

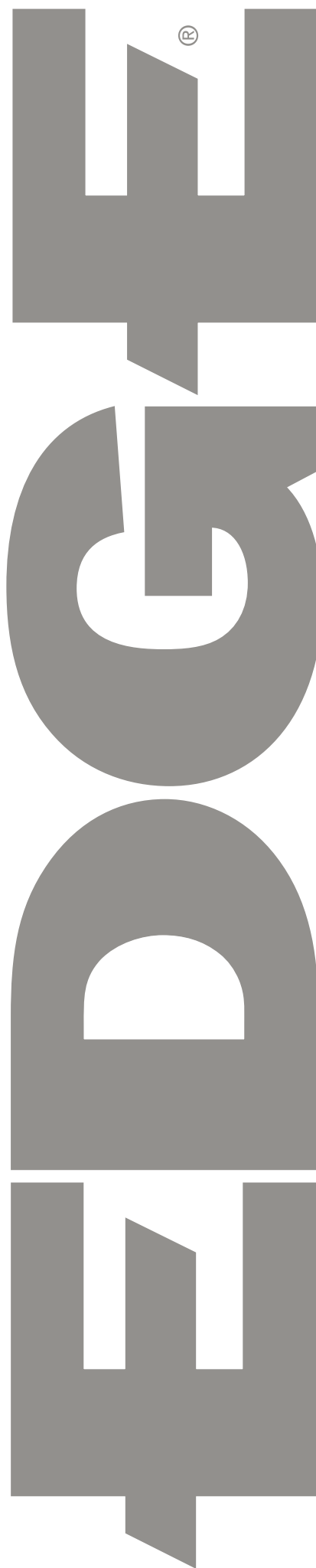
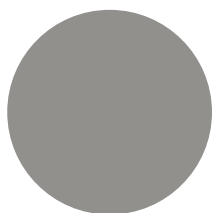
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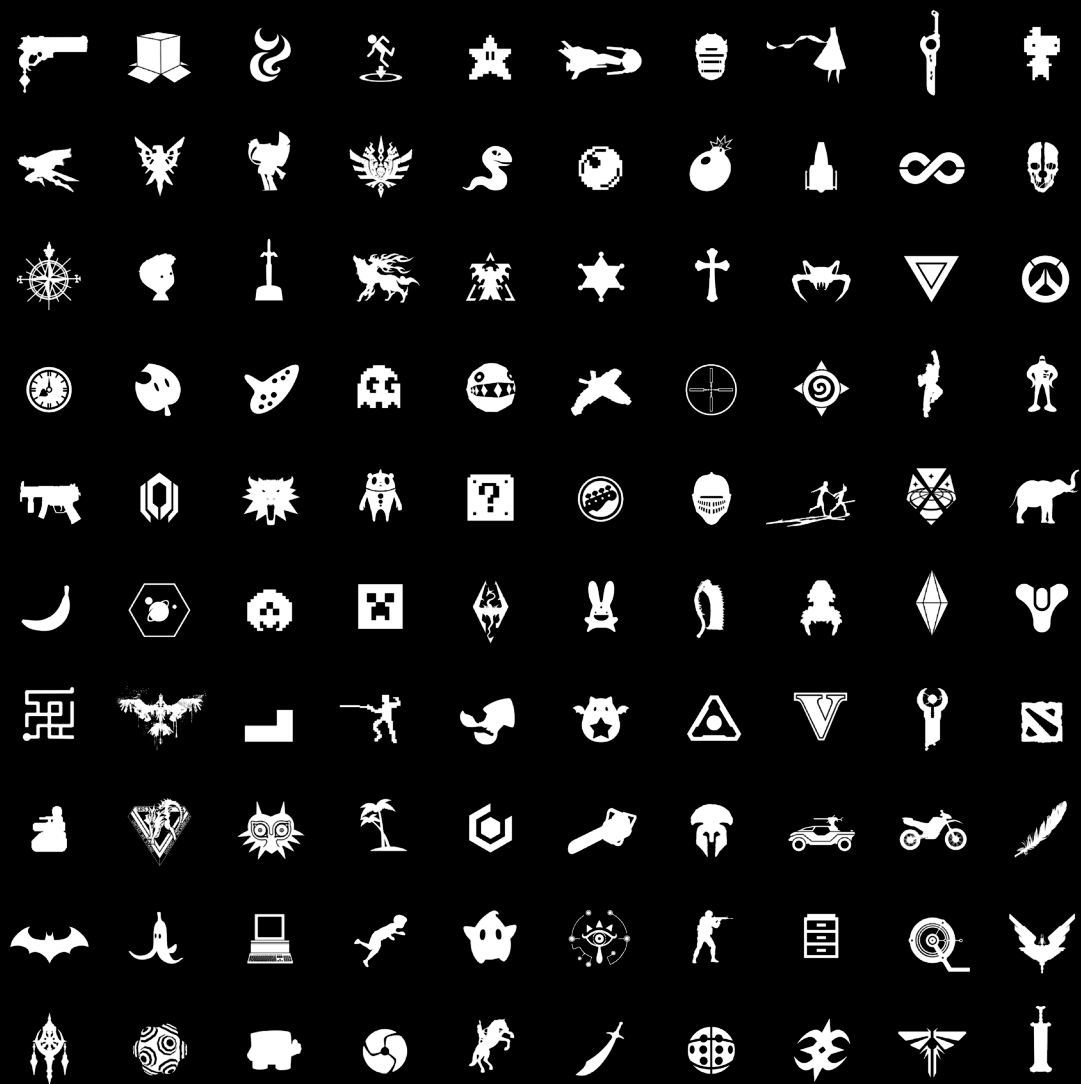
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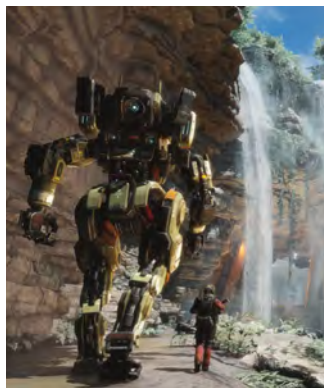
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OF MODERN CLASSICS
2017 EDITION

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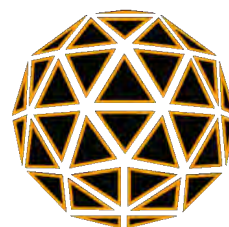
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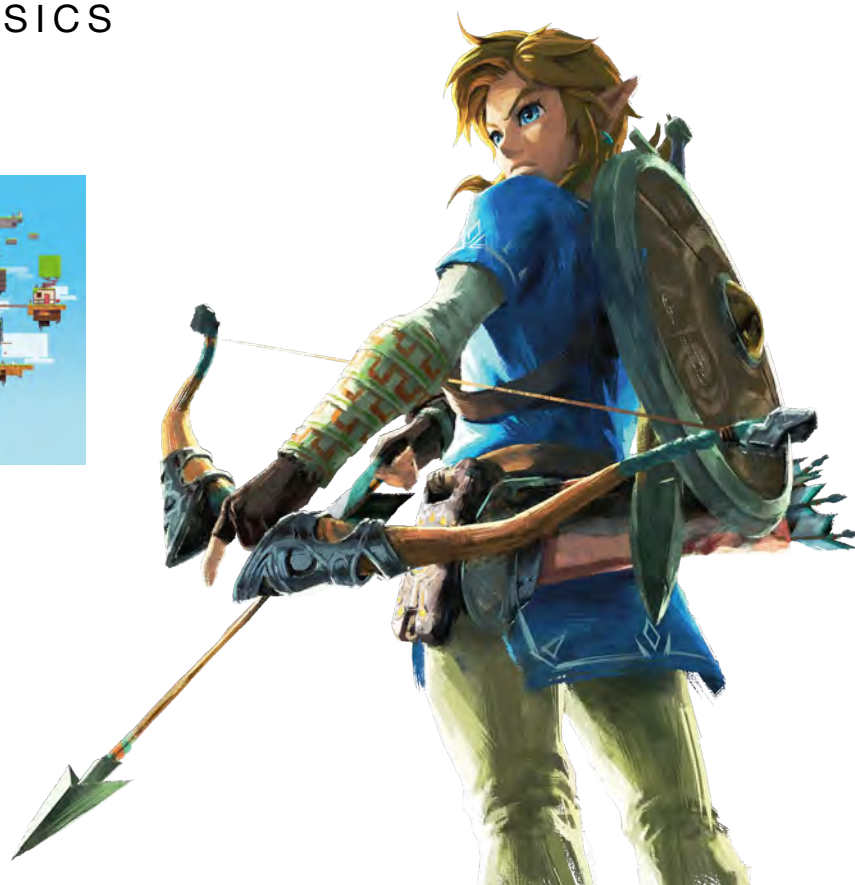




the 100 greatest videogames



THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION
OF MODERN CLASSICS
2017 EDITION



the 100 greatest videogames

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intro

Welcome to the 2017 edition of The 100 Greatest Videogames. If you're not familiar with the format, here are our rules. In compiling this list, we worked to simple criteria: all formats – portable, touchscreen, console, PC, whatever – were eligible; we could include only a single entry from any series that features straight-up sequels; and each game had to stand up today rather than making the cut for reasons of nostalgia or historic significance.

Not all of the games featured here are new, however. In fact, some of the most invigorating parts of the curation process involved pulling out and replaying a number of the most seasoned titles from the **Edge** archives. Hopefully this much-argued-over collection will inspire you in the same way.



contents



ADVANCE WARS	<u>162</u>	EARTHBOUND	<u>74</u>	KATAMARI DAMACY	<u>20</u>
ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF	<u>22</u>	ELITE DANGEROUS	<u>34</u>	KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM	<u>140</u>
BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT	<u>76</u>	FAR CRY 4	<u>98</u>	LEAGUE OF LEGENDS	<u>50</u>
BATTLEFIELD 4	<u>62</u>	FEZ	<u>108</u>	LIMBO	<u>70</u>
BAYONETTA 2	<u>184</u>	FINAL FANTASY XII	<u>14</u>	MARIO KART 8 DELUXE	<u>166</u>
BIOSHOCK	<u>42</u>	FIRE EMBLEM FATES	<u>124</u>	MASS EFFECT 2	<u>86</u>
BLOODBORNE	<u>198</u>	FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT – ADVANCED EDITION	<u>82</u>	METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN	<u>170</u>
BOMBERMAN	<u>36</u>	F-ZERO GX	<u>28</u>	METROID PRIME	<u>64</u>
CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE	<u>44</u>	GRAND THEFT AUTO V	<u>202</u>	MINECRAFT	<u>186</u>
CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT	<u>68</u>	HALF-LIFE 2	<u>196</u>	MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE	<u>94</u>
CIVILIZATION IV	<u>60</u>	HALO 3	<u>130</u>	NIDHOGG	<u>106</u>
COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE	<u>58</u>	HEARTHSTONE: HEROES OF WARCRAFT	<u>66</u>	OKAMI	<u>88</u>
DARK SOULS	<u>204</u>	HER STORY	<u>10</u>	OUTRUN 2006: COAST 2 COAST	<u>56</u>
DEAD SPACE	<u>116</u>	HORIZON ZERO DAWN	<u>160</u>	OVERWATCH	<u>110</u>
DEMON'S SOULS	<u>158</u>	HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER	<u>18</u>	PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION	<u>40</u>
DESTINY	<u>136</u>	ICO	<u>154</u>	PERSONA 4 GOLDEN	<u>84</u>
DISHONORED	<u>142</u>	INSIDE	<u>126</u>		
DOOM	<u>102</u>	JOURNEY	<u>114</u>		
DOTA 2	<u>118</u>				





PORTAL	<u>182</u>
PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME	<u>16</u>
PUYO PUYO	<u>80</u>
PUZZLE & DRAGONS	<u>46</u>
PUZZLE BOBBLE	<u>26</u>
RED DEAD REDEMPTION	<u>178</u>
RESIDENT EVIL 4	<u>188</u>
RESOGUN	<u>24</u>
REZ INFINITE	<u>172</u>
ROCK BAND 3	<u>148</u>
R-TYPE FINAL	<u>32</u>
SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS	<u>128</u>
SPELUNKY HD	<u>134</u>
SPLATOON	<u>144</u>
STARCRRAFT II	<u>38</u>
SUPER HEXAGON	<u>8</u>
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD	<u>112</u>
SUPER MARIO 64	<u>180</u>
SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2	<u>192</u>
SUPER MARIO MAKER	<u>122</u>

SUPER MARIO WORLD	<u>176</u>
SUPER MEAT BOY	<u>52</u>
SUPER METROID	<u>156</u>
SUPER MONKEY BALL	<u>12</u>
TEARAWAY	<u>48</u>
TETRIS	<u>194</u>
THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM	<u>152</u>
THE LAST GUARDIAN	<u>150</u>
THE LAST OF US	<u>200</u>
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST	<u>138</u>
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD	<u>206</u>
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK	<u>132</u>
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME	<u>190</u>
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER	<u>146</u>
THE SIMS 3	<u>30</u>
THE STANLEY PARABLE	<u>90</u>

THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT	<u>96</u>
THE WITNESS	<u>164</u>
TITANFALL 2	<u>100</u>
TOWERFALL ASCENSION	<u>72</u>
TRANSISTOR	<u>78</u>
TRIALS FUSION	<u>104</u>
ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV	<u>168</u>
UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END	<u>174</u>
VANQUISH	<u>120</u>
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN	<u>92</u>
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES	<u>54</u>



Format Android, iOS, Mac, PC Publisher/developer Terry Cavanagh Release 2012



Super Hexagon

Super Hexagon is something of a poster child, alongside *Dark Souls* and *Spelunky*, for the sadistic brutality with which some game designers gleefully approach their task. Of course, if a game were impossible it'd be no fun at all; the key to testing players' limits is positioning the challenge just far enough from impossible to remain satisfying and keep them hooked.

Super Hexagon accomplishes this with unnerving, hypnotic precision. The premise couldn't be more reductive: rotate a tiny triangle around a morphing shape (occasionally a square or pentagon, but more often a hexagon) in the centre of the screen so that it fits through gaps in the encroaching walls, which move inexorably, and ever more rapidly, towards you.

The game makes its intentions known from the off by labelling the easiest of its difficulty levels 'Hard'. Two more, Harder and Hardest, must be bested before a further three tiers of terror are unleashed. The aesthetic is stark, pairing muted two-tone backgrounds with simple pulsing lines that change colour like particularly gaudy stage lighting. The look serves to underscore the unforgiving challenge while at the same time ensuring that the screen is as uncluttered as possible — essential given how fast everything moves.

Your score for each level is simply how long you managed to survive, and it's sobering to find even five seconds dauntingly out of reach on your first few tries. It takes roughly 1.5 seconds for the first wall to reach you, and your

early games won't end much farther along than that. As you begin to sync with the game's rhythm, however, it becomes clear that focusing on your avatar — as so many games have trained players to do — is a surefire route to rapid failure. There's no time to wait until after you clear one obstacle to start thinking about the next; you need to focus on the edge of the screen and plan well ahead.

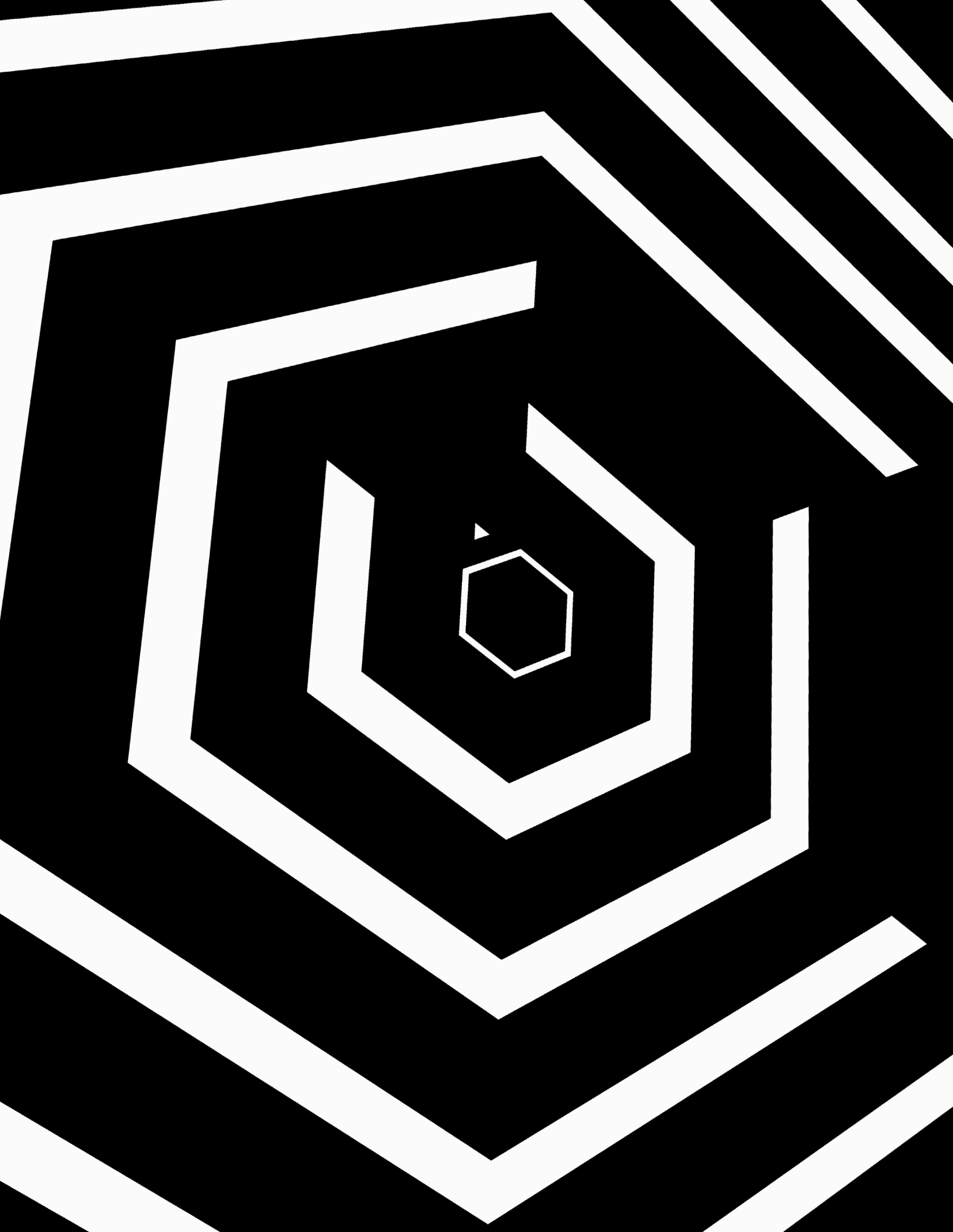
As you begin to eke out an additional hundredth of a second or two with each successive run, the game digs in and refuses to let go. And its one-more-go nature is bolstered by some smart design touches. The fact that each time you restart the colour changes, for example, or the sheer speed with which you can be in the action again after failing. Then there's the brilliant decision to pick up the music exactly where you left off with each retry, a crafty psychological trick that lessens the sense of lost progress. But more important than any of this is the use of procedurally stacked predesigned segments which spark waves of recognition-driven relief and the ability to learn useful manoeuvres even as the levels come at you in a semi-random order.

For a game of such modest construction, *Super Hexagon*'s onslaught is partnered with surprisingly refined handling as your triangle luxuriously swoops left and right, gracefully arcing through spiral pathways and deftly avoiding the edges of contracting shapes. When it goes well, at least.

The relentless pacing of the game is matched by an aggressive soundtrack by London-based chiptune musician Chipzel (who has no shortage of experience in videogame-related audio, having created much of her work using Game Boys). The arrival of each wave of obstacles is matched to the thumping beat, offering a faint helping hand in avoiding disaster.

Super Hexagon was a key game in defining the potential of iOS, a format eyed with suspicion by core players for so many years, and delivers a fast-paced challenge that rivals the best twitch experiences available on consoles. Touchscreen controls, it turns out, needn't equal a dumbed-down or imprecise interface and, handled well, are more than capable of delivering feedback as vivid as any clicking button. The game didn't start its life on iOS, however, and was adapted from a game created by Terry Cavanagh for a 12-hour game jam.

It's fitting then that the game took on a life of its own as a spectator sport, attracting huge crowds at specially arranged events that threw the trance-inducing action up onto big screens and allowed rookies and the uninitiated to marvel at the seemingly impossible prescience of expert players. Watching someone skilfully threading their way through the most difficult levels is on par with witnessing the best bullet-hell runs. There are plenty of astonishing efforts on YouTube, too, and trawling through them is as moreish as playing the game for yourself.





Her Story

Making detective games

is hard. Not games that merely feature crime — all those need do is recognise the repercussions of the dead bodies, wantonness and pilfered valuables that are more often simply the aftermath of the mainstay activities in your standard interactive power fantasy. No, games that seek to turn you into the investigator have to do something almost unthinkable in an industry where every prop is turned by an expensive artist, every quip and line is scribbled by a slightly less expensive writer, and every scene is made under the watchful orchestration of a very expensive director: they have to let you miss things. In fact, perversely, they have to actively hide things from you. A true detective game can't even afford itself the luxury of signposting all the wonderful bits that have been made at great expense that, sure, you're missing out on now, but you could go back to later. That defeats the whole purpose. And it's why so many have failed. To make this genre really work, the game has to let you to figure it all out for yourself.

Sam Barlow's *Her Story* is in this list because it does precisely that. You decide exactly how much of its tale you're going to imbibe before you make up your mind about its central mystery. It even offers you an out potentially hours before you've seen all the video clips that deliver, drip by drip, the fragments of information that fill in this captivating case and the associated backstory. Even should you choose — choose — to root out

every second of that footage, you'll still be left questioning certain facets of the facts presented. You may play the game with a screen before your eyes, but an essential, irreducible part of the computing is going on in the synapses you carry around with you every day. That's a rare and beautiful thing.

And the trick Barlow pulls to do this is simplicity itself: employ the verb set of the search engine. Here's how it works. Seven police interviews from 1994 are split up into over 200 separate chunks and then hidden behind the entry field of the LOGIC database. There's only one rule, one limit to gamify the whole process, which is that you will be served only the first five clips to match your terms. And yet that goes to show how potent a rule can be, for it takes what would otherwise be a rudimentary process of watching a chronologically scrambled narrative and transforms it into a procedure of investigation, seeking out the next suitably distinct string in exactly the same way you might scour a crime scene for the merest hint of a clue. Some words will lead to dead ends — little pockets of '90s miscellanea, perhaps — that seldom feel like wasted effort but terminate a promising line of enquiry. Others will take you to the seconds of footage that entirely scramble your working theories with brand-new information, upending your fragile understanding of the forces and motives at play here.

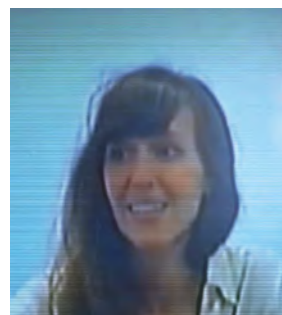
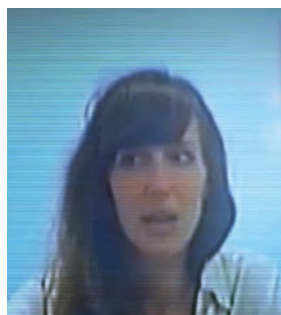
That alone would be remarkable enough. However, all this is

achieved with a form of videogame long thought cursed to bear the stench of failed Hollywood aspirations and a black mark in the history books: full-motion video. That it avoids such failure is down to several factors, but the most important two are the performance of actress (and musician in another life) Viva Seifert, and exemplary framing.

Being the only performer onscreen, Seifert is left to conjure not only a convincing inner life for her interviewee but also allusions and relationships enough with the invisible cast beyond the interrogation room walls to prevent the story collapsing inwards on itself. She does so capably under intense limitations.

The rest is up to Barlow, who dresses the game up in period fashion — everything from the detail work in the lo-fidelity desktop icons, which arouse recollections of Windows 95's school of interface design, right up to the encompassing protrusions of a fake CRT screen. In this throwback interface and the cramped framing of the camera lens, he presents *Her Story*'s footage not as misguided vanity, nor as a miserly alternative to CGI, but as a voyeuristic peep into a process the common man is not meant to be privy to, with all the gravitational pull of the forbidden.

It's just one more reason to be attracted to an unconventional game that tugs on threads few others dare to unravel, and has already proven that while making detective games is hard, the result can amply justify the effort.



Format GC Publisher/developer Sega Release 2001



Super Monkey Ball

There was one question on everyone's lips when *Super Monkey Ball* was announced for Nintendo's GameCube: how much fun would it be to mess around with Sega's monkey balls without a plastic banana in your hands? Because before it appeared on the console — signalling the start of Sega's post-hardware era — *Monkey Ball* had existed in an arcade cabinet controlled by an almost erotically upright banana-shaped joystick.

Overseen by Toshihiro Nagoshi, *Super Monkey Ball* was a GameCube launch title, and it encapsulated the inclusive philosophy of Nintendo's box of fun — in many ways, it anticipated the all-audience gaming ethos of its successor. In the absence of the coin-op's banana, the GameCube version is controlled with an analogue stick, and the underlying concept is simple: tilt a maze to steer a ball around it, getting from start to finish within a certain time limit. Except it has monkeys in the balls, and sheer drops into a brightly coloured abyss awaiting unwary primate pilots.

Nagoshi's newly formed Amusement Vision studio took this simple concept and polished it to within an inch of its monkey life. The hundred-odd mazes in the game are depicted with an incredible solidity, matched by an amazingly precise physics engine and wrapped in one of videogame history's most vibrant colour schemes (camouflaging a witty piece of in-game advertising — for Dole Food Company bananas). In terms of presentation, everything about *Super Monkey*

Ball is flawless. There's the classic videogame 'ching!' when you roll a ball into a banana, for example (collect 100 and you get an extra life, obviously). And there is the game's family of simian stars: AiAi, MeeMee, GonGon, and Baby (the smallest, and therefore the one most widely used by experts).

There is the pixel-perfect learning curve you'd expect from a game devised to part arcade-goers from their cash. From a set of ten simple mazes at the start, players graduate by the end of the game to some of the most vexing conundrums in videogaming. Initial simple layouts give way to increasingly rococo structures: wire-thin tendrils snaking around and up and over and under, across underwater environments, lush jungles and urban skies. One particularly advanced maze even assumes the shape of a guitar. And completing those later mazes demands an almost superhuman conjunction of skill and intellect.

Indeed it is only a select few who would manage to get as far as the end of the 50 Expert levels without breaking at least one controller. But *Monkey Ball* fans are an indefatigable lot. Or at least that's how it appears from the insane feats of virtuosity that continued to be posted across the Internet years after the game's release, depicting all sorts of speed runs, stunts and exploits that have required a rare kind of dedication to hone. These are tricks that demand the utmost accuracy and expertise: freefalling onto the thinnest of platforms or bouncing across tiny moving tiles.

Indeed, if *Super Monkey Ball* had stuck to that one thing — just tilting mazes and getting monkeys in balls from point A to point B within increasingly demanding time limits — then it would be a classic game, because it does that thing with unparalleled dexterity and charm. But it also throws in a clutch of minigames starring monkeys in balls, most of which are as entertaining as the main game, and some of which could easily have been developed into complete games in their own right.

Take *Monkey Race*, for example, in which players race around circuits picking up powerups. Apart from the limited number of race circuits, it is every bit as good as the eventual GameCube version of *Super Mario Kart*. Or consider *Monkey Target*, which brings back fond memories of *PilotWings* by transforming monkeys in balls into monkeys in gliders, to be steered and finessed onto distant targets featuring dartboard-style scoring divisions. *Monkey Billiards*, *Monkey Fight*, *Monkey Bowling* and *Monkey Golf* make up the rest of the unlockable suite, and each is a minor treasure (and *Monkey Target* a party classic). Brilliantly, the game even turns its credits sequence into a satisfyingly serene banana-collecting challenge.

Which is a pretty resounding answer: improbably, messing around with Sega's monkey balls without a plastic banana in your hands is even more entertaining. It's classic trance-inducing, flawlessly flow-state gaming. With monkeys in balls.



Format PS2 Publisher/developer Square Enix Release 2006



Final Fantasy XII

Sequels are normally

dilutions of the originals, and it's usually only the trashiest films that go beyond three, squeezing every last drop out of their franchises. *Final Fantasy XII*'s greatest achievement is in eschewing the cumbersome history behind it.

The staples of the RPG genre have been set in stone since the earliest *Dragon Quest* games: the litany of turn-based battles, menu commands and dark forces to use them against. *FFXII* casts them aside like so much bathwater while holding on to the potions, spells and fantastical characters that made the genre appealing in the first place. Battles happen without transition to a separate screen, while spiderwebs of coloured lines let you track at a glance what each individual character is doing. But the greatest innovation in the interface is the gambit system.

Gambits are conditions the player sets that will trigger actions when they're fulfilled. Your character could attack the party leader's target, for example, but if an ally's health drops below 50 per cent it will stop and cast a cure spell. On the face of it, this may seem to offer little beyond the usual — after all, the speed of attacks is dictated by a time bar, as always, and you'll find yourself bringing up the menu for very specific commands. But once enough gambits have been collected (you start with only the bare minimum) you can fashion a party tailored to respond to any given situation or enemy type in a specific and appropriate manner, quickly exploiting weaknesses and

dropping foes in a fraction of the time of a menu battle. The pace and flow of the entire experience is enhanced, and all of those pointless interruptions removed.

The revitalisation of RPG combat is complete with the chain system, proof that simple ideas are always the best, whereby killing many of the same type of enemy in a row will gradually improve the quality of the items they drop. The natural structure of the game means that ten- or 20-chain kills crop up on occasion, but when you deliberately gain a 40+ chain it becomes a matter of urgency to keep it going and find just one or two more of that particular skeleton or cockatrice.

As is true of many RPGs, the narrative of *FFXII*'s quest may be overwrought at times, particularly in the brick-subtle delineations of interpersonal relationships, but there's no denying that it's stirring stuff, and the pacing of the game is such that the grinding of levelling up just to defeat a particular boss is rarely necessary. The game remains challenging, however, and the key lies in appreciating that its combat is tailored for teamwork, MMO-style, rather than brute force.

Also MMO-like, travelling and exploration are some of the biggest joys in the adventure, and will take you from Dalmasca, a conquered kingdom and the home of the game's main character, Vaan, to the far reaches of the huge gameworld by foot, chocobo and airship.

FFXII also offers you the opportunity to hunt particular

enemies (and eventually join a hunters' clan), opening up bigger and better 'marks' as your own skills increase. Rarely have sidequests been so distinct from, yet utterly integral to the appeal of, a main adventure. There is the obvious appeal of exploring new locations, and occasionally revisiting old haunts, but the addiction comes from the rewards: sizeable amounts of cash (in a world where monsters themselves don't drop any) and very often rare or expensive items. Hunting a big mark is a focused way to suitably level and equip your party for a particularly arduous section, and quickly becomes as compulsive as the adventure proper.

Visually, *FFXII* pushed at boundaries on PS2. Importantly, it's in the environments and characters that it shines, not just the spectacular cutscenes. Bosses shake the screen with roars, colours explode from spells, and each battle animation has a grace of its own. From the Mediterranean architecture to the beads in characters' hair, this is a game of beauty and depth.

It has been said that *FFXII* cost Yatsumi Matsuno, the original director, both his mental and physical health. We'll never know. But the care that has gone into the crafting of even the incidentals is obvious. With *Final Fantasy XII*, Square Enix incorporated everything that ever made JRPGs great, and fixed almost everything that made them frustrating. As both an innovator and a refiner, it's the high point of a remarkable series.





Format GC, PC, PS2, Xbox Publisher/developer Ubisoft Release 2003



Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time

It's a thoroughly modern game, in most ways. It's slick, seamless, forgiving, possessed of a sharp cinematic eye and sly narrative sophistication. It was a game utterly of its time in 2003, maybe even slightly ahead of it. But none of this is what makes *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* stand out. What makes this such an unusual and spellbinding game is its sense of nostalgia.

It's not necessarily nostalgia for the original *Prince Of Persia*. *The Sands Of Time* pays faithful tribute to Jordan Mechner's austere 1989 classic, presenting a romantic hero in the Arabian Nights mode and focusing on smoothly animated, acrobatic negotiation of platforms and traps. But despite featuring the original as an unlockable secret, it doesn't overtly trade on the reputation of the old game. Its nostalgia is multi-layered and emotive, and defiantly non-retro.

For a start, *The Sands Of Time* remembers that, once upon a time, there were games about running and jumping. It deliberately harks back to a golden age of platformers – a genre that, by 2003, through interminable cross-breeding and feature-creep, had mutated almost out of existence. All-purpose action adventures, thirdperson shooters and collect 'em ups with strictly limited platforming elements stood in the place of the pure assault course; *The Sands Of Time* brought it back. Interrupted only by flamboyant combat (far less frequently than its sequels), here was a game whose absolute *raison d'être* was to use timing, the environment and the Prince's

acrobatic abilities to get from A to a seemingly impossible B. Here was a game in which you'd need to grapple with 3D spatial puzzles and turn the sinister machinations of vast devices to your advantage. Here was a game about that heart-in-mouth moment of pitching yourself towards the edge of a bottomless precipice, leaping, and praying; about the deep, hypnotic thrill of stringing together move after fluid move until it seemed you were turning the world around your character, not the other way around. It recalls no lesser a great than *Super Mario 64*.

And yet, it's not a backward-looking game; ironically, it's the Dagger of Time and its ability to rewind events that takes care of that. It wouldn't be *Prince Of Persia* – nor as tense as it is – if it didn't punish falls severely and present plenty of genuinely death-defying leaps. But it would be far, far more frustrating if not for the simple, devastating genius of that limited rewind button, offering an out from the instant-death scenarios that were a large part of why platformers fell out of favour in the first place. Go back, do it again, do it right. That's what you do, and that's what Ubisoft's in-house Montreal studio did.

The Sands Of Time is also a throwback in other ways. It offers a chance to play the swashbuckling lead of a 1930s film romp or boys' adventure book, a dashing, impetuous hero with a clipped accent and a lithe figure. And you get to play him in a genuine romance: there's a love interest – a love scene, even; there's a script

rich with banter and pathos; and there's a setting of ridiculously dreamy beauty, dripping with sensuous architecture, lush vegetation and softly diffused, bronze light. *The Sands Of Time's* unabashed, old-fashioned romanticism has always been extremely rare in games, and in these cynical times is often quite rare outside them; it's a major reason for the game being such a breath of fresh air.

There's one last sense in which *The Sands Of Time* lives in the past: its story does. The past-tense narration by the Prince himself – cutely embellished with a “No, it didn't happen like that” when you die – reinforces the storybook feel and strikes an uncommon note in the relentlessly immediate, present-tense world of videogames. But it's also more than just an atmospheric conceit. It turns out to be a crucial element of the plot and its preoccupation with time travel. The game takes you right up to the point at which the Prince is telling the story you've just played – to whom, and exactly where and when, we won't spoil here. It ends the game on a wholly satisfying if slightly melancholy note, as wistful and theatrical as all that's gone before.

Though the story itself is more cliché than classic, *The Sands Of Time's* cunning framing blends interactive and narrative with all the deft grace of one of the Prince's gravity-defying wall runs. It's a 'once upon a time' of a game, a self-contained time capsule of far away and long ago. And it's a tale that definitely bears retelling.





Format PC, Mac, PS4, Xbox One Publisher Heart Machine Developer In-house Release 2016



Hyper Light Drifter

It was, in the end, almost two years late. The estimated delivery time on *Hyper Light Drifter's* crowdfunding campaign said June 2014; on the last day of March 2016, the PC version made its belated debut. In a sense, it was a victim of its own success: by the time its run on Kickstarter had ended, a modest \$27,000 budget had swelled to \$650,000, enough to recruit Rich 'Disasterpeace' Vreeland for the game's soundtrack and to hire more designers and artists to expand and enrich its world.

There was another complicating factor. Director Alex Preston's ongoing health issues ensured it was never really likely to hit that deadline, but Preston had already begun to channel his problems into the game itself. It's there in every aspect: from the eponymous Drifter's frequent bloody coughing fits to the way he struggles back to his feet after falling in battle, to the dark, diseased world and its halting, irregular pulse. It's apparent, too, in the arduous challenges he faces, ranging from trap-filled warrens to claustrophobic encounters against multiple hard-hitting opponents.

This is an intensely personal experience, and that extends to its myriad influences. It draws most clearly from Preston's love of the early top-down *Zelda* games in its absence of handholding and the way its environment design provokes an intoxicating sensation of curiosity and trepidation. And in its art direction there are clear echoes of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä Of The Valley Of The*

Wind, and also apocalyptic anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

It's an exceptional piece of world-building, revealing a little but suggesting much more, allowing you the room to work out how its disparate pieces fit together, and why this beautiful setting ended up in ruin. For some, the slender narrative may be too oblique for its own good, but it contributes to a sense of finding yourself down the rabbit hole, thrilled by every small discovery even when its significance may be unclear. It's a place you come to understand in a broad but tangible sense, and if some details remain elusive, that's a small price to pay for such complete absorption.

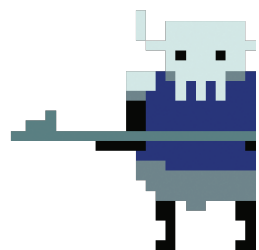
Truthfully, we'd expected something more meditative, with a focus on thoughtful exploration and enjoying the ambience of such a distinctive world. There's still plenty of that, but *Hyper Light Drifter* doesn't yield its secrets without a fight. Its combat demands intense concentration and precision, as you circle around enclosed spaces, quickly calculating the most potent threats before dispatching them with your gun and sword.

Your ranged weapon is the least risky option, but its ammunition is limited, forcing you to switch to your blade to replenish rounds. You can't rely on mashing buttons to pull off elaborate combinations; instead, you'll need to wait for the right time to pull off a surgical strike, before retreating out of harm's way. It's forgiving enough to revive you outside the entrance

of the last room in which you fell, but such is the level of challenge that the feeling of relief and satisfaction at having survived a particularly onerous battle is all the more acute. That's particularly true of the boss fights, where, with one or two exceptions, the difficulty peaks; the sense of weary triumph as you scrape through with a single, blinking block of health may well be the closest ludic equivalent to its creator's personal struggle.

Elsewhere, it upholds genre traditions, with pressure plates and levers, spikes and pitfalls, mysterious runes and arcane script, and doors that rumble open only once you've located a given number of artefacts. Yet there's a freshness in their presentation; the visual signifiers of a nearby treasure are often very subtle, and some of the world's mysteries require much more effort than usual to tease out. Some of the Drifter's most potent unlockable abilities are optional, and require exhaustive probing to find. The map's seeming uselessness might explain how the game retains its sense of mystery even once the final boss has been vanquished: however patient and thorough you are, you'll be certain there's more to be discovered.

You might never feel like you're quite finished with it, and yet *Hyper Light Drifter's* vision feels astonishingly complete: focused and purposeful, with barely a pixel out of place. If reaching that point was the trade-off for a two-year delay, then the result proves that the wait was worth it.







Katamari Damacy

You can summarise how *Katamari Damacy* plays in a single sentence: you roll a sticky ball around, picking up objects to make the ball bigger, which in turn allows it to pick up even larger objects. But to sum up *Katamari*'s playfulness needs several hundred words of postscript. For a game to swell so sweetly and remain so affecting based purely on its tone and art direction – surely *Katamari Damacy* has done little but hypnotise a jaded audience into overlooking the shallowness that fuels it? No. It simply taps into an oft-unacknowledged strength of videogames, that of sheer aesthetic joy, and its straightforward rules of play allow its other elements room to breathe deeply. If videogames are ever medicine, then *Katamari Damacy* will always manage to keep the doctor away.

It's a game that's very much alive, a Pinocchio that dances into life the moment its strings are cut and the PS2 switched on. The game's theme tune in a cappella form accompanies the appearance of the Namco logo, and a save slot is selected not with a pointer but with a katamari ball itself. From there, you're launched into an intravenous fizzy drink of an attract sequence: ducks sing, pandas dance, volcanoes spew rainbows, and a suppository-headed giant plays the guitar, as the incessantly catchy "Naaaa na-na-na" of the game's signature chorus begins to hook you right to the bone. Not so much an introduction as an induction, nothing is made clear during this

technicolour AV assault, apart from establishing *Katamari*'s philosophy – it doesn't have to make sense for it be entertaining.

The scattily charming King of All Cosmos has been on a careless drunken bender and knocked the stars from the sky. And it's down to you, the diminutive and hard-working Prince, to replace them, by rolling adhesive katamari balls around a series of domestic, suburban and urban locations, to form increasingly large bundles of objects that'll replace the contents of the night sky. Beginning with erasers, batteries and drawing pins, fodder for the katamari evolves ultimately to the point that the tower blocks of whole cities, dwarfed by the Prince's astral wrecking ball, are scooped up like bowling pins into the shovel of a JCB.

This incredible sensation of scale is just part of the fascination behind the process. As is a lawless but inarguably ideal soundtrack composed of delightful pop tunes and cute instrumentals. Another is the audio feedback – dozens and dozens of artefacts are absorbed into the katamari with a series of pleasing pops, like stamping on damp bubble wrap; once people, vehicles and animals become victims, each adds its own stylised sound effect to the cacophony of destruction-cum-creation. Visually, it's a game full of reality, but little realism, the recognisable contents of its world rendered with minimal texture but maximum character. Returning to an area that was once filled with hazards, now plump enough to

suck them all up with a cackle, is the ultimate revenge; watching a playground full of children and teachers scatter in exaggerated, pantomime terror as the katamari looms towards them is guilty amusement indeed.

As with any worthwhile fairytale construction, there's a murky heart to *Katamari Damacy*. Like gaming's most successfully child-like creations – *Chibi-Robo!*, say – it contains more stress and darkness than first appears. The Prince is, effectively, a rampant destroyer of worlds, however candy-coated the destruction. And few things are as chilling as failing to meet the target size of a given stage and suffering the wrath of a pissed-off King of All Cosmos. None of that stops *Katamari Damacy* being fun as all hell, but it's difficult not to want to savour it as a straightforwardly colourful lesson in how little things can become very big things, in your head as much as on the screen.

In terms of less tenuous impact, though, *Katamari Damacy* is the kind of experience that does more than encourage fringe demographics to pick up a joypad; it also engages parts of them that most other software can't reach. Many games can coax players into dressing up like a certain character and posing with a cardboard sword, change their avatar in a forum profile to show their affection, or even brand their skin with a tattoo. But very few can singularly inspire them to make tea cosies, cakes, replica katamaris, elaborate re-enactments, phone pouches, woolly hats and dolls.





Format 3DS Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 2012



Animal Crossing: New Leaf

Katsuya Eguchi designed

N64 title *Animal Forest* as a way to cope with his loneliness in a new job away from friends and family. The result hit perhaps closer to home than he'd imagined. Ostensibly a warm, happy game about making new friends and learning their idiosyncrasies, it also captured that strange mix of nervous excitement, unease and melancholia that can accompany a big move. In any game, the unfamiliar steadily becomes routine and you find your way in this new world, but always with a certain degree of detachment. You walk among the animals, but you're never really one of them.

As such, that slight distance that always made you feel one stage removed from your villagers feels all the more natural in *New Leaf* when, thanks to an admin error, you're quickly coerced into assuming the role of their new mayor. They'll still tell you their secrets, engage you in small talk and ask you for favours, but you're afforded a degree of respect that encourages you to earn your stripes. It gives *New Leaf* a greater sense of purpose and forward momentum than the more easy-going prior entries, as you're gently nudged towards more altruistic goals. One animal might request you to install a bridge, the next a bench or hammock, and while you're still free to ignore suggestions you receive, you'll feel a little more guilty about pursuing any more materialistic aims. That basement extension might just have to wait: if Puddles the pink

frog wants a fountain, it's time to start saving those pennies.

With the help of Isabelle, your adorably dorky assistant, you'll be able to set ordinances that allow you to tailor the game to your own needs. The series has always had a way of inveigling its way into your life — most *Animal Crossing* players will surely admit to having missed appointments or delayed outings to tend to their village — but these edicts allow you to better fit your virtual vocation around your actual job. An Early Bird town means animals should be up and about in time for breakfast, while those who work long hours will benefit from turning their villagers into night owls, with stores staying open for late-night shopping. Alternatively, you can have stores carry more premium items, or if you're not one for pulling weeds, issuing the Beautiful Town ordinance will prompt villagers to plant more flowers and tend to existing ones.

Elsewhere, it offers a steadier drip feed of discoveries. During those early weeks, it's rare to wake up inside your *New Leaf* village and not stumble across something new. Many series staples — Brewster's coffee house, KK Slider's weekly concerts — aren't available until you've earned them, but it's hard to mind when you're more empowered than ever to shape the future of your village. An initially sparse main street provides the most palpable evidence of progression, as it develops over weeks and months into a lively hub. *New Leaf* is a more social animal, too, with more

ways to connect with friends and strangers, to share décor tips via StreetPass, or slip into a dream and venture to faraway villages. The GameCube island resort makes a return, too, hosting a suite of multiplayer minigames.

More of the same is rarely to be celebrated in a sequel, but the many subtle changes have a way of shaking up the routine. And somehow it manages to make a virtue of the mundane. You can enjoy a busman's holiday playing barista in The Roost and it's a rare thrill when you memorise the coffee order of your regulars. Similarly, there's genuine joy in outfoxing shady art dealer Redd — who now carries sculptures and statues alongside his knockoff paintings — by spotting the minor visual differences between his fakes and the real thing.

More to do, of course, means more to think about: a game designed to be played a little each day can easily become an obsession. Some players will spend hours fishing in torrential rain for a chance to hook a rare coelacanth; others will book a slot to shake down and bag up exotic cherries from their orchard for a return that might just pay off Tom Nook's extortionate building fees. If at times these tasks feel a little like work, they're a more pleasant kind of chore in a much fairer world, one in which your efforts are almost always rewarded in some tangible way. As with its predecessors, the experience of playing *New Leaf* leaves you wondering why real life can't be this magical, this generous.







Resogun

Housemarque's shooter

history stretches back to the mid '90s, when members of Terramarque and Bloodhouse founded the studio. Since then the Finnish developer has prolifically turned out slick, arcade-influenced action, but it is its PS4 game *Resogun* that represents the pinnacle of the studio's achievements to date.

It was also the saviour of PS4's undercooked launch lineup, melding a fresh spin on classic gameplay with entrancing voxel-based presentation. Stages, enemies and your ship are made up of thousands of the cuboid building blocks, every one primed to erupt into a gorgeous cascade of debris if it gets even a whiff of a nearby explosion. It looks unlike any other shooter, but the sheer volume of shrapnel sets it apart visually from most games in any other genre you can think of, too.

None of this beauty comes at the cost of framerate, though, and the game whips along happily at 60fps, the action only occasionally slowing to linger on the dazzling pyrotechnics. Ship handling feels just right, your craft exhibiting a kind of truncated inertia that manages to strike an unwavering balance between butter-smooth movement and hair's-breadth twitch accuracy. Enemies pop in a satisfyingly violent way, and the upgrade path of your primary weapon takes you from floundering vulnerability to neon-spewing death-dealer in minutes.

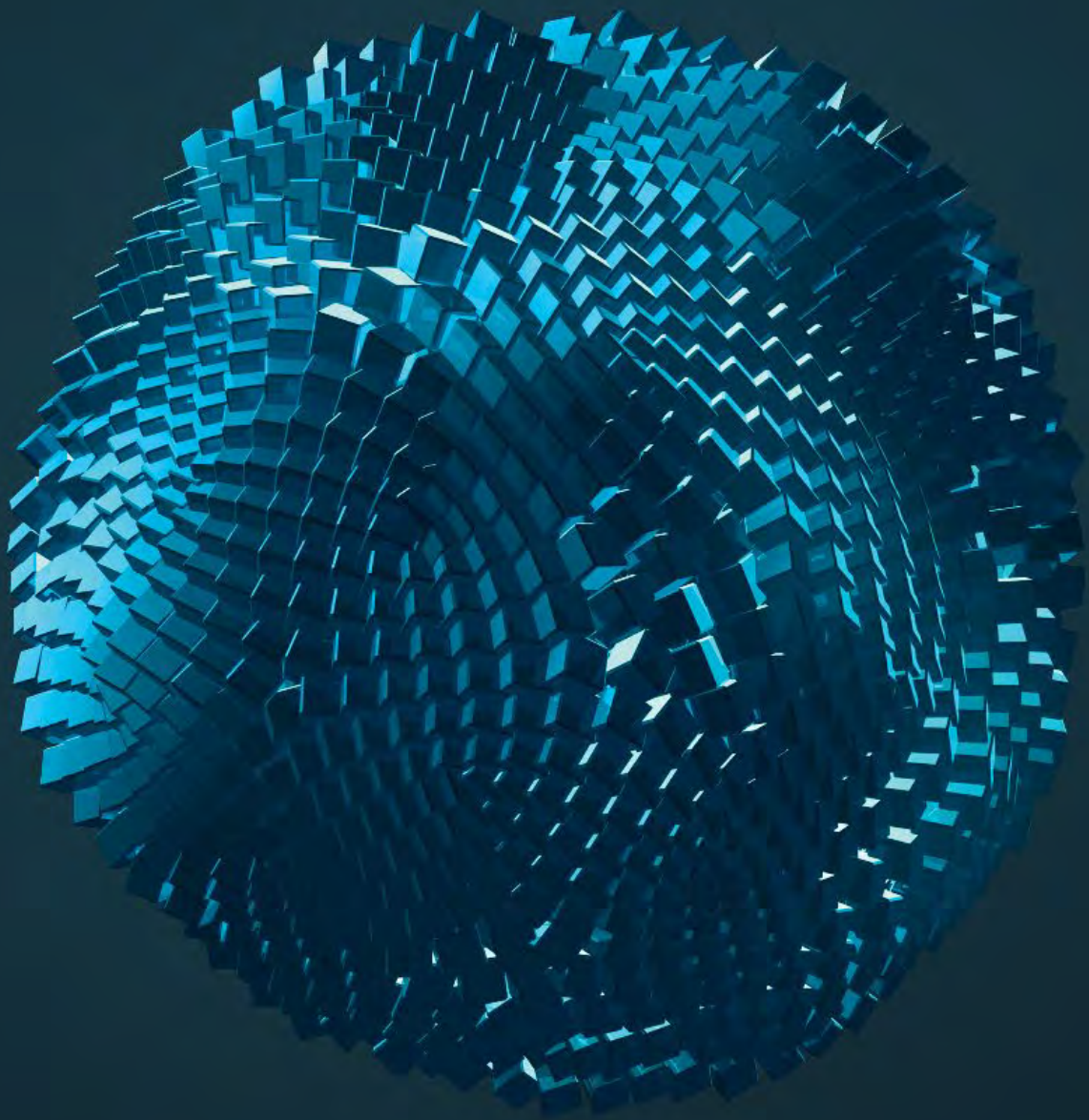
But for all its willingness to cheerfully embrace players,

Resogun is also a surprisingly enigmatic game — especially given that it belongs to a genre built on instantly understood controls and short, moreish gameplay loops. Its refusal to yield its depths straight away left it rather misunderstood when it was released. It doesn't help that the game wilfully, and regularly, instructs you to "save the last humans", despite that being the least important aspect of getting a high score. And then there are the three ship types, which at first appear to be slight variants on the same core idea but actually function as a kind of secondary difficulty tier — the Nemesis and its barrage of homing missiles best suited to beginner players while, at the other end of the scale, the expert-level Phobos sacrifices range and spread for close-quarters brute force. The game doesn't tell you, but you won't be troubling the high end of the leaderboards in anything but the latter.

It all comes down to the beautifully conceived additional abilities of your ship. Each can boost, deploy bombs, toss humans a short distance (depending on how fast you're travelling at the moment of release), and go into Overdrive to fire a hugely powerful, time-limited laser beam. It's the last of these that will rack up the big numbers. A small circle appears around your ship when you squeeze the trigger, while a larger one shrinks inward: let go at any point while the shrinking halo is within the circumference of the static one — but *before* it reaches the ship — and you'll

unleash a huge blast wave that destroys everything around you. Since the number of points you get rises with each consecutive enemy destroyed, these Overdrive outbursts are key to wiping out large groups quickly and racking up the big points. You charge your beam, slowly, by collecting glowing green particles from fallen enemies, and hits during Overdrive will slightly increase the duration of the weapon; figuring out when to deploy them and which waves of enemies will reap the greatest reward becomes an all-consuming obsession as you better understand the intricacies of the game.

This gradually unfurling depth, all of it hidden in plain sight, is a large part of what makes *Resogun* so special. Sure, save the humans if you can (and, yes, doing so will proffer perks such as shields and a Human Saviour Bonus at the end of the stage), but absolutely nothing should come above maintaining your multiplier. Leave too large a gap between shooting one enemy and the next, and it will reset to 1.0x. Picking up and rescuing humans also keeps the combo going, helpfully, but while the death of a survivor will trigger a pang of guilt, a seasoned player will shrug it off easily compared to the crushing moment you lose your multiplier. If you're going for a high score, you might as well restart there and then, because there's no coming back from it. *Resogun's* continual urgency and genre-defying depth elevate it from an excellent shooter to a magnificent one.



Format Various Publisher/developer Taito Release 1994



Puzzle Bobble

By 1994, years after *Tetris*, *Columns* and *Breakout* first ensnared a generation of obsessive-compulsive tidy-uppers, it was unthinkable that a new line-clearing puzzle game could take the arcade scene by storm. The early '90s had been a time of gentle refinement for the genre, the only real development being in their increasingly savvy marketing. Nintendo's heavyweight branding of titles such as *Dr Mario* (1990) and *Yoshi's Cookie* (1992) had demonstrated the benefits of attaching recognisable characters to these more abstract game worlds, and other companies were digging around their back catalogues in search of suitable faces to front their ideas.

But when Taito chose to cast the relative unknowns Bub and Bob, twin dinosaurs borrowed from the company's ageing *Bubble Bobble* series, as the cutesy heroes in its tardy stab at the genre, it seemed too little too late. Visually as well as notionally, *Puzzle Bobble*, often known as *Bust A Move* outside Japan, does little to stand out from the crowd. Candy-like blobs of garish colour set on sparse, muted backdrops frame a game that, while undeniably distinct in action, at first appears to do little more than amalgamate previous inventions. But in reality its triumph is down to this pick-and-mix approach to game design and the various skills required of the player – from planning and strategy to timing and accuracy.

In synopsis, play is wonderfully straightforward, requiring just left,

right, and a single fire button. At the base of the screen Bub (green) and Bob (blue) together control a vertically aligned harpoon gun, which can be pitched from side to side across a 180-degree arc. The aim of the game, literally, is to shoot sticky coloured bubbles up the screen, bouncing them off the sidewalls if required, into a frogspawn cluster of other bubbles hanging from the ceiling. Linking together three or more like-coloured bubbles makes them vanish, taking any 'hangers' (bubbles dangling otherwise unattached from the bottom of the matched cluster) with them for high scores.

While you play against the clock, the ceiling of the play area adds considerable pressure by lowering after every few shots. With each drop the music, some of arcade gaming's most perfectly memorable, speeds up with gathering urgency. If a bubble crosses the line at the foot of the screen under which Bub and Bob operate their cannon, the game freezes and discolours to a disheartening end.

In the first level a dotted guideline traces the aim of your harpoon, taking much of the difficulty out of the aiming while making tricky off-the-wall shots simple. However, from there on in you're on your own, and you quickly settle into an enjoyable but pressured rhythm of making tiny incremental taps of the joystick to line up the perfect shot, taking a prayerful intake of breath before stabbing the fire button to execute the micro-plan.

By making clever arrangements at the top of the screen it's possible to set up high-scoring chains, and the visceral way in which lines explode is as satisfying as popping bubble wrap. Every cause-and-effect cycle in play is eloquently soundtracked by excitable effects. The sharp stab of annoyance at having missed a crucial shot by a few pixels, leaving your missile awkwardly mismatched against wrong-coloured bubbles, is accompanied by a pitying twirl of musical disappointment. In a two-player match, such audio cues serve as aural points of reference for your opponent's progress.

The singleplayer game presents a series of puzzle-like levels, each offering a set of carefully arranged bubble patterns to take out. It's in the exquisite head-to-head setup, though, that the game comes into its own. Here, in traditional *Tetris* style, every time a player bursts more than three bubbles in one go, the surplus is sent to the opponent's play area. It is possible for the tide of a battle to turn with just one misfire.

A hit in arcades, the game spawned numerous sequels across a variety of home platforms, ranging from Sega's Dreamcast to SNK's Neo Geo Pocket. With each new iteration the game grew more complex, but at its centre remains the hypnotic core that made the early arcade and Neo Geo iterations such durable multiplayer challenges. Rarely has a game so clearly derived from its precursors felt so fresh, or proved so timelessly engaging.





F-Zero GX

Nintendo may understand gameplay, but you sometimes have to look outside of the company's R&D labs to find developers that understand Nintendo.

HAL gave us *Super Smash Bros*'s unashamedly vibrant celebration of all things Nintendo. Intelligent Systems crafted the wryly self-referential *Mario & Luigi* twinset. And when Amusement Vision was tasked with updating Shigeru Miyamoto's futuristic racing franchise for GameCube, the result was *F-Zero GX*: a game clearly made for fans, by fans.

GX (and its arcade twin *AX*) is fiercely loyal to its older brothers. The craft, quaintly reminiscent of the low-poly pastel-hued models born of a previous generation's technology, handle as they did on Super Nintendo and N64. For beginners, it's a nightmare: taking corners too fast sees your craft dragged by its behind into a race-scuppering trackside smash. But with practice it's possible to steer in graceful arcs that keep just the right side of skidding out of control, boosting out of corners, thundering past competitors with neck-tightening precision. It's *Scalextric* at 1,200kph. No other racing game comes close to evoking such a breathtaking feeling of barely keeping control of a vehicle that's going far too fast.

Having 29 rivals all focused on smashing you off-course in anything but the beginner's Standard Mode turns *F-Zero GX* into a thrillingly anarchic motorway war. Your competitors cheat with magic boosts in traditional *F-Zero* style, of course,

but that's the secret of the game's pounding relentlessness. Where every second is a potential overtaking opportunity for your enemies, every race won is a victory for eyes and fingers. And each craft has a unique balance of speed versus acceleration versus barging strength — so no single machine is ever odds-on favourite.

The tracks are spectacular. N64's *F-Zero X* had scenery restricted to the odd 2D statue to keep the framerate up on the struggling 64bit machine, and couldn't help but look limp next to its perceived rival — the cooler-than-thou PlayStation offering, *Wipeout*. In *GX*, Amusement Vision tweaked its *Super Monkey Ball* engine to push GameCube harder even than Nintendo itself, and transform *F-Zero*'s abstract tarmac ribbons into real places. Now, Mute City is a city, all blazing bridges and ghostly glowing billboards. Port Town is a port — with, apropos of nothing, much-maligned NES accessory ROB the robot looming over the ships and hotels. Craft cling treacherously to tube-like tracks looping over lava; Casino Town's psychedelic neon whips past at 1,500kph; towering ramps send the craft soaring over Aeropolis like a synchronised diving team.

F-Zero GX's unforgiving difficulty is what won over the hardcore. Extreme Mode is, simply, impossible. The notorious Story Mode is a masochist's dream: a deceptively short nine-stage challenge where the very first race — a simple cliffside race against Samurai Goroh — is tuned

to chew up and spit out even a 99-per-cent-perfect performance. Victory often only comes in that 'introductory' challenge by managing to barge the near-invincible Goroh off the track to his death. But, with Amusement Vision determined to exploit the gift of the *F-Zero* franchise to the full, *GX* rewards persistence with a huge goodie bag of fan-focused extras. Pilot themes with lyrics; new ships; hundreds of craft parts for *Gran Turismo*-style customisation; staff ghosts.

Perhaps the strangest — and yet most satisfying — reward is Toshihiro Nagoshi's curious attempt to contextualise the *F-Zero* universe for the first time with cutscenes and story. It's somehow irresistible — eschewing the clumsy start-line posturing of so many other 'character-based' racers for glimpses of Captain Falcon wandering neon-lit streets and drinking in seedy bars, doing for *F-Zero* what the cantina scene did for *Star Wars*. The bizarre multiple-choice interviews with pilots that come at the end of cups are preposterous, but they somehow speak the language of Nintendo and *F-Zero*'s loyal fans.

The best futuristic racing game? Well, which other example lets you time the destruction of your craft to slide over the finish line as a smoking husk? *F-Zero GX* represents one of those rare moments in gaming history where technical ability, visuals, game design and — yes — unashamed love for Nintendo intertwine to create something that's extremely difficult to fault.





Format Mac, PC Publisher/developer EA Release 2009



The Sims 3

All management games have an element of fantasy to them, whether or not their players choose to indulge it. Creativity and resource management go hand in hand in *SimCity*, for example. When Will Wright mapped out the blueprint for *The Sims*, the game he had in mind was an extension of those ideas. In place of a city's municipal demands, players would deal with a modern person's hierarchy of needs. Creating a place you'd like to live in became curating a life you'd like to have. In hindsight it's perhaps obvious that this simple shift would expand the potential audience for the game far beyond what Maxis had reached before.

Not only did *The Sims* become one of the best-selling series of all time on PC, it has done a huge amount to expand and diversify the audience for gaming. Because while these are absolutely management games, they are also architecture tools, lifestyle sandboxes, and vehicles for a very particular fantasy. *The Sims 3* is representative of the series at its most comprehensive, embodying all of these different aspects of *The Sims* across the base game and its many, many expansions. *The Sims 4* may well eventually supplant it, but that sequel is still playing catch-up with its predecessor in many regards.

The Sims 3's major achievement was a sense of scale. You select a pre-made family or create your own (or simply create yourself), and use your starting cash to buy a house in one of several neighbourhoods. These are large

spaces, with town centres and suburban areas, parks and beaches. Or perhaps you instead buy a plot of land and spend your first hours with the game building a home from scratch: one of the keys to *The Sims 3*'s appeal is the way your creative options expand steadily from the moment you begin to play, without straying too far from a quicker or easier option.

And then you live, however you see fit. Meeting basic needs comes first, and perhaps entails a job, but your Sims' ambitions — as close as *The Sims 3* gets to an end goal — require you to do more than just subsist. Balancing tiredness, hunger and hygiene with social and career needs while also developing skills and a healthy bank balance is the plate-spinning act that sustains *The Sims 3* as a management game. Later expansions added adventures, quests and collectibles too, challenging players to use the tools they were given to hone Sims for a specific task. Were this the sum of *The Sims*' offering as a game, it'd be rather thin — a case of growing numbers to meet requirements, forever, to be regarded in the same light as timesink mobile city-builders.

The game is a toolkit first, however, and its powerful draw is always that the player is capable of setting their own objectives and working towards them instead. All games are aspirational in some sense, but *The Sims 3* is actively about aspiration. It's about real aspirations, too, or at least close analogies for them: love, money, stuff, homes, fame, success. *The*

Sims is set in a world of relatable successes and exaggerated failures: the happiness of cooking a good meal offset against the chance that you may find yourself abducted by aliens. It's a world where nobody gets really sick or really sad, where discomfort is an empty bar you're always able to fill with something else, but where success is always available. It's capitalism without the politics or danger, which arguably makes it dangerously political in its own way.

For all that EA has notoriously capitalised on that power, for every expansion and high-street-brand DLC pack, the spirit of innocent creativity and aspiration that draws so many people to *The Sims* has persisted. *The Sims* as a series gets away with charging so much because for many it's less a game, more a hobby: by investing in new stuff, players expand their ability to tell the stories they want to tell. This is, after all, a game about acquiring things; it follows that it'd survive a DLC programme structured in the same manner.

There's certainly an argument to be made against *The Sims* and the fantasy it allows you to indulge in — that it can be voyeuristic as well as vicarious. Yet there are also clear positives. *The Sims 3* is a game that allows you to experiment with a life entirely about achievement, about both the value and the scarcity of your time. Its lesson to players is that you can only do so much with the time available to you, and that the worst thing you can do is nothing. Or get electrocuted fixing the microwave.





Format PS2 Publisher/developer Irem Release 2003



R-Type Final

Even Irem, practically a genre boutique in the '90s, knew that, come the new millennium, the shooter was dead. But producer Kazuma Kujo knew something else: that *R-Type*, the series that arrived in 1987 with a slow fade and a rising theatrical chord, had to go out in style. Developed in secret for over a year (in-house, no less), *R-Type Final* was a delectable compromise: a shooter of unprecedented scope, published under the express condition that it had to be the last.

Just as well we're celebrating single moments of excellence rather than precedents or legacies, because *Final* is anything but a seminal shooter. It doesn't offer rebirth to a genre in decline, but glorious death. No sooner does it find a voice for the shooter — something more than just a visual language of bullet patterns and giant flashing 'DANGER' signs — than it speaks a sombre farewell.

Its title screen: the omnipotent Force, symbol of mankind's war against the Bydo Empire, abandoned to the sea. Its soundtrack: funereal, host to downbeat reprises of the old chip-tune anthems. Its weapons: overwhelming, designed for a job that more than a dozen previous games couldn't finish. The Bydo: dying, either fighting last-ditch battles or nursed by strange machines. One of the only games to acknowledge so explicitly the state of its own genre, *Final* labours with every ounce of its being, reducing even the scroll of its levels to a geriatric crawl. Make no mistake, as a tonal

work of art this rivals anything Team Ico may imagine.

But never does it use this as an excuse to be a bad scrolling shooter. It bears repeating: 101 allied ships, 78 enemies, 84 wave cannons and 53 Forces — numbers that, when introduced to Kujo's team, are said to have had him almost laughed out of the building. It's a terrifying proposition, not just in terms of production schedule but in end result as well. Overkill, after all, is poison to many a sequel and a sure route to bankruptcy for many a franchise. Only for this game could it equal a win-win scenario.

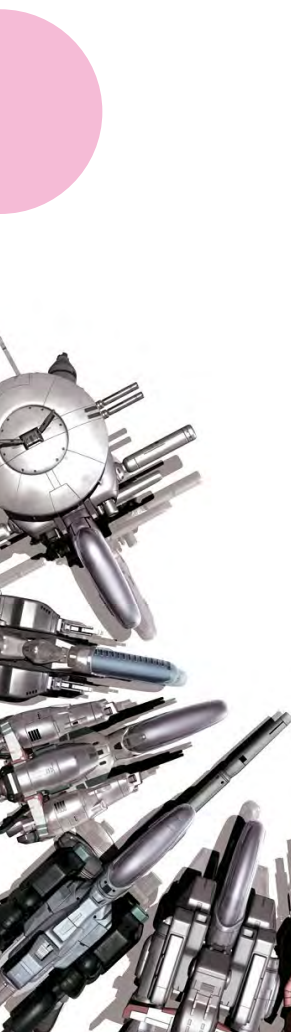
What *Final* gives you, essentially, is Irem's Great Glass Elevator — the means to explore every conceivable corner of the *R-Type* experience, passing en route an ensemble cast of its other franchise stars. Beginning with the standard repertoire of ricochet lasers, homing missiles, beams and bullets, it swells to become a document of both R-Concept ingenuity and Irem history. Some weapons exaggerate those of previous games, some pay homage to *R-Type*'s stablemates, some depict ancient Earth motifs and others potential mergers of human technology and Bydo flesh.

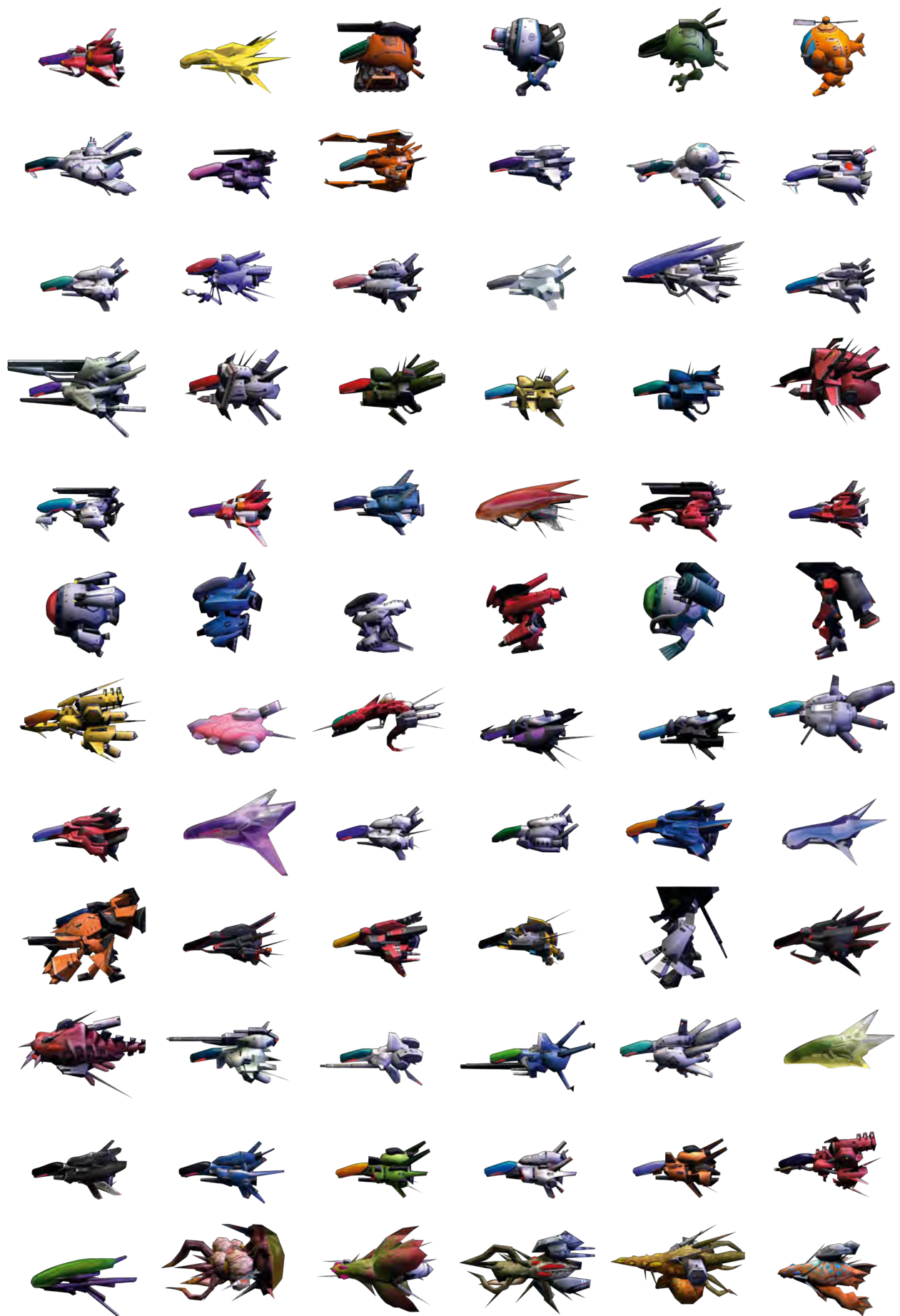
There's a palpable sense of endless possibility, compounded by the fact that much of the game has been deliberately left untested. Much is overpowered and much is ineffectual, the inclusion of an AI battle mode encouraging you to discover and exploit these flaws and take them into battle. Had this misfired, creating a freeform

disaster without balance or focus, it would have been worth it for the artistic statement alone. But of course it does work, far better than perhaps it should and differently from its predecessor, *R-Type Delta*. The two games sit at polar ends of a single spectrum, *Delta* tight and traditional, *Final* open and explorative — a genuine concept shooter.

If you've completed it already, playing it through from beginning to end, then you haven't nearly played it enough. What's more, anyone claiming to have seen 'how it ends' is fibbing, whether they realise it or not. Kujo's gift to fans — that one idea he simply had to see through — is a final episode that has no finale, growing unpredictably over dozens of hours of play. *Final* loops through umpteen different versions of its primary plot, banking into black holes and parallel dimensions, surfing conduits through time and space into levels hidden within hidden levels, leaving you ultimately without bearing on even the series' most basic truth: the evil of the Bydo Empire.

As genres segue together into sandboxes and evolve into modern forms, the chances of there ever being another game like this become unpleasantly slim. Series come and go, of course, with stories fit for dramatic ends, but *R-Type Final* was something different. When another of gaming's most fondly remembered, formative eras passed into twilight, here, for once, was a game with the heart to say goodbye.







Elite Dangerous

Elite has never wanted for ambition, only sufficiently advanced technology. Today's PCs are capable, finally, of delivering that vision with the kind of clarity that must surely have been in David Braben and Ian Bell's minds when they collaborated on the first game. Thirty-two years later, Braben is now alone at the helm, and *Elite Dangerous* represents one of the most remarkable achievements in videogames to date. This is a game that offers up a playground 400 billion star systems strong, weaving scientific and procedural data together to form a coherent model of our own Milky Way – an inconceivably large, fully explorable sandbox in which to live out your sci-fi roleplaying fantasies.

That scale comes at a small cost, but it's one that dovetails nicely with the fiction. The sheer scale of Frontier's vision means that it's going to take some time to fully realise, and so, just as with real space exploration, there will be limits on what's possible until budget and time allows.

For that reason, Frontier focused on the essentials first, massaging the game's flight model into something that feels truly special. Flinging the game's ships around space is a joy as you edge the throttle forward, slingshot around planets, and boost out of the range of enemies' attacks. Ambitious pilots can disable flight assist once they've mastered the basic flight model, allowing for all manner of advanced manoeuvres.

This satisfying and flexible handling model is supported by

audio design that manages to blend the clanking familiarity of existing technology with something disconcertingly foreign. The roar of your ship's engines is as intoxicating as it is threatening, weapons evoke impressions of dogfighting WWII aces and Star Wars in equal measure, while a melodramatic orchestral soundtrack further bolsters an already majestic audioscape.

This vivid picture is completed by a swish cockpit UI that feels believably utilitarian without sacrificing the sci-fi flair of fizzing, canopy-illuminating holograms. Engineered with VR headsets in mind (but equally as effective with a mouse-controlled viewpoint), the interface expands beyond a single screen with additional controls to either side of you. It's an array built in tiers, cleverly designed to allow players to sink deeper in as they become more familiar with the business of being a pilot. If you want to concern yourself with the frantic redistribution of your craft's limited power reserves between systems in the heat of a battle, you can, but you're just as welcome to simply point and shoot. The depth of control on hand is indicative of the fastidious nature of *Dangerous* – this a game that holds the minutiae of space life in the same regard as it does the grandiose. In short it's a game that wants, in part, to be a little slow.

Space battles are all very well, but the time you spend between them will be on the intergalactic equivalent of motorways. You'll have to deal with landing

permissions and queues to dock with space stations. Making money without breaking the law will require self-imposed commutes as you trade your way up to larger ships and better systems that will enable you to extricate yourself from the daily space grind. *Dangerous* can be a bit mundane, then – and it's all the more brilliant for it. After all, fully committed space fantasists are just as passionate about experiencing the assumed realities of earning a living on the wing as they are about firing laser beams at the thrusters of enemies.

With the core game nailed, Frontier has expanded what it's possible to do within its starbox. The Wings update introduces the ability for players to team up and undertake missions together, or share the spoils of freeform play. Powerplay, meanwhile, adds factions that players can join and work for to shift the balance of power in the galaxy. And a graphics revamp lights up the dark side of inhabited planets with city lights and significantly improves gas giant textures. Close Quarters Combat, meanwhile, bolts on a whole new competitive mode to the game. But even this feels diminutive compared to what the second season of expansions, named Horizons, will bring – the first update alone adds planetary landings, low-orbit flight, ground installations and driveable Surface Recon Vehicles. The universe continues to expand, and what exists now marks only the start for one of the most ambitious game projects ever undertaken.



Format Various Publisher Various Developer Hudson Soft Release 1983



Bomberman

Since the original game was published over 30 years ago, Hudson has produced a staggering number of *Bomberman* titles, across just about every popular gaming platform (and some unpopular ones, too). When a single piece of game design extends tentacles of this length, you know there's something special lurking in its DNA.

Drab colours and jerky graphics might've been early criticisms levelled at the series, but not after it made the switch to Nintendo's Famicom. The shift to more powerful hardware enabled the series to establish one of its key hallmarks: a strong, vibrant colour scheme and cute character design. In *Saturn Bomberman*, those characters include some drawn from Hudson's other games: Master Higgins of *Adventure Island*, Milon of *Milon's Secret Castle*, Bonk of *Bonk's Adventure*, as well as characters from the *Tengai Makyou* series, *Momotarou Denetsu* and *Galaxy Fräulein Yuna*.

Indeed, while it's difficult to pick a single, series-defining game from a collection this large, *Saturn Bomberman* remains one of the highest points. Unsurprisingly, it features the same core design as every other game in the series: you move your character across a grid-like expanse, dropping bombs and then retreating to a safe distance before they explode. And when they blow, they eliminate any enemies in their path and clear new routes across the screen. If that sounds simple enough, a wide range of powerups throws in an extra layer of strategy. There

are various different types of bomb, including Mines, Power Bombs and Remote Bombs, and there are items that enhance your abilities, such as Speed-Up and Bomb Punch, plus Power Glove, letting you lob bombs.

One twist seen in *Saturn Bomberman* and a number of other iterations is the inclusion of different-coloured dinosaur mounts. Initially uncovered by exploding a nearby piece of wall, they start out as eggs but grow increasingly powerful as they make the transition from baby to adult. One obvious advantage of riding a dinosaur is that if you're hit by a bomb blast, your mount dies instead of you. The other is each dinosaur has its own special ability: the purple variety emit ultrasonic waves to destroy rocks and explode bombs; blue ones can kick bombs over obstacles; pink can jump; green can run fast; and finally yellow lizards can halt opponents with a roar.

In other respects, *Saturn Bomberman* is similar to many of the other versions of the game. It features a similar singleplayer structure, for example, in which a bolted-on story provides the pretext for pushing on through successive worlds, destroying all the enemies in your path. In this instance, that story involves recovering some crystals to restrain the horrible monster Crator, but really, who cares? More important was the survival mode, which allowed players to record their best times.

And, since everyone knows that *Bomberman* is really a game that's

all about multiplayer, more important still were the game's competitive multiplayer modes. Like many of the other core games, *Saturn Bomberman* included a cooperative multiplayer mode, but the real meat of multiplayer was the ability to compete with your friends. Indeed, American and Japanese players could even enjoy online *Bomberman* well ahead of the modern era of console connectivity thanks to Sega's Saturn modem initiatives.

But *Saturn Bomberman*'s killer feature was confined to those whose gaming setup stretched to two Saturn multitaps: the game could support a hefty ten players at once, increasing the intensity exponentially. It's a game for which the word 'mayhem' might have been created. Playing against human opponents, deviously trapping them in dead ends or confusing them by creating chain reactions was, and still is, heady stuff, demonstrating how even static bombs can create fluid and frantic head-to-head experiences. In theory, it should be easy enough to avoid bombs that are fixed in place; in practice, in the fury of battle, the range of tactical options and the speedy pace of play can confuse all but the most experienced of players.

Bomberman's brilliance walks a fine line in the delicate space between tactical deliberation and blind panic. It was no surprise that Hudson attempted to refine its formula again and again, with varying degrees of success, until the company was swallowed up by Konami in 2012.





Format Mac, PC Publisher/developer Blizzard Release 2010



StarCraft II

Although its star has waned in the past few years, the realtime strategy template laid out by Blizzard with *StarCraft*, *Brood War* and subsequently *StarCraft II* is the founding rock of professional competitive gaming on PCs.

What started as a science-fiction adaptation of Blizzard's fantasy strategy games — *Warcraft* and *Command & Conquer* colliding with *Warhammer 40,000* — was adapted by its community into something much more. Although played by many as a singleplayer strategy game, *StarCraft*'s supremely high skill ceiling lifted the possibilities for gaming as a spectator sport. In South Korea, the home of the scene, that accidental mutation created the world's first rockstar videogame players.

The lengthy gestation period of *StarCraft II* reflects the difficulty of following up a game like that. Blizzard had to do justice not only to its competitive legacy, but the space opera it had set in motion and the culture of modding around it. To do so, the studio drew on the very quality that had catalysed the phenomenon in the first place: *StarCraft*'s ability to adapt.

Dividing the sequel into three games allowed Blizzard to invest heavily in creating distinctive campaigns for each of its three factions. *Wings Of Liberty* tells the story of Raynor's Raiders, Terran freedom fighters on the run from a corrupt Terran Emperor just as the planet-consuming Zerg make their reappearance. A light RPG progression system, handled by talking to characters on Raynor's flagship, allows players to make

decisions outside of individual missions that subtly influence how those missions play out. Upgrades twist familiar units in new directions, opening up strategic possibilities while locking out others.

This was possible only because of Blizzard's decision to silo off singleplayer from multiplayer. Each mission is different, like the early encounter with the Zerg that uses a day/night cycle to balance moments of placid expansion and fraught danger. *Heart Of The Swarm*, the Zerg campaign, takes this principle even further. Zerg leader Kerrigan becomes an RPG character in her own right, and the swarm theme is used in missions that adapt MOBA-style wave attack/defence systems into singleplayer strategy puzzles. Given that the MOBA genre began with the *Aeon Of Strife* mod for the original *StarCraft*, it's an appropriate gesture.

This is to say nothing of that genre-defining multiplayer. Blizzard smoothed out the more obtuse parts of *StarCraft*'s difficulty curve for the sequel, but was careful not to lower the skill ceiling. Competitive *StarCraft* is a game of mathematics and strategy combining macroscale economic planning (learned through many hours on community-run wikis) with intense second-to-second battle management. The very best players act and think with speed and clarity that substantially exceeds any other competitive videogame. *StarCraft II*'s recent struggles as an esports stem in part

from the fact that the standard is so extremely high: few players can cut it in a scene this demanding, and even audiences need to know a lot to be able to follow the action. Even as its player numbers dwindle, *StarCraft II* remains an icon of competitive game design.

Excellent matchmaking brought some of that quality within reach of normal players. Blizzard's seasonal ladder system, which seamlessly matched players into graded leagues and allowed them to play each other for points, has never been bettered. Though external sites are still mandatory for improvement, each successive game has provided better tutorials and replay tools. Blizzard's respect for its modding community is shown by the *StarCraft II* Arcade and provision of a map editor and scripting tools. Its decision to showcase player-created custom modes within the game itself predates Valve's by years.

StarCraft II would be worthy of a place on this list if it was simply an epochal multiplayer strategy game. As it is, it's an incredibly well-rounded experience, a testament to Blizzard's history of producing milestone games that feel like events. If you ever wonder why this company can draw tens of thousands of people to California for BlizzCon, or why every game it makes fills out midnight launches worldwide, *StarCraft II* will show you. It's a rare example of a game that tries to be for lots of different types of player and pulls it off, a case study in never compromising when it comes to following up a classic.







Pac-Man Championship Edition

The advent of widescreen may have helped a generation of game designers to realise their cinematic ambitions, but few if any games have made quite such a case for the extra screen space as *Pac-Man: Championship Edition*. Freed from 4:3 and CRT, one of the medium's original heroes feels thoroughly reinvigorated, in a triumphant update that is at once respectful and inventive, a perfect fusion of old and new. Bizarre Creations might have coined the phrase 'retro evolved' with fellow Xbox Live Arcade hit *Geometry Wars*, but this feels like the dictionary definition of the term.

Even given the involvement of *Pac-Man*'s creator Toru Iwatani, the task of bringing a much-loved bona fide arcade classic to a new audience cannot have been an enviable one. The challenge is seemingly impossible: it must hew closely enough to the simplicity and accessibility of the original design, while changing enough to ensure it stands apart.

So how do you make a 27-year-old game relevant again? On paper, Iwatani's answers seem insultingly rudimentary: adding a time limit, and splitting the maze into two distinct halves. But together these two disarmingly simple ideas are a stroke of genius, refreshing the challenge while keeping the game's core all but identical.

It's still about gobbling pellets and avoiding four pursuing ghosts — and, of course, exacting revenge once you've munched a power pill. But that tasty bonus fruit appears only once you've cleared all the pellets on one side, and eating it

refreshes the other side of the maze, revealing another trail of pellets to follow. And then slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the game starts to press down on the accelerator. Continuously eating pellets without losing a life boosts your score, and you'll discover that eating a power pill before the previous one runs out allows you to break the maximum 1,600-point tally for eating all four ghosts.

Soon you'll learn about sparking: pushing in the direction of a turn a split-second before it arrives allows you to take it more sharply.

Championship Edition, then, lends *Pac-Man* a note of urgency, one reinforced by the throbbing, insistent beat of the background music. Instead of simple survival, you'll constantly seek the most efficient route to a high score, while making split-second choices as the ghosts get faster and more unrelenting in their chase tactics: to chance a risky dash for a fruit with a ghost approaching from the side, or to double-back and stay out of trouble. With new lives gained every 20,000 points, you're rarely at risk of running out. Rather, it's that ever-ticking clock that makes you fear dying, because each life lost means a temporary drop in tempo — and crucially a loss of flow, for this is the kind of game where anything beyond the edges of the screen fades into irrelevance. Death isn't fatal, but it might well be terminal for your chance of topping the leaderboard.

Indeed, the allure of high scores was all the greater thanks to immaculate timing. *Pac-Man CE* arrived just as Xbox Live Arcade

was in its pomp, and as word grew that this was something quite special it brought out the competitive streak in critics and players alike. This time, however, there was more than one table to top: in addition to the headline five-minute Championship mode were two challenge variants, one offering more power pills and the other turning out the lights, plus three extra modes that changed the maze layout dramatically.

Three years later, Namco repeated the trick with *Pac-Man Championship Edition DX*. This added a host of new visual options and game types, but made minor tweaks to the game's fundamentals too. It enables players to stay in the game longer by triggering a period of slow motion when a ghost is in close proximity, as well as letting you set off a bomb to send them back to the pen — at the cost of a drop in speed. Additional sleeping enemies at junctions highlight optimal routes and introduce a moment of glorious catharsis: aggroed ghosts will pursue you in a line, allowing you to turn the tables and gobble them up for a huge score bonus.

Some say all this compromises the purity of *Championship Edition*, but whether you prefer the more focused original or the broader and more flexible *DX*, the two games represent a high-water mark for contemporary remakes. Little wonder that, having successfully taken a cherished game of his own creation and improved it, Iwatani decided to retire from making games. He could hardly have chosen a better way to bow out.



Format 360, PC, PS3 Publisher 2K Games Developer Irrational Games Release 2007



BioShock

***BioShock's* great strength**

is its ability to conjure stop-and-stare moments of symbolism and spectacle from a place beyond our imagination. It's easy to say games *should* do this without thinking about how boring it would be if they did, or how hard it must be to construct engaging, combat-heavy gameplay around an intellectually rigorous theme – but games *really* should do this. Fighting a metaphor of fallen idealism in a glass city at the bottom of the ocean feels transportive in a way that scoping the slightly big bugs of this season's apocalypse will never be again. *BioShock* can be accurately and more or less uselessly described as a firstperson shooter, but its real trade is in ideas. There are perhaps a dozen moments during the steady wonder of exploring Rapture that invite players to pause and enjoy audacious imagery for its own sake – the groaning sadness of the Big Daddies, the frustrated experiments in aesthetic perfection in Dr Steinman's surgery, the posed plaster victims of Sander Cohen.

In other words, *BioShock* is a culturally erudite game that has the technical prowess to erect a sophisticated fictional environment in which to play with a collection of concepts – objectivism, rational self-interest, the attainment of the great at the expense of the unworthy. It's famous for a twist based around the notion of free will it's been toying with in plain view the entire time, a twist that intentionally rebounds on the

player to trigger a reflection on the nature of play and choice.

That tension between the chosen and the imposed appears as early as the opening scene, an abrupt and elementally grandstanding set-piece featuring a plane crash in the ocean. The player's only chance of survival is a lighthouse, lamps illuminating a path inside to the game's first bit of ostentatious scene-setting: a stern, imposing bust of Andrew Ryan emerging from the dark carrying a banner on which is written the rationalist slogan 'No Gods or kings, only man'. Beginning a *BioShock* tradition of coy musical signposting, somewhere a gramophone creaks out the tones of *Beyond The Sea*.

It feels like an escape, but crucially to *BioShock's* philosophical parlour games, the player has no choice – the only path ahead leads to a bathysphere and a descent beneath the waves. Inside, Ryan appears on a projected 1950s information reel – part Orson Welles, part John D Rockefeller, a showman of the impossible, a Wizard of Underwater Oz. "I chose something different," he's telling us, free will buzzing through the bathysphere. "I chose... Rapture."

And with that the city is revealed. Rapture is *BioShock's* real achievement – the conception of it as a staging ground for violence and adventure, and the realisation of it as a beautiful art deco metropolis, a magnified mid-century Manhattan playing host to a philosophical interrogation of American individualism.

The primary choice, once inside, is a binary one – whether to harvest the infant girls who roam Rapture with their clanking diving-suit protectors, or to spare them for lesser immediate reward. The choice amounts to which side of a moving train the player wishes to look out from – the ultimate destination is the same, though *BioShock's* self-aware commentary dazzles enough for it not to seem important. Besides, these Little Sisters and Big Daddies are triumphs – of iconography if not gameplay, of impact and atmosphere if not meaningful interaction.

If there's meaningful interaction it expresses itself the only way most games know how, through violence. The scientific advancements of Rapture have led to genetic enhancements called Plasmids – powerups by another name – granting control of wind, fire and electricity, programmed super-abilities to supplement the rattle of *BioShock's* mechanical shooting. The route might be essentially on rails, but these abilities give flexibility to the way each encounter can be played out, variation to the unavoidable expression of violence and destruction that the game entails.

Not that the action is bad, but it can't help feeling inelegant given the richness of layered imagery and design in which it takes place. *BioShock* feels frustrated with itself – with the medium's ability to conjure all that spectacle and symbolism and yet still, accurately but uselessly, only amount to a firstperson shooter.







Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Sneer all you want. We get it. It is all too easy to see the name *Call Of Duty* and think of it not as a collection of individual games but as a collective, singular whole; to pretend that the earlier games in the series are guilty of the same sins as the latter ones; to suggest that *Call Of Duty* is, and has always been, a creatively moribund, politically questionable rollercoaster of a singleplayer game and a brainless, repetitive, ADHD-paced multiplayer mode whose matchmaking is populated by the teabagging, invective-spitting worst of Xbox Live. But to claim that about the *Call Of Duty* of today is questionable. To say it about *COD4: Modern Warfare* is madness.

Few games can claim to have had a profound effect on both their host genres and the industry as a whole, but you can see *Modern Warfare*'s DNA in the genetic makeup of countless games released in the nine years since it hit the shelves. It is the reason for the reduced runtime of the singleplayer campaign, though few can match its elegant pacing, its shifts in tempo and tone, its bombastic set-pieces. It is why games of all stripes — from RPGs to puzzle games, action adventures to Roguelikes and just about everything in between — employ some kind of perk system. *Modern Warfare* dragged the firstperson shooter, which had spent a decade or more either dug into a WWII foxhole or dosing around with energy weapons in the distant future, into a contemporary setting, ushering

in a new era of recognisable weaponry with customisable attachments. It is not *Modern Warfare*'s fault that Activision and everybody else picked up its success and simply ran with it, over and over. Rather, this is to its credit, a tribute to its importance. So too is the fact that, despite the wide spread of its influence, its appeal endures today.

That short campaign might be the reason so many of today's singleplayer modes putter along for five hours and end with a shrug of the shoulders, but in *COD4*'s slender runtime there is enough bombast and intrigue to fill a weekend-long action-movie marathon. There is drama here, too, from the first mission's frantic escape from a sinking container ship (steam bursting from cracked pipes, water cascading through the windows and across a floor that's pitching at a 45-degree angle) to a stealthy, Ghillie-suited stalk through a post-Chernobyl Pripjat and the conclusion when, battered, broken and half-dead on the ground, you slowly raise a pistol and send the game's antagonist to the afterlife.

In between, you'll die. This genre, as obsessed as it is with the business of death, had never really asked itself the question of how it might handle the death of a protagonist, or even if it could. Yet *Modern Warfare* kills a hero in a nuclear explosion and has you watch it through his own eyes, makes you watch as the screen first drains of colour, then fades to black as his breath slows and stops for good. Soon after, the game asks

if the experience has changed your view of murder en masse when it puts you in the gunner's seat in an AC-130 and has a CO compliment you for group kills over the radio. *Call Of Duty* has frequently been described as the Michael Bay film of videogames, and it's a fair point, but *Modern Warfare* is about so much more than simply blowing shit up for kicks.

Once the shooting stops and your pulse slows down, you'll head over to the multiplayer, and likely stay there for a couple of hundred hours. Infinity Ward offered the industry another template here, this time to be followed by a generation of online-enabled games. The perks, killstreaks, guns and attachments are the stars, of course, affording the player an unprecedented level of control of their playstyle. Yet the real mark of genius is in the unlock system, doling out new toys when you level up, then offering new scopes and silencers for your favourites the more you use them. It is a smart way of ensuring players stick around: hit the level cap and you're invited to Prestige, which puts all your goodies back in the toy box, resets you to level one, and asks you to repeat the process all over again. It is a very hard request to refuse, even now. Nine years after release, the servers are still surprisingly busy. That's perhaps the strongest testament to *Modern Warfare*'s magic. Even in 2016, with so many lamenting the pervasive influence *Call Of Duty* has had across the industry, it remains now, as it was then, one of the finest games of its kind.





Format Android, iOS Publisher/developer GungHo Release 2012



Puzzle & Dragons

Let us tell you about our You Yu team. As a leader, he offers an up to 12.5 multiplier to water-type monsters; when paired with a You Yu helper from our friends list, that bonus is squared to a massive 156.25. His active skill randomly spawns three water orbs and gives a 50 per cent damage bonus to Attacker-type allies for one turn. Facing a boss, we first trigger a team member's skill. Scheat has one of the most powerful actives in the game, turning heal and light orbs to water, then boosting the chance of water orbs cascading onto the board for four turns. Then we use You Yu's skill, giving us a few more water orbs to play with and triggering that 1.5 multiplier. Our thumb zips across the screen with fluidity honed through hundreds of hours of play. We line up the four water combos needed to trigger You Yu's full multiplier. Thanks to Scheat's cascade bonus, another couple of combos fall on to the board. Combined, the team dishes out over 140 million points of damage – enough to kill the strongest boss in the game several times over.

This is *Puzzle & Dragons*. It features all the hooks of F2P at its worst – dual currencies, stamina timers and so on – and layers over the top of it all an infuriatingly miserly RNG loot system. It took us months to put together our You Yu team. We found the monsters, levelled and evolved them to their most powerful forms. You Yu himself was bought from the Monster Shop, using a currency gained from selling off duplicate monsters. Evolving him meant

beating two of the hardest dungeons in the game, then levelling and evolving the bosses that dropped from them before feeding them, and some other hard-to-come-by materials, to You Yu's base form. It's been an insane timesink, but we don't regret a moment. Did you not see the bit about 140-million damage?

Yet even at the outset, long before you've even thought about team synergy and are simply scraping by with the handful of monsters at your disposal, *Puzzle & Dragons* is a joy. This is a game of matching three orbs of the same colour, but it is like no match-three game you have played. It's not about moving a single orb a single space in a single direction: you put your finger on the screen and can drag an orb freely around the board for four seconds (though that can be extended). When your time's up, orb matches are converted to damage, the value of each match increasing with the length of your combo. As a core mechanic, it is smartly conceived, pleasingly fluid in practice and, as elemental effects fizz about, thoroughly satisfying to watch. It's delightfully paced, too: while there's a timer on movement, there's no limit to how long you can wait between turns, so battles are an alternating mix of pensive preparation and frantic rearranging.

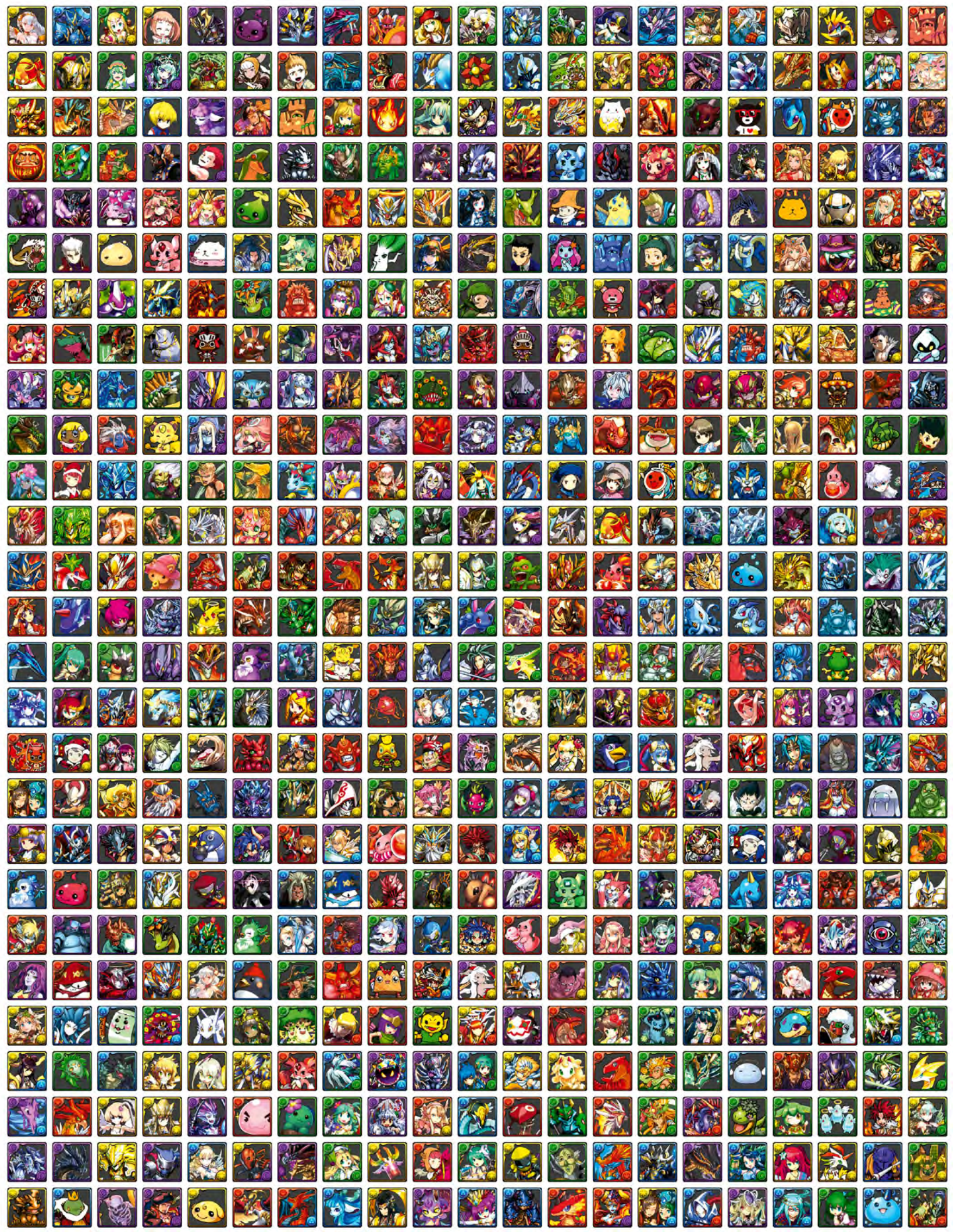
Given its model, power creep is inevitable. Developer GungHo needs players to keep playing and customers to keep spending, and barely a week goes by without some new carrot on the end of the

RNG stick. Monsters that were considered top-tier at launch have been all but forgotten now as the number available has grown to over 3,000. And as the tools at your potential disposal have become more powerful, so the challenge has ratcheted up: endgame dungeons come in and out of rotation and demand careful team composition, near-perfect play and often a hefty dose of luck.

The elemental system (fire beats wood beats water beats fire; light and dark beat each other) dictates that our Yu Yu water team, brilliant as it is, isn't suited to every dungeon. That's OK – we have plenty of others, but they are defined by so much more than just their colour. Each requires a shift in playstyle, be that matching full horizontal rows for damage buffs, going for long combos to steadily increase your multiplier, using poison skills to circumvent an enemy's defence stat, or simply grinding out a result against the toughest bosses in the game using a damage-resist team. The possibilities seem endless, and each new monster gained asks intriguing questions about the team in which it might be best suited and the dungeons in which it would prove most useful. And if you can't find a use for it, you either store it away for the future, feed it to something else, or sell it off for valuable currency.

Yes, *Puzzle & Dragons*' F2P hooks and RNG reliance can frustrate, but it's one of the most thrilling, compulsive and rewarding games of its kind to be played on a smartphone, or anywhere else.





Format Vita Publisher SCE Developer Media Molecule Release 2013



Tearaway

There remains something unfashionable – wonderfully and defiantly so – about *Tearaway*. It's the most unlikely of killer apps, wrapping a genteel, warm-hearted story around a genre all but forgotten by everyone bar Nintendo, and daring to make a virtue of the elements of Vita's featureset usually reserved for one-off gimmicks. It's a game with a genuine affection both for the material from which its world is crafted, and for the machine in which that world is contained. And it feels contained, too: as you push against the rear touch panel and see a simulacrum of your fingers poke through the floor, while seeing your face gazing down from a hole in the sun, you'll almost be convinced that *Tearaway's* universe somehow resides within the hardware itself.

The messenger you follow through its papercraft worlds is not actually the protagonist – or, rather, is only one of two. You are the other, pushing Atoi or Iota along with the analogue stick, while intervening as their omnipotent helper from on high. It's a strange kind of partnership, but it's realised beautifully, serving to highlight the artifice of the bond while still making you feel more connected to both the character and the world. It's an opportunity you're invited to grab with both hands: one steering the messenger while the other reaches into the world or manipulates it in some other way to assist. You'll tilt your Vita to manoeuvre platforms into position, tap the back panel to bounce your

partner off springy drum skins, and unfurl pieces of scenery to reveal hidden routes. Everything is constructed from paper and card, and not only does it look like the real thing, it moves and sounds like it, too. It certainly isn't the first game with a hand-crafted look, but no other has so successfully integrated its aesthetics with its mechanics.

And when you're not grabbing, pulling, rolling and folding what Media Molecule has built, you'll have the chance to stamp your own mark on the world. Agree to complete an NPC's request and you'll be briefly whisked away and into an art studio, with coloured paper laid out on a craft board, which you must cut and assemble, adding assorted ready-made decorations you've unlocked on your journey. First, you'll design a face for Atoi or Iota; next you'll find yourself making a crown fit for a squirrel before prettifying a pig and wallpapering an elk. Both of Vita's cameras are pressed into regular service too, while the messenger can also take their own snaps, complete with a selection of Instagram-like filters. You sense these little mementoes of your journey will become more than just set dressing, and so it proves in a touching closing act.

In a game that plays so fast and loose with convention, it's hardly surprising that there's rarely any threat. The boisterous, stubby little Scraps are the antagonists of the piece, but they're easily dealt with throughout the game. The messenger has a forward roll that

can knock tall variants off their stilts, while you can assist by squishing enemies for your counterpart to lift and hurl into the abyss, or sharply bumping Scraps from beneath to send them careering into the screen, before wiping them off with your thumb as if removing a bug from a windshield. Otherwise the only danger is falling – it's more easily done in the late game, though Atoi and Iota have a more reliable leap than Sackboy, and checkpoints are rarely far away.

You'll tear through the game in a couple of afternoons, then, even as you're encouraged to linger by the measured pace and the sheer beauty of the setting. And yet when it's over, you might choose to bring *Tearaway's* world into your own: each stage hosts a series of papercraft models to collect, which you can print out and make into physical memorabilia.

To some, this might all sound horribly twee – and it so easily could have been that – but *Tearaway's* gleeful, celebratory tone cuts through any cynicism. It's a game that's enamoured of both the physical and the digital realm, bringing the tangible and intangible together in unison by wholeheartedly embracing its host hardware. It also makes Vita's most-ignored features an integral part of its systems, rather than wasting them on novelties. On a platform that often seems to lack a discernible identity, *Tearaway* is a champion of everything Vita is and can be, and in that respect it feels like Sony's very own *Super Mario 64*.





Format Mac, PC Publisher/developer Riot Games Release 2009



League Of Legends

On the face of it, *League Of Legends* has never been all that revolutionary. In an era of VR and the graphics arms race, it can feel like a relic of a bygone age in game design: a free-to-play PC title where two teams knock heads like quarterbacks, marching through cartoon lanes while NPCs pump from one base to the other. It's a throwback, blossoming from the groundwork of *DOTA*, its MOBA brother-in-arms, and *League Of Legends* makes no real attempt to fix what isn't broken.

However, *League Of Legends* has a quality that many games lack — a mathematical beauty, something logicians would describe as a stern beauty, austere. 'Beauty in method' is how the old maths masters would talk about an especially pleasing method of proof, a proof that's unusually succinct and elegant. At its heart, *League Of Legends* is elegant.

The game pivots on the art of turning conflict into quantifiable solutions, of sifting through information, through thousands of variables that await you on the map. How many enemy turrets have fallen by 25 minutes of play? How many minions has your opponent killed so far? Success isn't simply a matter of downing the bad guys; it requires an understanding of the clockwork mechanism that is at work deep inside the game.

Picture the scene: it's a nice day on Summoner's Rift. Three lanes extend before you, stretching across jungle and river and sleeping turrets. At just over a minute in, minions spawn.

By ten minutes in, you'll measure your stats against those of your foe, weighing dead minions against dead champs to calculate the gold accrued. By 20 minutes in, your objectives expand. Now Baron spawns, a jungle-born monster whose buffs can swing the terms of the game. Plodding forward and back with the rhythm of a pendulum, the players constantly eye the clock for cues on when to switch from one lane to the next.

This can be a bewildering experience for the uninitiated, requiring study and time to learn the tics of your brethren champs. Is the enemy Twisted Fate? Then he can teleport across the map and kill you even when you thought you were safe. Is the enemy Blitzcrank? Then expect him to grab you and pull you into enemy clusters — but this ability has a long cooldown that leaves him largely toothless when triggered.

A good player needs to have encyclopaedic knowledge and an impossible brain that gathers all relevant variables and spits out decisive actions. Perhaps this is why the champions of esports are celebrities in their own right, a new generation of Internet stars blurring the lines between gameplayers and athletes, hobbies and sports. *League Of Legends* is one of only a few games that can offer a glimpse of exactly what competition, spectatorship, fandom and celebrity look like in the 21st century.

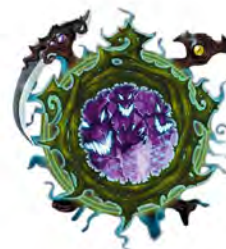
No, the online spectator isn't a new concept, but this is unfamiliar territory for even a

forward-thinking studio. Riot Games, standing on the shoulders of Blizzard-shaped giants, has created a sensational model for what esports can become. The studio did, after all, play a critical role in nurturing streaming culture. In its first days on a then-nascent Twitch platform, the US-based developer/publisher streamed its world championship event to an audience of over eight million. Today, its championship series are watched by over three times that amount, and get airings via ESPN — a network that, while once sceptical of esports, now seeks the attention of the increasingly valuable millennial gaming market.

The game's pro players have graced the halls of Madison Square Garden and London's Wembley Arena. Its top teams take home millions of dollars in prize pool cash. It's a Super Bowl in its own right, if a pretty unconventional test of brawn.

And its viewers, the fanbase, have finally seen their hobby lifted to those upper echelons of highest esteem. Despite early scepticism, the growing acceptance of esports within sports culture is conclusive proof of just how influential fans are in bringing new kinds of entertainment to the mainstream.

Where *League Of Legends* can seem like just a relic of the *DOTA* age, it redresses the balance by changing how we think about all games. It's a powerhouse, a machine that's helped set into motion the way we now interact with these things we play — and the ones we simply watch.



Format 360, Mac, PC, PS4, Vita, Wii U Publisher/developer Team Meat Release 2010



Super Meat Boy

Super Meat Boy's inception is well documented. Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes' struggle with the development of the game and subsequent — in their view under-promoted — XBLA release forms a major part of 2012 documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*. It was a process that left them exhausted. But that gestation has done little to hurt the game's legacy, or its endurance. Its influences, though, stretch back much further than that. Team Meat riffs on *Super Mario World's* perfect inertia, *Sonic The Hedgehog's* dizzying speed, and *Mega Man's* stern learning curve to create something that feels, if not quite as inventive, every bit as focused and important. *Super Meat Boy* is a platformer that reveres the genre's classics while magnifying the aspects that make those games so special.

It even recalls the 8bit and 16bit eras, albeit in a less family-friendly manner. The titular hero is a gory slab of bleeding meat who leaves a mucky trail of claret across every surface he touches. His goal in each level is to reach Bandage Girl, who is continually being abducted by evil scientist Dr Fetus, and he does this by running, leaping and wall-jumping to her location. He accelerates fast, slides to a stop and flings himself through the air with satisfying precision, and when the breezy early levels give way to fiendish creations lined with instantly fatal spinning saw blades and piles of salt, this nuanced control scheme becomes far more than just an enjoyable feedback mechanism.

Meat Boy is swift even at his standard canter, but he becomes a blur when you hit the run button. Jump at full tilt and it's possible to hurl yourself across most of the screen in one go — liberating, but dangerous. The deaths mount up quickly as first hubris, then lack of skill take their toll. But as you tune into the game, you can start to shut down your brain in favour of instinctive twitch reactions. The constant dying could become frustrating if not for the brilliantly judged instant restarts that make it near impossible to tear yourself away from even the toughest levels. This, combined with the several-hundred levels supplied, helps sweeten the handful of possibly slightly mean-spirited creations that conclude the game.

Super Meat Boy turns inevitable failure to its advantage. Every time you complete a level you're treated to a replay of all your previous attempts at once; dozens of Meat Boys bounce around the screen, their numbers steadily thinning as each meets his grisly end until just one remains, triumphantly stood next to Bandage Girl for the split second before she's abducted again. It's hilarious, certainly, and the spectacle never gets old, but it also provides a tangible record of your progress as each lesson you learn refines your performance.

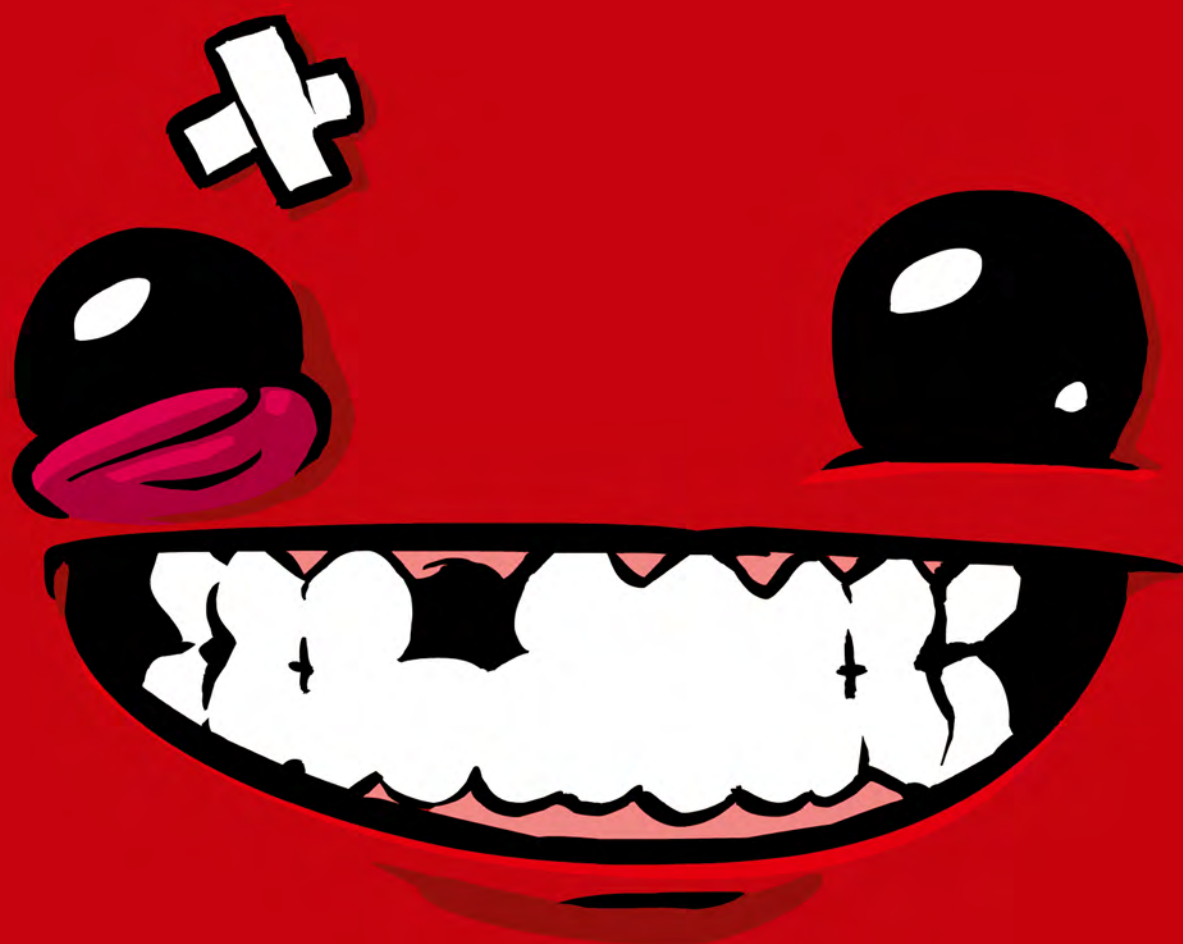
You get similarly considered visual representations of useful information throughout the game, almost all of them also initially masquerading as eccentricity. Those 16bit-style visuals, for example, ensure that levels are immediately readable, safe and

deadly surfaces clearly delineated without the need for tutorials on how to identify new traps. And the splats of blood that coat every surface or lethal object you come into contact with might elicit a morbid chuckle but also serve to mark the good and bad decisions you made in prior attempts.

Super Meat Boy's stripped-down aesthetic belies a richly varied game. Levels don't build on previous designs in a traditional way and, while grouped into broadly themed worlds, mix up their pacing and structure wildly. A run through a crystal-encrusted cave might come next to a dash up a tall, thin tower riddled with laser beams or an array of saw blades that requires delicate negotiation. The game is riddled with secrets — often accessed through portals placed in precarious locations — and there's a big cast of alternative characters to unlock including cameos from other games, such as *Braid's* Tim (who can rewind time) and the Spelunker from *Spelunky*, who can fling himself farther using explosives.

But once you're threading through tightly spaced death traps like a virtuoso, *Super Meat Boy's* greatest pleasure reveals itself: getting through the gauntlets as fast as possible. All those hours of practice coalesce into a zen-like state of mastery as you first begin to conquer levels in a matter of seconds and then hurtle through the campaign at ridiculous speeds. As in the similarly nuanced *Trials* series, you'll begin planning runs in your head even when you're not playing the game.





Format Wii Publisher Nintendo Developer Monolith Soft Release 2011



Xenoblade Chronicles

It's the world that stays with you. Over the years, characters and details have faded from memory, but *Chronicles*' magnificent sprawl, notably the widescreen splendour of Gaur Plain (arguably the closest thing to Hyrule Field we've seen since), remains every bit as vivid. It's ironic that a setting deserving of projection on an IMAX screen was contained on – constrained by – two consoles that could never really do its vision justice. And yet how fitting for a game of this grand ambition that it had to.

Not that such aspirations were without precedent. Director Tetsuya Takahashi had, of course, been responsible for the *Xenosaga* series: he'd envisioned an SF opus spanning six games, but publisher Bandai Namco pulled the plug after just three. *Xenoblade* saw him rein in his more extravagant tendencies, marrying a simple story with a broad sweep to systems which took in and built upon everything he'd learned from his work on *Ys* and *Final Fantasy* during its Square heyday. The result may not have been the revolution some suggested, but Wii owners were treated to the most accomplished Japanese roleplaying game for some years.

The genre had not completely stagnated before *Xenoblade*, but even the best JRPGs had been met with ambivalence in mainstream quarters, with few exceptions outside recognised names such as *Final Fantasy* and the *Persona* games. All this made *Chronicles* a pleasant surprise. It gathered in almost everything players had grown to love about JRPGs during

the genre's commercial zenith, with refinements to make it more palatable to western markets. It benefited from the endorsement of Nintendo as publisher and the coverage that accompanied its unlikely PAL localisation. It was only after a sustained Internet campaign, following universally positive reviews in Europe, that NOA president Reggie Fils-Aime decided to publish the game in North America.

The campaigners were right, not least because during Wii's twilight period, *Chronicles* was a game of uncommon quality and depth; indeed, few games released since can boast such a runtime. If it isn't averse to leaning upon entrenched conventions, then it tends to do so lightly, often subtly defying tradition. Take protagonist Shulk, for example. Yes, he's an orphan, and yes, he wields a legendary sword that carries an otherworldly power. But he's no cocksure, reckless, headstrong teenager; he's an unusually thoughtful and compassionate youngster, brave but not foolhardy, with a poise beyond his years. And while his story involves an early tragedy and a mission to bring peace to a world at war, this is no ordinary quest; more significantly, this is no ordinary world. After all, it is set upon two unfathomably huge titans, permanently frozen in eternal conflict.

As you traverse their limbs and bodies, you're regularly treated to sights that inspire genuine awe and wonder. *Chronicles* encourages exploration by rewarding the discovery of landmarks, yet

there's no real need: the naturally curious player will want to chart this world fully, if only to be surprised and delighted by yet another eye-opening vista.

Or, perhaps, a rare beast to slay. *Chronicles* features some striking creature designs, though in the heat of battle you'll often be too focused on their positioning and yours to notice. The pseudo-realtime combat is a revelation: elegant and malleable, it allows you to chain moves, combine with allies to land more forceful blows, and deliver specific attacks and convey status effects by launching an offensive from the side or rear of your foe. The Monado's ability to both stop time and show a glimpse of the imminent future, meanwhile, is at once a godsend from a tactical point of view and lends a palpable note of drama to each skirmish. The sight of an ally perishing in battle ensures that you take immediate steps to save them, and it's a rousing moment when you succeed in doing so.

An exceptional, diverse score soundtracks the journey, alongside an underrated and characterful English-language dub that grates only during the repetitive shouts of your allies during combat – although, as a consequence, you're more likely to switch party members regularly and discover new techniques. Even as the laundry list of objectives and side missions grows uncomfortably long and the hour count hits triple figures, this absorbing adventure casts a bewitching spell. Few games can lay as convincing a claim to the term 'epic'.







OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast

There are two schools of driving. The first would be confined to the real world if not for videogame simulations such as *Gran Turismo* or *Forza Motorsport*, and it's all about gear ratios, toe-in/toe-out, flywheels, limited slips, torque, drivetrains and so on. If that's your sort of thing, you'll enjoy the authenticity and difficulty of driving, occasionally fast, without crashing. The second school started life in the arcade. It's exemplified by games such as *Sega Rally* or *Daytona USA*, and it's all about flooring the accelerator without fear of consequences, powersliding your way around impossible bends until your car's nearly at right angles, and weaving in and out of traffic.

In 1986 Yu Suzuki and Sega AM2 created a game that embodied the second school of driving, putting players at the wheel of a Ferrari Testarossa convertible. In the absence of advanced physics simulation or finicky car setup screens, the appeal of the original *OutRun* was down to its hedonistic, hair-down approach: the vibrant and exotic locations, the sprite-scaling graphics, the inspired soundtrack (including the legendary Magical Sound Shower), the multiple routes, and the amazing sit-down cabinet that was, to the untrained adolescent eye, just like the real thing. There was no worrying about pranging the car or suffering a sudden loss of power due to a dodgy drivetrain. If you crashed, you crashed, with a spectacular

flip or roll, before the car was reset and you were free to race again.

In later years, driving games converged towards a different point, forcing would-be racers to take driving lessons or go to the shops before they could get on the road. In order to appeal to this generation of videogame racing drivers, who were used to something a little more complex than just sticking to the racing line, Sega clearly felt it had to add something more when it decided to update the *OutRun* concept in 2003. One obvious solution was to give players a choice of different Ferraris. Another was to give those exotic locations a graphical makeover — maintaining visual themes from the original game, preserving the blue skies and sandy beaches (and introducing the Milky Way), but revamping them with more powerful technology. Cars were given a shiny reflective sheen, the sun blazed through foliage canopies, and yachting marinas boasting glistening water effects whipped by in a haze of burning rubber.

But the really inspired addition, the touch that above all rendered the reimagined *OutRun* almost impossibly entertaining, was the powerslide. Whatever your tastes, there are few things more satisfying in videogames, or in life. If, at any point, you found yourself driving too fast to make it around a particularly difficult bend, you could simply jab the brakes, apply a helping of opposite lock, and then accelerate into an

unlikely skid that would see you round the most improbable curves. It's not always the best strategy for achieving the fastest times, but it's certainly the most entertaining, and it made segueing through the game's succession of labyrinthine twists and bends an almost otherworldly pleasure.

It invigorated an old-school structure that still saw players proceeding through a series of branching pathways hoping to make it to the end before a clock runs down (turning left for an easy ride, right for a harder time). That's how *OutRun* competes with other racing games — not by offering a laboured collect-'em-all strategy or a hundred setup screens, but by providing a driving experience so euphoric, so unlike anything the real world has to offer, that you'll want to spend hours and hours playing it.

Coast 2 Coast also provides hours and hours of extras. It not only includes the content from the two coin-ops, *OutRun 2* and *OutRun 2 SP*, in their entirety (all 30 courses), it also introduces *Coast 2 Coast* mode. This consists of a series of missions, from just drifting or racing to dodging UFOs and steering a giant beach ball. The PSP and PS2 versions even link up, meaning you can continue your progress on the move.

In an era of racing simulations that feature hundreds of licensed vehicles, and almost as many real-world racetracks, plenty would argue that the arcade-styled checkpoint racer is an anomaly. It is. But if they were all as good as this, it shouldn't be.





Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

When Minh Le co-developed a team shooter out of the bones of *Half-Life*, he established several design paradigms that would come to define the competitive FPS. A contemporary military setting and knife-edge lethality were hallmarks of the original *Counter-Strike* mod that would subsequently be adopted by *Battlefield*, *Call Of Duty* and so on. However many millions of people have levelled M4A1 assault rifles at one another in the decades since, it was in the hallways of `cs_assault` and `de_dust` that this industry-dominating exchange originally took hold. *Counter-Strike* was integral to moving the focus of the FPS away from space marines, BFGs and deathmatches towards teamplay and tactics.

Despite its wide-ranging influence, the parts that make *Counter-Strike* what it is have never been assembled in quite this way anywhere else. *Global Offensive* is simply the latest and most comprehensive expression of these ideas, a modern wrapper around a years-tested core.

Counter-Strike's competitive design starts and ends with the notion that when you die, you're out. Other game modes are a novelty; the soul of this game is in its round structure, in the long wait mandated by an early death. The feel of the game stems from the fact that failure is unusually punitive — the need for caution is a catalyst for both strategy and skill. This is most strongly felt when you're the last person alive on your team, a scenario that forces you to up your game but

promises, as a reward, the distinctive payoff of having been seen to overcome the odds.

This is possible because of a ballistics model that is deadly but resolutely fair, tied to an economic system that balances round-to-round success by giving winners more to lose. Do well in a round and you can afford better armour and weapons in the next. Die early and those guns can be picked up by the enemy, and if that enemy survives then you may as well have simply handed the cash over to them directly. This allows *Counter-Strike* to have weapons that meaningfully change the game as they are introduced — the legendary AWP sniper rifle being the best example — because possessing one is a risk as much as a reward. Where other military shooters strive for lateral balance in their armouries, *Counter-Strike* doesn't need to.

Each version of the game has had its individual quirks, and the way the community adopts bugs as mechanics — such as bunny hopping, which used to allow you to move faster while shooting accurately — is part of its makeup too. This was never going to be a simulation, but that's one of the reasons it's been so successful as an esports. By abstracting details such as which guns have access to a scope or some form of zoom, which can penetrate which kinds of cover, and how fast a player can move while wielding different weapons, finesse emerges. As with *Street Fighter* champions or *StarCraft* pros, good *Counter-Strike* teams are capable of weaving

strategy out of the myriad systems at work in the game.

Valve has always understood *Counter-Strike*'s value — it was Valve, after all, that gave Minh Le a job on the basis of the mod's quality. But this understanding is well expressed by *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, which has grown from a console adaptation to the definitive edition of the game. With it, Valve has done something that very few modern FPS developers have managed: created a competitive game where the community isn't divided by map packs or DLC, which is both viable as a spectator sport and accessible enough to be played casually. It has done this through its business model — a low base price welcoming newcomers, with profit from cosmetic items used to support free maps — and through the suite of features it has placed around the core game.

Global Offensive brought competitive *Counter-Strike* to a larger audience by offering ranked play as an alternative to regular drop-in, drop-out matches. In ranked, players commit to a best-of-30 that can last up to 90 minutes and show off the game at its deepest. Playing the same opponents on the same map so many times amounts to a kind of competitive Groundhog Day, a series of skirmishes that form a ballistic dialogue. On the opposite end, lightweight alternative modes lower the barrier to entry for those coming in after *COD*'s compulsive loop. In this way, the game has been able to both retain its soul and its vast popularity.



Format Mac, PC Publisher 2K Games Developer Firaxis Games Release 2005



Civilization IV

Nothing hurts quite like a nuke. To see that mushroom cloud rising over the city, to know you're one step closer to armageddon, to realise you'll be wasting worker time on scrubbing fallout. Nuclear weapons don't do as much damage as you'd expect in *Civ IV*. But they're the ultimate humiliation. They may not kill effectively, but they hurt. Especially when dropped by a close friend.

You could've looked at the original *Civilization* and thought it a near perfect game. Carry and guide a primitive people from a pre-wheel migratory existence to absolute domination, and/or landing a spaceship on Alpha Centauri. It was beyond ambitious – mapping the route from sticks and stones to ICBMs across just a few hours of game time. That such a game didn't flounder under a weight of detail was lucky. That it worked so well, driving players to a state of catatonic madness, spawning the phrase 'just one more turn' at the same time, can only be considered a gaming miracle. Why did it drive so many players to the point of obsession? Incredibly clear direction, tied to immense competition.

Civ's timeline is a clearly delineated measure of your progress; one that clearly marks how well you're doing compared to your opponents. Got catapults? So have the English. Got guns? So have the Aztecs. Got nuclear weapons? So have the French.

It's about demonstrating clear ownership to players. Civilizations become organisms to pet and coo over. Early towns become

characters. Your first city. Your first captured city. Your first recaptured city. Each lovingly named and tweaked. This is Fartsville. It's home to the pyramids. It has a rapidly growing population, and is a centre for academic research. Your borders: to my west are the English. They are my allies. To my east, the French. They are my enemies. Your empire: these are the Mongols. They are my people.

And it's about wild historical fantasy. Playing on a world map, rewriting history, is *Civ*'s basic thrill. Germany invading Poland, and continuing west until Japan. The Aztecs wading up through Mexico and holding Canada.

Quietly, though, over the years, the game's influence waned. There were too many sequels: *Civilization III* and *Civilization: Call To Power*. There were too many alternatives: the realtime strategy of *Age Of Empires* made *Civ* look sombre and slow. And there wasn't enough love: Firaxis produced *Civ III*, but its heart was clearly in *Alpha Centauri*.

And then came number four. And *Civilization* was reborn. The *Civ* games had always avoided religion. Too messy. Too offensive. Choosing a faith was the most demanded feature from fans, but would always be the most controversial. How could Firaxis dare define traits and stereotypes, and convert them into straight bonuses? Could it really be as clumsy as a +3 bonus to peaceful negotiation for Buddhists?

No. Firaxis's solution was inspired. Religion in *Civ IV* isn't

about bonuses. It's about infection. Religions spread from holy cities, carried by missionaries. Sharing a state religion with your neighbours makes the AI players more likely to share resources and tech. Sharing a state religion with any city with a matching temple gives line of sight: your flock are your spies. And state religions that own a sacred building will receive income from far-flung temples. Again: religion isn't a series of bonuses. It's a meme.

And then there was that other dream feature. Multiplayer. It had been tried in the previous iteration, but proved unstable and difficult to manage. But it showed the potential of *Civilization* multiplayer: long-form games that could last hours – the same chasm-deep mechanics, but with the fragile alliances, backstabbing and betrayal of Diplomacy.

Nothing brings out the inner dictator, though, like nuclear diplomacy. Players are free to build nukes if they wish, transforming the end-game. Bombing a city starts the Armageddon clock – and begins raising the Earth's temperature. Previously fertile savannah becomes barren; entire cities begin to starve. But nukes can be voted out of the game – if a peaceful player builds the UN. He or she can then call a vote on a non-proliferation treaty; each *Civ* receiving a share of the total vote proportional to their population. In *Civ*, nothing quite hurts like a nuke. Nothing, that is, but having those same nukes taken away by the nice man from the UN.



Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Publisher EA Developer DICE Release 2013



Battlefield 4

Battlefield 4 may be an essential component of any online FPS player's ammo box, but it didn't start with a bang so much as a storm of controversy. A launch beset with what at the time were thought to be server issues (although DICE subsequently revealed that the problems existed client-side) certainly attracted attention as EA continued its assault on Activision's *Call Of Duty* series, but for all the wrong reasons. Amid accusations of a rushed development schedule, players vented their frustrations at a game shot through with bugs, rendering it unplayable at times. Following refinement, though, what eventually emerged was a masterpiece of virtual warfare.

Battlefield 4 is an ambitious leap from the games that preceded it. Giant, evolving maps host 64-player matches that rage across land, sea and sky in a diverse range of vehicles. Standing at the edge of one of these conflicts can be an awesome experience, one that confidently shrinks the gap between PC and console multiplayer standards.

Conquest remains the strongest multiplayer offering, and here the larger number of players ups the frequency of engagements and increases the opportunities for meaningful cooperative gameplay. There's rarely a moment when you'll be on your own, and the expertly orchestrated ebb and flow of each battle, as capture points are taken and lost, encourages even the most solitary players to buddy up. *Battlefield 4* is a game that takes the

intimidation out of online competitive combat by ensuring that even the smallest contributions help the war effort. Don't feel you can go toe to toe with advanced infantry? Hang back and defend a secured capture point, heal teammates, or simply get up high and spot enemies to mark them for other players – it all helps, and you'll level up, too.

There are, naturally, plenty of other equally well-populated multiplayer modes to try elsewhere. Rush offers a scaled-down encounter in which an attacking force with limited tickets must destroy terminals protected by an unlimited defending side. Defuse is even more intimate, offering a *Battlefield: Hardline*-like five-vs-five mode on close-quarters maps with no respawns. And then there are the more specialised modes added via the game's numerous DLC updates, such as *China Rising*'s jet-only Air Superiority dogfighting, and *Naval Strike*'s Carrier Assault, which sees players attacking and defending aircraft carriers. While traditional deathmatch options exist, they're by far the least popular, and stand as extremely rare examples of the game choosing not to encourage the particular flavour of team play that sets it apart.

Aside from the new modes and increased scale, *Battlefield 4*'s other key addition is its unfortunately named Revolution mechanic, a device that builds on the large-scale destruction introduced in 2002's *Battlefield 1942* and refined further by the

Frostbite-powered *Battlefield: Bad Company*. The tower collapse featured on the Siege of Shanghai map was a key part of the game's promo campaign, and no wonder: it makes a big, loud case for DICE's technology. Taking out the four support pillars of the large skyscraper at the centre of the map brings it crashing down, reducing the area below it to a wasteland of rubble and sending a vision-obscuring dust cloud through the surrounding streets. On Paracel Storm, meanwhile, a series of islands are caught in the midst of a gradually intensifying storm that significantly reduces visibility and eventually results in the spectacular running aground of a destroyer. Taken purely as spectacle, the appeal of these events diminishes quickly, but once you've played a map enough times to be free of the desire to stop and gawp, Revolution moments transcend gimmickry and become purely strategic. In that respect, they never get old as both sides race to turn the environment to their advantage.

In terms of scale and variety, *Battlefield 4*'s multiplayer is peerless within its genre. Though its singleplayer campaign is much improved over *Battlefield 3*'s lacklustre offering, it remains a thin distraction from the main, assuredly superior online action. *Battlefield* champions strategy, teamwork and communication over pure twitch reactions, and Conquest remains the crowning achievement of a military shooter that is capable of provoking exhilaration like no other.



Format GC, Wii Publisher Nintendo Developer Retro Studios Release 2002



Metroid Prime

Ignore the cheery red-and-yellow Space Quarterback trappings: *Metroid* has always been a restless and difficult series, an introvert among the plumbers and pixies of the Nintendo catalogue. Serious, complex and unfriendly to newcomers, Samus Aran's adventures trade in elegant dread rather than clear-cut heroics, replacing the smiling clouds and summer skies with slimy rocks and echoing catacombs.

The difference is visible on every level: Mario goes left to right, a breezy sightseer on a predictable journey. *Metroid*, however, has always been about heading downwards, boring deeper into increasingly remote locations. And rather than the chummy, ever-expanding cast of the Mushroom Kingdom or Hyrule, *Metroid's* lineup is tiny and largely static. This isn't about being part of the gang, it's about quiet, lonely toil on the frontiers of space.

It's odd, then, that this ageing franchise, away from screens for almost a decade, should have beaten Mario and Link to become for many the standout title on GameCube. But the reason turns out to be simple: *Metroid Prime* is all about atmosphere and detail.

That controversial shift to firstperson, seen as a blunder from an untested developer, turns out to be a canny move. Rather than suggesting a new focus on gunplay, the change of perspective puts you not only into Aran's helmet but straight into her world. And from the orbiting Space Pirate lab to the decaying and corrupted planet interior of Tallon IV, it's the world

of *Metroid Prime* that truly makes it a classic. Like *Half-Life 2*, the game would rather tell its tale in stone and moss than cutscenes, speaking most coherently through the places that ancient calamity has left behind. *Prime* deals in archaeology as much as narrative. The caverns you travel through, the long-dead world you explore with its crumbled buildings and forgotten purposes, its ancient security systems and dormant switches, are far more than just the setting for a wider story – they *are* the story. And it's a surprisingly downbeat one: a tale of consequences and failures, of decaying remains, pollution, and the terrible aching loneliness that follows disaster.

What's surprising, then, is that the environments themselves at first seem oddly generic. Why get excited about another ice level, another world of lava and fire? These have been the stock set-dressings of videogames since their birth. But in *Prime* it's the treatment, the way the game uses tiny details to create a sense of isolation, of oppressive weight above and around you, that makes such tired ideas fresh again. It's the smashed computer panels, the tumble-down walls, and the terrifying prospect of an empty specimen case. Instead of levels, *Metroid Prime* has locations that feel real. Instead of enemies, it has developed a believable ecosystem, the creatures you fight emerging from the same environment that powers the story.

But, as ever with *Metroid*, that perfectly gloomy tale is just one of

two narratives at work. The other one is told in the slow but steady accumulation of new weapons and powers, the legacy of a series that understands more about rewards than Microsoft's Achievement system ever could. In *Metroid*, weapon upgrades are more than just bigger, better toys: they provide an elegant solution to the problem of pacing, opening up new areas and new possibilities, turning the constant backtracking into a deliriously exciting treasure quest. Gamerpoints are one thing, but a morph ball is something else: where will you use it? And how? This is a game that needs you to pay attention, to sit up straight and take notes, a game that asks you to remember where you saw that tempting gap you may now be able to pass through.

None of this was new to *Metroid Prime*, of course, but whereas certain iterations of *Zelda* and *Mario* may feel weighed down by their cumulative history of mechanics and traditions, *Prime* uses old tricks not because it has to, but because it can make them work; those it can't use, it ditches with little ceremony. On paper, drip-feeding and backtracking don't seem to make for a particularly thrilling game. But the results, when they're as well-judged and unsentimental as this, are both classically traditional and utterly revolutionary. Devastation has never been so colourful, lonely exploration has seldom been so exhilarating, and a game that rates patience and concentration above almost any other virtue has never been so endlessly gripping.







Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

Meet Mr Suitcase. He's an archetypal character in collectible card games (and the name of an achievement in *Madden NFL 25*): the guy who just has everything. He's the one who you mildly suspect has remortgaged a house simply to have an answer for all your strategies in that towering stack of foils, the guy who you play once and, if you win, spends 20 minutes constructing the perfect counter deck before demanding a rematch. If you lose, he's insufferable, wearing a smirk that asserts his tactical superiority even as he flops down a game-ending card so rare and powerful you could trade a Ming vase for it and still have to throw in change to make up the difference.

On the face of it, after two adventures, two massive card expansions and a period of earning its creator a reported \$155,000 per day in the US alone, *Hearthstone* seems like it would be dauntingly full of messrs Suitcase. And, in some modes, it is. The time has long since passed where you can enter Ranked matches with just a free booster pack or two to your name and expect to crack into the upper echelons. Even Casual seems more a hotbed for high-end players to deck-test than a welcoming start point. So it's not without caveat that we rank Blizzard's digital CCG among the most accessible examples of the form, nor declare it the quintessential template for converting physical game ideas to digital devices. Yet it is both.

Hearthstone's underlying magic is the same as it was on launch:

what it does with a processor behind all those skeuomorphic cards and with the distance imposed by an Internet connection. Presentationally, it's near flawless. Unsubtle glows inform you exactly which cards you can afford, a dazzling array of effects trace the precise ramifications of each one played, and there's a clear indication of when you have hit the limits of your turn or still have possible moves in hand. With no stats or effects triggers to track yourself, the onus is placed entirely on the way you play your deck. You are spared those knowing grins too — a simple emotes system creates a largely friendly atmosphere and denies alpha players the room to affect your turns.

Then consider the modes that just wouldn't be possible outside a specialist game shop: the pay-to-enter Arena, where you pick a hero and then draw up a deck from the entire card pool one selection of three options at a time, before trying to guide this on-the-fly construction to as many wins as possible before you accrue three losses. It's a wonderful way to counter the Suitcases of this world — it may not be fair in the sense of perfect balance, but everyone who pays the paltry sum of in-game gold or real money to enter through its doors is granted a playing field where no amount of completionism or cash will carry you. Likewise, the Tavern Brawl provides a weekly remix of the rules that can undercut the dominant decks in the current meta, or set the cards with which

you play. And the ability to render your cards into crafting dust to plug particularly synergistic holes in a deck takes a fair deal of the edge off the CCG's de facto blind pack purchasing model, so long as you don't expect to be buying the top-end legendaries that way.

Taken together, this represents an uncommonly generous approach for a free-to-play game, and one that permits acolytes entry to a genre of high skill requirements without splurging hundreds just to find out if they like it. At the other end of the scale, once *Hearthstone* has tutored you via its gentle introductory suite of AI matches, optional singleplayer adventures and countless online battles, there's a cerebral thrill in delving into the depths of its expanding card pool to pull together ludicrous chains of effect, from the one-turn KO deck to denial builds and all sorts of delicious tactical tricks. It's a rip current that, if you submit to it, can consume many a happy hour of daydreaming and deck tinkering, though it says much that Blizzard is even happy to help out with AI deck suggestions to facilitate dip-in/dip-out players.

The result is that *Hearthstone* is a CCG that's as deep, as costly and as time consuming as you allow it to be — good for short bus rides and evenings of streamed play alike. In unburdening an inherently gripping mode of play from the constraints of physicality, Blizzard has done something ingenious and captivating that absolutely trumps *Hearthstone's* paper-bound predecessors.





Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night

Younger players who took their first steps into *Symphony Of The Night*'s hallowed, half-lit gothic corridors via the Xbox Live Arcade port of the game would be forgiven for thinking it's a typical representation of videogames in 1997. But the truth is that, even upon its debut release nearly 20 years ago, *Castlevania*'s dark 2D environments, horror-shop cast of ghoul and zombie sprites, and orthodox side-scrolling action looked unfashionably dated. The fact it showcased some of the most exquisite and inventively designed sprites yet seen was of little consequence to a generation more interested in counting polygons and measuring draw distance.

But some players had the open-mindedness to embrace the game's nonconformist aesthetic elegance. And, once inside, it was obvious this outing ambitiously expanded *Castlevania*'s traditional mechanics, thus revealing itself to be a fresh, mesmerising and ocean-deep experience. As a result, *Symphony Of The Night* went on to command wallet-busting second-hand prices on Ebay as one of the most sought-after PS1 rarities.

The reasons for *Symphony Of The Night*'s sleeper-hit success are clear from the moment the imposing Romanian castle's cold gates clasp shut behind you. Continuing its forebears' premise, you're cast as a vampire hunter — in this case one Adrian Fahrenheit (nicknamed Alucard), Dracula's very own son. Locked within a labyrinthine castle, you're tasked with defeating a catalogue of

freakish but creative monsters in a hunt to find and defeat the lord of the castle. To help achieve this you're initially graced with the series' standard and sparse set of moves: a jump, two attacks (one for the left arm and one for the right), and a retreating backslide. However, over the course of the game these tight and familiar boundaries are expanded and a fistful of *Super Metroid*'s popular inventions dropped into the mix.

Now weapons, armour and items must be managed; defeating enemies yields RPG-style experience points to level up Alucard and increase his health and magic bars. Special moves, triggered with *Street Fighter II*-style inputs, invite previously untouched arcade mechanics into the fold. Logic-based puzzles present a new kind of obstacle for the player to overcome, and a huge emphasis is placed on obsessive exploration, a continually updating percentage score spurring the player on to fill in every single blank on the castle's sprawling map.

Upon this framework Konami overlays a simple but effective narrative, a staccato rhythm of ever-more-exciting boss encounters and, crucially, a brilliant and precise play arc controlled by a drip-feed of new obstacle-defeating upgrades to the player's abilities.

The mastery of this game design lies in how you're led to feel as though you have free roam in the castle, forging your own bespoke story by going off in any direction that takes your fancy.

While this is, to a certain extent, true, the game is more linear than it leads you to believe. By holding back key abilities, the designers are able to limit the areas you can reach until you've defeated the appropriate boss — an age-old game design mechanic but one rarely successfully writ so large and with such apparent freedom.

The designers' foresight and planning is only fully revealed at the supposed finale. Upon securing the game's best ending the screen blanches out and Alucard appears, standing alone in an upturned room. Venturing off into new screens, it transpires that you're in an upside-down version of the original castle. With astonishing generosity and vision, the world has been designed to work in both directions. Staircases become sloping ceilings, mantelpieces low ledges, and bell towers the deepest of basements. The castle must now be explored again up to the infamous and mathematically impossible target of 200.6 per cent.

But even discounting this magnanimous extra, what makes this the best of the *Castlevania* games? In part it's thanks to artist Ayami Kojima's mature and stylised character designs (removed from the subsequent DS games), which lend the game a certain dark charm, and an extraordinary soundtrack that matches the game's grand musical title. But more than that, the sheer excitement of not knowing what the game will throw at you next is yet to be matched by its sequels — or indeed few other games at all.





Format 360, Mac, PC, PS3, PS4, Vita, Xbox One Publisher/developer Playdead Release 2010



Limbo

Limbo is the go-to gateway game for luring non-gaming friends into the habit. It's easy to label as 'art': abstractly beautiful, mournful, eerie and possessed of deeper themes, even if it's not obvious what they are. It's something you'd be confident showing off to your grandmother without fear of a hail of gunfire or half-naked woman turning up to reinforce age-old stereotypes. And yet it's an entirely unpretentious game, a puzzle-based platformer that resonates even if you don't mean to engage with its implied narrative.

Limbo's title screen — a dilapidated treehouse and rotted rope ladder, grainy and indistinct in monochrome twilight — tells you nothing about what's coming. Pressing Start is not much more illuminating, as points of white light blink into life in a small silhouette's eye sockets, and he stands, bleary, in a grey and unfocused forest glade. Silence echoes; a sucking, gasping, empty noise, punctuated only by your rustling footsteps. You shuffle forwards, hesitant to disturb the stillness... and nothing happens.

This is the drawn-out tension of a horror game, not the blaze of colour and collectibles typically associated with platforming. *Limbo* still hasn't told you what's happening, which means you're apprehensive — scared without an object of fear, indicating the game's true mastery of horror. So you begin to overthink. A tiny sailboat on a steel-grey pond? Who left it there? Could they be tailing you? Wordless, *Limbo* has ensnared

you in its story out of fear for your own survival. Fear, as it happens, that is very well placed.

A boulder careers down a log, splattering you with surprising brutality considering that you're a small child. Later you're speared by the legs of a giant spider, and hunted by feral children who've hanged other travellers. Yet you reappear within seconds some metres back from the point of disaster. So it is with all of *Limbo's* harrowing puzzles, mechanisms and assailants. A successful first attempt on anything more dangerous than a rope swing is improbable, and *Limbo* takes sick satisfaction in scattering your limbs through the undergrowth. Its humour is black, your bark of laughter at the comprehensiveness of your death cut short by the realisation that you're watching a kid's head get popped off.

But it's this same repulsive, relentless funeral march that makes *Limbo* so friendly. *Limbo* is eminently accessible, without ever skimping on complexity. Death strikes hard and often, but it's also instructive, another effortless narrative tie to your running and jumping. You respawn without pause to draw breath, armed with the knowledge of what not to do next time. An aficionado may get it on a second attempt; a bemused relative, drawn to *Limbo's* pregnant opening in a way they can't fully explain, might take 30. It makes no difference — *Limbo* punishes often but teaches always.

It has a mere three controls (including movement) — run, jump and grab — and from that

intuitive toolset and the physics of mass and gravity it constructs puzzles along a flawless difficulty curve. It's almost a pity to step out from the forest, malicious and twisted though it was, because the ensuing cityscape is cold and uncaring, a shift from carefully set traps and ravenous wildlife to collapsing steelwork and electricity. Indifferent, it makes no concessions for your survival, its rotating industrial hardware demanding that you remain in motion. Death becomes a valuable respite in which to process how on Earth you got mangled that time. Then, after instilling in you the reflexes to conquer pacier puzzles, *Limbo* introduces its crowning gravity mechanics — switches that must be manipulated mid-flight to change lethal falls into graceful orbits around evil circular saws.

If you're good, this much might take you an hour or so to navigate, every moment of which Playdead handles with utmost economy. Nothing is extraneous, no empty stretch insignificant; each puzzle is one notch tougher than before, and every step attempts to tell you something. Because *Limbo* still hasn't explained what this bleak place is. For 60 brooding minutes it's pulled you along, its scenery, traps and even — especially — its gravity mechanics suggesting that something deeper is on display than a walk in a dangerous forest. The opening seconds snare your curiosity, but it's after the credits have rolled and the title screen's treehouse reappears that *Limbo* will begin to haunt you.



Format Mac, PC, PS4 Publisher/developer Matt Makes Games, Inc Release 2014



Towerfall Ascension

Towerfall Ascension presents a serious problem: you cannot afford to blink. Not when that split second could mean a tiny pixel arrow ripping through the air and pinning you to the wall. Not when it could blind you to an opponent dropping through a hole in the floor, then warping around to one in the ceiling so they can bop you on the head, eliminating you as dispassionately as Mario dispatches a Goomba. Not when staying stationary is to invite a quick dispatch, either directly by your foes or by the hazards built into these single-screen levels. Staying alive long enough to claim the crown in one of *Ascension*'s raucous, anarchic multiplayer matches is going to require all your attention, a little luck, and every last ounce of your skill. Thank goodness individual rounds tend to last in the order of seconds, not minutes.

Except of course you will still blink. And you will still die. That's inevitable. But while the game's pace is unforgiving and there's so much to keep track of onscreen, *Ascension* is not pure carnage. Rather, it is a game of imposing yourself on carnage, and provides a subtle, supple toolset with which to do so, as well as some sensible limitations. Take the dash, just a trigger squeeze away: it operates in the same eight directions as aiming, so it can be a double jump of sorts or grant you a little hang time, but it can also push you downwards, so a skilled player can use it to confound easy sight lines. You'll last even longer once you master the arrow snatch, where

you dash at an incoming projectile and automatically pluck it from the air, adding it to your limited quiver. It's a vital addition: while you start with a maximum of only three opponents, you also begin with just three arrows. Every other shot you fire, powerups aside, will rely on you first snatching up the leftovers from previous shots, whether or not they successfully find their targets.

It's a golden rule, one that sees combatants clash and then rush to retreat and scoop up projectiles, a cycle of tension and release broken only by being the last one standing. Developer Matt Thorson made *Towerfall* in an environment where local multiplayer testing was on tap — the Indie House in Vancouver — and it shows in this mechanical encouragement to scramble, which sees power forever shifting between the arrow haves and arrow have-nots. It's also displayed in the measured balance and overall leanness of the multiplayer game. Fall too far behind and you'll be granted a bubble shield that can soak up exactly one hit, redressing the playing field, while every zone has its own hazards and powerup arrows to get a feel for. Skill will out, or at least makes a significant difference to the final standings, but *Ascension* is tuned just so to ensure that novices are always learning and it's rarely too late for a dramatic comeback.

Since multiplayer matches are short, however, you'll feel the three-arrow limitation most in Quest mode, whether you play solo or invite your friends to help

you take on its waves of tricky enemies. It's a stern test of spatial awareness, keeping track of all the portals spawning in new foes, but your meagre ration of projectiles also makes high demands on your ability to plan and then improvise when it all goes wrong. What's most delightful is how few of the enemies act like player bots, but rather encourage fresh tactical approaches to cleanse your palette between deathmatches. Winged harpies can fling tornadoes at you, and defend themselves from an arrow by scrambling the airspace before them, requiring you to draw out the attack before closing quickly for the kill. Reapers, meanwhile, will simply bat away incoming missiles with their scythe, unless you can nail them with a shot to their undefended backs. None of the behaviours are especially complex, but having to learn the enemy types and plan a master strategy that allows you to loop around the arena to refill your quiver ensures that this is far more fraught than just determining target priority and expressing aiming skill.

However you play it, then, *Towerfall Ascension* is rarely less than frantic, but it is also never short of engrossing. It may look like another indie game that taps into the nostalgia of pixels and Mario's headstomp, but these are not crutches. Rather they form a framework upon which Thorson can add his own brand of twisted invention, a set of rules and ideas honed in the fires of local multiplayer but only fractionally less essential as a solo pursuit.



Format SNES Publisher Nintendo Developer Ape, HAL Laboratory Release 1994



EarthBound

It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. When Nintendo Of America came to localise Shigesato Itoi's *Mother 2*, it set aside substantial funds for an extensive promotional campaign. But the decision to mirror the game's subversive tone in its sarcastic slogan – "This game stinks" – was a mistake. In the US, the game sold fewer than half the number of copies that had been shifted in Japan, ensuring both its cult status and astronomical resale value in the years that followed. Its legend grew through enthusiastic word of mouth from the comparative few who'd played and loved it, until it finally earned a critical reappraisal two decades on, courtesy of a belated Virtual Console release.

Yet that was nothing compared to the troubles it had endured getting made in the first place. Itoi, asked by Nintendo to write a promotional slogan, took the opportunity to pitch a game idea to Nintendo, which Shigeru Miyamoto rejected. After an intervention from then president Hiroshi Yamauchi, who saw creative value in the fresh approach of an outsider, a sheepish Miyamoto was asked to call Itoi and accept his game idea, simply titled *Mother*. It was a success in Japan and a sequel was quickly greenlit. But four years into development, *EarthBound* still wasn't working. The graphics, sound and game scenario were all but complete, but the individual pieces couldn't be connected. Enter Satoru Iwata, then president of HAL Laboratory, who told Itoi

and his team that on its current path it would take another two years to finish. Iwata, however, had another plan: to start afresh, and complete the job within six months. No prizes for guessing which option Itoi took.

Still, without those hardships, you wonder whether the finished *EarthBound* would be quite the same. It's a game, after all, that is defined by its differences; through the ways in which it bucks, subverts or slyly pokes fun at genre tropes, and through its unlikely contrasts of the mundane and the otherworldly. It's a sideways, satirical look at small-town Americana with a wonderful absurdist streak, presenting you with baseball bats, cookies and picnic lunches one moment before inviting you to face off against giant roaches, extraterrestrials and zombie dogs the next.

Not all of its ideas seem as unorthodox as they once did, though for a JRPG to eschew random encounters was unthinkable at the time. The brisk turn-based combat remains its most conventional element, but even this has its unique wrinkles. Recognising that combat against low-level opponents was essentially meaningless in other RPGs, Itoi introduced the idea of weak enemies running away from you; catch them and you'll automatically gain the XP you'd normally earn from fighting them. And though players still had to endure the common frustration of moves failing to connect, Itoi wanted to avoid parties being wiped out at a single stroke.

Rather than killing you outright, potentially fatal blows see your HP gauge deplete slowly; defeat your attacker before it hits zero, or use an item or Psi power to heal, and you'll survive.

Like many of its kind, *EarthBound* is a coming-of-age tale, a story of a young adventurer leaving the comfort of his village to save the world. And yet it could not be more different from its peers in the telling. This is a heartfelt and deeply human story about a boy on the cusp of growing up, keen to demonstrate his independence while still reliant upon the comforts of family and old friends. Ness will get homesick if he doesn't call his mother often enough, and though his father is more distant, he's equally caring, concerned enough about his son's welfare that he'll suggest taking a break – before conceding that saving the world might just have to take priority.

Itoi said he wanted *EarthBound* to break players' hearts, but it's clear he's equally keen to make them laugh. The humour ranges from observational to surrealist, and it's this strange blend of the familiar and the bizarre that makes the game's world so alive.

Masterfully blending humour and pathos, *EarthBound* has a timeless appeal – a good job, too, given that some people had to wait nearly 20 years to play it. Still, if that delay was hard to excuse, we should offer thanks to those two late Nintendo presidents to whom it owes its existence. It may not be quite as fresh as it was in 1994, but the game certainly doesn't stink.





Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Publisher Warner Bros Developer Rocksteady Release 2015



Batman: Arkham Knight

Rocksteady's *Batman* has done a lot for videogames. Until the Caped Crusader first touched finger to cowl, sight overlay modes were used for tame things such as granting Sam Fisher grainy night vision. Until Bats laid cuffed glove on stubbled chin, perhaps the closest thing to this series' punchy freeflow combat was Ezio's polite, one-at-a-time swordplay in *Assassin's Creed*. And until he appeared, stealth in games was more often about avoiding detection than using the night as a cloak to dismantle a room full of guards layer by patient layer.

With all this appropriated by countless other action adventures, you may not even thank the Dark Knight or his Highgate handlers for it. But just as Ubisoft's much-overused territory-claiming waypoints are still enjoyable in *Far Cry 4* and still have purpose in *Assassin's Creed*, so it makes sense to come home to the series that developed these ideas to the point of mainstream adoption.

Every Rocksteady *Arkham* game has its own appeal. *Asylum* is the tightest and most focused; *City* has its excellent challenge rooms and some standout moments with the rogues gallery. But if we're seeking these influential systems at their ultimate, then *Knight* is the most complete expression of Batman's martial prowess and utility belt ever committed to code, and it takes place in the most expansive and complete videogame Gotham yet crafted.

That city is a marvel — acres of densely packed buildings and distinguishable districts forming a

rain-slick playground for the Dark Knight to dominate at his leisure. While the Batmobile will tear you through these streets to the next objective marker in short order, it's Batman's glide that allows you to best take in this sea of rooftops, Riddler challenges, landmarks and sidequests. Flight allows the world design to shine and lets the studio do away with minimaps full of icons and popups, as if the point of open-world distractions was merely to fragment your attention. Rocksteady invites you to read the city like the Batman, a point reinforced by not having every batsignal waypoint take you straight to the destination but to the general vicinity to work out the rest yourself. Demanding a little extra brainpower does much to create the feel of being Batman.

All that extra space also allows those stealth sections to breathe in a way they couldn't within the confines of *Asylum*, outdoor objectives granting freedom of approach to a barely constrained predator. In return, Rocksteady ups its guards' own tricks, with heavies who won't go down quietly, Detective Mode blockers, and medics who can undo your good work, requiring greater forethought and improvisation than any *Arkham* past. The latter quality is enabled more smoothly than ever by the Fear Takedown, a new trick that allows Bats to fell a string of nearby guards in quick succession, providing he's recently taken out a thug silently. It is both opener and finishing move, and a grand equaliser for the greater forces ahead. Still, perhaps it's

the enjoyment of messing with environmental toys — dropping a chandelier at the right moment, or sending goons tumbling down an escalator — that best delivers the satisfaction of being the most powerful man in the room, despite your painful mortality.

Melee combat, meanwhile, remains as bone-shatteringly brutal as ever, a rhythmic dance played to the percussive snaps of femurs and splintering glass jaws, although this time with top notes of spectacular environmental finishers. Again, new enemy types demand you play tactician, but freeflow combat was always the most accomplished arm of Rocksteady's power fantasy, and it still holds up brilliantly in 2016.

All these fundamentals are even counterpointed by certain spokes of sidequest. You join forces with Selina Kyle to tagteam Riddler's colour-coded bots. You engage in two memorable brawls that require you to stretch your understanding of freeflow to its absolute limits. The blaring sirens of Two Face bank robbery missions remove the de facto penalty for making noise in Predator rooms, but introduce a tight time limit. Not every part of the game is as smart — you may very well be sick of the Batmobile combat by the end of the main story's drone wars, for instance. Still, as the biggest and most open enclosure for the series' most diverse cast of scum and villainy, *Arkham Knight* is a peerless setting in which to enact the systems that not only made the Batman fantasy work, but have also helped shape gaming since 2009.







Transistor

There's a fundamental flaw in the traditional RPG levelling system. When you peruse the talent tree and ponder what to spend your newly acquired skill point on, you're not really making that much of a decision. You're not choosing what you want to be, so much as what you want to be *right now* — you might go for more health this time, but in another hour or two you'll be back at the skill screen, buffing up the stat you chose to ignore earlier.

Transistor's a little different. This is no 60-hour epic, where another skill point can be earned by spending a few hours crossing entries off your quest log. This tight, focused, story-driven RPG bombards you with options when you level up. There is simply no time to pick them all, at least not in a single playthrough. As you level up, you can pick one of a choice of two different moves, or you can unlock an extra Passive slot (providing a permanent buff to protagonist Red), or an Upgrade subfunction (which changes the effect of one of your existing moveset). Alternatively, you can increase your Memory, which governs how much you can equip.

That may suggest *Transistor* is a turn-based game, but that's only half the truth. You can play it entirely in realtime if you want, zipping in and out of cover and managing cooldowns on the attacks mapped to the four face buttons. Just don't expect a smooth ride. Instead, we advise a squeeze of the right trigger, which activates Turn mode. The battle freezes, the music filters

out into the distance, and you're free to cue up a string of moves unhindered; press R2 again and Red enacts the plan before the enemy knows what's hit them. Early on, the balance of power seems to be tipped firmly in your favour, but the enemy threat ramps up quickly and significantly, and mistakes are heavily punished. When your health bar's depleted, you don't die straight away but lose access to one of your moves. Battles are tense, despite the ability to pause time and plan out a combo that ends with a dash to safe ground; the gentle pace of Turn mode is punctuated by a fraught few seconds of hunkering down behind destructible cover, waiting in realtime for your cooldowns to recharge.

The setting is Cloudbank, a retro-futurist city that fuses the art of Gustav Klimt and Syd Mead, and the fashion of the 1920s with the technology of the future. One minute you're watching as Red, a singer by trade, sings a sultry torch number; the next you're voting on tomorrow's weather conditions at a streetside computer terminal. It's all run by the Camerata, a shady Illuminati-style group that recruits the great and the good — athletes, business leaders, celebrities, and so on — to put a presentable face on its clearly dubious intentions. Cloudbank is a world of stark contrasts that remains coherent throughout, as you piece together the mystery behind Red waking up alone in what was once a throbbing metropolis but is now a ghost town.

Well, almost alone. When she comes to, there's a talking sword by her side. While *Transistor* shares many similarities with developer Supergiant's debut game *Bastion* — both are isometric action-RPGs full of artistic flair — what really unites the two is voice actor Logan Cunningham. In *Bastion* he was the narrator but here he's an integral part of the world, and the game. As in *Bastion*, he's there to tell the story and comment on events, speaking equally on behalf of Supergiant's writers and you the player. But he is also speaking for Red, who wakes up having lost the ability to talk. He's a character in his own right, too, the soul of a dead man trapped in the hilt of the sword that killed him, understandably keen to find out what the hell is going on.

He won't tell you the whole story by himself, however: to tease that out you'll need to burrow deep into the game's interface, poring over terminal screens and item descriptions, even maxing out the upgrades on your attacks — a sprawling job that will require multiple playthroughs to complete.

Cunningham may be the most recognisable piece of connective tissue between Supergiant's games, but the real stars are the men and women behind the scenes. In the space of just two releases they marked their studio out as one of the very best in the business, indie or otherwise, making polished, deep, stylish games that belie their meagre headcount.





Format Various Publisher/developer Various Release 1991



Puyo Puyo

Puyo Puyo was created in 1991 but wasn't released outside its native Japan until it was repackaged a few years later as Mega Drive game *Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* and then SNES title *Kirby's Ghost Trap*. Even then, it took a while to impress European and American audiences due to the slow-burning charm of its subtle complexities, and it still struggles to achieve the acclaim it merits, often considered by critics to be little more than a poor man's *Tetris* clone.

That's partly because those critics can't see through the superficial resemblance to games such as *Tetris* and various other vertical puzzlers such as *Dr Mario* or *Columns*. Like those games, *Puyo Puyo* is played out on a grid, which gradually fills up with coloured blocks that descend from the top of the screen, and it's the player's job to keep clearing the screen by assembling the coloured blocks into groups. In this case the coloured blocks, or puyos, are actually coloured blobs, which drop down the screen in pairs, with a jaunty wobble and staring eyes that straddle the chasm between unsettling and charming.

The basic object of the game is to rotate and steer them so as to assemble groups of four or more blobs of the same colour, which then disappear, allowing any blobs above them to drop down. This provides the basis of one slight difference from *Tetris*, but the main twist is that the game takes the form of a twoplayer head-to-head competition (indeed, part of the game's appeal in singleplayer

is that different AI opponents play with different styles and strategies). The essence of the head-to-head structure is that it's possible to send over colourless puyos to fill up your opponent's screen (called, depending on who's calling them, nuisance puyos, or garbage puyos, or ojyama). You do that by arranging your puyos into blocks of more than four, or by setting up combos by arranging them into blocks that disappear to allow the puyos above them to form another group.

Those are the cold, hard, facts. But, as ever, they fail to do justice to the infectious zeal with which *Puyo Puyo* will take over your mind. It's the sort of game that leaves an imprint on your eyes – and on your consciousness – long after you've played it. Just when you think you're beginning to escape its clutches, you'll find it demanding that you try just once more to trigger another deeply satisfying cascading combination to wreck your opponent's carefully constructed plans.

At first you'll play it like any other vertical puzzle game, taking tentative steps, trying to make sense of the chaotic collection of coloured blobs. You'll patiently try to clear your screen piecemeal until, gradually, your brain will start to register the vertical scope of the playfield and its capacity to conceal successive combinations. And finally you'll have that moment of realisation when your brain at last makes sense of the game's dizzying scope and you start filling up your screen with potentially lethal shapes and

arrangements that, with the right timing and the right pair of puyos, will rain down a screenful of grief on to your unwitting opponent.

The game offers the ultimate in high-risk reward: to play well you need to throw off the shackles of conservatism, and toss caution to the wind, with confidence in your brain's ability to quickly make sense of the rapidly filling play area. You'll need to let your puyos pile up, with carefully controlled precision, until your screen is nearly full. At this point, to anyone who thinks the game is just another *Tetris* clone, your screen will appear on the verge of collapse. But actually, you'll be waiting for the right moment, and the right pair of puyos, to unlock the whole thing – to drag deadly order out of the chaos, to set in motion a cascade of combos, and to clear your screen while filling your opponent's.

It's a perfect formula that has, essentially, remained intact across countless sequels and spinoffs that have graced just about every major (and minor) hardware platform. Indeed, it's difficult to alight upon a single definitive version of the game, but *Puyo Pop Fever* (*Puyo Puyo Fever* in Japan) is a good place to start for the uninitiated. While its carefully polished visuals lack the pixelly charms of early versions of the game, it contains more modes than you'll ever need, including the masterful addition of the fever mode (which introduces a beat-'em-up-style special attack) and a clutch of even cuter characters. A poor man's *Tetris* clone? Hardly.





FTL: Faster Than Light – Advanced Edition

FTL never wanted for excitement. With its teetering stack of interdependent ship systems — interwoven by a common power resource — ready to topple over into your lap at a moment's notice, its core ship-to-ship combat has always captured the precipitous thrill of surfing on a wave of potential disaster, trying to move quickly enough to avoid being caught by the fury of the roiling ocean behind. But while when we reviewed this charming 2D Roguelike-like back in E247, we found the most engrossing Star Trek captain's chair simulator yet made, we yearned for more to do outside of trading crackling laser fusillades. "Make it so, Subset Games," we requested. Then it did.

The expanded *FTL* of today — sometimes badged up as *Advanced Edition*, though it is now the default — is a cornucopia of possibilities, and has become almost endlessly replayable (just ask the **Edge** staffer who slotted the iPad edition into his nightly routine, where it remained for weeks on end). The game's text events have always been randomly drawn, but *Advanced Edition* dips into a far larger pool, alleviating the strains of repetition. Knowing that some outcomes are also randomised ensures that you can never be totally sure what fate awaits you for picking up a drifter from a moon, or pitching in to help with an infestation of giant alien spiders — retaining the frisson of charting the unknown long after you've burned through the entire deck. Quests add unpredictability in a different way,

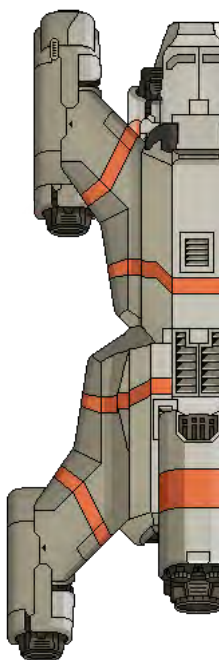
throwing up tantalising threads to resume in later sectors, which can be brutally severed by ill fate, their resolutions dangling to rediscover and resolve in a later playthrough. As ever, new paths open up with the right crew members or ship upgrades, too, providing tangible benefits to pursue outside of raw combat ability, though again a larger array of parts makes for more surprises. The result is a procedural universe that retains the capacity to surprise even after days spent sounding its depths. In short, *FTL's* fiction has become an even more imaginative and richly realised web to navigate — at least when you drop out of hyperdrive into a sector that doesn't contain a vessel bent on your immediate destruction.

Should that eventuality come to pass, *Advanced Edition* has stitched plenty into combat too, providing even more devious playstyles to complement its broad array of weapon and drone types. At a basic level, for instance, hacking allows you to disrupt enemy systems (each codified into a discrete room), freeing fire control to either double down on the beleaguered function or to hammer away at other prime targets. Brilliantly, it can even cause those rooms to turn on their masters, giving opposing crew members a reason to fear a trip to the med bay, or pulling a boarding party back to their vessel. Mind control, meanwhile, plays out a thousand 'aliens made me do it' sci-fi plots, allowing you to wreak havoc on a hostile vessel without ever submitting a crew member to

harm. Combined with a greater number of starting ship layouts and the paths these set you down, there is a staggering nuance to the process of persevering your limited hull strength as you race to the game's fearsome boss.

But all of *Advanced Edition's* many indispensable additions also serve to highlight what *FTL* got so right from the beginning: the atmosphere, the chaos, and the countless frantic balancing acts. With only a limited quantity of precious scrap for upgrades, and an army of rebels nipping at your heels, how much time and fuel can you afford to waste stockpiling riches for the next passing shop? Can you really get away with selling off crew members to fit those breach missiles, heightening the risk of leaving another empty hulk to spin through the stars just to even the odds in combat? And while battles can be paused at will, the juggling of limited bars of power across multiple systems to optimise tactical effect becomes a frantic loop in and of itself.

No Man's Sky may have missed some of its marks, but the space race continues, the evolving universes of *Star Citizen* and *Elite Dangerous* aiming to bring us the horizon in spectacular fashion. But you needn't wait for those games to realise their ultimate ambitions: with a little imagination and a robust constitution, *FTL's* perilous, fractious universe already offers a hundred varied hours of tactical management and the allure of forging out into the unknown. What will you find among its pixel stars?





Format Vita Publisher/developer Atlus Release 2012



Persona 4 Golden

The problem with PS Vita, like PSP before it, is that players and developers alike looked at its processing capacity and traditional controls and decided it was the perfect home for console games, instead of handheld ones. Only when it was too late would it become apparent that Vita was not quite capable of the graphical excesses players expect from big-budget, big-screen games. Its fiddly little sticks lack the fine control of a DualShock, and its rear touch panels are no substitute for a proper set of triggers.

Some of Vita's worst games are console ports; some are Vita exclusives that try, and fail, to replicate the scale and feel of a console release. *Persona 4 Golden* is the exception to the rule, a console port that's perfectly suited to portable play, and one of the best games available for Sony's handheld. Indeed, Vita is in many ways a more natural fit for this colossal Japanese roleplaying game than its original home of PS2. While it certainly can be devoured in long sittings, it's ideal for bite-sized play, too.

Set in the sleepy Japanese town of Inaba, *Persona 4 Golden* takes place across a full academic year at the local high school. Days are broken up into brief, discrete chunks — perhaps a conversation with a pal on the walk in, a pop quiz in the classroom, lunch with a love interest on the roof, and then off to some after-school clubs before spending the evening studying or tending the garden.

The reason the game is equally suited to five minutes at the bus

stop and a long-haul flight is that everything you do, however brief, has a purpose. Hard work improves your stats, while time spent with other people strengthens the bond — or Social Link, as the game has it — between the two of you.

It's classic JRPG narrative design, a gentle cultural brainwashing about the benefits of working hard and being nice to those around you. Yet here, set to the backdrop of a high-school comedy, it's tremendously effective. You're not just studying for a Knowledge boost; you've got mid-terms coming up. You're not only being a good person because of the game's mechanics, but also because high school is no place for the friendless, and good Inaba girls don't go for bad guys.

This peaceful little town is in the grip of a murder mystery. It rains for a few days, fog settles over the town, and someone goes missing and will turn up dead unless you do something about it. And by something, we mean enter a shadow world by jumping through a TV screen at the local department store. This, as you might have guessed, is where *Persona 4 Golden* gets weird. It's here you'll meet Teddy, a spirit taking the form of a man-sized cartoon bear who lusts awkwardly after girls and does a fine line in ursine wordplay. It's also the point at which the game takes a sharp left turn in its mechanics, going from knockabout teen flick to turn-based dungeon crawler.

Which is not to say that your actions in the real world lack

meaning down here, or that the tone changes very much. Knock all enemies onto the floor, for instance, and your party can join forces for a devastating team attack that sees you all charge in for a pile-on, the odd fist and foot sticking out of the cartoon cloud of dust that kicks up around the fray. One of your number, meanwhile, fights with a fold-up chair. And it's here that those Social Links you've been working on during the day come into their own, because they enable you to form, or 'fuse', more powerful Personas, the god-like beings that you summon for damaging magical attacks.

As if high school wasn't complicated enough, right? By day your expanding group of friends wrestle with the realities of teenage life — coming to terms with their sexuality, fretting about their miserable love lives, and dealing with the death of a close relative. One minute you're consoling a pal about their reluctance to take over the family business when they graduate, the next you're smacking a demon in the face with a desk.

Fifty hours or so later the credits will roll, but you won't be done; perhaps you'll revert to an earlier save to get a better one of the game's multiple endings, or start all over again on a min-maxing Persona fusion mission. It's an odd place, certainly, but one that's always worth a visit, regardless of whether you're there for a short trip or a long stay. This is *Persona 4 Golden*, and there's nothing quite like it.







Mass Effect 2

Disregard what came

before. Forget what came after. Somewhere between the high-concept opening and the high-profile ending lies an almost-perfect slice of the reasons why the *Mass Effect* series is still one of the biggest names in sci-fi roleplaying. It spectacularly avoids mid-trilogy sag by jettisoning into space — quite literally — a great deal of what didn't work from the first game, and acting like a third part was in no way a given, allowing for a standalone second act of uncommon coherence and character.

The game's Whedon-esque touch with an ensemble cast is primarily responsible for the latter, a likeable bunch of fractured misfits once again drawn together to save the world. It is also your expanded crew from which the game draws most of its structure, becoming a sort of intergalactic Blues Brothers as you hop from planet to space station putting the band back together on a mission from a man who's playing God. It's a glorious excuse to freewheel across the galaxy, but — more importantly for an RPG — it also puts the emphasis squarely on the people loosely gathered under your take on Shepard's command.

And what a group BioWare can conjure when it's on form. The best of *Mass Effect 1* carry over — plus Kaiden, if you saved him — which means more quality time with Garrus, Tali, Wrex and Joker. But it's the new additions who make for such a beguilingly unstable mix of personalities. The engineered-to-be-perfection

Miranda and engineered-upon wild child Jack share just enough overlap to thoroughly get on each other's nerves. Bringing on board a self-contained Geth hive mind was never going to be popular with Tali, whose people have been hounded across the stars by their creations. You'll have to stabilise this volatile mixture if you are to harness its explosive power to defeat a new threat: the colonist-abducting Collectors.

How you do that is just as important as why. *Mass Effect 2*'s loyalty missions are an antidote to reams of weightless fetchquests, providing chunky optional side stories that dig deep into your crew members' sordid pasts or current problems. Not only do they round out the characters and provide wonderful space for their development, they make you central to it. It's ideal sustenance for the roleplayer, but it also allows BioWare to introduce more shades of morality to underpin its binary Paragon or Renegade paths. How you navigate these difficult choices matters, and it matters not because it affects some distant apocalypse, but because it will impact the lives of a group of people you've grown to care about.

The perilous final mission, meanwhile, makes drama of these handspun threads of attachment by threatening to snap them, with death a very real possibility for your crew, and loyalty only a measure of protection. Of course, you're told the stakes are high, too — this is a videogame ending, after all — but that rings a little less hollow when you know that

everything you've worked for will only endure with the right calls.

Then there's the shooting leading up to that desperate last stand. Inevitably, Shepard won't be able to talk the Normandy SR-2's expanding ship's manifest of volatile personalities out of every situation, or even most of them, but it's hard to care, since BioWare made warmongering so viable and entertaining. While it builds on the thirdperson cover shooter template of *Gears Of War*, *Mass Effect 2* augments it with a host of powerful biotic abilities that blow up the possibility space. Enemy cowering in cover? No problem: summon a black hole to dislodge them. Want to get in shotgun range without dying? Pick a foe and dash across No Man's Land wreathed in blue fire, slamming your target backwards and leaving them vulnerable to a buckshot follow-up. And while Shepard cannot carry every power into battle, your pick of squad mates and as much control over them as you'd like means you'll rarely be short a tactical option.

While that combat has aged a little in six years, it has lost none of its vicious punch, and the enduring core of human nature being explored through distorted mirrors with tentacle hair and reptilian faces is timeless. Disregard what came before. Forget what came after. You don't need either to enter the fires of Hell with a ship full of nuanced crewmates, or to emerge having formed some of the most powerful attachments to be forged in videogames — online or off.





Format PS2, PS3, Wii Publisher Capcom Developer Clover Studio Release 2006



Okami

Okami owes its unique existence to Capcom's decision, in 2004, to stir up a climate of innovation within the company. It did this by forming Clover Studio from some of its most proven talents, including Atsushi Inaba (*Devil May Cry*, *Steel Battalion*), Shinji Mikami (*Resident Evil*) and Hideki Kamiya (*Devil May Cry*). Its defining production would be an action adventure based on traditional Japanese watercolour painting and aspects of Shinto, the ancient Japanese religion.

Okami's central character is a silent wolf goddess, Ameratsu, inspired by the Shinto god of the same name, and she's guided through the mythic settings by an inch-tall artist dressed as a bug. The tiny companion is both comic relief and the narrator of the tale, while their quest to free Japan from evil spirits is the motor for some unique and challenging game design concepts. *Okami's* most notable innovation is 'The Celestial Brush', allowing you to freeze a scene into a sepia-tinted parchment, which can then be painted upon with the calligraphic tool. The symbol drawn (such as a line, a circle, or a series of dots) will dictate the power used: players mend collapsed bridges, chop down trees, bring dead valleys to life, and cage enemies with plumes of bamboo — all with a twist of the brush.

This system creates some lavish visual effects and exhilarating puzzles, but *Okami's* ease of play makes it both massively imaginative and easily grasped. Few games pull off this kind of

balancing act and still manage to be funny, challenging and beautiful almost beyond belief.

The graphical achievements of some games are easy to eulogise, and *Okami* is one such title, but in this instance visual excellence is much more of a stylistic than technical accomplishment. Themed by traditional Japanese watercolours, cel-shaded and flowing, and filtered through a parchment, it is as if the entire game is drawn on a canvas or printed with carved wood blocks. It is the kind of vision, perhaps, that Sony may have been hoping for when it optimistically named its PlayStation 2's CPU 'Emotion Engine'.

The sheer range *Okami* is capable of suggests a palette that other games only dream of, and Clover refuses to concede on visual wealth at any point. The terrifying organic immensity of the Spider Queen includes an incidental special effect that is as stunning as it is fleeting, and the game is happy to produce such touches on a routine basis. Tidal waves of magically ignited fauna and exploding blossom; communes with forest animals; the grim spookiness of the cursed zones, whose enemies stalk the lands as haunted scrolls or tapestries (bad spirits, banjo-wielding demons waiting to be tripped) — *Okami* is pumped up with invention and charm, ready to burst open as you play.

What excited many *Okami* enthusiasts is the way the game reinterprets traditional Japanese themes and ideas, with both its

pastoral art and its demon-infested polytheistic folklore. Presenting all these ideas as a paintbrush-plus-*Zelda*-mixed-with-wolf-god tale provides encouragement for games to draw on far wider ranges of influence than they have in the past. But the charm of this peculiar recipe isn't simply in its processing of esoteric influences, it's also in the ease and flow, the slow but steady pace that keeps its ideas arriving. There's always another sword-wielding mouse (appearing as a mouse-wielding sword) descending from the heavens, and there's always another battle inside a storm of calligraphic ideograms. *Okami* makes all this seem natural and, more importantly, enjoyable.

There are complaints about *Okami*, too — that there is too much text, that the game is too easy, that the camera is clunky, that the freeze-frame-and-paint powers are too difficult to manipulate. But the privilege of playing a game that is so persuasive in so many other ways is enough to render such issues redundant, or at the very least digestible. *Okami* is too special to be cast aside that way.

The subsequent dissolution of Clover Studio led some commentators to argue that *Okami* represents a prime example of how unusual game design cannot make money in today's climate. But perhaps we should be less concerned about how *Okami* represents the failure of innovation, and instead be thankful that such an artful and elegant game came to exist at all.





The Stanley Parable

You begin in a cubicle in an abandoned office, ostensibly playing the role of a man called Stanley. Yet you're not, really, are you? You're you, playing a game. Stanley is a conceit. This is the key idea explored in *The Stanley Parable*, a game fundamentally about the relationship between the players and designers of games.

As you explore, a narrator explains Stanley's actions – your actions, sort of – in a way that acknowledges the many philosophical issues raised by that distinction. Which route you opt to take, whether you play along with the story or disobey, how adventurous you are in attempting to break the game or how stubborn you are in calling its bluff – all of these things lead to different areas, different endings, and wildly different experiences. It's a game that can feel short and sparse the first time you play it but evokes this feeling purposefully. The moment you realise just how much you can do and discover takes the form of a kind of magic trick. You are encouraged to push at the boundaries of what other scripted games would allow you to do, and the rewards for doing so are immense.

Despite its lofty ideas and adept execution, however, *The Stanley Parable* could well have been a disaster if it wasn't for its expert negotiation of tone. A game about games is about as pseudish a concept as it gets, carrying an inherent danger that it might only play to people who are already versed enough in game design debate to reflexively roll their eyes

at the concept of ludonarrative dissonance. *The Stanley Parable* dodges this issue, however, by being very, very funny. The writing is sharp and the comic timing peerless, with a central performance that takes the best of what Valve achieved with *Portal*'s GLaDOS and matches it.

It's not one type of comedy, either. There are visual gags and one-liners, an extended black-comedy dig at typical videogame morality ('press the button unless you want the baby to go in the fire'), and moments of giddy escalation and silliness. One of the finest moments arrives when you are asked to follow the critical path, with a frustrated narrator actually painting the critical path onto the floor ahead of you as a yellow line. You're asked to follow it faster, and faster, until its looping – over obstacles, up walls, in and out of doorways – becomes impossible to match exactly. Then the music kicks in, a manic carnival soundtrack that exposes the fact that you've been led into performing a French farce. At that point, it's up to you whether you embrace it or resist – and despite returning to that idea many times, *The Stanley Parable* consistently finds new ways to spin it.

There are also moments of sadness, beauty and horror – the game can play the serious notes too, even as it acknowledges that po-faced videogame sentimentality often becomes unintentionally funny anyway. It's the sense that *The Stanley Parable* knows exactly what it is that makes it so charming: it's

among a handful of scripted games that really embrace what the medium is, that accepts its limitations and uses them to power its effect. *The Stanley Parable* doesn't secretly aspire to be a film, as so many games do – it's about games, certainly, but it's also a game to its core.

While the writing and design of *The Stanley Parable* are its standout features, many of these same ideas were present in its initial form as a mod for *Half-Life*. The standalone version deserves praise for being not just bigger, but far more technically impressive. A vast number of perspective tricks, subtle transitions, and feats of level design sleight-of-hand are used to ferry you from one set piece to another, one choice to another. Then there are the subtle ways in which *The Stanley Parable* evolves as you play and replay it, a gradual escalation in mystery, playfulness and complexity that resembles a well-designed ARG. Then there's the metagame of the metagame, the Steam 'achievements' that reward you for tasks such as not playing *The Stanley Parable* for several years.

This is a game whose demo version is, in fact, an entirely separate game about the impossibility of making a demo for *The Stanley Parable*. If there's a problem with any of this, it's that you may suspect at times that *The Stanley Parable* knows exactly how clever it is, and that it may be too clever for its own good. This doesn't make it any less clever, however, or any less excellent.



238	254	270	286	302	318	334	350	366	382
239	255	271	287	303	319	335	351	367	383
240	256	272	288	304	320	336	352	368	384
241	257	273	289	305	321	337	353	369	385
242	258	274	290	306	322	338	354	370	386
243	259	275	291	307	323	339	355	371	387
244	260	276	292	308	324	340	356	372	388
245	261	277	293	309	325	341	357	373	389
246	262	278	294	310	326	342	358	374	390
247	263	279	295	311	327	343	359	375	391
248	264	280	296	312	328	344	360	376	392
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	270	286	302	318	334	350	366	382	398
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	276	292	308	324	340	356	372	388	
	277	293	309	325	341	357	373	389	
	278	294	310	326	342	358	374	390	
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Xcom: Enemy Unknown

Do you have attachment issues? Would you like some? The answer may be less simple than your rational mind suggests: to play the unmissable Firaxis reboot of Julian Gollop's extraterrestrial invasion management game is to experience one of the greatest loss simulators the world has ever seen, and some thoroughly decent squad-based strategy missions to boot. It's just that, well, it comes with a few side effects.

Enemy Unknown is, of course, not alone in using an abrasive type of design to stir up emotions. A certain cadre of games has arisen in recent years that trades heavily on the delicate balance between harsh penalties for failure and the euphoria of succeeding in the face of them. *Xcom*'s little trick, however, is that it can sting you with loss even while you're ostensibly winning, because to taste victory at all requires you to invest in people. Easily killed, and far from replaceable, people.

It starts with a psychological trick: if you're asked to name something, you'll form a slight emotional attachment to it. In this case, it'll likely be a greenhorn, drafted in to join your beleaguered and underfunded spec ops team. That weak tie won't necessarily last for long, perhaps severed by disuse or an errant bolt of plasma, but some will stick, and the bond will grow stronger as you adopt members into active rotation. With each Sectoid, Muton and Cyberdisc they fell, they'll grow in power, steadily climbing a tech tree in their chosen class that will grant crucial upgrades to survive

contact with an alien menace of fearsome, spiralling power. A Sniper may gain Squadsight, allowing them to find a vantage point and pick off targets the rest of their team locate from afar. A Support may gain Revive, allowing them to stabilise critically wounded teammates enough to get them fighting again. As they improve in flexibility, you'll invest in them further, buying better (and later specialist) armour or class-specific guns.

Then disaster will strike. The Chryssalid that bursts from the fog of war and implants its young into a valued Assault, rendering all that effort and expense little more than a walking incubator. The Sectopod that levels your best Psionic from halfway across the map. Even an unlucky critical strike or panic reaction can spell curtains for a treasured troop. Every one is a punch to the solar plexus. Every one a war story.

Outside of combat, meanwhile, you have an overwhelming number of plates to spin with your meagre stipend. Satellites to prevent the aliens gaining control over your airspace are key if you do not wish to lose too many valuable allies from the council (one perilous fail condition, given that multiple attack sites means you inherently cannot protect everyone), but that's vying with credits spent on the fleet of aircraft to protect them, all-important research, manufacturing the supplies your on-the-ground troops need, and base expansions to power your growing subterranean empire. Again, whatever you accomplish is

tinged with a lingering awareness of what you've left undone.

It runs entirely counter to the design 'wisdom' that says games must frequently and spectacularly empower players to retain the fickle attentions of a post-MTV audience. Upgrades in *Xcom* – to your squaddies or your outfit as a whole – most often mean just that success is still possible against an ever more prepared, ever more dangerous extraterrestrial threat, not that you're somehow pulling ahead of the opposition. And even when you finally begin to surmount this arms race, the most tooled-up super soldier is still just a few unlucky hits or one cocky placement away from being a memorial star, and your best-covered continent is a thin slice of bad luck from abject terror.

It's a disaster management game, in other words, but what a rush awaits those who face the storm head-on and subdue it. What triumph you'll feel when you quash foes that once left your teams in tatters and wield a squad of battle-hardened pros. What a sense of pride when you navigate all the metagame management dilemmas well enough to pull through. Cool-headed tactics and warm rushes of emotion are uncommon bedfellows – it's far easier to elicit an emotional response with a swell of music and a beautifully rendered sunset – but Firaxis creates a more lasting satisfaction by leaving scars as well as fuzzy feelings, by engaging your neurons as well as your heartstrings. It's impossible not to get attached to a game like this.







Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate

Slaying beasts, cooking

meat on a spit, adventure in the open wilds: *Monster Hunter* taps into something atavistic. The *Monster Hunter* player must be an explorer, a botanist and an animal behaviourist as well as a warrior with a big sword (or bow, or glaive, or bagpipe). When facing down some aggressive black-winged dragon-creature 100 times their own size, they must also be brave.

For most of its history, *Monster Hunter* has been beloved by few and baffling to everyone else. Most players are left scratching at the surface, discouraged by the many obstacles between them and the game's rewards. The most obvious of these obstacles for the PSP instalments was the control scheme, which necessitated the adoption of a hand-contorting posture known affectionately as the Monster Hunter Claw. Mainly, though, for non-Japanese players, the problem has always been finding people to play with.

Monster Hunter 4 is easier to get into than its predecessors, thanks to a rather gentler learning curve and a readiness to send you out to hunt weird, impressive creatures from the off rather than forcing newbies to pick mushrooms for seven hours before lifting the veil on the good stuff. It also makes it easy to play online, and the addition of other people is what makes *Monster Hunter* complete. On your own, *Monster Hunter* can sometimes feel impenetrable and unforgiving. In the company of friends, it is a riot. Past a certain point, *Monster Hunter* is not so much a game as

a lifestyle: after 500 hours or more, there are still new things to do, for as long as there are people to do them with.

It's the majesty and personality of its various beasts that makes *Monster Hunter 4* so thrilling, its animation and creature design among the best in videogames. Ungainly bird-like dinosaurs screech and peck and run at you with wings outstretched, irritated by your presence. Ape-like forest dwellers assert their dominance with chest-beating and flatulence. The more old-fashioned, dragon-like Rathian, Rathalos and Tigrex are impressive and intimidating, even on a little 3DS screen.

There are enormous 'event' monsters that swim through the desert and must be attacked with a harpoon-armed boat, and elder dragons that await you on mountaintops. Most *Monster Hunter* monsters are surprising, too: ten minutes into a fight with a glacier-dwelling land shark, it suddenly inflates itself, ballooning into a comical, bouncing airbag with a gluttonous grin. Fantastical though they are, *Monster Hunter*'s beasts are also weirdly plausible. They fit their environments, and to know a monster properly you must study where it lives. There is an ecosystem at work: enormous carnivores show up only where there is large prey – herbivorous beasts that graze calmly in a predator's absence and stampede away when it approaches.

The core game design has also benefited from a decade of refinement. *Monster Hunter* is now a supremely balanced action game.

Its combat feels exciting, physical and consequential, each of its weapon classes inviting a different mindset to go with its unique move-set. No one weapon outperforms any other (though don't try telling that to the Hammer fanatics), and when used in combination in multiplayer even the most conservative gunner feels part of the hunt.

An under-appreciated facet of the appeal of *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* is its charmingly bizarre sense of humour. You're accompanied on hunts by hilarious little cat companions that can be adorably outfitted (actually, there is an entire island entirely populated by cats). The excellently translated patter from townspeople, merchants, blacksmiths and other NPCs adds a note of warmth and humour to your adventures. It's not a game often lauded for world-building, but after you've spent hundreds of hours there, *Monster Hunter*'s world starts to feel like home.

Monster Hunter has an element of extreme nerdiness, in all the stat tables and skill activations and the endless pursuit of an immense collection of ostentatious weapons and armour to show off at the gathering hall, and also in the taxonomy of the creatures (ask a *Monster Hunter* obsessive about the difference between a Tigrex, a Brute Tigrex and a Molten Tigrex sometime). But despite that, the core appeal of *Monster Hunter* is universal. It's a game about conquering the wilderness, companionship, and self-betterment.







The Witcher III: Wild Hunt

Every boxed copy of *The Witcher III* contains a thank-you note from CD Projekt, the Polish studio behind this series of games based on Andrzej Sapkowski's novels. It's a simple expression of gratitude for you having spent your hard-earned money on its work. Before you have so much as put the disc in the tray, CD Projekt has made one thing clear: that it respects its players. It's a recurring theme throughout this enormous open-world adventure.

The studio has crafted a vast world, packed it full of things to do, and simply drops you in one of its corners and lets you get on with it. Yes, there's a critical path – the finely written, well-voiced, if perhaps overlong story of the titular hero, Geralt Of Rivia, on a hunt for his adopted daughter – that takes you from the windswept starting area of White Orchard to the towns and cities of Velen and Novigrad, then finally the starkly beautiful Skellige islands. But if you choose, you can ignore all this, heading off in any direction and picking up quests as you please, levelling up and unlocking new tools and toys along the way. You needn't speak to some arbitrary quest-giver to kick off a mission: the story sets up Geralt as a fine detective, so if you stumble upon a lead while out exploring, the case begins and is automatically added to your quest log.

The Northern Kingdoms are packed full of people that need saving, others that need help, and countless beasts, demons, soldiers and scoundrels that need duffing up, but they're all carefully and

credibly placed. CD Projekt used a dedicated location team to fill its world, mining medieval history to ensure its hamlets and settlements were appropriately located and spread out. Then a second team filled the environment with things to do. Many studios use metrics for this – ensuring, for instance, that you are never more than a few minutes from an encounter or event of some kind. CD Projekt has designed, populated and filled this vast world entirely by hand, then left most of it for you to discover, and it is all the better for it. There are few icons on the map to lead you by the hand to some vital sight or destination; there are quest markers, sure, but rare is the modern game that asks that you learn the location of a town-centre blacksmith by heart, or buries a brilliant questline on a hilltop in a distant corner of the map. It is a commendably hands-off design philosophy built, like so much of this game, on respecting players – giving them plenty to do, then letting them decide how, when and how far they engage with it all.

This extends to the combat, which encompasses graceful, patient swordplay, ranged weapons and magic spells; alchemical oils and potions apply temporary buffs to swords and Geralt respectively. A sword is essential – steel for man, silver for beast – but the rest of it can be either employed or largely ignored. A smartly designed skill tree, meanwhile, limits the number of abilities that can be active at once, letting you define a playstyle and focus on making it as effective as possible.

Those decisions can be agonising, but they're nothing compared to the choices you'll face out in the world. The Northern Kingdoms are a rough old place, infested with monsters and in the grip of a civil war. You are constantly faced with choices, but few are clear-cut, none will result in everyone living happily ever after, and many decisions bring consequences you didn't see coming. Many will have lasting impact on the world itself, a dangling corpse or scorched hamlet serving as a permanent reminder of those you cut loose or cut down. The world is yours, to save or to ruin as you see fit, and it will bear your mark forever.

CD Projekt's appreciation of its players extends beyond the thank-you note in the box, and even beyond what's on the disc: a cascade of free DLC has been released since the game's launch, and the studio has been quick with fixes, improving performance issues while fixing bugs and balance quirks, even adding a New Game+ mode. It's not been entirely hands-off towards players, admittedly – one patch introduced the Bovine Defence Force, a demonic bull-like creature that would appear to thwart anyone trying to break the game's economy by killing an infinitely respawning herd of cows. Clearly respect has its limits. But on the whole *The Witcher III* represents a leap forward in open-world game design – in scope and sprawl, in layout and pacing, and in ensuring that across it all it's the player, not the developer, who is king.





Format PC, PS3, PS4, 360, Xbox One Publisher/developer Ubisoft Release 2014



Far Cry 4

Far Cry 4 brings out the worst in you. It has you scouring the map for information on where a certain species of passive local wildlife is most likely to roam, so you can kill every single one you locate. You'll find yourself lobbing bait over a wall to lure a tiger into a village, then sitting back and watching as it tears everyone inside limb from limb. You'll set a fire in woodland, stand back and let it spread, just to watch the world burn. It's the kind of game where you jump on the back of an elephant, make it smash through a heavy set of doors, steer it through an intense gunfight, and then with barely a shrug watch it die under helicopter fire. They say videogames desensitise you to violence. Piffle. You're well aware of what you're doing. It's just such tremendous fun.

There is, at least, justification for all this bloodlust. Wildlife, for instance, powers *Far Cry 4*'s crafting system: ludicrous though it may be that you need four rhino hides to make a bigger bag for your explosives, if that's what the menu screen's telling you to do, you're not about to argue. The tiger you suckered into slaughter with some morsels from your bait bag helps you clear out an outpost, pushing back the local militia and returning it to its rightful owners. The fire? Taking out a drug operation, though we'll admit to doing it on our downtime more than once because *Far Cry 4*'s fire tech is excellent. And the elephant... well, you do feel bad about that for a bit, but it'll respawn back up the hill before

long, and such is the nature of this cruel land that it probably wouldn't have lasted anyway. At least it went out fighting.

The setting is Kyrat, a fictional Himalayan nation under the control of the despotic Pagan Min, whose distaste for the quiet life is made abundantly clear by his peroxide shock of hair, his sparkly pink suit, his rampaging, bloodthirsty army, and the 50-foot golden statue of him that looms large over the land from his hilltop fortress. He's bonkers, then, and a nasty piece of work — and he's got it in for protagonist Ajay Ghale, a Kyrati raised in the United States who returns to the place of his birth to scatter his mother's ashes but quickly finds himself wingsuiting away from a burning village with a smoking RPG on his back. Min used to have a bit of a thing for Ghale's mother, who shunned his advances, took up with his dad and founded a resistance army to rise up against him. You suspect Min's not taken it terribly well, but he presents a friendly enough veneer, popping up on your radio to congratulate you on your latest killing spree against the militia. After *Far Cry 3*'s exploration of the darker side of insanity, Min is a much better fit for a series that enables such a cheery brand of widespread wanton destruction.

Far Cry 4 is a Ubisoft game, which means it is bound by certain conventions. You scale rickety towers to re-establish radio comms, and fill the regional map with icons. Distractions are everywhere: collectibles to find,

local hostages to rescue, quadbike races to win, and so on. There's even a Horde-style mode with challenges for every weapon in the game, which plays out in front of a baying crowd. There are quest-givers aplenty, too, and they're a rum bunch — a tribal warlord turned born-again arms dealer, a haute-couture fashion designer, and Yogi and Reggie, a pair of stoner backpackers who pump you full of hallucinogens and send you out hunting tigers.

The game's main draw, however, are its outposts, the little settlements and factories under Min's control that can be approached from any direction and in any number of ways, from silent to loud and anywhere in between. They're playable in co-op, too — and if you thought *Far Cry 4* was crazy enough on your own, you should see the state of the place when two like-minded headcases are running about the place. On PS3 and PS4, your partner needn't even own the game, since each copy comes with ten invites for two-hour co-op sessions.

It's a strange sort of game in a series that, two instalments earlier, riddled you with malaria and gave you guns that jammed and broke in the harsh African desert. But *Far Cry 4* is the work of a studio that understands the way players approach open worlds. Given the tools, sooner or later we will all cause chaos. You might as well let us do so in a world that not only enables it, but justifies, rewards, and even celebrates it. You blew up a rhino? Good for you. Here, have a bigger backpack.





Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Publisher EA Developer Respawn Entertainment Release 2016



Titanfall 2

Titanfall 2 is a shooter in which the guns frequently feel like an afterthought. There is majesty in the weapon design, don't get us wrong: the Double Take, which switches between shotgun and sniper rifle with a button press, is proof enough of that. It's just that Respawn Entertainment seems oddly disinterested in following the conventions of the firstperson shooter. This is, by turns, a platform game, a puzzle game and a rollercoaster, in which you also happen to blow up and kill a bunch of things using guns.

The original *Titanfall*, released in 2013, was much loved — but it was also criticised for its lack of a traditional singleplayer mode. In *Titanfall 2*, Respawn makes reparations in astonishing style. The highlight is Effect And Cause, which sits — deliberately, we assume — right in the middle of the campaign, the fifth level of nine. It is *Titanfall 2*'s beating heart. By now you've just about got to grips with the game's moveset: its sprint, double jump, wall run and mantle. You've got your head around controlling your pilot's Titan mech, too. Perhaps you're on the edge of wondering whether that slender toolset can keep you engaged, tested and invested until the credits roll.

So Respawn puts you inside a ruined military facility, then equips you with a device that, at the tap of a button, rewinds time to before the building was in tatters. Laser forcefields that are absent in one timeline are present in the other; likewise whirling fan blades, walls to run along, and

groups of armed guards or huge, lizards to fight. There have been hints before this — the preceding level had you navigating the walls of in-production prefab houses on a factory assembly line — but this is the point at which *Titanfall 2* really kicks into gear, and becomes so much more than just a shooter. Now it's a puzzle game played at 60 miles per hour, surrounded by enemies in two timelines who would like to see you dead.

Despite all the destructive ordnance at your fingertips, *Titanfall 2* is a game of delicate pace. One minute you're rushing forward at speed, destroying a horde of robots with a shotgun; the next you're experimenting with a series of rotating platforms, trying to plot a course through them, knowing where you need to go, but unsure of how to get there. The next you'll be cannonballing through the sky, headed for a boss fight on top of a flying jet. Then there's the Titan, itself a pacing device, a powerfully destructive reward for a job well done, but also a sign of a designer moving the goalposts, abandoning the pilot's nippy mobility and making you think in terms of a slower form the size of a two-bedroom house.

How bizarre that this should be published by Electronic Arts, a company whose business is built on granular iteration on an annual theme. At times, *Titanfall 2* feels more like a Nintendo game than an EA one, with its procession of novel ideas introduced, explored to the fullest and then cast aside. When Effect And Cause shows you its hand, you naturally assume

that your wrist-worn time-travel gadget will be a permanent fixture. But finish the chapter and it's gone, never to be seen again.

After all that, the multiplayer can't help but disappoint — if only because it is a refinement of what came before it, rather than a reinvention. Yet the ideas that made the original *Titanfall* a fixture in the pages of this edition are every bit as effective in *Titanfall 2*, even if they have lost a little of their lustre since. AI-controlled mobs still patrol the online arena, providing willing cannon fodder for lesser-skilled players. Your pilot's high mobility means that simply getting around is a pleasure, and when you die you're rarely more than a hop, skip and wall run from being back in the thick of it. Titans, meanwhile, play the role of the COD killstreak, but instead of being the sole preserve of high-level players, here everyone gets a turn. Titans are linked to a timer, which can be reduced by racking up kills.

The online component is, as with any shooter, a matter of taste, and of no little persistence. But *Titanfall 2*'s campaign is among the best in its class, a beautifully paced, cleverly designed and quietly transformative take on the singleplayer shooter. When Respawn's founders made *COD4*, their template was borrowed en masse; suddenly every shooter around was a tight, six-hour rollercoaster of linear, scripted bombast. That won't happen with *Titanfall 2*, but it's a compliment, rather than a slur. Class like this isn't easy to copy.







Doom

It's probably the clearest evidence of *Doom's* economy, focus and confidence of execution that for all the ceaseless, giddy, nourishing escalation of its lengthy campaign, the foundations of all of its greatest, most heady joys are laid out within the first five minutes. By the time the prologue's climactic, expository dialogue gives way to a defiant cock of an already battle-worn shotgun, *Doom* has shown its hand and made its pledges. And all will be delivered with furious gusto.

Ten seconds in, you've already punched a zombie into Hell-spawned moussaka, and begun filling several more with pistol rounds. Twenty seconds, and you're becoming adept in the art of *Doom's* smooth, whirling, perpetual movement, the behaviour of a handful of lowest-level monsters focused into a small room serving as instinctive training in the ways of close-up, duck-and-dive combat. Already, the rhythmic ebb and flow of attack and evasion makes the skirmish area feel like a dancefloor.

Sixty seconds, and you, as Doomguy, have smashed aside a communications monitor the moment it told of anything beyond the solely important business of killing demons as aggressively and stylishly as possible. At the two-minute mark, you stand momentarily alone — if not knee-deep in the dead then at least with soggy ankles — having cleared a corridor with your bare hands to learn the risks and rewards of the ingenious, health-imbuing Glory Kill melee

system that will keep you alive for many hours to come.

And after five minutes you've claimed your first real victory, massacring a small arena's worth of rampaging Imps, their comparative ferocity forcing you to reconsider your surroundings via constant, creative reuses of space, just as their penchant for unpredictable retreat teaches you that the only way forward, truly, is forward. And then a shotgun cock. And a riff. And that title card.

This, for all of its modernity, is unmistakably *Doom*, a game intent on celebrating and elevating the original FPS principles of purposeful movement, rapidly evolving spatial strategies and thoughtful, extravagant, micro-managed slaughter with exactly the same drive and tenacity as the game of the same name that established them in 1993.

But for all of its spiritual authenticity, evolution is this *Doom's* key tenet. Not for a moment does it coast, or allow the same crime of the player. *Doom* delights in its systems, revels in their robustness and the malleability afforded by their strength. Between the chessboard of its enemy AI classes, and the many varied lockpicks of its ingenious and gratifying weapon-set, every element of *Doom's* warzone has resonant purpose, each capable of changing the flow of the vibrant combat ecosystem at a moment's notice.

It takes only some canny architectural design or the right demon spawned in the wrong place to whirl the faces of *Doom's*

Rubik's Cube combat into a brand-new configuration. Indeed, between the ever-shifting demands of its level design, the many interlocking strategies afforded by player-defined weapon mods, and the multiple, creatively themed challenge rooms hidden throughout, *Doom* feels intent on being the most complete, eclectic expression and exploration of FPS fundamentals as possible.

But for all of Id's insightful tweaks and nudges, it's always the player who is the real catalyst. All too rarely has an FPS felt so alive in its systemic relationships, so entirely aware of the player's presence. *Doom* might heap fiery spectacle by the meaty bucketload, but it's fuelled by an intimacy conspicuous by its frequent absence in the genre, ironic given the supposed purpose of firstperson-perspective play.

Doom has no such problems. Whether by cleverly curated arena design or the dynamic, emergent opportunity that lives within, there's always an uncanny sense that when you play with *Doom*, *Doom* is playing back. It pushes back, in fact. But never to dishearten, or oppress more than necessary. Rather, *Doom* understands that in an FPS environment so rich and layered, the real fun comes when the player gets to play with every toy in the box simultaneously. And thus it ensures you're always pushed to your limits, but never beyond. Always surfing the peak of a never-breaking wave. One made entirely of blood, naturally, but majestic nonetheless.







Trials Fusion

You could pick any *Trials* game – bar 2016's *Blood Dragon*-branded spinoff – and have a great time. But if we were marooned on a desert island with just a console, TV, power supply and a broadband connection that was for some reason restricted to side-scrolling motorbike games, we'd choose *Fusion*. The 2014 title is the series' best, despite adding a few ideas that don't quite chime with the brilliance of the core platforming.

For that's what *Trials* is. You may negotiate each level astride a motorbike (or occasionally a quad bike, and even a unicorn), but *Trials* shares more of its DNA with *Mario* than with *Excitebike*. The way the bike moves across the ground, the meaty bounce of its suspension, and the way you can shift your rider's weight give the game a wonderfully unfettered tactility that makes you forget you're holding a controller.

Of course, that great handling would only go so far without some undulating terrain to hop across, and *Trials Fusion* delivers the most coherent and satisfying selection of *Trials* tracks yet. It may not have the thematic and aesthetic variation of its predecessor, *Trials Evolution* (though the first season of DLC added a large range of more fantastical creations), but it offers a difficulty curve as well balanced as any good rider, and some of the most enjoyable obstacles *Trials* has to offer.

The smooth difficulty curve is in part thanks to *Fusion*'s in-depth tutorials. Make no mistake, the *Trials* series is a brutally difficult set of games, and high-level play

requires mastery of all manner of advanced techniques including bunny hopping, fine control on extremely steep surfaces, and tricky landings. *Fusion* explains these physics-based manoeuvres in more detail than before (to bunny hop, shift your weight back then forward while accelerating; land jumps with the back wheel and stab the accelerator gently to stabilise yourself), making the game considerably less daunting for newcomers. Don't expect to ace the Extreme tracks first time, however – *Trials*' signature creations are more fiendishly difficult than ever, and will keep you going for a long while.

Fusion also introduces a couple of new features. The quad bikes switch up the standard two-wheel acrobatics with something more torquey, offering a more forgiving ride ideal for less experienced players. It's a bit odd that they're introduced halfway through the singleplayer campaign, but they do add variety. The new FMX tracks, meanwhile, require you to pull off gravity-defying tricks on special undulating courses. Control here isn't as tight as in the game proper, but there's silly fun to be had tossing your rider around.

Fusion wouldn't be a proper *Trials* game without secrets and a macabre, odd sense of humour. As well as the expected shortcuts and hidden squirrels, RedLynx has included three bonus challenges on each track. You might have to make it through a course with your controls reversed or with a giant ball and chain attached to the back of your bike, or perhaps

just get through a course without touching any yellow objects. Challenges ensure there's always something else to do when you've had enough of banging your head against the Extreme tracks wall, and cleverly change the character of courses you already know well.

Once you've run out of levels, there's the track editor and online community to dip into. The editor is vastly upgraded from *Evolution*'s, offering thousands more objects, a suite of tools for animation, logic and other ingredients to make anything you want – a tricky course to negotiate, or a fleshed-out firstperson shooter. Player creations – which now number in the millions – are curated through a number of feeds in Track Central, *Fusion*'s online portal.

Fusion features several online and local multiplayer modes, but competing asymmetrically remains *Trials*' most thrilling aspect. Seeing a ghost of friends' best runs just ahead of you on the track is powerful motivation to shave a few more hundredths of a second off your own best time, and *Fusion*'s built-in notification system ensures that competition remains fierce. As in *Evolution*, you can also watch replays of your friends' runs (or the world's best players, if they're not one and the same) to gather tips on how to improve your own performance.

Fusion's mix of perfectly tuned handling, skill-based learning curve, and constant compulsion to chase medals and bragging rights makes it the kind of game you're thinking about playing even when you're busy doing something else.





RedLynx
A UBISOFT STUDIO



Nidhogg

The two swordsmen stand motionless upon the field of battle, a field soaked with the pixellated blood of their conflict. They are blocky, eye-wateringly neon figures, two unblemished white swords levelled in readiness for the coming clash. The beat pulses, and as if by unspoken accord both break into a charge. Beat. A sword is flung. Beat. The orange fighter rolls beneath it. Beat. The air fills with raining yellow pixels. Beat. The orange fighter retrieves his still-pristine blade from the stricken foe's guts. Beat. He is running, hurtling with heart in mouth to the screen's edge, where victory, and the Nidhogg, awaits.

This is *Nidhogg*, Messhof's stubbornly, almost offensively, lo-fi game of fencing and mind games. That moment might have ended differently — a divekick, a leg sweep, or a protracted sparring match all possible with the simple contextual moveset — but each match lives in the seconds-long flashes of duelling, of instinctual, reflexive action against a human foe. It can be played against bots and online, but to really get the most from it, it has to be played in the same room as your opponent. You want to see the look on their face when you've beaten them, of course, or vice versa when you're the one demanding a rematch, but it's more than that: reading the sharp intakes of breath when your sparring partner makes a move, exulting in the howls and grunts when you slip from their grasp, the opportunity to crow when you read them perfectly and sweep

the sword from their hands.

Nidhogg is not a solo pursuit.

The game's simple brilliance is that it also isn't about fighting. Not really. It's about reading your opponent, learning their plays, and surprising them by becoming unpredictable yourself. It's sport more than violence, just a rather abstractly bloody one. Die and you'll respawn in seconds. There's no limit to your lives. But what you've given away with each loss, or snatch away with each clever evasion, is time. Precious seconds can move the winner just a little closer to their end zone, where a phallic pink worm lurks, waiting only to gobble them up in victory.

To move across screens, however, you need the priority of being the last person to score a kill. So you'll have to learn how to fight. The mechanics of swordplay are simple enough, key presses or stick pushes moving your blade between four quantum states of position: low, medium, high and overhead. One key thrusts the weapon, and your body, forward, and any touch of a sword is instantly deadly. If you match the position of an incoming lunge, you'll rebuff the attack, giving you a short window to respond. But there's an even riskier move: bring your rapier into position as the attack is in progress and you'll flick the weapon from your aggressor's hand in a true Errol Flynn flourish. Even an unarmed opponent can dodge and cartwheel and evade, however, and can also scoop up a sword on the ground by rolling over it, so you might disarm and cross

swords several times before the next priority is decided.

Halo designer Jaime Griesemer once spoke of 30 seconds of fun that morphs with context to stretch out into a game. *Nidhogg*, despite having only a handful of maps, sees that 30 and condenses it down to sweaty-palmed five-second mie poses that, thanks to the context of an ever-shifting human opponent, rarely feel the same twice. The only easy matches are against dull foes; to play *Nidhogg* is to exist, for a few minutes, in a highly strung cycle of tension and release. And that, perhaps, is what also makes it riotous, hilarious, to play, every shock move carrying just the same impact as a brilliant return in tennis or fancy footwork that leads to a goal. It's just capable of regularly generating those moments across matches that stretch anywhere from 30 seconds to five minutes.

It's a targeted sort of game, then, resolutely multiplayer and unfashionably local in nature. But with an excellent dynamic soundtrack and triple-distilled moveset of such restraint and intelligence, there are few games today that can rival it for evenings lost to duking it out on the couch with a group of friends in tournament mode, or for lunchtime matchups with your favourite foil. If it existed in another age, *Nidhogg* might now be revered in the same breath as the other classics of couch multiplayer gaming. Today, it is simply one of the best possible uses for that second pad.



Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Vita, Xbox One Publisher Trapdoor Developer Polytron Corporation Release 2012



Fez

Fez's central appeal is that it harks back to the adventures of your childhood. It's not just in the overt references in its soundtrack and the chunky visuals, but also in the deep feeling of wanderlust evoked by its enchanting world and dizzying collection of gameplay hooks. Like a *Mario* game, it's so generous in its distribution of new ideas that you settle into a kind of warm complacency, confident that the next screen is going to offer another twist on the delightful mechanic that lies at its core.

Fez's central conceit is of a 2D platform draped over a 3D world. It's conceptually complicated (essentially each screen is made up of four different but interlocking locations that can be cycled through by squeezing the triggers to rotate the world 90 degrees at a time), but mechanically intuitive. This duality of space requires a lateral approach to puzzle solving as the spatial normalcy you associate with 3D spaces is neatly folded flat. A platform floating out of reach might suddenly be right next to the tower you're standing on if rotated just so; or a precarious-looking series of spinning blocks could become a solid, pulsing bridge; while standing in front of a fireplace and spinning the world 180 degrees will reposition you in the secret room behind the surround. Once your own thinking aligns with the game, navigating its spaces becomes uniquely enjoyable.

The puzzles might be mathematically exacting, but *Fez* never lets this encroach on

its sweetly playful personality. Characterful wildlife and villagers instill locations with life, and dialogue exudes the kind of harmlessly barmy earnestness that defined the surreal, unchecked games that made the '80s and '90s so memorable. It feels very much like a creation that could sit naturally among the games of that era, albeit one that makes spectacular use of more recent hardware capabilities. And for all the tricky processing going on behind the scenes, the game's pixellated visuals and pastel palette feel at once stylishly modern and authentically retro. The setup itself cleverly suggests that you have somehow crashed and corrupted the game's code in order to access the new dimensions, which, in a nod to Edwin A Abbott's 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance Of Many Dimensions*, only you can see.

Fez's idiosyncrasies are as much a result of the project's enforced isolation as they are its creators' singular talents. The game took more than five years to develop, but this allowed Polytron to cram *Fez* full of deeply concealed secrets, in-jokes and references to other games, and to refine an oddly appealing atmosphere that's by turns melancholic and saccharine. The chaotically assembled components can appear disparate at first, but it has an internal logic to ensure that it all hangs together convincingly.

That doesn't mean it won't drive you mad, though. Despite being a fairly sizeable game (to complete *Fez's* story, you must

seek out 32 cubes, each made of eight smaller pieces which, on collection, are held aloft and trigger a *Zelda*-esque rising motif), it will require multiple playthroughs before everything begins to come into focus. Puzzles can be tricky, especially in the second half of the game when an optional code-breaking aspect is introduced, and the branching world can quickly become disorienting, despite being built from locations that are modestly sized individually. But in these situations the game almost always steps in to offer guidance, whether through a craftily placed cube segment that leads the eye to a useful location, an initially cryptic message from the floating cube that accompanies you, or simply the appearance of a door that's only visible after sundown. In most instances you simply need to step back and look at things slightly differently.

Even when you're not sure what to do next, tumbling through *Fez's* cascading, multidimensional world is a pleasure thanks to protagonist Gomez's weighty yet precise movement, and failure only leads to instant replacement on the nearest platform, encouraging the kind of reckless experimentation needed to prevail. Gomez is also blissfully free of clutter — there's no upgrade path to work through, no pickups to gather beyond those cube pieces, nor any kind of attack move. *Fez* instead revels in unfettered exploration, both of its world and of memories of the long-gone games to which it so masterfully pays respect.



Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Publisher/developer Blizzard Release 2016



Overwatch

There were realtime

strategy games before *StarCraft*, dungeon crawlers before *Diablo*, MMOs before *World Of Warcraft*, competitive card games before *Hearthstone*, and class-based multiplayer shooters before *Overwatch*. The Blizzard ‘trick’ — one that has built the studio an empire spanning 25 years — is taking the rough and experimental work that other studios have done in a fledgling genre and applying a populist, perfectionist shine to it.

Overwatch may just be a single example of a trend with a long history, but it’s remarkable even so. The past few years have seen a run of developers, even those with major publisher backing, attempt to build an audience for original multiplayer-only FPS games and fail. *Titanfall*’s popularity dipped hard as soon as the post-launch honeymoon period ended; *Evolve* tanked harder, faster; *Battleborn* was DOA by comparison. *Overwatch* is the exception to a rule with tremendous precedent: not only was it wildly successful on release, but it retained its momentum as it worked through the early phases of its life.

Marketing is a factor in this, but so is design. *Overwatch* takes a scalpel to many of the core ideas of the online FPS. This is a shooter without killstreaks or even specific kill rewards, where every player has infinite ammo, and several don’t need to reload. It borrows cooldown-dependent special abilities from MOBAs and a colourful, international, real-world-plus character roster from fighting games.

The importance of aim and spatial awareness — the primary vector for skill for most games in this genre — is unevenly distributed in *Overwatch*, with certain heroes benefiting from it more and others less. The result is a game that meets Blizzard’s accessibility criteria while also providing room for meaningful growth as a player. If you have never played a competitive shooter, there’s something useful you can do. If you have played lots of competitive shooters, there are impactful ways for you to demonstrate the skills you’ve picked up. This is how a shooter builds an audience in the millions, rather than the thousands.

Yet execution is also critical and is another area where *Overwatch* pulls ahead. This is a best-in-class case study in subtle audio and visual signalling. Every ability has a specific sound cue and every character has a unique footstep. The mix is carefully balanced, emphasising important enemy sounds over nearby friendlies and even taking into account practical distance when balancing volume — how long a character would have to travel to reach you, rather than how far away they actually are. When you start playing, you might hear footsteps and know somebody is around the corner to your left; after a few hours, you’ll know it is the Korean mech pilot D.Va and that she has just activated her Defence Matrix protective power.

Subtle excellence such as this is the difference between a good design and a great game, and it’s

why *Overwatch* deserves inclusion among the best multiplayer games ever made. There are other strokes of brilliance, too: the ‘play of the game’ feature, which replays a key moment from the match after each game and also allows players to view their own best plays after the fact. This gives participants something meaningful to chase that isn’t experience or an unlock, cutting straight to the reward sought by most competitive players — public acclaim.

There’s also the game’s dynamic implementation of physics and ability interactions, which allows for strange and silly things to happen when superpower X collides with character Y on map Z. Coupled with the play of the game system, this turns *Overwatch* into a regular generator of moments you want to share. That means YouTube, streaming and GIFs, and all these things contribute to the health of *Overwatch*’s player population.

The game’s popularity isn’t simply a business issue or of interest to people who track how the industry succeeds and fails at making genres happen. Online shooters need large playerbases to survive. Audience retention is a crucial factor in gauging the quality of a game like this, and there are many ways to achieve it. *Overwatch*’s success is owed to the balance that Blizzard has achieved between accessibility, depth and generosity. It has exceeded games with much deeper timesinks through loud, inviting excellence. This is the multiplayer-only shooter that made it.



Format Wii U Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 2013



Super Mario 3D World

We miss the triple-jump, of course – much as we did in *3D Land*. But it had to go. *Super Mario 3D World* is another purposeful step by Nintendo towards bridging the gap between the plumber's side-scrolling escapades and his more ambitious but less accessible (and financially valuable) 3D outings. It achieves this by simultaneously simplifying Mario's moveset and refining the stage design so that he can be controlled via the D-pad or analogue stick without feeling like anything has been lost. At the same time, these obstacle courses have to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate solo and multiplayer sessions: roomy enough for four, yet still challenging enough for one. It sounds like an impossible task, but this is EAD Tokyo we're talking about.

Which isn't to say it doesn't feel like a slight comedown at first. How could it not? When you've spread your arms wide and soared past nebulae at the fringes of the universe, any landing is bound to be a little bumpy. And even by recent *Mario* standards, *3D World* has a gentle introduction, not baring its teeth until the fourth or fifth worlds. That it matters so little is testament to its ceaseless creativity: who needs challenge when you've got this many ideas? Whether you're scampering around in a cat suit, or blasting Goombas – and friends – with your head inside a cannon block, there's always something to keep you royally entertained. And don't worry, it gets plenty tougher.

It's Mario himself, and the reliability and familiarity of the way he moves, that allows EAD Tokyo to toss in so many disparate ideas and still keep things coherent. If there's one overarching theme, it's that anything goes. Everything is permitted, from circuses in ice worlds to beachside battles in arid deserts. If much of the joy of level creation in *Super Mario Maker* comes from subverting established Mario conventions, then *3D World*'s designers take similar pleasure in confounding and surprising players. Each taboo-busting moment prompts a gasp of delight, whether you're carrying a potted Piranha Plant to greedily gobble up obstacles and enemies, or using a powerful head-mounted lamp to disintegrate the formerly indestructible Boos.

That kind of cheekily playful touch is everywhere in *3D World*, and it's epitomised by Cat Mario, perhaps the plumber's most versatile powerup to date. From EAD Tokyo's perspective, it solves the perennial problem of combat in a space primarily designed for running and jumping, allowing Mario to dive at Goombas and Koopa Troopas claws bared, with less risk of harm from a slightly misjudged leap. It also affords its level designers the opportunity to hide secrets in higher places, forcing players to clamber up sheer vertical surfaces to reach them. From the player's point of view, it's both a means of thrilling empowerment and a source of

visual comedy: witnessing Mario pad about on all fours, turning his head toward objects of interest or danger, is consistently amusing.

The Double Cherry, meanwhile, mines a rich seam of boisterous slapstick, particularly with two or more players involved. Guiding multiple Marios is at once stressful and hilarious, not least when a stage throws in a troop of bugle-nosed infantrymen who break formation and scatter in panic when one of their number is stomped. *3D World* regularly makes a case for being the funniest *Mario* to date, from a spherical mini-boss flapping its legs to flattening a Goomba and finding you can don its head as a disguise, allowing you to walk among its kind untroubled.

So frequent are the shifts in pace and approach, it's a surprise when it does adhere to formula. The ten-second challenges of the Mystery Houses are frantic enough when you need to beat five in a row. When that's upped to ten and then 30 in the endgame, it's heart-stoppingly tense. And then there are the Captain Toad puzzles, an idea so good and so warmly received Nintendo decided to make a whole game of them.

3D World could so easily seem disjointed, inconsistent or compromised. But its chunky toybox universe binds together all these strange, wonderful ideas without fragmenting. What's remarkable is that in his fourth decade in videogames, the medium's most famous mascot is still offering new ways to celebrate the innocent joy of play.





Format PS3, PS4 Publisher SIE Developer Thatgamecompany Release 2012



Journey

***Journey* explores transience**

in a way that no other medium, even a novel or performance art piece, ever could. As you pass through the game's hazy, enigmatic world, your journey is personalised and lent significance by the other pilgrims you meet along the way. They might keep you company for a long while, or you might just as easily lose track of them after a fleeting glimpse, but in every case the sting of loneliness is more keenly felt in the stillness after parting.

It's an emotional slug to the chest without cynical tugs on the heartstrings, something that's, for now at least, uniquely powerful. There's no voice chat functionality to sully the purity of the moment; instead players must rely on the abstracted singing and symbols emitted by characters, and on the cooperation (or indeed isolation) they find in each other's presence.

The huge distances involved in the simple environmental puzzles that gate your progress are more manageable with a co-traveller, irrespective of whether you try to communicate and work together using the limited language palette afforded to you or keep yourselves to yourselves and tackle different parts of the area in a smoulder of introversion. Doing the latter, however, would deprive you of *Journey's* greatest pleasure.

The height and distance you're able to soar is tied to the length of your scarf, which grows as you find tokens around the world and needs to be charged up by flying tapestries that dart about in the air. But players are also able to

recharge each other's scarves by singing; hence, the simple joy of dancing through the air, leaping from platform to platform and sliding down the sugary dunes is prolonged if you stick together.

Equally, a more experienced player might lead you to a hidden scarf-lengthening token, or help solve a puzzle you've yet to intuit. Crucially, however you choose to play, *Journey* is a game that doesn't rush you, and one that encourages playful experimentation with its cleverly pared-back mechanics and wilful subversion of traditional online multiplayer conventions. This isn't a game to be beaten or mastered (though the hidden pickups jar a little as a result); it's a story to be experienced, and co-written, first hand.

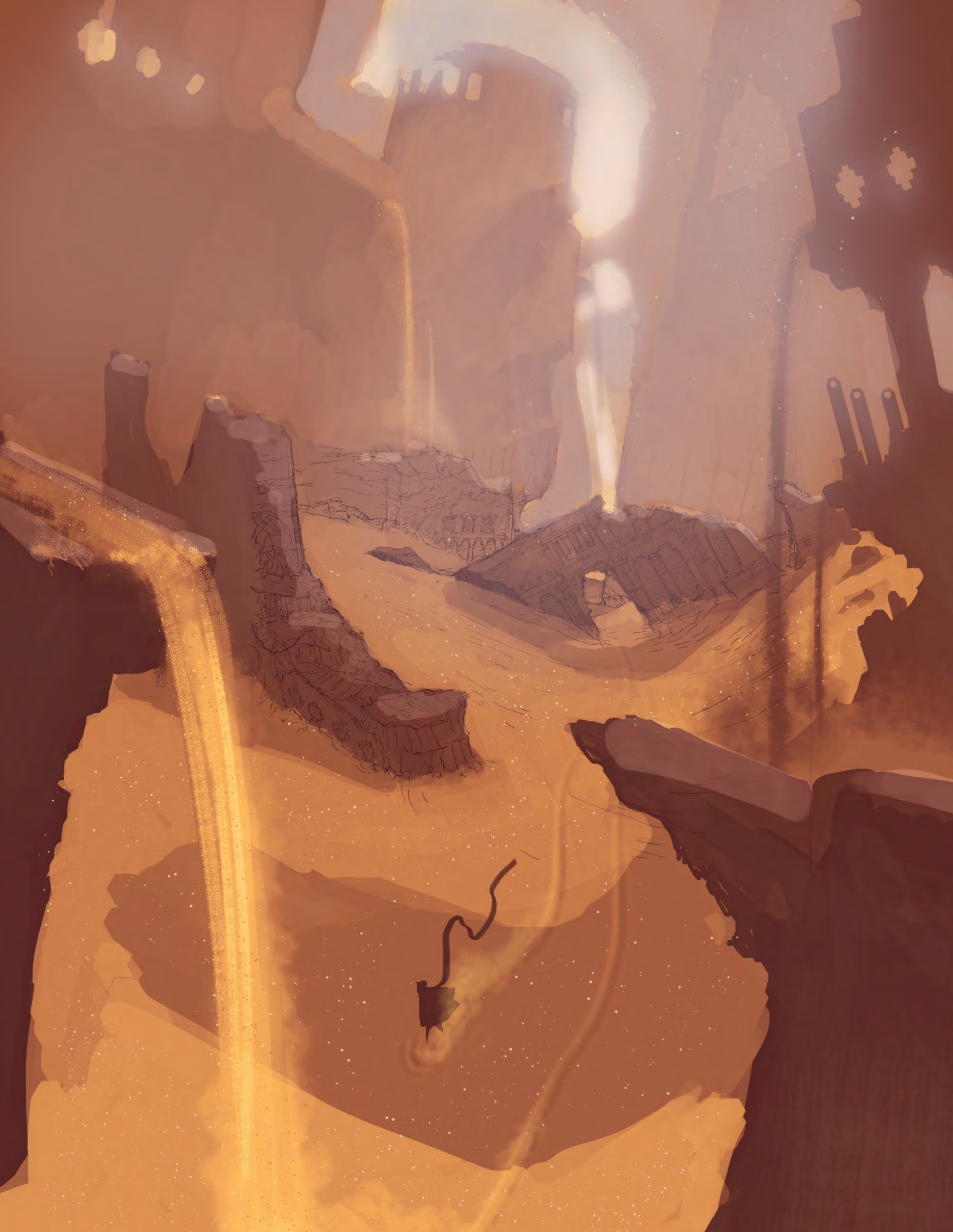
The game's core revelations are supported by a dazzling audiovisual assault on the senses. Austin Wintory's soundtrack lends even greater weight to each step you take, segueing from mournful elegy to playful paeon as you transition in and out of company or even into implied danger (though there is no real fail state in *Journey*, only a temporary curtailing of your ability to soar).

The imposing ruins you discover along the way blend Persian and Incan influences into something at once nostalgic and troubling, chipped stone and torn fabrics blasted by years of wind-borne sand. And what sand, depressing softly underfoot and capitulating into grooves as you slide down each towering dune. *Journey's* engine is based on the technology used to create *Flower's*

seemingly numberless blades of grass, but awes when set to work in this rolling, barren landscape.

The fragility of your encounters along the way might just as easily be an allegory for the challenges faced by videogames in enduring as for relationships. Classic albums, novels and artworks can remain timeless in a way that format-dependent games cannot, only committed collectors able to easily dip back into older titles in the way that they were intended. The trend towards generational rereleases, then, is a welcome (if imperfect) way to ensure new players get to experience things they might have missed. And in a world of easy streaming, party chat and online congregations, *Journey's* subversive design feels even more potent on PS4 than it did four years ago on PS3.

The extra headroom afforded by PS4's additional grunt has allowed Thatgamecompany to enact a subtle, but still striking, makeover. The PS3 version's 720p has been upped to 1080p at 60fps, and the game's colour palette has been brightened up, making the first version look a little washed out by comparison. But even without this lick of paint, *Journey* is a stirring experience that manages to raise questions about its medium along with emotive observations on life. Its power is diminished somewhat the second time through, the magic of your formative encounters unavoidably dimmed by foreknowledge, but what remains morphs into something else that's no less joyful and certainly no less important.





Dead Space

The best thing about *Dead Space* is all of *Dead Space*. The “Please let us make this” project of a talented internal team who patched together a prototype while working on EA’s *James Bond* licence, the Cronenbergian sci-fi horror is above all intensely focused, with a functional-future aesthetic flowing into frill-less shoot-and-stomp gameplay. It doesn’t just look great – grotesque, rusted, beautiful – and play wonderfully, but it has something to say – something about resourcefulness and capability, about heroes creating as well as destroying, and about how, if you’re going to battle an army of undead aliens, being handy with a spanner is a huge bonus.

Dead Space, in other words, is blue-collar space. Instead of a jetpack, our faceless hero Isaac Clarke gets a tram, and even then if he wants it to actually go anywhere he has to fix it first. His weapons are tools – laser cutters and bolt guns – and everything he interacts with makes a beeping sound tuned to the frequency of analogue 1970s retro-futurism. On board the USG Ishimura, the mining ship Clarke trams his way around, frantically fixing and fleeing, there are coils and vents and plodding metal-grilled corridors, the fixtures of Ridley Scott’s own horror-thick mining vessel, the USSC Nostromo.

Unlike the Nostromo, *Dead Space* doesn’t have an alien. Instead it has an even darker horror from the abyss – ourselves. People are the enemy in *Dead Space* – and the treacherous

notion of biology itself, which has somehow transformed us into reanimated, inside-out versions of ourselves with extremely sharp elbows. The Necromorphs are get-the-hell-away-from-me good, clawing and distended mirror images that flit and flurry under the Ishimura’s strobing lights.

Best of all, the design of the Necromorphs slots like an efficiently engineered socket into the game’s functional aesthetic. These monsters, all stretched-limbed and gangling, must be pruned rather than obliterated. Clarke is a precision craftsman – the Necromorphs go down faster if he laser-slices scythe-like arms and legs rather than aiming for genre-typical head and body shots. This feels both refreshing and fitting – God, it’s nice to be shooting slightly differently for a change, and for a reason that plugs right into Clarke’s brown metal engineer’s RIG. It also makes for leaner, nastier horror, demanding accuracy under pressure and a steady, practiced hand, and making survival a permanent entry on Clarke’s ongoing job list.

This is where Clarke’s improvised armoury really comes into its own. His three-pronged laser cutter features a revolving head that rotates on a 90-degree axis with the most perfect whir of effort. Once the jump scares are out of the way, combat settles into bursts of concentrated workmanship – a leg clipped from the hip here, then a quick rotation to the vertical position before the arms are sliced from the shoulders. *Dead Space*’s combat

is methodical and complex, with different tools selected for different tasks – a flamethrower to scatter swarms of fleshy parasites, a disc saw for dissecting crowds – and supplementary abilities – object-slowing stasis and object-shifting telekinesis – switched depending on the situation at hand. Late in the game, taking on a crowd of Necromorphs has the dextrous feel of a well-managed physical job, completed with a reliable set of tools that the workman knows inside and out.

Whether through intention or necessity, *Dead Space*’s core minimalism is strengthened by a tight-lipped approach to story. Logs and files are scattered through the Ishimura, a blunt but well-deployed narrative device, and otherwise we’re left with suggestion and conspiracy – of a religious sect whose subterfuge might have unleashed the Necromorphs, and, even more subtly, of a dystopian future society that’s reached the deeper reaches of space through rigid organisation backed up by the kind of forced-grin propaganda seen throughout the ship.

This background is all the more effective for being out of focus in a game that’s otherwise all about focus – about lean design, about a stripped-down hero whose face we don’t see until the credits are rolling, and about combating chaos in the form of messy biological mutation using literal laser accuracy. *Dead Space* is a classic of tight design, of form meeting functionality, and of heroes who fix things.





Dota 2

Dota 2 could never have been designed by a traditional game developer. What is now a free-to-play game run by Valve – the most popular title on Steam by a large margin – started off as the germ of an idea in a *StarCraft* mod. What if, the question went, you could build an RTS without base or army management? What if each player controlled a single character, and manipulated the flow of battle by disrupting AI-controlled armies that clash with or without them? That idea became the *Defence Of The Ancients* series of custom maps for *WarCraft III*, in their many versions and with their many competing creators.

This was a new type of multiplayer game, developed in forums and on IRC channels, that eventually coalesced into *DOTA All-Stars*. A competitive scene developed. *Heroes Of Newerth* spun away from *DOTA* in one direction, *League Of Legends* in another. Finally, Valve did as Valve does – hiring *DOTA*’s most prominent curator, bringing him in-house, and recreating the entire game with new art but exactly the same systems.

This is what separates *Dota 2* from other games in the genre: at no point has anybody attempted to streamline or popularise it. It remains that mod, organically grown and messy in many ways, now with bottomless resources behind it and annual competitive prize pools pushing past \$20m. There’s nothing like it from either a design or a business perspective.

At the microscale, *Dota 2* is about developing a single RPG

hero in a competitive environment and learning the complex interactions between hundreds of spells, items, stats, and so on in order to prevail in battle. You do this in coordination with four other people with a view to slowly demolishing the towers between you and the enemy ancient.

On the macroscale, this is an RTS where your team starts with all the buildings and fortifications you will ever have, and then must gather resources out on the battlefield – gold and experience from kills, AI-controlled creeps, and neutral monsters – in order to transform your characters into your new line of defence. Towers will fall eventually. What matters, what makes the game so exciting, is the economic and strategic dance that occurs as both teams attempt to account for the loss.

Combine these things and you have a complex game, yes, but also a very personality-driven one. *Dota 2* owes its success as an esports in large part to the fact that it’s a team game. Whatever level the game is played at, there is only so much a single player can do to tip a match in his team’s favour. Victory is reliably arrived at only through cooperation within an asymmetric system that requires different players to be good at different things. *Dota 2* is a game of tactical masterminds, virtuoso assassins, solid frontline fighters, and strategic support players. It is, therefore, substantially about people. How somebody plays *Dota 2* tells you something about them, and this is true whether you are playing with your friends or

watching the best in the world compete for millions of dollars.

That massive character roster only works because of Valve’s generous business model. Every player needs to have access to every hero, spell and item because the game itself is about the complex interaction between all of these things; introduce a paywall and the game itself is wounded. That’s why Valve’s decision to sell only cosmetic items and tournament tickets is so vital. It changes the type of game this is – not a game-as-service to be subscribed to, but a pastime available to anybody who wants to try it, whose depth reveals itself naturally over time as the player’s understanding grows.

Victory in *Dota 2* feels amazing because it’s the natural expression of all that developing expertise, the effort expended to learn something complicated, the personal pressures of working with others – strangers or not – towards a collective goal. It’s powerful because it feels like an encounter with chaos. The game’s origin as something collectively designed over many years manifests as a system that is uniquely adept at testing its players. Traditional game developers simply wouldn’t design something like this; they’d stop at some point. They would decide that enough complexity was enough. They’d consider more maps, more modes, more points of entry. *Dota 2* isn’t like that. *Dota 2* is three lanes, a hundred or so characters, ten people, and whatever happens next.





Vanquish

The official strategy guide for *Vanquish* is one of the best we've ever seen. Substantial and meticulous, it talks you through the game in the kind of confident detail you'd expect from those who've mastered its nuances. It doesn't simply guide you down the path of least resistance, but encourages truly efficient play, explaining not only how to make it through an encounter in one piece, but how to do so with style. Read it before you play, and you might consider yourself fully prepared for Shinji Mikami's action masterpiece. But nothing can prepare you for playing *Vanquish*.

Inspired by the cult anime *Casshern*, *Vanquish* was the right game at the wrong time: a thirdperson shooter arriving just as the genre was beginning to reach saturation point. This was partly Mikami's own doing, of course, with *Resident Evil 4* having inspired a slew of imitators, and the mechanical refinements of Epic's popular *Gears Of War* in turn informing several copycat cover shooters of debatable value. Many saw *Vanquish*'s chest-high walls and approached it in the same manner as its stop-and-pop brethren, little realising that this was a very different kind of game.

The key point of difference is its sheer speed. Consider *Gears Of War*'s roadie run, a typically western design in that it focuses more on heightening our physical connection with the game world than conveying any meaningful mechanical benefit. *Vanquish*'s Augmented Reality Suit (or ARS), by contrast, is distinctly Japanese

in its approach: it's at once stylish and functional, allowing you to execute swift dodge-rolls and trigger rocket boosts that allow you to get around much quicker, and escape any incoming barrages. If *Gears* is a gridiron match against a near-impenetrable defence, each play seeing you grind out a few more yards, then *Vanquish* is more like a series of Hail Marys. It's a sprint, not a crawl.

Except when you choose to slow things down. It's easy to forget that *Vanquish* doesn't actually have a bespoke slow-motion button; rather, it's automatically triggered during certain situations. Aim your weapon while sliding, dodging and vaulting over cover and suddenly those incoming missiles can be shot out of the sky, that enemy's weak point is exposed for longer, and that grenade you just threw toward a cluster of opponents can be sniped in mid-air.

Such command over the tempo of battle naturally comes at a cost. Your suit's energy gauge is at once your health and your stamina bar. As soon as it overheats, you're in serious trouble, and the meter drains when you opt to speed things up and slow them down. The same also applies when you launch your powerful melee attack. And yet at your most vulnerable, you're always given a small window of opportunity to retreat, since the ARS triggers one final use of slow motion. Even good *Vanquish* players will experience dozens of these death-or-glory moments in a single playthrough; experts walk a

constant tightrope, permanently on the verge of overheating.

With mastery comes the ability to showboat: you'll buzzsaw off robotic limbs, deliver drop-kicks to metallic breastplates, and glide between the legs of a giant mech, shotgun pointed upwards as you pass underneath. You'll pause briefly for a cigarette mid-battle, flicking the stub out to the left to draw enemy fire before rolling out to the right and flanking them while they're distracted. *Vanquish* might be too chaotic to be called graceful, but there are moments of beauty amid the mayhem, where you're the only one in control in a world that's permanently out of it.

As with all the best anime, there's a demented energy to each of *Vanquish*'s set-pieces, some of which are almost paradoxically ludicrous. It presents moments of staggering spectacle, folding in elements of danmaku and even quick-time events with consummate skill. These stick-twirling, button-bashing interludes aren't ever allowed to dominate the action, instead commonly reserved for delivering a coup de grâce that your prior actions have set up. And they're so smartly directed that grabbing hold of a torpedo and returning it to sender with interest feels every bit as gratifying as it sounds.

Bewilderingly, in the six years since its release *Vanquish* has had no meaningful influence on the genre. And yet in some respects that's no bad thing — after half a decade, it remains unique, a Platinum-grade action game that stands without peer.





Format Wii U Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 2015



Super Mario Maker

There's no tutorial in *Super Mario Maker*. In any other game-making toolkit, that wouldn't be daring so much as foolhardy, but Nintendo knows what it's doing. It's confident it's built a level designer that can be understood instantly from its user interface — and it has. And it knows that we know what we're doing, too: why bother with detailed guidelines on course building when you've already provided 30 years' worth of reference material?

More to the point, the lack of direct instruction invites players to get inventive. In the early years, Nintendo's creative leads had little to no experience of making games, drawing ideas from their own experiments in other fields. Before he joined Nintendo, Shigeru Miyamoto was a toy maker; Eiji Aonuma a puppeteer. The secret of Nintendo's success has always been its ability to approach themes from unlikely angles, which is how it's remained so nimble and so capable of surprising us over the years.

Sample courses are there for those who need a prod in the right direction; otherwise *Super Mario Maker* simply presents a canvas upon which anyone can start drawing. Crucially, it's never an entirely empty one: even if you actively delete the existing screen furniture, there's a familiar background to welcome you, and a flagpole means you don't have to think too hard about the ending, just the start and the middle.

For some, putting stylus to touchscreen will feel a little like an act of vandalism. These are, after

all, building blocks that have been previously reserved for Nintendo's finest level designers, schooled in the methods of Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka, who had to make do with graph paper to build the courses of the first *Super Mario Bros*, and tracing paper to augment and append them. Not only does using an interface this immediate feel a bit like cheating, then, but as budding creators we're acutely aware of the great responsibility that accompanies this great power.

Even so, attempting to build something worthwhile on your first attempt — or even your 15th — isn't easy. Placing blocks and enemies is a doddle. Placing them well is another matter entirely, even with the visual assistance of a trail of Marios that follows the arc of every leap. It's a sobering moment, and one that gives you arguably a greater insight into the creative process than any other level-building tool.

The piecemeal delivery of the tools is an understandably divisive choice, though a sensible one in many respects. By restricting us to the basics at the outset, we're encouraged to start small but think big; to embrace the kind of restrictions imposed upon Miyamoto, Tezuka and company before World 1-1 came to be. It's in keeping with Gunpei Yokoi's philosophy of lateral thinking with withered technology, too, inviting players to consider how to use simple ingredients in fresh ways. And suddenly it dawns: this is *Super Mario Maker's* tutorial. Pressing on brings a new course to play, containing a handful of

additions which are subsequently loaded up on your palette to experiment with. It makes perfect sense when you consider it as a teaching method. No one tries to fit an entire term's curriculum into a single lesson, after all.

Otherwise, you learn through play. The 100 Mario Challenge asks you to complete a series of user-created courses, providing what might be a disparate collection with a sense of structure and purpose. More significantly, it offers a constantly moving conveyor belt of ideas. They mightn't all generate a creative spark, but at some stage you're bound to come across a concept that's worth developing further. This is both *Super Mario Maker's* most significant caveat and its greatest strength. The majority of its stages have been built not by Nintendo but by newcomers, thus making it the most uneven *Mario* game to date. And yet in highlighting user creations ahead of its own, Nintendo has, in theory, created an endlessly evolving creative resource. Players can acknowledge the best stages by awarding stars, while dismissing weaker ones with a swipe of the stylus during play.

Over time, the Wii U community has pooled its knowledge and the overall quality of course design has improved. That it's been a gradual process is hardly surprising: Nintendo had a 30-year head start, after all. It may seem like a daunting lead, but in *Super Mario Maker* we finally have all the tools at our disposal to start trying to catch up.







Fire Emblem Fates

It would be naive to suggest that the decision to release *Fire Emblem Fates* in three parts (two physical releases and one digital, with a lavish limited edition containing all three on a single cartridge) was a purely creative one. *Fire Emblem: Awakening* had been a last throw of the dice for a series that had struggled to break out of its steadily narrowing niche for several games, but with a presentational spruce up and the addition of light dating-sim elements, it found a whole new audience — one that was evidently more than happy to spend big on its follow-up. A smart commercial decision, then, but one that also pays off handsomely from a narrative standpoint. Though *Birthright*, *Conquest* and *Revelation* all function as standalone stories, *Fates* is all the richer when the saga is considered as a whole; each part of the trilogy casts new light on a conflict with surprising ambiguities and nuance.

As a series, *Fire Emblem* has historically occupied a curious middle ground: some view it as an RPG with strategic battles, while others see it as a strategy game with roleplaying elements. *Birthright* and *Conquest* resolve that tension by pushing more firmly in opposite directions. The former's more single-minded approach to conflict — with most missions calling for you to rout the opposition — together with its greater flexibility when it comes to improving your stats, give it more of a feel of an RPG. *Conquest's* variety of objectives, steeper challenge, and comparative

rigidity when it comes to character building, enforce more careful tactical planning. *Revelation* finds a sweet spot between the two, giving you more options without dialling back on the difficulty.

If *Birthright* is more suited to beginners and *Conquest* to series veterans, that isn't to say the former shows *Fire Emblem* is going soft. Keeping everyone alive during the later battles in particular is still difficult enough to require a few soft resets, though if you're willing to grind until you're over-prepared then you might just be able to save everyone. Unlike *Advance Wars*, where you'll happily sacrifice a unit or two for the greater good, *Fire Emblem* has always striven to make you feel the weight of every loss. *Fates* goes to even greater lengths than *Awakening* to make sure that's the case, with a castle base that gives you more ways to interact with your allies, while giving you a more tangible measure of your progression. It's also a way to further personalise your game, beyond shipping your favourite characters (or min-maxing so they produce genetically superior offspring to recruit for the final push).

Most will have already picked a side before the game invites them to choose in its sixth chapter. *Birthright* automatically allies you with your biological family in the flourishing Hoshido kingdom, while *Conquest* has you fighting alongside your adopted brethren from the barren Nohr territory. The war is pitched almost as East vs West, but with Nohr ruled by a

bloodthirsty tyrant who kidnapped you as a youngster, it does seem like Hoshido are being positioned as the good guys. As such, some *Conquest* players felt put out by their initial pick, and yet *Fates* has a surprise in store. Called to protect Hoshido in *Birthright*, you quickly adopt the maxim that attack is the best form of defence, leading to much soul-searching as you consider the human cost of your actions. *Conquest*, meanwhile, sees your avatar seeking a more peaceful resolution, risking everything to flout the king's orders and spare their opponents.

It was a courageous decision to limit resources in one game and simplify objectives in the other, but it helps to ensure a greater harmony between systems and story. As such, in some respects *Revelation* is the least daring of the three routes, and yet in combining the strengths of the others it's perhaps the most purely enjoyable, particularly since it allows you to unite both sides to fight for a common cause. It's constructed around a narrative convenience that's too vigorous a hand wave to overlook, but by that stage you'll be too invested in the characters to worry. That in itself tells its own story. For all *Fates'* strengths — its slick, accessible interface, its delightful visual flourishes, its rousing soundtrack — it's the same emotional foundation that's defined the series since the start that makes it so absorbing. Everything else merely makes this expansive — and expensive — triumvirate the best way to experience this splendid series.





Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Publisher/developer Playdead Release 2016



Inside

Like its predecessor,

Playdead's second game has a single-line pitch for an otherwise wordless story. *Limbo*'s is short and to the point: "Uncertain of his sister's fate, a boy enters Limbo." Already, we have our setting and our goal. *Inside*'s, by comparison, is a little harder to pin down. "Hunted and alone, a boy finds himself drawn into the centre of a dark project." This gives away a little more, revealing the danger in which the boy finds himself, and yet at the same time it's holding plenty back. Where exactly are we? Why are we being hunted? What is this dark project, and why are we drawn toward it?

It's perhaps fitting for a game that lacks *Limbo*'s blunt immediacy. Its murky, near-monochromatic art isn't quite as instantly striking, either, drawing unfavourable comparisons against the stark, silhouetted look of Playdead's debut. And by dint of its similarities – both games, after all, are sidescrollers with light physics-based puzzles, starring young protagonists thrust into perilous, nightmarish worlds – *Inside* invariably loses some of that crucial surprise factor.

That, it turns out, is a sign of confidence. Playdead is happy for its second game to share a few similarities with its first, knowing that this boy's journey is headed somewhere very different indeed. And it is, without doubt, a better game than *Limbo*. It's more mature, more thoughtful, more measured in its pacing. Not only does it better integrate its environmental puzzles within

its world, it's prepared to leave more space between them.

The result is a more consistent sense of place. *Limbo*'s environments, though memorable, often feel like individual fragments stuck together, the hand of a game designer more obviously apparent in its obstacles, with traps sometimes callously placed. *Inside*'s hazards do require a certain precision and swiftness of thought, but they're rarely quite so fussily exacting. It's trial and error with fewer errors, then, and the puzzles that do halt your progress are simultaneously simple enough not to hold you up for too long while being rewarding to solve. It's thanks to a wonderful clarity of design that makes it easy to parse the individual components, so you can focus on working out how they fit together.

Player deaths in *Limbo* are often nasty, but they happen so frequently that they can become punchlines. They lose far less of their power here. This isn't about shock value in killing a young boy, though the violence can be shocking. But they don't linger: they're brutish and abrupt, and hard to take. In other games, you fear death because you fear losing progress, but the checkpoints here are so generous that you've little to lose in that regard. Instead, you'll try harder next time to avoid mistakes, because you don't want to have to watch the poor lad's body going limp once again.

Even when the boy's life isn't in immediate danger, this is a deeply unsettling experience. *Inside*'s nightmare is all the more insidious

for the moments its world hews closely to our own. From the boy's adult pursuers with their wandering flashlights and the piercing bark of their attack dogs, to the canteens and offices of later areas, the banality grounds the strangeness, and makes it a more potent kind of purgatory.

Its surprises are subtler, too. PlayDead finds time to let you settle into a rhythm before it yanks the proverbial rug. Where games like *Uncharted* overdo tricks such as crumbling scenery, so that after a while it's more of a novelty when a handhold does remain intact, *Inside* spreads out its jolts so they're genuinely unexpected. In edge-of-the-seat thrills, it can stand toe to toe with any game. One moment where, having spent a great deal of time trying to hide, you're suddenly exposed and tasked – quite literally – with falling in line is among the most exhilarating set-pieces in years.

And that's before you consider the hard left turn in the final act, a virtuoso high-wire act that is at once tragic, horrifying, repulsive and blackly comic. It's also a remarkable feat of animation: one puzzle involving a flaming crate and a set of sprinklers would be astonishing just to behold, let alone that you're entirely in control at the time.

Inevitably, you're left with as many questions as you had at the start, perhaps more. Regardless of your interpretation, *Inside*'s haunting tale stays with you. It might not have matched *Limbo*'s impact, but the mark it leaves takes much longer to fade.





Shadow Of The Colossus

If you were tasked with convincing someone that playing videogames is time well spent, that these things are possessed of a potential for artistic expression equivalent to that of older forms of entertainment, then *Shadow Of The Colossus* might well be the game you'd use as evidence.

Its central conceit is simple enough: you must defeat a series of gigantic enemies and in return your dead love will be resurrected. It also eases the player into the experience through cinematic sequences that very competently adapt the qualities lauded in film. But then you find yourself in a fiction of unquestionable thematic richness, of riveting emotional power, whose fundamental artistic qualities are completely fused with its interactivity. The stature of *Shadow Of The Colossus* as something worth discussing is entirely dependent on it being a game, and not a book or a film.

The rendering of its world and play mechanics coalesce to give you a sense of immense struggle without making the game too gruelling to complete. Though the ending is bittersweet, *Shadow Of The Colossus* convinces you of the vast hardships you have endured.

It does this through many means, foremost with its most obvious innovation: rethinking the concept of boss battles to provide a string of 16 gargantuan enemies each of which more or less constitutes a level in itself, in the approximate language of other, more conventional games. That each level poses effectively the same basic mission creates

repetition that compounds the immensity of this task. At the end of each battle, the protagonist is returned to where he began, increasingly bedraggled, only to have to pick himself up and press on, seeking out the next foe.

The landscape through which you travel, a startlingly beautiful but desolate peninsula cut off from civilisation by a range of mountains, its arcane ruins populated only by the occasional lizard, evokes a sense of total isolation. As you travel, often without incident for minutes on end, there is no musical accompaniment — just the sound of horse's hooves and the distant call of an eagle. How small and alone you feel here, and how phenomenally large your task.

It's a feeling that is obviously exacerbated by your opponents, the colossi, which are not monsters but vast structures come to life. Scaling them to find their weakspots is facilitated by elegantly simple controls but presented with a powerful evocation of physical effort. The animations of the protagonist as he heaves himself through a patch of moss on the spine of a colossus, or dangles precariously with one arm, provide such visceral feedback to your actions as a player that you find yourself holding your breath until the character has gained purchase. Yet, despite the exertion involved, the defeat of a colossus is only partly a matter for triumph; you're reminded in their piteous death throes that you are murdering unique and majestic creatures,

many of which don't respond to your presence with enmity.

It is not the only emotional sting you feel during the game. When your horse, Agro, plunges into a ravine, selflessly tossing its master to safety, the sense of despair at this further sacrifice to your mission is palpable. It's traumatic — Agro is much more than a superbly animated vehicle; given personality through cutscenes, it's lent vitality by the fact that it doesn't always obey. Momentarily frustrating as this may be, the sense of Agro resisting your control makes it your one source of companionship.

Although the girl you wish to resurrect cannot initially be drawn as a character, your emotional tie to her, and to the mission, is defined by circular logic: you struggle for her, so she is worth struggling for. When your joint fate is jeopardised at the last moment the feelings you experience are, brilliantly, given voice through the game's interactivity — first by allowing you to satisfy a need for revenge, and then instilling desperation when you are given control yet can still do nothing to avoid your fate.

At all points, *Shadow Of The Colossus* delivers its artistic vision through your agency as a player, your active involvement enacting its main themes — isolation, struggle and loss — all facilitated by an aesthetic of great depth and unity. The result is something that is highly persuasive of the videogame's unique artistic value, while never sacrificing the pleasure of the experience.





Halo 3

It may have diminished a little in stature under the custodianship of 343, but *Halo* has long been an industry giant, originally carrying the torch for console-based firstperson shooters and going a long way towards shaping the culture and colour scheme of Microsoft's home consoles for three generations. *Halo 3* is the sweet spot, a combination of a generation-defining multiplayer template (before *Call Of Duty* swept all before it) and a campaign that righted itself after the uneven over-ambition of *Halo 2*.

There is a functional feel to the story itself – repairing the cliffhanger disappointment of *Halo 2*, and tending to the crucial trilogy-capping business of how Master Chief ends the Covenant War. But even workaday levels are given a surge of vitality thanks to *Halo*'s particular and persistent feel, its solid and elegant system of movement and aiming. Clearly an extraordinary number of hours have been spent ensuring the turning, weight and orientation of existing inside *Halo* has an expensive feel of reassuring heft and purpose.

Whatever happens in *Halo 3*'s campaign, in other words, feels luxurious and somehow premium. It also recaptures enough of *Combat Evolved*'s directness to pull off a handful of thumping set-pieces. *Halo 3*'s giant Scarab tank attacks give a sense of scale and moving parts that alerts you to ongoing technical achievement even as you're bullseyeing weakspots and dodging canon fire. And The Covenant, the game's

eighth mission, is the logical conclusion of the series' use of three-way battleground dynamics, another race against time on another Forerunner installation but this time with human, Covenant and Flood forces fighting by your side.

The campaign, though, is the short film before the main feature, which is a multiplayer game of lasting and extraordinary quality. This is partly because of that luxurious gamefeel, but also because it was the last game in the series to be confident that feeling good to play was enough. There is a minimalist assurance to the simplicity of *Halo 3*'s multiplayer, which arrived before *Call Of Duty* made XP-gathering and loadouts ubiquitous, before chaotic perks and killstreaks became obligatory. Even with customised rules or modes, *Halo 3* is balanced and level in a way that encourages skill and strategy. Starting arms are standardised, and more powerful alternatives are prizes to be fought over on the map – this is a game of territory and tactics. There are no geography-defeating powerups of flight or speed, making fleet-footed navigation around the maps crucial.

And what maps they are. *Halo 3*'s geometry is so wonderfully designed that a playlist of the best five levels – Guardian, Epitaph, Blackout, Cold Storage, The Pit, some new and some old favourites recast – could conceivably be played endlessly. There is a pleasure in working the routes of these constructs and architectural formulations, a joy in tracing the

shortcuts, finding the sightlines and feeling out the kill spots and defensible corners. There's meaning and intention to these crafted blocks of space, so that playing a good, tight game of four-on-four Slayer, flowing in and out of three-exited rooms and from tight corridors to open platforms, feels almost like reading, like passing fingertips over braille to interpret shape into thought.

Crucially, they're also great places to shoot each other. *Halo 3* is at its best when hosting simple, stripped-down games of Slayer on small- to medium-sized maps. At this scale, the intention of those maps is easier to read: Guardian, with its opposing zones and asymmetrical flanking routes, making for skilful battles of cat and mouse; Epitaph, with its walkways and grav lifts, perfect for scope-shooters but full of shotguns turning corners; and Blackout, in its layered platforms and vertical shortcuts, good for anything and everything.

This isn't intended as nostalgic reverie. *Halo 3* is still worth the tangled wires of a 360 LAN party, or alternatively it's the best reason to play *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*, where there's an active population of players (but also playlists that will try to tease you away from playing a tight, obsessive circuit of *Halo 3*'s greatest hits). It is the last great stand of a kind of shooter that isn't fashionable any more, of balance instead of overload, of trusted systems rather than continual rewards, and of skill rather than slick repetition.







The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask

If there's a common thread that ties the *Zelda* games together, it is the childlike joy of discovery. Inspired by Shigeru Miyamoto's youthful expeditions into the forests and caves of the Kyoto countryside, *Zelda* games are infused with a sense of wonder. Whether you're sailing the Great Sea in *Wind Waker*, nudging the edges of the screen in the original game, or probing the walls with your sword for hidden caverns in *A Link To The Past*, you can never be sure what might come next, but there's joy in finding out.

Well, with one exception. *Majora's Mask* is the most unusual of *Zelda* games, because there is a notable absence of that joy. From its fatalist premise — the grotesquely grinning moon is falling into the earth in 72 hours, and there is nothing that anybody but you can do about it — to its troubled cast and eerie, subtly nightmarish world, *Majora's Mask* carries an air of melancholy that is rare among Nintendo games, let alone in this series.

It remains structurally unique, too, despite the many years that other developers have had to copy its ideas. Repeating the same 72 hours on a loop might sound tedious, but although there is some frustration to having the same conversations and solving the same environmental puzzles with each new three-day cycle, there's also something oddly soothing about knowing how events are going to pan out, and often, but not always, being able to change them. It also adds a sense of urgency to the dungeons, which

might otherwise have felt too familiar to players coming fresh from *Ocarina Of Time*. Instead of retreading the ground broken by its predecessor, *Majora's Mask* is arrestingly different.

The four main masks, which distort Link bodily into new forms, primarily allow us to experience the world as the non-human peoples of a mirror Hyrule — the Deku, Zora and Gorons — and reveals that they all have their own, very human, problems. It is also often forgotten that Link obtains these masks by being cursed and from the dead or the dying, another facet of the game's preoccupation with the macabre.

But it's the personalities of Termina that stick in the mind. As time goes on, the inhabitants of Clock Town emerge from their state of breezy denial and descend into full-on panic as it becomes clear that the sky really is falling. The end of the world invites all sorts of different reactions from them, inspiring dejected introspection, stiff-upper-lip endurance and even fatalistic hedonism. The Anju and Kafei quest, in which Link must follow a demanding and precisely timed sequence of events to reunite two doomed lovers, is perhaps the most memorable *Zelda* side-quest that there's ever been — despite, like so much of *Majora's Mask*, being tinged with deep sadness. Even the game's villain, Skull Kid, is revealed to be a tragic figure whose isolation and self-loathing made him susceptible to the influence of the titular evil mask. He is gaming's own Gollum.

Not least among these troubled characters is the boy Link himself, a child carrying the weight of experience of a grown man upon his shoulders, and the saviour of a world that few remember ever needed saving. At the beginning of the game, not long after he triumphed against Ganon at the end of *Ocarina Of Time* and found himself back in his childhood body, he appears slumped, dejected, on the back of his horse, wandering aimlessly through a forest in search of an old friend, a fairy called Navi. He never finds her. Instead, his horse is stolen (and, as is worryingly implied by the game's dialogue, destroyed), and he is transformed into a twisted Deku Scrub by the prankster antagonist. The pain of this transformation must be doubly acute for Link, a boy who at this point has already had his identity taken from him once. He has gone from the powerful Hero Of Time to lonely child and then stunted monstrosity.

Majora's Mask can be read as a game about identity. In experimenting with the masks he finds around Termina, ones that transform his body or change the way people perceive him, perhaps Link is searching for a new face that fits. There is debate among the *Zelda* faithful over whether Termina is a real place, or if, like Koholint in *Link's Awakening*, it is a product of the imagination. But to those who have swilled around the same three days in it, unpicking its relationships and mysteries, Termina is the most real of any of Nintendo's worlds.







Spelunky HD

Spelunky's premise is

familiar, and not just thanks to videogames' historical obsession with plunging into the Earth in search of peril and treasure. There's something elemental about its central quest, in which you explore an arcane warren of underground caves, skirting threats and collecting trinkets. We all share, at some level, the desire to explore an unknown world, a longing surely quickened by the promise of wealth that lurks, unguarded, beneath our feet. But while *Spelunky's* dangers and rewards are just as plain as those found in *Mr Driller*, *Cave Story*, *Dig Dug* and all the subterranean others, the recipe and aftertaste is complex and unique.

For one, Derek Yu's game is randomly generated — as if every expedition into the Earth's crust was taking place in a slightly different location. Caves and items rearrange with each playthrough so, if you wish to triumph, you must learn not layouts, but principles. Death is permanent here. There is no accumulation of abilities or levels to ease future attempts, save for the occasional, well-spaced shortcut, a design that raises the stakes of every trip to a feverish degree.

Then there's the combination of your small fistful of tools and abilities: a couple of bombs, a harpoon rope and, if you make it to one of the underground shops with enough gold in your back pocket, maybe a pair of spectacles, spiked shoes and a parachute. The way in which these items push against the world's dangers — the

bats that swoop, the bees that sting, the mummies that lumber, the spikes that wait, the spiders that dangle — is where *Spelunky's* beautiful friction is found, creating sparks that light up the world. Each threat behaves with clockwork predictability (not only in its swoops and bites, but also, in the case of the ghost that appears when you linger for too long, in their moment of arrival), and can be defeated or evaded with timing and good technique. As you quest deeper and meet the full cast of terrors, a complicated rhythm is established as the game sends a fresh situation your way and you must find the appropriate responses to overcome it.

In contrast to many other videogames, victory down here in the perilous subterranean playpen is anything but assured. Failure isn't binary, however — it comes on a sliding scale. The game doesn't end when you're out of ropes and bombs, standing thick metres of rock away from the nearest exit point, screen pulsing on a slither of health. Conversely, this is when it comes most alive, offering you a chance to forget all of those poor choices in your immediate past and swing for the greater glory.

Spelunky's lessons aren't limited to inspirational ones to do with never giving up, or trying to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and all of the well-worn others. There's moral instruction here too. You soon learn that, in *Spelunky* as in life, defeat is almost always rooted in greed — just ask the adventurer blown away by the

improbably nimble shopkeeper and his vicious shotgun, all for an act of petty, desperate theft. Then again, it's important to take the odd calculated risk, so long as you strike quickly. Those who dilly-dally never prosper (just ask the ghost). Then there's the one about luck, how your chances of a good run rest, almost without exception, on the throw of the dice that fortuitously places a jetpack or pair of spiked boots early in your quest. It's possible to execute a fine and long run on skill and patience alone, but that's going to take serious character.

No two runs are ever identical, then, and much of the game's joy comes from learning how to adapt in a novel yet familiar set of circumstances. This, along with the game's numerous arcane mysteries, which reveal themselves slowly, keeps *Spelunky* vibrant and engaging long after most other games would have grown rote and boring. The game's daily challenge, meanwhile, which randomly generates a cave system that is shared between all of the world's players every 24 hours to create a competitive version of the game, neatly folds into your daily routine and lodges there.

Spelunky can, at first glance, appear somewhat chaotic, but spend any amount of time with the game, and its rigour and precision becomes transparent. This game's walls and structures are not flimsy, just as its rules never bend. It is, rather, as refined a videogame as you could imagine, and despite that rigour, one from which incredible variety emerges.





Destiny

Chances are, if you're reading this, you played *Destiny* when it launched in 2014. After all, as someone with an avowed interest in great games, why wouldn't you? It seemed like a no-brainer, and too fascinating to resist: the maker of *Halo*, perhaps the greatest FPS series of them all, turning its hand to a living, persistent world, borrowing ideas from the MMO – character classes, skill trees, levelling and a loot game – and layering them over shooter conventions. The prospect was irresistible; the reality enthralled many, but turned off many more. At launch, *Destiny* was beautiful, brave and intoxicating, yet it was also slight, repetitive and flawed.

Which side of that divide you found yourself on was a matter of personality. Some chose to remember the highs – the time the mythical rocket launcher Gjallarhorn dropped at the end of a Strike; the time a raid boss left behind the armour piece that would finally take them to the level cap – and see the buzz of a good drop as fair compensation for the weeks of frustration that preceded it. Others asked why they bothered playing and re-playing the same handful of missions, however well designed they were, in the hope of a good drop from a randomised loot system that seemed engineered to punish first and reward second.

Both groups are right – which is Bungie's biggest problem as *Destiny* continues to mature. The studio wants the dissatisfied to return to a friendlier game, one that offers powerful rewards

through guaranteed means, and a more streamlined, yet flexible route to the level cap. Yet in doing so it must also ensure that its established core of players – those who love *Destiny* for what it is – are not left wanting.

The first step change in *Destiny's* evolution came with *The Taken King*, nominally the game's third expansion. It changed the emphasis away from capricious RNG towards definable goals, making some of the most powerful gear in the game available through guaranteed – though in places severely challenging – ways. The game's latest expansion, *Rise Of Iron*, takes the concept further. The new Record Book sits in your inventory and tracks your progress towards a host of fixed rewards from just about every component of the game.

Perhaps it wasn't the loot game that put you off all those months ago. Maybe it was the story, that half-baked waste of big-name talent caused, apparently, by a change of tack late in the launch game's development. That, too, has been improved significantly. Peter Dinklage's phoned-in, meme-sprouting performance has been excised from *Destiny* entirely, his role taken by an immeasurably more charismatic, robotic-in-the-right-way turn from Nolan North. Other pre-existing talent is better used now, too – Nathan Fillion's Cayde-6 is, finally, funny, his new lines symptomatic of a wider effort by a studio to lean in to the sort of light tone you'd expect from a game in which you shoot space wizards on the moon using a

sniper rifle that reloads itself in your pocket. And while game and story previously felt disconnected, as *Destiny* evolves Bungie is getting better at more elegantly linking the two. Both *The Taken King* and *Rise Of Iron* take story elements previously hinted at in item descriptions and collectible Grimoire cards, and makes them the focal point of the action.

Those who have stuck with *Destiny* since the beginning would argue, fairly, that the one thing that Bungie didn't need to do much work on was the action template at the game's core. It is, and has always been, a marvellous shooter, its gunplay immaculate, its intricate weaves of character abilities, weapons and armour perks powering a game that holds its lustre even as you blast down the defences of a boss you've already fought dozens of times. Yet still Bungie has built on it, adding an extra subclass to each of the three base classes in *The Taken King*, adding new weapons and gear with each expansion, and improving balance along the way.

What, then, of content, perhaps the biggest criticism of *Destiny* at launch? Including *Rise Of Iron's* additions to the pool, the *Destiny* of today has several dozen story missions, 15 strikes, over 30 multiplayer maps, and four raids. Perhaps we can put that claim to bed now too. *Destiny* was always a compelling proposition. At launch, Bungie failed to deliver, but as the months and years roll by, the most intoxicating shooter on the market continues to get bigger, braver and a good deal better.





Format GBA, SNES Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 1991



The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past

There's something about

viewing a *Zelda* game from above. Shigeru Miyamoto has famously said that *Ocarina Of Time* – which appeared seven long years after this, its home console precursor – was how *Zelda* had always looked in his head. And yet top-down *Zelda* has refused to die, still outnumbering the 3D games two-to-one. *A Link To The Past* was followed by the Game Boy classic *Link's Awakening*, possibly the most beautifully designed game of the entire series, an epic adventure distilled to just 160x144 pixels. Capcom subsidiary Flagship was drafted in to help create the *Oracle* companion games and the cute *Minish Cap* for GBC and GBA respectively. *Phantom Hourglass* forced a 3D world into the old overhead view on DS, and won considerable acclaim. *Zelda* in 2D was even invited back to the TV via GameCube for riotous multiplayer reinterpretation *Four Swords Adventures*.

Of course, the main reason for the survival of this format is its suitability for handhelds, but it's not the only one. Something it's easy to forget about 2D *Zeldas* is just how fast they are. For all *A Link To The Past's* grand scale – it was the first SNES game to stretch itself out across a whole, luxurious megabyte – it's a rapid, taut little action game to boot, bustling with enemies and pacy, button-mashing combat. Link can race from one side of the map to the other in a couple of minutes. These days, the rule is that the more complex, detailed and large an adventure game world is, the more languid

and involved the style of play. In that context, *A Link To The Past's* blend of arcade immediacy and fathomless depth is an utter delight, a miracle of a bygone age.

It's the flipside of Miyamoto's comment: *A Link To The Past* is the epic condensed, rendered with maximum efficiency in a bewitching tangle of sprites and icons that teem with life. It's *Zelda* concentrate, a heady dose of something videogames once excelled at but have almost forgotten how to do: magically shrink whole worlds with the sheer power of imagination.

And what worlds. Play *A Link To The Past* immediately after *Ocarina* and you'll be stunned at how incredibly close in conception the two games are. Every side of Hyrule is here: the pastoral bliss, the rugged wilderness, the pathos and comedy and humanity, the spellbinding mystery. *A Link To The Past*, it turns out, didn't just nail the formula for 2D *Zeldas* that would keep them going for years more. It defined the entire series, 3D games too. It painstakingly mapped out the rules and legends of videogaming's most intricate and enduring creation, for all of us to look down upon and marvel at.

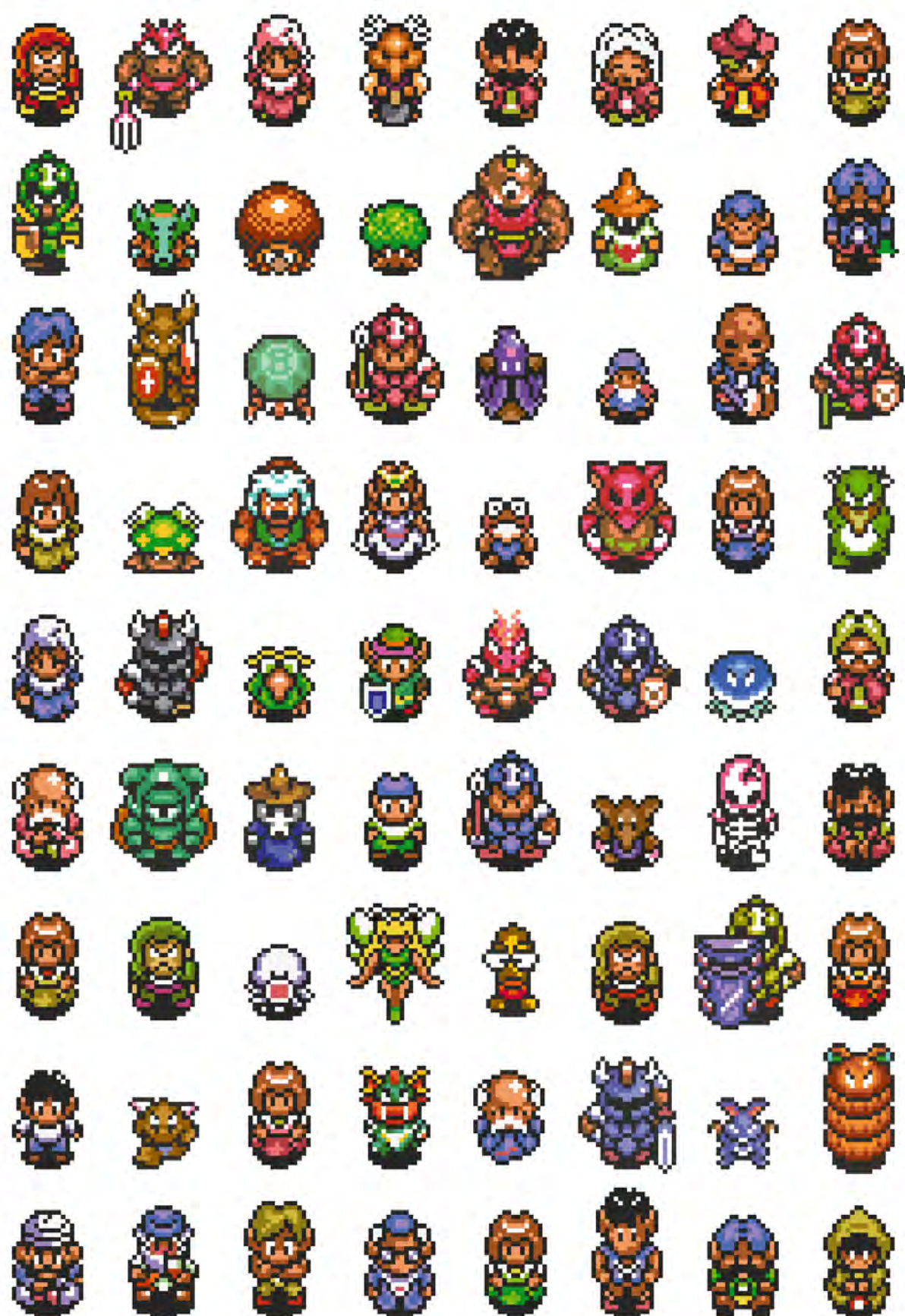
The single most important practical innovation it brought over the first *Legend Of Zelda* was probably the multi-level dungeon. It doesn't sound much, but it was effectively the series' move into 3D before the fact. The designers instantly began to explore complex spatial relationships and exploit the potential to turn dungeons into huge layered puzzles.

But they had an even grander meta-puzzle in mind, one that would become a cornerstone of the series. Link's unexpected transportation to the Dark World halfway through *A Link To The Past* introduced to *Zelda* the concept of two parallel realms, and the series would never look back. *Ocarina* and *Twilight Princess* copied it almost verbatim with their desolate future and shadow realms. *Minish Cap* put a twist on it with the ability to shrink Link to microscopic size. And so on.

The Dark World has a huge impact on *A Link To The Past* on two distinct levels, appropriately enough. It's an emotional sucker-punch, a one-two combination of wonder and fear at being transported to its grimy, sinister, mocking world where everything is the same and yet opposite. It stalks you with a vision of what should happen to Hyrule if you fail, and indulges a taste for the bleak and malicious and misanthropic that so rarely gets an outlet in Nintendo's games.

But the Dark World adds hugely to the design of the game's overworld, too. The relationship between light and dark worlds becomes a fascination, a source of countless mind-bending puzzles that literally tear the fabric of the game apart and put it back together again. It's the ultimate expression of what makes *Zelda* games so endlessly absorbing and satisfying to play. If *A Link To The Past* is 'just' the best *Zelda* in two dimensions, then that's nothing to be ashamed of: it's one more than most games have.







Kerbal Space Program

Kerbal Space Program is all about applying your creativity and understanding to one of the most romantic and ambitious fields of human endeavour: space travel. It is a lightly abstracted simulation of the process of managing a space agency, from policy and personnel to the nuts-and-bolts construction of vehicles.

It's about thresholds – between terrestrial flight and the upper atmosphere, the upper atmosphere and space, space and your first moon ('Mun'), the *other* moon, equivalents to Mars, Venus, and so on. Set in a cartoon analogy for our own solar system, *Kerbal Space Program* uses these natural barriers to construct a challenge that feels remarkably organic. You succeed at crossing each threshold thanks to your ingenuity and nothing else. As in the best creative games, you completely own your designs. As in the best puzzle games, applying those designs to the problem at hand reveals new possibilities every time.

Every attempt starts on the planet Kerbin, the Earth-analogue homeworld of the Kerbals – little green people whose exaggerated responses to the terror and splendour of spaceflight form the basis of the game's charm. While you might choose to pick up contracts in return for resources, you are free to set your own goals. Either way, you'll then use one of two construction facilities – one for planes, the other for rockets – and try to build something that solves the problem. This means assembling boosters, secondary rockets, wingles, on-ship labs,

communications equipment, command capsules, power supplies, and much more. You are free to place these to a fine degree of precision, and the detailed physics model means that your precision – or lack of it – matters.

You configure your vehicle's sequence – which rockets fire and when, which parts detach, when parachutes are deployed – and then pilot the mission manually. Each one teaches you something, from initial forays into the upper atmosphere, which help you work out the right time to angle into a burn, to ambitious transorbital ventures. Failure can result in outright disaster – a destroyed rocket, a dead crew – or another possibility. A Kerbal stranded in space around her homeworld might be lost forever unless you can pull off a daring rescue using a new, purpose-built craft.

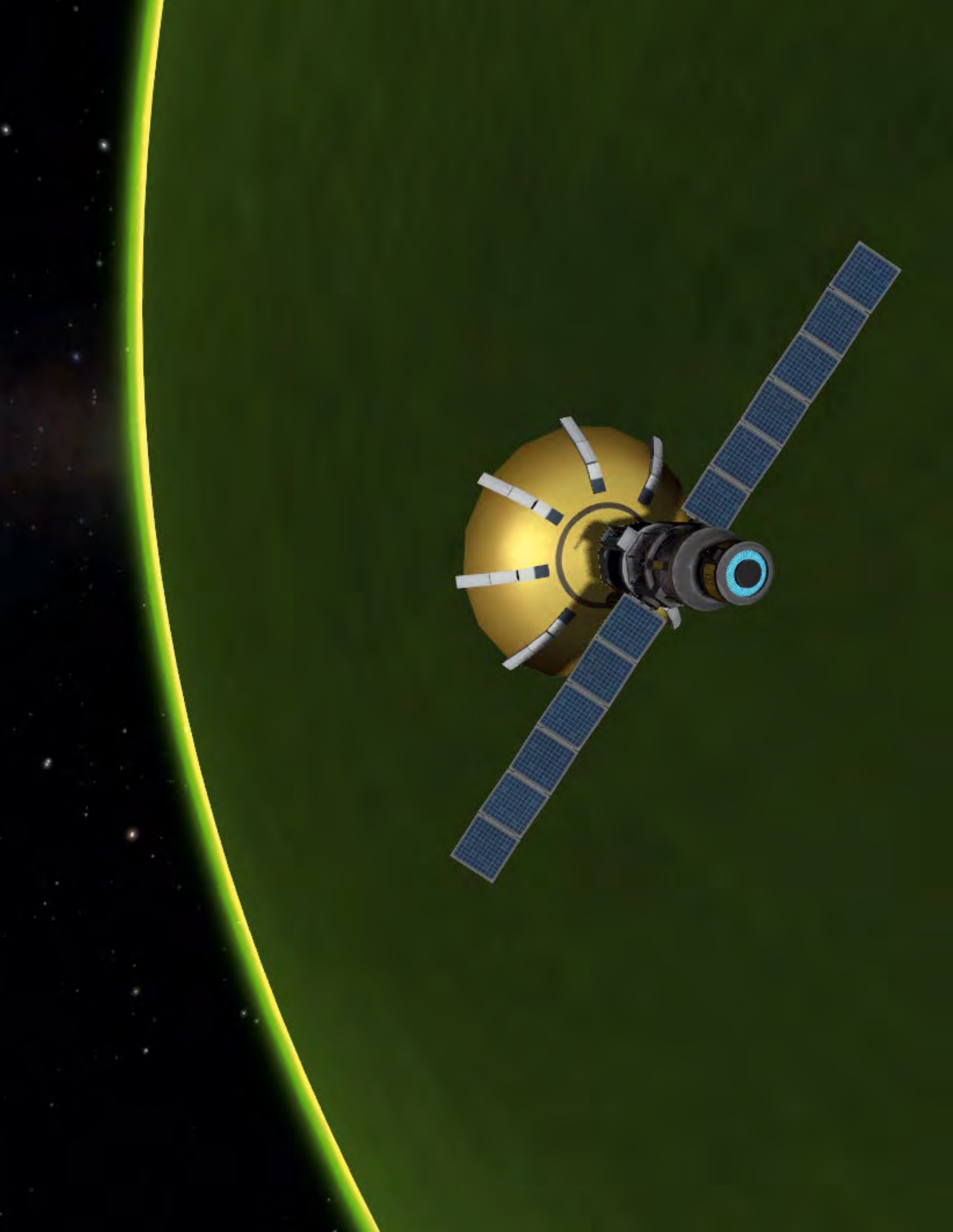
There are two parts to *KSP*'s magic. The first is its liveliness and sense of humour. The happy gurns of your Kerbals take the edge off the often-stiff difficulty curve and soften failure, ensuring that the game always feels like a game despite its serious subject matter. If the rigour of real rocket design gets tiresome, you can go away and build a rocket-powered plane or a giant explosive catapult and feel you're participating in a different part of the experience rather than breaking it.

The second part is almost the opposite. The degree to which *KSP* resembles real spaceflight – even if it doesn't quite match it – provides a heightened sense of import to what would otherwise

be a top-tier construction game. As you get better at the game you really learn what it takes to get a vehicle into orbit or land somebody on the moon. No game presents the challenge of spaceflight as resolutely realistically as this, and it is impossible to come away without being more amazed than ever that missions like this actually occurred. What's more, this makes your own achievements feel extraordinary. Not only have you cracked the puzzle, but you've imitated in some microscopic way one of the most incredible feats of human thought and engineering.

KSP was also a pioneer of Early Access game development, and remains an exemplar of how to get it right. Already brilliant when it was released to the public in alpha form, it then went through many years of development and iteration before being deemed finished. Over this time, Squad allowed the *KSP* community to guide it. Many features in the game that is sold today began life as mods, and there is still an active community producing new content.

The popularity of the game attracted the attention of NASA itself, which collaborated with Squad on a mission pack in 2014. After years on PC, it's also made the transition to consoles, and even though it doesn't stand up quite as well in those contexts, *Kerbal Space Program*'s growing profile is a testament to how brilliantly the concept straddles the divide between education and entertainment, sandbox fun and serious engineering.





Dishonored

Thief's Garrett and

Dishonored's Corvo Attano may be poles apart when it comes to personality, in that Garrett has a defined one, but both share a deep spiritual connection. Looking Glass and Ion Storm are long gone, but the disgraced Lord Protector can trace his lineage back through co-director Harvey Smith to the home of gaming's greatest burglar. No wonder, then, that a masked man on a mission of mercy and revenge spends half his time pilfering every coin, book and foodstuff that isn't nailed down, and slipping the key rings from guards' belts. It's in the blood.

But Smith's own legacy is *Deus Ex* and sequel *Invisible War*, and it's this — for all the threads between Dunwall and City 17 — that seemingly most influences the world Corvo sneaks through. In other words, the would-be toppler of a corrupt regime is presented with a powerful array of choice. The main one is whether he will kill and maim his way back to the top, or simply depose and ruin the conspirators, giving those in his way little more than a woozy head and aching windpipe.

Choice filters down from that lofty morality into *Dishonored's* moment-to-moment gameplay, primarily in your selection from a gleeful arsenal of weapons and tricks that can transform the voiceless protagonist into a spectre of death or simply a poltergeist that rearranges society and then fades back into the shadows. Perhaps you will expend your gifts from the supernatural Outsider on the ability to possess

one of the plague-spreading rodents that echo the corruption of the city, letting you travel to spaces no mortal man could enter. Maybe instead you'll simply direct the swarm onto the nearest warm bodies, allowing thousands of tiny teeth to tear apart what you can't be bothered to draw your spring blade to dice yourself. Possibly you'd prefer the ability to see through walls and judge patrol routes, but you could just stop time so you can saunter in and slit every throat before your foes can see you, let alone mount a defence.

The fixed point in all of this is Blink, a transformative ability that makes *Dishonored* unlike any other stealth game. You'll still need to watch patrol routes and expertly judge the intricate clockwork on which the local constabulary or hooligans run, but now you can dodge suspicion by disappearing and reappearing anywhere within a short distance that you can see. This, along with a generous jump and mantle, allows you to use every part of the environment, while a strict ration of mana prevents the ability to choose your ingress point becoming a crutch that removes all need to treat your enemies with respect and careful dedication. Randomised targets and locations, meanwhile, ensure that return playthroughs aren't simply exercises in remembering a path through these exquisitely crafted, albeit often decrepit and insalubrious, locations.

It's a setting with more than enough character to make up for the deficiencies of the blank slate through whose eyes you view it,

a world where superstition is fighting back against the march of progress. Your thirst for vengeance will take you to prisons and brothels, costumed soirees and tumbledown art dealerships. It will bring you into contact with art deco, Renaissance paintings and the hard, cold lines of the Third Reich. The fiction is no less layered or beautiful. On the surface, city officials maintain an iron grip on a terrified populace, whipped into a frenzy by the anonymous menace toppling the regime, not to mention the rat plague that is turning ordinary folk into walking contagion vectors. But underneath seethe tales about how misappropriation of technology can crush its optimistic pioneers, how unfeeling cruelty corrupts innocent spirits and drives them to Pyrrhic revenge, even touching on Lovecraftian themes of the Other. All these are slaved to your own narrative, one of close scrapes and raw power, and your ability to resist corruption yourself.

If *Dishonored* has a problem, it's that it is too tempting to simply give in and allow it to become the assassination simulator it seems in its heart to want to be. But while its sequel looks to address that issue, this is no lesser game, and its choices are only marginally less rich for beguiling many onto the path of violence. The Outsider may find that boring, the blood-soaked trail to the final cutscene, but one of the stealth genre's most refined toolsets and conglomerations of mechanics defies you to find it so yourself.





Format Wii U Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 2015



Splatoon

There's a moment in *Splatoon*, about two hours in, where your brain rewires itself around the least conventional, most accessible contemporary multiplayer shooter on the market, and it just flows. You won't have acquired all the weapons. You won't have dressed your cartoony squid-human Inkling in the freshest '90s skater threads. But what you've learned will be with you from this point until your tenth, 100th or 1,000th hour of playfully splattering glossy droplets over combat arenas and your opponents alike: it's all about the ink.

That simple fact alone turns the genre on its head, and welcomes a different cadre of players into a subset of games that are so often about a very particular set of skills. But *Splatoon* doesn't need you to pre-empt opponents, aim down sights or even score kills to score well: you win here through ink coverage. In an inspired piece of holistic design, you can also assume squid form by holding down the left trigger, allowing you to surge at great speed through your own ink or climb up even sheer walls, plus you'll slow down and pin your enemies by covering the ground around them in your colour. It's not so much spray and pray as spray and play.

What makes *Splatoon* uniquely suited to experienced shooter fans and total newcomers alike is how this levels the playing field. Kills pop your enemies into puddles of your ink and keep you in the game, so it never feels as if skill

is irrelevant, but in its weaponset and sparkling singleplayer campaign there are ample means for even the least competent aimers to transform into valuable teammates. Tactical thinking is more important than claiming heads, and the player who knows how to stay alive and keep squirting ink is a better helper than the gung-ho death merchant. And since in most modes the teams are shuffled after each match and there's no voice chat to poison the pool – or give alpha players the ability to take over and ruin the fun – all you really have to focus on is being the best teammate you can be. It's glorious freedom from the tyranny of the kill/death ratio, a return to exuberance, colour and playfulness for a genre that too often is deadly serious.

Perhaps *Splatoon's* greatest trick, though, is how it slowly coaches the newcomer to the point where you'll be splatting the opposition left and right. Take the roller weapon, which is just what it sounds: hold the fire button down and you push it in front of you, covering swathes of the map without even having to aim. Run into an opponent, meanwhile, usually by surprising them, and you'll roll them flat. You're not much at a distance but, as you improve, you'll learn to use the powerful short-range flick to defend yourself, or learn when to stay submerged to pop out and squish an unsuspecting victim. Once you master that playstyle, you could try your hand at a long-range squiffer sniper rifle, or the

explosive ink bubbles of a blaster, or a rapid-fire waterpistol.

While newbies have missed out on the brief window where everyone was feeling their way in a radically different breed of game, the difference between top-level gear and the starting kit is slight enough that no one is locked out. In return, a steady unfurling of maps, modes and new arms has expanded what was a slight but extremely moreish game at launch into a much more varied offering.

All of that has grown this quirky competitive team game a passionate fanbase, with matchmaking still primarily a matter of seconds, and a never-ending stream of Miiverse artists showing off their skills in the bustling plaza hub from which you begin the game. The Splatfest special events saw that community come together for intense weekends of battling, and it was wonderful to see how little animosity surrounded the schism of fans into two camps for an intense day of raucous battling. We've now seen the last of them, alas, but a large part of that community remains, no doubt partly thanks to such robust support from Nintendo during that first 12 months.

Maybe that's also down to *Splatoon's* character, which bears every Nintendo hallmark: memorable design, catchy music, unlimited enthusiasm, and offbeat charm. Spending time in *Splatoon's* universe is a pleasure, win or lose, which may be why, over a year on, we still keep coming back for more.







The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker

Over 12 years on, it's still one of the prettiest games we've played. *The Wind Waker's* cel-shaded style prompted wails of disapproval on its first reveal, but it is now recognised that this is among the most attractive and distinctive of all *Zeldas*. It's not simply how it looks, though, but how it *moves*. From the swaying, slobbering jowls of an approaching Moblin to the swirling curlicues of smoke as they're defeated, and the rolling, spume-topped waves, it's a world in constant motion – richly rendered, full of energy and life.

That's fitting, given the youthful, wide-eyed exuberance of our hero. *The Wind Waker* has an even younger-looking Link than was usual don the green garb of the Hero Of Time – a decision that contributed to the 'kiddie' accusations, along with a gentler difficulty curve – and it's an especially touching farewell as he sets out from his grandma's home to embark upon his grand adventure, looking far too young to shoulder the burden of saving the world. The same applies to those he meets along the way: Tetra is an ebullient partner, but Medli and Makar are both unwitting pawns in fate's design, asked to fulfil roles for which they seem wholly unready. The whole coming-of-age arc is hardly new to *Zelda*, but it's more movingly expressed here. The dungeons might not be the series' most elaborate – they're still very good, but we've been rather spoiled before and since in that regard – but they're perhaps better woven into the fabric of the narrative.

Though broadly speaking Link's toolkit is familiar – hookshot, boomerang, hammer, bombs and bow – this is a more radical *Zelda* than many gave it credit for. Its successors have seen us revisit well-trodden territory, yet here we get only a fleeting glimpse of those lush Hylian fields. *Zelda's* most famous setting is reserved for a spine-tingling cameo, Link's quest eventually taking him beneath the waves to a world in monochromatic stasis. The set-piece that ensues when you flood it once more with colour, and an invading army springs back to life, is one of the series' greatest moments, not least as the perfect showcase for *The Wind Waker's* simple but effortlessly thrilling combat. It's a showboater's dream, with its musical hit-pauses and last-second dodges. As Link rolls behind a Darknut, an upwards slash cuts the ties holding its armour in place, leaving it exposed and vulnerable. Even better, fire an arrow at a Moblin while its back is turned and it'll scuttle off in tears, clutching its backside.

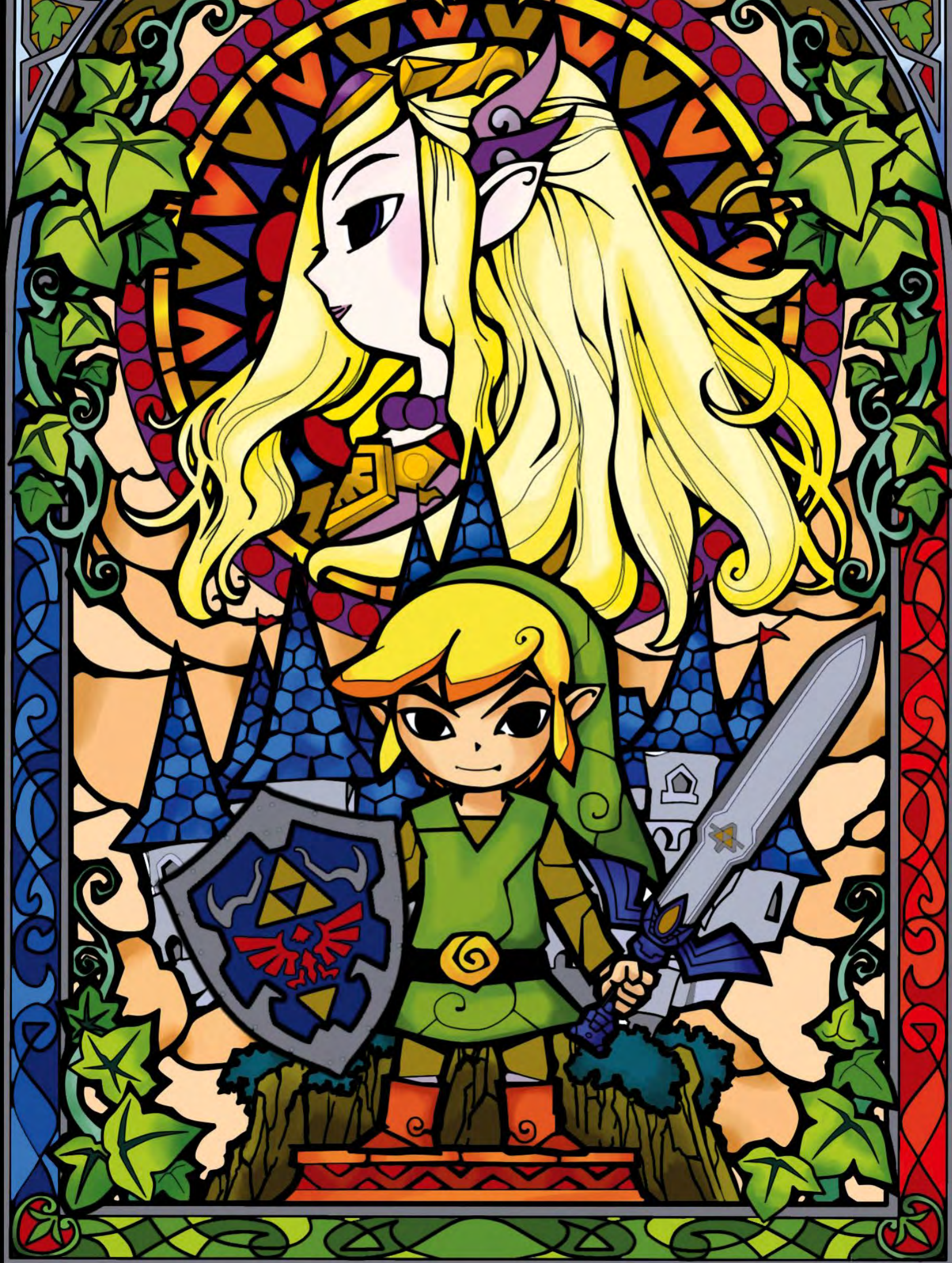
Indeed, with its frequent pratfalls and slapstick gags, it's comfortably the funniest *Zelda* to date. Witness, for example, Link's exaggerated eye movements and facial contortions – highlighted beautifully in the HD remake's selfie mode – and the comically thuggish aggression of a gaggle of squinting, jut-jawed Bokoblins. Among its human cast of misfits and weirdos, store owner Salvatore is the standout, overcome by ennui until you agree to engage him in a game of battleships,

whereupon he transforms into a hyperactive crackpot. You'll want to lose simply because it's funnier when a shot misses, and Salvatore lets out an accented "sploosh!"

Of course, away from the towns and dungeons, you've got that Great Sea to explore and to chart. Treasure maps, pirate ships, squalls and giant octopi await, but arguably greater pleasure can be found in the moments when you simply let the wind fill your sails and carry you to who-knows-where. As the main theme swells, the sun slowly climbs above the horizon and a cluster of gulls glides alongside you, you'll feel strangely at peace, even as you experience that bewitching mix of excitement and nervousness the series has always expertly evoked. It's freeing, too: though there are some restrictions on where you can sail, the gear-gating of *Zeldas* past is refreshingly absent. For the most part, you can set off for new horizons without hindrance.

Miyamoto's oft-cited quote about delayed games might have been ignored in the rush to get this to shelves: two unfinished dungeons were removed, leaving this as the slightest of 3D *Zeldas*. It's a feeling exacerbated by the Wii U remake, which trims the much-criticised Triforce quest and speeds up sailing. Yet whether in original or remastered form, it remains a warm, good-natured adventure. Like its hero, *The Wind Waker* might be small in stature, but it's big in heart, its few flaws easy to overlook in the face of such an ample sprinkling of Nintendo magic.







Rock Band 3

The concept of *Rock Band*, rebel offspring of a *Guitar Hero* sold out to Activision, begins when its art director watches a live performance by The Who recorded during the '70s. Having inflicted prolonged silence upon an electrified crowd, Daltrey and co explode into a reprise of Won't Get Fooled Again, backed by a fusillade of smoke and lasers. This moment of absolute rock'n'roll decides at once the look and feel of what is to be the anti-*Guitar Hero*, the Whisky A Go Go to its Hollywood Bowl.

Cut to 2010, and the entire music game business is staring down the barrel of a gun. In fact, if you remember the investor panic surrounding the previous year's *The Beatles: Rock Band*, the bullet's already in the chamber, leaving barely enough time for famous last words. Activision goes first with *Guitar Hero: Warriors Of Rock*, a painfully self-conscious refresh with that most telltale of gimmicks, a story mode. The intro depicts a cartoon fight between a guitarist and a big robot wreathed in flames. The reviews are tepid, and the series dutifully slips into a coma.

Rock Band 3 opens with The Doors, with words literally shouted from the rooftops.

Perhaps it's that you have to be there at the start to know how it should end — or perhaps that only the creator has the right to self-destruct. But if this is to be the closing chord of the music game's encore — and make no mistake, that was the mood six years ago — then Harmonix,

being Harmonix, knows just where to swing its axe: not at the floor, the kick drum or an innocent speaker, but at the ceiling. “*Tried to run! Tried to hide! Break on through to the other side!*”

The instrument in question is the Fender Mustang Pro, a 102-button training dummy for tomorrow's real musicians — at least, the ones too busy playing *Rock Band* to learn a real instrument. Too toy? Then empty your wallet for the Squire Stratocaster, which actually is a real instrument with a position-sensing maple neck for gameplay and MIDI support for recording. Because that last one, fun though it is to ride the new Pro Keyboard through Hip To Be Square, is the breakthrough.

It's not just that when you're flicking through the manual for this Eno-esque contraption you're transported to a place where 'gameplay' and 'amp' can be written in the same sentence, and where a laptop, headstock tuners and a D-pad can appear on the same page. It's nothing so obvious as Harmonix just wanting you to stop pretending. It's about harmony and poise: a bunch of real musicians from Boston who are just as proud to make videogames. It's not technological convergence that makes both the Squire and Mustang work as learning aids, but the design excellence behind Pro mode itself, mastered as it is to teach via play.

On the one hand, it's just a hell of a lot of fun to fail at, like all the best game modes. But you only have to strike a few correct

notes in sequence to feel its power. That very real bridge between game and musicianship, a plugging of one learning curve into another across the gulf between games and everything else, crackles like a jack against a socket. Envy those who can say they were there.

This wouldn't work if *Rock Band* wasn't already so great a music game, its glam punk vibe so infectious, its songs so carefully picked and annotated, its difficulty settings so tuned. Neversoft had its moments, sure, from the apocalyptic trilogy of Tool in *World Tour* to the just plain mighty *Guitar Hero: Metallica*, but Harmonix has had control, and its path has always felt true. From any other studio, not forgetting the bona-fide toolchain and distribution channel of the game's Rock Band Network, *Rock Band 3* would have collapsed under its own weight.

So, no: there will never be, despite Ubisoft's *Rocksmith*, a music game like it. Pro mode did not make a return for *Rock Band 4*, making 2015's back-on contest between it and *Guitar Hero Live* feel a little more like a cash-strapped reunion gig than a comeback. *Frequency*, *The Beatles: Rock Band* and *Rock Band 3* — is it really a coincidence that Harmonix's grandest, most visionary games are the ones that lose the most money? Or is it just that some musicians — the greats — are never so legendary as when, to quote a messianic Jim Morrison, “this whole shithouse goes up in flames”?





The Last Guardian

Even by Fumito Ueda's standards, it had been a difficult, protracted gestation. By the time *The Last Guardian* eventually emerged from its development cocoon, it had survived extensive delays; persistent cancellation rumours; the departure (and return, on a contract basis) of its director and some of his staff from Sony; and a shift to a new console that could finally – just about – support Ueda's bold, pioneering vision. After nine years in the making, it was a small miracle that *The Last Guardian* still existed at all – and a much larger one that it turned out to be quite this good.

Inevitably, not everyone saw it that way. The weight of a decade of expectation lay heavy on the shoulders of Trico, a creature that some found capricious, and others downright recalcitrant. Ueda had ignored the old WC Fields adage – “Never work with animals or children” – to build a fable of a blossoming relationship between a boy and a beast, with the pair forced to rely on each other to make their escape. For some, it proved a tough sell: if you wanted to be brutally reductive, you could describe it as a game-long escort mission with an obstinate AI-controlled ally. Some grew frustrated when Trico didn't do as they had commanded, while the game's origins on older hardware presented technical snags.

Some – most, even – of that inflexibility is deliberate, of course, baked into the design by Ueda and his team, who wanted Trico to be headstrong like a wild animal. Your main goal as the boy

may be to escape, but to do so you need to tame your formidable cellmate, to gradually build a bond of mutual trust. Firstly, your job is to feed him, bringing him barrels of a luminescent substance that he greedily wolfs down. Then it's to pacify him when he's agitated, and to care for his injuries. Eventually, you're able to teach him some rudimentary commands: to stay, to follow, to stretch, to leap.

The process is akin to domesticating a new pet, with all that entails. There are moments when Trico misbehaves, or fails to listen, and at these times *The Last Guardian* asks the player to remain composed. Sometimes simply waiting will suffice; at other times you'll need to repeat your instructions. Play it with the mindset of an animal trainer, and you'll find the frustrations begin to melt away. Testimonies suggest that the gentler and more patient you are with Trico, the more likely he is to do as he's told.

At times, you won't know if a failure is your own, or that of the game pushing against technical boundaries. But you can forgive these sins in light of Trico himself, a creature so convincingly realised that you find yourself responding to it as if it were real. It's designed to appeal to animal lovers of all stripes in its mannerisms and behaviours. Everyone can recognise Trico's avian features, but dog lovers will see it sniff and scratch and declare it part canine, while cat owners will argue otherwise, pointing to the way it toys with enemies as if batting a ball of yarn.

Either way, you may instinctively find yourself whispering apologies at the screen as you carefully tug an arrow from the creature's flank, and wince at the high-pitched yelp it emits as the projectile is removed. And the scenes where it is imperilled – especially the moments where it is violently assaulted – are truly upsetting; harrowing, even. By contrast, there's a thrilling catharsis in the moments when Trico's fury is aroused by threats to the boy, leaping in to save him as Takeshi Furukawa's emotive score surges accordingly.

This relationship is the game's heartbeat, but the world surrounding them is almost as great an accomplishment. It's as far from a traditional game setting as you're likely to find. We're accustomed to environments that are built around the abilities of a protagonist, but neither boy nor beast can easily negotiate these ruins without the help of the other. There are a few cranks, levers and gates to wind, pull and open, but for the most part the two muddle through together in a way that feels wholly natural.

Without doubt, there are moments where the foundations begin to crumble, and it's not always deliberate. *The Last Guardian* demands plenty from those who follow the boy and Trico to the wrenching conclusion of their journey. And it's here that the richest rewards await; where your investment of time, patience, thought and care is most generously repaid – and then some – by Ueda and his team.





The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Big open-world games are often exercises in forgiveness. You overlook the buggy and the broken because of the ambition and sheer scale of the thing, understanding that a rigorous QA pass would take tens of thousands of man-hours and still probably wouldn't catch every little thing. Across the *Elder Scrolls* series, Bethesda has pushed this goodwill to the limit, and *Skyrim* is probably the worst of the lot. There are scripting bugs, clipping issues, AI freakouts and hard crashes. One **Edge** staffer had to abandon a PS3 playthrough for a month while Bethesda fixed a memory leak that caused the framerate to tank into single digits when save files reached a certain size. You'd think that would have put them off, but they were in deep once again the minute the patch had installed.

Which is to say that there's just something about *Skyrim*, something that holds true today, even if it has been surpassed in so many areas as time has passed. Even away from the bugs, *Skyrim*'s problems are legion. Assets, facial models and voice actors are frequently reused across the world, the same voice often heard from all four corners of a single pub snug. Combat is clunky and imprecise, and can boil down to a battle of two health bars, with you and your opponent standing still and whaling on each other until one of you falls over. And despite all the prophecies written to proclaim you the saviour of the land, nothing you do has any lasting impact on it. The NPC who, in the early hours, advises

those with an interest in magic to visit the College Of Winterhold will tell you the same every time you cross his path in future — even 50 hours later when you've been there, joined the guild, completed its questline, got the metaphorical T-shirt and been crowned its arch-mage.

Despite all that, *Skyrim* feels like a real place. While it seems bigger than Bethesda's previous games, it is actually the same size, set across the 41-square-kilometre expanse Bethesda discovered years ago was the right area for its games (*Skyrim*'s predecessor, *Oblivion*, and 2015's *Fallout 4* follow the same format). *Oblivion*'s was a land of variety, each little area having its own architecture and colour palette. *Skyrim*'s is a land of ice and snow, its regions defined by their variations on that singular theme — bleak tundra, busy forest and rugged peaks.

Ah, yes. The mountains. At first, they're a source of some frustration, a relic of the time before minimap GPS was a commonplace design choice. Head to a quest marker as the crow flies and you're in for a few minutes of trying to hop up a mountainside before giving up and taking the long way round. But over time you come to appreciate the way they break up the world and frame it: the journey around one might take a little longer, but there'll be plenty to see along the way. Bethesda knows you'll take those roads at some point, and ensures some of the game's most striking vistas are shown from the perfect angle as you pass by.

It takes time, too, to appreciate the combat system, unrefined though it surely is. Later on you'll be flinging magic with your left hand and swinging a melee weapon with your right, your strength that much higher now you've levelled up a bit, the tools in your hand so much more powerful after a couple of dozen hours of looting. Your abilities improve the more you use them (there are few greater rewards than a skill-up notification after you've stealthily pinged an arrow into a distant deer's head), while levelling up grants skill points to be spent on perks in one of 18 different categories. Play for a few hundred hours — a real possibility once *Skyrim*'s sunk its hooks into your flesh — and you'll inevitably end up as a master of all trades, but early on you are free to specialise in the things that interest you, and you'll get better at those skills through practice.

And practise you will, because there is an absurd amount to do in *Skyrim*. Each new town or settlement greets you with a volley of new tasks. Others are found through exploration, and some even come to find you, Bethesda's 'radiant' quest system bringing some of the game's most memorable missions to your doorstep to ensure you don't miss them. The result is a world that is packed with so many enticing possibilities — in who you want to be, where you want to go, and what you want to do when you get there — that even those scripting bugs and hard crashes become impossible not to forgive.







Ico

When did you first fall in love with *Ico*? Was it with that initial, misty glimpse of the castle that would become your prison? Or was it later, when the clip-clop of shoes on stone had settled into your mind, and you discovered, at the top of the tower, the ghostly and innocent Yorda, suspended in her cage over a terrifying drop? Was it when you first protected her, clumsily knocking away soot-black spirits with an over-sized stick, or when you first took her hand and half-urged, half-dragged her onwards, into the next room, and then all the rooms beyond?

Ico may be built from the same actions as other games — the same running, jumping, climbing and swinging — but its real focus is far more personal: people and places, the nouns rather than the verbs. It's these that linger in memory long after the last wall has been scaled and the final block pushed. This is a game about relationships, a piece of alchemy wrought from just three simple elements: Ico, Yorda, and the castle itself.

And those elements are in perfect balance throughout, each a point of the triangle supporting all the others. Just try taking Yorda out of the equation. For a minute, try imagining things without her. The result would still, probably, be a memorable and challenging title: the platforming is pure and unforced; the sparseness of the setting is elegant and almost self-consciously Japanese. *Ico*'s mechanics are certainly sound enough to work without any kind of gimmicks. But without Yorda, this would be just another game

about escape — a narrative designers fall back on again and again, and for a simple reason: it works. Put Yorda back into the equation, both friend and burden, and the game suddenly ignites. *Ico* instantly becomes something far deeper than a mere obstacle course — it becomes a tale of responsibility and protection, a story of growing friendship between two lost children.

And that friendship, built on beckoning and disagreeing, united by a plight but separated by just about everything else, is one of gaming's greats. Never have children seemed so much like children, and never has trust slowly blossomed so elegantly. It's there in the way Yorda's tentative footsteps and desperate leaps complement Ico's youthful and often ill-judged movements, a language built of wobbles and lunges, of puffing, panting, and forever seeming inches away from an awkward sprawl on the floor. It's there in that lopsided run as Ico drags Yorda behind him (aided by an addled, unbalanced rumbling in the controller — perhaps the most perfect use of haptic feedback ever conceived). And most of all, it's there in the way Yorda only serves to complicate things, impeding progress and cutting off easy solutions.

And all of this plays out within the third and final element, the castle itself, whose puzzles, though ingenious, never feel contrived or tacked on. This is a place of effortless contrasts, from the gloom and rot of the cavernous interiors to the fading, sunworn

terraces and battlements. It's built not just of polygons but of textures: iron and brick, rotting wood and dirty glass. Surrounded by billowing winds, empty of all but echoes and shadows, *Ico*'s castle is a place you'll never forget.

There are plenty of other things the game gets right, of course: from the inky, unformed devils that emerge from the ground, taking a thousand shapes, eager to drag Yorda away, to the sparse narrative, which never clutters you with options or erodes your enthusiasm with gameshow variety the way other titles do. At all times, there's the universal language of simplicity at work in *Ico*, ensuring that, no matter how complex the locations become, you'll never be lost for very long. And while *Ico* lacks the meters and hit points of traditional videogames, it absolutely makes use of your own deep familiarity with the form: climbing, running and jumping are all intensely natural, and the controls often seem invisible.

But when *Ico* ends, short yet gruelling, lightly told but deeply involving, it's hard to recall the story, the journeys, or the fights. It's hard to remember the tricks used to guide you through the game, or the clever level design that brought you to that final, lonely beach. The plot fades away and all that's left is a sense of loss, loneliness, and desolation — along with static images that blend like watercolours. And they're nouns, not verbs: chains swinging in the wind, high windows, sun on brick, and those two clasped hands.



Format SNES Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 1994



Super Metroid

It's incredible that a game from 1994 can still be considered one of the most atmospheric ever made. Great design is ageless, true, but the audiovisual tools today's developers have at their disposal for immersing players, for evoking place and time and tone, are light years beyond what was possible then. Yet *Super Metroid* remains a masterpiece of mood, a game that can stop hearts and raise hairs.

It's not exactly working with the most promising of materials, either. For all the *Metroid* saga's reputation, its foundations are the stuff of cliché: power-suited cosmic adventurer battles space pirates and hunts energy-sucking, jelly-like aliens in mazes of caves. With the NES original hailing from 1986, that's easy to excuse. It's not quite so easy to explain how the *Metroid* games attained the rarefied power they did.

They do deviate from cliché in one crucial respect: the revelation at the end of the first game that Samus Aran, the protagonist in that suit, was female shocked the gaming world of 1986. At the time it was a show-stopping reversal of damsel-in-distress archetypes. *Super Metroid* exploits the contrast between the normal woman and the outlandish, bulbous spacesuit better than any other game in the series, revealing a flash of Aran's true form when the screen fades to white at every death. It makes her vulnerable as well as mighty, and serves as an effective reminder of the extreme hostility of the environment.

That environment is Aran's chief opponent. The tortuous

design, riddled with more secrets, puzzles and mysteries than a *Zelda* dungeon, is the most significant part of that. Caverns and ancient hallways are just as meticulously drawn up as mazes in other games, but then disguised with a crust of vegetation and dilapidation that makes them feel much more organic and twice as inscrutable.

Despite the map that fills in as you go, it's possible to feel utterly, desperately lost, so thorough is the misdirection, so carefully hidden the clues. Seldom has any game had the courage to double-back on itself so often, and this makes exploration feel natural and open-ended without sacrificing the pervading claustrophobia. This is key to the game's emotional hold: there's ultimately only one way to go, and that's down.

No game has ever exploited the fear and pressure of descent so well, not even the other *Metroids*, nor *Descent* itself. The prologue and the earliest sections of the game proper are characterised by impossibly long, implausibly quiet drops down empty shafts. The airlessness and rising temperature are almost palpable. Although the game clambers back to the surface for much-needed gulps of air, you know you're always going to have to go back, until the final boss encounter — with that Freudian nightmare, the Mother Brain — inevitably takes place at the very bottom of the very deepest pit.

And it's a journey you have to make alone. Enemies abound, but aside from the occasional skirmish with the space pirates and the monumental boss battles, they

mostly take the form of strange, barely sentient alien wildlife. Plant life undulates, statues' eyes glint, tiny insects scatter, electronic arrays scan Aran, mutely. Lonely as you are, it seems like something is there and watching you, and it feels like it's the maze itself.

Accompanying the lush, subtle gloom of the graphics is one of the finest soundtracks of the 16bit era. There's an unnerving abstract quality to the toneless squawks of the wildlife, the chirrups and clicks of the machinery. Beneath it all are the dark choral intonations of a series of unsettling, echoing, cyclical tunes that never resolve. They just rack up the tension.

It all sounds rather oppressive, and it certainly can be; for a fairly slow-paced, exploratory action-adventure, *Super Metroid* is quite the pressure-cooker. But its rich atmosphere beguiles as well as scares, draws you deeper into one of gaming's most head-scratching and intricate mysteries. And any time you feel the weight of all that alien rock is getting too much, the game, with exquisite timing, doles out one of its genuinely thrilling suit upgrades. You start out strong and confident in the suit, then enjoy a prolonged power rush with each upgrade, eventually running at rocket speed, piledriving through walls and slicing through enemies. The upgrades' ingenuity and potency are a perfectly paced match — and reward — for the demands and frustrations of the most bewitching maze in gaming history. No wonder that, all these years on, you can lose yourself in it just as easily as you can get lost.





Format PS3 Publisher SIE Developer FromSoftware Release 2009



Demon's Souls

Demon's Souls is not only one of the very best games of the PlayStation 3 era, it's also one of the best stories. Originally released only in Japan and Asia by a nervous Sony with little faith in its prospects, *Demon's Souls* was discovered in the west by adventurous importers, and word of its extraordinary blend of near-sadistic difficulty, dark-medieval fantasy and impenetrable mystery spread online, prompting a huge uplift in import sales. As a direct result, it was picked up for US and (eventually) European release, and became a cult hit; its sequel *Dark Souls* grew into a successful and beloved series. *Demon's Souls* was an obscure Asia-only release propelled to worldwide fame and success by nothing but the passionate advocacy of its players. It is the kind of story that simply does not happen in videogames any more.

It is easy to see why players of *Demon's Souls* were quickly converted into evangelists. It is quite unlike anything that anyone had ever encountered before (except, perhaps, the few who had braved the *King's Field* series, FromSoftware's earlier miserabilist fantasy). You play a dead thing in an entire world of dead things, all of which are trying to destroy you in creative and unexpected ways. Its multitude of awful creatures — manta rays that swim across the sky, sending iron javelins down to skewer you; skeletal warriors; awful octopus-headed mages that ring sinister bells; giant arachno-centipedes with a multitude of human faces — are frightening,

vicious, and eminently capable of ending you within a minute.

Dropped into a temple with no guidance and faced with five Archstones, each the gateway to a different flavour of horrific nightmare, *Demon's Souls* players had to fend for themselves from the first seconds. You fought with whatever you could scavenge, be it halberd, spear, casting wand, greatsword or bow. You learned to survive or you died, over and over and over again, each time reappearing at the very beginning of the area that you'd perished in, with your hard-earned Souls gone and every enemy right back where they were and ready to destroy you again. *Demon's Souls* appeared at the height of the trend for 'cinematic' games that led you by the hand, which made it all the more extraordinary that there was no help. Going from a more typical 2008 game to *Demon's Souls* was like plunging into an ice-cold pool after a half-hour in a comfortably warm sauna: a shock to the system, yes, but so invigorating.

Except, of course, there was help, in the form of the Blue Phantoms that you could summon to help guide you through *Demon's Souls*' deadly labyrinths — other players, scarred by their own experience, who've faced exactly the same challenges. There was always a reasonable chance when summoning a helper in *Demon's Souls* that they'd be exactly as hapless as you, but now and then you'd get a valiant protector who knew exactly what you were in for and was ready to guide you through it. There is nothing like

the gratitude that a struggling *Demon's Souls* player feels for the Phantom that helps them past a boss that had them on the brink of tears for hours previously. It is a quasi-religious feeling.

Demon's Souls' most innovative and memorable boss is an inversion of this spirit of camaraderie. Waiting at the top of the Tower of Latria, the most arrestingly horrendous of all *Demon's Souls* locales, was the Old Monk — a boss animated by the summoned soul of another player. Having faced all manner of awful things from the developer's imagination, you would now find yourself facing another person, a fellow traveller through the horrors of *Demon's Souls*. Other players in the form of Black Phantoms could invade at any time, of course, providing you were in human form, but for the Old Monk fight the game would pluck someone from another world regardless of whether they were intending to help or hinder you. It forced players to turn on one another, and it was the greatest of *Demon's Souls*' many moments of genius.

The community around *Demon's Souls* proved to be every bit as extraordinary as the game itself. Outside of the game world, players congregated on wikis and forums to piece together its secrets, develop strategies, offer advice, excavate its lore. Playing it becomes an obsession that persists outside of decaying Boletaria and in endless real-world conversations and anecdotes. It is a game that no player ever forgets.





Horizon Zero Dawn

It takes a few hours of play before you encounter a Thunderjaw, and it'll take even more before you're ready to face it. You'll need a good knowledge of your equipment, to learn a few valuable skills, and to have got a handle on what this colossal robotic Tyrannosaurus is all about: the dangers posed by its tail, the guns mounted on its back and head, and the radar system that means there's no hiding once it's aware of you.

And also its weaknesses. You might bring it down by pelting it with freeze bombs from your sling to make it more susceptible to damage, then notching three shock arrows on your war bow and loosing them at its power cell. Badly damaged and paralysed by the electrical blast, you've a chance to pinpoint the blaze canister under its chest with fire arrows, which will rock it with another explosion and set it alight, before you finish it off with a few hardpoint arrows to the heart.

Or you might go for tying it to the ground with your ropecaster and blasting the disc launchers from its back with tear arrows, so you can pick them up and devastate it with its own arsenal. Then it's time to take a photo of your character, Aloy, kneeling on her sparking and broken kill. There are multitudes of ways to approach every machine in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, and with strong strategy and care you'll defeat them all, steadily becoming a true monster-machine hunter.

Horizon Zero Dawn's immediate draw is its array of robotic beasts:

its herds of grazing reindeer-like machines, river-wallowing crocodiles, huge airborne eagles and packs of scavenging hyenas. They all wander a huge and beautifully rendered vision of a post-apocalypse Colorado that's returned to a new form of nature, one that's both organic and mechanical. Each species has its own behaviours and requires a tailored approach to take down, and they're all fearsome at first; one of *Horizon's* greatest pleasures is the sense of achievement it grants as you overcome them, one by one.

As richly as it's represented, what keeps you in this world is Aloy herself. In practical terms, her agility is a constant delight. She scrambles through the great deserts, forests and mountains at speed and her slide from a sprint to a crouch is worth pulling off just for the feel of it. Her weapon-set covers every approach you'd desire, from distant sniper to up-close melee, precision-targeting components or smashing them off with powerful bombs.

But she's a different kind of game hero. In place of the gritty yet empty vessels that comprise most open-world player characters, Aloy has a strong sense of compassion and empathy that's founded on steely resolve. She's perhaps closest in tone to a younger, less world-weary Geralt Of Rivia, but she's very much herself, brought alive by a subtle, measured voice performance from Ashly Burch and some superb animation. In the field, there's her ever-so-faintly lopsided stride

and incidental lines that have her remarking on the cold air and items she gathers. In cutscenes her gaze fixes and flits over the friends, enemies and fools with whom she talks, her expressions often unnervingly human.

Aloy's story is driven by a search. Through it she ends up saving the world, but it's really a search for identity, or, more specifically, a mother figure. *Horizon* is founded on a strong feminist outlook, with Aloy never looking towards men to allow her anything, and a world in which women take powerful roles in society. It lends an assuredly progressive air but it's not strident, simply part of the way cultures have regrown, and it helps this world feel fresh and distinctive. Whether the imperialist Carja, the industrious Oseram or the exclusionist Nora, the societies Aloy encounters are made especially vivid by the design of their architecture and clothing, their monumental buildings and dress that blends cloth with parts of the machines.

These societies' concerns ultimately pale in contrast to some imaginative and genuinely surprising science-fiction, which manages to justify a future walked by robot dinosaurs and tribal peoples while making pointed statements about our real-world reliance on AI. But despite the scale of that grander story, it still finds a very human focus, stepping back and giving Aloy the space necessary to do what she does best: hunting machines in the open wilds.





Format GBA Publisher Nintendo Developer Intelligent Systems Release 2001



Advance Wars

It's hard to say how much of the regard in which we hold *Advance Wars* is down to it being the first *Nintendo Wars* game to be released in the west. The 2001 GBA title came out of the blue – a turn-based military strategy game from Nintendo, of all companies – yet arrived with a full 13 years' development behind it. Intelligent Systems had been making these games, virtually unknown outside Japan, since *Famicom Wars* in 1988, with two home console versions and three Game Boy iterations already produced prior to the GBA edition. *Advance Wars* and its sequels even cherry-picked some of the best maps from their predecessors. No wonder it seemed so perfect.

Advance Wars 2 and *Dual Strike* could add nothing to its formula, although heaven knows they tried. They couldn't break it either, and are excellent and only very slightly over-egged games. But the first *Advance Wars* remains the peak of the series, and one of very few games on this list or anywhere that it is impossible to imagine being able to improve.

Part of that is down to the synergy between hardware and software. If turn-based strategy was on the point of death at the turn of the century, it's because few developers outside Intelligent Systems had realised how perfect a fit it was for gaming on the move. Totally devoid of time pressure, interruptible at any point, easy to support multiple players on a single handset, and so flexible that it could fill a spare five minutes or fully absorb your

attention for an eight-hour flight. It was a revelation. Intelligent Systems complemented it with a superb, streamlined and ultra-fast interface, the GBA hardware brought a large screen that could be packed with map information, and the deal was done.

Well, not quite. If one thing sets *Advance Wars* apart, it's presentation. Intelligent Systems' stroke of genius with this series rebirth – the one thing, above all others, that carried it to international success – was to do the utterly implausible, and make war cute and strategy cool. Every aspect of the art is perfectly judged: the clean-cut sex appeal of the manga characters; the vehicle designs, irresistibly chunky retro-futuristic toys, showed off in a brisk illustrative cutscene at every confrontation; the on-map unit icons that pack immense charm and character into a handful of pixels; the excitingly brash dynamism of the frontend. It's everything strategy games aren't – immediate, youthful, energetic.

Of the balance of air, sea and land units, their ranges and effects and strengths and weaknesses, it's hard to say anything other than 'perfect'. *Advance Wars* takes scissors-paper-stone and explodes it into a complex, cascading web of units that somehow always comes full circle – fighter-copter-mech-tank-rocket-cruiser-fighter, for one. The positional interplay of direct and indirect units is exquisite, and the extremely strict grid format renders this supremely intelligent system with total

clarity. *Advance Wars* recognises its immense debt to that greatest of military strategy games, chess, and it's not about to discard its most basic building block.

What's perhaps more of a surprise is the depth of tactical advantage to be squeezed out of the very simple terrain rules. This becomes particularly apparent when under the fog of war, *Advance Wars* having one of the most sophisticated yet easy-to-grasp applications of this concept in the entire strategy genre. The use of high-ground spotters and forest cover can lead to a single turn in a complex match meriting endless contemplation.

Extremely rarely among strategy games, *Advance Wars*' design adapts perfectly to both carefully crafted, objective-based scenarios with pre-deployed units, and a more traditional capture, build and fight mode. The latter arguably has longer legs, both in multiplayer and in the standalone War Room maps (the pursuit of S-ranks in which has become the obsessive goal of many a player). That said, however, it's *Advance Wars*' ability to deliver concise, intriguing, dramatic, sometimes even funny pre-scripted scenarios that makes it so accessible to the strategy novice.

The complexity and subtlety of ideas Intelligent Systems can pack into a single 10x15 grid is a lesson in game design economy. And, on a Game Boy Micro, *Advance Wars* is a true best-in-genre and a life-consuming, long-haul game you can fit in the palm of your hand. Sometimes less really is more.







The Witness

The Witness's first puzzle is so simple, it's almost insulting. A short, straight line with a start and exit; place the cursor at one end and drag it to the other side to open the door that caps the eerily quiet tunnel in which you find yourself when the game begins. The next one introduces a right angle to the mix, but nothing more. With a quick flourish of the cursor, the second door unlocks and you emerge into the game's sun-drenched island setting.

These opening tasks may appear excessively reductive, but they set the tone for a game that smartly — and, for the most part, wordlessly — teaches you its mechanics through a series of ever-more-complex conundrums. At this point, before you've set out to explore properly, you'd be forgiven for assessing *The Witness* to be little more than a collection of puzzles wrapped in the clothing of a particularly handsome firstperson adventure. But after a few hours spent in its company, it becomes apparent this is a project of startling, dizzying ambition.

But the foundation for all of this is the game's vast collection of ostensibly straightforward maze puzzles. Each one has at least one start point, denoted by a circle whose circumference stands proud of the pathways that extend from it, and one or more exits, which are represented by a short dead-end that concludes with a curved tip. To solve a maze you must trace an unbroken line from start to finish, at which point your route will light up and freeze in place. This basic mechanism is

retained for every panel puzzle in the game (which number in the hundreds), but an astonishing range of smart supplementary rules, environmental factors and mischievous subversions ensure that players are kept on their toes.

It's difficult to describe these ideas without spoiling them, but broad examples include: the separation or pairing of symbols; tracing particular shapes and hitting certain markers; and intuiting a solution in the face of distracting or obfuscating conditions and surroundings. Much of the pleasure derived from *The Witness* is as a result of the 'a-ha' moments you'll experience on spotting the solution (or at least method) to an apparently impossible puzzle, and in realising what you're capable of.

But that sense of discovery isn't limited to puzzle solutions, and extends beyond the game's core into the world. Divided into 11 distinct areas, each with its own visual style and particular puzzle rulesets, the island is a calming, mysterious contrast to the brain-twisting problems posed by the panels set up here. Crumbling architecture sits amid mint- and mauve-coloured grasses; water trickles down stepped waterfalls as it cuts a path through a glaring-white chalk mine; while a perennially autumnal woodland area envelops you in fiery reds and shimmering golds. It's an overwhelmingly beautiful place, and the drive to gawp at the next stirring view or find out what lies farther down the flotsam-strewn beach is as strong as

the determination that pushes you to see off the maze challenges.

This beauty provides welcome respite from the devilishly difficult puzzles that characterise the game later on. But while some have flippantly described *The Witness* as the "*Dark Souls* of puzzle games", simply because it doesn't pull any punches, there's certainly a comparison to be made in the masterful world building, which conceals secrets in plain sight, second guesses your expectations, and unfurls as you open up shortcuts and grow familiar with the island's layout.

But everything we've described is only the slightest scratching of *The Witness's* surface. Beyond its crafty line puzzles and entrancing open world lie several more layers of brilliance — and far from being bolted-on extras, or jarring mismatches, these additional strata represent ever-deeper explorations of the game's already tightly packed themes and ideas.

For all that, *The Witness's* greatest achievement lies in its willingness to trust in players' intelligence and fortitude. It boldly, unapologetically presents challenges that require you to use the deductive instincts years of hand-holding games have taught you to suppress; while maze puzzles are inarguably the driving force at its core, you'll need a far broader sense of awareness to succeed. And the waves of triumphant exaltation that accompany your success, instantly washing away any frustration from dozens of previous failures, are among videogames' most potent.





Format Switch Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 2017



Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe feels magical in the way that you remember Nintendo games from your childhood being. Its wanton disregard for oddly fashionable superficial polish is backed up by a luxurious treatment of the series that distills almost everything that made the previous entries special into a kind of greatest hits package. Born on Wii U, it's been beautifully updated for Switch, bundling in the original's post-release DLC, retaining its 720p resolution in handheld mode, offering 1080p when docked, and running at an unbroken 60fps whether played on the big screen or on the move.

The track selection mixes fresh tarmac with updated classics. Even divisive creations such as *Mario Kart 64*'s Toad's Turnpike are massaged into something that should please all comers thanks to this game's carefully balanced box of tricks. Foremost among these are the anti-gravity sections, in which karts' wheels fold underneath the chassis like a DeLorean time machine. Having the option to drive onto walls and zip past Toad's Turnpike's bustling traffic at a 90-degree angle changes the character of the track considerably.

Freed from the constraints of gravity, Nintendo's course designers set about doing for kart racers what *Super Mario Galaxy* did for the 3D platformer, rejecting tradition to create *Mario Kart*'s most exciting tracks yet. Now you get to tear straight up towering waterfalls, corkscrew through the sky above the finish line, or power

along the face of an imposing dam. These new ideas channel the spirit of *F-Zero* in a way that often makes you feel like you've played two games by the end of a track, both elements somehow bonding together seamlessly.

The inclusion of these slippery, futuristic bumper-car sections has emboldened Nintendo to tinker with the handling of karts when their wheels are on the ground. Everything feels meatier, with a greater sense of inertia, and even series stalwarts will likely overshoot their first corner if they come in expecting to map previously learned skills directly into a new setting. After a few laps, however, *Mario Kart 8*'s even greater focus on sliding becomes apparent, and you'll begin timing your drifts earlier into each corner. It's far from inaccessible, but it makes for a game that rewards skilful driving more than any other in the series before it.

All the skill in the world still won't save you in the face of the inexorable approach of a spiny shell, of course, but Nintendo's surprisingly thorough overhaul even takes this bane of any race leader's life into account. The handful of new weapons includes the Super Horn, which emits a shock wave that thumps into competitors' karts and has the incredibly useful side effect of deflecting any trailing projectiles. That Nintendo was prepared to add a defence — even if it is a rarely obtained one — against a weapon that has always been unstoppable says much about just how gutsy an update this is.

And that daring extends to a softening of Nintendo's — at the time — infamously reclusive design tenets. *Splatoon* has seen the company reach farther into the world of modern online games since, but MKTV's embracement of YouTube uploads, and an expanded 12-player online multiplayer grid, both remain transformative additions.

The base game's Coin Battle multiplayer mode was one of very few black marks against it, but *Deluxe*'s new Battle Mode more than makes amends. Balloon Battle harks back to *Mario Kart*'s origins; Shine Thief and Bob-Omb Blast return for those who fell in love with the series' GameCube entry, *Double Dash*; Coin Runners, meanwhile, originates from *Mario Kart Wii*. Battle Mode, like *Deluxe*'s track list, is a compilation of series high points and a work of deep, loving fan service.

Precious few pretenders have come anywhere near to matching *Mario Kart*'s genre-defining brilliance since the series' debut, and with *Mario Kart 8* Nintendo raised the bar yet again. Bright, bold 60fps visuals; a satisfying, rejigged handling model; track design that mixes progressive drama and nostalgia in equal parts; a host of cleverly implemented new weapons and mechanics; and the flawless soundtrack of classic tunes performed by a live orchestra. *Deluxe* may be a remix, packaged and polished to support a new console's quiet first few months. But when the core components are this good, we're in no mood to complain.







Ultra Street Fighter IV

The secret to longevity in sports, as any athlete in the twilight years of their career will tell you, is consistency. The secret to the *Street Fighter IV* series' success is that, if you look past the decades of technological advancement that power its visuals, at its core it is the same game as *Street Fighter II*. It has many of the same characters; their movesets have expanded, certainly, but the basics are there, those fireballs, dragon punches and flash kicks performed in the same way they were in the '90s.

SFII was always a complex game, but it was always accessible, always readable — two combatants with yellow health bars turning red, a timer counting down, and animations clearly showing whether an attack has hit home or been blocked. When *SFIV* arrived, it was familiar enough to lure in those who hadn't thrown a fireball in anger for a decade and a half, while the classic clarity of its presentation, and a new lick of HD paint, did likewise for a new generation of players. And over years of patches and revisions, Capcom rewarded both camps by turning it into the best fighting game of all time.

Indeed, it is Capcom's desire to cater to those two very different groups of players that defines *SFIV*. For the newcomer there is the Ultra Combo, a canned, spectacular animation preceded by a flashy cinematic that knocks off half your opponent's life bar. In that effect, it is far from the first of its kind, but what separates the Ultra from the crowd is that its

use is governed by a meter that fills not as you land hits, but as you take them. It's designed not to reward good play, but to spark comebacks when things haven't gone to plan — it's a chance of levelling the playing field when faced with a far superior foe.

While it may seem more immediately useful to the novice than the expert, the Ultra Combo is a vital part of the high-level player's arsenal. Its use in these hands is rather different, however, typically tagged onto the end of combos to maximise damage output when they find an opening. It's not easy — not always, anyway — and often requires the use of *SFIV*'s other headline mechanic, the one more obviously aimed at the experienced player.

The Focus Attack, a move that's available to *Ultra*'s entire 44-strong roster, is activated by pressing both medium punch and medium kick simultaneously, the simplicity of its input command belying its inherent complexity and broad potential. Keep the buttons held down until it is fully charged and you will automatically perform an unblockable attack that makes your opponent crumple to the floor if it lands. You can release the buttons earlier for a less powerful strike, or cancel the move with a dash. While it's charging, you can also absorb a single hit from your opponent. It can even be used to cancel the animation of a move of your own, whether it's hit its mark or just been blocked.

Simply put, the Focus Attack does everything. Struggling to

deal with an opponent's fireballs? Absorb the projectile and then dash forwards to close space. Under heavy pressure? Soak up a hit and dash back to safety. If your dragon punch has been blocked, Focus cancel it and dash out of there; if it has hit, Focus cancel and dash forward to prolong the assault. Fighting games are often decried for their complexity, but the most important tool in the *SFIV* games requires no stick motions and just two buttons. Rarely has so little been used for so much, and so well, in this genre or any other.

Over years of iteration, *SFIV* became a bigger game, of course, with new characters and stages added with each major new release. More importantly, it became a better game too, with Capcom paying close heed to competition at all skill levels — from beginner-level ranked matches right through to elite tournaments — in the course of its rebalancing work.

The result is that *Ultra Street Fighter IV* is the most balanced game in the series to date. When you lose, it is almost always your own fault, rather than some errant design decision infecting the game's code. Take it from us: we've lost a lot. Yet still we persevere — even after the release of *Street Fighter V*. That we have returned to a game that is knocking on for a decade old despite the existence of its successor tells you everything you need to know: *Street Fighter IV* is the greatest fighting game that there has ever been.





Format 360, PS3, PS4, PC, Xbox One Publisher Konami Developer Kojima Productions Release 2015



Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

As Hideo Kojima's heroes of old dashed between military installations, oil rigs and occupied jungles, you got little sense of the wider world they were striving so desperately to save. Radioed conversations hinted at happier times – of favourite films and foods – but even this was channelled into practical battlefield advice. Not so in *The Phantom Pain*, which places the series' Tactical Espionage Action into an open-world sandbox that helps fill in those gaps. 1984 Afghanistan is a warzone, yes, but the war's played out in recognisable farms and villages, as likely to be patrolled by goats and sheep as Soviet soldiers. That those guards relax to pop classics of the day leads to the startling realisation that Hall & Oates are now part of *Metal Gear Solid* canon. Any plot to wipe out civilisation is certainly more potent when you know A-Ha will be among the digital dead.

But this world offers much more than Now That's What I Call Infiltration Music, Volume One. The life it suggests beyond its boundaries is nothing compared to the organic happenings within. The way passing time causes patrol shifts that turn once-favoured routes into deadly gauntlets. The way sandstorms and monsoons blind and deafen soldiers, opening unexpected windows of opportunity for otherwise-impossible dashes to victory. The way the region's military operates as a whole, calling for reinforcements from nearby outposts, perhaps finding

their plea unanswered if you neutralised them earlier. The centrepiece of this unpredictable universe is a nervy enemy AI that allows a vague glimpse of Big Boss to blossom into curiosity and escalate into sweeping manhunts. Where so many stealth games can be learned by rote, no two *Phantom Pain* runs are ever quite the same.

Of course, in the figure of Big Boss the enemy face an antagonist every bit as unpredictable. How you tackle the action depends on which Big Boss enters the field. Is it the iconic lurker with a silenced tranquilliser in one hand and a cardboard box stuffed in his back pocket? Or is it a one-man army, armed to the teeth with weapons researched back at his HQ, Mother Base, and driving a tank he airlifted during an earlier mission? Does he gallop past guard posts on horseback, gun them down in his mech, or set his knife-wielding dog on them? Ironically for the entry in the series intended to reveal how Big Boss came to be the villain of the original *Metal Gear*, the man that emerges is different for every player. It isn't that this scope of approach didn't exist in previous entries, more that you were never granted the space to experiment with Kojima's playful systems.

It combines into a sandbox unlike any other, one that rejects the overblown power fantasies associated with the genre – gods needn't lurk in the shadows – for a rabbit hole of systems to learn and exploit. A relatively simple airport assassination, for example, can be played as a sniping exercise

or a full-blown runway assault, or can be taken on guerrilla style as you interrogate guards for the target's movements and lace the route with C4, or trace the car to its parking spot and booby trap that. The target needn't be assassinated at all, if you wish, but whisked off instead by balloon to be conscripted into your burgeoning army. Where the current open-world trend is to clog the map with time-wasting trinkets, every living thing in *The Phantom Pain* can be collected and put to work developing kit and support abilities, each one branching out the tactical possibilities ever further.

Transplanting *Metal Gear Solid*'s eye for detail into a space usually associated with baggy thrills is no mean feat, and some series trademarks are sacrificed along the way. Without Kojima's guiding hand ushering us to the next cutscene, the story feels sparser and less intrusive – a strength, many would argue, but hardly the grand farewell expected by his acolytes. But if it delivers fewer scripted moments of fourth-wall-breaking madness, it does so in the name of creating a space ripe for your own stories. Such as the time we were pinned down under fire and extracted a scientist through a skylight using a balloon. Or when we fought off two rampaging brown bears with a rocket-propelled prosthetic arm. Or the moment we escaped capture by luging down a hill on a cardboard box. All to an A-Ha soundtrack, of course. Truly, this is a world worth saving.





Format PS4, PSVR Developer/Publisher Enhance Games Release 2016

Rez Infinite

When it launched in 2001, *Rez* was an instant classic. But to creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi, it was always a compromise. Creative works almost always are — there's an inevitable conflict between ambition and reality at some point. But to Mizuguchi, *Rez* was compromised from the moment he first thought of it. The game in his head wasn't meant to run on a CRT television with a 4:3 aspect ratio, or to be hemmed in by the processing limits of a Dreamcast or PS2. It was vast, all-encompassing and pin-sharp, an inescapable assault on the senses. It was in virtual reality.

Fifteen years later, technology finally caught up with Mizuguchi's fantasy. *Rez Infinite* doesn't have to be played in VR to sing: it'll run in native 4K on PS4 Pro, for instance, and even on a standard 1080p set anyone who played the original, or its Xbox 360 HD remake, will feel as if the scales have fallen from their eyes. But in VR, well, heavens above. There is simply nothing like it.

Age is in many ways its greatest asset. While so many games made amid VR's resurgence strive — and generally fail — to deliver 2017-era visuals, *Rez*'s clean lines are no trouble for PS4's processor, even when taking VR's lofty power requirements into account. While modern VR games try to utilise contemporary mechanics, at its heart *Rez* is a simple on-rails shooter, controlled with head-tracking and two buttons. And while other developers struggle to deliver their visions in a way that avoids making players nauseous,

Rez Infinite just works. It is too abstract, too psychedelic to trouble you, even as it sends you flying through wireframe space, before abruptly yanking the camera through 180 degrees.

The story is piffle, really, its tale of an AI in the throes of an existential breakdown merely providing the setup for the audiovisual assault to follow. You start out as an amoebic blob, racing through layers of machine code, dispatching waves of enemies en route to the area's boss. Tap the fire button and you'll send off a single shot; hold it down and you can store up to eight rounds by tracing your reticule across every enemy on screen, the volley fired at once upon release. That, and a smart bomb for when things get hairy, is the sum total of *Rez*'s mechanics.

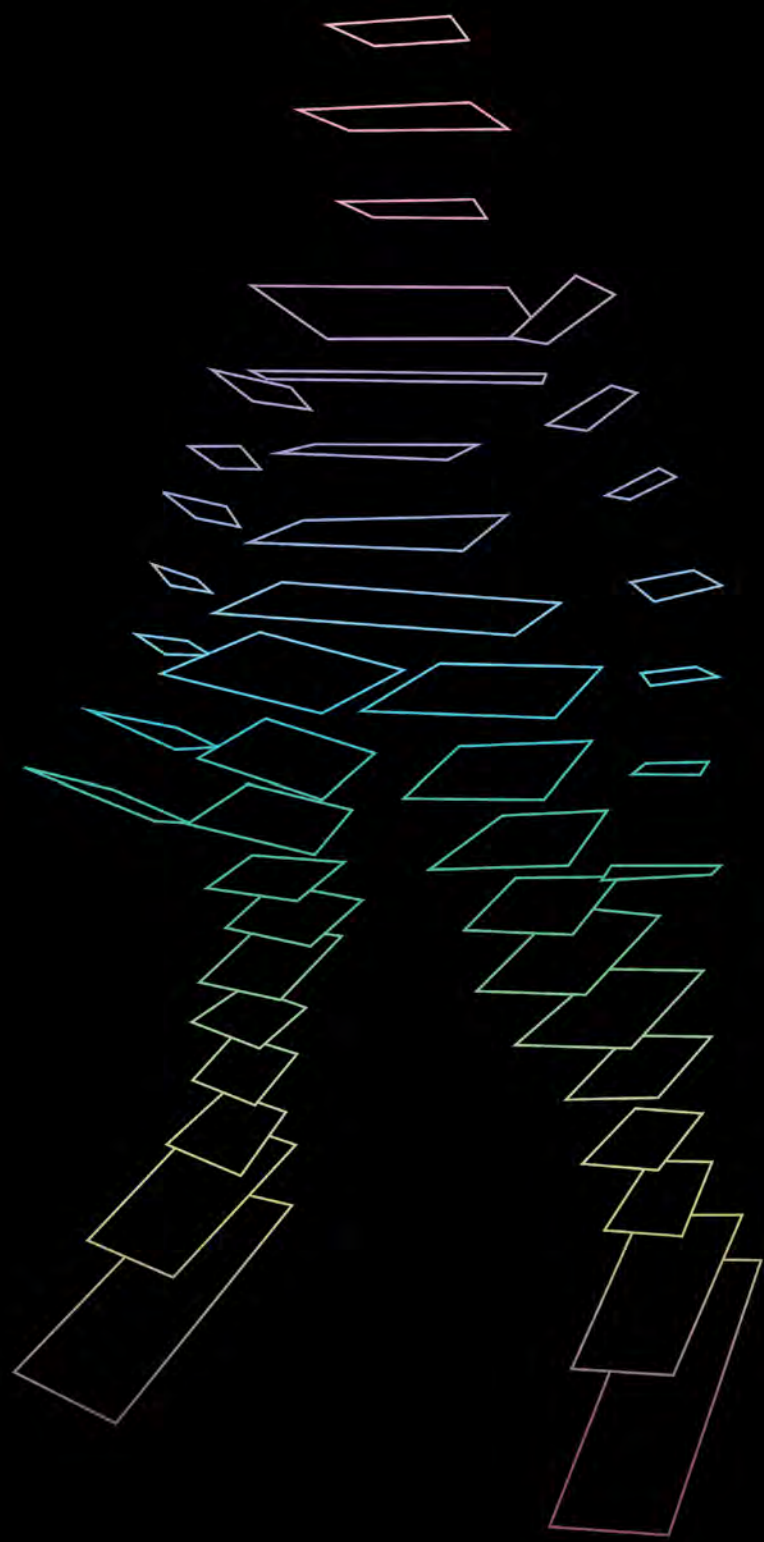
Or so you'd think. A single shot sounds like a hi-hat drum hit; a burst emits a choral 'ahh'. The action is set to a dark, pulsating, electronic soundtrack, penned by famous names such as Ken Ishii and Adam Freeland. The result is a game that plays out like the light show for the best DJ set you've ever seen at the greatest club in the world, with you on percussion.

As in the best music games, there's a tension here between efficiency and performance, and it is this conflict that gives *Rez Infinite* its magic. Sure, you could destroy every enemy on screen with a perfectly executed charge shot. But the music is swelling to a crescendo; who could resist building it up further with a button-mashed drumroll? It's

an idea that's put to brilliant use during boss fights: the action can get so hectic at times that hammering the X button is your only chance of survival. More often than not, the backing track will be optimised for it.

Until *Infinite* came along, the high point of *Rez* was the fifth and final level. Adam Freeland's pitched-down, dubby breakbeats soundtrack a journey through a fractal forest that takes you right to the core of the machine to face the AI. Then came *Infinite*, and with it, Area X.

Don't get us wrong: Area 5 is still a delight. But Area X is something else. Made specifically for *Infinite* and with VR in mind, it uses PS4's processing grunt to the fullest. While the game's other levels are on rails, Area X gives you full control over your movement. Where vanilla *Rez* is a wireframe world where enemies disintegrate, Area X is made of particles, and defeated enemies explode in a shower of sparks. And while the five classic levels are set to dark, pounding electronic music, Area X is soundtracked by a gorgeous, ethereal vocal-trance track. When Mizuguchi first showed it off, excited journalists wrote about how they were moved to tears. We didn't quite get to that point, but perhaps our brain was too busy dealing with the shuddering, full-body high to even think about troubling our tear ducts. It is an experience that has to be had to be believed, the defining element, of the definitive version, of the most transcendent music game of them all.





Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

How ridiculous, in hindsight, that people were nervous. Yet at the time it was understandable: Neil Druckmann and Bruce Straley were handed creative control of *Uncharted 4* after the rapturous response afforded their previous game, *The Last Of Us*. How could the makers of a game that was so bleak and so brutal possibly get the best out of the cheeriest action romp in all of videogames? Well, they could, and they did, with a flourish.

A host of flourishes, in fact. *Uncharted 4* is simply astonishing, a lavishly decorated, lovingly designed game that ensures Nathan Drake exits stage left at the deftly, sweetly handled climax of his best game to date. Inevitably, there are trace notes of *The Last Of Us* here, but at its core this is still an *Uncharted* game, with all that entails. Where Druckmann and Straley's previous game rears its head it does so elegantly, in service to Drake, to make what has always been an intoxicating but rather uneven series a little more coherent.

As sequel-making tradition mandates, it's a bigger game than its predecessors. Not in length, however, but breadth. Mindful of the *Uncharted* series' justifiably earned reputation for linearity, Naughty Dog has broadened Nathan Drake's horizons. There's still a critical path, but you now have more choice over how you traverse it, with multiple routes leading to a single objective. An overhauled climbing system lets you change the angle of our hero's outstretched arms in search of the

next handhold. Line it up just so and he'll clamber there automatically, a far cry from the days of nudging the stick in a vague direction and mashing X to make him jump up a cliff face.

Combat has been rethought too, and it's here that the influence of *The Last Of Us* is so obvious, and so beneficial. Straight-up firefights are still possible, and even advisable, if you're a fan of a Nathan Drake death scene. Stealth is favoured, but never essential: once spotted, you can break line of sight and use that marvellous new climbing system to clamber and rope-swing around to the opposite flank, disappear into the long grass, and plan your next assault against the smartest enemy force this series has known.

There are puzzles, of course – as ever the sort of puzzles you'd expect in a game that just wants to be enjoyed. In the unlikely event you get stuck on one, Naughty Dog will eventually ask if you'd like to simply skip it. There are similarly generous hints when, out in the expanded open world, you lose sight of your objective, a little D-pad prompt panning the camera around to nudge you back onto the breadcrumb trail.

Not that you'll need much impetus to continue. While the opening few hours are a little languid – the consequence of the introduction of Nathan's brother, Sam, who's never once been mentioned across three games and a Vita spinoff and needs to be ret-conned into the canon – once the pace picks up, it reaches absurd new heights. Some of the

series-standard set-pieces here are just ridiculous, and span multiple phases, the barnstorming highlight being a puzzle-platforming climb up a clocktower followed by a frantic escape by jeep, some desperate, if innovative, utilisation of a grappling hook, and finally a motorbike chase.

And all of it is realised with staggering fidelity. Every vista is a masterpiece, every character model a work of art, every shader, texture and physics object tweaked and tweaked again. No stone is left unturned – even when it's sliding, its physics modelled in real time, down a rock-face after an inquisitive Drake has fired his pistol at it (that an animated GIF depicting this went viral illustrates the impact of even *Uncharted 4*'s tiniest details).

OK, pacing is often sacrificed by the need to tell a story. Sam, while played wonderfully by Troy Baker, is certainly crowbarred into a universe that had never before acknowledged his existence. His brother is still a split personality, quipping and mugging his way through the cutscenes before making scores of orphans and widows the minute you put a gun in his hands. But that *Uncharted 4* isn't perfect doesn't mean it's not essential. It's absolute vindication for what many thought was a mistake, giving the keys to *Uncharted* to the guys behind *The Last Of Us*. Sad as we are to see the back of Nathan Drake, we're intrigued to see what Druckmann, Straley and one of the most talented groups of developers on the planet come up with next.





Format GBA, SNES Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 1990



Super Mario World

The first game in a beloved series on a new platform is bound to be littered with paradigm shifts, breathtaking new technology, and courageous reversals of accepted thinking, right? Rewriting the rule book is what Nintendo does, and a debut Mario game at the launch of a new console is when it does so. Isn't it? Not this time.

The surprising truth is that *Super Mario World* is, by the admittedly insane standards of the Mushroom Kingdom, quite conservative. Few of its ideas are not refined or expanded versions of things that appeared in the truly visionary *Super Mario Bros 3*. The liberal, nonlinear structure, the world map, the item granting the power of flight, and eight-way scrolling all made their debut in the preceding NES game. The only major addition in *World* is Yoshi, Mario's cute dinosaur steed and later star of his own SNES classic, *Yoshi's Island* (an apposite bookend for the machine's library when it was released towards the end of its life, five years later).

Nor was *World* a technical showboat for Nintendo's new platform. It looked slow and plain by comparison to the huge, vivid sprites and bold settings in Sony's bravura rival *Sonic The Hedgehog*. With *World* coming hot on the heels of *Mario Bros 3*, Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka simply hadn't had time to make it the brash system-seller Nintendo needed, especially in the west.

It wasn't a mistake they'd make again. Six years later, on much-delayed but powerful hardware, there weren't many things about

videogames that *Super Mario 64* didn't address. And yet *Super Mario World* rivals it in the eyes of many fans. So what went right?

In a word: everything. *World* is an astonishing, unending torrent of ideas from start to finish, each so clearly defined in those simple graphics that it can be appreciated in a fraction of a second as you barrel through the game, drunk on the joy of Mario's momentum. The designers revelled in detail. They set up gratuitous gags with immaculate slapstick timing. They constructed ever more devilish puzzles, and went to new lengths to conceal and misdirect around them. They went higher, deeper and farther than before, and built levels within levels within levels, missing no chance to elaborate the physical structure of Mario's world or seed it with secrets. They enriched the cause-and-effect complexity of the chain reactions of blocks and items and enemies.

They constructed terrifying, vertiginous sequences of unstable and moving platforms, making solid ground a luxurious rarity, urging you to never stop, never think too hard, just keep that dash button held down and lurch from one heart-stopping leap to the next. They placed enemies with pixel-perfect precision. They bent space and time, creating delightful, mind-twisting conceptual traps in the spookily lit Ghost Houses. They created clockwork death machines in the castles that need almost supernatural foresight and timing to get past. And they intensified the joyous surrealism of the Mushroom Kingdom in

locations such as the Vanilla Dome and Cheese Bridge Area.

Another standout is the world map. Linking together the surfeit of levels, shortcuts and secret exits becomes an overriding quest, far more important than rescuing Peach from Bowser; the infuriating Forest of Illusion, where every standard exit leads to a dead end, is a highlight. It even has a super-structure — Star Road, a set of dreamlike levels that can teleport you around the map — and an epilogue, in the almost comically tricky Special levels. *World* was one of the first mainstream action games that really wasn't over when it was over.

What Yoshi added shouldn't be underestimated, either. More than a mere powerup, the dinosaur (or flock of them) was a tremendously charming addition whose huge leaps and bottomless appetite rewrote Mario's playing style. Along with the cape feather that allowed you to circumvent entire levels by flying through them, Yoshi was a theoretical get-out-of-jail-free card, an overpowered item that ought to have rendered the game's hardest levels — some of the hardest ever conceived in a 2D platformer — laughably easy.

But they never did. Balance is one thing, but in *Super Mario World* there is simply too much going on for it to even be an issue. Even its lesser levels constantly distract you into stupid mistakes with the sheer density of their brilliance. It may not have changed the world but, simply put, it is more game, more of the time, than any other 2D platformer.





Red Dead Redemption

When Microsoft dreamed

up the Achievement system it probably had bigger hopes for it than what it has become. Achievements – whether on Xbox, Steam, or PlayStation’s Trophies – tend to fall into one of two camps: those doled out simply for progressing through the game, or long, post-game grinds. Every so often, though, a game sets you a task that changes the way you play, look at and remember a game, asking you to do something you would never have thought to do yourself. There’s *Geometry Wars’* Pacifism, for instance, a twin-stick shooter asking you not to fire a bullet for 60 seconds. There’s *Half-Life 2: Episode One’s* Little Rocket Man, which requires you to ferry a garden gnome from the game’s first area to the last before depositing it in a rocket. *Red Dead Redemption* has Hit The Trail, which tasks you with travelling from the pier at Blackwater, in the northeast corner of the map, to Escalera in the far southwest, before sunset.

Since Blackwater is the final location you visit in the game, the journey serves up a fond retrospective of adventures past, taking you from the snowy north to the sun-parched desert of New Austin, then across the water into Mexico, its burnt-red clay reddening further as the sun dips over the horizon. Along the way you’ll pass the gang hideout you cleared out with Molotovs in the game’s opening hours. The graveyard where, a little later on, you helped a necrophiliac dig up a corpse. The riverbank

where you fired the final bullet before the credits rolled.

Along the way, you’ll get into a heap of trouble. Hit The Trail’s true mark of genius is that it has to be completed in an online Free Roam session. Player-controlled bandits are seemingly everywhere, and while death is punished only by a respawn 100 yards from the action, firefights can drag out, and you’re on a deadline spelt out by the relentless burning sun. So you partner up with a posse, the hunt for the achievement nudging you towards co-operative play at the tail end of a game in which you have spent dozens of hours working largely alone.

Not that you’ll have wanted it any other way. John Marston might just be Rockstar’s finest creation, a conflicted old killer who can switch between cold- and warm-hearted as the situation requires. With his wife and son taken captive and held to ransom, there is narrative justification here for the contradiction between a character and his actions that hamstrings so many open-world games, and especially Rockstar’s.

Marston is joined by a fine supporting cast. Yes, there’s the usual revolving door of crazies and ne’er-do-wells with bizarre, murderous to-do lists, but there is nuance to the ensemble too. The elegant tutorial of the opening hours has Marston convalescing at a ranch run almost single-handedly by its owner’s daughter, Bonnie MacFarlane. She is a woman in a man’s world and she knows it, and her sharp banter with Marston as she gets him

back on his feet and earning his keep serves not only as a gentle introduction to the mechanics that stand *Red Dead* apart from its peers – horse-riding, cattle-steering, lassoing and so on – but also rams home that this was a time of change. The game’s opening cinematic puts Marston on a train eavesdropping on two ageing southern ladies lamenting the slow end of the Old West. You see a car, and realise Marston and everyone else are slowly coming to terms with the fact that the meaning of the word ‘horsepower’ is soon to change forever.

It is, of course, an open-world game, so it’s perhaps inevitable that it isn’t perfect. The middle third sags a little, as Marston unquestioningly takes both sides in a civil war that sees rivers of innocent blood being shed and jars with the spirit of the thing elsewhere. For a while here it feels like just another open-world game – you’re a bad guy doing bad things for bad people, just wearing a poncho instead of a suit, riding a horse instead of a sports car – rather than the unique genre piece of the first and third acts. With the masterful, zombie-themed *Undead Nightmare* add-on offering as savvy an approach to DLC as Hit The Trail does to Achievement design, this is a rich, sprawling game that offers something unique to its crowded host genre. The ways of the Old West may eventually have been wiped out by the pace of technological change, but even now, a generation later, *Red Dead Redemption’s* aim holds true.



Format N64 Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 1996



Super Mario 64

To get one of the ‘secret’ castle stars in *Super Mario 64*, you need to catch a yellow rabbit. It’s there, unexpectedly, when Mario unlocks a door in the basement of Peach’s castle, hopping to and fro. There’s no hint that you’ll be rewarded for capturing it; you just try because in this warped, consistently inconsistent, logically illogical, so-surreal-it’s-real universe, it seems like the thing to do. And because it’s fun. It’s a throwaway moment, but it also says a lot about this era-defining game.

Super Mario 64 was a voyage of discovery for everyone: Shigeru Miyamoto, his design team, EAD’s coders, and us. It’s been said that its achievement was transposing Mario’s world into 3D but, with the exception of the vertiginous Bowser stages, it did nothing of the sort. It made an entirely new world for him and around him. If *Ocarina Of Time* was a translation, *Mario 64* is a whole new language.

And it didn’t stop at defining the exploration of 3D space: it broke every conceivable boundary. Who says a level needs to have a start and an end? Who says it needs to be the same every time you go in it? Why should levels be connected in a string – can’t they grow organically out of a hub? Does everything in the levels really need to have a point, anyway? And let’s face it, does a level even need to be a space at all? Couldn’t it be – say – a rabbit?

That slippery rabbit – named MIPS, after the Silicon Graphics subsidiary that worked on the N64 architecture – was, in fact, the first part of *Mario 64* to exist,

after Mario himself. Miyamoto insisted that it had to be fun simply to manipulate Mario with no rhyme or reason. This resulted in a game in which moving around in 3D wasn’t just easy, it was intoxicating and hilarious. It takes a while to get to grips with moving Mario relative to the uncommonly free camera; it could never be as instinctive as it had been in 2D. To compensate, Mario got a set of moves so complex, so extravagant, so focused on pure entertainment value, that it included an entirely pointless breakdance routine. To this day, it’s virtually impossible to fire up the game without taking a moment to do handstands on treetops and triple-jump dives into the water. Mario occasionally attains such giddy, uncontrollable momentum that he seems to have a mind of his own.

It’s logical enough that, as the first test of Mario’s motion, the developers gave him something to chase after. It’s more surprising that MIPS the rabbit made it into the final game. He did so because Miyamoto’s visionary team built a place that could accommodate him – or pretty much anything. *Mario 64*’s structure of entrances to self-contained levels around a hub became the de facto standard for 3D platform games and action-adventures, at least until *GTAAIII* showed what could be done with a single, contiguous space. But even more radical and long-lasting than the way it structured space was the way it structured goals.

There’s the use of the stars as a system of progression, opening up the castle and the levels at a pace

that always outstrips yours, so you always have multiple things to do and are free to pick what to tackle and when. It’s so commonplace now that it’s easy to forget how alarmingly freeform this was.

Then there are the two endings – you can beat Bowser barely more than halfway to attaining all 120 stars, offering satisfying goals for both everyman and Mario fanatic. But mostly there’s the fact that this abstract currency of stars meant anything could count – even, yes, catching a rabbit.

All of this is what makes *Super Mario 64* such a visionary and profoundly influential game. All of this is also what ultimately ate away at the pure platforming genre: although *Super Mario 64* never lost sight of the running, jumping and falling, it offered a blueprint for a scattershot, activity-centred style of game design.

But none of this is quite what makes it a work of genius. That lies in its expression of beautiful, funny and wicked ideas that could only exist in a 3D game space. It’s the infinite staircase you’re always at the bottom of. It’s the secret entrance you glimpse in a mirror. It’s the mind-messing reversals of Tiny-Huge Island, the spooky underground town-in-a-box, the microcosmic Igloo ice maze, the ship rising from the sea bed with you inside it. It’s the unfettered wonder of one of videogames’ finest minds seeing that the world has three dimensions, devising something you’d never have thought of, and – with typically gleeful generosity – allowing you to discover it as if you had.





Portal

Type ‘idclip’ while playing *Doom* and you can walk through walls. It’s just a cheat code, but dematerialising the linedefs and vertices that define each level’s perimeter offers fresh perspective on their construction. Fourteen years after *Doom*’s release, Valve made *Portal*, a game that’s wholly focused on disrespecting the boundaries set out for you.

Based on a project called *Narbacular Drop*, created by students from DigiPen Institute Of Technology, *Portal* is a mind-bending firstperson puzzle game that chronicles the rebellion of lab-rat protagonist Chell. Awaking to find herself in an Aperture Science Enrichment Center cell, she is funnelled through a series of increasingly complicated tasks under the watchful observation of GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System), an AI taskmaster shot through with a streak of petty sadism.

Making your way through each chamber would be impossible without *Portal*’s contribution to firstperson tools: the Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device. As weapons go, it’s as imaginative and versatile as *Half-Life 2*’s Gravity Gun and even more fun to wield (its ancestry is betrayed by the tool’s secondary ability to pick up and toss objects). Once up to full functionality, the gun is capable of creating two portals, one orange and one blue, with anything that passes through one emerging from the other. As such, you can set up fascinating feedback loops: perpetually falling from a portal

above into the one below as you accelerate up to terminal velocity, or staring at your own back repeated infinitely into the distance by the portals placed in front of and behind you.

More usefully, you can appear on the other side of an otherwise insurmountable gap or, thanks to conservation of momentum, fling yourself to great heights. Quick-thinking players can avoid fatal impacts, and later on in the game you can use portals to break dangerous lab equipment, such as the game’s chatty sentry turrets, by conjuring up a warranty-voiding fall right underneath their adorable, murderous feet.

For all the gun’s brilliance, however, the real star of *Portal* is GLaDOS. Voiced by Ellen McLain, the derisory AI spends the duration of the game patronising and belittling you. And yet GLaDOS’s sustained assault on your self-confidence lends the game a strangely charming atmosphere, and the impulse to hear the next brilliantly conceived put-down is no less powerful than the drive to solve the game’s puzzles. Don’t let the simplistic memes that emerged from the game put you off: *Portal*’s is a videogame script of uncommon inventiveness and hilarity.

Having already subverted so many firstperson traditions, *Portal* goes further by slowly unravelling its own fiction. It starts with a loose panel here and there, an abandoned office left open or a segment of the compound’s shifting walls that’s been prevented from sitting flush

with the rest. Peek beyond, and you find the dirty, over-engineered scaffolding on which the predominantly gleaming white chambers of Aperture Science are built. Look closer and you’ll discover evidence of former test subjects – cubbyholes, hideaways and unofficial pathways smeared with graffiti, all beyond GLaDOS’s surveillance network. Despite the power of your Portal Gun, you can never outmanoeuvre Valve’s level designers, of course, but *Portal* makes you *feel* as if you have, each fresh discovery seemingly entirely your own as you begin to break out of the claustrophobic confines of Aperture’s network of test chambers and gain the upper hand. In threading everything together, the game sets a standard for environmental storytelling that has yet to be bettered.

Portal’s mix of elements is so expertly constructed that its impact isn’t greatly diminished on a second playthrough, despite the fact that you’re now armed with the foreknowledge of all the puzzle solutions. And, as added incentive, Valve throws in Challenge Maps and Advanced Chambers, the latter complicating matters with new hazards, the former keeping everything the same but requiring you to complete each puzzle in the shortest possible time or with the fewest steps or portals possible. It’s telling that, even under such scrutiny, the game never threatens to reveal any weaknesses along the way. Nine years on and in the company of a brilliant sequel, *Portal* feels no less wondrous today than it did in 2007.

01

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Bayonetta 2

Bayonetta 2 very nearly didn't exist. After one poor fiscal quarter too many, the original game's publisher, Sega, was told by parent company Sammy to narrow its focus onto proven hits. That meant recognisable IP such as *Sonic* and *Aliens*, and reliable performers such as *Football Manager* and *Total War*. There was certainly no room on the newly risk-averse publisher's release slate for a complex Japanese brawler starring a sexy, sassy witch who makes lascivious quips while kicking angels and demons in the face. While 2010's *Bayonetta* was a critical darling and a cult hit, a sequel was never going to do the numbers Sega now needed. We'll never know quite how far along it was when the axe dropped – though it was far enough for Sega's PR team to talk to us about a possible cover story – and for a while it seemed as though the sequel to one of the great melee brawlers was set to lie forever on an Osaka cutting-room floor.

Then Nintendo unexpectedly saved it. *Bayonetta 2*'s subject matter and target audience may seem an even less suitable fit for a largely family-oriented company, but the Umbran Witch is more at home on Wii U than you might think. With its bold colour palette, blue skies and playful humour, *Bayonetta 2* is a more appropriate stablemate for Mario and Yoshi than Master Chief or Lara Croft. PlatinumGames' commitment to flow and feel mean that, in Wii U, its game found its most appropriate home – if not for potential sales, then in spirit.

While aimed squarely at genre connoisseurs, with its extended air combos, cancels, parries and all manner of advanced techniques, the key to *Bayonetta*'s magic is its accessibility. Squeeze the right trigger and our hero cartwheels away from incoming attacks; time it right – which you almost certainly will, because the input window is generous in the extreme – and time slows down, giving you a few seconds to dole out damage without fear of reprisal. Melee combat games are defined not just by the means they give you to kill things, but how they enable you to keep yourself alive, and it is a rare game indeed that manages to blend the two without making something so frighteningly hardcore that most players will never see it through. *Devil May Cry 3*'s Royalguard style is a beautiful thing to watch being used skilfully, but put a pad in inexperienced hands and you're only going to see someone embarrass themselves. *Bayonetta 2* retains the sky-high skill ceiling that the purists crave, but down on terra firma it's perhaps the friendliest on-ramp that this genre has ever known.

Witch Time, as the dodge's effect is termed, also gives Platinum the means to ramp up the odds against you, so within minutes of loading up the game you're being chased up the side of a skyscraper by the snapping jaws of a dragon from Hell. Things just get bigger and sillier from there, and by game's end you're bopping gods on the nose without batting an eyelid. Your moveset will have

expanded, and your health bar will have grown, but your core skillset – watch, wait, dodge and then steam in – is the same from the first minute to the last.

Well, almost. It might have Nintendo's name on the box, but Sega's legacy lives on in an *After Burner* pastiche that has Bayonetta and pal each stand on the back of a jet fighter and fire magical bullets at waves of enemies. If some hard-worn 16bit-era platform loyalty means that doesn't sit right with you, it can quickly be transformed into a *Star Fox* homage by donning a Fox McCloud costume that not only changes the look of our protagonist, but also turns the plane into an Arwing, the dodge into a barrel roll, and shows three allied ships behind you in a cutscene. Elsewhere, Bayonetta borrows duds from the likes of Link and Princess Peach, and uses Nintendo-themed weapons, including one modelled on a Chain Chomp. All these are also available in the original game that comes bundled with *Bayonetta 2*'s special edition, a sales-minded decision by Nintendo aimed at luring in those who never played the first one that also helped solve a potentially lengthy office argument about whether the original or its sequel was the more deserving of a spot in these pages. The truth is that both games are essential, but *Bayonetta 2* wins the day, if only for the way it cartwheeled away from the axe and slapped the suits in the face, escaping development limbo to become the best game on Wii U.





Format Various Publisher Various Developer Mojang Release 2009



Minecraft

***Minecraft* stands**

monumental. Its value (\$2.5 billion, according to Microsoft) is one thing, but quite another is its stature in the industry and beyond. Notch, now with 3.8 million followers on Twitter, is a developer icon, having created the game largely in public and crafted it in response to player reaction. *Minecraft*'s current-day developers — Jeb, Dinnerbone, Grum et al — attract mobs at any event they attend, and are revered as gods at their game's official convention, Minecon. Their uncommon familiarity to fans has melted barriers between players and makers.

Minecraft was the catalyst for the explosive growth of a new genre, the sandbox survival game, and its naive-seeming pixelated blocks popularised a new aesthetic that's become for a generation of players as natural a signifier of 'games' as Mario's smiley faced Mushroom Kingdom. Perhaps more so. It's YouTube's most popular game, having made genuine stars of many YouTubers.

Minecraft's gently melancholic music, punctuated by TNT blasts, is the soundtrack to legions of parents' lives. It's on everything, after all, from smartphones to PS4, as well as in classrooms. It's sold over 100 million copies. And it's a platform for many more experiences besides, like Survival Games and Build Battle, products of a vast, often self-taught community of mod makers, server owners and creative teams who have formed a professional industry around the game.

So *Minecraft* is big. You knew that. But the sheer variety and scale of its achievements are still important to note. And they aren't why you should play it. The real secret to *Minecraft* is that despite all of that hugeness, it remains personal. You could say that it's huge *because* it's personal.

For a start, that success has been down to players, not multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns. It was as if it was built for, dare we say it, virality. With no tutorial and facing a world in which without preparation they would be killed by monsters on their first night, early players needed to learn how to make a pickaxe and a torch, and build a shelter. Very quickly, the act of playing meant joining other players, if only by watching their videos or reading their tips on forums, to develop a knowledge of how things work, ready to be passed on to the next newcomer.

What made players persevere were the still-brilliant interplays between an exciting scenario (survive, explore and build in a wild world where monsters come out at night!), an intricate crafting system, and the many little complexities that arise from the simple rules that govern blocks, creative freedom, and getting to play it all with other people.

Minecraft's crafting system unfurls as you progress: from chopping wood to finding iron, discovering diamond ore deep underground and building a Nether portal. Each stage opens new possibilities and feels organic and rewarding on its own terms, and

every advance has you learning new insights into the way the world works. Many of the post-*Minecraft* games that use crafting mechanics employ them as ways of slowing player progression, making them grind along defined lines of progression, metering their achievement. *Minecraft*'s approach is far more humanistic. To get to the Nether dimension you'll need obsidian, but it's up to you how you get it. Or maybe you just start a farm instead.

What makes it all seem accessible is down to the fact it's all made of blocks. They're big, hard to miss, tempting you to understand their properties. And when you place them, it's hard to make things that look truly terrible, and they're easy to wipe away and rebuild. *Minecraft* requires none of the sculptural facility that most 3D building tools demand, and yet still offers great flexibility in terms of both scale and detail. Make a world! Make a house. It's up to you.

Minecraft's redstone, which enables machines to be built, and command blocks, which give finer control over the way the game behaves, allow players to create worlds with new rulesets that can tell stories or allow specialised functionality. If you want more, there's always modding.

These tools aren't easy. *Minecraft* as a whole isn't easy. And yet it's only as hard as you want it to be. That's a value that permeates the game and why it's captured so many imaginations since it emerged seven years ago, and is still capturing more.





Format 360, GC, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii Publisher/developer Capcom Release 2005



Resident Evil 4

The phrase ‘a new kind of evil’ has been devalued over the years, but not by *Resident Evil 4*, where clucking chickens scamper at the feet, cows lazily chew cud in their stalls, men tend the crops, and women stoke a communal pyre on which trespassers are burned alive. In the parochial mob, Shinji Mikami and Production Studio 4 found something scarier than the common gang driven by money or delinquency: pure, unbridled hate. For the first time one of the series’ games lives up more to its western title than its Japanese original, *Biohazard*. Despite familiar themes of infection and possession, there really is a new kind of evil at work in its obscure parish setting: an indigenous, human kind.

How easy it was when it was just zombies, so simple to predict and dodge. There’s a reason why your first encounter with Los Ganados mirrors the controversial ‘head-turning’ sequence of the very first *Resident Evil*. Just as the bar was being set back in 1996, here it was being reset for a new generation. When that villager’s head snapped towards you, focusing a glare full of feral rage, it was the first time in nine years you’d emptied a clip out of fear.

If earlier sequels tirelessly rung the changes in search of the right combination, this game sounds a klaxon. It has less forgiveness, more action, less backtracking and a whole lot more gristle. Fear? Try the feel of your heart pounding as you’re smoked out of a bell tower, into the murderous crowd. Horror? Try the sight of a Regenerator, immune to all but the most

accurate shot, slowly filling your rifle scope. Laxatives? Try the sound of a chainsaw.

Subversion is *Resident Evil 4*’s secret weapon, the very best of its scares powered by reversals of expectations. Never before has the series cast you as ‘un forastero’ – an outsider. Having seen Leon S Kennedy through his role of defending his hometown against the T-virus outbreak in *Resident Evil 2*, now you join him as a heretic in a world that’s dropped off the knife-edge between rural tranquillity and abject barbarism. Everything from the man-traps to the pervasive fog suggests a place that, from mortar to flesh, has mobilised against you.

No matter the tools you acquire (rocket launcher aside), it will always outmanoeuvre you. If the series drilled the same rules of engagement deep into your head over several games, this one switches them with malicious glee: headshots trigger dangerous mutations, enemies hide their weak spots, paces quicken and slow to disrupt your tactics.

Still a quintessentially Japanese production, *Resident Evil 4* is self-aware, happy to bring down the fourth wall and packed with all the usual otaku fetishes: a Lolita girl sidekick, a lipstick mercenary, heavy weapons and pantomime villains. And it’s still a *Resident Evil* game, pulling off the near-impossible by retaining almost all of the mechanics of its ancestors yet somehow working them to its advantage. With its enemies employing all kinds of strafes and subterfuge, shifting gears and

making moves with devilish cunning, it validates perhaps the series’ biggest gamble of all: the retention of its archaic tank controls. In the absence of circle-strafting, it’s the same old game of trepid steps, urgent retreats and panic-inducing turns.

Now, though, there are brand-new players. Ganados and Los Illuminados footsoldiers won’t merely amble into your sights, they’ll run outside of them, duck as you take aim, sidestep, run, or sneak up behind you and laugh. Groups will slowly advance while those at the back take aim and fire arrows, throw knives, sickles and makeshift spears. For once, you have all the high-tech weaponry in the world while your enemies are medieval throwbacks. And it helps you not one jot.

The decision to ditch the series’ ubiquitous storage chests but not its personal inventory system, that obstructive block puzzle of objects and slots, seemed absurd until Capcom willed it to succeed. The carnival-style shooting stages are as incongruous to Ramon Salazar’s castle as a pub quiz machine, but nobody would see them removed. And the merchant is the most traditional device the series has ever used, his repeat appearances following no logic known to man. Would a more po-faced game have included The Mercenaries as an extra, for perhaps the greatest bonus mode ever? Doubtful.

If it’s the details that make a game special and the dynamic that makes it great, this hit both marks square between the eyes. A momentous, bloodcurdling epic.







The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time

Shigeru Miyamoto once said “a delayed game is eventually good; a bad game is bad forever”. It’s unclear what game he had in mind, but the sentiment certainly fits *Ocarina Of Time*, the game that didn’t make the Nintendo 64 launch date by over two years.

No wonder it took so long, given what it delivered: a fully 3D world to explore, combined with an inspired directorial flair, and some of the greatest dungeons, characters and gadgets of any adventure. The game begins in Kokiri Village, a training level that is also a masterstroke of simplicity. Rather than a list of instructions and commands, or dropping you in at the deep end, *Ocarina* begins in an eminently explorable village and tells you to explore it. There are chests to find, people to talk to, a training dungeon – it’s several hours before you even feel a need to look farther. When you do and the world opens its horizons, it is one of gaming’s great moments. *Zelda* games were always epic, but it was with *Ocarina* that they achieved Homeric scale: the central field seems to go for leagues, opening on to a sea, a castle, a fortress, mountains, woods, a ranch. Even the best games hadn’t presented an adventure like this before.

Adventure, of course, requires adversity. In *Ocarina* the real enemies are not the skeletons, wolves, ghosts and octoroks that attack Link, but the Rubik’s Cube of the dungeons. The interlocking rooms, switches, moveable blocks, hidden items, crystals, manholes, torches, targets, spikes, statues

and locked doors are the building blocks for puzzles with solutions so elegantly simple they take the most grizzled player by surprise, allowing you to make it through one door at a time, get that little bit closer to the boss, and then get stumped all over again. Few entire games can compete with the single moment in each *Ocarina* dungeon when finding a new item suddenly opens up new areas and previously insurmountable challenges are suddenly all too possible. The Water Temple still arguably stands as the greatest challenge of spatial awareness in a 3D adventure game, and even when the challenges have been met, all the switches pressed and all the keys collected, there is always one final challenge – usually huge, with teeth. The bosses are screen-filling behemoths that can toss Link around like a ragdoll, manipulate reality to their will, or even mimic his form and moves – how can you defeat yourself?

The light and dark worlds of *A Link To The Past* had made the dual-world mechanic a central part of *Zelda*’s mythos; *Ocarina* upped the ante by making the division between the two worlds nothing more complex than chronology: there were no portals or what-might-bes, just a gap of seven years. You were either young Link, struggling against the brawny adult figure of Ganondorf, or you were adult Link, in the adult world Ganondorf ruled. The brilliance of this touch, quite apart from the change in focus it allows the later challenges, is in giving an inevitability to Ganondorf’s victory, creating a fear that spurs

the player ever onwards. Is there any other game set in a world that you’ve already failed to save?

The darkness of the adult time infuses the whole world. Nintendo being Nintendo, the gorier sides of growing up are hidden beneath a covering of wit and sly obscurity, but they’re there all the same. The world resonates against its earlier self, and unless you’d been paying attention to Link as a child, you may not understand why he stares blankly at a stump in the sacred meadow as an adult. It’s one of the many riddles that exist in every corner of the game; from visiting the ghosts of people you knew as a child to selling masks to spread a little happiness, the dungeons and both worlds of *Ocarina* are crammed with possibilities.

Ocarina is also a model of how to design for specific hardware: the N64 C-buttons allowed wide access to your inventory and the titular ocarina, while Z-targeting allowed an easy switch between movement and combat that has become a standard. Automatic jumps removed the distraction of lining up movement: Link jumped when he reached edges because... well, he would, wouldn’t he?

Ocarina Of Time instantly rewrote *Zelda* history such that its precursors, barring perhaps the exceptional *A Link To The Past*, seemed mere blueprints; it was an astonishing achievement and still a landmark for 3D adventures in general. In a series composed of awfully big adventure games, *Ocarina* may no longer be the prettiest or the biggest, but it’s still arguably the best of them all.





Format Wii Publisher/developer Nintendo Release 2010



Super Mario Galaxy 2

Yes, it's essentially a level pack. Though it's not Nintendo's first, and these are very different circumstances to *The Lost Levels*. The sequel to *Super Mario Bros* was an attempt to capitalise on the success of its genre-defining forebear, a game geared towards an audience that, having vanquished Bowser, craved a steeper challenge. *Super Mario Galaxy 2* may be a hint more difficult than its predecessor – certainly its early stages aren't quite so straightforward – but challenge was not its aim. Rather, here were the concepts EAD Tokyo simply had no room to stuff into the first *Galaxy*. These levels weren't lost; they'd always been there in the collective imagination of one of the industry's most inventive developers, ideas biding their time until the studio had the resources to fully realise them.

At first, it doesn't quite feel as special as the original, though that's no surprise – few remember the second man in space, after all. The absence of Yoshiaki Koizumi's wonderfully melancholic storybook is also keenly felt. The spaceship hub is more utilitarian than Rosalina's comet observatory, and its accompanying theme isn't a patch on the best Disney waltz that never was.

Then, via a rudimentary level map, you launch into the first galaxy – and, as a brass fanfare sounds upon landing, you realise Nintendo reserved the magic for the stages themselves. The designers trust that players will be familiar with the original's gravitational twists, which allows them to experiment even further,

conjuring levels of bewildering ingenuity that resemble no other platformer you've ever seen. As early as World 2's Puzzle Plank Galaxy, its buzzing sawblades offset against the soundtrack's cheerful fiddles, *Galaxy 2*'s levels are dismantling themselves as Mario leaps and yahoos through them. Later stages take the conceit to ever more abstract realms.

If this interstellar journey sometimes leaves you pleasantly baffled, you're never discomfited: Mario has always been a joy to control, but this time he's brought along a set of powerups that might just be his best ever toolkit. Alongside the first game's Bee and Boo forms, there's the satisfyingly sturdy Goomba-flattening Rock Mario, while a burrowing drill pickup is used judiciously but expertly each time it shows up. Cloud Mario allows you to conjure three fluffy platforms of your own – which naturally means secrets can be hidden higher and farther. And the return of Yoshi is simply a delight. His prehensile tongue gives the Wiimote pointer a more interesting role than to vacuum up star bits, while a trio of powerups temporarily transform him into a lightbulb, a blimp and, best of all, a runaway train, legs circling 19-to-the-dozen as he dashes up vertical inclines.

Several galaxies showcase some of Nintendo's finest ever level designs, and yet many of them are only visited once. Ideas are always discarded before they can be exhausted, often leaving you wanting more. But as you're hurried towards the next world,

it's hard to mind – you know there's another great one around the corner. There are so many standout sequences: Shiverburn Galaxy's irresistible combination of ice and fire, as a skating Mario pirouettes across lava; the Spielbergian thrill as you weave through the ancient rumbling mechanisms of Clockwork Ruins Galaxy; the nostalgic sigh of Throwback Galaxy; or the moment in Slimy Spring Galaxy where you emerge from a refreshing swim to sunrise at the end of the universe.

As dazzling as it is from a conceptual standpoint, it would be easy to overlook the brilliance of the game's fundamentals. Take, for example, the camera, which consistently frames the action immaculately. With no right analogue stick to manually guide it, it has to cope with some astonishingly demanding level geometry, but it never falters. Gravity might flip, platforms might slip, or climb, or blink into or out of existence. Mario might find himself above, beneath, or even inside a planetoid. No matter what's happening, you always know exactly where you are.

If it's a level pack, then, it's the greatest level pack of all time, a sequel that embarrasses other sequels with its constant, giddy invention and its wide-eyed sense of wonder. The plumber's pioneering journey beyond the stars will always hold a special place in the heart of many players, but moment to moment, his second trip into the Super Mario Galaxy is his brightest and best adventure to date.



Tetris

Some say *Tetris* is so pure and simple that it barely qualifies as a videogame at all. To others it's the videogame reduced to its essence. *Tetris* did, however, come from outside the then-young videogame industry: a computer research lab in Soviet Russia, and the interest of a puzzle-loving mathematician, Alexey Pajitnov, in the nascent field of AI. To him, a puzzle was something that functioned on levels both logical and psychological, mathematical and emotional.

Certainly, the design Pajitnov arrived at via this unusual route is a work of psychological genius that manipulates its human test subjects like lab rats. Simplifying the Pentomino geometric puzzles (whose pieces are made from five squares) into tetrominoes made of four squares, *Tetris* adds the time pressure, random sequencing and limitless scope that running on a computer allows. Four squares can be combined into seven possible shapes, matching the seven things, give or take, that the human brain is supposedly able to recognise at once. Here is a game that operates on a subconscious level, slotting into the brain like one of its pieces into the gap awaiting it.

In fact, *Tetris* is probably best played subconsciously, in a zen state where matching blocks and clearing lines is a near-automatic response. But several aspects of the game constantly pull you out of that state. The scoring system dares you to build higher and more complex structures so you can eliminate four lines at once in the big-scoring 'Tetris' move. But even

before you consider score, *Tetris* lures you into worry about where exactly that next block should go.

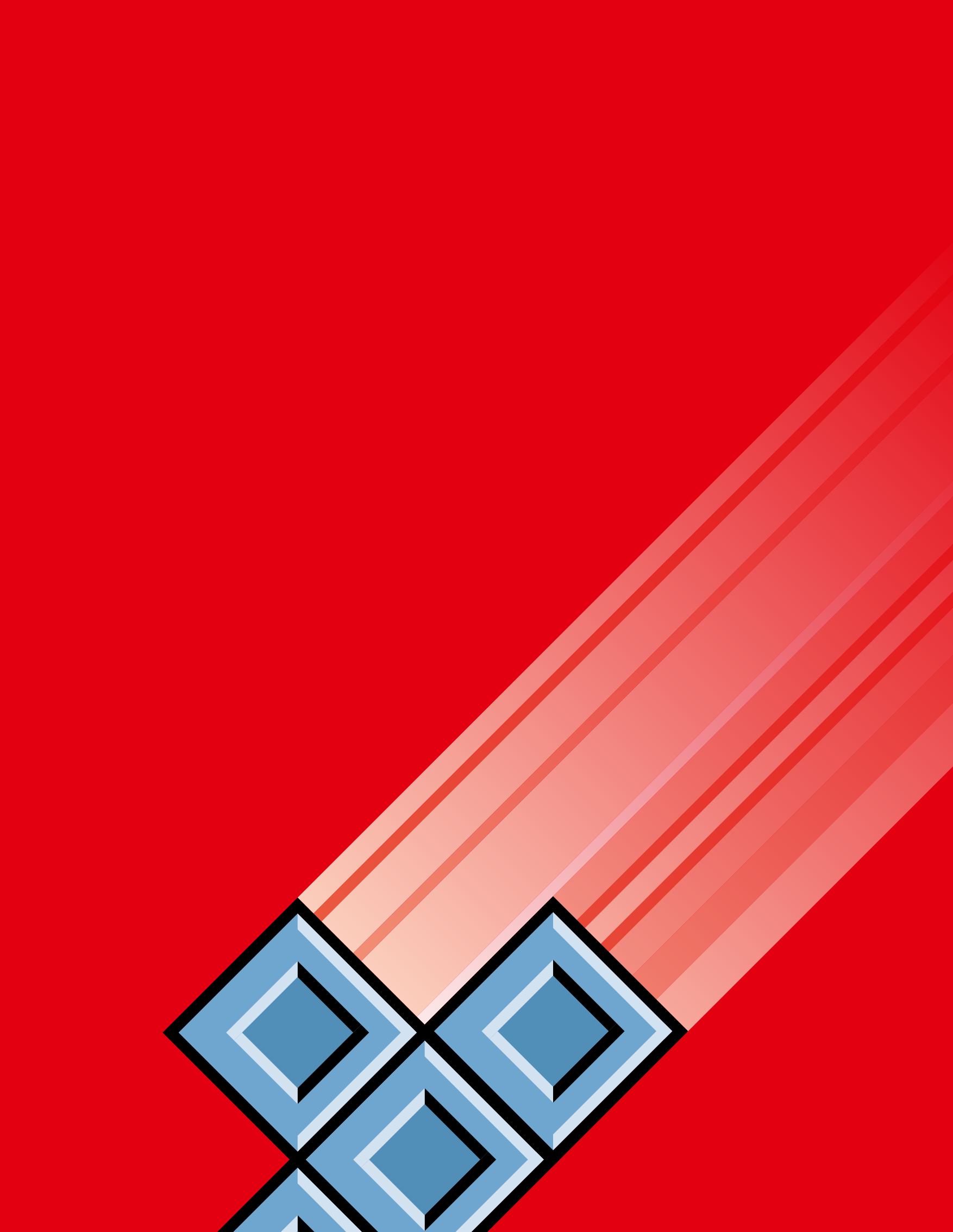
It's said that the best-designed games leave players only ever blaming themselves for failure. In *Tetris* there literally is nothing else you could blame (except perhaps the vicissitudes of random block selection), since you design the levels as well as play them: it begins with just an empty screen, and it's your own placement of the falling blocks that dictates the difficulty. It's a strategy game in redux, where planning is all: it's not just pieces piling up at the foot of the screen, but dozens of micro-decisions, be they careful, panicked or impulsive. You watch as an accumulation of your own failure — not the work of some cruel designer, but your own actions — climbs up the screen. And there's nothing you want more than to make it go away.

Tetris's abstract, peaceful nature — its supposed avoidance of the destruction, consumption and competition that have always dominated the videogame form — is often cited as the reason it has reached a far wider audience than other games. It might be fairer to credit Pajitnov's clear vision of the fundamental emotions and thought processes contained in all games: discovery, recognition, completion. The context may differ, but the player's most basic motivations in *Tetris* are shared with the vast majority of other games: the adrenaline kick of fast reaction, plus the urge to impose order on chaos, to take a slate — of blocks, of enemy spacecraft,

of quests in a log — and wipe it clean. *Tetris*'s stroke of genius isn't to take destruction out of the equation, but to unite creation and destruction in a single, simple, endlessly compulsive act.

Although *Tetris* spread on word of mouth and on its undeniable merits, there were external factors in its success too. One was timing. The Cold War was thawing and the game became symbolic, the first great entertainment export of a new Russia. This was cleverly exploited in graphics and music added by the western and Japanese companies marketing the game. Beyond that, *Tetris* can be coded to run on just about anything, and it has been: computers, just as PCs with basic graphical capabilities started appearing on every desk in the world, then Nintendo's Game Boy, where it was instrumental in turning both game and device into phenomenal successes, and on to everything from mobile phones to iPods to calculators.

Pajitnov created *Tetris* while working for a Communist state, so it was claimed for the people (ie, the government) of Soviet Russia. All this initially meant was that it was only western licensees which really profited from it. But the unruly tangle of its bungled rights sales, and the difficulty of clamping down on clones of a game almost any programmer can remake, has spread *Tetris* farther and wider, in more versions, than any videogame before or since. In a beautiful irony — and not in a way the Politburo would have meant — *Tetris* is still the people's game, and always will be.





Half-Life 2

Had it slipped even further from its intended 2003 release date, sending expectations not just through the roof but into outer space, *Half-Life 2* would still have scored an **Edge** 10. Like *Xen*, the border world in which life for Gordon Freeman went from bad to catastrophic in the blink of an eye, it exists in a universe of its own. Many are the imitators who have borrowed chapters whole from its playbook, and yet 12 years on, its integrity is undiminished by being nibbled at by the crowds – a testament not only to its robust constitution, but how impossibly inimitable the whole has become.

Still it overwhelms. Simply classifying it can be a game in itself, leaving you with something like ‘big, dumb, ingenious fun’ and the knowledge that you’ve been bested. Really, nothing explains it better than Freeman himself, a muddle of scientist and soldier who, through exemplary use of anecdotes and narrative technique, has ascended into myth. Never seen but reflected in the words of others, he’s a perfect catalyst for the game’s historic events.

His flight through the streets and suburbs of City 17 is ominous, bewildering and oppressive. This is a world being wrung out over a drain, and Valve pokes a camera into its darkest corners at every chance it gets. Or, to be precise, you do. The ‘directed action’ of *Half-Life* has evolved into something not just more dramatic, but also transparent. Unlike *Gears Of War* and its ‘objects of interest’ lock-on camera, *Half-Life 2* knows the value of truly ambient events.

Worse than the discovery of Overwatch soldiers burning bodies on Highway 17 is the ease with which it’s overlooked, suggesting a background of atrocity that shakes the imagination.

Likewise, most of the peeling walls and alcoves have some kind of window into Combine-occupied Earth, similar in effect to decking a claustrophobic restaurant in ceiling-high mirrors. Anti-establishment slogans wrestle with Dr Breen’s propaganda, newspaper clippings chronicle the fall of Man, and a world is created far bigger than the game that leads you through it. The remnants of human infrastructure, meanwhile, ship survivors into City 17 but never take them out. Given sign upon sign of global peril, you really are the last free man.

Half-Life 2 refuses to sit within the highbrow genres invented – or indeed reinvented – to describe it. You could call it a work of interactive cinema, a triumph of environmental narrative or a milestone in virtual mise-en-scene, but you’d only embarrass it, and yourself. This is a shooter – a game of guns and gore.

It’s not enough to say that Valve’s happy to yank a buzzsaw blade from a wall and fire it through a zombie’s guts; it delights in doing these things. It cheers the barrel that pitches multiple Combine high into the air and leaves them burning on the ground. The thought of Dog leaping buildings to take down aircraft gives it goosebumps. Talk of narrative ambitions all you like, but the evidence is

there in the places where it matters most: Nova Prospekt, Highway 17, and Ravenholm.

Often cited as the weakest link, its combat is nothing of the sort. Were it just a question of AI tactics and ballistics modelling, the critics would be on to something, but killing a man can mean so much more given the right context and a modicum of effort. Every set-piece in *Half-Life 2* is logically staged; every trigger pull has meaning.

As for the G-Man, his meaning remains safely locked inside a briefcase. He might just be the most infuriating device a drama could ever have, a placeholder for truths that even Valve has yet to fully imagine. Is he the puppeteer behind this epic state of affairs? A transdimensional anomaly? A face from the shadows of Black Mesa? Gordon Freeman himself? Ashton Kutcher? It doesn’t matter. In fact, it’s best we never know. G-Man works best as the only thing we do know him as: a simple agent of fate, struggling to keep tabs on Freeman’s wild endeavours.

Despite the cruel indignities of time upon its texture work, and the trampling boots of quick-marching technological progress over its physics model, rendering each faintly ridiculous, what endures as strong as ever is that fantastic sense of otherness. *Half-Life 2* wordlessly embraces its appetite for gunplay and ludic contortions, then makes them vanish with a wave of the hand, leaving in view only the most enduring and self-accepting of videogame worlds.







Bloodborne

It sounds like a gimmick. So recognisable and established has Hidetaka Miyazaki's template become that any minor deviation from its ruleset feels like change for change's sake. If you'll forgive us for briefly transplanting you from **Edge** to a publicly traded publisher's investor call, it is tempting to dismiss *Bloodborne* as the result of a platform holder exploiting the success of one of the most beloved franchises in the world, making just enough little changes to justify the creation of a new IP, then making it exclusive to its new console. It was as easy to be cynical about *Bloodborne*'s announcement as it was to be excited by it. A gun instead of a shield? A flighty sidestep instead of a dodge roll? Victorian England instead of medieval Lordran? Pshh.

The reality is, of course, very different. The pistol, blunderbuss or repeater in your left hand isn't Miyazaki giving out guns, but eradicating the shield; your Hunter's movement speed isn't a gimmick, but a necessity, your only reliable way of escaping trouble now that the game director has robbed you of a way to block incoming blows. Gunfire, when properly timed, can trigger the equivalent of the *Souls* games' shield parry, deflecting an enemy attack and staggering them. But blocking? Forget it. The result is that even *Souls* veterans struggle at first with the adjustment from a game that encourages, arguably even rewards, a defensive approach to one that punishes it — brutally.

At least at first. *Bloodborne*, to an experienced hand, gets weirdly

easier even as the odds against you ratchet up and up. It is not without its spikes, admittedly — countless playthroughs later, we still sprint past the trio of rival Hunters in Yahar'gul Chapel, still back off and catch our breath when faced with those ghastly grabby things in Upper Cathedral Ward — but *Bloodborne* asks so much of you from so early on that mastery quickly feels like your only option. The game's opening, set across the cobbled streets of Old Yharnam and centred on a town-square bonfire surrounded by ghoulish pedestrians, is a punishing gauntlet of encounters that are subtly, yet significantly, different each time you face them. There are fixed spawns — the gunman behind the stagecoach, the axe-wielder behind the staircase — but many of these denizens are on the move, shuffling loosely to and fro around the fire. The group of three that cornered you might be just one on your next spawn, but there's no respite in putting him to the sword, or axe, or whip. The other two are still out there somewhere.

Where the *Souls* games are readable, repeatable, *Bloodborne* keeps you on your toes. The remarkable boss fights are set over several phases — just as you think you've got your head around an enemy's moveset, they change and become more deadly still. Tension comes not only from the fear of dying and leaving your hard-won stock of Blood Echoes on the ground; it also comes, simply, from the fear of what lies in wait ahead of you. Gone is the *Souls*

games' low fantasy; in its place is a Lovecraftian horror that uses jump scares, and the threat of them, to have even the stoutest old guards exploring these places in terror.

Until the fighting starts, at which point things move at lightning speed. As hard as it is to adjust to the lack of a shield, the change of mindset is the greater challenge. When an enemy backs off, you must follow; when you've been hit, you're often better off continuing the assault than retreating to heal, since landing a few quick hits will regain your lost health. The pace of the thing means that it feels more like an action game than FromSoftware's previous output. It's hardly *Bayonetta* — there are no complex combos here — but there's a frantic pace, and balletic grace, to the action that is unlike anything else Miyazaki has made.

Yet the game's greatest achievement is in its world. We have come to expect masterful level design from a Miyazaki game, but this is something else. Yharnam and its surrounds are dense, yet sprawling; every area feels different, but the whole thing locks together with remarkable coherence. Whether it is the creator's greatest achievement is moot — all his games are essential — but what stands *Bloodborne* apart are the things that make it so different. The pace of its action, the emphasis on attack over defence, the shock of its horror — and all because you lost your shield, gained a dash, and leapt forward in time a few hundred years. Gimmicks? Not a bit of it.







The Last Of Us

As Number Nine Dream author David Mitchell once said, “the trick to writing a compelling narrative is so simple it’s often overlooked: invent a character the reader likes and make nasty or dangerous things happen to them”. The modern Naughty Dog may more obviously look to the silver screen for its inspirations, but *The Last Of Us* shows it takes Mitchell’s meaning all the same. This is the zombie apocalypse not as a vehicle for consequence-free violence, but as a conveyor belt to heap terrible events on a Texan called Joel and his ward, Ellie.

Those events deserve to be experienced for themselves, but are delivered with a violence of emotion that will strip you raw – a double surprise given the happy-go-lucky adventures of Nathan Drake in particular and the genre at large. Far from content to just keep you shooting chunks out of humanoids, *The Last Of Us* tugs at similar levers as Romero’s *Dawn Of The Dead*. It would rather use the crumbling of society to examine what happens to the few who remain physically unaltered, and chooses to do so amid the thunderous claps of headshots and splattering viscera to unsettle, rather than to glorify those acts.

Neil Druckmann’s script is brutal and uncompromising in its depiction of a world ravaged by a strain of cordyceps fungus that forcibly strips its victims of their humanity, and the dehumanising effects of the desperation that plague causes in the healthy. Joel begins the game proper as a dispassionate misanthrope,

though a savage prologue affords you a measure of empathy with his position. Even the savvy Tess, his respected smuggling partner, recognises they have become terrible people. Ellie is Joel’s salvation from self-interest, and a reason to reconnect with a more caring past life. Druckmann also toys with what care can drive a man to, though again the theme’s manifestations are best left unlisted. Suffice it to say that Joel and Ellie’s evolving relationship is the balm for all the very human ugliness exposed elsewhere.

What really distinguishes *The Last Of Us*, however, is what it does with the silences between jury-rigged nail bombs and flying buckshot. It revels in them. Some are given over to Naughty Dog’s artists, who conjure the verdant, beautiful side of a world being reclaimed by nature as often as the ugly, distressing tragedy of civilisation slowly peeling away. They paint with foliage and fauna, decay and bloom. Other pauses go to Druckmann, who finds in Ellie a wonderful mirror to reflect on the trappings of modernity and normalcy that we take for granted.

Saturating all the storytelling is Gustavo Santaolalla’s restrained, sparse soundtrack. He is able to conjure wistful melancholy with just a few haunting strings and trills, and shores up emotional beats with just as quietly powerful use of plucked bass and feathered drum skin. *The Last Of Us*’s music doesn’t need to shout – in fact, it’s all the more threatening for often lurking in the same region as the ear expects to find NPC tells,

and all the more elating for mingling with distant bird song.

That combined artistry would mean little if these themes were not also communicated through play. But the desperation of the survivors is brilliantly backed up by the act of tensely creeping past echolocating Clickers in the dark, a single homemade shiv your only cushion between these nightmares and your life ebbing away in a sickening shower of arterial spray. The new strains on resources and relationships are shown when you cower behind cover with Joel’s ear to the ground, an old rifle you’d rather not have to rely on clutched desperately in your palms as you try to avoid a costly all-out gun battle with roving gangs, but hit home the hardest when you see this predatory world through Ellie’s eyes. And there’s something primal and satisfying in clutching a virtual half-brick in a fist, even without its heft – a comforting sense of preparedness that speaks to the ancient survival instincts this game can play like a fiddle.

We rarely talk of ludonarrative assonance, given how problematic game storytelling is, but *The Last Of Us* is remarkable for how often it ties together plot and play. It not only has something to say, it has also found a confident voice with which to say it. Hearing its message requires taking a Brillo pad to your soul – to be raw, vulnerable and largely alone in a hostile place. It demands you to *feel* like the last of us. That it can sustain that across 15 hours is testament to its deft touch with nasty and dangerous things.





Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One Publisher/developer Rockstar Games Release 2013



Grand Theft Auto V

OK, on the face of it, it seems like a bit of a gimmick. Three protagonists? Surely just change for change's sake, a feature to put on the back of the box, an excuse to pilfer from three genres of TV and film at once instead of the traditional one. To a degree, all this is true of *Grand Theft Auto V*. In fact, its three co-leads are on the *front* of the box. Rockstar uses the setup to riff on modern gangster stories such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Sons Of Anarchy*. Yet the trio powers Rockstar's greatest work to date, a varied, smartly designed game whose best moments simply wouldn't be possible without the player being able to switch between the three at will.

You can do so whether on- or off-mission, and while there's a thrill in hopping from one man's shootout to another's tennis match or living-room hotbox – or saving yourself the schlep back into town after a long drive out into the sticks – it's during the game's signature heists that the switching mechanic comes into its own. You'll smash open a jeweller's display cases with one, jump on a motorbike with another and escape through a sewer network, then switch again to the driver's seat of a van you'll use to knock pursuing police off course. One blocks off a road, another disables an oncoming military truck, and a third counter-snipes a SWAT team across the street as the others pillage the vehicle for booty. Rockstar, always enamoured of cinema, used to use cinematics, not mechanics, to hit its narrative

beats. Its back catalogue hardly wants for great games, but never before has it created this level of drama through pure play.

Admittedly, the three co-leads don't drift too far from Rockstar's protagonist archetype. They are, to a man, deeply flawed, sociopathic monsters. Michael De Santo, however, is pitch-perfect: a conflicted, damaged, retired mobster mired in a mid-life crisis and wrestling with the realities of a failing marriage, uncontrollable millennial offspring, and the boredom of the straight and narrow. Franklin Clinton, meanwhile, gives Rockstar the traditional *GTA* story arc of the street thug who works his way up the ranks to a big score. There's a symbiotic relationship between the two: Rockstar couldn't write a character like Michael without a Franklin to provide the more traditional thrills, and Franklin couldn't make it to the big leagues without a Michael for a coach.

Then there's Trevor Philips. If Franklin is the character every *GTA* story needs, Trevor is the protagonist the game itself has always lacked, the psychopath who finds a grenade launcher and a busy road and needs no narrative justification for what inevitably comes next. He is Rockstar's acknowledgement that a good proportion of its playerbase couldn't give a jot about the story and are buying *GTAV* solely for the pleasure of mowing down a few dozen innocent citizens on Sunset Boulevard before leading the police on a merry dance through the Hollywood Hills.

The host city, Los Santos, is Los Angeles in all but name, its landmarks borrowed and renamed, its sprawl reduced because no one wants a videogame recreation of the rush-hour freeway crawl from downtown out to Santa Monica Pier. Beyond the city limits lie the deserts and mountains of rural San Fierro County, the colossal landmass walled in by some of the most hypnotically realistic water ever seen in a game. And across it all is a caustic skewering of modern-day America: from libertarianism to spiritualism, weed clinics to celebrity obsession, the banking crisis and the banality of social media. All of it is, as ever, set to a soundtrack that caters equally to the aching contemporary and the connoisseurs of the past.

Crucially, it's also a huge mechanical leap forward for the series. Its gunplay is weighty, responsive and hugely satisfying, as is its driving model; systems for flight and sea travel are equally finely tuned. All this is put to good use in *GTA Online*, which despite running into significant problems at launch has grown from forgettable multiplayer mode into a game all its own, one teeming with content and customisation options designed to last a decade and more than capable of managing it.

If there's a concern, it's where on Earth Rockstar goes from here. Fortunately, there's more than enough to see and do in Los Santos until one of the world's most secretive game companies reveals what happens next.







Dark Souls

The Crestfallen Warrior

sits by the bonfire at Firelink Shrine, *Dark Souls'* central hub and about as close as this most intimidating of videogame worlds gets to a sanctuary. He exists, and exists alone, as a storyteller, and a pretty depressing one at that. While there are plenty of others dotted around Lordran's corkscrewing sprawl who help to flesh out the game's mysterious, unforthcoming narrative, they serve a secondary purpose: they are merchants and blacksmiths, fire keepers and covenant recruiters, as well as raconteurs. That's too much effort for the Crestfallen Warrior, who realised long ago that the jig was up and now sits by the fire, ready to drag every passing adventurer down with him into the emotional abyss. Instead, he has the opposite effect. You resolve that, no matter how bad it gets, you'll never be like him. You will never simply take your seat by the fire and wait for the world to end.

Just a short way into this remarkable adventure, the Crestfallen Warrior gets right to the core of what makes *Dark Souls*, and Hidetaka Miyazaki's games in general, so special. "How do these martyrs keep chugging along?" he asks. "I'd peter out in an instant." If *Dark Souls* hasn't clicked with you by now, this is the point at which it does, your synapses fizzing as the realisation dawns that the only thing standing between you and victory is persistence. The reason *Dark Souls* gives you so little help is because it is built on a single foundational

principle: that players are capable of anything. It does not patronise you, never offers to lower the difficulty, does not dare suggest a different tactic during a post-death loading screen. By telling you nothing, it also tells you everything. Keep going. You can do it. And when you do, the sense of reward will be staggering.

Many are put off by the game's supposed difficulty, but while you will die countless times on your first trek through *Dark Souls* – and many times more on your inevitable repeat playthroughs – it is a mechanically straightforward game. It is not a game of long flowing combos comprised of precisely timed inputs. It is a game of controlling space, creating openings and making the most of them. Or a game of donning the heaviest armour you can find and tanking through many hits. Or a game of dancing away at range and flinging magical projectiles. Or of stripping to your pants, opting out of the levelling system entirely and finishing the entire game using a wooden club. There's tremendous flexibility in the class and gear systems, and you'll drift off in meetings or conversations daydreaming about potential builds and boss strategies. There's by no means an infinite number of ways to make your way through this world, but there are times when it certainly feels that way.

And what a world it is. While it's perhaps been outclassed since by Miyazaki's PS4 exclusive *Bloodborne*, *Dark Souls'* Lordran is still a remarkable achievement. It is an entire world constructed

with the intricacy of a single level, and some of the game's most memorable moments coming not from a downed boss or set-piece but simply kicking down a ladder or opening a door that takes you back to an area you left a dozen hours ago. Despite the (mostly) coherent way it links together, it is a land of tremendous variety, from the dilapidated dwellings of the Undead Burg to the spider-infested poisonous swamp of Blighttown, the grimy, curse-filled horrors of the Depths to the majestic splendour of Anor Londo.

There will be times when you feel like the Crestfallen Warrior might have a point, though. After a swinging axe in the trap-filled Sen's Fortress has knocked you off a bridge the width of your instep for the 20th time, you'll contemplate just giving up. After little-and-large boss duo Ornstein and Smough have sent you to your doom after a protracted fight for the fifth time that evening, you might switch the console off for the night and ask yourself if it's really worth going back. But it is, and you will, because once *Dark Souls* gets its hooks into you, they are into you for good. It is a rare game indeed that has you starting a second playthrough the instant you finish the first, but what else are you going to do? Give up? After *Dark Souls*, other games, with their handholding and their hint systems, just don't quite scratch the itch any more. So you jump straight back in, time and time again, on yet another mission to show the Crestfallen Warrior how terribly wrong he is.





The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild

You sense it most clearly away from the hurly-burly of combat, outside the intricate conundrums of the Divine Beasts and the puzzle shrines. It's there when the music — suggestive, rather than strident — fades entirely, and all you hear is the clank of Link's sword and shield jostling together as he jogs onward.

There's a stillness, pregnant with possibility, as you crest a hill, gaze over the horizon and see a world stretching out in front of you: vast, uncharted, begging for discovery. Previous *Zelda* titles speak of MacGuffins: ocarinas and shrinking caps, cursed masks and batons to command the winds. This, as the name makes clear, is something different. It may not take physical form, but you can feel it spurring you on.

This new Hyrule contrasts sharply with *BOTW*'s home-console predecessor, the compact, coddling *Skyward Sword*. In *Breath Of The Wild*, Nintendo allows Link to stretch his legs while opening its arms to embrace ideas from western sandbox games. Or, rather, to learn from them and reinvent them in playful, Nintendo-like ways. There are towers, yes, but each requires thought to climb; tasking you with dispatching nearby enemies, or finding a safe route to cross before you can begin your ascent. And while they reveal unvisited areas of the map, it doesn't suddenly become pocked with dozens of icons. You'll see the topography and a few place names, but nothing more.

In practice, that's all you need. Look out from a tower and you can

mark areas of interest, or simply pull out Link's glider, float down and decide where you're going when you land. It's easy to see why Nintendo prefers the term 'open air' to 'open world'; since you'll spend plenty of time with your feet off Hylian turf. As long as the rains hold off, every surface is climbable, and you'll often find yourself scaling tall cliffs to get your bearings, before leaping off and drifting toward your desired destination. In doing so, you can bypass trouble below — but if you do fancy a ruck, you can rain down death from above, drawing your bowstring as time slows. Loose some fire arrows and the resulting flames can cause an updraft, taking you skyward once more.

It's startling just how far it goes to dispense with *Zelda* traditions. A few areas are gear-gated, but the vast majority of this wondrous space is yours to traverse however you please. The starting area is this new Hyrule in microcosm, a Great Plateau that, within hours, provides all the tools you need for the journey to come. After that, it's up to you to combine and experiment with them.

The logic underpinning *Wild*'s sandbox is so consistent that you're encouraged to try things in the hope they might come off. Before long, that hope becomes expectation. Fell a tree, and its trunk can become a bridge across frigid waters, fuel for a campfire, or even a weapon for the ogish Hinox. Drop raw meat on Death Mountain's volcanic ground and you'll soon have a seared steak. Attach enough Octorok balloons

to a raft, and for a few glorious moments you've got an airship.

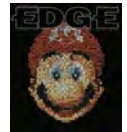
Discoveries great and small lie over every hill and within every cave — and each feels all the more personal for the lack of an invisible hand guiding you there. It was 80 hours before we stumbled across the tranquil coastal hamlet of Lurelin Village; a colleague found it within ten. An extensive, multi-part quest featuring an avian accordionist rewards you with a spine-tingling payoff; another sees you witness the blossoming of a new community from nothing. Sometimes, it's just a view. *Breath Of The Wild* naturally produces the kind of spectacular sights where you need only click the Switch's Snapshot button for another magical memento.

While so much is thrillingly new, there's a healthy respect for what's gone before. The moment you draw gaming's most famous sword from its resting place is imbued with a weight of meaning that only history can impart. Elsewhere, there's a touching nod to the late Satoru Iwata in the form of a kindly, bespectacled trader with a familiarly tidy centre parting. The game's story offers a subtler salute, too, as Link draws upon the powers of warriors past to overcome a calamity. Director Hidemaro Fujibayashi and his team could hardly have found a finer way to pay tribute to Nintendo's own fallen hero, leaning on Iwata's creative spirit to produce Link's most expansive adventure to date — and for now at least, his greatest one, too.





EDGE



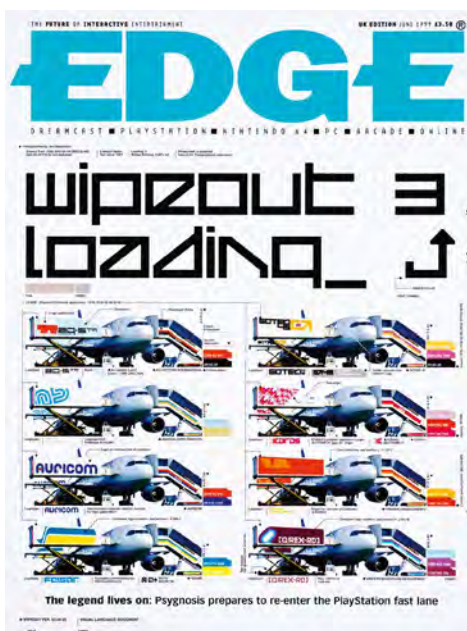
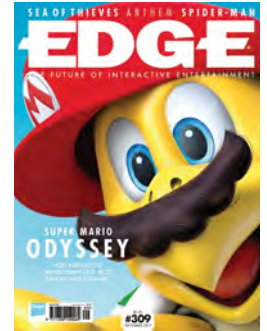
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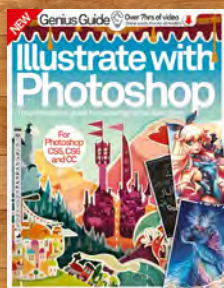
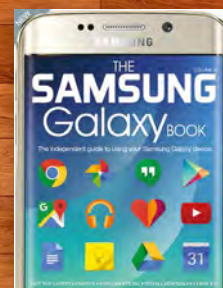
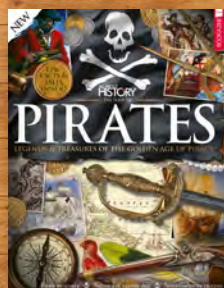
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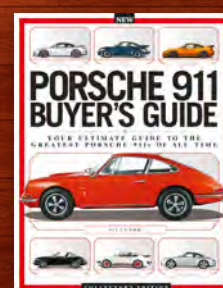
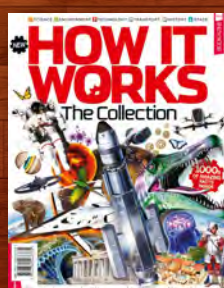
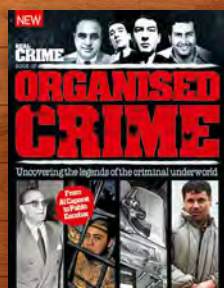
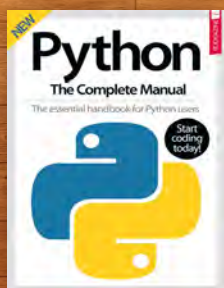
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