there's a glowing Republic of Gamers logo on the back and it's overclocked. A normal GTX 1070 runs at a base clock of 1506MHz and boosts to 1683MHz, while the Strix version starts at 1683MHz and boosts to 1885MHz.

It also stays whisper-quiet while gaming and its fans are totally still when the PC is idling. Though, again, this is a very large card, so make sure to check if your case has room.

For pure value this is the second lowest card on test but as an indicator of what $400-odd will get you, it's a mighty impressive example.

87%

STACKED UP

■ PRICE ($) TITANFALL 2 (fps) @ 1440p, Ultra detail, 8x MSAA ■ Minimum ■ Average THE WITCHER 3 (fps) @ 1080p, High detail ■ Minimum ■ Average

1 GTX 1060
270
55 73
63 77

2 GTX 1050 Ti
150
32 44
40 47

3 GTX 1050
110
28 39
34 43

4 RX 480
300
40 49
58 73

5 RX 470
220
34 45
56 66

6 RX 460
110
20 27
27 33

7 GTX 1070
470
81 109
105 113

ESSENTIALS

	GPU	SPs	Clockspeed	Memory	Memory bus	BfB
1	GP106-400	1280	1280	6GB GDDR5	192-bit	120
2	GP107-400	768	1290	4GB GDDR5	128-bit	75
3	GP107-300	640	1404	2GB GDDR5	128-bit	75
4	Polaris 10	2304	1130	8GB GDDR5	256-bit	175
5	Polaris 10	2048	4476	8GB GDDR5	256-bit	110
6	Polaris 11	896	1090	2GB GDDR5	128-bit	75
7	GP104-200	1920	1683	8GB GDDR5	256-bit	150

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

ADVANCED

MID-RANGE

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 $1,016

MOTHERBOARD

NEW ENTRY

H270M Bazooka
MSI **$95**

Kaby Lake has landed and the 270 series chipsets with it. MSI's Bazooka H270M is a perfect fit for our new Core i3-7100 CPU.

PROCESSOR

NEW ENTRY

Core i3-7100
Intel **$119**

Kaby is a minor advance on Skylake, but for a new PC, there's no better choice. Two cores, four threads, and a 3.9GHz clock.

GRAPHICS CARD

NEW ENTRY

RX 480 G1 Gaming 4GB
Gigabyte **$205**

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 **$67**

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

POWER SUPPLY

EVGA 500W 80PLUS Certified ATX12V/EPS12V
EVGA **$42**

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

SSD

Torch LE 120GB SSD
Patriot **$58**

This SSD is insanely cheap, and the perfect size to house your Windows system and most-used programs.

HDD

500GB 7200RPM HDD
Seagate **$46**

500GB of additional storage for all your games and other programs. Spend a tiny bit more and you double its capacity.

CASE

Nova
Bitfenix **$34**

Not the fanciest of cases, but for $37 you can't go wrong. There's even room for a 120mm AIO cooler inside.

DISPLAY

VS247HR 60Hz 1080p
Asus **$140**

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

KEYBOARD

NEW ENTRY

Alloy FPS
HyperX **$100**

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

MOUSE

Rival 100
SteelSeries **$30**

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

HEADSET

HyperX Cloud
Kingston **$80**

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

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL $1,721

MOTHERBOARD

NEW ENTRY

Z270-A Pro
MSI **$115**

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

NEW ENTRY

Core i5-7600K
Intel **$240**

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

NEW ENTRY

GTX 1070 8GB Dual
Asus **$405**

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

COOLER

Kraken X31
NZXT **$69**

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

MEMORY

Savage Black 16GB @2400 MHz CAS 12
HyperX **$125**

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

POWER SUPPLY

RMx 650W
Corsair **$100**

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 **$92**

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 **$50**

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 **$70**

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

DISPLAY

Q2778VQE
AOC **$255**

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

KEYBOARD

NEW ENTRY

K70 LUX RGB
Corsair **$150**

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 **$50**

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

ADVANCED BUILD

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

TOTAL $3,589

MOTHERBOARD

NEW ENTRY

Z270 Gaming M5
MSI **$200**

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

NEW ENTRY

Core i7-7700K
Intel **$345**

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

NEW ENTRY

GTX 1080 FTW Gaming ACX 3.0
EVGA **$610**

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

COOLER

NEW ENTRY

Kraken X62
NZXT **$160**

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

MEMORY

NEW ENTRY

Savage Black (4x8GB) 32GB @2400
HyperX **$291**

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

POWER SUPPLY

HX750i 80 Plus Platinum
Corsair **$150**

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

SSD

NEW ENTRY

960 Evo 250GB M.2 PCIe SSD
Samsung **$130**

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

SSD 2

850 Evo 1TB
Samsung **$319**

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 **$400**

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

DISPLAY

PG279Q ROG Swift G-Sync
Asus **$752**

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

NEW ENTRY

K70 LUX RGB
Corsair **$150**

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

NEW ENTRY

Rival 700
SteelSeries **$82**

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

GALNET TODAY

FIRST CONTACT!
25 JAN 3256

In a day that will live in infamy, the human race finally made contact with an intelligent alien species in the Milky Way.

However, after careful consideration and a thorough study of the human race, the Thargoid ambassador has decided that in fact, they have to go, because they have work in the morning, and they'll give us a call, maybe.

"We attempted to make peaceful contact," Ambassador Gruugthaax Morgblorb told Galnet in an exclusive interview. "But the one you call 'Commander Weedlord' fired at our ship, and we've come to the conclusion that you are, to borrow a human term, a bunch of jerks."

Many believed the Thargoids were about to wage war on humanity, but they were in fact about to gift us wondrous technology that would unite the systems and bring peace to the galaxy.

"Honestly, you don't deserve it," Morgblorb explained. "We'll come back in another thousand years or something."

We asked Commander Weedlord, who was delivering several crates of fish to a nearby star system, what he thought about the aliens' response.

"They can stick their technology up their slimy alien holes," he said. "We're doing fine without them!"

Weedlord was killed later that day, just for the hell of it, by another commander testing out his new rocket launcher.

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE MARCH 28

A L I E N W A R E™

15

GET DANGEROUSLY DEEP IN THE GAME.

Introducing the most powerful 15" gaming laptop on the planet. Engineered with:

- Dynamically overclocked Intel® Core™ i7 processors
- Windows 10 Home
- NVIDIA 10-series graphics

Built to get you deeper in the game than ever before. **We're Game.**

Intel Inside®.
Extraordinary
Performance
Outside.

intel CORE i7 inside™

START GAMING AT ALIENWARE.COM

p2

Intel, the Intel Logo, Intel Inside, Intel Core, and Core Inside are trademarks of Intel Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries.