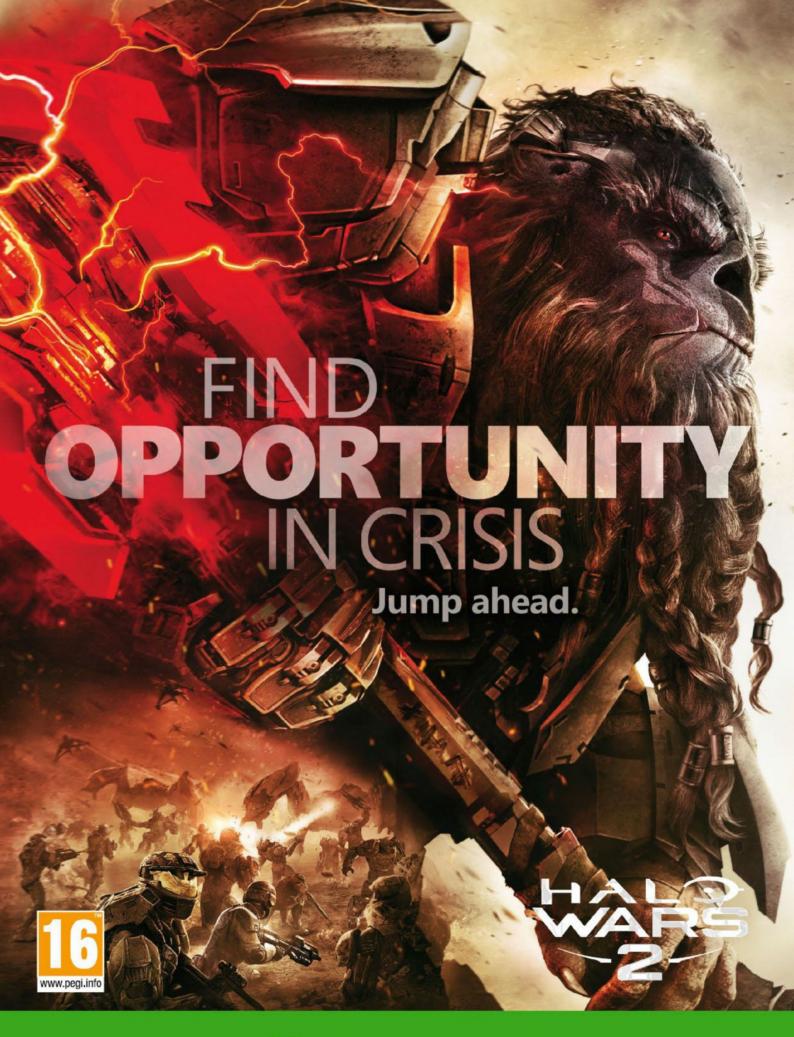


THE OFF MAGAZINE

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Future







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Massive attack



Matt Gilman Editor of the good ship

Meet the Commander OXM, although his job involves 100 per cent fewer sexy aliens and 25 per cent more scanning for minerals. It might have felt slower than an Elcor doing his tax returns, but Mass Effect: Andromeda is finally at our metaphorical doorstep, and you are in absolutely the right place to get at every last bit of essential info before it touches down planetside. Not only have we gathered all the facts into one gigantic feature, but we've also got exclusive behind-the-scenes access to the dev team over at BioWare, with loads more to drink up like a fine Serrice Ice Brandy. The good times keep on coming, too, with another huge feature detailing our long-awaited return to Morrowind. If you know your Xbox history, you know that this is one of the most formative roleplaying landscapes in modern gaming, so get on over to our The Elder Scrolls Online feature and get it in your face. Enjoy your OXM!

$0 \times M$ $\mathsf{T} \mathsf{H} \mathsf{E}$ INITIATIVE



■James 'J-pop' Nouch

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



■ Kimberley Ballard Production editor

Kimberley is in charge of the office plant, which we all forget to water when she takes time off. We only really have it to guilt trip her into not taking holiday..



■ Dave Meikleham

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



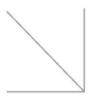
■ Samuel Roberts

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

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Everything you can look forward to over the next 100 or so pages



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 \Rightarrow HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY? WHY NOT WRITE TO TEAM OXM AT OXM@FUTURENET.COM

digitised warfare involving Spartans and whatnot, it's not always so bad, especially if you're talking specifically about Halo Wars 2 (p8). With the latest Elite-bashing RTS out in shops this month, we visit 343 Industries for an in-depth chat about all aspects of the ambitious sequel. On to matters more prehistoric, and we meet with Studio Wildcard about its latest Ark: Survival Evolved update (p12). Ever had a hankering to stick a plasma cannon on a T Rex's extinct cranium? Ark's new Tek Tier DLC has you covered. Actually, we best keep in the Tyrant Lizard King's corner: it's the only thing that can protect us from Overwatch's salty community (p15). Turns out, they hate when heroes with a cheaty chain hook get nerfed. Mercifully, things are a lot calmer when we pore over Rime's latest trailer (p18) in a scene-by-scene breakdown. The enchanting indie was once a PS4-exclusive, but it's since slipped Sony's grasp to bring its mystical brand

of island puzzles and magic foxes to Xbox One.

War is, as they say, "heck". Actually, when it's



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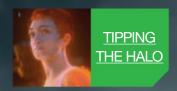


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Strat report

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





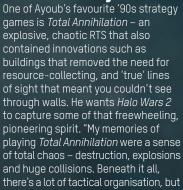
Industries' studio head, Dan Ayoub.



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

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

Chaos theory



what you see on screen is an explosive, chaotic free-for-all."

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

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

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

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

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







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

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

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

Blitz it

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

OXM SAYS



Matt Gilman

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



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

an audacious mechanical variant on

the real-time strategy formula.



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

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



Kimberley Ballard

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



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

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

Brute force

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Halo Wars 2 is out 21 February and we'll have a full review next issue

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



Tek it back to basics

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



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

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

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

Killer clothes

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

Tek Tier hits in mid-Feb, with further updates planned for later this month

EXCITED? HORRIFIED? LET THE WORLD KNOW AT WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK







PLAY/EJECT

THE THINGS PUSHING OUR BUTTON (OR NOT)



New Xbox pads

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



Mass Effect ditches season pass

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



Pets in Ark: Survival Evolved

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



Scalebound gets canned

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



Resi's awful digit

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



NFL star sues over Gears Of War

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



Need to know

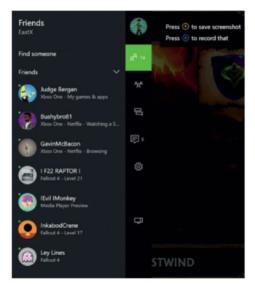
<u>Microsoft's new Creators update will make your Xbox One</u> faster, friendlier and even dreamier for streamers

THERE'S A NEW GUIDE AND ITS ALL ABOUT SPEED

Hurry up! We want it now, dammit! Yes, your Xbox One will soon get a new, swifter Guide as part of the Creators update. A swift jab of the Xbox button on your controller brings up said shiny interface, which will appear on the left side of your screen. Tweaked, more streamlined apps will now live here. The new Guide gives you direct access to your Game DVR clips, and Microsoft promises that cutting videos and viewing captures will be quicker. That's not the new Guide's only party trick: a fresh Achievement tracking overlay is also set to debut. Oh, and Microsoft says updated versions of Gamerscore leaderboards, Cortana and options to control your background music will feature in the latest Guide, too.

YOU CAN STREAM WITH BEAM IN SUPREME STYLE

What's that, you say? Twitch? Never heard of it. When it comes to the Creators update, Microsoft wants you to give its new streaming service a try. Called Beam, it connects to your Xbox Live account, then lets you stream your favourite games in an instant. Now the whole world will see that time you totally, definitely, unquestionably took out six players with a single plasma grenade in Halo 5: Guardians. Beam looks to be fairly idiot-proof - a single button press brings it up once you're in the new Guide. No additional software is needed for it to work, and other players will be able to easily interact with your streams and broadcasts.





IT'S EASIER TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS

Because we all know the Xbox pals who stay together... um, slay together? Anyhoo, the Creators update has its sights set on making it simpler for you to find, stay in touch with and share your gaming moments with friends through Xbox Live. The official Xbox Newswire promises it will be "easier to connect with people you care about on other social networks". Translation: it should be simpler to communicate through Twitter and Facebook. The Activity Feed is also getting a makeover, and Microsoft says new updates make it easier to connect and share with friends - this includes the ability to share Looking For Group posts in your feed. Finally, Clubs are being improved to make it easier to find new players. Talk about one big happy Xbox family.

ABOVE Here's a quick demo of your screen capturing menu before (left) and after [right] the Creators update. Occoooh.



XBOX ARENA LETS YOU MAKE YOUR OWN TOURNAMENTS

After being rolled out to members of Xbox One's Preview programme last year, Arena is finally coming to the masses courtesy of the Creators update. This tournament service kicks off with Killer Instinct and World Of Tanks, and aside from professionally run cups, you'll also be able to create your own Arena tourney. Once you've made your tournament, you can invite friends and Club members to either compete or spectate. Fight! Fight! Ahem. These contests will be instantly recorded, and can be easily shared. Expect loads more titles to support Arena going forward, too.

The Creators update is scheduled to hit Xbox One and Windows 10 in April

FOR ALL THE LATEST XBOX NEWS, VISIT WWW.GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM





Nerf's up, Roadhog

Overwatch fans blow a gasket over hero tweaks



Time to break out the nerf(ed) guns: a trio of beloved characters from a certain Blizzard shooter have been weakened ever so slightly through balancing tweaks. Oh, the horror! Yes, the news of recent minor changes to *Overwatch* has set its community alight with fury.

Tweaks to Ana, D.Va and Roadhog were rolled out in the latest patch of *Overwatch*, released alongside a timed Chinese New Year celebration, dubbed Year Of The Rooster. Player rage is testament to how much a certain subset of Roadhog loving types really loved his super cheaty (in our admittedly salty opinion) Chain Hook.





Aussie rules

Previously, the big-boned Aussie's signature weapon could pull hooked players to either side of him with a cheeky turn mid-grapple, but with the changes rung in, rivals will now be yanked directly in front of him regardless. Couple this with further tweaks that ensure Roadhog's hooked enemies are released should he lose sight of them, around a corner for example, and it means it's now a lot more difficult for players to cheaply

hook opponents off the side of cliffs or through walls. D.Va has also seen her armour lowered to 200 and health bumped up by 200.

With these revisions and further changes, such as the healing boost on Ana's Biotic Grenade being halved, matches should now be much more even, yet parts of the *Overwatch* community remain miffed. At one point the discussion was so heated on Battle.net forums, that game director Jeff Kaplan had to step in to douse the interweb's flames. "I encourage people to log in and try these changes for a few nights – not one anecdotal match – and see how you feel about them by formulating your own opinion."

Kaplan also pointed out that only 0.26 per cent of *Overwatch*'s total player base had actually tried out the test realm changes at the time, and we've certainly found the alterations to make for a finer game overall. So, chin up, Roadhog lovers. It'll all be fine. (And we'll hate you that little bit less... probably...)

Keep an eye on these pages for more info on the global Overwatch League



BARREL WATCH

GAMING'S FAVOURITE PROP RATED BY OUR RESIDENT COOPER



Rise & Shine
"In my
formative
coopering
days, children
were seen and

not heard. They certainly did not hop over my beloved barrels with reckless abandon."



Resident Evil VII: Biohazard "Heresy! Thou shalt not hold a candle so close to the

precious tinder of the almighty barrel. May your face be eaten by zombie hillbillies."



Metal Gear Survive "Barrels of all colours joining forces brings a tear

to this cooper's eye. Red and black barrels uniting? How delightful."



Watch Dogs 2
"If you strike
my barrels
down, they
shall become
more powerful

than you could possibly imagine, Mr Yellow School Bus. A pox on your depot."



Rise Of The Tomb Raider "No one puts a barrel in the corner... or, in the case of

Tomb Raider, leaves it to catch cold in a storm. This sort of neglect is why the Great Barrel War looms. I fear for us." <u>TEAM</u> SUPREME

Forever fiends

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



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

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

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

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

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

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







RIME PUBLISHER GREY BOX/SIX FOOT DEVELOPER TEQUILA WORKS RELEASE DATE MAY 2017

what is it?

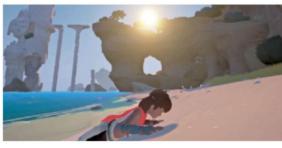
An endearing puzzle adventure with a childlike sense of wonder... and fugly eagle beasties. Seemingly inspired by the likes of PS2 classic ICO, Rime stars a young boy who's shipwrecked on an island. Seeing as this mysterious rock is populated by magic foxes and

sinister hooded men,

it's no wonder he's looking to escape. Platforming also features, with the lad scaling a lighthouse swathed in fluffy clouds in recent trailers. Rime is set to hit Xbox One this May.

Scene by scene

Rime washes back on shore with an enigmatic new trailer



The boy washes up on a beach, while the broken columns of a bridge dominate in the distance. He may be a castaway, but at least there are no bloody volleyballs about.



Considering he's trapped on an island, the kid looks pretty chipper. Perhaps he's happy Rime is coming to Xbox One, after a new publishing deal freed it from PS4 exclusivity.



Is it us, or do these structures remind you of *The Witness*?

Hell, *Rime's* whole art direction recalls the 'water colour come to life' design of Jonathan Blow's puzzler.



The trailer hints that puzzles can be solved by shaping the wind or shouting loudly. Also, the cute mystical fox totally reminds us of that space coyote from The Simpsons.



Various interconnected beacons can be seen throughout the island, and seem to be activated by gusts. All those eerie orbs definitely suggest paranormal hijinks are afoot.



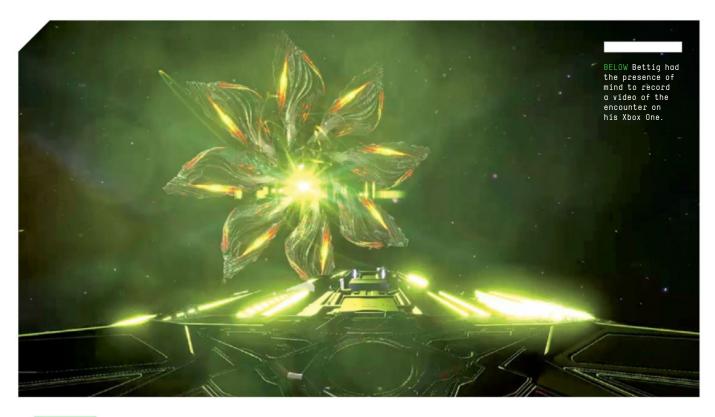
Later, the lad pushes this hefty stone ball around, which in turns appears to speed up the day/night cycle. That spiritual-looking lighthouse looks like it's connected.



Underwater scenes also feature, and judging by this shot, there's some seriously bummed-out sea life patrolling the island's waters. Cheer up, poorly whale shark!



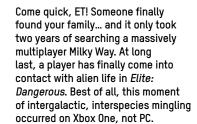
The brochure didn't mention flying monsters! Alongside the trailer's creepy robot sentries, and robed dudes who scream 'killer cultists', the island certainly seems hostile.





We are not alone

An Elite: Dangerous Xbox fan makes first contact with aliens



It was presumed that Frontier Developments' sprawling space adventure was a PC-first kind of joint, given that the game was available on rigs a full year before arriving on our hallowed consoles, but it was an Xbox player who made this landmark discovery. All this alien-cavorting kicked off when Commander DP Sayre – real name Robert Bettig – journeyed from his home system of Kisatsya to the Maia system. It was on this trek that something strange happened to his ship. Brace yourself for a close encounter of the weird kind...



Suddenly, Sayre's vessel seized up. The next thing he knew, he was forcibly pulled out of a hyperspace jump – a feat never documented before in *Elite: Dangerous,* and something we didn't think possible.

This piece of cosmic sabotage heralded the arrival of a terrifying craft; a monstrosity that looked like a spaceship made from a giant, decomposing daffodil. "You try telling someone that something the size of a space station that looks like a jellyfish and a flower is baking you with yellow light and, yeah, they tell you to go fly a kite," Bettig says.

After briefly scanning his ship, the colossal craft departed, and now players are speculating it belongs to the Thargoids: an alien race that has appeared in previous entries. Although Bettig's encounter was a peaceful one, many players are worried intergalactic war is inbound. Either way, it's clear Elite's players are no longer alone in the universe.

You can download the standard version of *Elite: Dangerous* for £19.99



RIGHT Players think this craft belongs to the Thargoids, who have yet to surface in ED.

Steve Hogarty is...

The Fixer

This month, Steve tackles the concept of good and evil

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

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

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

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

The problem

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



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

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

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



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

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

The solution

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

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

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

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





Jordan Erica Webber is

The Praiser

This month, Jordan explores the underwater paradise

of Abzû

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

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

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

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

Blue crush

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



"The prehistoric zone has fish like the helicoprion and dolichorhynchops"

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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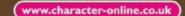
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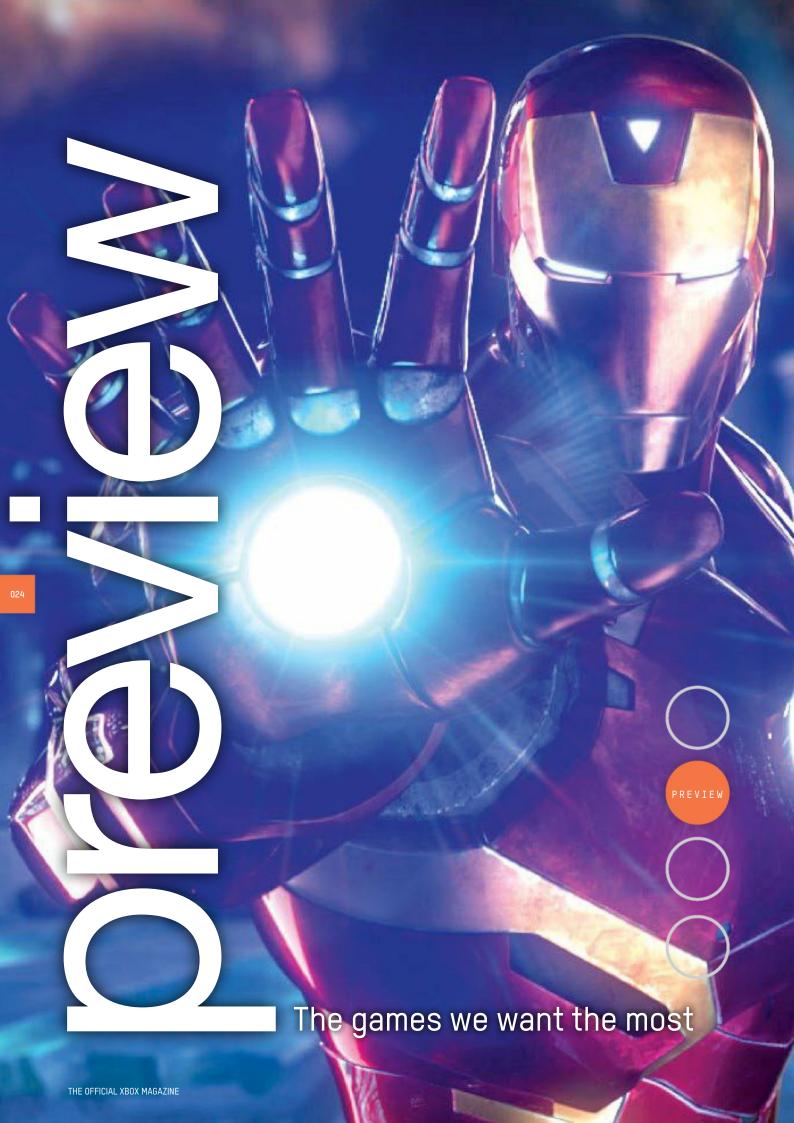












James got to play Tokyo 42 in the dev's house while eating cream cakes and sipping chai - we hate him



OXM'S MOST WANTED

Matt's pick Ghost Recon

The only thing that would make this better is Kinect recognition of my ludicrous tactical hand gestures.

Dave's pick

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

Kimberley's pick

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

James' Pick Tokyo 42

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

The dearly departed Tom Clancy and Xbox have enjoyed guite the storied past. When Xbox 360 first launched in 2005, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter was one of the first triple-A titles to unlock the early potential of the beefy box. Skip ahead a decade and the iconic military novelist's most famous gaming IP is at it once more, this time with the thrilling, open plains of Ghost Recon Wildlands (p26). With the ultra-slick online sandbox shooter a little over a month away, we visited Paris to get distinctly up close and personal with the latest potential Clancy classic. Who wants to waste time sipping caffè lattes in sophisticated bistros by the Seine when there are virtual Bolivian terrorists to whoop? 'Oorah' indeed. Elsewhere, we take our first look at the incredibly ambitious Prey For The Gods (p32), a giant-slaying indie that you need on your radar. Made by a ludicrously small team, this boss battle-centric affair pays homage to classics of the past with a contemporary survival-flavoured angle. In a word: want. We also get a chance to sink our chompers into Vampyr (p36), the latest offering from Life Is Strange studio Dontnod. Its beloved episodic hit was all teen angst time travel, so an action RPG focused on a bloodsucker (who's also a doctor) in 1918 London is quite the departure. Any excuse to don a top hat.



026



032



034



036

ightarrow READ THE LATEST PREVIEWS OF THE BIGGEST GAMES AT GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM



A live-action Wildlands short film, War Within The Cartel, will air on Ubi's Twitch stream on 16 February

MAIN Half the fun in Wildlands is kitting out your soldier in increasingly more specialist quar. You'd better hope you've got some really good friends for this four-player co-op return to the Clancyverse. Not just people you like or get on with, but people who, when you say 'go over there, hide and don't shoot anyone', will actually go over there, hide and not shoot anyone. It's a sensitive balance. Wildlands' open-world Bolivia-set drug lord hunting won't cut you any slack if yer buddy Johnny Kill 'Em All suddenly decides to go rogue and pepper the nearest bad guy with loud, attention-grabbing bulletry.

It's not unforgiving in a ruthless way, it's just big. Actual real world big, not videogame big. So for the first time in an action-focused military shooter like Ghost Recon, scale is more of an enemy than, well, the enemy. Go in without a coherent plan

and you'll get split up, the gunfire will come from all directions and chaos will stamp all over your finely tuned scheme. It's far from a military sim level of realism but the size of the spaces you have to control can be large, and shooting the first person you see is a recipe for disaster. You'll die because you panic when a ton of enemies appear. Or because you stop working as a team and just start firing in all directions like a military sprinkler. Ever seen one of those scenes in a war movie when a soldier breaks down and curls up sobbing behind a wall as war happens all over the place? That's you playing Ghost Recon Wildlands badly.

"For the first time in an action game, scale is more of an enemy than the actual enemy"

This scale is obvious from the start: the world stretches off across undulating mountains, there are lakes covered in flamingos that scatter as you clatter past in a stolen truck, llamas running across the hills and more. Not to mention enemy bases, safe houses, intel sites and rebel outposts. There's an abundance of opportunities and, most importantly, space for you to use. "When you look at real special operations teams and how they function, it's not just going in and hitting a target, it's you planning out your own operation," explains narrative director Sam Strachman. "You are gathering the intel, you're following your leads, you're going it about it how you want."

Wild abandoned

lhat's the approach Wildlands is taking here with its massive, country-sized map. Settling into Bolivia and working out the best approach to what's ahead may take a while. Our early attempts to blunder through gung-ho style ended repeatedly in disaster until we learned to work more as a group – marking targets, forming a strategy and trying to thin the numbers as silently as possible





ABOVE You have a simple radial menu to command your team when playing solo.

LEFT Using your drone to scout ahead and mark targets is a crucial skill.







"If you don't communicate with teammates, you'll get very literally shot to pieces"

THE MAP?

Ubi is selling Wildlands as the biggest open-world ever. There are no hard numbers on the actual size yet but our experience trying to cross it certainly suggests it's huae. We started near the bottom-left corner and set a marker to reach that as a starting point, thinking we could fly in a chopper from corner to corner. It said about 12km, a tiny, tiny, fraction of the whole map but after about eight or so minutes trying to fly to the checkpoint we'd only barely crossed about 3km so we gave up and chased llamas instead.

BELOW As fun as it would be, it's not possible to ride the llamas.



HOW BIG IS → before going loud. Most importantly, continued communication is vital when enemies pour in from all angles or a previously missed sniper or helicopter makes its presence known. Talking about loadouts is also hella helpful. It's no good having a team full of snipers if everyone wants to tank. This is a game where strategising is best started in the locker room, and then continued on the trip to the mission, and before anyone pulls a trigger, and all the time the shooting's actually happening. Basically, if you don't communicate with your friends you'll get very literally shot to pieces.

Better together

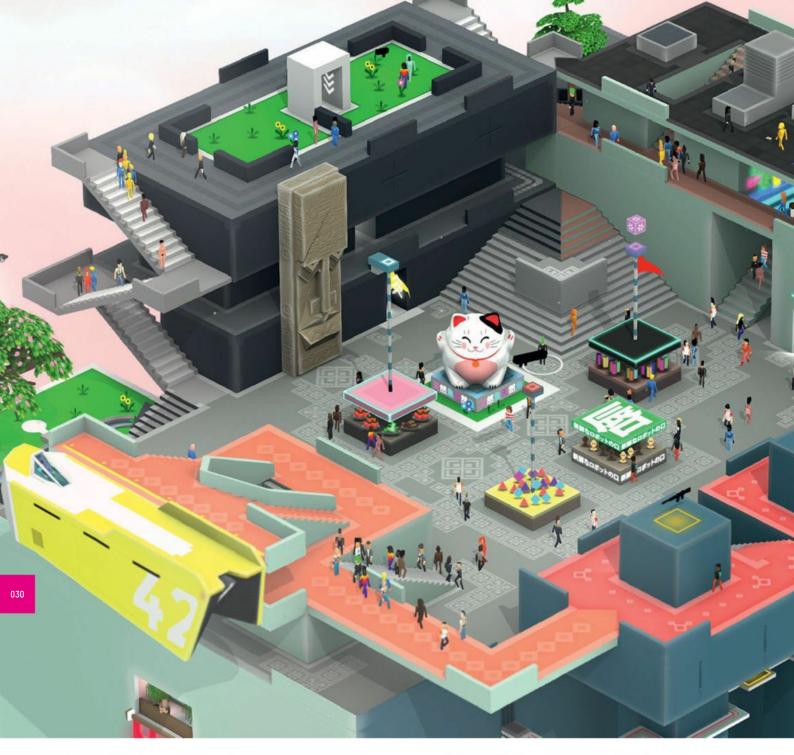
There is a single-player mode but despite Ubi's insistence that the game can be played in any combination, we've yet to be convinced that going it alone will capture much of the fun of co-op teamwork. As AI, your team don't feel hugely smart. In a game with so much freedom, angles to cover and possibilities, the 'point-and-shoot' nature of your NPC back-up feels functional but not much more, leaving you to do most of the work. It's okay, it just doesn't feel like an advance on anything you've seen before. Considering the excellent job in worldbuilding here it's a shame to have soldiers teleport in and out of cars, or vaulting walls to run in front of enemies because their pathfinding decided that was the quickest way.

No, from what we've played this is a world best enjoyed with friends, and everything's open more or less from the start. "Here's the sandbox, here are your toys, now go play how you want," is how Strachman puts it. There are 100-plus story missions you can access in any order across 11 distinct ecosystems like mountains, salt flats, snowy areas, swamps and more. The only truly gated content the stuff you can't access until you reach a certain point - are four final sub bosses and the top dog of the drug cartel, El Sueño himself. With that scale and openness you have to really earn your place here.

That's because progression in Wildlands is as much about learning the lay of the land as it is unlocking new guns and skills. Those sub bosses have multiple underlings to work through, with the Bolivian drug trade split over four different areas: Production makes the cocaine; Smuggling gets it out (and the money in); Security protects it all; and, finally, Influence creates the propaganda. Depending on the missions you find and complete, you'll learn more about these wings and try to compromise them to various extents.

You will also obviously improve your team and become better equipped for more dangerous areas and enemies. "There are multiple dimensions to our levelling and progression system," explains Strachman. "On the one hand you have different skills that you can unlock for your Ghost," he says, highlighting things like physical skills (faster aiming, better damage resistance and the like) or drone skills (things like more range, or vision modes), and squad skills to improve the team when you're playing singleplayer (this might make an NPC squad play better, we didn't have time to find out. If it does then it's hiding away crucial smarts you need up front). But it's not just about your crew: "You also have this parallel progression system of Rebel Resources," adds Strachman. "As you go around the world and do these side-quests, you'll be able to loot different kinds of resources that you can put towards different rebel skills." These effectively act as extra troop, supply and attack resources you can use, like summoning rebels to attack certain places or calling in mortar attacks and vehicles.

There's something potentially exciting here simply because of the scale of everything. During one mission - a chopper raid on a safe house to extract a target - a storm suddenly blows up. Rain pours, the sky closes in and lightning picks out the silhouettes of distant ridges. It's hard not to buy into the promise at moments like that. There are a few reservations, like the AI and some odd physics (self-righting cars, for example, and odd helicopter controls) but hopefully these will eventually seem trivial in the (very) grand scheme of things.





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

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







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











DINKY DUELS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Summer in the city

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

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

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

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







Prey For The Gods

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

Dave Meikleham

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



BEAST MODE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Survival series

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

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

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











ABOVE Who says size matters? This guy.

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

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





ABOVE People cheered when Mega Man was announced perhaps because his inclusion suggests UMVC3 bête noire, Zero, won't make it.

LEFT Ryu's slow walk means he often struggles in fast-paced games. Having an Infinity Stone will sort that right out.

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



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







Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite

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

PUBLISHER CAPCOM DEVELOPER CAPCOM FORMAT XBOX ONE ETA WINTER 2017



Capcom's fighting games have a history of not quite getting it right the first time round. The Street Fighter III series only took hold the third time, with the aptly titled *Third Strike*, and *Street Fighter X Tekken* only came into its own after a hefty balancing update. *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* was as good as broken right out of the gate, and it took the *Ultimate* revision – a full retail release just nine months after the base game launched – for it to survive.

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

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

That, at least, is our reading of the announcement press release, which goes to great pains to stress that

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

Infinite will feature a lengthy and cinematic story mode at launch – Street Fighter V's was months late – as well as "a variety of exciting and accessible single-player modes".

Okay, okay, we get it.

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

Kicks and stones

Capcom's solution is to pare back team size - you now only take two warriors into battle - and do away with assists entirely. Partners can be tagged in or out at any time, even mid-combo; in previous games you've only been able to switch characters at specific moments. To offset any perceived loss of depth (and awkward comparisons with Street Fighter X Tekken), Capcom has added a new mechanic. After you've picked your team, you'll choose one of six Infinity Stones, lore-born artefacts which grant the wielder a new ability, and the team a damaging, cinematic super move. So a slow, heavy character might suddenly gain a zippy dash; someone who struggles against projectiles might acquire the means to pass through them, or even to throw out one of their own. It's smart stuff, ensuring there's enough scope for creative team-building, without taking things to extremes.

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

X-FACTOR

There's a big question mark over the fate of the X-Men in Infinite. They're part of the MVC furniture but are as vet unconfirmed, and the rumour mill is swirling with talk that they won't appear, Disney. apparently, cares little for Marvel characters it doesn't own the movie rights to, and Fox has the licence. Fair enough, if you ask us: Wolverine was really annoving in MVC.3.





PREVIEW

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





Vampyr

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

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

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



DRAC ATTACK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blood not-so-simple

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

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











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

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

LEFT Ah, yes, a liquid lunch. Delectable.



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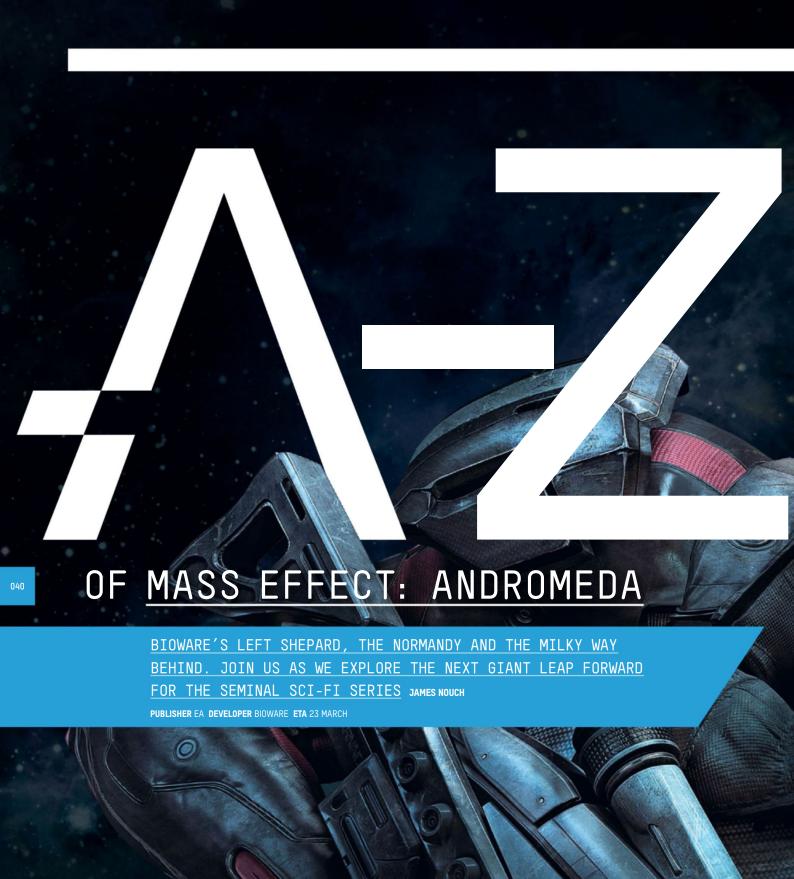
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Although the Ryders leave the Milky Way around the time of Mass Effect 2, it takes them 600 years to reach the Andromeda galaxy







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

Biotics

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



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



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







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



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





<u>exploration</u>



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



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

family

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



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







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



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

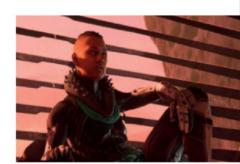


hyperion

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



interrupts



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





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

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



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

loyalty missions

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

BELOW Loyalty missions veer off the critical path to tell character-driven stories



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

mako 2.0

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



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

nexus

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

open-world

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







quests

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



R

reinforcements

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

ENCYCLOPEDIA ANDROMEDA

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





S skills

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

tempest

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

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

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

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







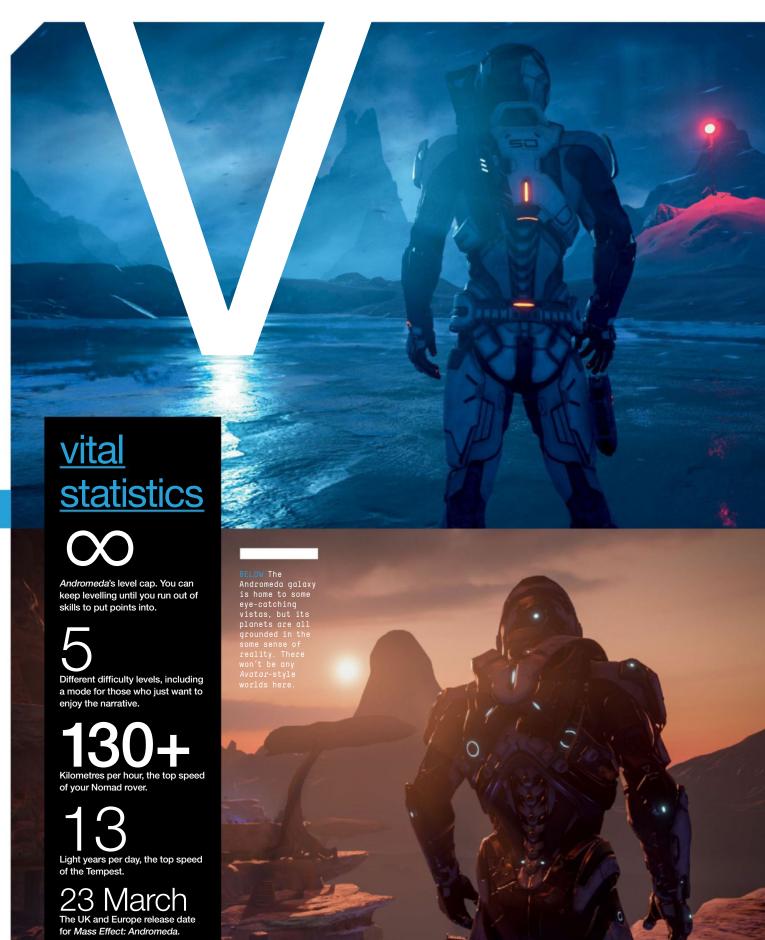


under the hood

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



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EA Access subscribers can sample ten hours of Andromeda on 16 March, a week before launch

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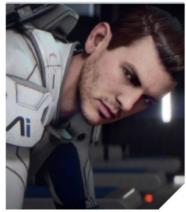
weaponry

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





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





x-rated

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



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





zoology

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









ENCYCLOPEDIA ANDROMEDA

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





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



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

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

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

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

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

It's clear that the conversation system has seen something of an overhaul, and the Paragon and Renegade system has gone. Could you describe the new system for us a little, and tell us what you were trying to achieve by making those changes as well. So, Paragon and Renegade is gone, the reason they're gone is because they felt very Shepard – they were very tied to the Shepard character, so they didn't really make sense if we weren't going to have Shepard as our protagonist. But part of it is also the fact that the core team that worked on the original Mass Effect was basically the Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic team, where light-side and dark-side decisions were a thing, right? And people really enjoyed that in KOTOR and that's why we picked it up in Mass Effect. But as we've progressed in the trilogy, we've found people seem to enjoy the more grey decisions. Not just the "are you evil? Are you good?" kind of thing.

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

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



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

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

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

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

Loyalty missions are back this time around, which is fantastic news. Why did they go? Why are they back? And how will they differ from the ones we saw in *Mass Effect 2?*Love it – precise questions. I can answer all of those. Why did they go? The easy reason

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

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

Last of all, we wanted to touch on the Kett. The Reapers were these uncaring space monsters, but the Kett seem a little more nuanced. Would you be able to introduce them to us a little and maybe give us an insight into what their motivations are? Yeah, I'm not going to get too much into the details of it, but I will say I think that's a good word, nuanced. I think what we wanted to do with the Kett was create a clear and obvious enemy. I think that was important for us off the bat, but as you – like many things in a Mass Effect game – dive into it a bit more, as you spend more time with it, you realise they're maybe not all as bad as you thought.

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

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

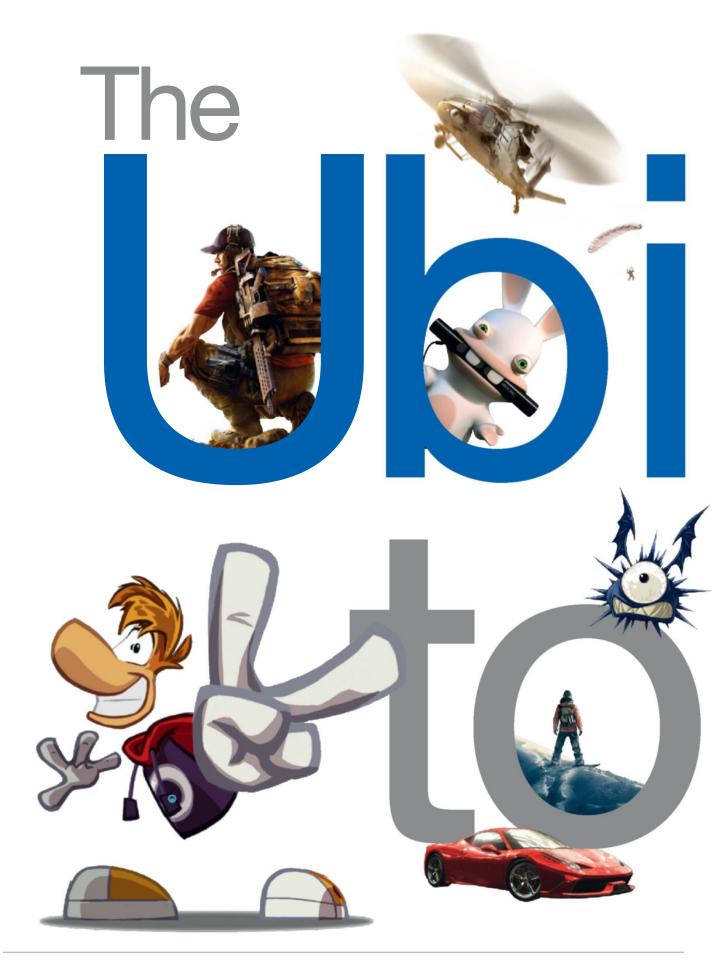
is, we'd always fight this sense of "well, I'm supposed to be saving the galaxy, but this character over here wants me to help them with their relationship. How do I justify that in the grand scheme of things, when the galaxy is about to be wiped out?".

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

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

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

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



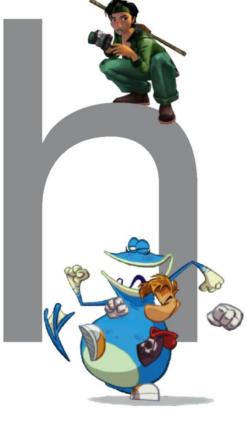


WITH JUST WEEKS UNTIL THE RELEASE OF GHOST RECON WILDLANDS, WE VISIT UBISOFT PRODUCER

XAVIER POIX AT HIS PARISIAN STUDIO JAMES NOUCH







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

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

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

How would you describe your role and responsibilities within Ubisoft?

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

So, how many people does that encompass?

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

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

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







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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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





UBISOFT PARIS

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

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



UBISOFT ANNECY

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



UBISOFT MONTPELLIER

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



IVORY TOWER

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



Greatest hits The Crew, Wild Run, Calling All Units





ABOVE Rayman and his cuddley but kinda creepy elephant buddy.

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







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

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

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

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

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

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

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



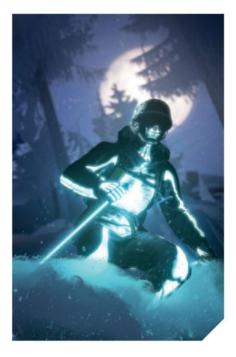
"With the marriage of technology and creativity, we can create new experiences and potential series"

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

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

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

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



magic moments

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

bisoft Montpellier is known for its risk-taking creativity, and this critically adored actionadventure is a brilliantly odd showcase of the studio's talents. 2006

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

A landmark GR which added a pinch of accessibility to the notoriously thorny franchise, but also for the incredible visuals. 2011 D.A.V.N.4.A.

RAYMAN ORIGINS

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

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

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

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

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

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

لو



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

MAYBE TO

MORROWIND?



SCRATCH THAT: DEFINITELY TO

MORROWIND. WE'VE BEEN BEHIND

THE SCENES AT ZENIMAX HQ FOR

THE INSIDE SCOOP ON THE

BIGGEST MMO ON XBOX. JOIN US
ON A JOURNEY BACK TO ONE OF
THE MOST INFLUENTIAL LOCALES
IN GAMING, AND DISCOVER WHY
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE IS
ABOUT TO BECOME MORE ESSENTIAL

THAN EVER...

MATT GILMAN

PUBLISHER ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS DEVELOPER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS RELEASE 6 JUNE 2017

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

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





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

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

Until now.

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

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

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

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

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

Good morrow

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

It was the first one that did the open-world, radiant quest AI stuff, and you can go in whatever order you want, so it's remembered very ABOVE For anyone familiar with the old game, seeing Morrowind in 2017-o-vision is mouth watering.

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



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

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



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

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

Viv' le difference

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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



THE WARDEN

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO YOUR NEW FAVOURITE CLASS

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

WINTER'S EMBRACE BEST FOR...

Taking the hits

SKILL 1

POLAR WIND

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

SKILL 2

ICE FORTRESS

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

SKILL 3

IMPALING SHARDS

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

SKILL 4

CRYSTALLISED SHIELD

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

SKILL 5

FROZEN DEVICE

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

ULTIMATE SKILL .

SLEET STORM

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



GREEN BALANCE BEST FOR...

Healing your buddies

SKILL 1

FUNGAL GROWTH

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

SKILL 2

HEALING SEED

Pop these into the ground and the flora that grows will steadily heal nearby buds over time. SKILL 3

LIVING VINES

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

SKILL 4

GREEN LOTUS

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

SKILL 5 NATURE'S GRASP .

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

ULTIMATE SKILL

SECLUDED GROVE

This billowing ability sees trees slowly grow in a circle around you for huge health rejuvenating heals for any friends milling about inside.

ANIMAL COMPANION BEST FOR...

Dealing out tons of damage

SCREAMING CLIFF RACER

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

SKILL 2

SUBTERRANEAN ASSAULT

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

SKILL 3

GROWING SWARM

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

SKILL 4

BULL NETCH

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

SKILL 5

BIRD OF PREY

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

ULTIMATE SKILL

WILD GUARDIAN

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

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

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



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

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

Choose your battles It's just as well you can read the

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



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

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

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE MORROWIND

European prices weren't available at time of writing, but the standard boxed edition of Morrowind will cost \$59.99 (approx £49)



SOTHA SIL, AKA THE CLOCKWORK CITY, IS A <u>LORE</u> <u>VETERAN'S DREAM LOCALE</u>, WITH OMINOUS AUTOMATON GUARDS, RAPTOR-ESQUE BOSS FIGHTS AND <u>UNNERVING VISTAS</u>

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

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

Trial and terror

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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





SEYDA NEEN

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



BALMORA

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

VISIT VVARDENFELL

SEE IT BEFORE IT'S ASH!

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



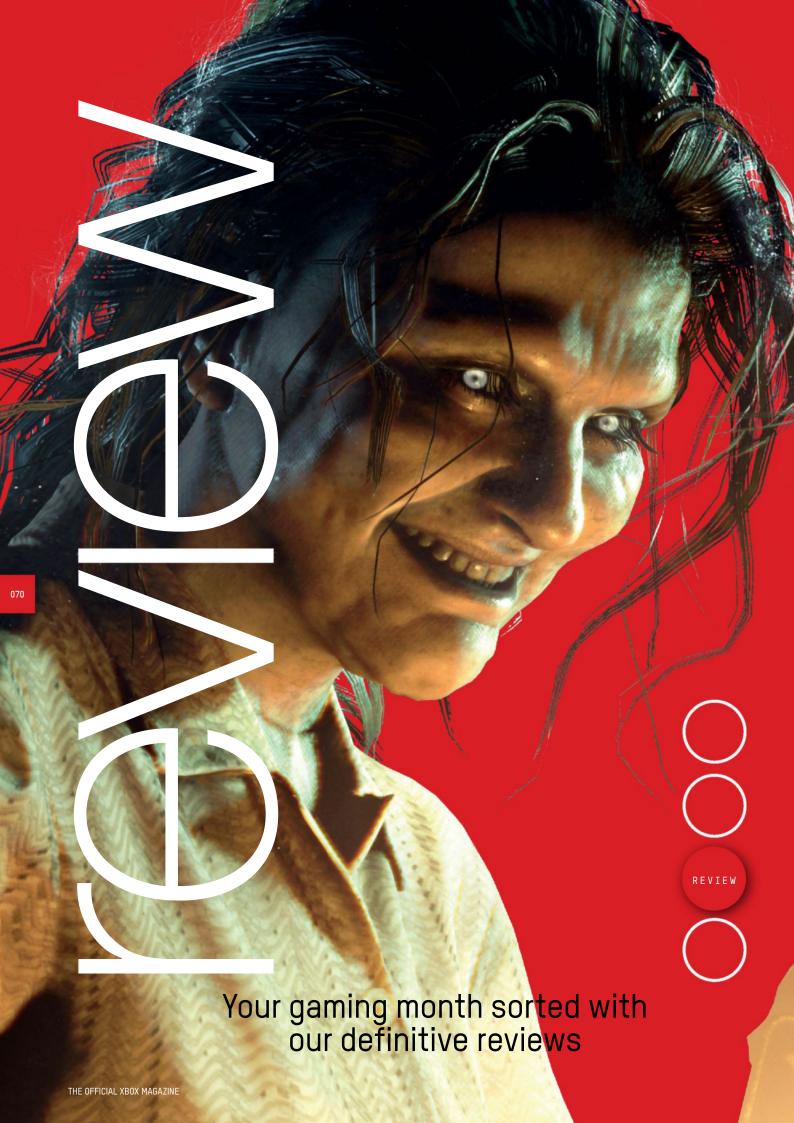
VIVEC CITY

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



SADRITH MORA

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





HOW WE SCORE:

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

- 10 A gaming masterpiece
- 9 An essential slice of brilliance
- 8 Give it a whirl and you won't regret it
- **7** Some minor flaws but still good
- 6 Solid, but not setting any loins aflame
- 5 Average. Not good, but not terrible either
- 4 Honks just a bit
- 3 Look away, lest ye be tainted 2 Angry-makingly
- 2 Angry-makingly bad
- 1 Just... no...
- β Titles with this symbol are on Game Preview, so while they aren't finished you can still find out if they're worth playing



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

Pssst. Want some free travel advice from your old pals at OXM? Of course you do. Don't visit Louisiana. EVER. Oh sure, New Orleans is a splendid city. It parties like nowhere else on Earth, keeps the bead industry in rude health and, above all, does absolutely killer Creole sea gumbo. But despite the best efforts of its sensational seafood, Resident Evil VII: Biohazard (p72) has put us off the Bayou State for life. That's what happens when you spend ten hours imprisoned on a sinister, swampy estate run by flesh-eating hillbillies. Resi's newest Big Bads may be horrendous hicks, but boy do the Baker family know how to cook up a cracking horror reboot. Capcom's latest is actually unusually light in the zombie department this time out, so if you're looking for a hearty helping of undead action, you'd better slip into the first two episodes of The Walking Dead: A New Frontier (p78). Telltale is unquestionably the new master of virtual brain-biters everywhere. If all these grisly Earthbound endeavours are bumming you out, may we suggest taking a little intergalactic trip to check out Astroneer (p91). This delightful spaceset sandbox is the latest addition to Xbox's Game Preview programme, and it features the cuddliest darn astronauts we ever did see. C'mon, don't be like that, Buzz Aldrin. We still think you're a total fox.



072





084



091

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PUBLISHER CAPCOM / DEVELOPER CAPCOM / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £52.99

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

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

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

See that 'VII' sitting
a couple of inches
above? Hoo-boy,
is it unnecessary.
Chances are, the ever
escalating number

reminds you of all the heaving zombie baggage this horror franchise has been saddled with in recent years. What a pity, because while it makes for some clever iconography – the 'VII' cutely slots into 'EVIL' for the game's logo – this sequel firmly returns Capcom's spook 'em up to its origins. Brace yourself: real survival horror is back...

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

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

Resi remix

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

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

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

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





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





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

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

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

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

Winters' pain

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

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

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

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

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

short cut

WHAT IS IT?
A grimy horror reboot served up in a distinctly unsettling Deep South setting.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? Deliverance meets Dawn Of The Dead... with extra mutant hillbillies.

WHO'S IT FOR? Lapsed Resi fans who are desperate to see the series return to its roots. stealth sections reminiscent of Alien: Isolation... if the Xenomorph was a bearded southern psychopath fond of chowing down on offal. At other points you face him in full-blown boss fights, with a couple of choice skirmishes offering up the best battles since Resi 4's El Gigante scuffle. He may well be the series' greatest villain ever.

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

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







LEFT Find bigger backpacks to increase storage.

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

SMASH-AND-GRAB

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





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





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

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

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

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

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

ABOVE RIGHT We've already

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

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

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



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





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

Fright lite

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

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

STIM AND HERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



OXM VERDICT

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

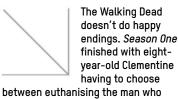




PUBLISHER TELLTALE GAMES / DEVELOPER TELLTALE GAMES / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST 65.19 PER EPISODE OR 624.99 FOR THE SEASON

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

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



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

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

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

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

Sweet and deadly

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

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

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

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

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

WHO'S IT FOR?

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

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

The grim tone of The Walking Dead as a whole is fuelled by its unusual central tenet of 'total infection'.

Every living person and everyone who will ever be born carries the zombie virus, and there's no hope of a cure. It doesn't matter if you've been bitten: the world is going to end and everybody is a zombie in waiting. As time passes in the various branches

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





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

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

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

Friends in need

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

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

FAR LEFT

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

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



GENERATION GAP

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

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

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

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

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



OXM VERDICT

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

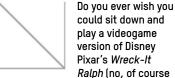


At one point, Rise joins forces with muscled grunt Mega Badass, but a landmine makes it a short pairing

PUBLISHER ADULT SWIM GAMES / DEVELOPER SUPER MEGA TEAM / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £11.99

Rise & Shine

THE EARLY BIRD CATCHES THE RETRO SHOOTER SLAUGHTER DAVEMENKLEHAM



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

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

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

Guns 'n games

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

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

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



WHAT IS IT?

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

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

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

WHO'S IT FOR?

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

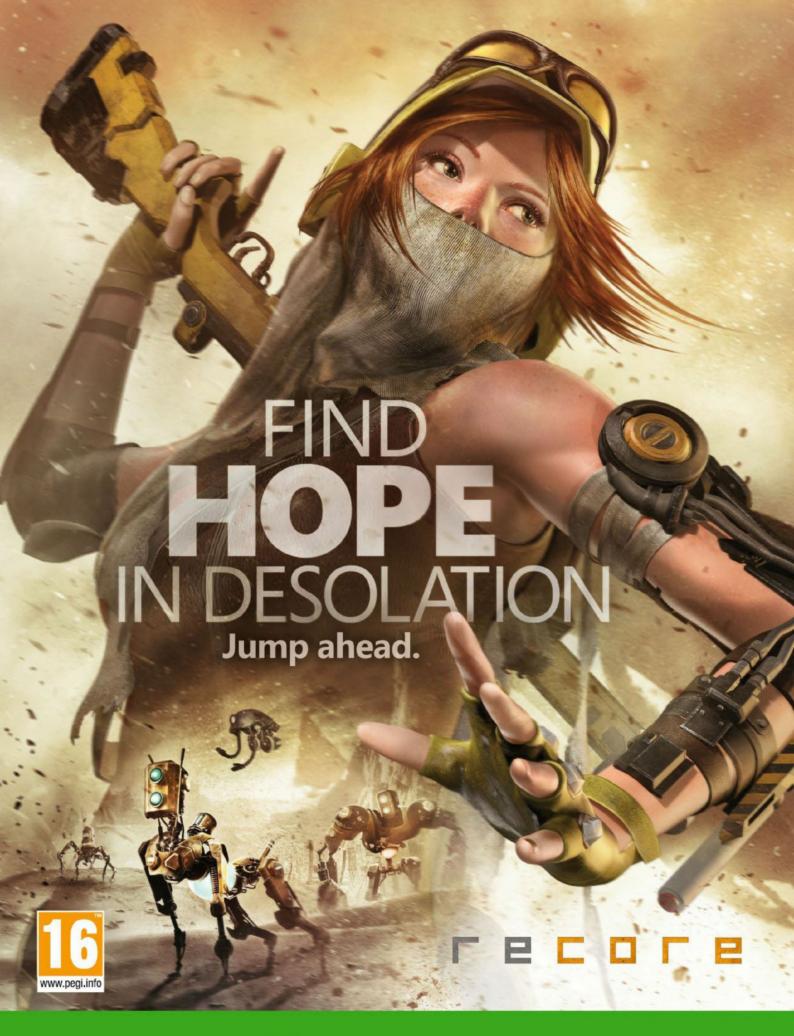
Rise & Shine can be a seriously tricky customer, then. Awkward boss fights and sporadically fussy controls mean there's a serious challenge to be had here. Yet providing you can overlook the moments when this oldschool throwback makes you feel like a plate-spinning gun-for-hire, it's a challenge (mostly)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



OXM VERDICT

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







The entire concept for TowerFall Ascension was cooked up within 48 hours at a 2012 game jam in Vancouver

PUBLISHER MATT MAKES GAMES / DEVELOPER MATT THORSON/ FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £11.99

TowerFall Ascension

COUCHPLAY COLOSSUS TAKES ITS SHOT AT GLORY DAVE MEIKLEHAM

RIGHT Levels are

crawling with

monsters, like flying eyeballs. Buzz off, freaks.





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

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

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

Take a bow

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

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



WHAT IS IT?

An arenabased archery showdown where you try to shoot your friends.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

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

WHO'S IT FOR?

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



OXM VERDICT

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





PUBLISHER FINJI / DEVELOPER BITS & BEASTS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST 67.99

Feist

LIKE MOGWAI IF THEY WANTED TO KILL YOU WITH A STICK CHRISSCHILLING



If the main aim was to capture the brutality of the natural world, then this game is a success. Though

there aren't any blood or guts, every encounter within its shadowy, silhouetted woodland setting is a frantic, savage fight to the death.

As a kind of sentient ball of hair you're targeted by everything from hairy caterpillars to hairy spiders and hairy mole/hedgehog hybrids – and though every beast could do with a good trim, they're all a severe threat to your existence. You can fight back with nearby rocks, logs and sharp sticks, but the latter only survive one hit, and you'll have to retrieve the rest once thrown. It's tough, and purposely so, but for us, *Feist* crosses the funfrustration divide far too often.

The problem is the presentation. As striking as it looks – like a cross between Limbo and knockabout endless-runner Badland - the scenery can obscure vital visual information. When you're running from trouble, it's a bit much to be speared while you were obscured by a tree in the foreground. Detritus on the forest floor can get confusing at times, like when you go to pick up what looks like a log only to find it's just some uneven ground. And with no visual indicator to clue you in on how close to death you are, you're never confident whether you can survive another hit or not.

That would be less of an issue if your opponents weren't quite so unerringly accurate. Inchworms





WHAT IS IT?

A dark, twisted side-scrolling survival game that's constantly trying to kill you.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Take *Limbo*'s toughest bits, and throw in finicky creature combat.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Keen survivalists with vast reserves of patience and the capacity to improvise.



"Inchworms rustle up to launch spines while flies attack you from above"

suddenly rustle up from the ground and quickly launch spines at you. Large flies do the same from above, and in both cases the velocity of the projectiles gives you barely a split-second to react. Their behaviour can also be hard to read. Sometimes flies will wait a little while before attacking; at other times they'll fire three shots in as many seconds. Leap and you'll be punctured in mid-air; stay grounded and you're every bit as likely to become a pincushion. Grabbing flies mid-flight is something of a lottery, though at least if you stun them with a projectile, you can pick them up while they're prone and aim their backsides at aggressors.

Feist bumps

This isn't the kind of challenge you can learn from and adapt to, so much as brute force your way past after a succession of failures. You can pass tricky sections simply by sprinting through and getting lucky. At other times you'll be reliant on the caprices of the AI – whether a fly will float

lazily away from your swipes or swoop down within whacking range. Not that you'll always be able to rely on flight over fight: some sequences force you to beat specific enemies before the earth will rumble and clear an obstruction further down the path.

Although Feist made us wonder whether we should give up games journalism for a less stressful gig, such as, say, keyhole surgeon or airtraffic controller) there's something about its unflinching challenge that makes it hard to completely dismiss. As arbitrary as it can sometimes seem, that unfairness probably makes it a more accurate depiction of what life is like at the bottom of the food chain. If you've got a masochistic streak, you may well get a kick out of conquering one of the steepest challenges we've faced in some time. Just don't blame us if you end up shelling out for a new pad or three.



OXM VERDICT

Unrelenting and vicious: this pitiless survival game is not for the easily frustrated.





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

PUBLISHER WAYFORWARD / DEVELOPER WAYFORWARD / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £15.99

Shantae: Half-Genie Hero

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

short cut

WHAT IS IT? A cute action-

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

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

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

WHO'S IT FOR? If you thought the

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

Shantae shake

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

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

"Shantae needs to foil a git who kidnaps women and sells them as mermaids"

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





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

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

WayForward attempts to mitigate the inverse difficulty curve that

URN YOUR KEEP

As well as the village store, you can spend your gems at Tuki's shop. She can be found hiding in urns within certain stages, selling rare potions and transformations, Shantae can become a fruitproducing tree or assume the form of a jug of gems if she's low on health or funds respectively. Best of all, however, is the Blobfish transformation. In practical terms it's just about useless; for comedy value it's all but essential. plagues so many games of this kind, whereby the further you progress, the easier the game seems to get. In the early stages of Half-Genie Hero, when you have just two hearts to play with, you'll find yourself playing much more cautiously than in later stages when top-ups are in abundance and enemy attacks deal half the damage. Its solution isn't always elegant, with one-hit-kill lasers, insta-death poison pools and bosses that take an inordinate amount of punishment before they finally explode.

Date with death

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

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



OXM VERDICT

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



There are more than 150 levels for you to run, jump and dive through in whatever order you like

PUBLISHER DIGERATI DISTRIBUTION / DEVELOPER DANIEL LINSSEN / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST 65.59

The Sun And Moon

NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE GAME WHERE YOU CATCH CUTE ANIMALS KATEGRAY



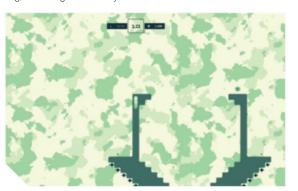
Ludum Dare, a game jam that takes place regularly and tasks its participants with creating something within a time limit of

a few days, is responsible for some of the most interesting and creative game ideas in the indie community recently. Daniel Linssen is a bit of a rock star within that community — his ideas range from a fully-fledged RPG, Roguelight, in which light is a valuable and limited commodity, to WALKIE TALKIE, where you can create mini-platforming levels using ASCII. Linssen's mind is something beautiful.

The Sun And Moon is Linssen's award-winning Ludum Dare entry from 2014, now ported onto console. It's a brilliantly simple platformer where you can reverse gravity at will, but only when you're inside blocks. This means that completing each level requires physics-defying, brain-bending acrobatics as your tiny little character swoops and dives in and out of blocks like a graceful penguin, changing from black to white and back again, also kinda like a penguin. Some levels have spikes to avoid, others have disappearing platforms and most levels are just really bloody difficult.

Puzzling platform

The problem isn't with the design, because it's a perfectly balanced little thing, even if you're not very good at it – but with it being on the big screen. In each level, there's all this empty space, and it feels like this big, ill-fitting coat that your mum has



RIGHT It's hard to capture, but the fluidity of the movement is incredibly satisfying. Like a penguin.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

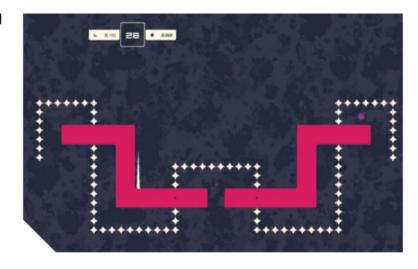
A Ludum Dare award-winning platformer with a physics-defying and fun twist.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

A much simpler Super Meat Boy, or a more complex Thomas Was Alone.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone who wants a sweet little platformer with a lot of smarts.



"There's so much empty space, the game can feel like an ill-fitting coat"

said you'll "grow into" even though you're in your mid-twenties. The backgrounds are just right on smaller PC monitors, where they walk the line between being pretty and not too distracting, but on a telly, they take up more of the screen than the action does. The music, as well, is incredibly repetitive, playing the same simple arpeggio loop over and over again. If the levels weren't enough to annoy you, this definitely will. It's a shame the music is so ill-matched because it's enough to put you off playing.

The levels also unlock in a strange, non-linear way, which means that even though they're numbered, you can work through them however you like. If one batch of levels has you stumped, you can go and try something else out for a while instead and come back to it. The swooping style of platforming is very, very hard to get right, and you might even find yourself completing levels without being entirely sure how you did so. But that's not really an issue: the way it works is so slick and fluid that it's

hard not to enjoy just playing around with it for as long as you like.

Don't get us wrong: we'd love to see more Ludum Dare games coming to Xbox. New ideas, new blood, new things to play with: all of these can only be good things. But *The Sun And Moon*, despite being a great little game with interesting ideas, just feels weird lifted from its original format onto a living room-sized gaming setup. Some games are just designed to look better when sitting 18 inches from the screen than from a sofa.

It's not that there isn't a place on Xbox One for indie games, but something as simple and small as this can feel lacking when it arrives on bigger screens. It feels like a really good mobile or PC game that got ported because of the hype around it, and while that hype was definitely justified, something more needed to happen in the shift to console.



OXM VERDICT

A fun and deserving indie game that needed a bit of adjustment for sofa-based play.







In Ostrich Banditos' last game, High Vaultage, you catapult into the sky with the power of super farts

PUBLISHER ADULT SWIM / DEVELOPER OSTRICH BANDITOS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £7.99

Westerado: Double Barreled

A FUN-SLINGING REVENGE STORY THAT'S GOOD, BAD AND A LITTLE UGLY KIRK MCKEAND



We've all had days like it. One minute you're out chasing a stray buffalo across some arid plains, the next you're riding

back to find your home is on fire, your mum is dead, your brother is bleeding out and you're the one who has to put him out of his misery. Mondays, eh?

This seemingly sombre opening isn't played straight at all. It's just an excuse to get you exploring the bitesize open-world - dotted with ranches, towns, mines and Native American reservations - and interacting with its various NPCs. Each time you perform a task - be it convincing someone's drunk husband to leave the saloon at gunpoint, finding a pickaxe for a ghost or performing a raid on an oil tycoon you're rewarded with a new clue as to who killed your family, starting with your dying brother's description of the shape of his hat. Great.

Dressed to kill

Over the couple of hours each playthrough takes, you'll uncover the colour of the assassin's clobber, from his belt to his bandana, piecing them together visually until you can identify the culprit. The killer's identity is always randomised, so there's plenty of incentive to replay this murder mystery, along with unlockable characters and unexpected endings.

Backed up by snappy writing, all the branching stuff is great, and it means choices have real consequences. You can even draw your gun on someone RIGHT The Wild West is evoked pretty well in pixels, filled with orange sunsets, dry desert and six-shooters.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A murder mystery full of horizontal shootouts, hats and banjos.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

It's a Red Dead where you can kill whoever you want, even midconversation.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Wild West fans looking for a couple of hours of pixelated pistols.



"Choices have real consequences so be careful who you point your gun at"

mid-conversation or simply accuse them of being the killer. Drawing on someone has various results depending on the person, so there's plenty of scope for experimentation.

Unfortunately, Westerado's combat doesn't live up to its other ideas. It does some interesting things, but it just feels clumsy, mostly thanks to the fact you can only shoot horizontally. You can't aim up or down the screen, so you have to line enemies up at your sides before pulling the trigger. You're like a well-armed crab. When there's a group of enemies attacking you together they often clump up, making it so there's nowhere safe to stand if you want to return fire. It gets frustrating, particularly towards the end when the enemy count jumps up and the screen gets busier.

Fortunately – assuming you keep yourself topped up with purchases of hats in the saloon – you can take three shots for free, each hat acting like an extra life. With precision shooting, you can even knock hats straight from the heads of rival

gunslingers and scoop them up for yourself. Coupled with the need to pull back the hammer before each shot, as well as forced manual reloads where rounds are loaded one at a time, gunfights do feel deadly. Every shot counts, especially when you know you're going to lose money if you haven't banked it before you're killed.

It's cohesive, too, as the quests tie into the feeling of risk. If a mission goes badly for your allies, they'll retreat or be killed, and that questline is often then closed off to you completely, forcing you to come at the game from another angle. This means your first run will probably be spent dipping your cowboy boots into almost every plotline, but it gives you a good view of the whole game and enables subsequent playthroughs to be more deliberate. Besides, you'll want to experience this more than once, despite niggles with the combat.



OXM VERDICT

Frustrating shooting is compensated by a sense of freedom and witty writing.

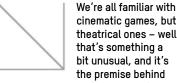




PUBLISHER WALES INTERACTIVE / DEVELOPER PROLOGUE GAMES / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £11.99

Knee Deep

'KNEE DEEP IN WHAT, EXACTLY?' EVERYONE ASKS SUSPICIOUSLY MARTIN KITTS



this intriguing indie 'swamp noir'.
A small-town mystery in three acts, with echoes of cult TV show *Twin Peaks*, it certainly stands out from the choose-your-own adventure crowd.

Knee Deep is set in a backwater Floridian town called Cypress Knee, where a famous actor has hanged himself from the water tower. Spacedout blogger Romana Teague is first on the scene, swiftly followed by bolshy local journalist Jack Bellet and depressed private investigator K. C. Gaddis, and you get to make dialogue choices for all of them.

Of course there's more to Cypress Knee than meets the eye, and the ill-matched trio soon uncover some sinister goings-on with property deals and a secretive cult called the Church of Us. Was the actor's death really suicide, they begin to wonder...

Stage dressing

It's all presented as a play, with footlights at the front of the stage and multiple settings for the characters to act in. It's a nice concept but it feels unconvincing within the context of this game.

Theatre productions make a virtue of the confines of the stage, but in *Knee Deep* everything is spread out over a vast area. The stage would have to be the size of a football pitch to fit all of that stuff on it. and in the first act





WHAT IS IT?

A murder mystery where you can influence the characters' dialogue.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

A Telltale game with nothing but dialogue and somewhat lower production values.

WHO'S IT FOR?

If you want a vague Kentucky Route Zero vibe but aren't too picky, maybe you.



"Despite being an interactive story, it's superficial and packed with filler"

the characters frequently stand on a little plinth to be whisked away to yet another enormous location.

Later in the game the plinth idea is abandoned – perhaps as a result of feedback, given that this was originally an episodic game on PC – and the characters sometimes walk directly to an adjacent scene, which is much better. But the theatre setting is still underused, with only some foldout scenery and very rare segments delivered to the audience reminding us of where we're supposed to be.

In terms of actual gameplay, you never get to move the characters or interact with objects. Instead you choose from three dialogue options to drive the scene forwards, so you can play almost the entire thing with just the A, B and X buttons. There are also a handful of picture reconstruction puzzles, which looked difficult until we realised the pieces lit up yellow when they were in the right area, and a password puzzle tells you the solution as soon as you start. It's clearly not meant to be a challenge.

It's hard to tell what *Knee Deep* is striving for. The dialogue choices come thick and fast, with few seeming to make any difference to the way events unfold. It's all so superficial, no wonder the game has to flash up a 'critical choice' alert when you've got a decision that might make more than the tiniest difference later on. Apart from that it's generally just a choice between agree/disagree/character-specific comedy response, with the effects lasting no longer than the subsequent line of dialogue.

As an interactive story it's not particularly compelling. There's too much filler and precious few good lines beyond Bellet's amusingly offensive 'belligerent' response options. But it's definitely different, and though it didn't strike a chord, we've got to give it some credit for forging its own path through the resurgent graphic adventure genre.



OXM VERDICT

A strange concept in an evocative landscape that's in search of a better game.





The game's Foundation Pack costs a hefty £31.99, but it nets you all 16 heroes and bonus skins

PUBLISHER PERFECT WORLD ENTERTAINMENT / DEVELOPER MOTIGA/ FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST FREE

Gigantic

FREE-TO-PLAY MONSTER HUNTING PACKS A STEEP PRICE DAVEMENT HAM



What a thoroughly bizarre little thing this is. Wait, did we say 'little'? The correct wording to describe this

odd MOBA/shooter hybrid should be 'maddeningly enormous' or 'stupidly sizeable' given the title. This frantic, five-on-five online effort may revolve around a slim premise – namely, laying a cartoon smackdown on cutesy warriors – yet the headlinehogging Guardians are seriously big customers. 'Multistorey mansion' big.

Gigantic is one of the latest titles to hit Xbox One's increasingly crowded Game Preview programme. As such, it's still ropey in places. Matchmaking is often terrible, to the point of being broken – in every one of our games, the borked system takes at least six minutes to find a match. Such glacial waits are unforgivable, and it's an issue developer Motiga needs to address immediately if Gigantic has any hope of sustaining a decent community.

But what of the game itself? Phew, this is going to take some explaining. So, an average match of *Gigantic* pits you and four teammates against another band of five warriors. Aside from slaying foes and capturing command points, the main goal is to injure, then kill the other side's Guardian: a mythical beast the size of a brachiosaurus that takes a hell of a lot of slashing and shooting to down.

After your team takes out a certain number of opposition players, your Guardian hunts down its rival. At this point, you have 30 seconds to sprint RIGHT The number of ranged projectiles, bombs and melee slashes that dominate the screen can easily overwhelm.



WHAT IS IT?

A hectic part MOBA/part shooter where you try to slay huge beasts.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

It combines bits of *Battleborn* and *Evolve*. Hardly the best teachers.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Folk who don't mind matchmaking waits or enjoy cartoon combat.



"Combat is less precise than doing heart surgery with a dessert spoon"

across the map to get into a position to put a hurtin' on it. Once the regal griffin or massive serpent wrestles its foe into submission, you have a short window to wound the beast. Deal enough damage, and a third of the monster's energy depletes. Wound it significantly like this three times, and you win the game. Simple, right?

Monster smash

Um, no. Not at all. While you're wailing on a rival Guardian, enemy players try to stop your attacks, and this is when *Gigantic* devolves into one appropriately colossal cluster. Range combat with the likes of Charnok – a dragon sorcerer who flings fireballs – is reasonably accurate, but close quarters melee combat feels frustratingly haphazard.

Charge in with a hero such as the Minotaur-esque Lord Knossos, and the resulting spear scraps are less precise than performing heart surgery with a dessert spoon. Collision detection forever feels off, and the sheer onslaught of explosions and energy blasts that engulf the screen

are both visually exhausting and super disorientating.

Gigantic is also free-to-play, meaning microtransactions are never far away. Of the game's 16 heroes, six are available for free. To unlock more, you either buy them with Crowns – a currency that's drip-fed to you in sinfully small doses after matches – or you pay with Rubies – valuable gems that cost actual money. A thousand of the latter will set you back £7.99, and with each hero costing between 300 and 900 Rubies, owning the entire eclectic roster will prove costly.

The real appeal of the game lies in playing with the powers of its various cast members, especially if you want to get the most of its insidious price. It's still a wallet-basher, though, and when you add in those almighty matchmaking issues, *Gigantic*'s problems are anything but small fry.



OXM VERDICT

A colourful yet messy MOBA with serious online infrastructure issues.



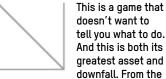


Astroneer has four-player drop-in/drop-out multiplayer, which makes exploring planets faster and safer

PUBLISHER SYSTEM ERA SOFTWORKS / DEVELOPER SYSTEM ERA SOFTWORKS / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £15.74

<u> Astroneer</u>

MINECRAFT IN SPACE! SORT OF! KATEGRAY



second you, a tiny astronaut, land on the deserted planet, you have to figure out how to not die - your oxygen slowly ticks down as you run around the alien surface; your power blinks and flashes urgently as you frantically run back to your shuttle, where you know you'll be safe.

It takes a while to work out what's going on in Astroneer. Still in its Game Preview stage of development, it's light on tutorials, which is especially vexing as its controls are hard to figure out, with three different ways of controlling the camera. Your job on this planet is to survive, Matt-Damonin-The-Martian style, but instead of potatoes and your own hard-earned poop, your most valuable commodities are resin and compound, which are used to craft things to make exploring and gathering easier. These materials can be found in the ground, and can be mined by terraforming the land.

You'll soon find that the ground all around your base is pitted with potholes that you made, and you'll fall into them ALL THE TIME, before running out of oxygen trying to escape. Then your new astronaut will have to spelunk to rescue the loot, rinsing and repeating ad infinitum. This is worse when you accidentally drive your brand-new truck into a big hole and have to abandon it there forever. RIP, truck. We hardly knew ye.

RIGHT The sky at night has a beautiful horizontal stripe of pink and teal stars.



WHAT IS IT?

A survival-crafting exploration game in space. Think Minecraft meets Elite: Dangerous.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Beautiful, creepy, weird, exciting; it unfolds in different ways each time.

WHO'S IT FOR? People who

want a gentle yet compelling exploration game.

BELOW The weird architecture in Astroneer is the best thing about the whole game.





"The first thing to figure out on this deserted planet is how not to die"

The relative silence you'll find in Astroneer is beautiful, though. It feels like you're really alone on this planet, with no one but the machines you build for company. Exploration is no one's game but your own, and you set your own goals and targets without any pushing or prodding. You drive as far as you can, then set a trail of oxygen-giving tethers deep down into a valley because you saw something cool, then grab a weird-looking lump of something to take back for research. It's brilliant, understated. self-motivated fun.

Savage beauty

There are some fantastic structures and plants that you can stumble across, and therein lies the most wonderful part of the game: finding something cool in its randomly generated terrain. Caves are frequent and mysterious, filled with glistening plants that look like glass sculptures and lethal, pulsating geysers that lure you in and choke the air around you. Crashed spaceships hold glorious loot and the implication of terrible things having happened. There's always more to explore, and building a shuttle to open up new planets widens the variety even more.

There are a few issues, especially given the game's early development status. The janky physics can be frustrating, there's a definite tapering off of Things To Do after about five to six hours and trying to terraform a ramp to get in and out of caves is so much harder than it needs to be. But the worlds Astroneer generates are such a joy to explore in increments, without the kind of threat or predecided motive that many modern videogames force upon you.

It's early days but this looks like a game of exploration for the sake of exploration, where seeking and finding takes precedence. Astroneer won't tell you what to do, but it gives you the freedom to figure it out yourself.

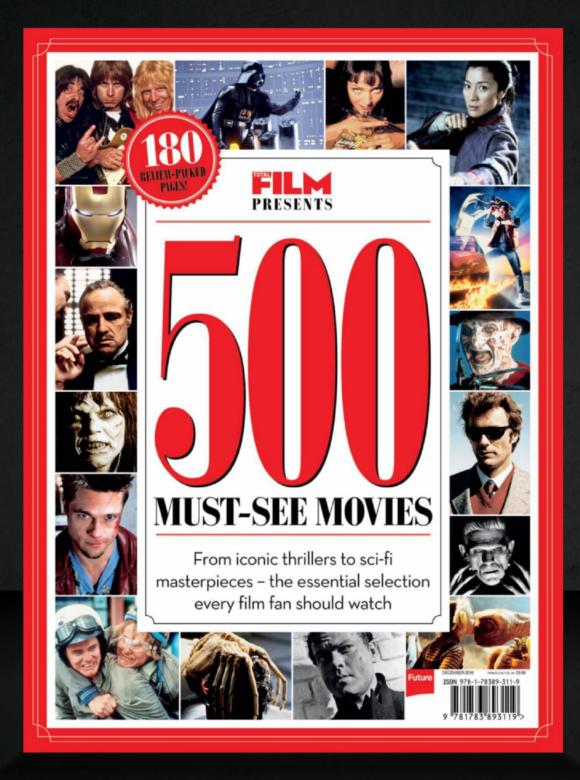


OXM VERDICT

Not perfect, or finished, but there's the spirit of something truly special.



ON SALE NOW

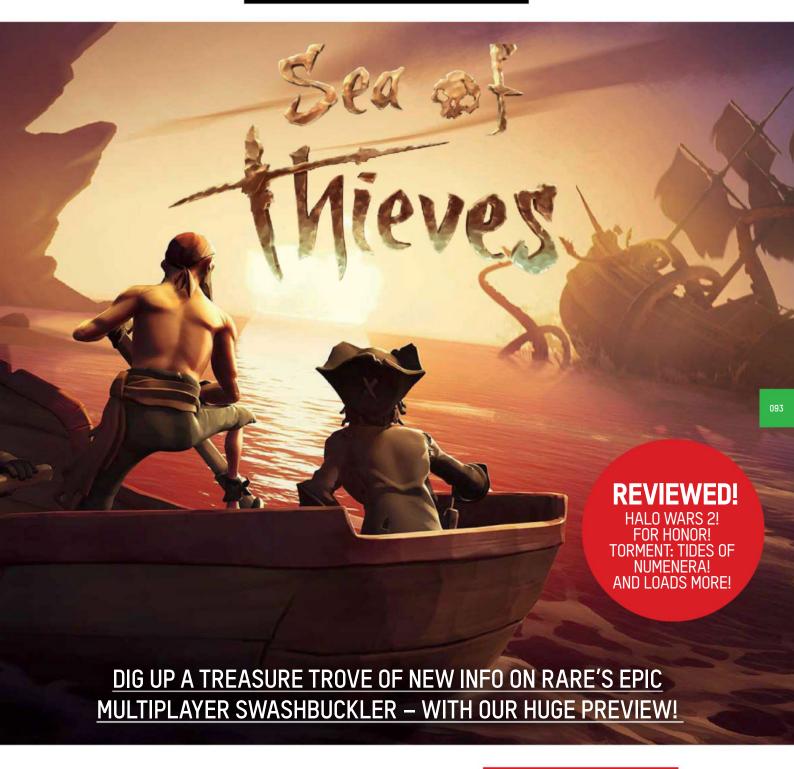


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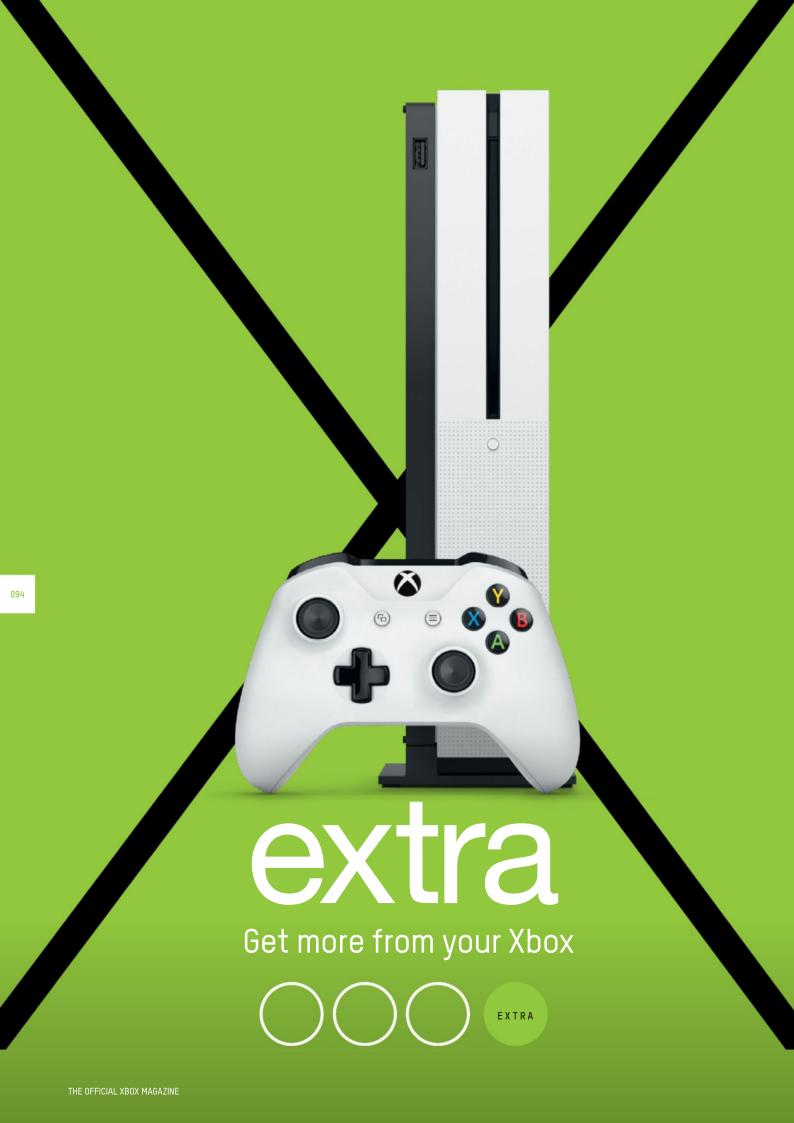
NEXT MONTH



NEW ISSUE ON SALE 10 MARCH

TURN TO PAGE 038 TO SUBSCRIBE NOW

*Contents subject to change. Please don't get angry if they do.







Sometimes, it's hard to keep the voices at bay. Shut up Mr and Mrs Inner Monologue, we will not set fire to the neighbours' rose bush! When the urge to embrace our internal demons arise, we always find videogames are a rather wonderful outlet for those baser violent urges. That's why we've hopped back into Hitman (p96), so that Agent 47 can act as a super-stabby cypher to help wash away our arsonistic impulses. There's nothing like pretending to be a yoga instructor, then booting an ex-Yakuza lawyer over a balcony to rebalance your Zen. Hey, don't judge us. We've been going through a lot this month. Revisiting Bully: Scholarship Edition (p102) has brought all those painful playground memories flooding back. If, like us, you need a little help getting over those repressed high school night terrors, going back to Jimmy Hopkins' jock-pummelling sandbox can prove oh-so-cathartic. Once you've reclaimed your virtual lunch money, you should be ready to play nice with others once more. If that's the case, you should most certainly visit our 15 best companions list (p108). Whether it's a wisecracking Breegull or a megalomaniacal Al system who's had its operating system downloaded into a Maris Piper potato, you'll be hard pressed to find more loyal sidekicks than these kickass compadres. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're keen to pop back to Sapienza to poison a dastardly scientist's spaghetti bolognese.



096



102



106



108



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Duck fails

Instead, Novikov immediately senses danger. He pauses and sends a bodyguard to investigate, at which point I start attracting attention from other parts of the room. To distract them I set off the bomb, which actually does kill Novikov, along with his bodyguard and a handful of bystanders. Panic ensues as the crowd rushes for the exit and I leave the building among them. Then I

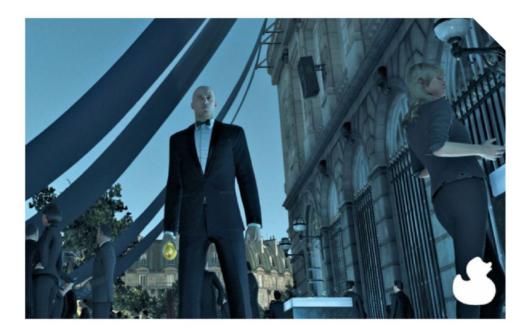


remember that I need to take out Dalia, who is now locked in her safe room. Back to the drawing board I go.

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

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

Colorado proves to be a harder assignment, due to there being four



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

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

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

Weapon swap

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

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

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

There's no special person who needs protecting, no 'game over' for killing too many civilians. You'll never be forced to stay within a particular area and you won't have to go back to a checkpoint if you get spotted. Even the most liberal open-world games will make you replay a mission for

failing some of those conditions, which makes *Hitman* all the more remarkable when

WHAT IS IT?

Stealth, disguises,

blatant murder and

vast replayability. It's

part puzzle game, part

shooter and all brilliant

all the time.

you consider what a traditionally rigid genre it comes from. However hard you try, you can't break it. *Hitman* is the Tonka truck of stealth. There are rules, of

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Forza Horizon 2 is set in a squashed version of the Mediterranean, the French and Italian countryside warped and remixed to fit for entertainment's sake. Forza Horizon 3 is set in an even squishier version of Australia - the world's largest island (where I live) swallows those two countries seven times over. Each has a hit list of iconic settings, destinations and landmarks to include as it aims to capture each location's unique nature. That's a lot to fit into an Xbox One game.

Being an art bod, it was Penrose's job to show all that off, wrapping the locales around an energetic racer that offered cars to die for and compelling reasons to mash the accelerator flat to the floor. He'd been poring over feedback from the Xbox 360's Forza Horizon and, in his words,

"became obsessed" over a single-word description of the game: beauty.

Open-world Need For Speed spends its time careening around industrial yards and chemical works, the antithesis of what you see in any Forza Horizon.

Treachery, he said, wasn't what they were going for. Instead, they wanted "descriptions of lush verdant fields, different colour hues of rocks," and "naturalistic representations of the landscape". In fact, the historic Amalfi coast inspired Monet's famous paintings. It's there, in Forza Horizon 2.

So when I spoke to Penrose in the weeks leading up to Forza Horizon 3's launch, I asked him if 'naturalistic representations' were still his ethos.



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

Yes, of course, and one image that the team captured of Australia and recreated for their concept art that stood out to him: the Twelve Apostles,

WHAT IS IT?

An open-world racer

which shares a lot of tech with Forza Motorsport,

and features the greatest

collection of Australian

cars you'll never

see again.

a natural rock formation in

the state of Victoria which anchors the Great Ocean Road. No cars were in view, just the beach, rocks and a seagull skipping across the sand.

Better red

All of the other imagery - the red centre, cities and rainforest - flows out from there. Fire up Forza Horizon 3 and the first drive you take rockets you down the Great Ocean Road, past the Twelve Apostles. What's incredible is that Horizon 3 has made me appreciate the places I've travelled to even more, from the simple Coalcliff Bridge to the burnt hues of the Outback. (Sure, the map makes no sense when compared to the real thing, but getting hung up on that is a fool's errand.)

You can't have a racing game without cars, and Horizon 3, more than other racers, is a time capsule for Australian motors. All three Australian car manufacturers - Toyota, Ford and Holden - are shuttering this year. For many Australians this is still unfathomable, and yet the final hero cars of each - respectively the Camry, Falcon and Commodore - have already rolled off each production line. While Toyota's family-sized shopping trolley holds as much cultural cache as your uncle's Vauxhall Cavalier, the Falcon and Commodore are mainstays, especially in local motorsport.

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

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

THE OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE







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

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



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

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

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

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

The debut game from Things don't start one-man developer Eric well. When creating Barone where you inherit my character, I spend and cultivaté a farm. It's old-fashioned, at least 45 minutes soothing and always delightful to play. wondering which jumper best represents me as an individual and going back and forth between two shades of dark brown hair. When that's done, I decide to call my farm 'Cherry Blossom Farm' except I miss out the M and accidentally call it Cherry Blosso Farm. I don't know how to change it and now everyone who meets me is going to think I'm a moron. Frustration sets in.

I also feel a little bad taking all of this land from my grandfather at the beginning of the game. Like, did we have any kind of relationship? Did



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

I sit on his knee as a child and ask him to tell me stories from wartime or whatever? I feel like my youthful entitlement and millennial greed are what really killed him. I glance

at a book my mum got me for Christmas, Women Who Think Too Much, and sigh.

I quickly fall in love with the game. My farm is cute despite the rampant destruction, and I like my little wooden house and its selection of soft furnishings. I mean,

there is that weird mayor who leaves messages outside my house late at night, but every town has its resident creeper I suppose. The farm itself is a mess, but that's okay. I find that cracking rocks and cutting down annoying foliage is oddly satisfying, especially with the little swishy sound effects that accompany each action.

That night, however, I wake up with a hammering pulse. I realise that this farm is an overgrown paradise

and I'm bending it to my own whims! It's so typical of humans to corrupt the natural landscape. I confess my worries to a friend the next day. "You're overthinking this," she says. "Shut up," I reply, bookmarking my place in Women Who Think Too Much.

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

Fortune's favour

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

Growing vegetables and foraging out in the forest is also the perfect pastime for a foodie like me. If only there were a crossover between Stardew Valley and Overcooked where I could make an array of meals with all my veg. I spend so much time fantasising about this that 12 game hours pass and I realise that I'm standing in someone's garden in middle of the night like a freak.

I love my farm so much I end up spending all my time there. I know we're supposed to visit the locals but everyone skeeves me out a bit. I keep expecting a twist where it turns out everyone's in a *Wicker Man*-esque cult and I'll be burnt during a May Day festival – I mean, have you noticed everyone is a super babe in this game? Maybe they've discovered the gift of eternal youth and beauty?

I miss all of their birthdays and am quite sure everyone hates me. Whatevs. I'm that cute but weird recluse, just like in real life. Wait, wasn't this game supposed to be about escapism? I blink at the screen solemnly and decide to plant some more strawberry seeds before dark.



OXIM EXPLORES

PUBLISHER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS / DEVELOPER BETHESDA SOFTWORKS / RELEASE DATES 2002-2013



From gleaming glades to smouldering ruins, Tamriel will satisfy every adventurous urge. Here are 12 breathtaking spots from the Elder Scrolls games to help you tell your Hammerfalls from your Vvardenfells MATTELLIOTT



Castle Volkihar The Sea of Ghosts

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim This bleak structure is hidden in The Sea of Ghosts, and you can live here if you side with the Volkihar Clan in Skyrim's Dawnguard expansion. It's got everything a discerning vampire could want, including a blacksmith, a kitchen, platters of fresh human flesh and a dungeon crammed with imprisoned vampire cattle. Perfect for a large midnight snack.

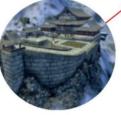


Bard's Leap Summit, The Reach, Skyrim

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
The first thing any right-minded
person thinks when staring up at Skyrim's mountains is . which bits can I jump off?' This bit. There's a winding trail to the top of the waterfall, made slightly more stressful by the presence of Forsworn and Hagravens. Make the leap without shattering your bones, and you'll be met by the ghost of the bard Azzadal, who was less successful in his attempt

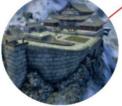






Eldergleam Sanctuary, Skyrim e Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion After visiting all those

castles, mountains and bustling cities, Eldergleam Sanctuary is a great place to come and reflect in the glory of nature. At least, it is once you've killed the angry Spriggans who protect the sanctuary. It's also the only place in Skyrim you can pick a fight with a tree, if that's how you choose to live your life.

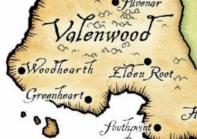


Cloud Ruler Temple, Cyrodiil

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion This mountain retreat is the home of the Blades, a secret order dedicated to protecting the Emperor. It's worth a visit, if only to understand exactly what's wrong with their strategy: 1) Secret orders shouldn't live in castles: 2) It's located miles away from where the Emperor lives;

3) There's only about nine people in the order. No wonder he died.







Throat of the World, Skyrim

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

It's the highest mountain in all of Skyrim, and the seat of the High Hrothgar - an ancient monastery and home of the Greybeard order. In order to get there you have to climb the Seven Thousand Steps: a twisting staircase cut into the side of the mountain (which actually only has 748 steps, despite Todd Howard promising he'd count them).

Whiterun



Arkved's Tower, Cyrodiil

On the outside, it looks like any other tower - white stone, leafy surroundings - but inside is one of the best quests in Oblivion. It starts quite sedately, but then the place begins to manifest as the eternal nightmare of a wizard who stole the Orb of Vaermina: upside-down rooms, giant dining halls, and shadowy voids full of hanging bodies.

olstheim



Ald'ruhn, Vvardenfell

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind Ald'ruhn is a town in Morrowind and the council seat of House Redoran, one of the five Great Houses of the Dark Elves. It's built in the Redoran style, which means that every structure resembles a crustacean. The manor district is even contained within the massive, hollowed out body of a giant crab, because the only thing vorse than imagining a giant crab is living inside one.



Red Mountain, Vvardenfell

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowing

It's not so much a red mountain as a huge, definitely-evil volcano, and the source of everything bad in Morrowind. It's contained within a glowing, mystical wall called the Ghostgate, which keeps blighted creatures inside (except when it doesn't). It's also the location of *Morrowind's* finale, during which the Nerevarine stabs a giant, throbbing god-heart with a magic blade. Honestly. Check the wiki



Shrine of Azura, Vvardenfell

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowing

There's a Shrine of Azura in every Elder Scrolls game, and they usually come with a quest that will bag you Azura's Star - a powerful, reusable soul gem. And while the quest in Skyrim is probably the most enjoyable, the statue in Morrowind is especially beautiful; sat on the south west coast of Vvardenfell, staring out over the sea.



Mournhold, Morrowind

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind

Mournhold was the capital city of Morrowind, and the setting of the Tribunal DLC. Continuing with the god-bothering theme established in the core game, you visit Mournhold and end up murdering its celestial patron, Almalexia. According to the lore, the city is sacked by Argonians later in the timeline and Morrowind's capital is moved to Blacklight. It's still being rebuilt around the time Skyrim takes place.



A Strange Door, Cyrodiil Scrolls IV: 0

lournhold

This is a map of Tamriel, so technically we can't include the Shivering Isles, which is secretly the best bit in Oblivion. Instead, here's the doorway that leads to the realm of Sheogorath, the Daedric Prince of Madness. If you head south of here towards Leyawiin you can also find his shrine, which will unlock the bizarre and wonderful Wabbajack weapon.



White-Gold Tower, Cyrodiil

The Elder Scrolls IV: Obl

The standout structure in Oblivion is White-Gold Tower. It's a slender, commanding building, built by a lost Elven race called Ayleids, and is where the catastrophic events of the fourth game reach their climax. It also bears a resemblance to Saruman's tower in Lord Of The Rings, which is why we're nicknaming it 'The Milkybar Orthanc'.







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

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



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

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

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

choice of setting and array

of characters makes it the

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

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

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

Culture clash

NAME

CHANGE

Bully name.

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

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

The school is divided into different factions. You have the '80s movie-style nerds,

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

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





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



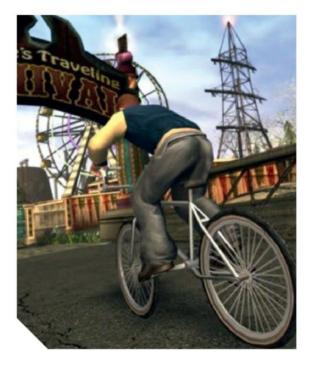


→ where bullies always get their just desserts, or where posh kids get their houses egged for being dicks. The teenagers at Bullworth are a mixture of the ruthless, the overly sincere, the incredibly mean and the bafflingly insecure - they're real teenagers, basically. But it's all played for laughs.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

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

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

Completing lessons gets you extra abilities or items. Science unlocks firecrackers, which can knock out a student or prefect (Bullworth's version of the secret police), as well as itching powder and stink bombs. If GCSE Science lessons had taught me



vile gym teacher, Mr Burton, is taking a poo inside. It's not exactly shooting a blimp down from the Los Santos skyline with a rocket launcher, is it? Bully is just a riot - the way the setting opens up keeps the missions varied, and it benefits from being significantly shorter than any GTA.

Slippin' Jimmy

Jimmy is also a solid underdog protagonist. You want him to triumph over Bullworth's elite because he's underestimated by everyone around him, including his mum and the school's self-important principal, Dr Crabblesnitch. But a more interesting presence in Bully is that of Gary, a paranoid sociopath who Jimmy meets early on and later becomes the story's main villain as he tries to take over the school. Gary constantly undermines the confidence of Petey, a timid kid in your dorm, and he gets an obvious kick out of causing fights between

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

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

such things, I'd have done more than stare at a wall for years. Collectively, it feels like you're actually a student living a year at school, which shouldn't be nearly as enjoyable.

There are plenty of reminders you're a kid rather than a typical game hero. You get detention for misbehaving (note: don't shoot potatoes at small children), and in a sweet touch, Jimmy has to go to bed by 2AM or he falls asleep on the spot. The most illegal thing you can do in Bully is drive a scooter into someone, or knock over a portable toilet while the particularly

the school's different factions. He frequently taunts Jimmy, and when he asks Gary what his problem is, he responds with, "ADD, primarily, but also life, my parents, this school, Western civilisation..." He's a brilliantly written and acted creation. Gary is on the fringe of the school's social strata, and while he loves being the arbiter of chaos, he does so by manipulating other people (including Jimmy, initially) into getting their hands dirty on his behalf.

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

The secret to Bully's success, I think, is that it's surprisingly warm and sincere - you'll find moments like that in Rockstar's games, but they're

further reading

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



SLEEPING DOGS

In this open-world game set in Hong Kong, you can explore the vibrant setting at your leisure and look at all of the delicious food.



SAINTS AND SINNERS **SAINTS ROW IV**

Become a superhero and

the president in the best of Volition's goofball series, which has a self-aware, silly tone.



MAD MAX

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



usually fleeting, like John Marston's interactions with his family in *Red Dead Redemption*, or Trevor and Michael's rare moments of genuine friendship peppered throughout their exhausting antagonism in *GTA V. Bully* is only ever cheeky rather than cruel. No one dies. The only stakes are getting expelled, or being forced to cut the grass after school (which is still a bit lame, I'll admit).

Teen dreams

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

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



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

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

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

up with for what is the most offbeat game of Rockstar's back catalogue.

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



WHY LOVE... BASTION'S NARRATOR



A silver-tongued storyteller, a reactive companion and an understated narrative lynchpin all smartly bundled together in one distinguished parcel JAMES NOUCH

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS / DEVELOPER SUPERGIANT GAMES / FORMAT XBOX 360, XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE JULY 2011

We talk to Greg Kasavin, writer and designer for Supergiant Games, about Bastion's concept art

- 1 "These are early concepts of Rucks by Huy Dinh, who contributed to Bastion in its early days before art director Jen Zee joined the team."
- 2 "These are Rucks' concepts by Jen Zee, who created all the character and environment art You can see how the character evolved to take on her distinctive style, but the overall idea of a mysterious old caretaker (with a luxurious moustache) remained intact."
- 3 "This is the final in-game character asset. It's a 2D illustration to match the style of The Kid (who technically is also 2D in the game but created from a 3D animated model, based on Jen's concept)."





Supergiant's action RPG doesn't open on a pre-rendered cutscene or a wall of introductory text. Instead, it opens on a black

screen and a sonorous voice. "Proper story's supposed to start at the beginning," it rasps. "Ain't so simple with this one." As the dulcet tones of this mysterious narrator fade from your speakers, the image of a young man lying on a threadbare bed creeps into focus. And then... nothing happens. The Kid just lies there, motionless, until you push on the analogue stick and he drowsily clambers to his feet. The narrator chimes in again: "He gets up."

It was at this moment during my first playthrough of Bastion that I cocked a quizzical eyebrow at my screen. Did the narrator just react to something I did? At the time, I wasn't sure, but I very soon would be. Because Bastion's narrator isn't just some simplistic storyteller or a hokey conveyor of lore he's a reactive character that will offer commentary, guidance and context to your actions within this world.

Perhaps the most famous example of this gruff raconteur at work can be triggered within minutes of firing up the game for the first time. Roused from your slumber and confronted with a ruined world, you steer The details of Rucks' The Kid from his bed on character are only hinted at in the main game, to the game's critical but he is the subject path, picking up your of Bastion's DLC, The trusty hammer as you go. Stranger's Dream. And, when you stumble into a clearing covered in

breakable boxes, you probably do

what most gamers would: smash 'em.

But your destructive tendencies don't go unnoticed. "The Kid just rages for a while," breathes the narrator. It's a simple line that does a lot of heavylifting. First, it works to recontextualise your videogame-y habit of smashing crates in search of collectables, turning a flatly utilitarian action into a moment of role-playing character development. Your workmanlike hunt for currency is suddenly reimagined as a passionate outburst, a violent

And, once you reach The Bastion - which stands as the one remaining sanctuary in this dead world - you'll get to meet the man behind those

tantrum in the face of oblivion.



"The team was adamant that the narrator should never repeat himself and never interrupt himself"

treacly pipes. Although he's initially introduced as The Stranger, you'll soon discover that his name is actually Rucks, and while his enigmatic dialogue doesn't give much away, his character design provides all sorts of hints towards Rucks'

STRANGER

THINGS

role within this gameworld. Both Rucks and The Kid wear red bandanas and carry cog insignia, for instance, and the two men have the same colour hair and eyes, too...



ABOVE Logan Cunningham, who provides the voice of the Bastion narrator.

A proper story

But for all of the narrative intrigue that his presence throws up, Rucks impresses most thoroughly on a technical level, and a little context into the character's creation only makes Supergiant's achievement more remarkable. As the debut product of a small independent studio, Bastion was not a big-budget affair with clearly defined job roles. As such, composer Darren Korb was also tasked with recording the game's voicework, and he asked his thespian roommate Logan Cunningham if he'd be interested in the part. Rather than hiring an expensive recording studio, Korb set up a microphone in a closet, and Cunningham would deliver his lines into the blank back wall of a cupboard.



Korb proved a demanding taskmaster, too, asking Cunningham to perform take after take to ensure that every single sentence had exactly the emphasis, inflection and tone that he was looking for. By the time Korb's recording sessions were complete, he had more than 3,000 lines of narrator dialogue for the team to implement in-game, and it's this vast catalogue of informative interjections, interesting asides and contextual comments that give the illusion of intelligence to the narrator's nattering.

While all that might seem frictionless in the final product, it was far from an easy goal to realise, and writing a system that would retrieve and play these audio files at the appropriate time proved a significant engineering challenge - doubly so, given that the team was adamant that Rucks. should never repeat himself and never interrupt himself. Making this faintly mad ambition a reality required two of Supergiant's finest to sit down and hand-script all of those 3,000 or more lines of dialogue. It took quite some time.

But the result isn't just impressive or immersive - it's very much delightfully un-gamey, too, and it's only when you're confronted with a companion that never loops lines of dialogue or cuts out mid-sentence that you realise just how accustomed you are to making concessions for NPC eccentricities. Every time Rucks crops up to provide background on your surroundings or fill you in on Caelondia's feisty fauna, it only adds to the sense that Bastion is a game that pays attention to your actions. Plenty of games may feature silver-tongued storytellers and eloquent speakers, but Bastion is one of the very few that appears to listen back.

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





15

LYDIA – THE ELDER SCROLLS

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





14 POTATO GLADOS -

I love GLaDOS, and I love potatoes. The former is witty, cruel, sassy and sarcastic; the latter tastes nice with salt. Maybe a little bit of paprika. My point is this: Potato GLaDOS is the best thing to happen to both the psychopathic AI and tubers, because it gives the former a sense of pathos that allows you to understand some of her motivations and feelings. There's also something thrilling about your former enemy becoming a reluctant companion, especially as she's stuck inside a potato and can't do anything about it. Maybe 2017 can be the year we get more vegetable companions.

13

NAIEE & NAIA – BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

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



12 CLAPTRAP – BORDERLANDS

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





11

ELIZABETH – BIOSHOCK INFINITE

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

10 DORIAN – DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

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



extra

09

ROACH - THE WITCHER

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





GARRUS – MASS

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

07

ALYX VANCE – HALF-LIFE 2

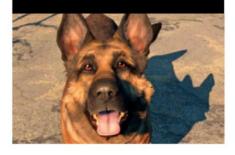
Gordon Freeman must be a hard man to be friends with. He doesn't say anything, and though that might make him a good listener, it makes him terrible at almost everything else. What do you want for dinner, Gords? Nothing? Okay. Where should we go on holiday, G-Dog? Nowhere? Cool. His righthand woman Alyx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



06

DOGMEAT - FALLOUT

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





05

DOG - FABLE II

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

04

CORTANA

Cortana: the companion so good Microsoft put her inside your Xbox One. She's the Siri of your heart. I could yell, "Hey Cortana" in the office right now and it would probably... do nothing, but it might make people think about why Cortana is such a great character (after I've been told off for being disruptive). She's helpful like System Shock's Shodan, but thankfully less homicidal; she's caring like a mum, but less disappointed in you; she's sort of sometimes in love with you, like the robot lady in Flubber, but less creepy. It's all we've ever wanted from a best friend-slash-mentor-slash-computer.



03

KAZOOIE – BANJO-KAZOOIE

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



02 HANCOCK – FALLOUT 4

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



WEIGHTED COMPANION CUBE – PORTAL

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







Games, films and television – everything you need for the ultimate Xbox One experience

THE TEN BEST XBOX ONE GAMES

games

01

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO



Hearts Of Stone and Blood And Wine have made an already outstanding RPG unmissable. One of the most authentic, entertaining game worlds ever.

DEFINING MOMENT Geralt at a wedding; cue hilarity, menace and light jigging.

02

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES



Brutal and beautiful in equal measures, GTA V is so rich in size, scope and spectacle it's hard to believe it was originally built for Xbox 360.

DEFINING MOMENT Warping into the skin of Trevor – only to find he's drunk-driving a helicopter.

03

DARK SOULS III

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO



Get over the initial difficulty hump and you're rewarded with a combat system that gives you unparalleled opportunities to express yourself.

DEFINING MOMENT Taking down a monstrosity the size of a state school using reflexes and ingenuity alone.

0^{2}

BATTLEFIELD 1

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS



Alongside a surprisingly affecting single-player campaign comes one of the most robust and satisfying multiplayer offerings on Xbox One. Brave and unforgettable.

DEFINING MOMENT Your first, last-ditch bayonet-charge kill. Have it.

05

OVERWATCH

PUBLISHER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT



PUBLISHER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT
Blizzard decides to have a go at
making a multiplayer shooter and
somehow ends up creating one of
the best since Team Fortress 2. Just
beginner's luck? We doubt it.

DEFINING MOMENT Getting your first
Play of the Game!

Play of the Game

06

TITANFALL 2

PUBLISHER RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT



PUBLISHER RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT
This sequel to the ace (but multiplayeronly) game compensates with arguably
one of the best solo FPS campaigns
ever. It's a wall-running, doublejumping, mech-punching delight.

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

N7

DISHONORED 2

PUBLISHER ARKANE STUDIOS



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

()8

GEARS OF WAR 4

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS



A soft reboot that respects what made Gears great, then introduces new threats and surprises for the best game since GOW 2. An essential entry for Gear-heads and newcomers alike.

DEFINING MOMENT Fighting Swarm in the storm during the peaks of Act 4.

INSIDE

PUBLISHER PLAYDEAD



In this eerie, enigmatic side-scroller, a small boy must survive a strange world of robots, puppet-people and worst of all: adults. Discover what happened to his world while trying to survive.

DEFINING MOMENT When our hero finds a head device that can control people.

10

HITMAN

PUBLISHER IO INTERACTIVE



10's flashy reboot adds mystery and menace to Hitman's bag of tricks. Each episode takes place in a different city, and each hit is more challenging. Easily the best Hitman game yet.

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

→ READ THE FULL XBOX ONE REVIEWS AT GAMESRADAR.COM/OXM

THE BEST FILMS AND TV IN MARCH

films



GREEN ROOM

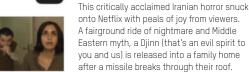
FOR FANS OF Blue Ruin, slasher films





UNDER THE SHADOW

FOR FANS OF Old-fashioned horror





EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT

FOR FANS OF International cinema





VICTORIA

FOR FANS OF Art-house cinema, Berlin

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



KNIGHT OF CUPS

FOR FANS OF Terrence Malick, artsy drama

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



A BIGGER SPLASH

FOR FANS OF Tilda Swinton

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

television



THE OA

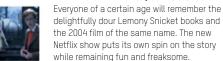
FOR FANS OF Stranger Things, Twin Peaks

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



A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

FOR FANS OF Tim Burton, Gothic stories





SENSE8

FOR FANS OF Heroes, the Wachowskis

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



TAB00

FOR FANS OF Peaky Blinders, bloody violence

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



SHERLOCK S4

FOR FANS OF Anything with Benedict C

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



Z: THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

FOR FANS OF The swinging '20s

bo w ta

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



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



Matt's choice OVERWATCH This month I tried to finally finish Doom, Deus Ex:

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





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

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





choice OVERCOOKED This month, I introduced my housemates to

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



ightarrow FOR MORE FILM AND TV REVIEWS, VISIT GAMESRADAR.COM

the disc slot

They make the games we love, but what do they play for fun? We ask developers to pick thier faves from Xbox history. This month: Harvey Smith





P Harvey Smith
Creative director
on Dishonored 2
Although he's best
known today for his
work on supernatural
stealth-em-up
Dishonored and its
superlative sequel,
Smith also served as
lead designer on the
original Deus Ex. All
that, and excellent
hair to hoot



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



[1]

ightarrow LOVE THIS ISSUE? THE NEXT ONE WILL BE WAITING FOR YOU ON 10 MARCH





