

PC

GAMER

PRESENTS

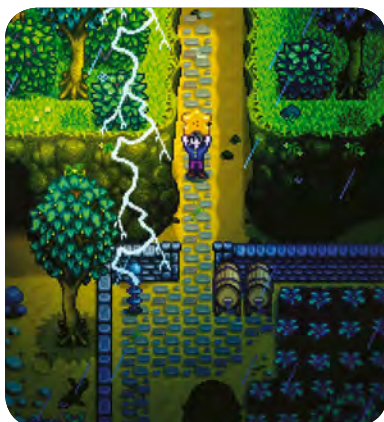
The BEST PC GAMES EVER

2017



The TOP 100 PC GAMES

FROM **STARDEW VALLEY** TO
HALF-LIFE 2



REVIEWS OF TODAY'S
BIGGEST PC GAMES:

DISHONORED 2

HITMAN

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

XCOM 2

And more!

CLASSIC GAMES REVISITED
INSIDE:

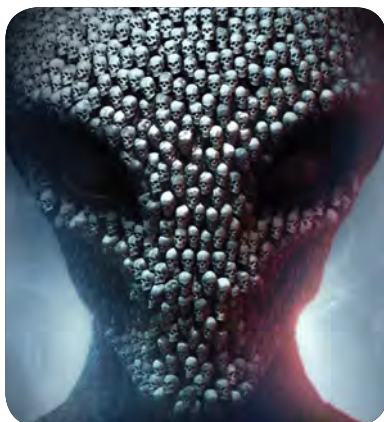
DEUS EX

RED ALERT 2

QUAKE II

BENEATH A STEEL SKY

And more!



The BEST PC GAMES EVER

2017



The classics

Welcome! If you're new to PC gaming, or you simply want a refresher on the best PC games you can buy right now, this book is for you. Inside you'll find PC Gamer's Top 100 PC games list, as well as reviews of the best PC games from the last two years. You'll also find genre lists, history features and the making of *Call of Duty*'s best levels.

You'll find an extensive retro gaming section towards the back of the book, where we revisit some beloved PC classics from yesteryear, including entries from the *Deus Ex*, *Quake* and *Command & Conquer* series. Enjoy.

SAMUEL ROBERTS
EDITOR

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GAMES EVER
2017



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06 THE PC GAMER TOP 100

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THE TOP

100

PC GAMES

The very best from three decades of PC gaming

MEET THE TEAM



Tim Clark



Samuel Roberts



Evan Lahti



Phil Savage



Tyler Wilde



Tom Senior



Chris Thursten



James Davenport



John Strike



Every year, the global PC Gamer team congregates to hash out a list of the 100 best PC games you can play today. The 'today' part is crucial: these are games from across the history of PC gaming that you can still enjoy playing in 2017. We will no doubt celebrate many of your favourites in this list. Hopefully, you'll discover some new favourites, too.

The Top 100 selection process is democratic and subjective. Each writer simply nominates their personal top 15 games, and we combine the resulting choices to produce a longlist. Two writers, one each from our US and UK teams, then get together on a sweaty and prolonged Skype call to decide on a final list that we're proud of. That's what you have here, along with personal picks from the team highlighting games they love that didn't make the final cut. Enjoy.

And: Jarred Walton, Steven Messner



Tony Ellis



Wes Fenlon



Chris Livingston



Andy Kelly



Shaun Prescott



Angus Morrison



Tom Marks



Daniella Lucas



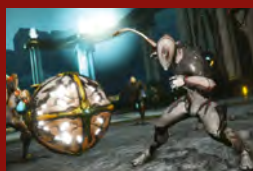
Matt Elliott



100 KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New entry

James: The marriage of point-and-click with literary fiction, this is a slow exploration of rural America through the lens of magic realism. You spend most of the game clicking around a minimalist overworld, a road trip dotted by brief text interactions with bizarre denizens. *KRO* ruminates on history and decay, sometimes through folksy song, and sometimes via populating the entire floor of an office building with bears.



99 WARFRAME

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New entry

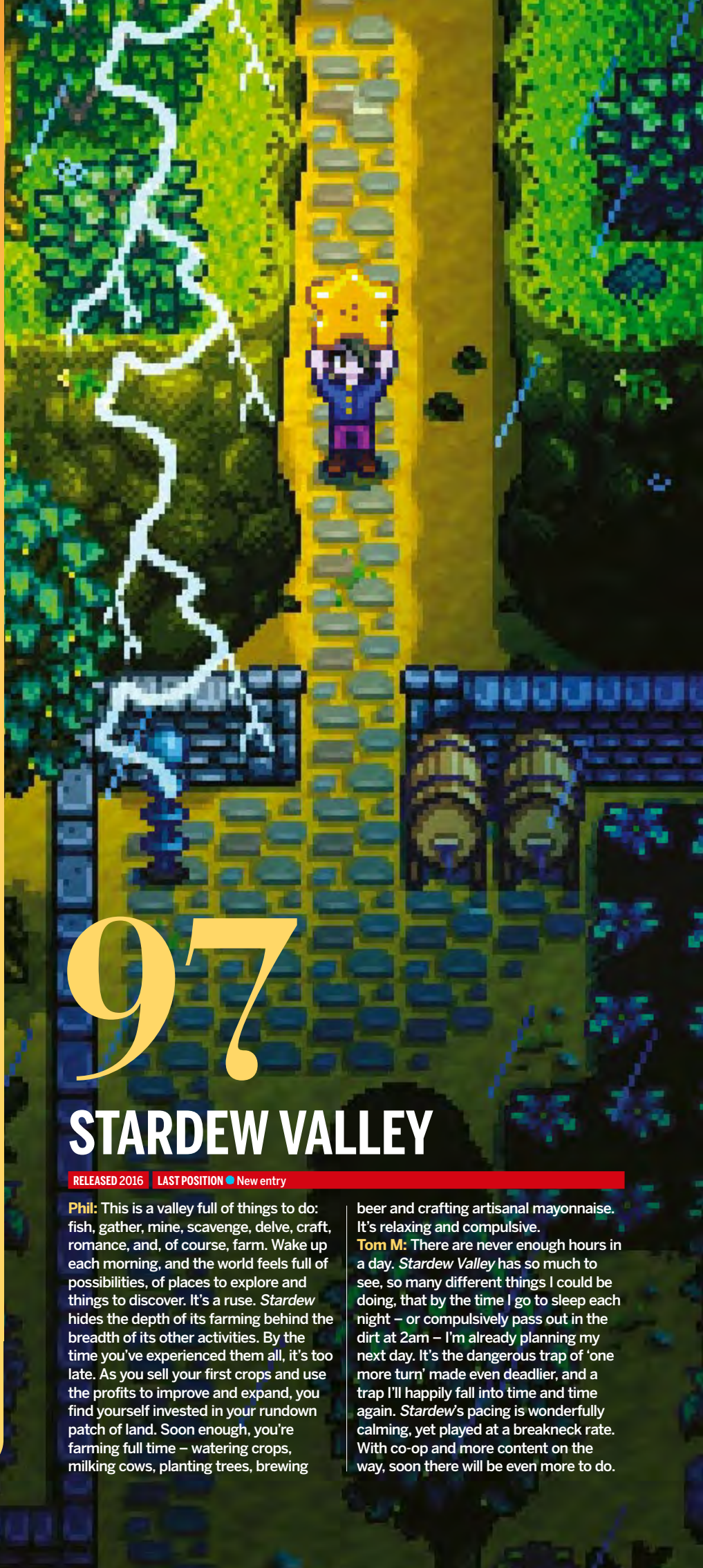
Steven: This third-person shooter has taken the basic concept of running repeatable missions as a hybrid ninja warrior and turned it into something that rivals the scope of a traditional MMO. The progression is deep – almost too deep, letting you slowly craft the ultimate warrior on your path to vengeance. *Warframe's* nimble run-and-gun parkour sets a new standard for movement in this genre.



98 THEY HUNGER

RELEASED 2000 LAST POSITION ● New entry

John: Of all the hundreds of *Half-Life* mods shipped across the world on PC Gamer's demo discs, this is the one I'll never forget. *They Hunger* has a sinister eeriness we re-lived much later in *Ravenholm*. It has all the hallmarks of a low-budget John Carpenter horror film: a claustrophobic setting, a crooked local sheriff (who, surprise, is a zombie) and a tormented local radio station broadcasting to stranded souls.



97

STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Phil: This is a valley full of things to do: fish, gather, mine, scavenge, delve, craft, romance, and, of course, farm. Wake up each morning, and the world feels full of possibilities, of places to explore and things to discover. It's a ruse. *Stardew* hides the depth of its farming behind the breadth of its other activities. By the time you've experienced them all, it's too late. As you sell your first crops and use the profits to improve and expand, you find yourself invested in your rundown patch of land. Soon enough, you're farming full time – watering crops, milking cows, planting trees, brewing

beer and crafting artisanal mayonnaise. It's relaxing and compulsive.

Tom M: There are never enough hours in a day. *Stardew Valley* has so much to see, so many different things I could be doing, that by the time I go to sleep each night – or compulsively pass out in the dirt at 2am – I'm already planning my next day. It's the dangerous trap of 'one more turn' made even deadlier, and a trap I'll happily fall into time and time again. *Stardew's* pacing is wonderfully calming, yet played at a breakneck rate. With co-op and more content on the way, soon there will be even more to do.



96 HOTLINE MIAMI

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▼ 92

Tim: Of all the games on this list that might legitimately be described as twitch shooters, this is the one that makes me twitch just to think about it. The mix of lurid, lo-fi ultraviolence and fever dream storytelling remains a potent brew. Each level is a brutish puzzle you slickly glide through, until you don't. Instant restarts, animal masks, and those crunchy kills amp the experience until your nerves are shredded and you push the mouse away. The disappointing sequel only confirms it as bona fide lightning bottling.

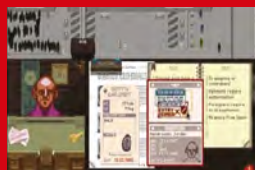
Samuel: This felt like such a true original at release, and it's still the one I go back to for high scores. The soundtrack remains incredible.



95 ZORK: GRAND INQUISITOR

RELEASED 1997 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tyler: Still funny despite its age and the many pitiful attempts at game humour that preceded and succeeded it. Its puzzles are absurd in a consistent way that lets you finish it without a guide (though the Hades Shuttle Service Courtesy Phone might take you a minute), and always come with a good gag. The whole of *Zork* is great, but this is absolutely the one newcomers should play as an introduction.



93 PAPERS, PLEASE

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▼ 56

Shaun: Bureaucracy is not fun. Working as an immigration officer for a fictionalised Eastern Bloc nation does not sound like fun either. So it stands to reason that a game about these things would also not be fun. And it's not! It's effective though, in its demonstration of how the staunch observance of systems and protocols bleeds us of our humanity

Phil: The theme song is good, too. "Bwarp, bworp, bwarp, bworp," etc.

94 DRAGON AGE II

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tony: In most RPGs, a town is somewhere you pass through, solve everyone's problems, then never come back. You live in Kirkwall for ten years. You invest so much time in this setting, you build up so much history, that it becomes a *place* in a way few RPGs ever achieve. Somewhere you lived. People whine about the over-familiar scenery, but since when did we play BioWare games for their floorplans?



Phil: We're really doing this? OK then. How are all caves the same cave? Why does anybody ever go to those docks? It's repetitive. But here's the thing: it's also really good. It has some of the best BioWare characters, and gives you a decade to learn their stories. And you won't find a more endearing friendship than that of Hawke and Varric.

Samuel: I agree. Second only to *Mass Effect 2* for party and writing. Sorry!

92 UNDERTALE

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Wes: Indie developer Toby Fox managed to bring the heart and quirky humour of '90s console JRPGs to the PC. More importantly, he bridged the story and battle system in a thoughtful way we've never seen before.

Tyler: *Undertale* is the pinnacle of the self-referential game trend, partly because of its complexity – it can take three playthroughs or maybe more to fully understand its web of



decisions – but also because it isn't cynical. It surprises with self-aware gags and Kojima-like manipulation, but also tells a heartfelt story about our bittersweet connection with fiction and characters we love.

Samuel: It found a massive audience on PC, and deservedly so. While you can finish it in around five hours, it's full of secrets that only reveal themselves on a second or third playthrough.

PERSONAL PICK Tim Clark



FAR CRY 3

"Douches abroad" story aside, my favourite of Ubi's schlocky open-world shooters. Killing sharks to craft a high-end wallet proved an oddly compelling feedback loop, and I obsessed over owning all the signature weapons. Perhaps most importantly, it was completely malaria-free.

PERSONAL PICK Samuel Roberts



SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH

Probably the lightest RPG ever, but a fantastic representation of the show that cleverly captures South Park's brutally immature, but often incisive, sense of humour. I admire any RPG I can play with just one hand.

PERSONAL PICK

Evan Lahti



STELLARIS

It captures the wonder and virtuousness of space exploration better than any game in the 4X genre. The first phase is wonderfully, paradoxically calm and uncertain – each new event feels like a revelation for your species.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage



TROPICO 4

Not as deep a city builder as *Cities: Skylines*, *Tropico 4* stands out due to its satirical theme. You're not just a mayor, you're El Presidente, a (possibly) benevolent dictator who's just trying to do right by his people (and embezzle a few million dollars along the way).



91 ANACHRONOX

RELEASED 2001 LAST POSITION ▼ 76

Tony: I could tell you it's a JRPG made by Ion Storm, but that doesn't really help. If I tell you that one planet you visit gets sliced in half, and another one joins your party, we're a little warmer. If I tell you that you can still visit that party-member planet, and all its inhabitants have seen your adventures in the sky, we're finally getting somewhere. *Anachronox* was wildly inventive, but with its in-engine tracking shots and oddly poignant moments it was also cinematic at a time when nobody was using that word to describe anything as trashy as a videogame. I look forward to the day someone in our formulaic, risk-averse industry tries something like this again.



90 BROKEN SWORD: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS

RELEASED 1996 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Andy: The fusion of fascinating real-world history and a compelling occult murder mystery makes for a brilliantly twisting plot that takes you from Ireland to Syria. Witty hero George Stobbart is endearingly goofy, and showing every single person he meets the contents of his pockets – including a disgustingly moist tissue – is a joke that never gets old. It's a game that keeps me coming back.



88 EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Angus: This world-conquering sim marks the point where usability got some of the attention Paradox usually reserves for complexity. By tweaking the barrier to entry, the studio invited grand strategy converts from the more focused *Crusader Kings 2* to expand their horizons by colonising the early modern world. Few games let you found the British Empire on one run and fight as Incans the next. *EU4* is the best of them.

89 CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ▼ 40

Tyler: This is the best modern city builder, and a direct response to the flub that was *SimCity*. Colossal Order and Paradox embraced the modding community, setting up an attractive, refined ecosystem for urban planning hobbyists that will likely be the baseline for years to come.

Shaun: The beginning of a new project in *Cities: Skylines* is a meditative, easygoing process: some light dabs of Industrial and

Residential here, a bit of Commercial there, maybe a lovely main street by the water. Being a civic deity isn't so bad after all! But then the traffic piles up, the rivers fill with waste, the citizens turn rogue and that prison you built next to a school proves quite the cunning plan. Presiding over your personal dystopia has always been a PC-oriented pleasure, and we have *Skylines* to thank for having a nigh-perfect way to do that again.

87 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ▼ 10

Shaun: To an increasingly loud minority, it's the best modern *Fallout*. It's not hard to understand why: Obsidian's take on the formula focused on all the best parts of classic *Fallout* – the weirdness, the substantial narrative branching paths, the humour – and made good on a promise that *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 4* struggled to deliver. It also lacked the hammy grandiosity of the other two games. There's less dissonance between

the urgency of the main story and your optional dalliances with Deathclaw extermination, and you have a lot more agency when it comes to how that bigger picture resolves.

Phil: It is just set in a big desert, though, isn't it? At least *Fallout 4*'s got a few green patches.

Samuel: I like *New Vegas*'s diverging main quest, but it's become the *Fallout* it's cool to be seen liking. I prefer the worlds of the other games.

86

UNREAL
TOURNAMENT 2K4

RELEASED 2004

LAST POSITION ▼ 67

Tyler: A joyous test of speed and reflexes with one of the best FPS guns ever. The whole series is great, but this is the one we play most today – and we've had some heated instagib duels in the office, bounding around each other and clicking for kills with only milliseconds between a gib and a miss. It hasn't gotten old yet. *UT* is extensively customisable and host to tons of usermade maps, and along with the *Quake* series it still stands as one of the few brilliant, still easily playable arena shooters in existence. Even as the concept reemerges – in the new *Doom*, for instance, *UT2K4* and its predecessors remain some of the best options.

Evan: *Quake III* is the purer FPS, but in terms of art, maps, guns, and mechanics as a whole, *UT2K4* is the peak that arena FPS achieved, the sum of all its good ideas that began in the late '90s.

85 PATH OF
EXILE

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Steven: It's hard not to see this as a spiritual successor to *Diablo II*. They share a similarly dour tone, but where *Diablo II* is fading away, *Path of Exile* is getting better every month. Each 'season' revamps the basic formula with exciting twists that have spawned an entire community hungry for the challenge of rolling new characters. That too is exciting, as *Path of Exile*'s progression system is like *Final Fantasy X*'s sphere grid, only crazy in size. It's huge!

84 COMPANY
OF HEROES

RELEASED 2006 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tom S: Every year I return to the small European towns of the Western Front to battle the panzers and halftracks of the Axis vanguard, and still find myself rewarded with close-fought and intense real-time scraps. The clever use of terrain and cover creates tactical intrigue that refuses to fade with age. The earthy explosions and top class sound design make it one of the punchiest and most satisfying strategy games ever.

83 PSYCHONAUTS

RELEASED 2005 LAST POSITION ● No Change

Tom M: The reason fans like me are so hyped for *Psychonauts 2* is because the first was truly fantastic. It's a 3D platformer with a unique setting and a fantastic sense of humour. It wasn't afraid to do weird things with plot, personality, and even level design, and that fearlessness is one of the main reasons people are still talking about the Milkman level 11 years later. It's one of Double Fine's best games.

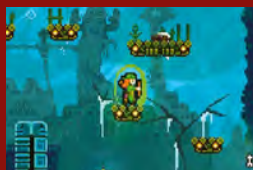


EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION 85

Phil: Drive around a condensed Europe, delivering goods and trying not fall asleep on the M6. This isn't about drama in the traditional sense. Those 16 tonnes of packaged foods probably will make it to Düsseldorf on time, even taking into account a brief stop to refuel. Instead, *Euro Truck* is about maintaining a delicate balance between relaxation and efficiency. Travelling Europe's roads feels atmospheric and calming, especially at night. But it's also easy to slip into complacency, increasing the risk of incurring fines for speeding, running red lights or crashing into other vehicles. Despite the absence of action, *Euro Truck* has a huge, passionate community – from modders, to the DJs who fill its internet radio stations with dedications, requests and Europop.

Andy: *Euro Truck Simulator 2* is therapy. Rumbling along the grey, featureless roads of Europe, listening to the rain tapping at the window, the swish of the wipers, it's absolutely hypnotic. Which makes the moments where something exciting happens – which is whenever *anything* happens – even more powerful. A hot air balloon. A waterfall. A ship sailing past. And then it's back to the road. The tranquillity of endless asphalt, where your only worry is getting that yoghurt to Aberdeen in time. Most vehicle simulators are rough and poorly made, this one is a fun, polished, and occasionally beautiful game.



81 TOWERFALL ASCENSION

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▼ 51

Tom M: As a local multiplayer game, it provides the quintessential couch experience, with easy-to-learn but hard-to-master controls, quick rounds, and a heaping helping of chaos. There are still so many little intricacies to *Towerfall*'s controls that I know I haven't mastered, despite wanting to play it every time I have friends over. None of its peers has managed to match its exhilaration, although many have tried.



80 SUPER MEAT BOY

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Shaun: Instead of playing an Italian plumber, you play a piece of meat. Instead of fending off goombas and flying turtle things, you're avoiding globs of snot and meat grinders. Every single thing about *Super Meat Boy* is better than *Mario*: it feels better to play, it feels more satisfying to win, and there's no Luigi. Team Meat mastered the action-oriented platformer with this, and while thousands have tried to replicate its success, none have managed.

79 RISING STORM

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tyler: This realism-focused 64-player shooter casts you as an extra in a sweeping battle. As much as personal victories matter – wrestling ranged shot out of a WWII rifle, finally making it to the front line with a flamethrower to shut down a capture – just running to points as a team as artillery fire splashes around you is part of the fun. Kill the right guy, or suppress a route well enough, and you may earn your team a win.





78 FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▼ 27

Samuel: A consistently fun strategy game, *FTL* captures the feeling of being a space captain better than any other. A lot of that is tied up in the writing, which subtly portrays a rich galaxy in the throes of civil war, where slavers roam unoccupied star systems, where the bad guys are coming to get you, and where the good guys are barely holding on. I play it for at least 20 hours every year.

Tom S: There's an element of luck to the items you acquire and the events you run into, but there's always a sense that you have a chance to reach the end, even as the oxygen is draining from every compartment, and your crew is being killed by rampaging space insects.



77 THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

RELEASED 1997 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tom M: Some adventure games just don't get old, even if you know all the puzzles and jokes. Something about sword fighting with insults just doesn't lose its charm, and *Curse* is filled with so many charming moments that everyone who has played has a different one they remember fondly. It doesn't show its age nearly as much as the earlier games, and is still worth your time in today's adventure game resurgence.

76 80 DAYS

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Andy: A masterpiece of interactive fiction, this has some of the best, most evocative writing I've encountered in a game. It paints a fascinating world of mechanical curiosities and political turmoil, and every trip is different. Hero Passepartout, an unassuming French valet, grows as a character with every leg of the journey, and his complicated relationship with his master results in some great moments – particularly on

those rare occasions when the unflappable English gentleman reveals his true feelings about the trip.

Wes: I solved a murder on a passage from Japan to California. I spoke to the sentient machine powering an incredible airship. I fled from an army of automatons. Every one of these moments was conveyed through text, but the writing is so vivid, I'd count them among my most memorable game experiences in years.



75 THE STANLEY PARABLE

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 96

Phil: It's a comedy about agency. A narrator guides you through a surreal story about an office worker. At multiple points, you choose whether or not to act out the disembodied voice's instructions. Whatever you decide, jokes happen.

Samuel: Jokes, and other things so surprising I won't spoil them here. This is one of the best narrative games on the list, and for every different choice you make on a playthrough, you're rewarded.



74 NUCLEAR THRONE

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Wes: Where *Spelunky* brought deep systemic interaction to the roguelike, *Nuclear Throne* brings furious twitchy shooting married to the precision of mouse control. A few stray bullets (and there are many, many bullets in this game) will end your run, but enemies go down fast, too. The real replayability comes from a ridiculously diverse arsenal, from screwdrivers to flame shotguns, and the roster of ten-plus unique playable

characters. Where else can you play as a katana-wielding chicken or a melting pile of flesh who destroys corpses with the power of his mind?

Samuel: This roguelike shooter cements Vlambeer's place as one of PC gaming's most exciting indie developers, sporting weird and wonderful post-apocalyptic visual design. Probably the best twin-stick shooter on PC (but you're probably using a mouse, of course).

PERSONAL PICK

Tyler Wilde



LOVELY PLANET

A strange, wonderful shooter, and far more challenging than it looks. Rush through the short levels shooting every enemy and every falling bomb, making zero mistakes. Each level is a superbly designed puzzle and an infuriating FPS acrobatics course.

PERSONAL PICK

Tom Senior



THE LAST STANDALONE

This mode for *Dawn of War II: Retribution* was so good it received a spin-off release. You and a couple of friends kit out some Warhammer 40,000 heroes and face hundreds of enemies in an arena survival challenge. Victory rarely feels this heroic.

PERSONAL PICK

**Chris
Thursten**



WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

Who'd have thought *Wolfenstein* would form the basis for the freshest new FPS campaign in years. It's astonishingly loud and astonishingly violent, big and muscular and Wagnerian in both its dumbness and its surprising cleverness.

PERSONAL PICK

**James
Davenport**



VVVVVV

This side-scrolling platformer uses one button – V by default – to reverse gravity, sending Captain Viridian to the ceiling or floor in order to cross gaps and avoid death by spikes. It's a challenging, charming game that I'll never quit.



73 DON'T STARVE

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 82

Tim: In many ways this compulsive and engrossing Tim Burtonesque goth survival whimsy is a poster child for how betas and Early Access ought to work, with a long cycle of iteration based on feedback from a fanbase that instantly fell in love with the cute but gloomy art. The most recent release, *Shipwrecked*, has you hop-scotching between islands trying to scrounge resources to craft vital contraptions, beset by poop-flinging monkeys, aquatic terrors, and the ruthless march of the seasons. The joy is in getting to the point where your camp feels perfect, and you're equipped to face all the world's perils. Because that's inevitably when you really mess up.



72 RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

RELEASED 2001 LAST POSITION ▼ 68

John: Taking more than a little inspiration from Clint Eastwood's battle in *Where Eagles Dare*, this brilliant FPS throws Nazis and zombies together like salt and pepper on bratwurst. It taps into Hitler's terrifyingly real exploration of the occult, and dispatches BJ Blazkowicz to put a lid on it. It's a solid shooter, packed with hidden treasure, tongue-in-cheek gags, and a few leather-clad frauleins thrown in for good measure.



70 FINAL FANTASY IX

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Daniella: A true JRPG classic and a highlight of the *Final Fantasy* series, it finally came to PC this year, wearing a shiny HD jerkin. The backgrounds are a little shonky and showing their age, but this tale of love, war and riding airships grips you at every turn, more so than even *FF7* (yeah, I said it, fight me). Added Boosters to speed up battles or skip them keep the pace feeling modern for those playing it for the first time.

71 MECHCOMMANDER GOLD

RELEASED 1998 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Evan: In this RTS take on BattleTech you micro-manage as many as 12 mechs from an isometric view across 30 missions, developing your pilots as you accumulate equipment, gamble on risky secondary objectives, and topple angry MadCats. Some of the mission design is wonderfully tough, putting you up against tight time limits, hidden land mines, or hard-to-crack base defences. Your pilots add a

touch of colour, coming with clichéd callsigns like Scarab, Goblin, or Ronin (my favourite was the hillbilly, Rooster), each with their own voice lines and even a unique death howl should you expose them to one too many ER PPCs. *Gold* combines the *Desperate Measures* expansion pack with the original game, adding 12 missions, more equipment and mechs, as well as a tile-based level editor. Oh, and it's freeware.



69 DOOM II

RELEASED 1994 LAST POSITION ▲ 73

Chris L: I mentally swap *Doom* and *Doom II* just about every time I consider which is the better of id Software's two genre-defining first-person shooters. The original's level design is probably superior, but *Doom II* was bigger, blastier, and more ambitious. Plus, it gave us the double-barrelled super shotgun, still one of the most satisfying boomsticks in all of games. *Doom II* did something exceedingly rare: it kept

intact what we loved about the original while changing just enough to feel like its own separate experience. **Shaun:** Just like Chris, I waver between *Doom* and *Doom II* as my favourite. But when it comes to modding and level creation, *Doom II* is better because (a) it has the super bloody shotgun, (b) it has more monsters, (c) the skyboxes are better and (d) landing three rockets into a Mancubus is the best stress reliever.

68

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION ▼ 31

Steven: Blizzard's fantasy MMORPG had an enormous impact on not just the genre, but popular culture as a whole. Its influence was so widespread that there was even a time when it was cool for celebrities to talk about their characters.

World of Warcraft was so influential, it effectively killed the potential for an entire genre. Its financial success warped expectations and buried just about everything that followed in its wake. Before *World of Warcraft*, MMORPGs were unique and messy, but now they're all dying to fall in line and march to *Warcraft*'s drum.

People will fight to the death over its future, but all that serves to highlight is how, even in its old age, *WoW* still demands so much attention. Even as its subscription numbers begin to shrink and people start to lose faith, one thing's for sure: *World of Warcraft* will not go quietly into the night.

Matt: Adding *World of Warcraft* to this list is like endorsing peanut butter after a

triple bypass, but if it wasn't brilliant, I wouldn't have played it until my legs turned blue. No game has kept me as engaged in the relentless, self-defeating pursuit of *nothing* quite like this one. I spent weeks getting excited about a Paladin's hammer. I wasted a month pretending to be a highwayman in Darkshire. I created a guild named after the Teutonic Order – the Templars were already taken – despite it making shit-all sense in the context. And despite knowing that it's terrible for me, I can't hear that menu music without getting a swell of nostalgia and a creeping, inescapable desire to go back. Even after losing days, weeks and years to this monstrosity, there's still loads I don't know and things I still want to discover. Just writing this makes me want to start playing again, so I'm going to stop before I slide back into a world of herbs, auctions and grinding for mounts. Screw you, *World of Warcraft*. You're amazing and I hate you.



67 FAR CRY 2

RELEASED 2008 LAST POSITION ▲ 78

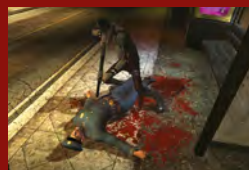
Chris L: Plenty of games succeed at making the world seem cold, but this open-world FPS is the only one that feels convincingly hot. Standing in the blistering sun near the brittle trees on the arid landscape you can almost feel the sweat trickling down your neck. The gunplay is chaotic and fun, and few shooters have felt so immersive before or since. Even fewer have been brave enough to cast the player as someone who, ultimately, isn't a hero.



66 BURNOUT: PARADISE

RELEASED 2008 LAST POSITION ● New entry

James: No arcade racing game has ever felt as freeing. It nailed precise, fast driving that gave equal rewards for first place and ten-car pileups. Paradise City is what I visualised playing with Hot Wheels as a kid, a jungle gym of huge ramps and winding highways populated with fun stuff to throw my metal body into. It allows for aimless meditative driving, intense improvisational races, and playful destruction.



65 VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION ▼ 63

Chris T: A cult nocturnal vampire adventure occupying the middle ground between a BioWare RPG and *Deus Ex*. A bit of a technical mess – you'll want the community-made patch – but it's still atmospheric and brilliantly written.

Wes: The first time I tried to play I found it impossible. It was my fault: I was playing a Malkavian, a clinically insane vampire other vampires brushed off as a nuisance. How many RPGs give you that kind of freedom?

LIFE IS STRANGE

RELEASED 2015

LAST POSITION ● New entry

Chris T: A bittersweet episodic adventure with shades of *Twin Peaks*, *Veronica Mars* and *Donnie Darko*, *Life* nonetheless has its own voice. There's a sincere, funny, and characterful heart to this tale of time, friendship and the apocalypse.

You can rewind events to undo your mistakes, which turns the trial-and-error pattern of most adventure games into an aspect of the plot itself. There are some incredibly tense set-pieces, too.

Protagonist Max and her best friend Chloe are believable leads, negotiating young-adulthood, family life, loss and friendship. In particular, it's nice to see a game put the experience of young women front and centre.

Tony: When it comes to emotional colour, most games are a five-year-old wielding fluorescent marker pens. This one is a moody teenager who's discovered pastels. The result is uneven and overwrought, but sincerely felt. It's a game of pleasantly melancholy hues: the trials of college life, the lost security of childhood, the heartache of intense adolescent relationships. It's easy to mock, but a lot harder to pull off, which is why *Life is Strange* has my respect for succeeding as far as it does.

Phil: It has a few duff moments, but what episodic game doesn't? It succeeds because of the interesting, nuanced friendship of its two central characters. You want them to succeed.

64



63 ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON 2

RELEASED 2002

LAST POSITION ● New entry

Daniella: Who knew cleaning up vomit could be this much fun? This management sim lets you control all parts of a theme park, including designing your own rollercoasters and choosing how many people you want to humiliate by dressing in Panda suits. The second game builds on everything in the first, and you can forget anything that came after – this is still the best coaster sim you can buy. Until *Planet Coaster* comes out of Early Access, that is.



62 HOMEWORLD REMASTERED

RELEASED 2015

LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tom S: One of the most beautiful and challenging RTS games ever has been adoringly remastered by Gearbox, rescuing a classic from obscurity. The singleplayer missions can be brutal for the unprepared, but they tell a powerful story of loss, recovery and revenge that's surprisingly emotional. It helps that the sight of a full fleet gliding into battle is such an incredible spectacle. Simply one of the best space opera PC games out there.

61 DIABLO II

RELEASED 2000

LAST POSITION ● New entry

Jarred: *Diablo* turned the ASCII-based, randomly generated dungeons of the old, geeky *Rogue* games into an action-packed clickfest. Watching the animations as dozens of monsters explode, searching for better loot, and levelling up have become standard fare since then. New environments and the continued story kept things interesting in this sequel, and for me it remains the high point of the series.





60 HALF-LIFE

RELEASED 1998 | LAST POSITION ▼ 43

Chris L: There's no need to simply wax nostalgic about one of the most influential and celebrated shooters of all time: *Half-Life* is still perfectly playable today. Sure, the graphics might make you blanch, but the fun is still entirely intact. The scripted set-pieces are still a joy to witness, the combat still feels frenetic and thrilling, and Gordon Freeman's transformation from oversleeping scientist to planet-saving action hero is still one of the best experiences in games.

Phil: I enjoyed the funicular sequence almost as much as I enjoyed learning that those diagonal lift things were called funiculars.



59 PILLARS OF ETERNITY

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ▼ 48

Angus: This remains the poster child for the RPG renaissance. Though *Pillars'* reams of text tend towards the flowery, they bring the sort of colour to the world that physical rendering and the fanciest 3D models can't. Nuanced party members emerging from unexpected corners make for a lively trip through a classic fantasy world. And if you get tired of roaming? The 15-level megadungeon under your keep should keep you busy.



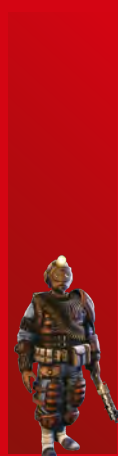
57 KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

RELEASED 2003 | LAST POSITION ● New entry

Samuel: Still a great in BioWare's oeuvre, and the best representation of the Star Wars universe in videogames. Set thousands of years before the films, this RPG explores the war between the Sith and the Republic, your place within it becoming shockingly clear over time. It's still very playable, even if it looks low-fi, and characters like assassin droid HK-47 made far worthier contributions to the canon than the prequels ever did.

58 BIOSHOCK INFINITE

RELEASED 2013 | LAST POSITION ▼ 38



Tony: This intelligent and ambitious game is many things, but one of them is simply a thumpingly good FPS. Lightning and crows stream from your fingers. Bullets and death stream from the peppermill gun of the porcelain-faced George Washington you're fighting, but that's OK because you can grab a sky-hook and race through the air in combat that is *literally on rails*. The battle on Comstock's airship is one of the most exciting,

intense and exhausting I've ever had in singleplayer.

Samuel: Never the most popular *BioShock* in this list, the dreamlike feel of *Infinite's* gorgeous environments makes for some of the most effective world building I've seen in any game. I think it's a fun shooter – I don't like that side of it as much as Tony – but I don't think anyone who enjoys games should miss getting to experience the floating city of Columbia first hand.

56 HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

RELEASED 2006 | LAST POSITION ▼ 54



Phil: There's a good chance the new, episodic *Hitman* game – simply called *Hitman* – will one day be regarded as the best. Until that happens, *Blood Money* is the finest collection of intricate stealth murder puzzles around. Do you manipulate the environment, causing your target's 'accidental' demise? Do you pose as one of their guards, and catch them with their proverbial pants down? Do you find a big gun and just

shoot everybody? All are valid solutions, although some feel more legitimate than others.

Blood Money stands out because of its levels – both in design and conception. Previous games sent Agent 47 on a scattershot world tour, but *Blood Money* is more focused, and more interesting because of it. From the suburban home of a gangster, to the White House, *Blood Money* is a subversive tour through American popular culture.

PERSONAL PICK

John Strike



BATTLEFIELD 4

With the undoubtedly broken launch now a distant memory, I'm still stuck deep in *Battlefield 4*. DICE's first-person shooter has a large and passionate community. Three years on, it's still the game I play with my friends more than anything else.

PERSONAL PICK

Tony Ellis



FAR CRY 4

It's the *Far Cry* formula, perfected. The biggest and best outposts, missions and fun things to do around every corner, but most of all, that setting: beautiful, pristine mountains looming over a fantasy Kashmir full of temples, tigers and tuk-tuks.

PERSONAL PICK

Wes Fenlon



DUNGEON OF THE ENDLESS

My favourite lazy Sunday co-op game is a bizarre hybrid of tower defence and roguelike, turn-based and real-time. It shouldn't work, but it does: each run is a balancing act of hero micro and tower building. And the pixel art is just rad.

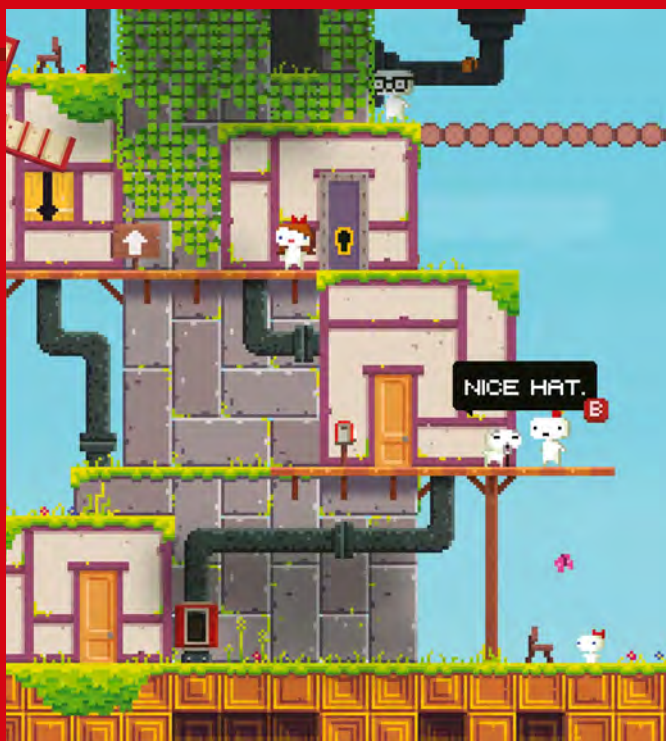
PERSONAL PICK

Chris Livingston



PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES

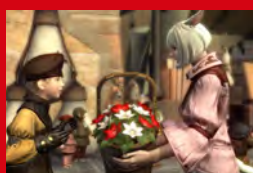
It felt like a toy at first, another cute little casual game, until it completely took over my life. Beneath the adorably designed plants and zombie jokes is an addictive and engrossing tower defence game, easy to learn and nigh-impossible to quit.



55 FEZ

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ● New entry

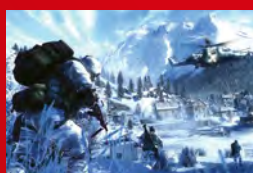
Tom M: Everything from the puzzles to the art style tricks you into thinking this is a straightforward puzzler. But that clean pixel art is dotted with complexity that makes the world of *Fez* feel alive and lived in. The puzzles and platforming are easy for those who don't want to go too deep, but ludicrously hard for the few who keep digging. It's a game where 100% completion means you aren't even halfway to finishing everything there is to do. A game that presents you with a funny looking foreign language, and then later demands you decode that language if you want everything the game has to offer. You get as much out of *Fez* as you are willing to give.



54 FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Daniella: This takes all of your favourite monsters, locations and themes from the series and puts them in a single, beautiful world to explore. I'm choosing to forget the version that launched in 2010, and only counting everything since the excellent *A Realm Reborn*. It's constantly updated so there's always something new to do, and you ride Fat Chocobos while wearing Moogle slippers. What else do you need in life?



52 BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ● New entry

John: This was the first *Battlefield* to use DICE's Frostbite engine, and it soon proved itself to be a crucial part of a winning formula. Though lacking *BF2*'s urban sprawl, the more rural areas and new Rush game mode gave way to a new wave of tactics online. It was the first *Battlefield* where destroying buildings, flattening jungles and deploying sheets of smoke really made players feel like they could re-shape each level.

53 DARKEST DUNGEON

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New entry



Evan: *Darkest Dungeon* clicked for me when I figured out I had to play it like I was a Dark Ages version of Lumbergh from Office Space. Instead of being a protective parent to the adventurers I recruited (as *XCOM* encourages, for example), I had to become the type of unfeeling boss who rolls up to his battered lackeys and says, "I know you just caught the Black Plague, but yeah, I'm gonna need you to come in on Saturday to fight a bunch

of menacing fishpeople." Unlike many other 'campaign' games, *Darkest Dungeon* punishes emotional investment in your team. It's usually in your interest to treat characters like disposable batteries, using them to earn valuable trinkets and resources to upgrade your unsettling estate, then throwing them away when they're too diseased or mentally devastated to be worth the coin it'd take to restore them.

51 LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION ▼ 35



Wes: It's still the biggest game in the world for a reason: it took the addictive ingredients of *Dota* and refined them into a purer, and mercifully simpler, game. It merely takes hundreds of hours to master instead of thousands (and yes, I'm being pretty loose with "master" here), but Riot understood which ingredients were core to the MOBA recipe and which complicated the mix. The five-man team

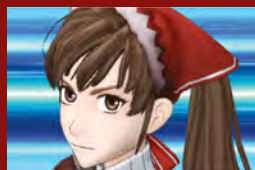
composition, the three-lane map and jungle, battles over map positioning and gank opportunities, item progression and character roles: *LoL* honed in on these things and made them fun to play. It may not have the touch of spice added by couriers and denying and the other dizzying layers of strategic depth you'll find in *Dota 2*, but it's still an immensely satisfying competitive strategy game to devote mind and reflexes to.

MAX PAYNE

RELEASED 2001 LAST POSITION ▲ 69

Samuel: The *Payne* games hold up because developers don't make shooters like that any more. It's all cover shooting these days, but bullet time offers an empowering experience like nothing else – *Max Payne* was largely responsible for that phenomenon and no other game topped it. It still feels sweet to land headshots with dual berettas, and the shlocky, fourth wall-shattering noir storyline is a lot of fun. Its best-remembered level is the nightmare sequence where Max follows the trail of blood and screams to his dead wife and child, but the whole story is full of interesting twists and turns, depicted through gorgeous comic book panels. The sequel is fantastic, too. How about a fourth entry that dials up the noir again?

50



49 VALKYRIA CHRONICLES

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tom M: This is probably one of the most 'PC' JRPGs in existence. It's a strategy game at heart, a peculiar blend of turn-based tactics and pseudo-realtime combat set in an alternate reality WWII. Nothing about the themes and genres it combines should work on paper, but the concoction that resulted is one of the most compelling and unique tactics games ever made. It took six years to make it to PC, but it was worth the wait.



48 MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

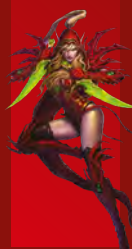
RELEASED 2006 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Matt: I've spent thousands of hours wrestling with France, unifying Spain and healing the Byzantine Empire, but *Medieval II* still feels full of surprises. Unlike later *Total Wars*, it's alive with accidental stories. Nothing feels forced. I can go back to a save I haven't played for years, look over the map and remember every charmless princess and useless prince. It's history brought to life, with the bonus of being able to change the bits I hate.

47 HEARTHSTONE

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▼ 25

Tim: *Hearthstone* remains in a strange place: hugely popular to watch and play, yet hardly taken seriously by anyone, including some of the pros who play it competitively. Nonetheless, as seen with *Overwatch*, no developer does polish quite like Blizzard, so it'll be fascinating to see whether *Gwent* or *The Elder Scrolls: Legends*, both of which come with built-in fanbases, are able to seriously challenge the mad RNG king.





46 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION ▼ 26

Samuel: Oh thank God, a less controversial *Dragon Age* game. This bridges two generations of BioWare RPG, and in many ways is the most complete game the studio has made, offering an all-encompassing vision of Thedas and its inhabitants. The deep, strategy-focused combat system is fantastic, too.

Chris T: A big comforting fantasy novel of a game. If *Dragon Age: Origins* had a smell, it would smell like old library books.



45 GUILD WARS 2

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▲ 47

Phil: You can't fault it for its generosity. It's a free-to-play MMORPG with no subscription options, funded by its paid expansion and a microtransaction store that avoids exploitation. It offers a huge, beautiful RPG world, a fast, responsive combat system, and event chains that encourage the formation of ad hoc groups. *Guild Wars 2* takes the restrictions once thought inherent to the MMO genre and removes them.



44 THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

RELEASED 2002 LAST POSITION ▲ 60

Steven: *Morrowind* will always be my favourite *Elder Scrolls* – even if it hasn't aged well. If there's one key aspect of this open-world RPG that continues to set it above all others, it's that Morrowind's island of Vvardenfell is a fantastically alien landscape I never want to leave.

Matt: Everyone remembers their first *Elder Scrolls* game, and *Morrowind* still stands out for me as a bold, open, alien experience, with the best main quest.

ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 45

Evan: I've loved watching *Arma* mature from *Operation Flashpoint* to become one of the most popular games on Steam today. Bohemia's milsim platform unifies many of the things we consider to be at the heart of PC gaming: a play-how-you-want philosophy, ridiculous fidelity and scale, passionate player communities, huge modding potential, and software that pushes the limits of your CPU and GPU. All that congeals in an experience that's as serious and cinematic or silly and light as you want it to be, depending on who you're playing with and what scenario you've loaded up.

Some of *Arma*'s maps, like Chernarus, are based on satellite-

modelled terrain. That authenticity lends *Arma* this rare feeling of natural beauty, and it makes all the difference when you're double-timing it to link back up with your squad, falling from a smoking helicopter, or idling behind a rock for ten minutes waiting to ambush a convoy.

Phil: I love the Zeus mode, which lets a player build multiplayer scenarios on the fly – placing vehicles, soldiers and buildings in response to the successes and failures of the team below. We played it in the office, with Andy as our omnipotent overlord, and I got that same feeling of malevolent intent as from *Left 4 Dead*'s AI director. Only worse, because it was Andy.



43



42 TERRARIA

RELEASED 2011 | LAST POSITION ▲ 88

Daniella: Usually lumped together with *Minecraft*, it's often dismissed as the 'lesser' world-building game. By idiots. The 2D perspective and pixelation takes a little getting used to, but it's a lot more adventurous than its famous cousin, with a greater range of biomes to explore, bosses to fight, and oddities to discover. Here the zombies wear anoraks when it rains, flying fish are angry with you, and your ultimate aim is to fight a Lovecraftian god.

Tom M: Five years later, they're still updating *Terraria*. Despite it being at least three times as big as on the day it launched, the developer has never sold DLC or charged for a content patch.



41 BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

RELEASED 2000 | LAST POSITION ▼ 30

Andy: I love it when games make you feel like a stranger in a strange land, and *BGII* does this brilliantly. Transplanting the hero to Amn against their will is a brilliant device to change the setting, and it's one of the most vibrant, interesting places I've explored in an RPG – particularly the giant city of Athkatla. It's a huge game, with complex characters, hundreds of hours of questing, and a deep turn-based combat system.



39 HER STORY

RELEASED 2015 | LAST POSITION ● New entry

Andy: This bold narrative experiment tells its tale as only a videogame could, letting you piece the mystery together in any order by searching a database of video clips. Non-linear, it has all the drama of the best scripted stories.

James: One hour in, my desk was a mess of notebook papers on which I'd scrawled keywords and conspiracy theories. It turned Googling into an even more unsettling game than before.

40 C&C: RED ALERT

RELEASED 1996 | LAST POSITION ● New entry

Tyler: This feels like it was pulled from my childhood imagination – or maybe it just influenced my imagination. It's clean and readable, like the maps I'd draw on grid paper with forested blobs, rivers, and just enough of a sense of perspective to notate terraced cliff edges. Its weapons are the cool, riveted metal machines in my illustrated military history books, with some Tesla coils bolted on. It's a lattice of simple strengths

and weaknesses – infantry against armour, ground against air against sea – more concerned with nailing the right feeling than being meticulously balanced. On top of that, it's easily moddable – `rules.ini` is still my favourite file in existence.

Samuel: It has a kind of magic to me, particularly its more chaotic skirmish mode and laughable lack of balance. Getting this and the expansions was a highlight of my young life.

38 COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

RELEASED 2012 | LAST POSITION ▼ 20

Evan: Some of *CS:GO*'s individual techniques have more depth than entire FPSes. The AWP isn't a sniper rifle, it's a whole discipline composed of dozens of smaller manoeuvres like flicking, noscoping, passive sniping, and crouch-peeking. You can spend a whole evening practising pop flashes, or working on your spread control with the AK, or your retake tactics for bomb site

B on `de_dust2`. Or you can skip all that homework and play a perfectly satisfying, 12-on-12 casual match with weapons that've had 15 years to mature.

Steven: I'll never forget the adrenaline rush of my first kill in *Counter-Strike 1.5*. *CS:GO* carries that tradition forward, demanding more but, in return, offering an experience I'm convinced is immune to ageing.

PERSONAL PICK

Andy Kelly



L.A. NOIRE

Rockstar's homage to film noir is one of the best period pieces on PC. Its recreation of 1940s Los Angeles is painstaking, and wandering the streets as Cole Phelps feels like stepping back in time. It's more linear than it lets on, but the cases are intriguing and the acting superb.

PERSONAL PICK

Shaun Prescott



ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

Survival games are like pulp novels: there are hundreds of them, they all play kinda the same, and most of them are forgettable. *ARK* is different, because you can (a) poop, and then collect your poop and (b) you can tame and ride dinosaurs. It's the small things.

PERSONAL PICK

Jarred Walton



HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC III

It got its claws into me back in my college days, and my grades paid the price. Who can forget playing Sandro the necromancer wearing the Cloak of the Undead King, leading an army built on the husks of his foes?

PERSONAL PICK

Angus Morrison



SUNLESS SEA

It's the perfect game for a long voyage. Its sea of shifting landmarks, twisted tales and unforgiving survival mechanics can be exhausting in the course of extended play, but away from home, on a low-power PC, its dark miscellany comes into its own.



37 FALLOUT 4

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Jarred: If I had my way, every *Fallout* and *Wasteland* game would go on this list, but the latest release can count for all of them. Open-world RPG action with fun sidequests and hours upon hours of entertainment, and workshops enabling you to upgrade your equipment. Add mods and you can kiss your social life goodbye. It's sort of like an MMO, but without all that 'other people' nonsense, and that's the way I like my gaming.

Samuel: This lacked the wow factor of a decayed world that *Fallout 3* had, but sidequests like The Silver Shroud demonstrated Bethesda was firing on all cylinders when it came to quest design. Boston is an impressive world, too.



36 STARCRAFT II: LEGACY OF THE VOID

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Jarred: This might seem like sacrilege, but I don't care about multiplayer – arguably the biggest draw of the *StarCraft* series. I'm here for the story, and like a good book series that leaves you saddened when you finally turn the last page, *Legacy of the Void* wraps up the storyline we've been following for decades. *StarCraft II* is equal parts fun, stress, excitement, and silliness rolled into a tasty whole.



34 PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 LAST POSITION ▼16

Tony: Superficially an RPG in the pre-rendered mould, this is a journey to an exotic world and a whole different way of doing the genre. You explore it mainly through dialogue, and you can lose yourself in the labyrinthine conversation trees of other people's lives. But it all comes back to your own character, the terrible things you've done, and that question: "What can change the nature of a man?"

35 STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

RELEASED 2009 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Chris L: Following the glitchy brilliance of *Shadow of Chernobyl* and its disappointing prequel *Clear Sky*, the third entry in the series wound up being the best. It perfectly recaptured the brutal and unforgiving atmosphere of the Zone from the original while improving on the AI, world, and action. There are plenty of FPS horror games, but none quite so tense, so terrifying, and so

utterly drenched in dread as *Call of Pripjat*.

Steven: *Stalker's* realisation of ruined Pripjat is so vivid that I can close my eyes and picture it perfectly in all its grim, haunting glory. There's a pervasive sense of wrongness that I can't look away from. Like watching a natural disaster on the news, all I can do is shake my head and press on, deeper into the Zone.



33 RESIDENT EVIL 4

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▲53

James: It took me nine months to finish *Resident Evil 4*. I was expecting tense combat and B-grade horror going in, but when I entered the first village, heard the chainsaw rev up, and the villagers started pouring out of every window and doorway, I paused the game and went on a walk. It was huge departure from the typical slow burn of survival horror, so overwhelming I could only play the game in short bursts. No game has

made me feel as small and ill-prepared as often as *Resident Evil 4*.

Samuel: It's the pacing and variety of the game that I love. It's non-stop excitement for about 16-18 hours, taking you from that opening village to a gigantic castle full of impossible contraptions and eventually, an exploding island. The first time through, I never saw any of those set-pieces coming. It's a thrillride, and at its best on PC.





31 CRUSADER KINGS II

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▼ 13

Chris L: It's a grand strategy game that also happens to be one of the most intensely personal games ever made. You send armies marching across the globe, but you also have to deal with your goddamn family. It's like they squashed *The Sims* inside *Civ*, and it works perfectly.

Phil: By building a strategy game around people – their plans, triumphs, flaws and failures – Paradox has made a historical soap opera that gives you the starring role.



30 MOUNT & BLADE: WARBAND

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Steven: A single paragraph will never be enough to convey all the excellence packed inside this endearing medieval nobility simulator. It's the kind of robust RPG you could lose months of your life to in a bid to become king. Or maybe I'll just be a humble merchant instead. And if you ever tire of the singleplayer, you can go online and play in epic multiplayer siege battles, manning the walls against a real-world onslaught.



29 THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

RELEASED 2006 LAST POSITION ▲ 66

Chris L: The freedom to go anywhere, do anything, and be anyone has rarely been captured as well as it has in *Oblivion*. It's a game happy to offer you dozens of different adventures, yet it doesn't give a damn if you actually undertake them.

Angus: It's great on account of its Britishness. Everything seems prim, pastoral and proper in the Imperial heartlands. Then you stumble upon a Lovecraftian cult in the wilderness.

32 DIABLO III

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▲ 79

Tom S: Somehow this RPG about hitting millions of monsters doesn't grow old. The game has been in a holding pattern this year, but a couple of new zones and enemies are all the incentive I needed to roll a new hero and violently convert the forces of Hell into delicious XP. Endless glittering loot drops complete the engrossing kill-loot-level loop, and seasonal rewards provide moreish ongoing incentives. This is the action-RPG as comfort food, and after years of work, the recipe has reached perfect balance. Please make more, Blizzard.

Steven: I hate to be the one to say it, but there's little comforting about permanently losing a hardcore character because of an unfortunately placed wall and a sweeping laser. There's only the gaping emptiness in realising hours of my life turned to dust. I still can't bring myself to roll another witch doctor.

Tim: I used to treat *Diablo III* like a comforting bath, only instead of bubbles I would sink into a froth of giant numbers, an iPlayer police procedural on one monitor, an AoE spell-spamming, Excel aneurysm on the other. Man, I miss it. It's like a fantasy-themed Lazer Floyd show for accountants. I was also one of the scumbags who enjoyed the Auction House, because it put cool gear within range of small IRL spend. Obviously I appreciate the loot system is much more sensible now, and the game has improved immeasurably since that messy launch, but I haven't found time to go back. Perhaps I will, but... Oh, there's the new *Deus Ex*.

Phil: I love the Wizard's Disintegrate spell. It's a massive, piercing laser that, true to name, makes just about everything disintegrate into a fine red mist. It's the best.

28

PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011

LAST POSITION ▼ 14

Tim: I firmly maintain *Portal 2* is best played with another person, taking it in turns at each puzzle until one of you cracks it. Partly to prevent frustration when you get spatially snowblind, but more because each section spits out so many wonderful “Ooh, look what the clever bastards have done here” moments that you instantly want to share. Also, that one of best and funniest games on PC is fundamentally about physics and geometry is, well, perfect.

Andy: Everything is pitch perfect. The puzzle design, the art, the music, the voice acting, the humour. Your journey through the history of Aperture Science is both funny and surprisingly moving.

Samuel: Stephen Merchant and JK Simmons were a vital part of *Portal 2*'s success when it came to storytelling.

Phil: I think *Portal* has the better, tighter singleplayer story, but *Portal 2* has some great extras. Co-op is frequently hilarious, especially if you play with a jerk. The thousands of mods and user-made maps are just the icing on a very real cake.



27 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

RELEASED 2015

LAST POSITION ● New entry

Shaun: Modern shooters punish you for staying still, for being careful, for stopping to take a breath. These things are fundamental to how *Siege* is played. Ubisoft's destruction engine ensures that surprises continue nearly a year later.

Evan: *Siege* is surprisingly intimate. You get to know your opponent over a series of rounds on attack and defence, spying on them through surveillance cameras and wheeled drones.

26 CIVILIZATION V

RELEASED 2010

LAST POSITION ▲ 37

Tyler: I love the early game, when I'm plotting my ideal civilisation, imagining my mining town connected to my seaside capital connected to my island shipyard. And then *Civ* gets in the way with barbarians and encroaching territories, and so begins ten hours of warring and rebuilding.

Tom M: It's exciting and dangerous, like a race against invisible opponents and a clock you can't see. When they finally fade into view, the real game begins.



25 LEFT 4 DEAD 2

RELEASED 2009

LAST POSITION ▲ 95

Evan: If you haven't dug into *L4D2*'s ocean of player-created campaigns, models, and weirdness, you're missing out on some of the best mods of the decade. Download *GoldenEye 4 Dead*, *Questionable Ethics*, the *Silent Hill* remake, or the re-creation of *Helm's Deep*, and thank me later.

Wes: It's the best platform for a co-op shooter ever: Valve and the community built years' worth of great stuff to play casually or competitively with friends.



24 OVERWATCH

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Chris T: Its success is the result of a million small but brilliant decisions. As with *World of Warcraft* a decade ago, they've taken a genre – in this case the online class-based FPS – and made its qualities accessible to a much bigger audience. And in doing so, they've hit upon innovations that competitors will be borrowing for years to come.

Angus: You spawn, shoot – usually not well enough – die, and respawn. On the whole, I am sick of this loop, but somehow *Overwatch* has swept away years of genre fatigue. It might be the insane variety its characters bring to the 'shoot' phase. Or it could be the Blizzard palette saturating my eyes.



23 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▲ 28

Tom M: The freedom of choice of this RPG is something I can't even begin to comprehend. You can kill anyone you want and the game keeps going. You can steal anything not bolted down, which for most people meant a whole lot of paintings. You can make a choice with one character, then decide your other character disagrees. I spent 80 hours beating *Divinity*, and plan to put another 80 into the *Enhanced Edition*.



21 DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION ▲ 32

Tom S: Soft synths, a forest of glowing skyscrapers at night, stylish technology, beautiful ceilings – *Human Revolution* has everything a cyberpunk fan could want from a PC game. It's also a smart immersive sim that blends cover-shooting, conversation and hub exploration into a brooding, violent thriller. When the VTOL hurtles towards a new city and the music picks up, I get tingles every time.



20 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007 LAST POSITION ▼ 4

Phil: Not as new or flashy as *Overwatch*, but age has its benefit. What other class-based shooter has such a breadth of stuff to do? You have the many, many maps, the library of weapons, and modes ranging from co-op robot-smashing to experimental grappling hooks. *TF2*'s history is found in dialogue, across battlegrounds, and in Valve's hilarious comics and short films. Also, and this is key, it's still a really good multiplayer game.

Evan: *TF2* struck, and continues to strike, a perfect balance between being an FPS with great depth within each of its nine, ever-evolving roles, and a game that you could hang out in comfortably for hours at a time, casually catching up with friends as you plotted your next Kritzkrieg. *Overwatch*'s six-on-six, short-round intensity can't give you that. It's the first multiplayer game to have cohesive, lovable lore.

PERSONAL PICK

Tom Marks



THE WITNESS

Even while it's slowly teaching you how to play, it doesn't really tell you what the game is actually about. The puzzles can be challenging, but learning how to understand them – or even discovering they exist at all – can be even harder. It's a gorgeous world filled with secrets.

PERSONAL PICK

Steven Messner



SOMA

It uses its isolating underwater setting to set up one of the most poignant sci-fi stories I've ever played. If there's one thing that amazes me about it, it's that in a deep sea lab populated by machines, I've never been more painfully aware of what it means to be human.

PERSONAL PICK

Daniella Lucas



TALES OF ZESTIRIA

It's not a very modern or great JRPG, but its likeable cast, bright art style and predictable plot twists are comforting. It doesn't compare to the great *Final Fantasy* titles, but sometimes you just want to smash up monsters in a pretty world.

PERSONAL PICK

Matt Elliott



LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

I shouldn't love a game that makes me eat snail meat in a wet dungeon, but by God, I do. This tile-stepping, nonsensical RPG discards every principle of modern game design except handsomely-rendered slabs. Oddly, that's what makes it feel fresh.



19 XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Chris T: The gradual reinvention of this sci-fi strategy series took some big strides here, from the inverted setting (you're invading the world to free it, rather than freeing the world from invaders) to the nitty-gritty of class balance and mission design. It's let down a little by a weak conclusion, but there are many brilliant successes (and terrible tragedies) to be enjoyed on the way.

Tom S: It's an extremely strong survival game that masterfully applies pressure for the majority of the campaign, successfully expanding on Firaxis's 2012 reboot of the series. Breaking stealth to initiate a chain reaction of offensive abilities feels amazing every time.



18 MASS EFFECT

RELEASED 2008 LAST POSITION ▲ 49

Chris T: It's not an overstatement to say that *Mass Effect* overturned two genres at the same time. Thanks to BioWare's sci-fi epic, every action game is now an RPG and every RPG is now an action game. The original is a classic for its music, big ideas, and its phenomenal final act – a series of well-orchestrated crescendos the sequels failed to match. As the series prepares for its return next year, this is well worth revisiting.

17 BIOSHOCK

RELEASED 2007 LAST POSITION ▼ 3

Tim: It's testament to *BioShock*'s eerie sense of discovery, and the lasting impact of its big reveals and ambiguity, that few first-person games since have left anything like the same impression, which perhaps partly explains Irrational's own eventual disintegration. How do you top that first Little Sister choice anyway?

Chris L: It combined so many things so well: horror, action, exploration, and story, not to mention giving

us so many different options for combat and character building. Rapture remains one of the most memorable and intriguing locations in games. Shame about the water damage.

Andy: The descent into Rapture is unforgettable, the music swelling as Ryan's introduction video slides away to reveal the city in all its eerie, ominous glory. The ecosystem and the variety of ways to battle its residents make this one of PC's smartest shooters.



16 ALIEN: ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 LAST POSITION ▲ 19

Andy: The retro-futuristic aesthetic gives it a brilliantly unique visual identity. The fiendish intelligence of the alien and the oppressive atmosphere make it one of the most effective horror experiences.

Angus: The horror starts at the loading screen: the tiny Sevastopol Station hanging in the blackness of space, dwarfed by a gas giant. It epitomises the old line that in space, no one can hear you scream. That won't stop you though.

15 SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 24

Wes: Devote months to mastering its platforming physics, its many moving parts and many secrets, and you're only left with a deeper appreciation for how everything interlocks. Understanding how a random jungle enemy can wander into a shop, pick up a boomerang, and trigger a shopkeeper's rage doesn't stop those kinds of interactions from being endlessly entertaining.

Shaun: I've died over 3,000 times but I've only

completed the game twice, but I don't really play *Spelunky* to beat it. I play it for the moments Wes describes, to witness its countless simple variables interact in funny and often enlightening ways.

Phil: *Spelunky* mitigates its randomness through its many possible objectives. Do you aim for Olmec, for the City of Gold, or just one of Tunnel Man's stupid requests? There are hundreds of smaller successes along the way.



EVE ONLINE

RELEASED 2003 LAST POSITION ▲ 26

Tyler: *EVE* is the ultimate social sandbox, which is why more people care about it than actually play it. It's the ongoing story of real struggles and losses, pirates who build giant citadels on the far side of wormholes, saboteurs and double agents, wars that span months and grudges that span years. It's a political, economic, warfare sim that remains unmatched in its breadth and drama.

Chris T: Very few games create history. There are record-breaking success stories, certainly, and someone will one day write a history of esports – but never in the sense that *EVE* creates history. This impenetrable space politics sim has seen friendships turn into alliances, rivalries turn into year-long wars featuring thousands of players. *EVE* is important because success and failure in *EVE* matters in a way that it simply doesn't in other games: first in the world

to build a Titan, or one of the new Citadels? That's an astonishing feat of planning, logistics, personnel management and spycraft that can't be replicated by just any player. It's this that makes *EVE* so impenetrable, but also why it's important that it exists.

Steven: I've never felt more morally conflicted by a videogame than *EVE Online*. Watching the wreckage of a lowly mining barge drifting in space while its pilot sits in his escape pod, helplessly captured by my warp disruptor. He begs me to let him go. It's in that moment of his desperation that a tiny drop of humanity bleeds through the blackness of the virtual galaxy around me, and I can't help but feel a sting of guilt. Somewhere, on the other side of my computer screen, someone is angry and hurt because of something I did, and I can't get that thought out of my head.



13 DEUS EX

RELEASED 2000 LAST POSITION ▼ 8

Tony: Within the boundaries of its huge maps, this untidy and increasingly ugly cyberpunk adventure let me go anywhere and try anything. The modern prequels look prettier, but they compartmentalise their freedom into little boxes.

Phil: *Deus Ex*'s freedom applies to the story too, rewarding you for paying attention and not simply accepting what you're told. It's still the most immersive of the immersive sims.



12 DOTA 2

RELEASED 2013 LAST POSITION ▲ 18

Chris: An astonishingly deep team-based action-strategy-RPG *thing* that has become a secret language for hundreds of thousands of players. *Dota 2* will always repel a certain number of people who try it – God knows I'm never getting the PCG team to try it again – but it remains one of the deepest and most gratifying competitive experiences you can have. Every other MOBA is a paddling pool: *Dota 2* is an ocean.



11 KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ▲ 17

Phil: Space travel is predicated on complicated equations, technological advancement and brave, hardy astronauts. Not here, though, where space travel requires trial-by-error tinkering and green imbeciles. The equations are accurately modelled, but *Kerbal*'s success is that it gives you the freedom to learn from your own mistakes. You build a rocket, fly it, and then build a better rocket that's less likely to spin out and explode.

14

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM 10

RELEASED 2011 LAST POSITION ▼ 5

Tony: *Scrolls* games free you to RPG how you want, where you want, in a vast open world full of fantasy quests. I love *Oblivion*, but *Skyrim* did it all over again in a place that felt more original, lived-in and romantic.

Tim: I loved *Skyrim* so much that I spent an entire Christmas break grinding my enchanting, alchemy and smithing until I was able to craft a 350-damage Daedric War Axe with which to one-shot every single endgame monster, including the dragons. Still the very best of times.

Andy: I'll never forget the first time I emerged from that dingy cave into the vast, snow-covered expanse of *Skyrim*. There are better RPGs on PC, but that feeling of going where you want, shaping your own destiny, is what sets *The Elder Scrolls* apart. I revisited the game recently to celebrate its fifth birthday, and that exhilarating feeling of freedom was just as powerful.



9 GTA V

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ▼ 5

Andy: Los Santos is what happens when you pour all the money in the world into an open-world game. *GTA V*'s sun-soaked playground is one of the most amazing constructions on PC. A joyous, anarchic sandbox filled with fun things to do – and then you leave the city limits and find a vast expanse of countryside.

Tony: Wherever you go, a designer has been there first and left a vulgar garden gnome for you to discover or a convenient gap in the fence, a flashy car for you to steal or a backpacker to punch. It's the richest, most vibrant world in gaming.

Phil: It's one of my favourite games, and the reason is the online heists, which have led to some of my favourite moments in any action game. It's a guaranteed great time, whether you're rescuing your team from a police assault, or just cruising around in a convoy, trying to find trouble. It's *GTA*'s hilarious, chaotic action, but amplified because of friends.

Samuel: Agreed. *GTA Online* has deservedly taken on a life of its own.



8 ROCKET LEAGUE

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Samuel: A continued hit on PC, and deservedly so. The most immediately fun multiplayer game ever made, in my opinion. Within seconds you're out of the menu and into a game. Rocket cars and football are a winning combination, and scoring a goal in *Rocket League* offers a high that no other game can provide.

James: Last year, it was car soccer and hockey. This year, car basketball. Psyonix made a game – no, a platform in which they practise the inevitable: a future in which all sports are played with cars.

7 PORTAL

RELEASED 2007 LAST POSITION ▲ 9

Chris L: It could have had no story to it, no mystery, no humour, and it still would have been a fantastic first-person puzzle game. As we played, though, not only did we love the mind- and space-bending puzzles but we also discovered one of the most entertaining antagonists of all time, and a deeper history that was delightfully carried through to *Portal 2*.

Tom S: It had the courage to be short before games were allowed to be short. Games are still padded out and bloated with tertiary collecting systems, crafting systems and the odd duff mission. *Portal* is pure and refined. Every chamber has a purpose: to teach you something, or to give you the chance to play with the lessons you've learned. This dedication to perfection makes *Portal* a huge success. GLaDOS would be proud.

Angus: *Portal* is over before you know what's hit you. And then, after that brief bombardment with the driest wit and blackest humour any game has to offer, the credits roll to That Song. They say good comedy lies in subverting expectations, and I'll wager that nobody expected a musical finale on the tail end of a puzzle game about quantum physics.

James: The only thing that hasn't lasted is the cake jokes.



6 METAL GEAR SOLID V

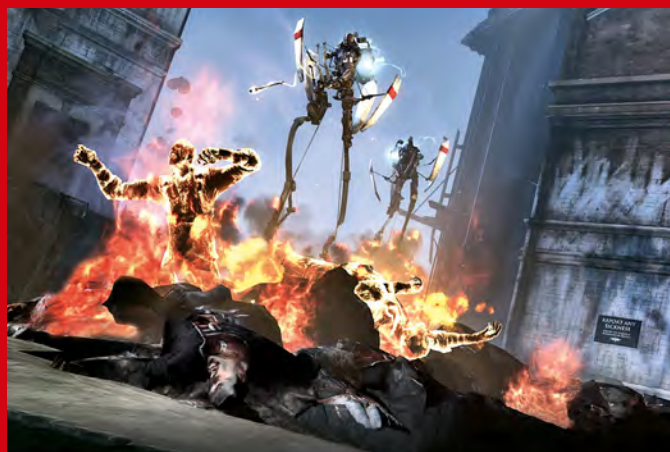
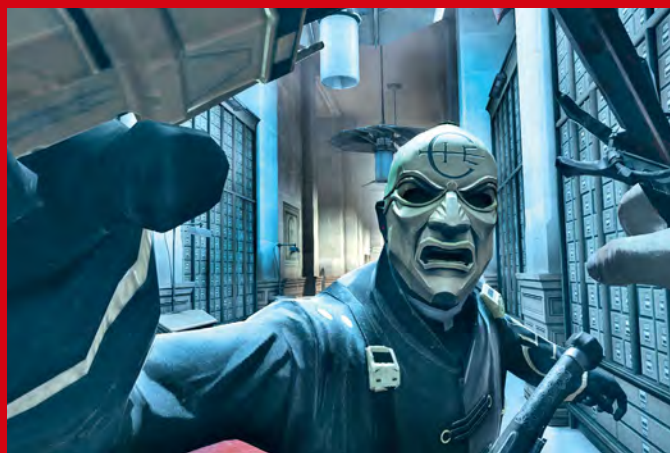
RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION ● New entry

Samuel: Whether you want to sneak through a level, or call in an airstrike as your dog, wearing goggles, is knifing bastards, while your attack chopper blares out Friday I'm In Love, this is a riot of your own making. The first proper *Metal Gear* to appear on PC in years, and a perfect match for an audience of players who have a history with *Deus Ex* and *Far Cry*.

Tim: It's unfashionable to admit, but emergent shenanigans aside, what I liked most about *MGS V* was its dual function as a collection manager for really cool modular weapons, and a balloon-based mercenary abduction simulator. I am unwell. But happy. "Oooh, an S++"

Tony: It's one of the most freeform games ever created, and yet every sortie I make in every mission plays like it was scripted down to the last incident by Hollywood screenwriters. I have so many choices of weapon, timing and approach, and yet whichever I pick it's *always* the best, every time. How do they do that?

Phil: I like the dog. He's a good boy.



5 DISHONORED

RELEASED 2012 LAST POSITION ▲ 6

Tim: By the time *Dishonored 2* arrives, the gap between it and the original will have been four years. Significantly, the first game – with its Victorian punk art style and dizzying, murderous use of magic-juiced locomotion – has barely faded in the memory at all. Perhaps an Olympic wait is perfect between installments when it comes to the really special games.

Chris L: It took a few playthroughs to discover just how excellent the level design really was. To infiltrate the same locations repeatedly, each time with different powers and approaches, and still feel like each level was designed perfectly for how you've chosen to play. Amazing.

Samuel: *Dishonored* is a game you can play entirely in stealth, but if

you choose not to, every interaction, from firing a gun to throwing a grenade at a tallboy, feels better than the combat in any other immersive sim.

Lady Boyle's Last Party is rightly considered the game's triumph – the detail in that one level alone is extraordinary.

Chris T: It isn't really steampunk (thankfully) but it is a beautiful piece of clockwork: each level a meticulously designed device there for you to break apart and put back together according to your own design.

Normally, your design is to stab people. However, the brilliance of the game is the freedom it gives you to tell your own story, whether that means following one of the pre-planned nonlethal options or, I don't know, feeding half a town full of people to plague rats.



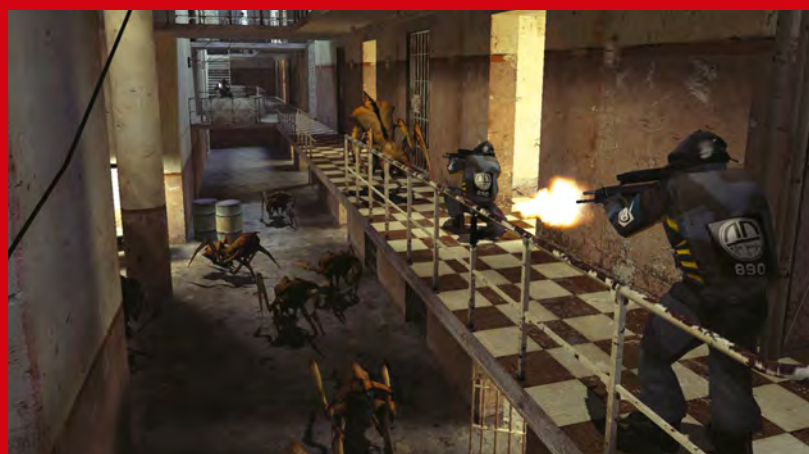
4 MASS EFFECT 2

RELEASED 2010 LAST POSITION ▼2

Samuel: *ME2* brought more action-oriented combat to the series, which I preferred. Also, removing the Mako allowed them to focus on telling compelling stories in this sci-fi universe. It starts with the Normandy blowing up, before putting Shepard in league with a potential enemy. I found that way more exciting than the Chosen One scenario of the first game, although the whole trilogy is great. It's the party and their respective loyalty quests that clinch it for me, particularly Thane's, as well as the daunting notion that the lives of these characters you care so deeply about are in your hands.

Tim: The immediate build up to and execution of the climactic suicide mission is probably my single favourite piece of game design. I've never wanted to not fuck up quite so badly.

Andy: It's the most I've ever been invested in a game story. After getting to know and love the crew of the Normandy, the suicide mission – in which any of them could die – became a genuine ordeal.



3 HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 LAST POSITION ▼1

Chris L: We were given a new engine, a new setting, a new world, and yet it was still *Half-Life*. It's a linear shooter that never felt like a hand was pushing you down a tunnel, a game that taught you how to play it without you even realising it, and a world full of detail and environmental storytelling to absorb.

Jarred: The gravity gun and physics changed the way we looked at gaming. *HL2* combined a great story with excellent pacing, then sprinkled in a variety of environments, weapons, and enemies to keep things interesting. And who could forget Ravenholm?

Andy: Valve got so good at making FPSes, it's devastating they haven't developed one in almost a decade. *HL2* remains one of the best, with tight level design, creative use

of physics, and characters you care about.

Phil: There are standout moments, but *Half-Life 2*'s great success is its variety and balance. The pacing is masterful, mixing up the action with expertly judged downtime designed to build back the tension. Each chapter tries something new, and ideas that could underpin an entire game are dropped in favour of the next experiment. It's that constant reinvention that makes *Half-Life 2* so good even now, 12 years later.

Tom M: The linearity is a big reason it continues to stick out from the crowd, especially among today's huge open-world games. Ultimately, you are being funnelled down a single path, pushed through a series of thoughtfully crafted scenarios. But you never feel like you're on rails.



2

DARK SOULS

RELEASED 2012

LAST POSITION 57

Wes: *Dark Souls* redefined action-RPGs in a flash by proving that opaque storytelling and punishing difficulty can sell just as well as the rollercoaster set-pieces of so many other action games. More importantly, choosing to meet its challenge pulls you deeper and deeper into its masterful design: a labyrinthine 3D world, NPCs and bosses with fascinating stories only discovered with study and scrutiny, combat that rewards patience and experimentation. It has rough edges, but those just give you more ways to exploit the game.

Shaun: I've played, completed and forgotten hundreds of games, but finishing this one feels like a true milestone in my life. I can remember how I felt when I started it (sceptical, noncommittal), how I felt when I was playing it (hopelessly absorbed and addicted) and how I felt when I finished it (scared that I'd never want to play

another videogame). It's not often that game enthusiasts have new formative experiences during adulthood, but *Dark Souls* helped me feel wonder and fear again, arriving at a time when big budget videogames weren't as appealing to me as they once were.

James: *Dark Souls* is the rare game made of clear rules without (too much) compromise, working in unison with an incredibly cohesive art direction that doesn't reach beyond the limits of the hardware it was developed for. In 20 years, it will play as good as it always has, an artefact we'll revere until the fire fades. The third game is a refinement of a lot of the first's ideas, but I'm always surprised at how good the original still feels to play.

Angus: Set aside all debate about difficulty, mystery and environmental storytelling for a second. There's a reason *Dark Souls* stands among the top

PC games. We clamoured for a Windows version for ages before Bandai Namco acquiesced – and released a truly vile port. Modding that mess into a state that let its inherent brilliance shine is a tale of true PC gaming chutzpah.

Tom S: *Dark Souls'* influence is still being felt throughout the games industry. Its pioneering multiplayer features are gradually being appropriated by games such as *Watch Dogs*, and the nuanced environmental storytelling techniques will be the envy of many designers. It's a genuine design landmark, building on From's previous games to deliver a sensational world. I love *Dark Souls'* combat, but its enduring feature will surely be Lordran itself, a tall, twisting, interlocking labyrinth, masterfully designed. For players who have put hundreds of hours into mastering *Dark Souls*, Anor Londo, Darkroot and Firelink Shrine will never be forgotten.

1



THE WITCHER 3

RELEASED 2015 LAST POSITION 41

Andy: It mixes familiar high fantasy with Eastern European folklore to brilliant effect. Confident writing, a beautiful setting that feels rich with history and culture, and some of the best quests ever written (particularly 'Family Matters') make it one of the finest RPGs on PC. And when you're finished with the main game, the sublime *Blood and Wine* expansion is waiting for you. Roleplaying doesn't get much better.

Phil: Many RPG towns feel like set dressing for the main character's story. In *The Witcher 3*, they feel like places. Take the city of Novigrad. It has history, intrigue and politics, and Geralt is only a small part of its overall timeline. This is an old world, and it would exist without the White Wolf's meddling, albeit in an even more harrowing, monster-ridden state. That's great world design, especially as *The Witcher 3* isn't bogged down with lore. Sure, it can be confusing as you're introduced to new characters, places and concepts. But it also puts the focus on something more interesting: people, and the emotions that drive them. It's also got the best minigame of any open-world game. Gwent is for life.

Tom S: I'm not a fan of the combat and your trusty horse isn't built to handle the complex creases of the terrain. Fortunately these problems can be avoided by shifting down to easier difficulties and running everywhere (Geralt can run really fast). Then you're free to start enjoying a top-drawer piece of worldbuilding. *The Witcher 3* is a class act. At a glance it looks like a staid sword 'n' sorcery ordeal, with knights and dragons and kings and the other expected trappings. With time the game's wry sense of humour starts to appear, and you realise the characters in this world are much more interesting than your usual NPC monarchs and magicians. Then you realise some of the monsters you're fighting are more interesting still. On top of all that, this is one of the best-looking open worlds we've ever explored. It's simply a magnificent example of the genre.

Shaun: One of the game's greatest achievements is Geralt. Look at the box art and you'll see a generic videogame hero: tough, steely and blood hungry. His characterisation is subtle, though, and before too long the droll monster hunter is someone you genuinely look forward to spending time with. That's why the game's expansions have been so rewarding, because it's a new opportunity to roll with the Butcher of Blaviken.

James: In the span of ten minutes, a quest goes from fighting a Djinn on the deck of a

ship somehow marooned at the tip-top of a snowy mountain to a tender confession (or not, your choice) of Geralt's love for another character. The events leading to the battle with the genie aren't convoluted or boring – they're part of an intriguing mystery that makes sense within the world. And the love story isn't the typical male-empowered fantasy nonsense you might expect – it's a tender, serious (possibly sad) moment built up over the course of three games.

Tony: Faux medieval Europe is so often a lazy choice of setting for a fantasy RPG, but fair play to *The Witcher 3*: at least it commits to the idea. The Northern Kingdoms aren't your usual Bavaria-by-way-of-California egalitarian fairytale. This place is a war-torn shithole. It's a squalid, muddy world full of squalid, muddy peasants dressed in sacks. No wonder Geralt has to take all those baths.

Angus: It's the most convincing place of any open-world videogame. Somehow, in among writing genre-defining quests, rigging faces and mo-capping swordplay, CD Projekt Red had the commitment to model its terrain as if real geological processes shaped the Northern Kingdoms. Overhanging riverbanks are evidence of erosion, roads follow the easiest route through terrain, not the straightest, and bogs are as bleak as the real thing. The Witcher's world is muddy, bleak and utterly believable. A triumph.

Wes: Thoroughness. I don't know if there's a better word to describe CD Projekt's approach. They studio seems to understand, better than most, how to make characters and places feel real. Sometimes that's by giving you backstory for random townspeople, or adding twists to seemingly straightforward quests. Tracking down a runaway reveals the tragic story of a werewolf. Retrieving a frying pan reveals a spying operation. But just as often *The Witcher 3* takes care not to tell you too much. It doesn't introduce characters directly. Geralt interacts with old friends and old enemies. They tell stories about the old days, or grudges, or third parties. This happens time and time again as you travel the world, making Geralt feel like a real person with a real past. It's easy to overlook how brilliant the adherence to "show, don't tell" is, but when you finally start to pick up on the nuances of its motion captured acting, the different accents, the changes in environment and fauna... every little piece comes together to form the most convincing world in PC gaming, no exceptions.





a **BRIEF HISTORY** *of*

IMMERSIVE SIMS

It may be a rarity, but the immersive sim is one of gaming's great genres. We delve deep to find the best.

By Rick Lane

1992

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

Conceived by Paul Neurath, who later co-founded Looking Glass Studios, *Ultima Underworld* was inspired by the first-person perspective of *Dungeon Master* on the Atari ST. Yet instead of designing another RPG, Neurath wanted to simulate the feel of exploring a treacherous underground labyrinth.

Even by today's standards, *Underworld* is astonishingly ambitious, sporting an open 3D world where quests can be completed in any order. It features both melee and ranged real-time combat, including a magic

system with dozens of spells, many of which must be discovered through experimenting with the arrangement of runes. You also have to eat and sleep in order to function, predating survival games by some 20 years.

BEST FEATURE: Your game map only fills out if you illuminate new areas with a light source, compounding the feeling you're inside a dingy dungeon.



T

he immersive sim is one of the most exclusive of PC gaming genres, and perhaps the most illustrious. Only around two dozen such games have been developed in the entire history of PC gaming, but at least a quarter of these would be considered among the best games ever made.

This is not surprising. Immersive sims are complex and ambitious creations by their very nature. These games combine elements of FPS, RPG, platforming and stealth into one seamless whole. Each game varies the emphasis of these components, but there are some clearly identifiable qualities that mark them out. They are always first-person, they prioritise compelling environment design, and they encourage emergent play, providing the player with an array of tools to pursue open-ended goals.

This month, I've traced the history of this genre through ten of its best and brightest examples, games that epitomise, expand upon, and subvert its conventions. They include some of the PCs most celebrated games, alongside flawed yet fascinating experiments.



1999

SYSTEM SHOCK 2

System Shock was Looking Glass's first original title, building upon the ideas explored in *Ultima Underworld* while transposing them into a sci-fi, cyberpunk universe. It's a fine game. But the sequel, co-developed between Looking Glass and Ken Levine's Irrational Games, exists on another level entirely.

Two things elevate *System Shock 2* above the original. The first is its atmosphere. The beleaguered spaceship Von Braun is perhaps the most terrifying virtual space ever, its neon-blue corridors are procedurally prowled by lurching former crew members who scream "I'm sorry" at you as they try to bludgeon your head in, while the eerie electronica soundtrack will slowly erode any player's resolve.

The second thing is how it twists the fundamental concepts of immersive sims. *System Shock 2* takes that

essential idea of freedom to play and explore as you like, and flips it on its head. The game's multiple upgrade paths, Military, Engineering and Psionics, are less roads to power, and more ropes for the player to hang themselves on. No matter which option you choose, the game always finds a way to undermine your decisions. Few games manage to provide so many options for the player while making them feel so vulnerable in the process.

The story compounds this feeling of helplessness, forcing you to work with an adversary far more powerful than you and utterly contemptuous toward your existence – the mighty SHODAN. Levine would explore these ideas again in *BioShock*, but the subtler approach makes *System Shock 2* both Irrational's and Looking Glass's finest work.

BEST ENEMY: SHODAN, who else? Brilliantly written by Levine and with a superb performance by Terri Brosius, the megalomaniacal AI remains one of gaming's greatest adversaries.

SIMDIES

Interesting efforts from indie devs bravely taking on the formidable challenge of immersive sims



1 CONSORTIUM

Consortium is a dynamic murder mystery that takes place inside a giant military plane. Although it's rather rough around the edges, it's an interesting take on the format, minimising combat and instead focusing on dialogue and player choices. Most impressively, you can completely bypass the main mystery and still complete the game. A sequel that plans to expand upon the original premise is being crowdfunded.



2 NEON STRUCT

An abstraction of many immersive sim ideas, *Neon Struct* is a pure stealth game that sees you rebelling against a dystopian surveillance state, breaking into high-security buildings, sneaking through guard patrols and generally making a nuisance of yourself. You can knock guards out but can't kill them, and it boils down the ideas of its bigger brothers to a simpler level. But it remains intriguing through its fantastic level design.



3 THE MAGIC CIRCLE

A satirical prod at mainstream game development, *The Magic Circle* casts you as a game tester who goes rogue on a troubled project. You team up with a sentient AI, and go around reprogramming mob enemies, infusing them with new powers to overthrow the game's creative director. The intriguing AI-rejigging system makes it more than a simple send-up.

2000

THIEF II

The original *Thief* is a groundbreaking concept with moments of stunning vision, let down by its overemphasis on the undead and some loopy level designs. The sequel, however, is a stone-cold classic. *Thief II* tidied up the ideas of the original. It offers a more coherent storyline told through a series of beautifully constructed missions that may be the best sequential campaign ever committed to code.

Thief is laudable for being an immersive sim that narrows in on a specific idea, providing emergent play without being a chocolate-box of concepts. The stealth emphasis also

encourages players to pay full attention to their surroundings, observing guard patrols, seeking out shadows and figuring out how to break into buildings.

BEST LEVEL: *Life of the Party* is the mission that made everyone yearn (perhaps mistakenly) for an open-world *Thief*. It sees Garrett breaking into the tower of Angelwatch and is a masterpiece of 3D level design.



2000

DEUS EX

If *System Shock 2* is a subversion of immersive sims, and *Thief* is a refinement of them, then *Deus Ex* is a culmination of the concept, the game that the genre slowly built towards over just shy of a decade. It's as crazy and grandiose as the conspiracies that infest its gloomy near-future world. The difference is *Deus Ex* actually manages to pull off its cunning plan.

Deus Ex provided the broadest palette of player choices to date, blending a skill and augmentation system to create a truly astonishing array of opportunities. Want to be a nano-ninja who can turn invisible and see through walls? No problem at all. Want to be a cybernetic superman who's able to lift a shipping crate and run like a gazelle? Go for it! Want to just be really fucking good at swimming? Well, OK then.

Yet where *Deus Ex* goes beyond the games that preceded it is in how it allows the player to not only interact with the world around them, but also influence it too. It was the first game of its kind to include dialogue choices that impacted directly on the story, leading to the deaths of major characters and altering the fortunes of particular factions. These decisions aren't simple binary choices either, they're fraught with grey areas and troubling external pressures, and their consequences can impact you hours deeper into the game. Indeed, *Deus Ex* offers three endings, all of which have huge and not necessarily happy ramifications for JC Denton and the world he's trying to save.

BEST MOMENT: Escaping UNATCO after being captured is a superb sequence, turning a familiar and friendly environment into a hostile and dangerous one, and featuring some gripping encounters with friends and coworkers who all react differently to your betrayal.



2006

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Morrowind may be the darling of the *Elder Scrolls* series, but it was with *Oblivion* that Bethesda's games moved away from the stats and dice rolls of RPGs into something better resembling an immersive sim. It ditched traditional character classes, allowing the player to customise their avatar through a mix of specific skills. Melee combat was made more realistic, while the introduction of Havok physics lent greater tactility to both archery and magic.

Oblivion fully embraced the 'go anywhere, do anything' notion of the *Elder Scrolls* series, attempting to cram in as much variety as possible. This resulted in problems; the world design was less coherent than in *Morrowind* and *Skyrim*, while the game's radiant AI struggled to cope with what the devs demand of it. But it also delivered remarkable highs, containing some of the best quests in the entire series.

BEST QUEST: Whodunit is a Dark Brotherhood quest that tasks you with assassinating five guests at a house party and is probably the best example of *Oblivion*'s sim-like qualities. You can simply wade through the guests with a sword, but it's equally possible to manipulate guests into moving to isolated areas or killing each other.



There's something for everyone, even this.

2004

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES

Bloodlines would be the best immersive sim ever made, if its developers had been given the time and resources to finish it. Nevertheless, it remains a great example of the genre, its remarkable diversity of play making up for its wonkier elements. You can play as a True Blood-esque

Toreador vampire, using your powers of persuasion or seduction to your advantage, or a grotesque Nosferatu who's prohibited from being seen by regular humans, and must use Los Angeles' sewers and the ability to turn invisible to protect the vampires' secret society.

It's also arguably the most characterful game on this list, infusing its vampiric theme with gothic horror, explosive violence and jet-black comedy, which is bolstered by a superb script and one of the best dialogue systems in existence.

The combat may be awful and there are still bugs being ironed out by hobbyist patchers, but *Bloodlines* remains a fascinating flawed gem.

BEST CLASS: Malkavian vampires are mad from the moment they're sired, and if you choose to play as one, their dialogue options are completely different from any other class, just one example of *Bloodlines*'s tremendous scope.



2006

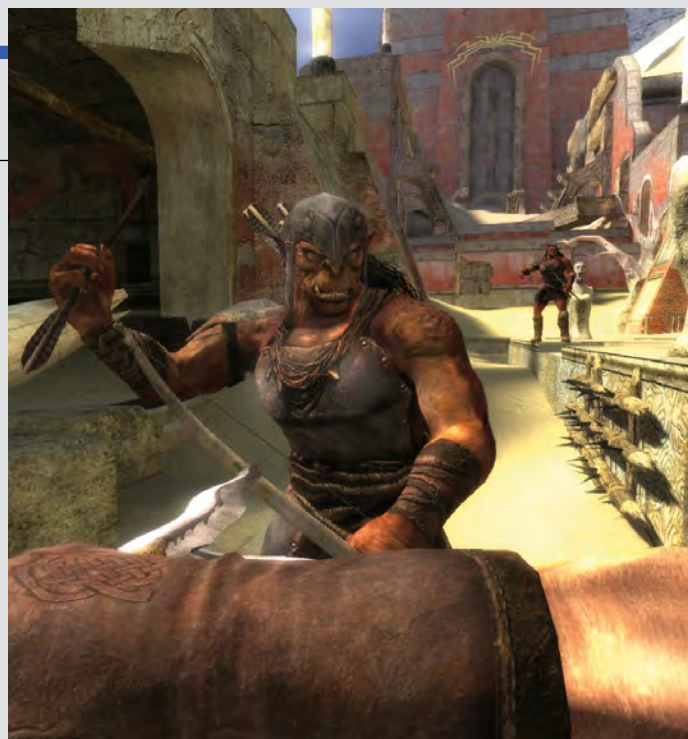
DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

Dark Messiah isn't the smartest game on this list, but it makes up for this by being an enormous amount of fun. Although it vaguely resembles an RPG, at its heart *Dark Messiah* is a swashbuckling simulator. Its levels are built like the sets of an Errol Flynn movie, littered with objects that can be actively used in combat. Enemies can be kicked off ledges, booted down staircases, and shoved into walls of conveniently placed spikes. Heavy objects are often

suspended above arenas by fraying ropes, while rickety bridges can be destroyed as enemies cross them.

With its lithe animations and sense of momentum *Dark Messiah* is also one of the best swordfighting games. Few things in life are as satisfying as decapitating one of *Dark Messiah*'s gurning Orcs, except perhaps chucking a barrel at them and watching them cartwheel down a flight of stairs.

BEST ABILITY: *Dark Messiah*'s ice spell is a purveyor of endless slapstick fun. It can freeze enemies in place, but it can also be cast onto the ground. Enemies that then step on this newly frictionless surface will slip and collapse in a pile of limbs, or stumble off a ledge if you cast it in just the perfect spot.



Big Daddy minus the leotard and sequined cape.

2007

BIOSHOCK

Few games take the idea of immersive sims as literally as *BioShock*, set as it is under millions of gallons of ocean. One of Irrational's goals with *BioShock* was to make Rapture seem like a plausible place, a city where the cream of American ingenuity held back the tide and lived in utopian bliss. No surprise then it's Rapture (alongside *that* moment) that *BioShock* is mainly remembered for. The underwater city is a marvellous virtual space, its vibrant architecture creaking and leaking as the weight of the sea bears down on it.

Yet Irrational's most famous work remains in love with the ideas of emergent play that underpinned its spiritual

predecessor. The game's plasmids hark back to the Psi abilities of *System Shock* and are enhanced to interact directly with the environment, setting the turrets and cameras against the Splicers, or enraging a Big Daddy into doing all the hard work, before it turns its glowing red eyes on you.

BioShock may have popularised immersive sims by leaning closer to the FPS side, but if you're willing to forego the efficiency of guns, it can still provide some splendid emergent moments. *BioShock 2* was arguably better at providing players with a range of tools to experiment with in combat.

BEST LEVEL: Fort Frolic is undoubtedly the high point of *BioShock*. Mad auteur Sander Cohen sprinkled much-needed humour into the game's absurdist-horror tones, and it exhibits some of the best environment design in the game. Fort Frolic was developed largely by Jordan Thomas, who was responsible for *Deadly Shadows*'s Shalebridge Cradle.



2010 STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

The *Stalker* series has always represented the ultimate endgoal of immersive sims, a cohesive and believable environment, AI that acts autonomously of the player, and complex interactions that result in an unscripted, unpredictable world.

None of the games achieved what *Shadow of Chernobyl* set out to do, but *Call of Prip'yat* comes close. It condenses the fragmented environments of previous games into three large areas, where multiple factions of Stalkers, bandits, scientists and others patrol, hunt wildlife, scour for valuable Artifacts

and battle over territory. When the wind blusters, the rain rolls in and you're being hunted by an invisible mutant, few games are as engrossing.

BEST FEATURE: Prip'yat is constantly under threat of Emissions, violent energy bursts that alter the situation within the zone, creating new Artifacts, killing NPCs and spawning Zombified Stalkers.



2012 DISHONORED

Recent years have seen a revival of bona-fide immersive sims. In 2011 *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* proved it was possible to make a follow-up that rivalled Warren Spector's masterpiece. Then in 2012 came *Dishonored*, a game openly inspired by the work of Ion Storm and Looking Glass. Arkane's *Arx Fatalis* and *Dark Messiah* had both shown glimmers of a similar talent, and it finally coalesced in their magical murder-sim.

Dishonored took the level design of *Thief* and the open-ended play of *Deus Ex*, and weaved them together superbly. The majority of its missions are built in a similar style to *Thief II*'s Life of the Party – a smattering of open city that surrounds the central area where the mission takes place. Particular highlights include the Golden Cat, an opulent brothel whose spiralling layout makes for a tricky assassination

challenge, and Lady Boyle's manor, where the ensuing Masquerade Ball allows the player to hide in plain sight.

Dishonored also boasts the most inventive toolsets of any game of its ilk, blending mechanical gadgetry with pagan-style magic. You can possess enemies and freeze time to manipulate your opponents and remain unseen, or deploy nasty springrazors and summon hordes of rats if you fancy adopting a more sociopathic approach. *Dishonored* even lets players complete the game without killing anyone, although many of your targets may wish they were dead given some of the fiendish alternatives.

BEST ABILITY: Although it's the least spectacular ability in Corvo's arsenal, *Blink* transforms everything about the game. This short-range teleport affects movement, platforming, combat and stealth, enabling you to dart across gaps between rooftops, flash into cover when noticed by a guard, or vanish away from a pistol-shot and stab your aggressor in the back.

SIM-SPIRATIONS

Games outside the immersive sim genre make use of some of its traits. Here are a few examples



1 HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

IO's best *Hitman* game has nearly all the hallmarks of an immersive sim, only differentiated by its third-person perspective. Its level design encourages exploration and experimentation, while you can quietly dispatch your targets with your fibre-wire, use pre-designed assassination methods to make your hit look like an accident, or simply waltz through the crowds with the biggest gun you can find.



2 ALIEN: ISOLATION

Isolation doesn't quite possess the open-ended nature of true immersive sims, but immersion is a crucial factor in making the game work. It combines highly realistic environments with a convincing Xenomorph AI to really hammer home the tension and terror of being trapped in a closed space with one of those creatures, and there's an array of tools to aid you in distracting and dealing with your chitinous nemesis.



3 FAR CRY 3

The *Far Cry* series has always been a shooter at heart, but it has also placed a strong emphasis on emergent play. *Far Cry 2* was the main innovator, but the third game masters the form, with its checkpoints providing dozens of little sandboxes to play around with. It also introduces dangerous predators to the food-chain and a wider array of toys, from recurve bows to wingsuits.



20 THE BEST SPACE GAMES ON PC

Leave boring old Earth behind and travel to the farthest reaches of the universe – and beyond – in these, the PC's greatest space games.

By
Andy
Kelly



THE DIG

YEAR 1995 | DEVELOPER LucasArts

The LucasArts point-and-click adventure that everyone forgets about. A mission to divert an asteroid heading for Earth goes awry, sending a group of astronauts to a distant, seemingly abandoned, world. Some of the puzzles are maddeningly obtuse, even for a LucasArts game, but its colourful, strange planet feels genuinely *alien*. Great voice acting too, with X-Files and Terminator star Robert Patrick playing the lead.



LUNAR FLIGHT

YEAR 2012 | DEVELOPER Showsoft

→ This modern take on classic arcade game *Lunar Lander* is a unique, challenging low-gravity flight simulator. It's not as deep as some sims, but wrestling with its physics to deliver cargo and make landings on alien worlds is enjoyable. It's also one of the best games to play with a VR headset, if you're lucky enough to have one.



SPACE ENGINEERS

YEAR 2013 | DEVELOPER Keen Software House

→ *Minecraft* in space, basically. Harvest asteroids for building materials then craft them into floating bases and flyable spaceships. You can hover around with a jetpack or build a gravity generator to walk on the surface of bigger asteroids. One of the best co-op build-'em-ups on PC, and new features are being added regularly.



HOMEWORLD REMASTERED COLLECTION

YEAR 2015 | DEVELOPER Relic/Gearbox Software

→ One of the best singleplayer RTS campaigns ever, beautifully remastered by Gearbox. The sight of thousands of your ships streaking across the game's vividly colourful space-scapes is majestic. Battles are tense and tactical, with many types of ship to command, including colossal battleships. The *Remastered Collection* looks great on modern PCs and comes with the original *Homeworld* and its sequel.

EVE ONLINE

YEAR 2003 | DEVELOPER CCP Games

Live another life – in space! There's nothing else like *EVE Online* on PC, a massively multiplayer RPG where everything is controlled by players. It's a living, breathing galaxy in which thousands of capsuleers fight, trade, mine, and explore together. Break away from the relative safety of your police-patrolled starting system and you'll find a ruthless, cosmic Wild West, where piracy, espionage and scamming are rife. Whether you're fighting in a massive space war, where thousands of real-world dollars hang in the balance, or just exploring New Eden on your own, *EVE* is unforgettable.

ELITE: DANGEROUS

YEAR 2014 | DEVELOPER Frontier Developments

→ An entire galaxy is your playground in this massive, beautiful space sim. Starting with a basic ship and a handful of credits, it's up to you to shape your own destiny. Do you become a fearsome pirate? A master trader? An explorer? The beauty of *Elite: Dangerous* is being able to play in a way that suits you. From thrilling dogfights to gentle exploration, there's something for everyone. Its ships are a dream to fly, from nimble fighters to heavy cargo haulers, especially with a flight stick.

STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER

YEAR 1994 | DEVELOPER Totally Games

→ A rare opportunity to be the bad guy in George Lucas's space opera. With a variety of *Empire*-themed missions – dogfights, escorts, attacking capital ships – and a story to follow, it's one of LucasArts's best *Star Wars* games. Replace this entry with *Star Wars: X-Wing* if you'd prefer to play as the boring old Rebel Alliance. The best thing about this entire crop of *Star Wars* space sims is that they've all resurfaced to buy on GOG.com, compatible with modern systems.

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

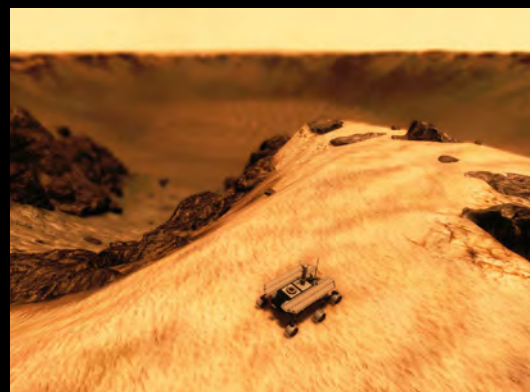
YEAR 2012 | DEVELOPER Subset Games

→ *FTL* mixes turn-based and real-time strategy together to capture the experience of captaining a *Star Trek*-style spacecraft. It's a strong roguelike, too, with a backdrop of a familiar yet fun sci-fi universe that comes with its own semi-humorous lore and a neat set of narrative beats that make the journey to its finale endlessly exciting. Being able to name your ship and crew makes it all the more heartbreaking when they die together in enemy space.

WING COMMANDER: PRIVATEER

YEAR 1993 | DEVELOPER Origin Systems

→ Fans of the series will argue endlessly about which *Wing Commander* is the best, but we love *Privateer*'s darker feel. It's a rich sandbox in which you can be a mercenary, a pirate, a merchant, or a mix of all three. You jump between systems looking for bounties to hunt and ships to rob, and the first-person dogfights are a thrill. There's a linear story, but the real joy lies in doing your own thing.



TAKE ON MARS

YEAR 2013 | DEVELOPER Bohemia Interactive

→ If you like your space games a little more grounded, try *Arma* developer Bohemia's *Take On Mars*. It's a space exploration simulator based on real astro-science. You can build a Curiosity-style rover and explore the surface of the red planet or construct your own Moon base. A game for people who want the sci without the fi.



SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

YEAR 2008 | DEVELOPER Ironclad Games

→ Mixing real-time strategy with 4X elements, *Sins* is a game of galactic conquest. Choose a faction, gather resources and become a mighty space-lord. Commanding its real-time wars is a thrill, but combat isn't always the answer: you can use diplomacy to conquer systems too. A refreshingly slow-paced RTS with some truly massive space battles.

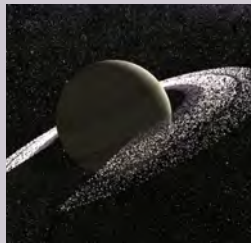


KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

YEAR 2015 | DEVELOPER Squad

Wrestle with gravity and the laws of physics as you build your own spacecraft and attempt to explore the cosmos. A robust, compelling sandbox of possibilities that's as funny as it is clever. Escaping Kerbin's atmosphere and landing on the Mun for the first time with a ship you've built is about as satisfying as PC gaming gets.

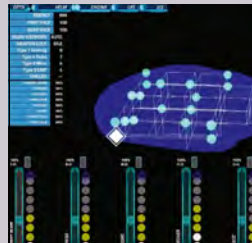




UNIVERSE SANDBOX

YEAR 2011 | DEVELOPER Giant Army

→ This space simulator lets you play god and manipulate replicas of real galaxies and solar systems, and witness the (often catastrophic) results of your cosmic meddling. Increase the mass of Jupiter and you'll see the rest of our solar system being sucked into it, or delete the Sun and watch Earth and the other planets drift away confused. A sequel, *Universe Sandbox 2*, recently arrived on Steam Early Access.



ARTEMIS: SPACESHIP BRIDGE SIMULATOR

YEAR 2013 | DEVELOPER Thom Robertson

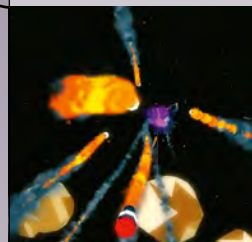
→ You'll need a group of three to six friends to get the most out of this one. Each player controls a different station of a starship – engineering, weapons, helm and so on – and must work together to destroy enemies, with a captain giving orders. It's basically like staging a Kobayashi Maru test in your living room, and it's amazing.



GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II

YEAR 2006 | DEVELOPER Stardock

→ Conquer space with an army of customisable ships. Thanks to its smart, creative AI, a full-size game can take many exciting weeks to complete. You have to balance economic, technological, diplomatic, cultural, and military power to forge alliances, engage in battles, and dominate the galaxy. Similar to the *Civilization* series, certainly, but on a much grander scale.



FLOTILLA

YEAR 2010 | DEVELOPER Blendo Games

→ This turn-based strategy game by prolific indie studio Blendo (*Thirty Flights of Loving*, *Gravity Bone*) plays out in 30-second bursts. Queue up your orders, then watch the action unfold until one side is completely obliterated. With a relaxing classical score, including Chopin's Raindrop Prelude, and a stylish, curiously colourful art style, it's one of the more offbeat games on our list. *Flotilla* also features psychic advisor dogs – there's a strong sense of humour at work, here.

STARBOUND

YEAR 2013 | DEVELOPER Chucklefish Games

Basically *Terraria* in space. Hop between randomly generated planets on a starship, hunt alien creatures for food, build colonies and underground bases, and try not to die. A brilliant sci-fi sandbox with a charming art style. Playable races include robots, beings made of solar energy, ape-like creatures, and wingless birds.



SPACEENGINE

YEAR 2010 | DEVELOPER Vladimir Romanyuk

→ Do you like feeling small and insignificant? Do you enjoy having existential crises? Then play *SpaceEngine*, which features the *entire universe*. Or at least the bit we know about. Focus on Earth, then pull back at top speed, and you suddenly become aware you're on a tiny speck of dust hurtling through an endless void. The tech is remarkable, allowing you to travel effortlessly between galaxies and land on planets, but besides exploring, there isn't much else to it.



FREESPACE 2

YEAR 1999 | DEVELOPER Volition, Inc.

→ While most space simulators use plane-like physics, *FreeSpace* attempts something more realistic, resulting in responsive, weightless controls. Battles play out like zero-gravity World War II dogfights, and it's one of the best space combat games on PC. You'll never forget your first combat encounter inside a colourful nebula.



MASS EFFECT 2

YEAR 2010 | DEVELOPER BioWare



If you've ever fantasised about being Captain Kirk, in command of your own starship, exploring the galaxy, meeting weird aliens, being confronted with cosmic dilemmas, then *Mass Effect 2* is that in game form. It's part Star Wars space opera, part brilliant Star Trek episode, and one of the best sci-fi games on PC. It doesn't have the freedom of *Elite* and is largely a linear experience, but it takes you on an unforgettable journey around the galaxy, visiting bizarre planets and getting involved in the lives of the people who live on them. We love the whole series, but *Mass Effect 2* is our favourite.

20 THE BEST FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

You feel the urge to shoot things in the head, be they zombies, aliens or realistically animated human soldiers. We can help with that.

By Samuel Roberts and Phil Savage

Shooting things is cool. Our criteria for this list was pretty simple: the guns have to feel good and shooting has to play a prominent role in the game to make the cut. It's why *Dishonored* made the list and none of the *Deus Ex* entries did, for example, or why *Mirror's Edge* didn't make it here either. If they're not primarily about shooting, they're not on this list. Also, we limited each series to one entry. Just because *Far Cry 3* isn't on here, for example, doesn't mean it's not also worthy of your time. Enjoy.

DISHONORED

If you want...
good shooting with your immersive sim

You might have played *Dishonored* purely as a stealth game, just as prod ed Tony Ellis did, denying yourself access to its firearms because you decided it's the most credible way to play. The thing is, firing a gun in *Dishonored* feels really good. The armoury consists of antiquated weapons that feel very satisfying to fire and fit the

design aesthetic of the world. Also, they're nice and loud, with pleasing reaction animations from enemies during battle, particularly when you blink up to a Tallboy and open fire. For a game that ultimately punishes you for chaos and killing in various ways, they do make the idea of murdering absolutely everyone incredibly tempting.



BULLETSTORM

If you want...
arcade-style action

➔ *Bulletstorm* is an incredibly well-made score attack shooter that's a little different to everything else on the list. The energy leash, the ability to kick enemies and the fast player movement give you plenty of scope to put together cool, flashy combos and to use your armoury creatively. The swears, deliberately immature script, put together by comic book writer Rick Remender, matches the over-the-top action perfectly. The only downside is it's still locked behind the infernal Games For Windows Live, and getting it to work at all is an absolute pain in the arse – it could really do with an update or two.



LOVELY PLANET

If you want... first-person shooting with a difference

➔ With a name like *Lovely Planet*, you may be surprised to learn this isn't a game where you pull off headshots or yank out crossbow bolts from corpses. Because that would be lovely. This is, instead, a shooter where precision matters above everything else, where memorising the maps is all but essential. You have to kill every enemy in every level and navigate through obstacle courses of potential environmental mishaps, and you have to do this across 100 levels. Thanks in part to an unconventional but pretty art style, there's nothing else quite like *Lovely Planet* on PC.



METRO 2033

If you want...
well-crafted survival horror misery

In the *Metro* series, mankind survives in the tunnels beneath Moscow, having abandoned the nuclear-irradiated overworld, now infested with mutated creatures. The idea is that ammo is finite, that each stash is precious, and *Metro* walks an interesting line between

survival horror and first-person shooter. The guns feel great, but it's the fiction around them, the commitment to such a bleak tone, and the gorgeous environments with just a few signs of human life that you'll remember *Metro* for. Now in a *Redux* version, it's never looked better.

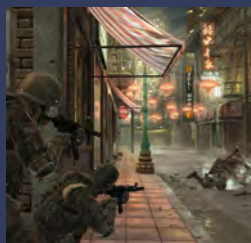


FAR CRY 4

If you want... **open-world frolics**

The other games in the *Far Cry* series have plenty to recommend them, but *Far Cry 4* is the latest and best. It properly buys into the big and silly, letting you raid bases on elephant back, hang glide, and dangle from gyrocopters. It's the best use of the

open-world formula that Ubisoft pretty much applies to all its big games. As a shooter, it's fantastic fun, but it's these extra tools, and how easy it is to find yourself thrown into an absurdly fun and chaotic set-piece, that make this one of the best FPS games around.



CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

If you want... **well-scripted set-pieces**

→ Marking the start of the age of scripted shooters, *CoD4*'s campaign is still a blast even if it isn't that interactive. It jumps between different playable characters in an escalating global conflict, from raiding an enemy ship in the prologue, to the unforgettable 'All Ghillied Up' flashback sequence. *Modern Warfare* still has a small active multiplayer base, too.



DOOM 2

If you want... **hundreds of ways to play**

→ Classic *Doom* feels great. Its movement is fast, but not uncontrollable. Its levels are complex, but not confusing. Its enemies are demonic, but not so tough as to be unaffected by a couple of shotgun blasts. And it's been further elevated by its modding community. More than 20 years later, they're still going strong. You'll find new weapons, new campaigns and total conversions that let you be everything from a pirate to a cartoon square.

TRIBES: ASCEND

If you want... **speed, skill and skiing**

→ *Tribes: Ascend*'s best weapons – the ones that make it worth celebrating as a fast paced, high skill competitive FPS – work in tandem with its inimitable traversal to create exhilarating ski-by shootings. Nailing a top-speed kill with a spinfusor, mortar or grenade launcher is a feeling that can't easily be beaten. The game was long thought abandoned, but developer Hi-Rez is now testing the first patch in over two years.



LEFT 4 DEAD 2

If you want... **always surprising co-op**

→ *Left 4 Dead 2* is an unpredictable and highly replayable co-op zombie shooter, with a huge history of mods behind it, some that swap textures and others that improve key elements like the AI. Want to play through *GoldenEye* levels or a 12-map *Silent Hill* campaign with your friends while mowing down hundreds of infected? Go for it. It doesn't hurt that Valve regularly discounts the game on Steam – and sometimes gives it away.





COUNTER-STRIKE: GO

If you want... **complex team-based shooting**

→ *Global Offensive* is the clear winner of the *Counter-Strike* wars, and is even challenging *Dota 2* for Steam's highest concurrent playerbase. That's one hell of an achievement for a game that came out three years ago and isn't even free-to-play. As to why, it's probably thanks to the peerless tactical challenge of its competitive mode – a 30-round intense battle of wits, skill and endurance. For those looking for something less extreme, *Arms Race* and *Demolition* offer a comparatively more relaxed way to enjoy *Counter-Strike*'s eternal battle between terrorist and counter-terrorist.



ARMA 3

If you want... **military simulation on an insane scale**

→ *Arma 3* is about scale and detail together: it's not just a snapshot of a battle, it's the whole thing. It's the realistic reloading, the helicopters that almost require real-life helicopter pilots to control them, and the damage you sustain from taking an enemy shot. No other first-person shooter offers what *Arma* does, with the same high production values. And as Bohemia gradually builds on the base game with more environments – *Apex* added the tremendous Tanoa region to the game – it becomes a fuller simulation of war.



HALF-LIFE 2

If you want... **one of the best games ever made**

Our number one game in this year's PCG top 100, *Half-Life 2* is worth recommending for a whole bunch of reasons. The variety in its ever-changing levels and presentation of story, for example. But it's also a fantastic shooter, primarily because of the opportunities put in your

hands with the Gravity Gun. It's a tool to help you reshape the environment on the fly as you work out the best way to use explosive barrels to dispatch enemies, or to catch grenades and lob them back at the Overwatch. *Half-Life 2* gets so much right, but it starts with world-class combat.





BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

If you want...
tuned, focused chaos

→ There's a reason this one felt more explosive than its *Battlefield* successors. It's the setting. By avoiding commercial urban environments, *Bad Company 2*'s smaller, less essential buildings were at the mercy of the Frostbite engine's destructive capabilities. Houses would creak and moan, then collapse in a beautiful moment of panic and chaos. It's best played in Rush mode, which has maps that elegantly funnel players through a gauntlet of destructible chokepoints. Great sound design, too.



TEAM FORTRESS 2

If you want... **an ever-changing multiplayer experience**

→ As of writing, *Team Fortress 2* has had 525 patches. And yes, a lot of those have been updated localisation files, but plenty have also brought new weapons, items and maps. *Team Fortress 2* exemplifies the idea of multiplayer gaming as a service. That's not the only thing that makes it a great first-person shooter, though. It's also a cleverly crafted, endlessly replayable and deeply engrossing team game. It has nothing as boring as an assault rifle. Instead, its guns are powerful, deadly and situational – rewarding skilled play and tactical movement with lots and lots of kills.



WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

If you want... **big-ass guns**



This big, silly revival of *Wolfenstein* has inventive level design, a daft but entertaining story based on an alternate WWII history, and guns that feel amazing to fire. It also made dual-wielding an exciting idea for the first time in about a decade. You battle boilerplate robo-dogs, you fight Nazis on the Moon. The feel of the machine guns and shotguns is spot-on.

The former Starbreeze leads who formed MachineGames reinterpreted *Wolfenstein* in a way that made it exciting and new both for the series' existing audience and for those gamers coming in fresh. This big, chunky shooter is so much more than just a retro pastiche, offering variety and production values you rarely get to enjoy in singleplayer games these days.



QUAKE III

*If you want...
fast run-and-gunning*

→ This is a shooter so fast you could earn a multikill in the time it takes to read this sentence. It forces you to build the muscle memory needed to navigate its tight corridors. The reward is a frenetic shooter that favours those able to perfectly execute their strafe-jumps through the piles of pick-ups. Speed has a dramatic effect on the gunplay, too. It's no good being able to fly through an arena if you can't hit your equally speedy opponents.



BIOSHOCK

*If you want...
shooting with a side of strategy*

→ You go from firing a pistol and zapping splicers with electricity to being a full-on badass, deploying traps, turning enemies against each other and finding the optimal way to navigate increasingly tough battles. That layer of strategy can be very empowering, and the guns, particularly the shotgun and '20s machine gun, feel loud and brutal. Also, it turns out that grenade launchers and bees are great things to fire at Big Daddies.

STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

*If you want...
open-world misery*

→ *Stalker's* atmospheric open-world setting balances tension, terror and, ultimately, isolation. If you're looking for a power fantasy, look elsewhere. The guns are basic and utilitarian. They're also vital. They're tools that, if you're extremely lucky, will get you to your next objective – whatever that may be.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT

*If you want...
more fast run-and-gunning*

→ The guns, the maps, the movement. The original *UT* was such a satisfying multiplayer shooter. "Unstoppable!" yells the voiceover as you turn enemies into chunks with the rocket launcher, or pound through an opponent with the minigun. The armoury is perfect, the over-the-top sci-fi theme nicely done – this remains a classy multiplayer shooter, followed by a number of mostly great sequels.



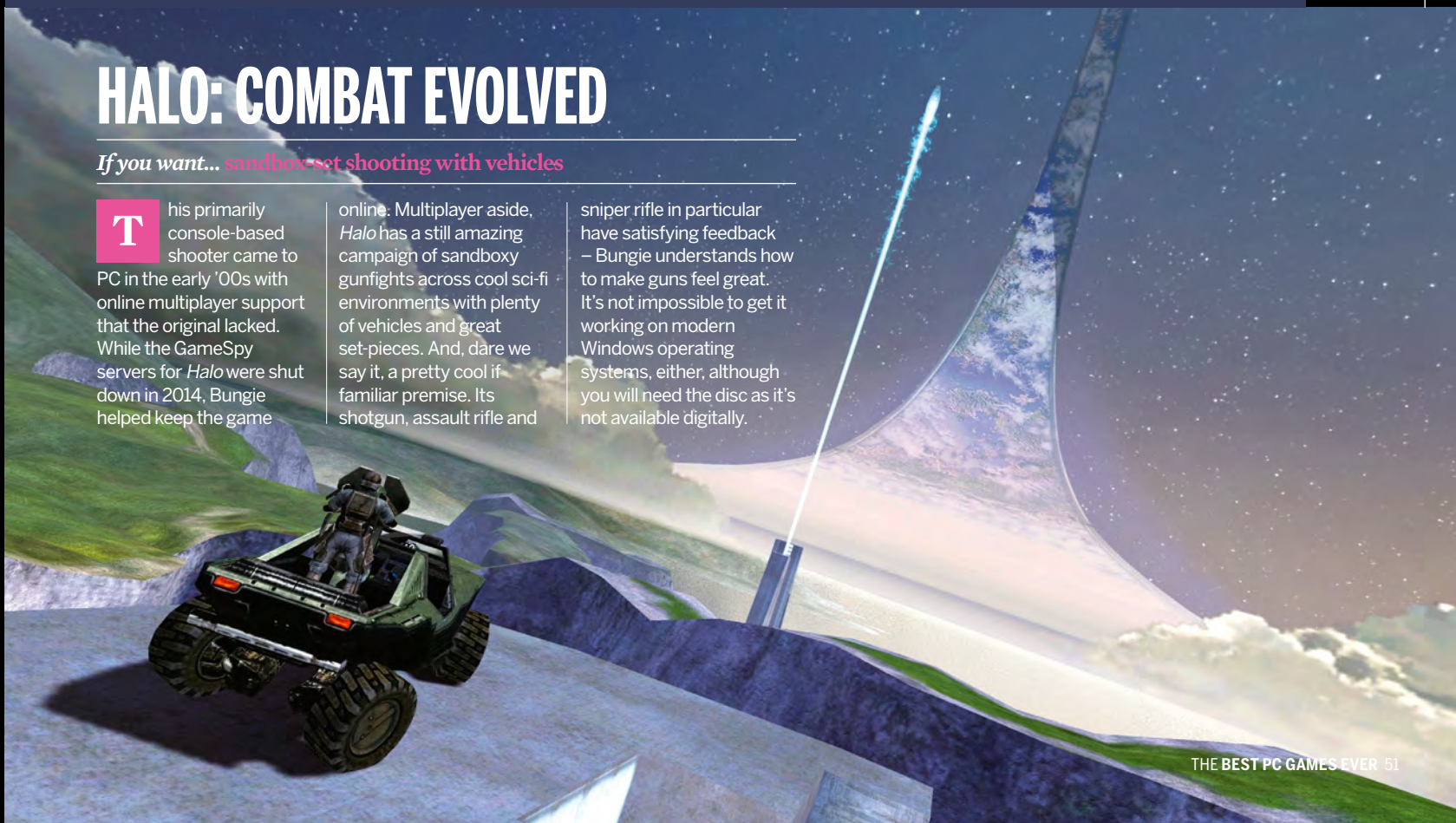
HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

If you want... sandbox set shooting with vehicles

This primarily console-based shooter came to PC in the early '00s with online multiplayer support that the original lacked. While the GameSpy servers for *Halo* were shut down in 2014, Bungie helped keep the game

online. Multiplayer aside, *Halo* has a still amazing campaign of sandboxy gunfights across cool sci-fi environments with plenty of vehicles and great set-pieces. And, dare we say it, a pretty cool if familiar premise. Its shotgun, assault rifle and

sniper rifle in particular have satisfying feedback – Bungie understands how to make guns feel great. It's not impossible to get it working on modern Windows operating systems, either, although you will need the disc as it's not available digitally.



DUTY FULFILLED

With *CoD4* recently remastered, PCG spoke to **MOHAMMAD ALAVI**, designer of some of *Call of Duty*'s most celebrated singleplayer levels.

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

We call them first-person shooters, but “first-person follower” would be just as apt. If there’s one thing every *Call of Duty* campaign has in common – other than military acronyms and cutscene pyrotechnics – it’s an AI personality who escorts you through the level, booting down doors and wrestling the odd guard to the floor. These characters can be more annoyance than accomplice, especially when they oblige you to digest some plot development before you can move on. At worst, they feel like personifications of *Call of Duty*’s legendary unwillingness to cede real agency to the player.

Is there a place alongside more obviously choice-driven, open-ended games such as *Metal Gear Solid V* for campaign design that merely asks you to keep up? Do we have anything left to learn from the likes of *Modern Warfare*’s Soap MacTavish? As regards the work of Mohammad Alavi, at least, the answer is yes. Now employed at Respawn Entertainment, a developer formed by Infinity Ward co-founders Vince Zampella and Jason West after their seismic bust-up with Activision in 2010, Alavi is the designer behind two of the most acclaimed missions in *Call of Duty* history: *Modern Warfare*’s sublimely paced and reactive All Ghillied Up, and *Modern Warfare 2*’s extraordinarily disturbing No Russian.

Alavi’s creations represent the *Call of Duty* campaign at its most thoughtful (though arguably No Russian is a different case), especially in terms of how they explore the role of an AI

companion. I spoke to him about their construction, how *Call of Duty* and the FPS have changed since he first began work at Infinity Ward, and whether the traditional singleplayer campaign has a future in the age of *Destiny*.

SETTING SAIL

Before Alavi became involved with *Call of Duty* he was all set to enter the medical profession. While at school he had produced mods for shooters such as *Duke Nukem 3D*, ranging from the basic – a level modelled on the Alavi family home – to larger-scale collaborations such as the original *Natural Selection* for *Half-Life*. But he had given little thought to game design as a vocation, until one of his mods was featured in an issue of PC Gamer.

The publicity inspired Alavi to apply for a course at Florida’s Full Sail University (he had, in fact, already been accepted by a medical school, but chose not to inform his parents of this). After graduating, he applied for a programming job at the up-and-coming Infinity Ward, which had just completed development of the very first *Call of Duty*. He wasn’t successful, but Infinity Ward’s management were impressed enough by Alavi’s mods to offer him a level design position on *Call of Duty 2*.

The so-called AAA games industry has changed enormously since Alavi made his debut. Team sizes have rocketed – the original *Call of Duty* was the work of fewer than 30 people, while 2015’s *Call of Duty: Black Ops 3* was the work of around 400 – and it’s no longer entirely feasible for an

individual employee to operate across several disciplines. “When I started in 2004, I made textures, models, FX and sound FX,” Alavi recalls. “I did final art and lighting for levels. I wrote all kinds of systems as well as gameplay scripts. Plus, I designed and scripted levels. Fast-forward 12 years and I do one thing: I design and script cinematic gameplay. I’ve become a specialist in this particular area.

“I might be oversimplifying my role, but it’s hard to ignore how complex making games has become. The technology, the art, the design... it’s all advanced to such a degree, that I feel one can’t help but deep-dive into a particular area of game development in order to be successful.”

This is a regrettable transition in some ways, because Alavi’s finest creations stem from his willingness to forage beyond his official role – typically without the knowledge of his superiors. Step forward

All Ghillied Up, *Call of Duty*’s first sustained attempt at ‘true’ stealth, and evidence that engaging choices *are* possible within a campaign that’s all about travelling from A to B.

GUERRILLAS IN THE MIST

It’s the calm that throws you. Even by the standards of subsequent games, *Modern Warfare* is dizzying – a coruscating carnival of tank raids and AC-130 bombardments, shellshock and broken glass. But it also has a playable flashback set in post-meltdown Chernobyl that opens amid overgrown fields and woodland, wind hissing through the stalks. “Too much radiation. We’ll have to go around,” remarks a voiceover the radio. Then, a clump of vegetation in the foreground stands up and reveals itself to be your ghillie-suited CO, Captain MacMillan. It’s a masterful introduction, setting the tone while almost casually illustrating the mechanics of staying hidden.

Born from study of *Half-Life* and the *Metal Gear Solid* games, All Ghillied Up marked the first time in *Call of Duty* that NPCs were capable of the behaviours we associate with stealth in series such as *Splinter Cell*. They react differently to the player depending on the distance and angle, rather than switching from passive to hostile the second you enter a certain viewing range. Lie prone in the grass and a guard might stroll right by, oblivious – a coding feat used to great dramatic effect when you and MacMillan have to crawl through a group of APCs and infantry. It’s one of the few moments in

DO WE HAVE ANYTHING LEFT TO LEARN FROM SOAP MACTAVISH?



All Ghillied Up introduced nail-biting stealth.



But can the Ghillie suit ever replace the cardboard box?

» *CoD* when enemies actually inspire fear, rather than aggression. Soldiers loom against the sky, caterpillar treads thunder to either side and the slightest movement could be your doom.

None of this would have happened had Alavi not put his fledgling programming abilities to the test, writing a huge quantity of code in secrecy while designing the level. “The biggest challenge was that I’m not an AI programmer,” he says. “I’ve learned a lot about finite state machines and writing complex compartmentalised systems, but at the time I didn’t know what I was doing. Arguably, I still don’t.

“In a perfect world I would be an expert systems programmer as well as a designer. But my two options were to either describe my design goals to our AI programmer, who was swamped and wouldn’t have had the time to give me all my features, or to write it myself and deal with the consequences of inexperience. I chose the latter. Anyone who’s seen the code internally knows it’s garbage, but to the end user it did exactly what I wanted it to do, and I didn’t have to compromise on the feel of the gameplay.”

On the surface *All Ghillied Up* feels like just another corridor mission, and there are certainly elements that evoke *CoD* at its most restrictive – pockets of radiation to keep you from straying too far, a talkative companion whose death spells game over. But the level’s greatest trick is that it’s open to improvisation. The patrolling helicopter is primarily

there for ambience, but if you keep your eyes peeled there’s a way of shooting it down. Rather than sneaking by infantry, you can pick them off with a scope, weave in among them with a silenced pistol, or go loud with automatic weapons lifted from the fallen. There’s a touch of *Metal Gear Solid V* to how much choice AGU crams into a limited span.

“To feel right, the AI needed to be programmed with every possible reaction to every possible thing the player could do, and double that for MacMillan,” says Alavi. “Which meant it took me three months and over 10,000 lines of code to do the first minute of gameplay for AGU. [Lead designer] Steve Fukuda sat down at my desk to play the first minute, and he replayed it for half an hour, ten different ways, and had fun each time. For me that was a real success.” So entertaining was Alavi’s script, it became the basis for the AI in *Modern Warfare 2*.



Nowhere is the level’s reactivity more apparent than in the personality of Captain MacMillan. Where other escort characters are forever ordering you around, he presents you with scenarios and allows you to work out your own solutions using the tools available, with bespoke dialogue for each outcome. MacMillan will encourage you to avoid the helicopter,

for example, but if you really want to tangle with it he’ll back you up. Likewise, slotting a wild dog is acceptable, providing you can deal with the rest of the pack. It’s gently empowering, and forms an intriguing contrast to the level for

which Alavi is nowadays best known, *Modern Warfare 2*’s *No Russian*.

SENDING A MESSAGE

It starts not with a bang or the crash of a door being kicked in, but a whisper. “Remember, no Russian.” You’re in an elevator with a small group of men in body armour, all holding light machine

IT STARTS WITH A WHISPER: “REMEMBER, NO RUSSIAN”



guns. The doors open and you stroll out towards a crowd waiting at an airport baggage check-in. Two security officers turn in mild surprise. There's a jolt of realisation, a half-second in which you cotton on to what the game expects of you. Then, you open fire.

For better or worse, No Russian is a watershed moment in the debate over the ethics of representation in videogames. It casts you as a US double-agent operating within the terror organisation of Vladimir Makarov. In order to prove your loyalty, you must take part in an attack on a Moscow airport – a cold-blooded killing spree in which the wounded are casually finished off as they drag themselves away from you, which evolves into a running battle with security forces and ends with your betrayal and execution right outside the getaway van. Makarov, it transpires, knew of your deception all along, and hopes the discovery of an American agent's body at the scene will provoke war between the US and Russia.

Whether an interactive massacre is the right fit for an entertainment product is a question for the individual player. No Russian provoked heated exchanges in the press at release, some praising it as a statement about how

desensitised we are to videogame violence, others accusing Alavi and Infinity Ward of including the scene to raise the game's profile. He rejects both claims. "I mean honestly, *Call of Duty* didn't need any more publicity." Rather, as Alavi explained in 2012 to fellow designer and writer Matthew Burns, the aim was simply to build up the game's villain in a memorable and player-driven fashion, rather than in the worn-out form of a cutscene.

No Russian was originally the brainchild of Steve Fukuda, but Alavi was behind almost every aspect of its creation, from scripting Makarov's team to motion-capturing the animations used for dying civilians. "It took lots of iteration to get the first half of the level right. I was in and out of the mo-cap studio multiple times to re-shoot sequences, as well as redesigning and iterating on that first half over and over again. The massacre could easily have felt cheesy or gimmicky if it blended too quickly into the combat portion near the end."

As convincing as it may seem, the level isn't based on a real-life massacre. "I didn't interview anyone for a couple reasons," says Alavi. "I honestly don't think I could emotionally handle a face-to-face recount of such an event in >>

THE MAKING OF TITANFALL

How the Respawn team brought their mech shooter to life



It must have been incredibly challenging to adapt infantry map design to a game of pilots and Titans.

You make it sound like we followed a plan from start to finish! First of all, I can't really take any credit for it – my specialism is singleplayer, not multiplayer map design. And it's not like we sat down and decided we were going to make a mech game with parkour pilots and figured out what the design demands were. We iterated for years on a plethora of new, old, and seemingly disparate gameplay mechanics that seemed fun and exciting. We were trying to innovate in the FPS genre and we didn't know what that exactly meant. We were just hopeful that we would recognise "the fun" when we found it.

Early on we added double-jump and wall-running in a very rudimentary form to classic *Half-Life* multiplayer. It certainly had its moments but at the time seemed shallow. Titans sprang from a piece of concept art by Richard Smith about human power armour that seemed to really resonate with the team. The concept gave context to a totally different idea about power-ups that was making the rounds. Then there were months of ideas and prototypes, ranging from infantry combat to *Brothers-in-Arms* style squad control to RPG-style quests. But that power armour concept stuck. It morphed into Titans. That merged into another design prototype about cat and mouse gameplay, and then it hit a roadblock.

Being the cat, the Titan, was fun. It was the ultimate power fantasy, but being the mouse wasn't. At the time, pilots were simply footsoldiers, like in *Battlefield* or *Call of Duty*. We couldn't seem to balance pilots and Titans without significantly nerfing the Titans. I'm not sure who had the breakthrough, but when we decided to reintroduce the parkour element to the pilot motion model, it all fell into place. Design ideas about the roles of Titans vs pilots started flowing. Being the mouse became a tactical game of out-manoeuvering the cat. All of a sudden, we found the fun.

There were still many questions that needed answers. Designing maps for two drastically different scales and motion >>

Alavi abandoned a promising medical career for games.



IMAGE CREDIT: GREG DE STEFANO

» models was among them. Weapon and health balancing, the introduction of AI to an MP shooter, and many more... but that initial breakthrough set the direction.

I adore *Titanfall*, but I wasn't convinced by your multiplayer campaign. Could you have done anything differently?

The reality is we tried something new, and we learned a lot from it. We're a passionate team of devs who have a wealth of knowledge split between singleplayer and multiplayer design. The choice to do MP-only on *Titanfall* was out of necessity. We were a brand new start-up, working on a brand new IP, with technology that was brand new to us, on a brand new console, while going through a multi-million dollar lawsuit. We were also trying to innovate in a genre that's been stagnant for years. You can imagine the level of stress.

Some of the choices made in the development process happen because we live in a reality of finite money, resources, and time. We simply didn't have the time or the resources to do two games – a fully fledged multiplayer game, and a fully fledged singleplayer game – while upgrading the Source engine and tools to next-gen standards. That didn't mean we could just curb our passion for storytelling though. So we made an economic decision to weave a story into a MP-only game, without detracting from the competitive online gameplay.

***Titanfall's* MOBA-style AI is unique within the shooter genre in how it creates the impression of a vast battle. How much trial and error did it take to get that right?**

So much! And it's tough to say if it's still "right." I've heard many reviews refer to the AI as "dumb" which is really funny, because that couldn't be further from the truth. That sentiment really irks Jiesang Song, our main AI programmer. The AI are *really* smart, actually. At the flip of a switch the AI can be deadly accurate, flank the player in coordinated squads, set up a perimeter to search for you when they lose sight, run to cover, etc. Even if those things sound "cool", they wouldn't serve the goals of the game. It was a design decision to "dumb" them down.

At its core, *Titanfall* is a competitive MP game. Having deadly, highly coordinated AI would have detracted from the focus on player combatants. Furthermore, the AI lowers the barrier of entry to the competitive shooter scene, which was another goal for *Titanfall*. Too often when picking up a new shooter, we jump into the MP only to be totally schooled by pros. We aimed to make *Titanfall* both accessible to newbies while not alienating the hardcore. You could argue that we didn't do it perfectly, but I would say we came pretty close to that goal.



» a person's life. I wouldn't even know what kind of questions to ask without sounding like I have an agenda. I wouldn't want anyone to relive that story just so I could have some juicy tidbits for a piece of entertainment. All my research was done through news articles and movies."

Alavi also edited the portrayal to stop it being too traumatic. "I made sure to handle it as tastefully as I possibly could without diluting the gravity of the moment. For example, I made the decision to not have any children in the airport. I didn't have families huddling together in fear, I didn't have people crying out the names of husbands, wives or children. I could have taken it to a much darker place, but that would have been just for shock value."

Publishers typically shy away from content that breaks taboos, but Alavi isn't aware of any pushback on No Russian from Activision, and most colleagues at Infinity Ward were supportive.

"There was a bit of resistance from some members of the team which led to some small design changes and revisions," he recalls. "There were obviously strong feelings about participating in a virtual act of terrorism, as well as firing on the armed forces sent to prevent you from shooting up an airport."

Feedback from randomly selected playtesters ran the gamut of responses, Alavi says. "The most memorable reaction was from an enlisted gentlemen who immediately put down the controller and left the room. He

said he wouldn't play that level. He would play the rest of the game, but not that level. That's where the decision to make it skippable came from. We didn't want anyone interested in the rest of the game to be blocked by something they found morally wrong." Even if you do choose to play No Russian, it's possible to get through it without firing – given enough patience, Makarov's team will roll over all the opposition without any help, and without turning on you for your non-involvement.

In some ways this does No Russian a disservice. Allowing players to opt out implies, after all, that the sequence isn't necessary to the narrative, and thus reinforces the suggestion that it was included purely to scandalise. But in a

certain light, No Russian is more powerful for being optional. It's not just that the sequence prompts reflection on how willing players are to follow ethically dubious orders in videogames. Where All Ghillied Up is a

camouflaged celebration of player choice that invites you to push against the confines of the scenario structure, No Russian feels like calculated, vicious mockery of the desire for agency. It waltzes you through depictions of carnage without even granting you the courtesy of a central role, requiring only that you are present throughout. Then, it puts a bullet in your head as you're approaching the exit.

Makarov is a villain in a couple of senses. On the one hand, he's a genocidal maniac. But in a more enduring sense, he's a player-hater, a

"I COULD HAVE TAKEN IT TO A MUCH DARKER PLACE"



griever who denies you the meaningful participation games are supposed to provide, even if only on paper. Where MacMillan is your mentor but not your boss, Makarov's defining act is to punish you for the presumption of wanting any kind of control at all.

THE BIGGER THEY COME

It's harder to pick up on the detail of Alavi's design and scripting in the multiplayer-only *Titanfall* – the story beats in the 'campaign' mode are easily overlooked. The spectre of his work on the *Modern Warfare* series is almost palpable, however, in the game's mission intros, each a brisk but stylish first-person sequence that grounds the ensuing battle in the wider fiction.

Alavi bears much responsibility for the fact that *Titanfall* has a narrative component at all – he pushed for longer and different introductions to each campaign map, designing one for Airbase in three days to demonstrate this could be achieved within budget. His and *Modern Warfare's* influence is perhaps also apparent in how *Titanfall's* on-map AI allies support the player, though MOBAs are the more obvious comparison. They're at once scene-setting and a tactical resource, calling out the locations of enemy pilots and remarking on your actions as you pass.

Does Alavi ever miss *Call of Duty*? Seemingly not. "The *Call of Duty* games are well-made titles, but after this many years they are experiencing brand fatigue. I'm proud of my previous work, but more excited about being at

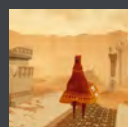
TACTICAL RESOURCES

Alavi's creative influences don't stop with videogames



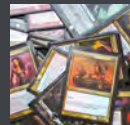
SAVE THE CAT

"Yes it's a book. No it's not about games, it's about screenwriting. More specifically it's about screenwriting for people who don't know how to write (like myself)... It might not be obvious, but I try to incorporate those lessons into every level I make."



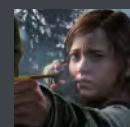
ICO, SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS & JOURNEY

"These three titles hold a special place in my heart for the same reason: beauty in simplicity. There's a [cheesy] quote that I honestly feel applies to good design: 'perfection isn't when there's nothing more to add, but nothing left to subtract'."



MAGIC: THE GATHERING

"This game is amazing. I hate it, I love it, I leave it, I come back to it, but I've always felt the designers of this series are geniuses. They've managed to keep a game relevant for over 20 years without really changing the core ruleset."



ANY NAUGHTY DOG GAME

"Every time they show something new, my reaction is always: 'How the hell did they do that?!' To baffle a 12-year industry veteran is impressive, and they do it every time, and I love them for it. *The Last of Us* especially is a masterclass."

Respawn Entertainment and the future of *Titanfall*." In general, he feels the FPS is in dire need of fresh thinking. "The genre has become so stagnant. People like to point to military shooters and say they all look the same, but to me, regardless of setting, all shooters kind of look the same these days."

Yet Alavi has limited patience for "gimmicks" like virtual reality or motion control; designers, he insists, remain the key to the industry's future. "Augmented reality is more viable in my opinion because the barrier into unfamiliar territory for the consumer is lower, but I'm a purist at heart. I still

believe that innovation will come from familiar concepts expertly juxtaposed to make something revolutionary."

It's a point amply supported by No Russian and All Ghillied Up, two missions that rely on many of the same approaches and devices as other *CoD* levels and of shooters in general, but which stand apart in the execution. As *Call of Duty* continues its attempts at reinvention, adding exosuits and singleplayer upgrades, it's worth reflecting on how much Alavi's grandest efforts achieve with comparatively little. I hope designers continue to follow in his footsteps. ■



Has something been lost in the move from ghillie suits to exosuits?

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

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

ALPHAS & BETAS

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

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

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

THEY'RE BACK

Old games revisited by our expert, with jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

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

Examples *Big Brother*

11%-39% Yikes. Technically broken, or so fundamentally flawed that it's ultimately not worth any time or money. Bad.

Examples *The War Z*, *Sonic: Lost World*

40%-49% This game is functional, but majorly flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Firefall*, *Star Trek*, *Armikrog*

50%-59% Mediocre. If it has any interesting ideas, they don't work well. Might suffer from bugs or technical issues.

Examples *Primordia*, *Painkiller: Hell & Damnation*

60%-69% An interesting idea poorly expressed, or a derivative idea executed averagely. Comes with caveats.

Examples *SimCity*, *Just Cause 3*, *Blood Bowl 2*

70%-79% Good, but not a classic. This score is a recommendation, just not a glowing one.

Examples *Broken Age*, *Batman: Arkham Knight*

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

Examples *Elite: Dangerous*, *Soma*, *Fallout 4*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Ahead of its time and important to PC gaming.

Examples *Rainbow Six Siege*, *Undertale*

95%-98% This is far and away one of the best games we've ever played, and we recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2*, *Kerbal Space Program*, *Spelunky*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Life-changing.



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

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The best of the best

Every month in the pages of PC Gamer magazine, we review a variety of good, average and bad games. In this section, we've collected our reviews of the best games you can play from the last couple of years, focusing on longer reads that allow you to get deeper into the games in question.

Hopefully the preceding pages have given you a broad scope of amazing games to play from the history of PC, but here you'll find the games that we're in love with now. From the intense, ever-changing turn-based strategy of *XCOM 2* to the complex mazes of *The Witness*, here's a host of PC games you can't go wrong with. Unless you hate mazes, in which case avoid *The Witness* at all cost.

Phil Savage

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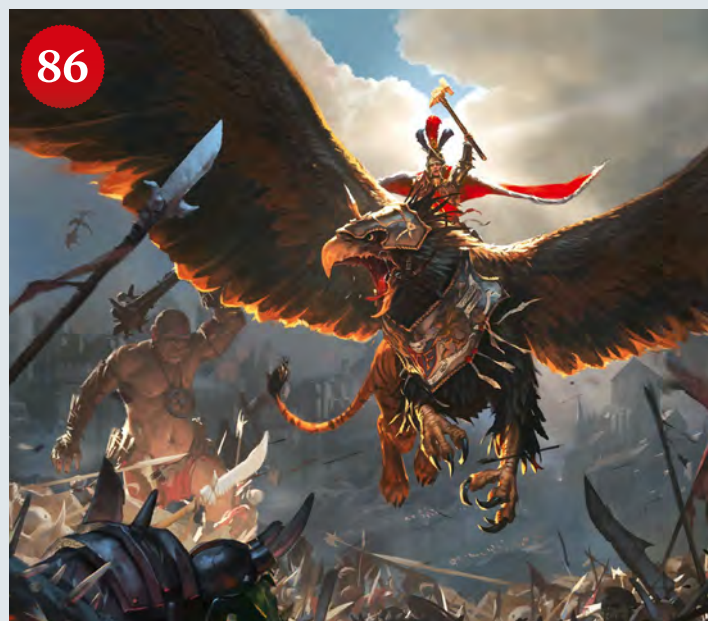
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WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via pcgamer@futurenet.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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Our panel of reviewers...



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Hitman, FPSes
Currently playing
Hitman
In this book
Reviewed *Hitman*,
Dishonored 2 and
Overwatch in this
shiny book.



SAMUEL ROBERTS
Specialist in
Sneaking, RPGs
Currently playing
Resident Evil 7
In this book
Reviewed *Metal Gear*
Solid V, the king of
stealth games.



TJ HAFER
Specialist in
Strategy, RPGs
Currently playing
Civilization VI
In this book
Was very taken with
Firaxis's long-awaited
sixth *Civilization*
game.



EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL
Specialist in
Puzzles, narrative
Currently playing
The Witness
In this book
Solved an absolute ton
of mazes to review *The*
Witness for you.



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
FPSes, narrative
Currently playing
Doom
In this book
Punched his way
through the demons
of 2016's *Doom*.



TOM SENIOR
Specialist in
Strategy, Warhammer
Currently playing
Long War 2
In this book
Reviewed *XCOM 2* and
gave it a big score. Tom
reckons you could play
it forever.



TONY ELLIS
Specialist in
Words, RPGs
Currently playing
Baldur's Gate
In this book
PC Gamer's brand
guardian edited all of
the words found in
these pages.



**“AS GOOD AS ITS PREDECESSOR, AND
FREQUENTLY BETTER”**

PUBLIC EMILY #1

There's a new king of immersive sims.
It's **DISHONORED 2**. By Phil Savage

The most dismissive thing I can say about *Dishonored 2* is that it's a lot like *Dishonored* – one of my favourite games of all time. At its worst, it offers a similar experience to its predecessor, which is to say, it offers tens of hours of extraordinary first-person stealth and action. Frequently, *Dishonored 2* does more than that. While the moment-to-moment experience is broadly the same, the whole thing is elevated by both small, crucial details and big set-piece missions. Put simply: it's brilliant.

Set 15 years after the events of the first game, *Dishonored 2* follows either Empress Emily Kaldwin or her father, Corvo Attano. Emily is deposed, on the anniversary of her mother's assassination, after a coup by the Duke of Serkonos. You, as either Emily or Corvo – a choice made at the start of the game – must escape Dunwall and travel to the southern city of Karnaca, the home of the Duke's cabal of conspirators. I'm deliberately skipping over a lot of plot, but the upshot is what you'd expect: a hit list of traitors to murder or disable, this time with the goal of taking back the throne.

As in *Dishonored*, your targets are people of means. They're protected, and getting to them requires either a lot of sneaking, a lot of stabbing, or a lot of stopping time, possessing the guard who just tried to shoot you, and walking him in front of his own

bullet. Emily and Corvo have magical murder powers, granted by the mysterious Outsider – think Star Trek's Q if he'd grown up listening to My Chemical Romance. Emily and Corvo have different sets of abilities, but you won't be able to fully upgrade all of them. *Dishonored 2*, like all great

immersive sims, is about choice and consequence. Where do you go? What do you do? Which eldritch horror do you inflict on that poor, unsuspecting guard?

You can trace *Dishonored 2*'s lineage

back to Looking Glass and Ion Storm, and the design philosophies of games such as *Thief* and *Deus Ex*. It's not just that this is a first-person game that lets you choose between sneaking or combat, between lethality or pacifism. The legacy of these early-2000s classics is of worlds that follow consistent rules, allowing you to plan your actions safe in the

Like all great immersive sims, it's about choice and consequence

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Thief*-like immersive sim about magical assassins.

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Arkane Studios
PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

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

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.dishonored.com



knowledge that things will either work as they should, or go hilariously wrong for reasons that, in hindsight, make sense.

I'm surprised, for example, when a guard is immolated after I shoot him with a sleep dart. But it happens for a reason. In *Dishonored 2*, certain bottles of alcohol burst into flame when smashed – a trick useful for burning down the nests of Karnaca's parasitic bloodflies. This is a universal rule that exists outside of the player's direct involvement – a rule that can trigger when, for instance, a recently tranquillised guard drops their drinking glass onto a bottle. It's not about realism – this is a game in which one of the main characters has a parkour tentacle – but it works, and feels immersive, because everything has its own defining laws within the fiction. The biggest joy of *Dishonored 2* is in discovering these systems, and manipulating them to your own ends. That wouldn't work if you couldn't trust in its simulation of the world.

MISSING IN ACTION

Having played through the game once, and after replaying a couple of sections to try alternate solutions, I trust *Dishonored 2*'s simulation. It knows what its players will try, and always seems to have an answer. The first time I played the opening mission, I killed my target. Later, a guard announced to his men that their leader was dead. The second time through, I again killed my target, but hid his body in a secret room, locking the door behind me. This time, the guard announced that their leader was missing. With no way to access the room containing his corpse, his fate remained a mystery.

It's a tiny thing – a single voice line – but it builds that trust. It would make sense for the game to treat dead or alive as a binary state, but *Dishonored 2* knows that these details are important. It respects your ingenuity, acknowledging when you've done something clever. This is ➤

HEADS OF STATE Will you play Empress or Protector?

CORVO

- Can summon wind
- Can summon rats
- Teleportation
- Good stubble
- Can stop time, attach a spring razor mine to a guard's back, then teleport-kick him into his buddies, eviscerating them



EMILY

- Can turn into a shadow monster
- Can create clones
- Parkour tentacle
- Good dress sense
- Can link guards, then use Far Reach to grab and pull one into a rewired Wall of Light, incinerating them all

» taken to the extreme during a later mission, A Crack In The Slab. I'll be aggravatingly vague to avoid spoilers, but an act of petty revenge resulted in a change so far outside my expectations that I can't help but marvel. This isn't an objective, nor even something hinted at by the game's achievements, but it's something possible – arguably even obvious – within that mission's conceit, and the payoff is impressive for something so few people will see.

Abilities, too, have their rules within the world. I played as Emily, whose power set feels tailored for sitting and thinking through the possibilities of your approach. Her best power, Domino, lets you link multiple characters together. What happens to one then happens to them all. Choke out one, and the others fall asleep. Stab one, and the others drop dead. Emily also has a power called Mesmerise, which, when fully upgraded, can hypnotise up to three people, letting you pass by unseen.

The limitation of Mesmerise is that often a room will contain more than three people, and the others will be alerted by the gibberish of their hypnotised friends. But if Mesmerise is an effect applied to a person, then can't it be transmitted via Domino? Sure enough, it can. Thanks to this, I'm able to set up great chains of hypnotised guards – strolling through busier rooms without a care.

SEE EMILY PLAY

Another power, Doppelganger, enables Emily to create a clone of herself that distracts guards. It, too, is a physical humanoid entity, and so it, too, can be linked with Domino. That's bad news for any linked guards that catch up to and shoot the clone. I love this stuff. While each power has its own, basic use, the implications of the systems create so many possibilities when they're used in combination.

In addition to powers, Emily and Corvo have a multitude of weapons and tools. Many will be familiar to players of *Dishonored*, from the pistol and crossbow, to the spring razor mines that shred any enemy unfortunate enough to get near. The crossbow gets a couple of additional bolt types, and like many of

Dishonored 2's changes, they're designed to give more options to non-lethal players. Howling bolts blind and deafen enemies, while stinging bolts cause them to flee in agonising pain. More than ever, *Dishonored 2* realises that stealth and non-lethal options aren't one and the same, and takes steps to provide tools that cater to both methods.

You can kill silently, sneak by undetected, burst into a room and render everyone unconscious, or murder everything in a cacophony of grenades, guns and rat swarms. This is reflected in direct combat, too. Swordplay is no longer a fight to the death. Parry an attack, and you have the option to disable your opponent with a chokehold. It won't work if you're surrounded, but there are other options for that and, once again, they aren't all lethal.

I enjoy stealth, but play stealth games in the most infuriating way – quickloading the moment I'm spotted. Here, though, it turns out I like playing non-lethally. I'm fine

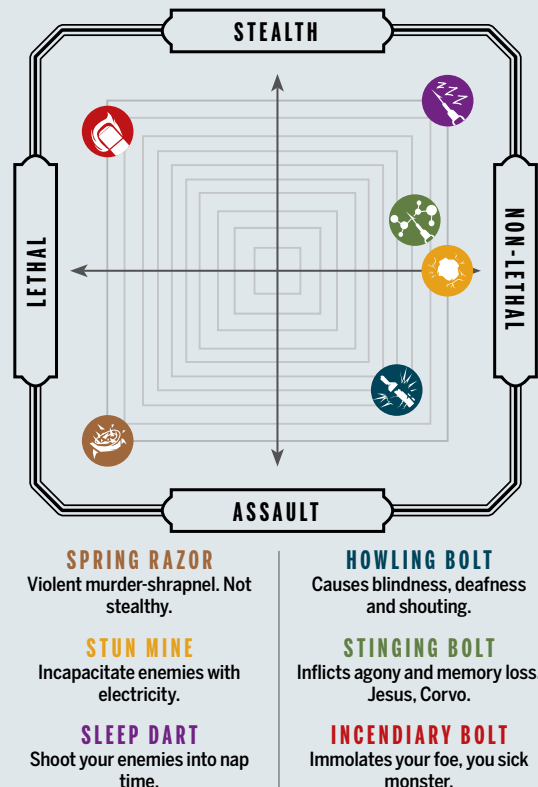
with being spotted, as long as everybody is incapacitated with their head still attached and their miscellaneous viscera intact. In one mission I was spotted more than 20 times, something I would have balked at

in the original *Dishonored*. Here, it was a number that reflected some panicked action sequence, a liberal use of sleep darts, and a cool shadow walk power that lets you render a target unconscious with a quick tendrill to the head.

If Emily has the more manipulative powerset, Corvo is your man for getting into a fight. Possession is a great, broad stealth ability with applications outside of combat, but Windblast is a boon for crowd control, and Devouring Swarm is a literal, lethal swarm of devouring rats. While Corvo's base powers are the same as those available in the original game, each now has multiple upgrade options. Blink – the short-range teleport that is the bread-and-butter of your traversal options – can be upgraded for a longer distance, but also to knock down enemies if Corvo blinks into them. Far Reach, Emily's parkour tentacle, functions almost identically, except that its upgrade lets you pull enemies

MORALITY PLAY

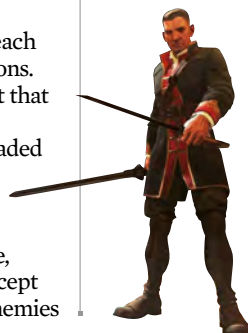
How your tools help define your style



towards you, killing or knocking them unconscious in mid-air.

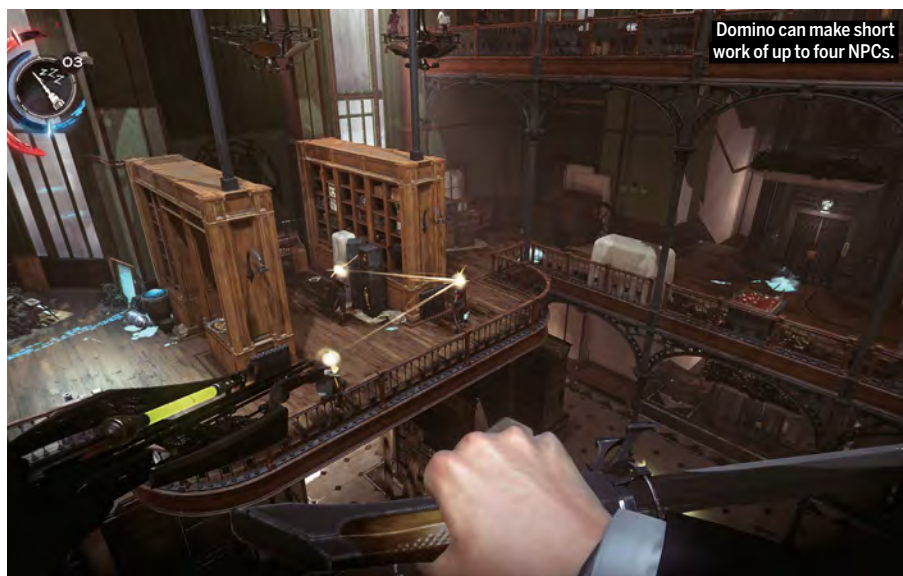
What powers you chose to upgrade should be defined by your emerging playstyle. If you want to take out multiple enemies at once, go for Doppelganger's final upgrade – two clones of Emily who'll fight alongside her. If you want the breathing space to escape a bad situation, Corvo's Bend Time can, with its final upgrade, pause the action entirely.

Each mission has an objective, and usually a prescribed solution to let you complete it non-lethally, but the route to that point is a systemic sandbox of possibilities. More importantly, those interactions feel good. Swordfighting is basic, but can be enlivened with some creative motion – sprinting, sliding and jumping to maximise a sort of frenetic survivability. Stealth is considered and satisfying, and imbued with the thrill of unpredictability – the guards feel less robotic, thanks to the natural fluidity of their pathing.





Dishonored is a series about sad men on boats.



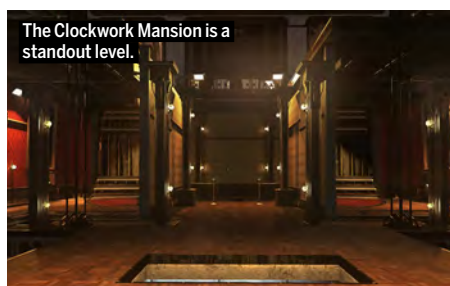
Domino can make short work of up to four NPCs.



You know it's a good immersive sim when you can peek in rooms.



The Clockwork Mansion is a standout level.



You can combo powers for interesting effects.



The whale population is dwindling. This is why.



It wouldn't be a conspiracy without red string.



When you're lethal, you're very lethal.



Mesmerise is a weird looking power. Hypnotic, almost.



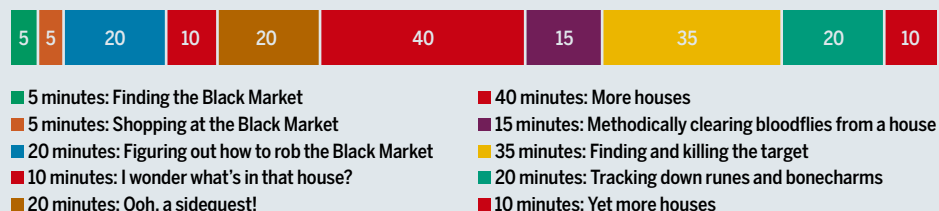
Corvo is looking about 40% more dad these days.

Then there's climbing, which, as in *Dishonored*, is a delight. It's a pleasure to leap from balcony to balcony, either using Blink or Far Reach, or putting your trust in the mantling system. *Dishonored 2*'s environments feel huge, and part of that is how vertical each location can be. Not every building can be explored, but there are enough balconies and rooftops to create winding routes overhead. This is just one of the ways *Dishonored 2* distinguishes itself from the recent *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*. That game did stealth well, but many of its primary methods of traversal felt less polished, and the levels, while large and open, didn't have the same sense of scale found here.

Where Dunwall was a caricature of Victorian London, Karnaca is southern Europe. It's bright and sunny, with attractive buildings sprawling across hills overlooking the glistening water. And yet, while a stark contrast to the grey, drab Dunwall, it's no less dark or grimy. Landing at the docks, your first sight is a long channel of blood, winding down from the fisheries and out to the ocean. Quarantined buildings are covered in sheets, warning people of the deadly bloodfly infestations within. Even the brickwork is stained and grubby. The beauty is a facade. Scratch the surface and you'll find squalor and suffering.

That's a premise reflected in the writing, too – one of *Dishonored 2*'s strongest elements. The world is full of notes and diaries, often referring to characters who appear over multiple missions. There are individual stories of love, heartbreak, triumph and failure, and larger, more detailed explorations of choices and their consequence. There's a lot to read, if you want to engage with the deeper stories of this world. And if you don't, there's a lot to loot. I mentioned *Dishonored 2*'s Thiefling, but the direct comparison is that much of my time was spent poking into people's drawers and cupboards looking for things to sell. A black market is available on each level where you can spend this coin, but for me illicit finance wasn't the attraction. It's just incredibly satisfying to systematically work through a building, tracking down its valuables.

TIME OUT *How to waste three hours in one mission*



Even on a higher level, the writing feels more nuanced and subtle than in the original game. Things were rarely black or white in *Dishonored*, but here the motives often feel more desperate – there's a sense that the inequalities of this world have forced people into a corner. This also applies to your targets. They've done bad things for bad reasons, but the route of their choices is often something more sympathetically tragic.

While Karnaca has an aesthetic theme, each level offers something new – either visually, thematically, or, in the best cases, systemically. The two standout missions, The Clockwork Mansion and A Crack In The Slab, are fascinating – the former taking stealth exploration and

pathfinding to an ingenious extreme; the latter committing the cardinal sin of restricting your abilities, but more than making up for it with a strong central hook applied masterfully in both presentation and execution. Both were shown off in pre-release videos, but I won't reveal their central mechanics on the off-chance that you avoided such spoilers.

LEFT UNSAID

Dishonored 2 is also a story about its protagonists, who here are more than just vessels for the player. In *Dishonored*, Corvo was ultimately a cypher whose personality was expressed through action. That comes across here, too, but Emily is also a character with a proper story arc. Although that said, some of the internal dialogue isn't as revealing as I'd have liked. Often, it's short statements – sometimes limited to just saying the name of the conspirator whose portrait I'm inspecting. Surely the actions of these characters warrant a bit more

introspection? The protagonists often think in broad, crude strokes, at odds with the subtleties of the people around them.

This is one of only a few, minor complaints that I have. (Another being that the new lean system is a bit awkward, requiring that you hold down the Alt-key for fine control, and even then often not working as smoothly as I'd like.) Fortunately, my other major complaint has since been fixed. The launch version of *Dishonored 2* was a mess, with performance problems resulting in low framerates and control issues – even on a GTX 970. The patch, released a week after launch, seems to have done the trick. *Dishonored 2* is still demanding – you'll need a powerful PC to get the most out of it – but it is at least now playable for those not comfortably above its recommended hardware requirements. This is still not acceptable. Even in a world of Steam refunds, it shouldn't be too much to ask for a game to work on release.

I'm happy it's fixed, because *Dishonored 2* is a game I want to celebrate. It's easily as good as its predecessor, and frequently better. As much as I've delved into the specifics of each individual system, what makes *Dishonored 2* so exceptional is how they're all connected. The writing sheds light on the world, which sheds light on the systems, which sheds light on the environments and characters. For everything that works in isolation, the real trick is that *Dishonored 2* feels unified – a powerful piece of world building where everything happens for a reason. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

A rich, detailed world, tense stealth and frenetic action. *Dishonored 2* is up there with the best immersive sims.

93

X-TRAORDINARY

The aliens strike back in the exceptional strategy sequel, **XCOM 2**.

By Tom Senior

Deep inside your flying base is a bar dedicated to fallen soldiers. It has a list of each soldier's name, time of death, and the operation they died in. It's a trigger for dark memories. Reading down I remember one soldier crushed to death by a giant snake, another burnt to death in a ruined office. Another shot dead then psychically resurrected to fight her friends. Operation Dismal Window was a bad day for rookie Neel Mehra. Sergeant Flynn Hudson bit the dust in Operation Half-Eaten Tears. If it wasn't obvious from XCOM's ominous naming convention for operations, this is a tough gig. But these are the heroes you'll remember when the lasers stop. These are the fallen stars in this gruelling, outstanding strategy game.

Humanity seems doomed from the outset in *XCOM 2*. The game assumes you failed in your attempts to repel the alien invasion in *Enemy Unknown*. Now Earth's citizens live a coddled life under the totalitarian control of the aliens and their co-opted soldiery, Advent. The resistance lives on only in the form of a few determined soldiers, scientists and engineers who have managed to repurpose a huge alien ship, the Avenger. This is your home.

A detailed cross-section of the vessel lets you zoom into rooms to initiate research and building projects. A central cluster of rooms can be cleared out to build new facilities, and on the bridge you access the Geoscape, a map of the world that lets you choose where you want to park your spacecraft.

To fight back, you must expand your reach from your lone starting territory by contacting nearby resistance groups. Time is frozen on the Geoscape, but when you park over an objective – make resistance contact; acquire resources; contact

the black market – you activate a timer and spend precious days to claim it. This is nerve-racking. At any moment your scans can be interrupted by an alien attack, or a mission that will let you attack the aliens.

You can choose to ignore some of these, but it's not wise. Missions net you important resources, give your soldiers a chance to gain experience, and counter 'Dark Events' – varied alien initiatives that, among many options, can half your income for a month, or send an interceptor out to hunt The Avenger.

The moment the timer freezes during a scan, I stop breathing

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A turn-based strategy game about fighting aliens who've already won.

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

Firaxis

PUBLISHER

2K Games

REVIEWED ON

Intel i5-7690K, 8 GB RAM, GTX970

MULTIPLAYER

Two-player turn-based battles

LINK

www.xcom.com

Just describing the strategic layer doesn't capture the rhythm of success and setback that makes it so gripping. The game cleverly uses scarcity of opportunity to force you into difficult dilemmas. At any one time you might have only six possible scan sites, while combat encounters are largely meted out by the game, but what you choose to do with this narrow range of options matters enormously. You need to recruit new rookies; you need an engineer to build a comms facility that will let you contact more territories; you need alien alloys to upgrade your weapons. You can't have all of these. You can probably only have one. In 1989 Sid Meier described games as "a series of interesting decisions." *XCOM 2* is the purest expression of that ethos that Firaxis has yet produced.

Brilliantly, you even have to scan to collect your monthly cache of supplies, hidden in the landscape to escape alien detection. I have left supplies on the ground for a week because I needed to recruit an engineer. I needed to hit an alien base to reduce the Avatar Project count – a doom clock that is very bad news if it maxes out. I needed Advent corpses to get a vital armour upgrade. I needed a cup of tea because it was all getting a bit too much. This narrow series of opportunities fits the fantasy perfectly. You take whatever you can get. You're scraping food and fuel out of the dirt to keep The Avenger in the air.

DEAD OR ALIVE Which of these choices will save this soldier's life?

1 RUN BLINDLY INTO WOODS

There's no cover over there and it's probably full of aliens anyway. You're doomed.

2 ATTACK ENEMY

You're not in cover and you're damaged, which means his return fire could kill you instantly.



3 HIDE BEHIND CACTUS

Almost. The cactus is heavy cover, but that soldier on the far left will flank attack you.

4 TAKE COVER BEHIND ROCK

Correct. The rock protects from all enemies, and gives you flanking bonuses.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

The moment the timer freezes during a scan, I stop breathing. There's a notification screen you have to click through to find out what is about to try to kill you – I swear this is intentional, to let the sense of dread register for a second or two. If you're lucky, it's the council getting in touch to give you a thumbs-up and tell you they've dropped some sandwiches for you in South America. If you're unlucky you'll be faced with *XCOM 2*'s equivalent of *Enemy Unknown*'s

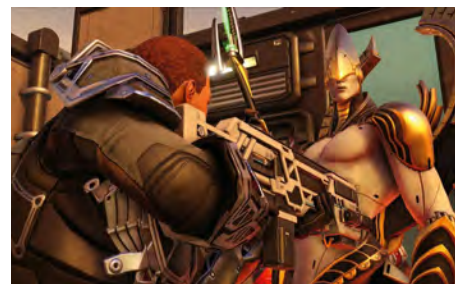


ALIEN ACTIVITY

Sometimes cover can't save you from giant lasers.



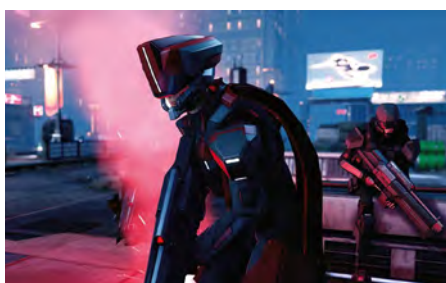
Regulation sunglasses help pistoliers stay cool.



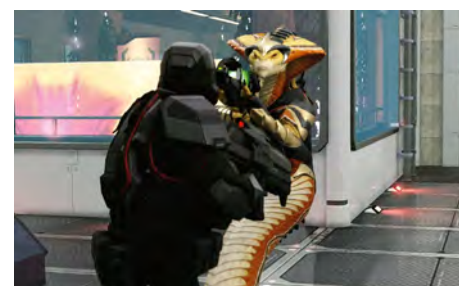
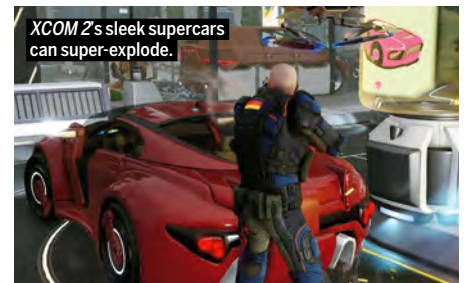
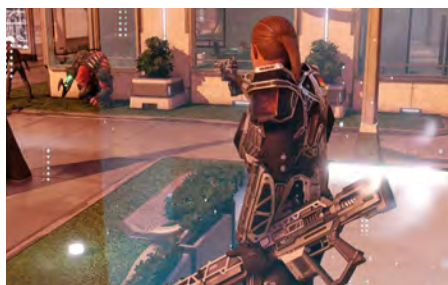
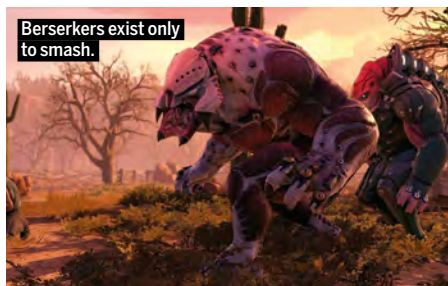
Gatling guns let you create your own Predator moments.



Sarah Connor, shortly before being mauled by a Muton.



In time you can use your own bright purple psychic powers.



» Terror missions. Dubbed Retaliation, these once again ask you to rescue civilians from the battlefield while the aliens' best troops try to annihilate them. I have to steel myself for every fight, knowing that a bad performance could ruin my plans.

Combat is turn-based, and takes place on procedural battlefields that are uncannily well generated. Only once have I seen a truck spawned partly into a wall. For the vast majority of battles the terrain is busy, interesting, and benefits from a huge leap in visual fidelity from *Enemy Unknown*. The snowy forests, slums, city centres and alien bases are varied both in decorative assets such as sleek futuristic cars and fluffy trees, and in the verticality provided by cliffs and multi-storey buildings.

They blow up nicely, too. I'll commonly grenade a wall to remove cover and offer my soldiers high-chance shots at a target. To my surprise, I also discovered that soldiers running around above ground level can fall through the floor if they're in a burning building. Explosions can start fires that propagate, blocking floor tiles. One of my grenades started a fire next to a terminal I had to hack. Sending a soldier to stand in that fire and hack the console was not one of my finest *XCOM* moments.

The four soldier classes have been revamped. *Enemy Unknown* players will recognise the suppressive heavy-weapon capabilities of the grenadier, and the sniping ability of the sharpshooter, but both can access new abilities that alter their jobs. The sharpshooter's gunslinger skills, earned by levelling up, can turn them into an effective mid-range pistolier who can take out multiple enemies in style, while the grenadier can improve the explosive potential of their grenade launcher, effectively merging *Enemy Unknown*'s heavy and support roles in one class.

The other two classes are less familiar. The specialist has a drone, which can move around the battlefield to heal allies, zap enemies, or hack alien comms towers, and also has robots to disable or even temporarily steal units. The ranger fills the speedy, close-range role formerly occupied by the assault class, but they have a sword for

SUIT UP

You won't survive a minute without good gear



1 Attachments dropped by the foe can improve your weapons. You also change colour and patterning, for fashion's sake.

2 Specialist drones are cute. More importantly, they can heal and revive allies in dangerous positions at no risk to their operator.

3 Better armour not only improves the health of your troops, it gives them extra pockets to carry grenades or special ammo.

4 The ranger's sword, used well, can take out mighty enemies in a single blow, but it can also leave your soldier badly exposed.

5 To hear your international team cursing aliens in their own language, check the international audio box in the options.

high-risk, high-damage charge attacks, and therefore win. They can also pursue the scout skill track, which lets them strike very effectively from stealth.

HUNTING THE HUNTERS

Stealth is new. You start most battles incognito, and can freely move around the map without being attacked, as long as you stay out of the red detection range of enemies, lingering civilians, and watchtowers. By putting most of your units in overwatch – the staple *XCOM* move that gives your soldiers free reaction shots against movement in the enemy turn – you can set up deeply

satisfying ambushes.

With my trap primed, I use my sharpshooter to break stealth and get a near-certain kill shot on the most dangerous enemy. As the alien mob scatters, their movement activates fire from the rest of my

team. The camera swoops between them as they open up, shredding the enemy in glorious slow-motion.

Once concealment is broken, life becomes much more difficult. Successful shots are dictated by chance rolls, and you secure favourable odds by staying in good cover and flanking. A poor move or a stroke of bad luck can wipe out a soldier, or take them out of action for days. Time-limited objectives to hack a terminal or rescue/assassinate a VIP in a certain number of turns force you to be reckless. What's more, all alien variants, bar the lowest tier of enemy soldier, have the capacity to be incredibly disruptive. The lowly

Sectoids of *Enemy Unknown* are all grown up, and can mind-control your troops and resurrect corpses.

I won't ruin the surprise and horror of the more advanced alien troops, but a couple left me in despair after a massacre, wondering if I had the soldiers and the ability to go on. I slowly fought back. I recruited new troops, built new technology, got better at the game, and was left elated, feeling I'd conquered a impossible task. Strategy games just don't normally feel like this.

There's more you're better off discovering for yourself, like the weapon mods, extensive troop customisation, Psi-ops warriors, exo-skeletal suits and the story, told over a series of special missions.

I can find little to criticise. The camera occasionally wafts through walls in close-ups, there's sometimes a lengthy pause before the character you're watching acts. A lack of foreknowledge in your first playthrough will hurt your ability to plan, too, forcing you to be more reactive, though the constant flow of new enemy types and story missions makes up for that. Thanks to your varying starting position, procedural missions and tactical depth, *XCOM 2* can and should be played repeatedly.

I already have plans to build a proper unit of psychic soldiers, and a stealthy all-ranger scout squad in my next run. Those aliens won't know what hit them. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Exceptionally tough, rewarding strategy and a masterful reworking of the *XCOM* formula. We'll play this forever.

94



REVIEW

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain



**“METAL GEAR SOLID V CELEBRATES
YOUR CHOICES AND INGENUITY”**

SOLID GOLD

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN is a landmark-making stealth sandbox masterpiece. *By Samuel Roberts*

I've failed this assassination mission three times now. Each attempt, while searching for an enemy informant who can tell me where my target is, I'm almost immediately spotted by an enemy guard tower in a nearby camp. Spooked by the sudden gunfire, my potential victim makes a prompt getaway by helicopter. The chopper moves too fast for me to hit it, and it's gone. Mission failed. But how about this: screw the informant.

How can my target escape if I make sure there's no helicopter to begin with? The getaway chopper I'm looking for doesn't just spawn out of nowhere – like everything in *The Phantom Pain*, it's part of the environment, circling a hill, waiting for its passenger. I track the helicopter down based on its flight path from my three previously failed attempts and hose it with my grenade launcher until it's in flames. I just got rid of the problem.

Within five minutes, I've killed both my target and the informant by accident, firing rockets randomly at anything that moves. Master Miller, who guides me through the mission, isn't pleased I killed the informant without interrogating him first, but the game doesn't mind. Mission complete.

Metal Gear Solid V celebrates your choices and ingenuity more than any sandbox game I've played in years. This mission, and so many others, allows players to figure out the strategy that works for them and run with it. This is a reinvented, systemic *Metal Gear Solid* with an almost *Far Cry*-like open-world structure, elevated significantly by the choices and subsequent one-off moments you'd encounter in a *Hitman* or *Deus Ex*. Crucially, too, *The Phantom Pain* retains the oddness, detail and some of the character of the *MGS* series.

A few of my stealth playthroughs that suddenly went wrong became my favourite moments in *MGSV*. I forfeited a perfect kill-free stealth run of one mission because I couldn't get a good enough sniper angle on my

target before he took off in a chopper. Sprinting up flights of stairs to the helipad, my victim spotted me just in time for me to throw every grenade in my inventory under the chopper, destroying it, vanquishing him and knocking me over, before I made a ludicrously frantic escape on horseback. It was amazing, and I'm

not sure it would've been vastly improved had I silently shot the guy and snuck out.

The punishment for a stealth mission going wrong is an exhilarating set-piece in a constantly surprising open world.

I've had weird and wild gunfights of unending nightmare across giant bases, battling hordes of soldiers, mechs and even a chopper, as an

Nighttime battlefields fill with smoke, flares and explosions

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world stealth sim rooted in the series' complex history.

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Kojima Productions

PUBLISHER
Konami

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5 4460@3.2GHz,
8GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 780

MULTIPLAYER
Coming soon

LINK
www.konami.jp/mgs5

ill-equipped one-man-and-a-dog army. Nighttime battlefields fill with smoke, flares and explosions. I've had to hide from swarming troops and mortar fire behind buildings, patting my dog for reassurance while I call in more ammo drops, preparing for my second wind as the night gradually turns into morning.

HAPPY ACCIDENT

Some hardcore players will never want to find themselves in that position. But when the controls are this good, when your tactical options are so extensive, it's in no way a bad thing to be part of these escalating, huge-scale battles, which offer the sort of moment-to-moment thrills most action games would struggle to script. Embrace it when things go wrong in *MGSV*. Nothing boring ever happens when it does.

The goal that guides every level is to sneak through environments without being caught by the enemy – if they spot Snake (aka Big Boss), an alert phase ensues until you can lose his attackers. *The Phantom Pain*'s story missions take Snake to one of two enormous military sandboxes: »

SNAKE'S BUDDIES

What do a dog, a horse, a mech and a woman in pants have in common?



D-HORSE

The easiest way to get around Afghanistan without stealing an enemy vehicle.

STRENGTHS

Offers a quick way out of hairy situations. You can shoot from horseback.

WEAKNESSES

A bit awkward to steer, has no function in combat by himself.



D-DOG

Wild dog puppy who Snake rescues early on, which later grows into a big scary bastard.

STRENGTHS

Senses enemies around you, and can attack or distract soldiers.

WEAKNESSES

None, he is a dog.



QUIET

Enemy sniper-turned-ally who wears a ludicrous bikini-and-pants combo to battle for some reason.

STRENGTHS

Picks off enemies at a distance, gets deadlier with time.

WEAKNESSES

Isn't always that trigger-savvy in the heat of battle.



D-WALKER

An armoured mech walker with custom weapon and gadget kits. A hi-tech marriage of dog and horse.

STRENGTHS

Fast and well-armed if you prefer a loud, explosive approach.

WEAKNESSES

Snake sticks his arse out and looks a bit daft driving it.



HOW I BUILT YOUR MOTHER

The different divisions on Mother Base and what they do



COMBAT UNIT PLATFORM

Send your best soldiers on mercenary missions to bring back monetary and resource rewards for no work.



R&D PLATFORM

These guys develop weapons and other upgrades, and they need to be of a certain level for you to unlock the more powerful firearms.



BASE DEVELOPMENT

Base development guys go off and find building or fuel resources for you, so Snake has to do less farming.



SUPPORT

Responsible for dropping your equipment into the field. The better they are, the faster your shotgun ammo arrives.



INTEL

Will scout out rough enemy locations on the map, and get faster and more accurate readings as you level them up.



MEDICAL

These guys treat the Mother Base staff, who I pay no attention to as I roam the open world on horseback with a grenade launcher.

the cliffs and plains of a Soviet-populated Afghanistan, and later, the swampy Angola-Zaire border. Out in these environments, *MGSV* throws together smart AI, uncontrollable weather situations and varied types of locations in ways that frequently generate new stories. The mission objectives tend to be a bit basic on the surface – extract this guy, assassinate this informant, stop this convoy – but what happens along the way is often unexpected and almost always exciting.

Heading into a mission, you pick Snake a limited loadout of two primary weapons, one sidearm, and explosives. Importantly though, you can also have anything from your armoury sent to the battlefield at any time via Snake's iDroid device. Crossing the ten-hour mark, this range of instantly accessible options expands into AI companions of varying skillsets, airstrikes that let Snake summon fire from the skies, helicopters that can provide supporting fire and lots more. As someone who's enjoyed the entire series, I see this as a natural progression from *Metal Gear*'s mini stealth sandboxes into something that realises the potential that was there all along, without any compromises.

As a result, the balance between game and story has now shifted significantly in favour of the former. It's so different to previous numbered *Metal Gears* in its lack of cutscenes that it takes some getting used to. Such narrative as there is, you'll find pretty sober and convincingly serious for a series known for elderly snipers, vampires and men who can fire killer

bees. In *The Phantom Pain*, it's 1984 and Snake is attempting to rebuild his military offshore haven Mother Base following its destruction at the end of *Ground Zeroes*. Having been in a coma for nine years, he's seeking revenge on those responsible. After a deliberately confusing, scripted intro set in a hospital, in which Snake escapes a horrific military attack, story is limited to a few brief cutscenes and a lot of optional, occasionally interesting audio tapes.

The lack of an intrusive story and the focus on unscripted sandbox action makes *The Phantom Pain* feel very contemporary and easy to recommend to new players. That modern approach extends to basic things that *MGS* has always struggled

with, such as the way Snake moves.

The Phantom Pain shares *Ground Zeroes*' intuitive third-person control scheme, which means it's as much fun to play *MGSV* like a shooter as a stealth

game. It's important that they got this right, because there's a lot to consider at once here: marking enemies in nearby settlements using the binoculars, switching to first-person aim with a gun and sneaking up behind soldiers to interrogate them all feel really easy to pull off. While you can remap the keyboard controls, I recommend using a controller for *MGSV* because the menus were built with that in mind.

SANS FRONTIERES

It took me a decent chunk of my 50-odd hours with *MGSV* to learn the way everything works. In the field, visibility is affected by the

day-and-night cycle, and when you're deep into an enemy base and the sun comes up, it can be the difference between a perfect stealth playthrough or the final set-piece from an '80s action movie. I love this as an unpredictable factor in a stealth game, as well as the changing weather, such as sandstorms and rain. It's dramatic and exciting to have something game-changing happen mid-mission that you can't control.

The list of stuff to do in *The Phantom Pain* is divided into main story missions and Side Ops, and while the latter is mostly composed of optional missions, there are some key shards of story within them, too. It's almost like an RPG quest structure, with both strands earning you GMP, *MGSV*'s currency.

Rebuilding Mother Base is the foundation of the story, but it's also the metagame that ties everything together. This is where you'll spend GMP, and use resources found all over the open world, such as fuel or plants. It's both an offshore platform that's Snake's explorable home between missions and a slightly dull management sim that takes place in menus on the iDroid, but the rewards are definitely worth it.

There's another side to this, too. In the field, you can kidnap stunned or sleeping (not dead) soldiers using the Fulton Recovery System, which attaches tiny balloons to them and sends them back to Mother Base to join your army. You can then assign them to the various divisions (see 'how I built your mother') based on what their skills are best suited to. The Fulton system can also airlift animals from the field, leading to funny images of goats looking confused in mid-air, and later it can



It's exciting to have something game-changing happen mid-mission



A grenade launcher in a stealth game? Outrageous!



The face of a man who's killed a lot of robots.



Mission zones can get pretty hairy.



Look how silly Snake looks riding this thing.

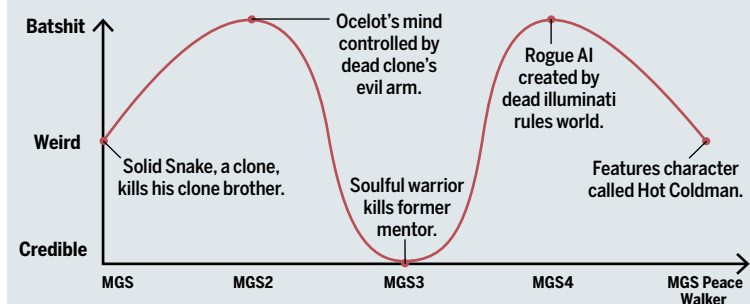


It's a sparse but gorgeous world.



GEARS OF WHA?

A brief history of Metal Gear's oddest moments



➤ be used to bring home whole vehicles and shipping containers.

Mother Base is not a particularly fun space to be in, to be honest, aside from when you're beating up your loyal troops for no reason. What makes it worth the time is that levelling up your divisions is the key to unlocking new weapons, equipment or any other sort of upgrades. Each weapon type has a tech tree: a tranquilliser dart gun can become a more powerful one with a better clip and damage, and so on. New weapon blueprints are found all over the two environments, and the thrill of researching a new grenade launcher and having it instantly dropped into the battlefield is similar to the joy you get from an RPG crafting system.

Some of the upgrades are frivolous but awesome: you don't need speakers on your attack helicopter to play music, but why not go full Kilgore and have it play Ride of the Valkyries to scare the shit out of the Russians? Music pops up all over the world on collectable tapes, such as A-ha's Take On Me or Kids In America by Kim Wilde, and you can both listen to them on Snake's Walkman and have them blare out of your helicopter's speakers. Custom music works, too.

Upgrades also play a key role with Snake's four AI 'buddy' support units in the game (see 'Snake's buddies'). Like your weapons, you can call in a new buddy and swap out the old one at any time with the iDroid, another refreshing layer of flexibility, and they progress in interesting ways. You can

order your sniper, Quiet, to provide covering fire, tell your dog to attack enemies or order your horse to do a shit. Which makes enemy jeeps skid out of control, if you were wondering.

PEACE WALKTHROUGH

You can use all of these options or none of them – that's the point. And don't worry if this array of stuff to do sounds overwhelming: Kojima Productions sensibly drip-feeds you these elements over the first ten hours so you know how to use them all. I found the journey to figuring out my optimal loadouts to be tremendous fun.

Why not go full Kilgore and have it play Ride of the Valkyries?

I've seen all of *The Phantom Pain*'s elements feature separately in other games, but not brought together in quite this way. I love that the end-of-mission scoring system rewards a multitude of different playstyles, and not just the stealth-only approach. While there are heavy bonuses for ghosting and penalties for being caught by the enemy, you're also strongly rewarded for headshots or speed. This encourages players to be more experimental, and not to feel like it's the end of the world if they're spotted. This is a game where it feels great to fire a gun, and you'll have dozens in your inventory. You should definitely use them.

I recommend *The Phantom Pain* without question to someone unfamiliar with the series. In fact, I think existing *Metal Gear* fans will be the hardest for *The Phantom Pain* to win over: the structure is just so different. But once I reached the eight-hour mark, I realised how in love with it I was, and how much

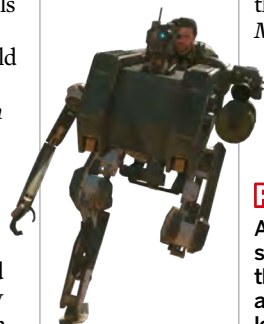
fun I was having just doing daft stuff like trying to blow up a bear with C4, lobbing a sleeping guard off a cliff to his death or Fulton-ing a tank into the air with a dude inside just because I was too lazy to blow it up. They've built a world that lets these moments happen constantly, and it never stops being impressive.

The environmental design feeds into this madness perfectly, and some of the backdrops to missions are gigantic, with many points of entry. While as open worlds they feel a little quiet and spread out, the more populated areas of refineries, abandoned towns or palaces are all playgrounds that encourage repeat runs of missions. I'd happily swap the old *Metal Gear* hub environments for these any day. In retrospect, they feel like prototypes for what the team at Kojima Productions have always wanted to build.

There are some parts of old *Metal Gear* that would've made a welcome transition, though: other than a couple of great sniper duels and one larger fight I can't talk about without spoiling, I thought the selection of boss fights was pretty dull, particularly an annoying recurring scrap with some cheap zombie soldier men that are little more than bullet sponges.

Bad boss fights occupy less than one hour of *MGSV* total, though, and that's a tiny fraction of my playtime so far. This is a massive experience, with an extensive and challenging endgame, too. Even the most basic playthrough will clock-in at 25 hours, and those that really get deep into experimenting with the game will easily reach 50 hours or more.

Those tens of hours have sailed by. I'm truly obsessed with *The Phantom Pain*, and I think it's a dazzling example of how exciting open-world game design can be. Not just being set in a big or beautiful world, but having the building blocks in place to let players have moments that feel like they belong to them. *Metal Gear Solid V* is a standard-setting sandbox game that makes perfect sense on PC, and is likely to be the most influential *Metal Gear Solid* game since the first. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

A generous stealth sandbox masterpiece that will delight both new and existing fans of the long-running series.

93

REVIEW

Overwatch



**“A MIXTURE OF LOVABLE ROGUES,
GRUFF VILLAINS AND HEROES”**

CHARACTER FULL

It's bright, colourful and competitive.
But is **OVERWATCH** any good? *By Phil Savage*

Right now, I hate Junkrat. He's a scrawny, impish explosives expert with a grenade lobbing Frag Launcher. His ultimate ability – a slow charging special attack that fills faster as you do damage and score kills – is a motorised, remote control tyre bomb with a devastating area of effect. Put simply, he makes things blow up. Things like me and my team of misfits, who, until Junkrat showed up, were seconds away from winning the match.

That's *Overwatch*, a multiplayer character-based shooter in which 12 players compete across two teams to fulfil whatever objective the map asks of them. I say character-based rather than class-based because that's an important distinction. Widowmaker and Hanzo are both snipers, but play completely differently. Mercy and Lucio are both healers, but one uses a staff that shoots healing energy, and the other uses, well, phat beats. Each character fits into a broader category, but is otherwise unique. Weapons, abilities, ultimates and even movement are specific to that hero.

It's a shooter then, but with a MOBA attitude to character design. To be clear: *Overwatch* isn't a MOBA. Rather, it's as if *Heroes of the Storm* went to *Team Fortress 2*'s house party, and left without cleaning up after itself. There's no lane-pushing, AI creeps, item shopping or levelling. Objectives are straight out of the class-based shooter playbook: points to attack and defend, payloads to push and hills to king. But the characters have abilities, reflective of their style and personality, and those abilities have cooldown timers.

Take Tracer, the peppy attack hero with the grating faux-cockney accent. Her basic ability, Blink, is a short range teleport that holds three charges, each on a three second cooldown. Her more powerful move, Recall, rewinds her to the health, ammo and position she had three seconds before. It's perfect for extricating yourself from a dangerous fight, but takes 12 seconds to recharge after use.

There are characters who improve map visibility, soak up incoming damage with shields, or throw out armour for teammates to pick up. There are characters who lay traps, or debuff or stun enemies. There are characters who use a jetpack, teleport long distances, or boost movement speed for every teammate within an area of effect. It's a wide and varied roster with a plethora of styles and abilities.

As a result, some of the game's systems are more streamlined than you'd expect from a class-based shooter.

Only a couple of heroes

carry multiple weapons, but even that is mostly a choice between attack and utility. Only some heroes have an alternate fire mode. Even beyond specific loadouts, there's no ammo management. Most guns need to be reloaded, but they have an unlimited ammo pool. There's still plenty of complexity, and, by making abilities the focus, *Overwatch* feels distinct from its competitors.

ALL THE MOVES

I particularly love how varied the movement is between characters. Not just Tracer's Blink, but also Genji's vertical scaling, Lucio's wallrun, Widowmaker's grappling hook and, most of all, Mercy's glide. Mercy, *Overwatch*'s medic, is the perfect example of how every aspect of a character can, in the best cases, support a specific style. Alone, she's vulnerable and slow – easily ambushed and dispatched. But with line-of-sight to a teammate, she can spread her wings and fly towards them. It's fun to do, and also

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A multiplayer first-person shooter, set on a future Earth full of robots and a cowboy.

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, 8GB RAM, i5-3570K, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
6 vs 6

LINK
www.playoverwatch.com

reinforces the symbiotic partnership between healer and healed: Mercy needs her teammates as much as they need her. It's masterful design.

Part of the process of playing *Overwatch* is learning the characters, their abilities and how to counter them. This can be both gratifying and infuriating – hence why I currently hate Junkrat. Previously, I've hated the sentient turret Bastion, the assault rifle wielding Soldier: 76, the sniper Widowmaker, the engineer Torbjörn, and, briefly, the shuriken-throwing Genji. Tomorrow, I'll likely hate someone else. It's a work in progress list, which changes with each new revelation over how to identify, avoid and eventually nullify a particular style of play.

Many times, I've been annoyed by a specific attack or ability. I have decried things as being OP, or, worse, >>

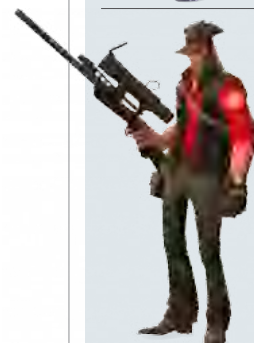
SNIPER WARS

Who's the best assassin?



OVERWATCH WIDOWMAKER

- + Aim-down-sights to charge shot
- + Rifle has fully automatic mode
- + Grappling hook
- + Gives team infrared vision
- No hats



TEAM FORTRESS 2 SNIPER

- + Aim-down-sights to charge shot
- + Secondary SMG for close range
- + Australian
- + Can throw jars of piss
- No butt

as hot bullshit. But balance is a nebulous thing in a shooter that lets you change character mid-match; that lets a team field multiple instances of the same character. It rarely is bullshit, but rather my own frustration at my inability to anticipate the thing that killed me. And there are many, many characters I adore. Mercy, clearly, alongside fellow support Lucio, with his beat-dropping ultimate that briefly overcharges the shields of nearby teammates. Also Tracer, and Pudge-a-like chain-hook carrier Roadhog. And yes, even Junkrat. Sometimes it's fun to be the jerk.

Not all the characters work, and not just because I'm bad at them. Bastion is already infamous among the *Overwatch* community, reviled for being cheap, powerful and a little bit boring. He's a robot who can transform into a high powered, long range, highly accurate turret. He's the bane of new players everywhere. I'm now at a point where Bastion rarely bothers me, but he still feels out of place. He's rarely fun to play and almost never fun to fight. He's an annoyance – either trivial or devastating depending on your experience and ability to work as a team. That's because, despite some heroes clearly being more friendly to beginners, *Overwatch* values and rewards experience and skill. That's great for the most part, but leaves characters like Bastion in an awkward place.

With so many heroes to choose from, and only six players per team, composition is vital. Again, experience comes into play, and after a few hours you'll get a feel for some effective combinations. The interface does a good job of cajoling players into making sound picks. During the opening seconds of a match, the entire team sits at the character selection screen, picking heroes while a tooltip critiques the overabundance of snipers or lack of a support. It works more often than it doesn't – I've seen players guiltily snap up their favourite pick before grudgingly switching to a tanking character for the good of the team. Still, sometimes you're going to end up on defence with two Hanzos and a Widowmaker. No tooltip can fully eradicate human stubbornness. At least such matches tend to be short.

The end of match "Play of the Game" clip doesn't exactly help. As the name suggests, it caps things off with a brief clip showing the most impressive action of that round from the perspective of the player. Right now, the algorithm seems to favour multikills, thus a specific roster of heroes. You'll see Bastion mow down a string of helpless attackers. You'll see Torbjörn hammering away at his turret. You'll see Junkrat's tyre bomb blow up half a team. Sometimes, rarely, you'll see a support character do something helpful. I suspect that only happens when nobody achieves a big enough killstreak.

While individual characters each have a couple of hard counters, things become more complicated across an entire team. Bastion, when operating as a sole agent, is easy enough to deal with. But a Bastion protected by Reinhardt's energy shield is a powerful combination, especially if both are supported by Torbjörn's upgraded turret. In *Overwatch*, communication is just as important

as experience. It feels like there are specific hero combinations that – in pub play, without the unity that comes from fighting with friends – can be very difficult to unpick.

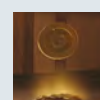
A lot of that is down to the maps, and the

few, specific locations where things become slightly too restrictive. For the most part, the maps are great – an interesting flow of chokepoints, corridors, open areas and alternate routes. The best provide specific pathways for each type of hero – be it a wide main corridor for lumbering tanks, narrow flanking routes for squishy attackers, or balconies for those heroes who can climb, clamber and fly. But in certain areas, that doesn't hold true. One of my most frustrating matches took place in the hangar of Watchpoint: Gibraltar, where turrets and tank heroes easily repelled our attempts to get close. A failure of communication on our part, sure, but also a casualty of us having fewer routes to the enemy's position.

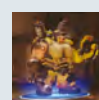
Escort mode maps – think *Team Fortress 2*'s payload mode – are, to my mind, the weaker set. The other maps, designed for point capture modes, feel less restrictive. More than that, though, *Overwatch* feels more urgent and interesting when

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

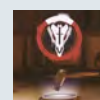
Loot boxes can be bought, and are provided after levelling up. Here's what's in them



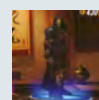
CURRENCY
It's like money, but only works in *Overwatch*.



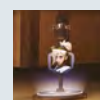
SKINS
What if you wore blue clothes instead?



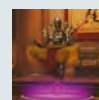
SPRAYS
Virtual graffiti. Oddly more legible than the real thing.



VICTORY POSE
You won? Yay! Now pose in a slightly different way.



DIALOGUE
A new voice line for you to get sick of hearing.



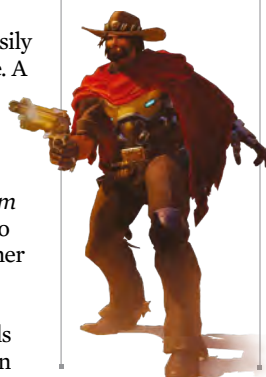
HIGHLIGHT INTRO
A new Play of the Game animation.

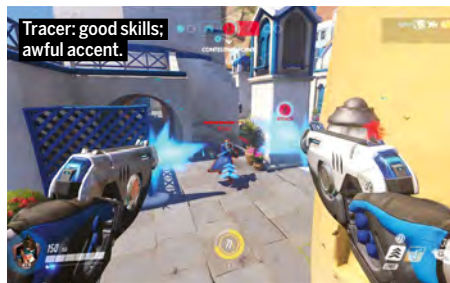
these small, varied teams are battling over a static, vulnerable control point. The most exciting and tense moments I've yet had in *Overwatch* have been at Hanamura's final, multilayered temple, and the large indoor arena of Volskaya Industries. These were the backdrops to wonderfully close encounters, where the winner only emerged at the last possible second.

SPOKES

To help solo queueers communicate, a dialogue wheel lets you call out important information. Stuff like: get on that objective, group up with me, or, most frequently heard of all, hello. That said, it is one of the weaker interface elements – the icons and messages often getting lost in the audio visual assault that is moment-to-moment play.

Despite being set in a future version of our own world, *Overwatch* still looks and feels like a Blizzard game. It's bright, vibrant and quirky – its characters a mixture of lovable rogues, gruff villains and over the top heroes. It's disparate and strange. A team might feature an erudite gorilla, a blue assassin, a meditating robot, a cowboy, a cyborg ninja, and a teenage *StarCraft* pro in a pink mech. It's a diverse cast, and yet one that feels cohesive within the hyper exaggerated, cartoonish setting. It's all tied to a story about futuristic terrorism, robot uprisings and a disbanded group of heroes. For the most part, this tale is told externally, through comics and short films. It feels incidental to the action. There is an opening cutscene, but I skipped it. ➤







» In action, *Overwatch* looks exhilarating. Matches are a light show of effects, as weapons fire and abilities trigger. Expect the first few hours to be overwhelming, as you learn what each effect means and why it just killed you. Eventually, as you start to parse the information behind the effects, it feels surprisingly clean. The small, incidental detail is fantastic, too, from the destructible objects in the spawn rooms, to the way the cap of Junkrat's Frag Launcher flaps open and closed as you jump. This is the sort of polish and attention you expect from Blizzard, and it's great to see carried across into a first-person setting.

It also sounds amazing. If anything, the audio design conveys more information than the visuals. Each character has their own specific lines for the majority of interactions, keeping you abreast of the current situation. Enemy barks are more prominent in the mix, which alerts you to potential danger. The battle between clarity and style has one side effect: there's a lot of repetition. Yes, Tracer, I do get that feeling of *deja vu*. Thanks for asking.

The weapons, for the most part, feel good: big, powerful heroes shooting big, powerful guns. Roadhog's chunky scrap gun is excellent, as are Reaper's dual shotguns. Not all are so substantial. Beam weapons and assault rifles are both a little underwhelming. The same holds true of abilities and ultimates – some are just more enjoyable to use. Others, however, have grown on me. I was initially disappointed by Lucio's ultimate. It's a beat drop, and should feel more forceful and energetic than it does. The subtlety of the effect has grown on me, but I had to meet it halfway.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

Overwatch runs beautifully. Its options are highly customisable, and I've yet to experience any framerate drops playing on Ultra settings at 4K with a GTX 970. As for online performance, the only lag I've experienced was isolated to a few hours on a single evening – probably more the fault of my sluggish home internet connection than Blizzard's servers. And despite some predictable post-release downtime, servers have

THE 1 IN TEAM

A well-picked team composition is the key to victory

✓ Yes, this is a good selection. Plenty of attack power, and a good range of tanking and support. Just remember to switch things up if your opponents are easily countering.



GENJI, PHARAH, WIDOWMAKER, MEI, REINHARDT, LUCIO

✗ No, no, no, you've gone horribly wrong. Where's your support? Where's your tank? How are you going to keep Bastion alive with no shields? This is a massacre waiting to happen.



HANZO, HANZO, WIDOWMAKER, MCCREE, BASTION, REAPER

remained steady across launch week. It's nice to have a new multiplayer game perform so reliably.

If there's a notable omission, it's the lack of ranked matchmaking – planned for a late June release. Other team-based shooters get away with the lack of a ranked mode through use of a server browser. In that setting, it's easy to track down like-minded communities with their own stat tracking and sense of competition. Twelve players per match is likely too few to support a browser system, and so the current absence of a ranked system is more keenly felt. *Overwatch* does at least do a good job of making its action feel immediate and important, even when it's not. A ranked

system can only help increase the stakes.

Matchmaking can, however, feel a bit wonky at times – something Blizzard will need to look at before ranked is released. Queue for a round, and the system places you with a group that the underlying maths has judged to be your equals. That doesn't always feel like it's the case, although it's a hard thing to judge in an online game. Maybe that player who ran endlessly into a stream of Bastion turret fire was dealing with a cat on their keyboard. It happens.

It's tricky to nail down how good *Overwatch* is, because, in a multiplayer game, emotion can't operate as the guiding light of an inherently subjective process. In most games, frustration and annoyance are

solid indicators that something isn't working. Here, they're part and parcel of competition. If I'm annoyed, someone else is probably having a good time. If I'm elated, someone else is probably raging. I hate Junkrat, but that's no one's fault but my own.

Here's what I can say for certain: *Overwatch* is a great, often fantastic shooter, and filled with clever design decisions. But, as good as it is, there are some rough patches to be found underneath Blizzard's peerless polish. For that reason, *Team Fortress 2* remains my favourite class-based shooter. Its characters feel more intricately, elaborately woven, with a wider range of utility. *Overwatch*, however, comes in a pretty close second, and with the benefit of not carrying years of experimental baggage. Its microtransactions are better, too, thanks to being purely cosmetic – unlockable through crates either bought or earned via levelling.

And *Overwatch* has a bright future. Unless Blizzard does something drastically wrong, it's only going to get better. New maps and heroes are a natural choice for expansion, and Blizzard has previously stated they'll be added at no additional cost. Hopefully they'll arrive before the current 12 maps and 21 heroes get stale. Whatever happens in the future, though, *Overwatch* in its current form is an excellent jumping off point. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

It's not flawless, but *Overwatch* is still one of the best new multiplayer shooters to arrive in years.

88



MAPNIFICENT

Discovering, decoding, and developing a living world in **CIVILIZATION VI**. By TJ Hafer

Civilization VI is the ultimate digital board game. More than ever in the series, the map is the soul of every opportunity and challenge. I'm playing for, with, and against the board. Forests and deserts and resource-rich tundra influence the growth of my civilisation, granting it boons and burdening it with lasting weaknesses. The glorious, challenging dynamics that emerge leave me in no doubt that the series has crowned a new king.

While *Civ VI* is probably the most transformative step forward for the series, its changes shouldn't trip up longtime players too much. You still settle cities, develop tiles, train military units, wage turn-based warfare, and conduct diplomacy. It mirrored my memories of past *Civs* closely enough that hints from the in-game advisor were all I needed.

All the same, there are so many new features that it could feel overwhelming at times. It resembles a *Civ* game that's already had two or three expansions added on top – from the new Districts that perform specific tasks and spread my cities out into an often messy but somehow pleasing sprawl, to a whole separate tech tree for civic and

cultural progress that ties into a sort of collectible card game for building a unique government. Such feature richness is welcome, but I also worry about the game's accessibility for more casual strategy fans.

What binds everything together is the map. I have reservations about the art style – some of the military

units could have fallen out of a freemium mobile game – but the map itself, and its cities, iron mines, and festival squares, is more alive than ever. I never needed to pull up an overlay to see which tiles were being

worked, for example, because the models and animations did that job for me at a glance.

Unworked fields lie barren, and I could tell how many citizen slots in

**No two cities
you build will
ever look or feel
the same**

NEW NEW DELHI *My capital in the information age*

1 DOWNTOWN

You can still see my first ever building, a monument, tucked between soaring towers.

2 SHINING OASIS

This blotch of desert turned out to be the world's largest source of aluminium.

3 DELHI-CALCUTTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Mostly used to bomb the Russians, to be honest.



4 MT. GANDHI NATIONAL PARK

Established in the Eastern Mountains to boost my civilisation's tourism.

5 DELHI-CALCUTTA URBAN CORRIDOR

Linking the two sister cities with art, culture, learning, and industry.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Turn-based strategy spanning all of human history.

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Firaxis

PUBLISHER

2K

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10 64-bit, Core i7-4770K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 770

MULTIPLAYER

Up to 12 online, local network, and hot seat

LINK

www.civilization.com



my commercial district were taken by the bustle in the streets. The tech trees and the leader interaction screen were the only parts of the UI that hid my soaring cities from my view. The latter has animated, 3D representations of everyone from Montezuma to that jerk Peter the Great who thinks his moustache and his science bonus are so cool, even though they're not and I've had bombers in range of his second largest city since the Atomic Age. They're all very well voice acted, with the return of native language dialogue from *Civ V*.

HEXISTENTIAL

Spending a lot of time staring at hills, valleys, and potential pyramid locations isn't just enjoyable and informative, however. It's critical to getting the most out of the game. Terrain and tile types have always been a factor but they're at the heart of nearly everything in *Civ VI*. With districts and wonders taking up a tile each, and being the most powerful tools I had to catapult myself toward victory, city planning became a huge focus. When I unlocked the ability to build a Holy Site, I had to ask myself if I wanted to nestle it among those forested hills to gain bonus faith, or wait to clear out all the trees later on, plop down an industrial district and enjoy a huge boost to my production.

There was never a time that I felt I could fill every tile with the most obviously 'correct' district or improvement and call it a day. The need for foresight is unending. There are always sacrifices, like when I fell behind in culture because my only eligible tile for a theatre was the one I'd been saving to build a rocket launch site to clinch a science victory. It's a fantastic, richly realised way of forcing difficult decisions at every bend in the river and making sure no two cities you build will ever look or feel the same. It feels like a revelation for someone who's been playing 4X games since before I could see over a car dashboard. The constant planning ➤





Look out! That skyscraper-sized truck is headed right for the cows!



Curved... swords?!



Unexplored regions are pleasingly parchment-like.



A proud monument to bloodsports.



Buildings are no longer constrained to your city centre.



My teacher wouldn't believe that Einstein was born in Calcutta in 1782.



Natural Wonders really enhance the map.



When the gods give you tundra, make culture wonders.



Hopefully headed for a better game than *Beyond Earth*.



Mountains: home to hoary wise men.



Policy cards unlock powerful bonuses.



Unit stacking is more flexible now.



My top agent, trying to find out why Peter is such a jerk.

➤ and trade-offs seem like how this series was always supposed to work.

There's a level of trial and error that caused me some frustration in my first few races to the space age. When everything is fresh and new, you might not realise you're plopping down a university campus in a place you should have waited to build a neighbourhood several centuries later. One late game civic (the cultural equivalent of a tech) unlocks national parks, which grant a massive culture boost – but unless you've been planning where it's going to go from 4000 BC, chances are you've already destroyed all of the pristine nature required to set one up.

I longed for some kind of city planning utility, where I could mock up where everything was going to go once I'd unlocked all the districts and improvements, especially considering some of them get adjacency bonuses for being next to each other.

EUREKA MOMENT

The map also ties into the tech and civics tree. Every technology and civic has an associated mini objective that will trigger a "Eureka" moment and pay off half the cost immediately. Founding a city next to an ocean tile sped up my progress toward sailing. Building three industrial districts with factories jumped me ahead in my quest to embrace communism. These advances are often tied to having room for specific districts, access to specific resources, or contact with other civilisations. Where I spawned on each map had a significant effect on which techs I could get quickly, and thus which ones I tended to go for first. It also helps alleviate waiting several turns for a building or a unit to finish, as I could always be pursuing a Eureka objective.

It's not all reinvention. The *Civ* staples of war and diplomacy have returned, recognisable but honed to the sharpest edge. I particularly enjoyed the way AI leaders now have agendas (one public, and one that must be uncovered) that make it theoretically possible to stay on everyone's good side if you're willing to jump through a lot of hoops. Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, for instance, wants to kill all city states and hates anyone who so much as

SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERS *Understanding AI agendas*



PETER THE GREAT WESTERNISER

Gains bonus culture and science from trade routes with civs ahead of him in civics and tech. Thus, he likes civs that stay ahead of him in these categories.



HOJO TOKIMUNE BUSHIDO

Wants to be bros with those who have a strong military, but also strong faith and culture output. He turns up his nose if you don't have all three.



VICTORIA SUN NEVER SETS

Gets along great with other civs who start on her continent, dislikes civs from continents where England does not yet have a city.



QIN SHI HUANG WALL OF 10,000 LI

Wants his civ to be the most wonderful in the world. Dislikes anyone building the same wonder as him, especially if you beat him.

lends them a cup of sugar. If you're going for a very pacifist run, you can let that agenda guide you, ignoring city-states and the benefits that courting them provide, and chances are you won't have pretzel-scented warriors knocking down your door.

In the event that hostilities do break out, *Civ VI* has split the difference between *V*'s one unit per tile and *IV*'s Clash of the Doomstacks

to find a happy medium. Support units such as medics and Great Generals can attach to and occupy the same tile as a regular combat unit like a pikeman. In the mid and late game, you also gain the ability to

Civ's score breathes life into all these conflicts and conferences

combine two combat units into a Corps, and later you can add a third to make an Army, which are more powerful versions of that unit that only take up a single tile. This adds some new layers and tactics to a model of warfare that could get predictable and repetitive in *Civ V*.

Civ's score breathes life into all these conflicts and conferences. Christopher Tin's new main theme, *Sogno di Volare*, is just as sweeping, catchy, and beautiful as *Baba Yetu*. I predict it will join his previous *Civ* effort in the pantheon of the greatest pieces of music written for a videogame, though I suspect it won't spawn as many memes – if only because it's more difficult to imitate its soaring, Italian cathedral choir chorus without sounding like an asthmatic screech owl. The real magic happens past the menu screen, however, where every civ has a main theme that grows more complex and epic as you progress through the ages. England, for

example, begins with a simple, aspirational, and even somewhat haunting flute rendition of Scarborough Fair. By the Modern Age, it has exploded into an orchestral and choral celebration of all things English that made me want to sail a ship of the line made of crumpets through the walls of a Spanish fort and unleash the redcoats to toss scalding tea into the faces of their enemies.

When I looked down upon everything that I'd built as my Mars colonists blasted off to barely snatch victory from Peter and his moustachioed cronies, every tile struck me with a sense of history. The sprawl of the Delhi-Calcutta metroplex. The 3,000-year-old farmland I'd had to bulldoze to place an industrial-era wonder. And just beside where my first settler had spawned, at the foot of the soaring peaks that had protected my people from marauding armies for generations, was the new forest I'd planted on the site of a former lumber mill to create enough nature for a national park.

For each valley, steppe and oasis, I could tell you why I'd developed it the way I did much more meaningfully than "Because hills are a good place for mines." As the board shaped my empire, and I shaped it, the history of my civilisation and my decisions accumulated and followed me right up to the threshold of the stars. And that, more than anything, is why I'll never need another *Civ* game in my life besides this one. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Sight, sound, and systems harmonise to make this the liveliest, most engrossing, and rewarding 4X on Earth.

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REVIEW

Total War: Warhammer



**“THIS IS A GROUND-UP REINVENTION
OF THE TOTAL WAR FORMULA”**

NAILED IT

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER bludgeons two very different games together to make a beautiful monster. *By Jody Macgregor*

Dwarfs line the walls of the Everpeak, weapons ready. They fire bolt and lead at the incoming Orcs, but to the giant lummocking forward at the head of the green horde it may as well be a light smither of rain. The giant crashes into the gates, stumbles back and crashes into them again. It bursts through only to be faced by massed units of Longbeards: fearless Dwarf veterans who mob it like dogs harassing an elephant.

They win, because in the rock, paper, scissors of *Total War: Warhammer*, the Longbeards' immunity to psychological effects makes them good at fighting fear-causing giants. Slayers would be even better, as they have the Anti-Large trait as well as Unbreakable, but this is a game where paper can beat scissors so long as there's enough of it.

Total War is a turn-based strategy wargame that erupts into real-time, cast-of-thousands battles whenever armies meet. Until now, the series has recreated historical eras, and so the tactics made available in combat have always been based on simplified versions of real-world approaches, whether deployed by Rome or Napoleon. Cavalry units flank, and race ahead to attack missile units before they get too many shots off; spears defend and resist cavalry charges; missile units pour volleys into dense infantry units as they slowly advance. Not any more.

GEEK MYTHOLOGY

The Warhammer World is a fantasy setting, one loosely based on Renaissance Europe but with the fiction of JRR Tolkien, Michael Moorcock, HP Lovecraft and Fritz Leiber funnelled into it through industrial pipes while copies of 2000AD and heavy metal album covers are scattered on top. It's a mishmash of everything someone at Games Workshop ever thought was cool when they were a teenager, and it's both familiar and really weird.

There's plenty of crossover between fans of historical wargames

and Warhammer, as shown by the way two of the previous *Total Wars* received fan-made mods that squeezed Warhammer armies into them. This is something else. This is a ground-up reinvention of the *Total War* formula to make it suit the fantasy setting of the Old World (and it's moddable too: someone out there must be itching to reverse the trend and put historical armies back in). In previous *Total War* games the different factions all played in a relatively similar way to each other, but not here.

The Greenskins, for instance, have a meter measuring each army's Fightiness. Win battles, and it rises. Lose, or squat in your hovels like a coward, and it drops. If Fightiness is high enough, and there are at least 17 out of a maximum 20 units in the stack, all that victory encourages other Orcs to band

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The *Total War* skeleton given a fantasy skin.

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
The Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, 17, 8GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 960

MULTIPLAYER
Online battles and campaign mode

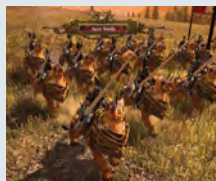
LINK
www.warhammer.totalwar.com

together in a bonus force called a Waaagh! For other species, buying and maintaining multiple armies is a huge expense, but Greenskins can earn them free, which encourages a state of constant aggression that's entirely appropriate.

Dwarfs on the other hand have to keep track of grudges. They never forget a slight, carefully noting each in a massive book of bitterness. Any time their land is raided or attacked or Dwarfs are hindered in any way, some scholar back at the capital sucks in air over his teeth and says, "That's going in the book." While revenge earns rewards, having too many unavenged grudges drops public order as people lose faith in their leader. It breeds a playstyle all about defence, limiting fronts on which the Dwarfs can be attacked and only marching off to make new enemies when old ones have been thoroughly dealt with.

Meanwhile, the Vampire Counts rely on spreading corruption in the form of a grey, sickly taint on the map. Other factions suffer attrition when moving across corrupted land while Vampire Counts armies are diminished by marching across uncorrupted land. The Vampire Counts can also raise the dead to fill armies instantly rather than waiting. >>

BATTLE BESTIARY Or, what the hell is a Varghulf?



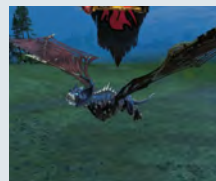
DEMIGRYPH

Most Imperial knights ride horses but their best and maddest riders track down these eagle-headed lions, essentially wingless griffons, as steeds. It's probably just like that scene in *Harry Potter*.



DOOM DIVER

Life as a Goblin is short and mean, like Goblins themselves. Their one path to glory is to strap on a pair of wings and pointy helmet, then be launched from a catapult for a moment of significance.



TERRORGHEIST

In Sylvania giant bats are one of many things that can kill you and drink your blood. Sometimes they soak up the land's dark magic, or drink the blood of a Vampire, and become these scary things.



VARGHULF

When Vampires give in to their bestial side they become Varghulfs, no longer pretending to be mortals and existing only to kill and drink blood. They are also big ugly bats monsters, but don't fly.

» (As in *Rome II*, armies are generated by generals rather than settlements, but cost extra away from the buildings that produce specialists.) It's not as much of a game-changer as you'd expect. Unlike the *Heroes of Might & Magic* games where the undead grow and grow as they incorporate the fallen into their hordes, Warhammer's Vampire Counts are still reliant on the old-fashioned way to get decent troops, though provinces where large battles have been fought provide a better class of corpses to recruit.

The final of the four playable factions is The Empire.

(Bretonnians exist as NPCs but can be used in multiplayer, while Chaos Warriors are available free to those who pre-ordered or buy *Total War*:

Warhammer in its first week, and will be paid DLC later.) Modelled on the Holy Roman Empire, the humans are the most traditional faction, their starting units including crossbowmen, spearmen, and knights who will be more familiar to *Total War* players than terrorghaists and arachnaroks. Imperials get weirder as they go on, boasting steam tanks and knights who trade horses for eagle-headed demigryphs, while their leader Karl Franz can upgrade to a flying griffon.

FIGHTING FANTASY

There's variance between factions in both the turn-based campaign game and the real-time battles. Dwarfs don't have wizards but are blessed with plenty of artillery, and are generally more of a defensive, come-get-me-you-lanky-bastards force. Vampire Counts don't have missile units (not even skeleton archers), though their wizards have a decent Wind of Death spell. For them it's all about lurching forward, targeting specific enemies with flying units and Black Knights while the skeletons and zombies shamle up to fill the gaps. The Greenskins have a bit of everything, but can be hard to control. When their Leadership drops due to being flanked or attacked by enemies who cause fear, they have a tendency to scarper, but recover quickly and need to be shepherded back into the fray for wave after wave.

The effect of spellcasting on battles is less than expected. There's

a limited pool of Winds of Magic to draw from, with goofy blue haze wafting over the campaign map to show where it's strongest this turn, and individual spell effects feel slight compared to the impact of a flanking manoeuvre or well-timed charge. The Raise Dead spell can summon a unit of zombies out of the ground, which is suggested by the handy in-game guide as a good way of blocking a charge, but also works to bog missile units down or pull off a flank attack. Zombies are weak combatants, however, and the spell can only be cast if you're at less than 20 units.

Plus, even if those fragile zombies survive they'll be gone at the end of the battle.

Most of the other spells are variations on projectile attacks, buffs, or debuffs, with flavour text to differentiate them – Goblin

Shamans can cause distracting itchiness, while Necromancers make enemy soldiers age by years. There are magic items for your Lords and Heroes too, and banners to your troops, most of which give percentage boosts to abilities.

Those Lords and Heroes are powerful combatants, though. Unlike previous *Total War* games where the general led from the back, close enough to provide benefits but not close enough to be slaughtered, in Warhammer they're some of your best fighters. Though their loss is still devastating to morale, and undead armies can crumble after a general's death, I charge in anyway out of both necessity and a desire to watch their animations as they wreak havoc.

The temptation with *Total War* is always to zoom right in and watch fights up close, and that's even stronger when it's Dwarfs with mohawks taking axes to looming trolls. But it's important to keep an eye on the overall battlefield to ensure reinforcements are being dealt with, flying units aren't hassling your artillery, and so on. Tabbing in and out of a tactical view that presents the battlefield from far above with units as neat rectangular banners helps, and when I zoom back in to see melee devolve into a mess, units overlapping and soldiers clipping through each other, I do feel a pang for the straight edges and ruler-perfect abstraction of turn-based tabletop Warhammer.

The Raise Dead spell can summon a unit of zombies out of the ground

WARHAMMER ARMIES

Who's killing who in the Old World



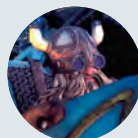
GREENSKINS

Orcs and Goblins, with trolls and giants thrown in. Goblinoids may actually be a fungal lifeform, as they are in the sci-fi Warhammer 40,000 setting, but don't mention that around fans unless you want to hear a very nerdy argument.



THE EMPIRE

The Holy Roman Empire but with wizards. The Colleges of Magic in Altdorf provide Battle Wizards to the Imperial armies, and the Imperial Zoo the occasional griffon. The Emperor has only a tenuous grip on the provinces, however.



DWARFS

Stunty, bearded and an odd combination of staunch traditionalists and mad inventors. Their social rules are so strict any Dwarf who breaks them shaves and becomes a Trollslayer in the hope of finding redemption via death in battle.



VAMPIRE COUNTS

The Aristocracy of the Night, the Von Carsteins rule the Imperial province of Sylvania and have ambitions to go further. They have mastered dark magic, and believe the only thing that goes with black is more black with a splash of red.



BRETONNIA

Only playable in multiplayer, though you can encounter them in the singleplayer campaign, these are French Arthurian types. They field Grail Knights, peasants, and Damsels who get magical powers from The Lady in the Lake.



CHAOS WARRIORS

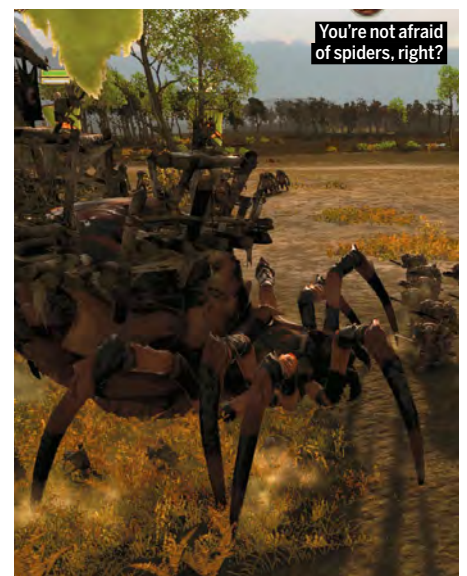
Chaos is a magical force that mutates everything it touches, even its own followers, like malevolent radiation. When it seeps into the world the Chaos Warriors march south, and each time they're harder to defeat.

It's possible to pull off amazing things even in the morass, though it helps to abuse the slow-motion button and give orders while paused, as you can in singleplayer mode. You can overcome odds that the auto-resolve option for battles isn't able to: outnumbered ten to one by two Greenskin stacks I still won a narrow victory as the Vampire Counts even though my Legendary Lord Mannfred Von Carstein fell. It's always a great feeling to pull something like that off.

LORDS OF THE THINGS

At the start of a campaign you choose which of two Legendary Lords will lead your faction, iconic Warhammer »





characters such as Emperor Karl Franz and High Wizard Balthasar Gelt, with the other character becoming available during the campaign. Each has their own questlines to pursue: storylines that unlock special battles to earn unique artefacts. These quest battles can also be played outside the campaign in a separate mode of their own. You might be facing an army with four Shamans, or reinforced by Dwarf Gyrocopters, and your Lord begins each battle with a rousing speech. (This is the only time you hear speeches – unlike *Shogun 2* you won't have to skip them before every scrap.)

Though early quest destinations are near the starting positions, they quickly pop up much farther away. Sending your Lord off with an army strong enough to beat them is a bad idea, as even with another powerful stack of troops at home it leaves you open to a concentrated attack, like a sudden Waaagh! Unlocking quests often requires sending your Heroes off to perform specific actions, too.

Heroes are both tough individuals who can embed within your armies and agents who can deploy across the turn-based campaign map to perform specific actions. That map, incidentally, is Creative Assembly's best ever – a fantastically detailed Games Workshop shop window display brought to life.

Heroes assassinate and corrupt, damage walls and buildings, reduce income and public order, or improve those things within your own borders. Sadly there are no videos for Hero actions, none of those clips of a ninja or geisha doing something cool that the *Shogun* games had.

Nameless Heroes can die, but named characters are only ever injured and keep coming back. Sometimes this seems apt: having to kill the Necromancer Heinrich Kemmler twice only to see him resurrect again was perfect. It's odder when Joe Random Minor Hero keeps coming back to annoy the same city even after I paid money to have him successfully assassinated.

It's not all about death. There are unique tech trees to research, buildings to construct, public order to maintain, and diplomacy to tinker with. Even the Greenskin tribes engage in limited diplomacy – though

ODD THINGS FROM THE DEEP LORE

Facts about Warhammer that Games Workshop has probably forgotten



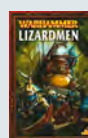
PRATCHETT ALMOST WROTE IT
Among the authors approached when a line of Warhammer Fantasy novels was first planned in the 1980s was a young Terry Pratchett. The deal fell through when he was offered the same amount of money as the designers writing their rulebooks, though Kim Newman did end up writing several Warhammer novels under his Jack Yeovil pseudonym that read like Pratchett homages.



BRETONNIA WORSHIPS AN ELF
The Lady of the Lake worshipped in Bretonnia is an unusual goddess who encourages chivalric ideals but also steals away magically gifted children, sometimes returning them in adulthood as enchantresses who can cast spells normally beyond humans. That's because the Lady is an Elf goddess in disguise, helping out the humans while basically wearing a wig.



IT WAS PART OF 40K
For a while the Old World was explicitly part of the wider Warhammer 40,000 universe, though cut off by a warpstorm. A daemon named N'Kari managed to travel from one setting to the other, the Chaos gods used to reward their followers with boltguns, and a campaign set in Warhammer's pseudo-Britain Albion ended with 40K weapons falling into the hands of the fantasy heroes. None of this gets mentioned nowadays.



CHARIOTS OF THE FROGS
In ancient times alien beings called the Old Ones travelled to the Warhammer World with their servants, the frog-like Slann, and genetically manipulated the locals to create the Elves, Dwarfs, Humans and other races. If you've read *Chariots of the Gods* by Erich von Daniken, it's a lot like that. Things went wrong when the portal they used to travel between worlds ruptured and let Chaos in. Whoops.

The end times came and I ignored them until it was too late

they don't make trade agreements they do negotiate alliances with each other, and sometimes the Dwarfs tempt them with gold to buy peace. A lot of money gets thrown around on the diplomatic screen. It's easy to profit by letting one side of a war buy you off then waiting for the other to tempt you away, flip-flopping repeatedly with no noticeable impact

on your standing. After a few *Total Wars* I've forgiven the weaknesses of the AI, but the talking heads on the diplomacy menu still feel daft.

Sometimes the *Total War* game underneath pokes

through, creating situations that don't feel right for Warhammer. When Dwarfs defeat Greenskins they have an option to ransom their captives for cash, a decision I can't see either side agreeing to in the fiction. But there are times when the tone is absolutely right, as when the Dwarfs are given a choice to forgive a grudge but both the replies available are different wordings of "hell, no."

One of the most Warhammer-ish things is Chaos. After 20 turns warnings appear: Chaos gathers in the north. It's another 50 turns before I notice their effects, a spreading corruption like the undead's. As the computer turns whiz past, the pause while the Chaos Warriors move grows longer and longer as

their numbers grow. It's past turn 100 before I engage with them, but by then the northern Old World is in ruins, and Archaon The Everchosen is leading a doomstack right at me.

SPOILERS OF WAR

But you should encounter Chaos for the first time for yourself. Games Workshop has told the story of this Chaos Incursion twice – the first time Chaos lost and fans hated it, the second time Chaos won and fans hated it. Now you can tell it. It's a tale of nations squabbling when they should unite, but even as darkness draws closer the acrimony between me and my foes, combined with the desire to take their territory, stops me from committing to confederation. The end times came and I ignored them, pretending it wasn't my problem until it was too late.

The part of me that collected a High Elf army as a teenager wishes this game was broader in scope (at least give us Skaven!) but there will be expansions to cover some of that. In any case, the best *Total War* games have always been the most focused, whether on a single nation or a single general. *Total War: Warhammer* takes in a continent but tells one story, and it's all the more potent for that. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

If you find real history a bit bland compared to glorious nonsense made up by British people, this is the *Total War* for you.

86



GREAT JOB, BLOW

There are mazes within mazes in **THE WITNESS**, Jonathan Blow's triumphant return.

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

Whether slyly illustrating a language puzzle in *Fez* or telegraphing an attack window in *Dark Souls*, every game must instruct you about the tools at your disposal. Less talented creators teach with HUD prompts or via cajoling NPCs, often wresting control away when you fail. Skilled creators hint and tease, insensibly guiding you towards a solution. Though not without its flaws, Jonathan Blow's *The Witness* is one of the finest teachers I've studied under.

If you're at all minded to play it you should stop reading now and do so. Yes, that's a terrible reviewer's cop-out, but the joy of *The Witness* is simply how you learn, and while I can dance around specifics, I'd hate to deny you a single particle of that satisfaction. Is the pricetag a concern? Well, it took me 30 hours to polish off the main arc of the game and I still managed to bypass large tracts of it, including several unlockable areas and scores of puzzles. So if the bang-for-buck ratio is of paramount importance, I'd say you're covered.

Still here? OK, you can't say I didn't warn you.

The Witness is a series of screen-based maze puzzles (some 600 or more) set on a tropical island – a sumptuous, thickly hewn expanse of cliffs, meadows, orchards, swamps

and sand, dotted with buildings such as a church, a logging depot and a windmill – many of these falling into disrepair. The place is a regular car-crash of eras and traditions, from the vaguely Japanese temple near the centre with its plush red shutters, to the rusting tanker shipwrecked on the northern coast.

There are, however, shared and persistent themes, among them a motley and unnerving population of stone effigies – priests, kings, guitarists, photographers, rock-climbers and

more, all frozen mid-gesture like trolls caught in the sun.

And then there are the omnipresent and incongruous screens that house the majority of the puzzles – bright blocks of colour that you spot through gaps in the foliage or at the crest of a distant hill. The puzzles that they present are

This is one of the toughest games I've played in years

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A series of increasingly complex maze puzzles, set on an idyllic island.

EXPECT TO PAY

£30

DEVELOPER

Thekla Inc

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

i5, GTX460M, 4GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.the-witness.net

arranged into loose, area-specific sequences that share a particular game mechanic. Each completed puzzle sends a bolt of power to the next one along. The further you push into the game, the more these different puzzle mechanics begin to combine, until by the climax you're using the full set to unravel enigmas that would have seemed impossible hours before.

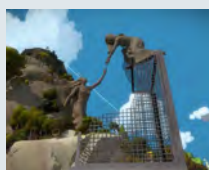
The silent elegance with which *The Witness* cultivates your understanding of its rules, the artfulness with which it feeds you concepts and layers them into complex problems, is where its greatness lies. Early puzzles are painless: you hold-click to zoom on a screen and activate a cursor, then draw a line through a maze-like grid layout from start to finish. But then you start to encounter symbols on squares within each maze that impose additional requirements. These are commonly introduced via strips of five or more screens that walk you through each facet of the new puzzle mechanic, beginning with a maze that's a square or two wide to demonstrate the basic principle. Beyond a couple of text prompts to explain the controls at the outset there isn't a breath of actual exposition in the game. It simply doesn't need it.

TORTURE GARDEN

That's not to say that *The Witness* is a breeze. On the contrary, it's one of the toughest games I've played in years. The premise of each puzzle may be digestible, but the devil is very much in the detail, and holding all the mechanics in your head at once can be a challenge. It's also easy, while roving the island, to run into a conundrum you lack the knowledge to solve. On the other hand, you're never forced to tackle things in a certain order, and it isn't necessary to work your way along every thread in order to reach the finale.

The ambiance is also immensely restful: there's no real score, just the

STUCK? Don't fire up a walkthrough just yet – try one of the tactics below



1 CHECK YOUR SURROUNDINGS

There's often a clue hidden in the vicinity, and some puzzles require you to make use of bits of the environment. Take a step back and soak up the view.



2 EXPLORE THE ISLAND

Each region has its own theme, and introduces you to how it works. If you're struggling, you may not have gathered the right insight yet.



3 FIVE-PART PUZZLE STRIPS

These are usually designed to teach you what a particular symbol does, building up from simple problems. Be sure to do these first.



4 IS IT NECESSARY?

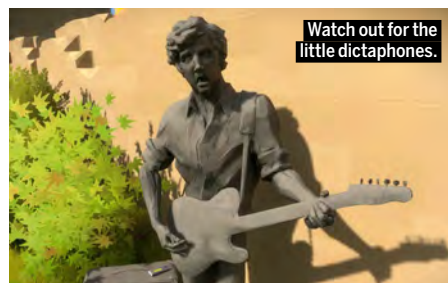
You don't need to solve every puzzle you come across to proceed. If something's frustrating you, consider leaving it until another playthrough.



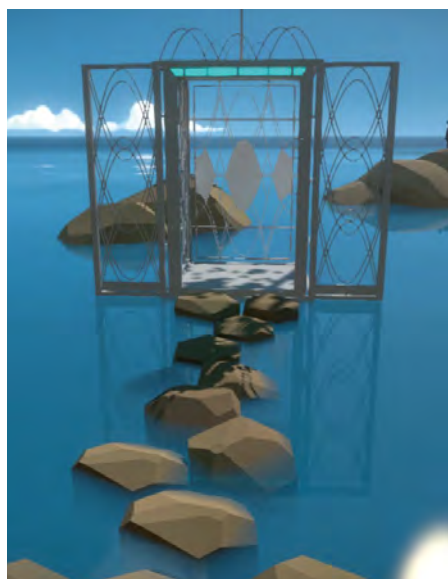
Puzzle boards make surprisingly good bridges.



If you get stuck, at least the scenery is nice.



Watch out for the little dictaphones.



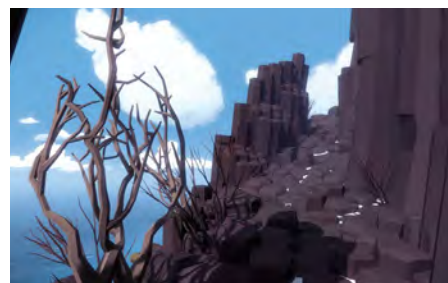
Not all the mazes are on screens.



It's part-game, part art installation.



Clues to puzzles can be found in their surroundings.



I was half-expecting Slender Man.



I guess they haven't got around to painting this bit.

seethe of wind in the forest canopy and the lilt of flowing water, and the views are captivating. The scenery might seem a distraction – a way of padding out the playtime, even, by having you trudge back and forth between puzzles – but this would be a much less enjoyable game were it not for the opportunity to take a break in a clearing and watch the clouds pass by. It helps that *The Witness* is a masterclass in using art direction to compensate for less than cutting-edge graphics – its radiant colour scheme and fat, stylised props amply disguise the relative crudeness of its geometry and textures.

The landscape is also more than it appears. As time goes on, you'll pick up on a delicate negotiation between the screen puzzles and the geography and architecture that surrounds them. There are puzzles that mimic shapes nearby, such that to solve them is also to create your own little artworks – a quietly significant invitation to collaborate in the world's making. There are puzzles that are effectively diagrams of the machines they're tied to – I might trace the shape of a motorised stairway in order to lower it, while contending with the rules of any symbols on the board in question.

There are tricks of perspective that feel decorative at first, but which actually supply clues about the strategies that hold sequences together. And there are puzzles that require you to actually use the environment itself in some fashion to proceed, a revelation that depends on your having soaked up enough of the game's visual language that certain things begin to stand out. These latter discoveries are among the most delightful *The Witness* has to offer.

There are also, sadly, a handful of puzzles that aren't so gratifying. *The Witness* falls slightly afoul of the classic endgame dilemma – there's a point where you stop learning, stop working out how to employ the techniques you've picked up in different contexts, and the challenge becomes too much a question of overcoming artificial-feeling obstructions thrown in your way. As with the arrival of a bullet-sponge boss in a first-person shooter, it's all about having the patience to proceed rather than the ingenuity. To be fair,

this tendency is balanced out by a couple of masterful (and insanely hard) puzzle specimens and by some opulently weird interiors, but it's sad nonetheless that the closing sections of *The Witness* aren't quite the send-off the game deserves. If you really want to experience *The Witness* at its best, I recommend spending as much time as possible touring the island and cracking the optional puzzles (particularly, those which pertain to certain mysterious black pillars) before making a break for the credits reel.

There's also the storyline to consider – or rather, the mass of oblique audio recordings and suggestively positioned objects that *could* form a coherent storyline, assuming they aren't the trappings of a non-narrative thought experiment. Even making allowances for the fact that I haven't uncovered all the secrets, it's difficult to draw conclusions because at the time of writing, key elements of the fiction aren't in the game. Although it's

playable from start to finish, the review build PC Gamer was supplied with lacks a number of more explicit audio files and has non-final endgame sequences. It should also be noted that it was a bit buggy,

featuring some mild glitches on things like reflections and at least one documented crashing problem.

CONNECTIONS

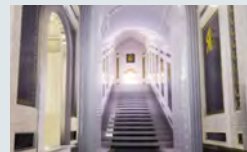
I'd hedge that *The Witness* is, at least in part, an attempt to map and celebrate the sheer act of composition, rather than a series of events to be unearthed, as in a comparably open-ended 'walking simulator' like *Dear Esther*. It's a journey to the heart of its creator's artistic process that, among other things, positions the supposedly trivial business of joining the dots as a model for how we think.

Many of the recordings are excerpts from canonical texts of science, philosophy and literature – you can look forward to Paul Cezanne's meditations on the relationship of painting to nature, and BF Skinner's remarks on who really wields the power in a game scenario – the player or the designer?

It goes without saying that, being a Jonathan Blow game, *The Witness*

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Other wistful metaphysical brain-ticklers



PNEUMA: BREATH OF LIFE

A puzzle game built around lines of sight, in which the player's character begins by declaring himself to be God.



FEZ

A 2D platform hero discovers his world is secretly 3D, and can be rotated to create new routes. Linguistic dilemmas and black holes result.



THE TALOS PRINCIPLE

A morally conscious robot is asked to complete puzzles involving drones, turrets and forcefields. Bloodier than *The Witness*, and more sinister.



QUANTUM CONUNDRUM

Your mad scientist uncle has created four dimensions with different physical properties. Just as well you've got your magic glove with you.

is highly aware of its own artifice, but this isn't sprung on you, as in other games, in the form of a plot twist or tiresome 'meta' in-joke. It's tacitly advertised from the outset, freeing up the rest of the game to explore the implications of this.

You're left with a mirror-tunnel of allusions and surmises that is undeniably thought-provoking, but may daze and annoy as many players as it beguiles. Mind you, it's perhaps to the purpose that you're asked to make sense of it all. I introduced *The Witness* as a teaching machine, but I suspect Blow's agenda is to collapse the master-student relationship, equipping you with the tools and insights you need to approach the game's sources of inspiration on your own terms.

The Witness might be constructed around mechanical challenges with unambiguous outcomes, but as the choice of title implies, what it seeks in the end to offer is a vantage point, an enlightened perspective on life's mysteries, rather than answers. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Jonathan Blow does it again. Exquisitely layered puzzles populate a world that will keep you guessing to the end.

89



WADICAL

Playing **DOOM** makes me very happy to find myself back in Hell. *By James Davenport*

Doom is an action comedy that reveres every FPS trope it had a hand in creating. The Doom Marine is vindication, violence, and masculine excess personified. In the opening minutes, he rises from a sarcophagus and pops the heads of several possessed Martian zombies. In the next room, the Doom Suit rests, surrounded by candles and demonic insignia. I feel the same reverence. From there, it's a rude journey to shut Hell the hell up.

Abated by a dull multiplayer mode, a limited level creation toolset, and familiar art direction that doesn't feel as malevolent or creative as modern technology allows, my journey is otherwise one of playful, indulgent FPS action. Hell is my home now, and I won't leave until a better source of unadulterated fun guts me out.

The plot is simple and easy to ignore, loose scaffolding for the furious gunplay, which suits *Doom*. But for the curious, hidden codexes detail the narrative in high-fantasy strokes. I couldn't take any of it seriously, and that's the point. We're meant to inhabit the blind, dumb rage of Doom Guy, a man whose sole purpose is to be a relentless, unfeeling human tank.

Levels tend to have a goal outlined at the beginning – turning off comm arrays and switching all sorts of important videogame switches – and end in gigantic battles accompanied by destructive events that the Doom

Guy kicks off with overkill. It's routine FPS stuff, but filtered through *Doom*'s exaggerated tone, everything is poised to be absurd. One level has your friendly AI companion guiding you through his shutdown process. As I methodically dismantle his power and cooling systems, the AI explains away his impending 'death'

as a utilitarian necessity in a soothing pre-programmed voice. I felt bad for laughing, but Doom Guy couldn't care less.

For all its brutality, *Doom* is charitably paced. Environments are a sprawl of

corridors that span multiple levels of industrial Martian facilities and the rocky islands of Hell. I spent more time looking for yellow keycards or secrets than I did in combat – bursts of action that demand intense focus.

Enemies spawn by the dozen; some pursue with melee in mind and others fire projectiles, and the variety expands throughout a given fight. One quick and small enemy can

It's all rad, but never quite bad (in a don't-tell-my-dad sense)

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A fast, furious first-person shooter on Mars.

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

id Software

PUBLISHER

Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON

Nvidia GTX 980 Ti, Intel Core i7-6700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Co-op and PvP

LINK

www.doom.com



teleport around the arena and spawn minions, which forces me to prioritise them over every other threat. Some are quick and tall. Some fly, and shoot fireballs. Most have horns and gaping mouths with sharp canines – they're an imposing bunch, but the majority are familiar faces rendered in a tame 3D aesthetic.

Limited by the era's development bottlenecks, the forced minimalism of *Doom* and *Doom 2* let my imagination do the heavy lifting. Their worlds were my first prolonged experience with occult imagery that felt at once wrong and magnetic. Seeing a Pinky demon realised as a cute reptilian monster in the 2016 version, or Hell as a cluster of floating spires adorned with cartoonish skulls, diminishes the sense that I'm playing something I shouldn't. It's all rad, but never quite bad (in a don't-tell-my-dad sense). I wouldn't be surprised to find an identical underworld in *World of Warcraft*, so after seeing how well id Software elevated *Doom*'s run-and-gun play, I'm slightly disappointed they went with a safe rendition of Hell and its inhabitants.

PARKGOUR

Art direction and story take a backseat to gunplay. There is no reload button. Just worry about pulling whatever trigger you can. The super shotgun explodes, dissolving anything in its path and drowning the sound mix. *Doom* would dent your eardrums against your will if it could. My weapon of choice, the rocket launcher, shoots slow rounds. The satisfaction of predicting where a target will be and firing a rocket a full second before it connects never gets old. Classic *Doom* weapons fill out the remaining arsenal, with updated designs and secondary functions. It's nice to see them again, though they're not bursting with newness.

Weapon mods add an alternate firing option to each gun. The shotgun gets a three shot burst, the gauss rifle gets a scoped charge shot – methods for doing more damage at

CAST A COLD EYE *A short history of the Cacodemon*



**1993, 1994
DOOM, DOOM 2**

A glorious, striking red and harrowing horn arrangement? Yes.



**1997
DOOM 64**

A cartoonishly large eye, horns, and chains? No.



**2004
DOOM 3**

Phew. *Doom 3*, you're great, I love you, but your Cacodemon? Oof.



**2016
DOOM**

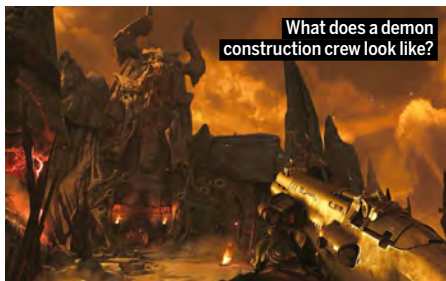
Still not a striking red, but the classic look and that big grin are back.



Detonating a rocket to inflict bleed on the crowd.



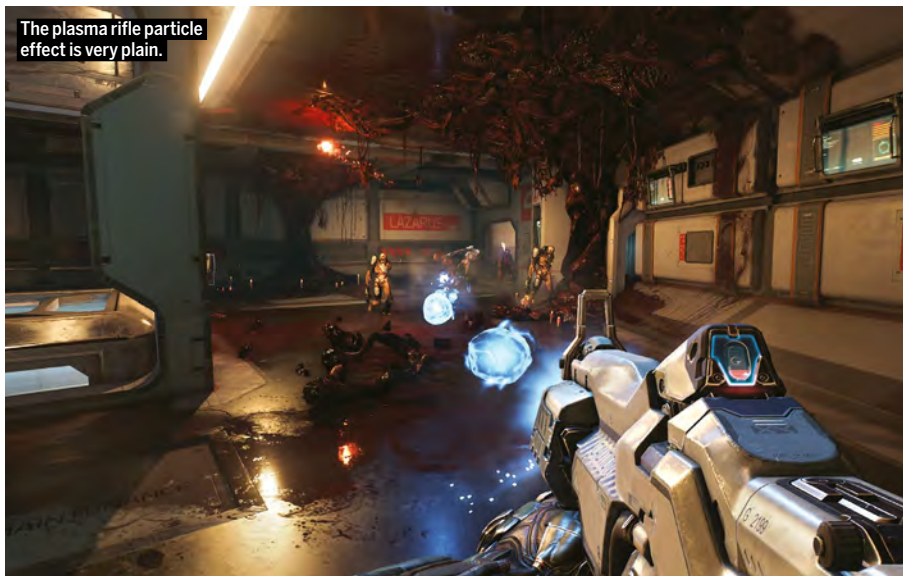
Mars people need to get in touch with some Hell architects.



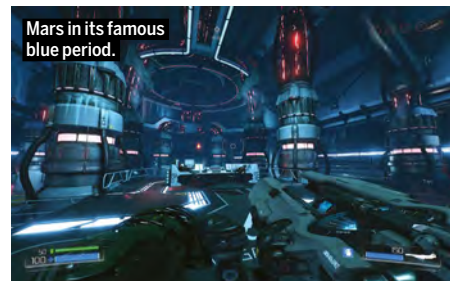
What does a demon construction crew look like?



Demon heads are bags of pudding.



The plasma rifle particle effect is very plain.

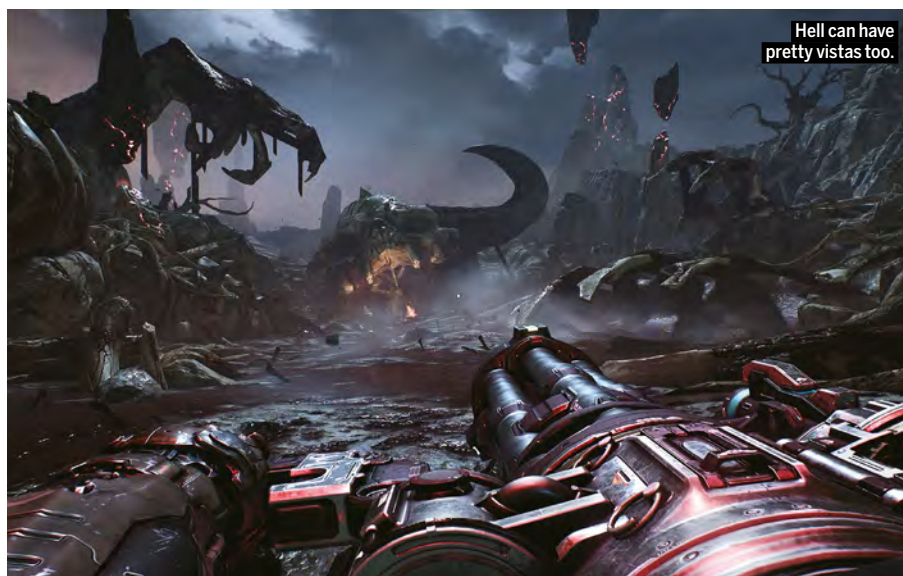


Mars in its famous blue period.





Holograms, the new audiologs, tell small bits of story.



Hell can have pretty vistas too.



That skin condition still hasn't cleared up, then.



Old haunts haunted by new haunts.



It's really not that different to ice sculpture.

the cost of consuming ammo faster. If I need a Cacodemon out of the picture sooner than later, I bite the bullet and empty my gauss rifle reserves; it's satisfying, and the cost forces experimentation with every weapon. Some have more specialised uses. By right-clicking with a rocket launcher mod, you can explode the round anywhere on its trajectory to inflict bleed damage. The plasma rifle has an alt fire that stuns enemies for a short period. If I'm cornered by a few Hell Knights, I stun and run. While the gun viewmodels aren't much to look at, each a static smattering of greys and blacks, they feel great in your hands and force diversity enough to make every combat feel different.

It's *Doom's* emphasis on mobility and spontaneity that makes everything work. Aiming down the scope of the gauss rifle while strafing is one thing, but aiming down its scope while flying over the entire stage after hitting a jump pad is another. Base movement speed is faster than a sprint in most other FPSes, and that

quickness is motivation to kite, dodge, and lunge at demons, some of which are as agile as you. Almost all arenas have little terraces and mesas you can double-jump onto, along with hidden powerups and ammo and health pickups. If I died, I switched up my weapon choices, tried to explore more of the arena, and if things got dire enough, I equipped new runes.

Rune challenges are time trials hidden throughout the campaign that reward you with equippable perks, providing a small boost to certain abilities. My favourite extends the reach at which I can execute Glory Kills, quick melee attacks that guarantee health drops you can perform once an enemy has taken a significant amount of damage and enters a stagger state. Since executing a Glory Kill shoots you toward that enemy, I'm able to close a 20 yard gap almost instantly. Combined with a rune that gives me a temporary speed boost after performing a Glory Kill, I can zip across an arena and kill several enemies in about ten seconds, and heal along the way. I'm still excited to try out new rune combinations just to find new ways of emptying a room.

In multiplayer, firefights are often a matter of who saw who first

BENCHMARKS

MEDIUM (1920X1080)

Even low-end cards can hit 60fps without strain on medium, and mid-range cards nearly double that.

ULTRA (1920X1080)

To comfortably stay at 60+ fps, a mid-range card is a necessity.

ULTRA (2560X1440)

The creep towards 4K requires a high-end card. If you have the cash, put some down for a GTX 1080.

FRAMES PER SECOND



The cherry on top is the chainsaw, which prevents combat from devolving into a desperate search for resources by functioning as a limited ammo regain tool. Spend some chainsaw fuel to treat yourself to a grisly show and a shower of ammunition. Chainsaw use and Glory Kills are fun resource management that forces me to keep an eye on ammo, health, and not outright liquefying every enemy on sight.

Doom's combat is a bumping demonic dance floor, a swift, improvisational system, focused on skill and thrill. The only thing missing is a live band improvising to my

sweet moves, but the inspiring fuzz of industrial metal will do.

SNAPMAP

Within my first hour of exploring SnapMap, *Doom's* proprietary level creation tool, I tended to a farm in *Harvest Doom*, gave birth to imp-shaped raccoons, raced through parkour time trials – there's no shortage of good ideas, and it's easy to find or make them via simple sorting and creation tools. I just worry SnapMap's limits won't support a community on the PC. Only 12 monsters can spawn at once, environments are limited to prefabricated modules, and the logic system is unreliable. Enemies have trouble with pathing routines and switches fail at random. There's incentive for players to experiment with SnapMap, but there's no room for expression beyond its limited scope, which makes the lack of mod support really sting.

The soupy chaos of the campaign and surprise of SnapMap don't

translate to multiplayer. Firefights are often a matter of who saw who first, or happened to collect more armour after spawning. Scattered around are special weapons, health pickups, and demon runes, which turn one lucky player into a devastating demonic force, but the presence of a progression system upsets the balance. Weapons and hack modules, temporary boosters to XP or armour after respawning, are locked behind levels and pull in the opposite direction to the ethos of games with similar shooting mechanics.

Doom's quick movement and twitchy arsenal are deliberately old school, but feel like a half measure when compared to the new *Unreal Tournament*, where everyone starts and stays on even footing. There's fun to be had, but *Doom's* multiplayer fails to carve out an identity of its own, abandoning the pursuit of new ideas in favour of enforcing popular ones. Thankfully, it's easy to ignore in favour of the excellent campaign.

With *Doom's* campaign, id Software found a sweet spot nestled somewhere between nostalgia and modernity that celebrates the pulpy sheen of big-budget shooters and resurrects an intense, simplified focus on the shooting itself. *Doom* doesn't reinvent the genre, but it's a reminder that FPS games aren't limited to stop and pop corridors and political melodrama. It's a reminder that sometimes a crafted appeal to base desires – going fast, flying high, and swift, tongue-in-cheek demon justice – is more than enough. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Despite drab multiplayer and limited level creation, this is a cheeky, fulfilling return to pared-down acrobatic gunplay.

88



FINE TUNED

FORZA HORIZON 3 is a fantastic PC debut for the series. *By Phil Savage*

What's next? I could join an exhibition race, competing against 11 other cars to be first across the finish line. Maybe I'll take a 1984 Peugeot 205 on a point-to-point race across the dusty dirt roads of the Australian outback. Maybe I'll use a Pagani Zonda for a tight, technical circuit race around Surfer's Paradise, Queensland. Perhaps I'll do both, linking these and other routes into a multi-stage championship.

Or, I could do something less daunting, such as attempt a Bucket List challenge. These give you a car and a goal: beating a skill point target in a Ford RS200, or speeding across country roads in a LaFerrari. If none of that takes my fancy, I could drive as fast as possible through a speed trap, set a distance record off a stunt jump, go looking for a classic car hidden in an abandoned barn, smash bonus boards for XP, or challenge any of the AI racers populating my open world to an ad-hoc head-to-head race. Alternatively, I could simply drift around a big field, smashing down someone's crops and hedgerows to max out my skill chain.

Forza Horizon 3 isn't just a racing game. It's a huge, varied playground full of things to do in cars. The titular Horizon is a festival, where enthusiasts come to race, pull stunts and enjoy the open road. In *Forza Horizon 3* you take over a condensed but varied slice of Australia. There

are city streets, beaches, forests, fields, and a large patch of the outback. The festival conceit is a great way to link multiple classes of vehicles racing across many different terrains, all under the umbrella of a unified celebration of competition, collaboration and skill.

I'm all for the fantasy, and the suspension of disbelief it requires. This is a world without rules, where speed cameras are repurposed to reward speeding, where smashing into oncoming traffic is no big deal, and where finding a rare, classic

car in a barn means that you now own it. It's incongruous, but necessarily so, as it allows Playground Games to get the most out of the festival concept. *Forza Horizon 3* also features the least hateful cast of any game in the series. The previous, Xbox-exclusive *Forza Horizons* were more consistently irritating in their banter. Here, the radio station DJs are intolerable, the Horizon engineer is

You're the Kim Jong-un of improbable car festivals

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A racing game set in an open world run by woeful trust fund kids.

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

Playground Games, Turn 10

PUBLISHER

Microsoft Game Studios

REVIEWED ON

i5-6600K, GTX 970, 16GB RAM, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

2-12 online, 2-4 co-op

LINK

www.forza-motorsport.net



an overly enthusiastic Australian caricature, but your primary point of contact, Kiera, is merely a bit patronising. That's hardly a ringing endorsement, but it's miles ahead of the previous games.

SPIN CONTROL

The major difference this time is that you're in charge of the festival. In terms of progression, and the way you unlock new races and challenges, it's a good switch that enables a welcome degree of choice and customisation. Tonally, though, it's weird. You're no longer the scrappy underdog, making a name for yourself and earning the right to star in showcase events – the ridiculous, Top Gear style challenges that pit you against trains, helicopters, and other unlikely opponents. As festival leader, you get to participate by default. Your job is to earn fans by winning races and completing challenges. But winning all your own races is hardly great PR. You're the Kim Jong-un of improbable car festivals: creating a monument to your own brilliance at the expense of everyone else.

This is just a strange new wrinkle in a series that, for me, has always struggled to reconcile unappealing fiction with unrivalled action. And, ultimately, it doesn't hamper my enjoyment. I've played and loved every *Forza Horizon* game, and, in terms of size, scope and variety, this is the best of them. *Horizon's* challenges are enjoyable because its cars are so satisfying to drive. It's not a simulator, like *iRacing*, but nor is it a pure arcade racer, like *Burnout Paradise*. It feels realistic, but never to the point of hampering your fun. Certain cars are better suited to certain types of terrain, but you can take a hypercar onto the beach, wrestle with its skittish, nearly uncontrollable handling, and still emerge unscathed.

Over 350 cars are included at launch, with more planned as DLC. Playing with an Xbox controller, I get an immediate sense of the weight and

TOUR GUIDE

What to do in Forza Horizon 3

A

A race. You should already know what these are.

B

A street race. Like a race, but with traffic to avoid.



C

Custom Bucket Lists let you create or play user challenges.

D

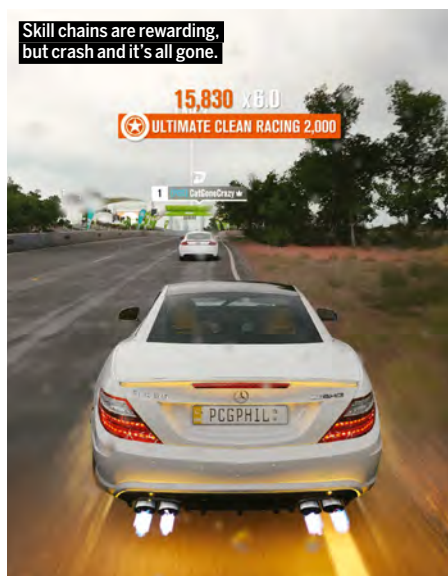
Showcases are *Forza's* attempt to be Top Gear with millennials.

E

Go and look at a nice, pretty bit of Australia.



Live out the fantasy of being young, rich and awful.



You shall rue this day, LOLSTURM.



Imagine dealing with this crap on your morning commute.



Each car has an accurately modelled dashboard.



If you like cars, *Forza Horizon* has them.



Bloody kids, doing sick jumps over vital transport routes.



In your face, LOLSTURM.



I'm willing to bet that guy isn't, in fact, Batman.



Australia is 20% lens flare.

» power of each vehicle, and can feel its limitations as I turn into corners. The feedback makes driving feel tactile and instinctive. This is a series about celebrating cars, with a handling model that makes each one a pleasure to race. The breadth of vehicle types, and the variety of the world, keeps things fresh and exciting even dozens of hours in.

You can also tailor the experience to your preference and skill level. By default, *Horizon 3* is an easygoing game, with plenty of driving assists, forgiving AI opponents and the ability to rewind time to correct mistakes. Those assists can be disabled, and opponents made more skilled, and doing so increases the rewards you get at the end of the race. AI racers are based on other players, and appear in your world with their Xbox Live name. This is *Forza*'s 'Drivatar' system, which supposedly creates AI behaviour based on a player's driving style.

I have no idea if it works. The AI doesn't stick too rigidly to the driving line, but all of my opponents have been broadly effective. Some are maybe a little more aggressive, but I haven't discerned any distinct personalities. Still, the system is welcome because it's more interesting having

familiar, recurring names appear in your races. Drivatars are more likely to be people on your friends list or in your "Club" – *Forza*'s version of a guild. That familiarity breeds rivalries. I don't care about a nameless opponent, but I do care if I'm being beaten by Official Xbox Magazine's Matthew Castle.

If you'd prefer your competition less artificial, you can head online – embarking on a series of events, or simply grouping up for a free-roam adventure. Multiplayer events range from standard races, to arena modes such as capture the flag and "Infected". It's competent stuff, although I've never been a big fan of the more arcadey game types. More interesting to me is the co-op campaign, which lets up to three other players join and progress your open world. It's a great way to hang out with friends, or to get someone who's actually good at drift challenges to do them for you.

Forza Horizon 3 doesn't just succeed as a racer, but as an open-

It doesn't just succeed as a racer, but as an open-world game

world game. Each activity provides a variety of rewards. Money lets you buy new cars. XP rewards you with a "wheel spin" each time you rank up – a slot-machine payout of credits or high-end vehicles. Fans, the main currency of progression, allow you to upgrade festival sites, filling up the map with even more things to do. Best of all are skill points. These are earned for driving feats, which in *Forza Horizon 3* means everything from drifts, near misses and clean racing, to trading paint with opponents, doing big jumps and knocking over bins.

As you chain these tricks together, the skill multiplier builds. Go a few seconds without

increasing it and you'll bank the points, putting them towards your next skill point – used to unlock a variety of passive bonuses. Crash, and you lose them all. On a long enough timeline, you're all but guaranteed to hit an oncoming vehicle as you e-drift down a winding country road. And so skill chains become the perfect risk/reward minigame on the way to each new event. It's the reason I've yet to use the fast travel option: simply driving to a destination is entertaining in and of itself.

HIGH PERFORMANCE

This is the first full *Forza* game to arrive on PC, and it does so via the Universal Windows Platform. As such, it's only available on Windows 10 through the Windows Store. On my home PC, using a GTX 970 and an i5-6600K, it runs at a solid 60fps at 1920x1200, despite my pushing some graphics options above the auto-recommended "High" setting. However, my less powerful work PC did experience some noticeable

stutter, which improved as I closed programs running in the background, but never fully abated. Seemingly this is a known issue, to be addressed in a future patch. Ultimately, I wouldn't expect to hit "Ultra" unless your rig is pretty new, and I'd advise caution if you're only just scraping the recommended settings. A demo is planned sometime after launch. If you're at all concerned about whether you're able to run the game, I'd advise waiting for that.

The upside is that the sense of speed feels exhilarating at 60 frames per second. *Forza* has always been good at selling the excitement of its fastest cars, but this is a clear step up over the Xbox One's 30fps. It's a gorgeous experience too, from the lavish recreation of each car, to the vibrant colour palette of the Australian setting.

Forza Horizon 3 is huge, varied and constantly entertaining. It treads a fine balance between simulation and arcade – bombastic and silly at times, but also an accomplished populist racing game. I don't like the script, the cast of irritants manning the radio stations, the way playing your own music in-game requires the use of Microsoft Groove, or the fact that one of the nicknames you can choose is "Bantersaurus Rex". More seriously, I worry Microsoft will continue its habit of integrating DLC cars and expansions in overbearing ways (*Forza Horizon 2* went as far as playing an in-game trailer for its *Storm Island* expansion). But these are annoyances I'm prepared to forgive in a game as good as this. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The best *Forza Horizon* game is now one of the best racing games on PC. It's vast, varied and lots of fun.

92



NAME GAME Which of these awful player nicknames isn't in-game?



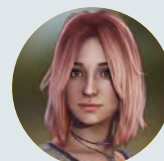
BANTASAUROS
REX



EL POLLO
DIABLO



ABROHAM
LINCOLN



DARK
LORD



BROMEO

Answer: Trick question. NPCs will call you any of this dumb shit.

SERIAL KILLER

Six episodes later, was **HITMAN: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON** worth it? *By Phil Savage*

Like many, I was surprised when *Hitman* was announced as episodic. Surprised, but not worried. Story has never been the main focus of *Hitman*. That changed for *Absolution* and I – like many series fans – didn't much care for it. In releasing each mission individually, IO seemed to be signalling this new *Hitman* was again a standalone series of sandbox murder playgrounds. Everything good about *Blood Money*, but bigger and with more options.

Looking back, that's pretty much what we got. *Hitman*, like *Blood Money* before it, does have a story, but it's a tale told in the margins – in post-mission cutscenes, overheard dialogue and, later on, specific mission objectives that nonetheless follow the regular template. That's good, because the template works. There is a target, or two, or four, each with their own routes and security. Your job, as bald killer clone 47, is to assassinate them.

You can, in many cases, just shoot your target and run away, hoping to reach the exit before the security team surrounds you. Doing so would be valid, but messy. 47 is a pro, and that means getting in and out with the minimum of fuss. Shootouts can be lethal – 47 is far from invincible – but *Hitman's* most satisfying challenge is taking out targets without being recognised. This is where disguises come in. 47 can take clothes from unconscious (or dead) NPCs, wearing them to blend in.

Disguise yourself as a waiter, and you'll have access to more of the level than a member of the public. Disguise yourself as a security guard, and your access expands further still.

Disguises have been one of the series' defining features since its inception, but *Hitman* offers perhaps the most elegant implementation to date. Instead of *Blood Money's* opaque and seemingly arbitrary suspicion meter, here you can only be discovered by specific NPCs of the same type.

In certain cases the system requires some suspension of disbelief – it's not always clear why some guards can recognise their colleagues when so many others cannot. However, the transparency is certainly welcome, ensuring you can circumnavigate these characters in an effort to remain undetected.

But it's not just a case of using disguises to get to a target. You must also figure out how you're going to kill them. Again: you have a silenced pistol, and it will do the job.

You can only be discovered by specific NPCs of the same type

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

Sandbox stealth about a clone who is good at killing.

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

IO Interactive

PUBLISHER

Square Enix

REVIEWED ON

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

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.hitman.com

Alternatively, you can take various tools into each mission, from guns and explosives, to lockpicks and a variety of poisons. Often, though, the most fiendish means of murder can be found within the level itself. 47 can rewire electric cables, loosen chandeliers, or tamper with gas heaters. And beyond the more generic options, each mission has its own tailored murder methods – called 'Opportunities'.

OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK

Opportunities allow you to manipulate your targets from their set routines, often fatally so. Similar in function to *Blood Money's* accidents, they're a powerful tool to either draw a target away from their security, or to lead them straight to their own demise. In *Hitman*, not only are there more per level, but they're more formalised – letting you discover and track specific Opportunities based on overheard conversations or information found throughout the level.

While Opportunities are invariably the most entertaining ends, and most directly buy into the fantasy of *Hitman's* premise, they can also be overbearing. By default, Opportunities lead you, step by step, exactly where you need to go. If dropping a stuffed moose on some jerk requires a cameraman disguise, you'll be told where to track one down. Arguably it means *Hitman* is more welcoming to

FINAL DESTINATION 47's busy itinerary



EPISODE 1
PARIS, FRANCE
A smart progression of *Blood Money's* ideas. **75%**



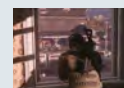
EPISODE 2
SAPIENZA, ITALY
Huge, open and beautiful. **85%**



EPISODE 3
MARRAKESH, MOROCCO
A murdering paradise. **81%**



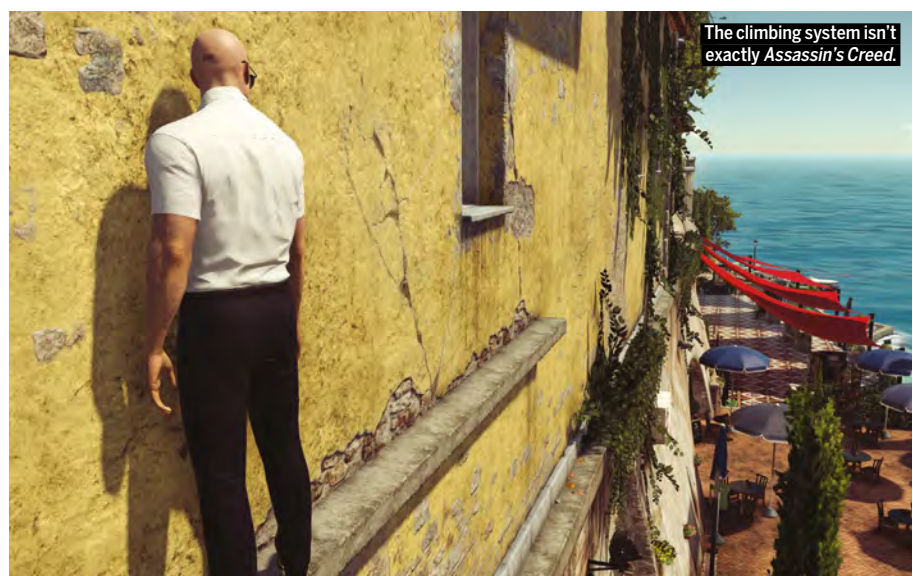
EPISODE 4
BANGKOK, THAILAND
More good *Hitman*. **78%**



EPISODE 5
COLORADO, USA
A welcome departure from previous episodes. **75%**



EPISODE 6
HOKKAIDO, JAPAN
A confident and experimental end. **85%**





A nice spot for a quaint murder vacation.



Typical delivery driver, mishandling packages.



47 had always struggled with the concept of hugging.



Knock Out



Me, after reviewing Hitman seven times.



Also you can be a ninja, I guess.

newcomers. To my mind, though, such detailed direction undersells the satisfaction of the core experience.

Fortunately, every element of the UI can be tweaked. Opportunities can be set to minimal, giving you only the broadest of objectives and leaving you to figure out the finer details. Or the objectives can be disabled entirely, challenging you to complete Opportunities more organically, using NPC dialogue and contextual hints. The result is the same – a jerk, dead by moose – but the feeling of accomplishment is far greater.

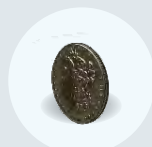
My recommendation is to disable as many UI elements as you feel comfortable with before you first attempt each mission. Each *Hitman* mission is designed to be replayed, but you only get one chance at experiencing it for the first time. Turning off unnecessary hints forces you to stumble through these massive, intricate spaces, picking up items, searching for clues and seizing upon opportunities (note the lower-case 'o'). I'm hesitant to say this is *Hitman* as it's meant to be played – part of the appeal is how well the challenge scales. Nonetheless, the detail within each environment is such that *Hitman* is improved by the need for exploration.

THE JOY OF SIX

IO has succeeded in making levels bigger than any previous *Hitman*. They're dense, too, packed full of items and possibilities. Thematically, few of its environments are as strong as those of *Blood Money* – there's nothing that feels quite as iconic as the suburban witness protection scheme, or the New Orleans Mardi Gras. Nevertheless, each of the six levels offers something slightly different. Paris takes place in an enormous mansion during a fashion show – layering access between public, staff, and the secret auction being held on the top floor. Sapienza is a vibrant and rustic town. Marrakesh is a contrast between the public unrest of the streets and the calm, minimalist interior of the Swedish consulate.

The early missions are all different takes on a similar theme – usually there's a big house involved. Later, though, IO starts to tweak and experiment with the formula. Colorado takes place on a farm full of mercenaries, and the entire area is marked as hostile. Hokkaido is set in a high-tech hospital, meaning 47 is

DEADLY DESIGNS *The tools of the trade*



COIN

Throw it to distract guards, or have them think that you're a bit of a simpleton.



LETHAL POISON VIAL

Drop it in someone's drink. If they drink it, they die. Easy.



EMETIC SYRINGE

Inject someone and they'll be overcome by a need to heave.



PROXIMITY EXPLOSIVE DUCK

Exploit man's desire to probe rubber ducks.



REMOTE AUDIO DISTRACTION

An overengineered alternative to the coin. Typical Silicon Valley.

unable to smuggle in items. These small shifts to the established formula can have a big effect – at least on your first run through.

Each level is designed to be replayed, either repeating a mission to find new methods, or taking on one of the Escalations – special missions featuring alternate targets that evolve with new complications each time you complete them. As such, every environment is big and intricate enough to support multiple approaches, be it silent, fiendish, or crazed axe-murderer. Marrakesh and Bangkok are arguably the weakest in this aspect, but even they have plenty to do. In the best spaces – Sapienza and Hokkaido, specifically – I've happily spent hours playing and replaying, each time finding fun new tricks.

As in *Blood Money*, the joy of *Hitman* is in manipulating these self-contained puzzle sandboxes. Strip away the theme and fantasy, and you're left with a diorama of moving parts – a seemingly perfect system of loops, each intersecting to create a complex scene. It's left to you to decide how you want to break it – whether it's by surgically removing key actors, or by violently smashing it all up with guns, bombs and a stuffed moose. This was the formula the series had been slowly perfecting, up until *Absolution* dialled it back in favour of smaller levels that fit a more prescribed narrative format. This new *Hitman* is bigger, denser and has more options.

There are problems, though, some of them caused by the episodic structure. The biggest is the reuse of the same few voice actors. *Hitman*

bills itself as a 'World of Assassination', but the voices of that world are the same, no matter where you are. I didn't find it too distracting, but then I'm more invested in *Hitman* as a systemic challenge. If you're looking for an immersive experience, the repetition of voices will definitely damage that. Similarly, music repeats too. If, like me, you were a fan of the fantastic Jesper Kyd

soundtracks of earlier games, the score for this *Hitman* is a disappointment.

Online functionality is also awkwardly implemented, with unlocks and challenge progress requiring an internet connection.

You can play offline, but you can't carry an offline mission online or vice-versa. You also can't use your unlocked items or alternate starting locations while offline. None of the online systems – the community-created Contracts mode, nor the one-time only Elusive Targets – are worth the downsides of this system. *Hitman* never justifies its restrictions. At least now you're no longer kicked directly back to the menu should your connection drop.

Issues aside, the actual design of *Hitman* – the targets, environments and challenges – is strong throughout its six episodes. *Hitman* isn't perfect, but it's a well made and entertaining successor to *Blood Money* – a far cry from the mistakes of *Absolution*, and a return to form for the series. ■

It's a well made and entertaining successor to *Blood Money*



PC GAMER VERDICT

Confident design and a willingness to experiment produce some of the best missions of 47's long career.

84

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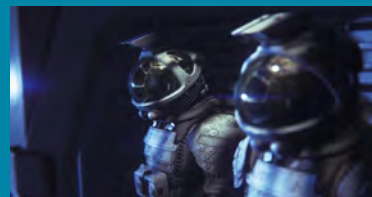
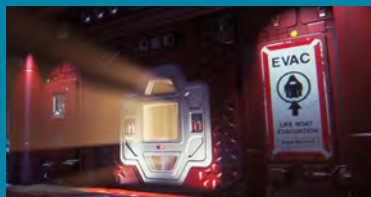
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THE LO-FI TECH OF ALIEN: ISOLATION

The Creative Assembly looked to the past to build a believable future. *By Andy Kelly*



A lot of 1970s science fiction has aged badly, but *Alien* hasn't. This is down to several factors, including director Ridley Scott's insistence on realism over flashy effects, and the practical, industrial designs of concept artist Ron Cobb. In the *Alien* universe, space travel is not glamorous or exciting; it's completely matter-of-fact. The crew of the *Nostromo* aren't in awe of the fact that they're travelling between the stars. They just want to get paid and get home. And this is reflected in the stark, functional design of the *Nostromo*, which is more like an oil rig or a submarine than the fantastical ships we're used to seeing in sci-fi cinema.

In *Alien: Isolation*, The Creative Assembly used Scott's 1979 film as the basis for the game's bold art design. Fox gave the developers access to a colossal 3TB archive of production material, including unreleased photos of the sets, and from this they created their own world using the same utilitarian design philosophy. The result is a setting that doesn't just look like *Alien*, but feels like an authentic part of its universe. Sevastopol, like the *Nostromo*, is the product of a society where all the wonder and adventure of space travel has been replaced by business. I've always loved that about the *Alien* series. Much sci-fi is optimistic, dreaming of a brighter future, but in this universe, space is just another way to turn a profit.

It's remarkable that, even with the presence of chunky IBM-style keyboards, flickering CRT monitors, and reel-to-reel tape players, *Isolation*'s setting doesn't feel like an

archaic throwback to the 1970s. You completely buy into its retro-futuristic design, a result of how artfully understated everything is. You get the sense that this technology is a natural part of the setting, rather than something included to evoke a particular time period or aesthetic. It's an attention to detail and a dedication to believable world-building that sets both *Alien* and *Alien: Isolation* apart in their respective genres.

FUTURE IMPERFECT

In an interview in Paul Scanlon's *Book of Alien*, Ron Cobb says: "I resent films that are so shallow they rely entirely on their visual effects. I've always felt that a lot of effort should be made to render each environment as convincingly as possible, but always in the background." And that's what *Isolation*, and the film, do so well. They invite you to credible sci-fi worlds that don't rely on far-fetched technology and fancy special effects to convince you that you're in the future. You believe you are because it seems real. The more grounded a setting is, even if it's fantasy or science fiction, the easier it is to relate to it. That's why something like prequel *Prometheus*, with its showy holographic computer interfaces, isn't as convincing as *Alien*, despite major advances in effects technology.

Alien: Isolation also takes deeper inspiration from the film's design.

The cold claustrophobia of the *Nostromo* is a big part of *Alien*'s power as a horror film, but the lo-fi technology plays a part here too. In a lot of sci-fi there's some magical device or weapon that saves the day, but all the crew of the *Nostromo* have to fight the alien is a cattle prod, a primitive motion tracker, and some rusty old flamethrowers. This establishes that, even in this advanced spacefaring future, technology won't save you; you have to rely on your wits. And the game echoes this brilliantly. The crude technology actually adds to the horror, because you never feel like there's a miraculous technological solution to your problems.

Alien: Isolation is proof that, when it comes to science fiction, less can be more. Videogame sci-fi is often shiny and ostentatious, as artists strive to show you just how incredibly futuristic they can make their worlds look. But Sevastopol is more convincing than any of them, because it keeps it in the background. Granted, the artists at The Creative Assembly had some incredible source material to work with. But rather than just recreate the film's sets, they used that enormous archive of reference material as a starting point to craft their own distinctive extension of the film. *Alien: Isolation* is a passionate, faithful homage to the film, but it's also a worthy addition to the universe and mythology in its own right. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED October 2014	DEVELOPER The Creative Assembly
PUBLISHER Sega	LINK www.alienisolation.com

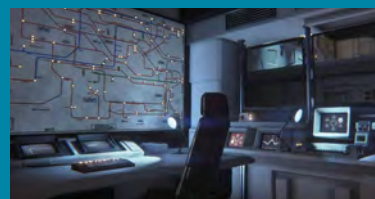


SCREEN BURN

Hey, that looks familiar

You occasionally see this image on screens around Sevastopol. If you recognise it, that's because it's in two of Ridley Scott's most famous films. Its first appearance is in *Alien*, when Ripley is escaping in the shuttle. Its second is

in *Blade Runner*, appearing on a screen in Gaff's spinner. It's almost certainly just a reused effect, but it's a nice piece of connective tissue between *Alien* and the similarly retro-futuristic *Blade Runner* – and now *Alien: Isolation*.

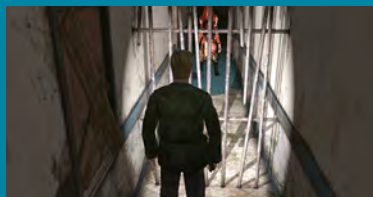


RIGHT: *Nostromo's* dippy bird: the direct ancestor of all kitsch cockpit-clutter in all sci-fi films and videogames.



THE MONSTERS OF SILENT HILL 2

There's more to Team Silent's horrifying creatures than meets the eye. *By Andy Kelly*



RIGHT: Sunderland's first mannequin encounter in the Blue Creek apartment building. Good thing he found that hefty wooden plank earlier.



When James Sunderland arrives in *Silent Hill*, he finds strange creatures roaming the empty, fogbound streets. On the surface they're simply enemies waiting to be shot or bludgeoned to death. But nothing in Team Silent's horror masterpiece is that simple. As you journey through the town and learn more about Sunderland, you begin to realise that there's more to these monsters as well.

They're so unusual. None of art director Masahiro Ito's designs can be traced to creatures from other horror fiction. "I wanted to give them a human aspect," Ito said in a 2001 making-of documentary. "When you first see one as a silhouette in the distance, obscured by fog, you think it's a person. But then I undermine this human aspect by giving them strange movements and using improbable angles for their bodies."

When designing monsters, most artists look to horror films for inspiration, but Ito was influenced by the grotesque, emotionally charged paintings of Francis Bacon. And he wanted to make sure that each creature not only looked scary, but affected you on a subconscious level. Speaking about perhaps his most famous creation, the monster commonly known as Pyramid Head, he said: "The triangle has right angles and acute edges. Its sharpness suggests the possibility of pain."

This design philosophy is part of what makes the creatures in *Silent Hill 2* so special. But it goes deeper. Their designs are also intrinsically tied to the story, which gives their presence a meaning often lacking in horror games. Each monster

represents something lurking in the dark corners of Sunderland's psyche. They're manifestations of his guilt, fear, insecurity, and sexual urges. He's fighting his personal demons in a very literal sense.

One type of creature, named Lying Figures by Team Silent, resembles faceless people wearing straitjackets made of their own flesh. They writhe and squirm, seemingly in agony, which represents Sunderland's inner suffering. Another type, Mannequins, are feminine torsos with long, slender legs attached to them: manifestations of Sunderland's sexual frustration. And Pyramid Head, who stalks him for most of the game, represents his desire for punishment – a desire that makes sense when you reach a certain pivotal point in the story.

At first we sympathise with Sunderland, thinking he's someone who accidentally stumbled into the haunted town. But the final act makes it clear he's been lured here to face judgement for something he did; something he's repressed to the point where he's completely disassociated himself from it.

The monsters that haunt you in *Silent Hill* are unique to you. Sunderland meets other characters in town, and subtle clues in the dialogue reveal that they see creatures too, but in a different form tailored to their own psychological issues. Eddie, for example, sees them as people laughing at him. The horrors in the town mirror the emotions and neuroses you bring into it, but no one visits of their own accord. They're tempted there by something, in Sunderland's case a letter from his deceased wife.

CREATURE FEATURE

The creepiest monsters



LYING FIGURE

A writhing humanoid trapped in a straitjacket of its own flesh. Spits toxic gas and skitters around on the ground.



MANDARIN

These curiously human-bodied creatures dangle from the ceiling and attack Sunderland with fleshy tendrils if he gets too close.



ABSTRACT DADDY

A disturbing creature from Angela's personal version of *Silent Hill* that somehow ends up in Sunderland's.



MANNEQUIN

The surprisingly graceful movement of these collections of plastic limbs is at odds with their grotesque appearance.



NURSE

A monster born from Sunderland's fear of hospitals, and his wife's terminal illness, with a bulbous lump of skin for a face.



PYRAMID HEAD

An executioner who hunts Sunderland throughout the game. He kills it a few times, but it always comes back, stronger.

THEME PARK

Silent Hill 2 has a depth and complexity that's sorely missing from most games, particularly in the horror genre. Everything is designed with intent, and closely linked to the story. "Psychological horror has to shake your heart deeply and uncover your emotions," says Sato Takayoshi, character artist. "Sex and death are something people think about every day, which is why both are core themes in the game."

Silent Hill 2 is now out of print on PC, and there's nowhere to buy it digitally. It's a shame something this important isn't more easily accessible. But there are ways to find it, and it's worth seeking out if you haven't played it before. Sunderland's trial is a powerful one, because this is a game that understands that sometimes the scariest monsters are the ones lurking in your head. Other games in the series are devoted to the mythology of the town and the source of its evil, but the intimate, personal story in *Silent Hill 2* is far more interesting. Sadly, with Team Silent long since disbanded, we'll never be told another one like it. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2002

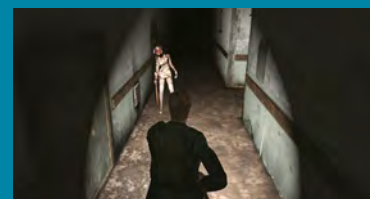
EXPECT TO PAY
£60, eBay

OUR REVIEW
48%

LINK
www.konami.com

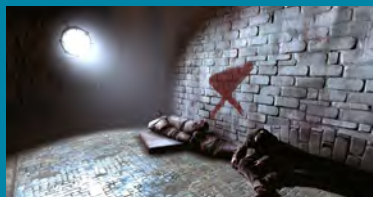


RIGHT: The first thing you see when you start *Silent Hill 2* is this grotty public toilet. Someone needs to get in there with some Cillit Bang.



DISHONORED'S DUNWALL

The city at the beating heart of Arkane's
immersive sim. *By Chris Thursten*



Dishonored owes
its atmosphere to
its art direction,
not the technology
that powers it.



Dishonored without Dunwall would still be an excellent game. It nearly was. Arkane's supernatural immersive sim was almost set in medieval Japan, and almost in London in 1666, before it settled on a city of its own creation. This is a game about meticulously crafted environments waiting to be cracked apart with your assassin's toolkit: it's about power and freedom and cunning, about you and your choices. It could be set just about anywhere, but I'm glad it wasn't. Dunwall is one of my favourite videogame places, providing the context and atmosphere that allows *Dishonored's* well-designed systems to output an experience with real artistic integrity.

In the span of a relatively short campaign you encounter the city from every angle. You get a sweeping glance of the skyline in the prologue, at the height of day, as the Empress is assassinated. Escaping from prison at dusk provides a glimpse of Dunwall's rotting depths as well as the steel web of new technology slowly being spun around it. Your crumbling red brick safe house, the Hound Pits pub, overlooks a ruined residential part of town – the revolution pulling their own pints for want of a landlord.

Your first mission involves stalking through industrial streets at dusk before breaking into the High Overseer's office – a sheer stone testament to militarised faith. There's a sense of days passing slowly as you cross Kaldwin's Bridge at sunset and raid Lady Boyle's party by moonlight. The only other game to use time of day this effectively is *Half-Life 2* – another Viktor Antonov game.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
October 2012

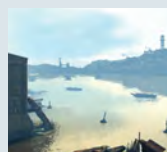
EXPECT TO PAY
£20, Steam

OUR REVIEW
PCG 246, 92%

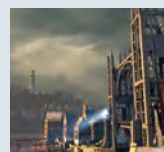
LINK
www.dishonored.com

THINK OUTSIDE THE SKYBOX

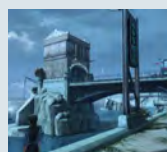
How Dunwall's skyline helps you locate yourself within the city



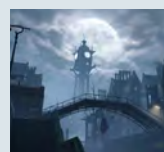
FROM THE HOUND PITS PUB
Look out from the shoreline to spot many mission locations, including the palace and Kaldwin's bridge. Keep an eye on that clocktower in the distance.



FROM KALDWIN'S BRIDGE
You cross Kaldwin's Bridge from the Hound Pits side to the clocktower side, and from the top you can see how the bend in the river conceals mission locations.



FROM THE DISTILLERY DISTRICT
Turn around after leaving Samuel's boat and you'll see that same clocktower. You're a few miles further down the river, on the same side as the Hound Pits.



FROM THE ESTATE DISTRICT
The Boyle manor takes place right beneath the clocktower. By this point, Corvo's missions have taken him all the way along the coast and into the upper city.

London is an important reference point for Dunwall, but not just *any* London. This isn't the London of Sherlock Holmes, or the cor-blimey God-save-the-Queen themepark that you should expect from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, or the jumble of fashions and speculative technologies and social patterns that sometimes coagulates into steampunk. Dunwall remembers a different London – a working-class city of wet streets and red brick, heavy with the legacy of the industrial revolution. This is the London of the Leeds-born landscape painter John Atkinson Grimshaw, whose 'Nightfall on the Thames' might be *Dishonored* concept art. This unusually sophisticated approach makes Dunwall a rare example of a videogame location that owes more to real history than it does to contemporary pop culture.

Dishonored isn't historical fiction, however, it's fantasy – and Long Island proves to be a useful touchstone for Dunwall too. Lovecraft's New England is felt in the juxtaposition of industrial 19th century streets and ancient horror: shrines to the Outsider found in lonely basements, a furnace set among the bones of an ancient leviathan whale. This is a society growing fat and sick because of its helpless addiction to power drawn

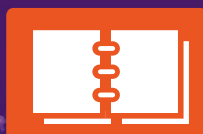
from the ocean. The soul of the game is found in the contrast between moments of beauty – a sunset over gabled rooftops, boats bobbing in the tide – and ugliness, the corpse piles and mouldy brickwork and the painted faces of aristocrats. Dunwall has a sickness that goes beyond the rat plague, and it is the player's choice whether to act as a salve, a scalpel, or a culling blade.

You aren't the only person with power, however. As with *Half-Life 2's* Combine, new technology in Dunwall takes the form of an occupying force. Grey steel impales old brickwork, forming watchtowers and checkpoints. It's something new, another outside power equal and opposite to your own. The Lord Protector has gained the power he craved by posing as the city's saviour, binding its wounds by force. In that regard he's a philosophical challenge to Corvo as well as a practical one, but while these ideas don't clash in the story they do in the environment. Entrenched power versus individual action, brutality versus subtlety. Dunwall isn't remarkable for including these ideas, but it is remarkable for expressing them with this much artistry. *Dishonored* tells you a little through its characters, but it shows you so much more – and makes you live it – through its city. ■



A lot of historical and artistic material was drawn upon in the creation of Dunwall.





DIARY

SURVIVING WITHOUT A WALKTHROUGH IN DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED

Have we lost what it takes to
play the unforgiving, illogical
adventure games of old?

by Phil Savage



THE RULES

1 Don't look at any walkthroughs or FAQs for answers.

2 Use the old 'verb wall' interface, and no object highlighting.

3 Andy Kelly is your LucasArts hint line representative.



I never played *Day of the Tentacle*, despite its reputation as one of the best adventure games ever made. With the remastered edition now available, Andy has challenged me to finish it without a walkthrough. It's my chance to experience the game as it was meant to be played – without the safety net of the internet. In the spirit of the era, I can use Andy as my very own LucasArts helpline. Be warned, there are puzzle and plot spoilers throughout this article.

I'm not too bad at modern adventure games – I completed the *Blackwell* series without a walkthrough – but I'm less adept at the older ones. *Monkey Island 2* had me utterly stumped. Judging by *Day of the Tentacle*'s opening cutscene, I'm worried this will be more of the same. It appears to take place in a slapstick cartoon, where logic has upped sticks and bought a quaint country cottage in a heartland of zany adventure. I'm in trouble.

We open to the lobby of Doctor Fred's combined hotel, laboratory and psych ward. I recognise my first puzzle: a coin on the floor that's stuck to some gum. I go to pick it up, but it won't budge. No doubt this is part of some long, elaborate puzzle chain. If I was a standup comedian, here is where I'd go on a long routine imagining common tasks through the lens of adventure game logic. Perhaps a skit about acquiring milk by using leather cushions to trick a cow into letting me near her udders.

No time for that, though, as I trigger a cutscene by climbing into a

grandfather clock. Soon, a time travel mishap occurs.

The three playable characters now exist in three different time zones. Equable roadie Hoagie is in the past, and skittish student Laverne finds herself in a future ruled by tentacle monsters. Both must get power to their Chron-o-Johns. Back (or forward) in the present, bookish Bernard must buy an expensive diamond to bring his pals home.

I quickly make what seems like progress by picking up every item I can find. Pretty soon Hoagie and Bernard's pockets are bulging. Not Laverne's though, because she's stuck up a tree. Also, I've talked to the founding fathers of the United States. They seem nice.

Climbing into a grandfather clock in the past as Hoagie, I find Fred's ancestor, Red Edison. He's going to help me build a super-battery, but only if I provide him with three things: oil, vinegar and gold. I suspect these aren't the ingredients for a battery, but then *Fight Club* lied about the recipe for homemade napalm, and the most cartoonish thing about that was Jared Leto's hair. Thanks to my earlier hoarding, I already have the oil.

Next: vinegar. I don't find any, but I do have a bottle of wine. As any sommelier will tell you, wine plus time equals rhyme. And also vinegar. I'm about to drop the wine bottle into the Chron-o-John – which lets me transport inanimate objects between





time periods – when I realise a conceptual flaw in my plan. If I send the wine forward in time, it will still be wine. I need to hide the wine in the past, and have one of the other characters retrieve it and send it back. I am a clever boy.

Admittedly not that clever, as it takes me a while to realise I need to put the wine in Thomas Jefferson's time capsule. In the meantime, I cajole George Washington into cutting down a kumquat tree by painting its fruit the colour of cherries. This frees Laverne. I'd gloat, but it was accidental. I recognised the basic template of an adventure puzzle, and attempted to solve it regardless of

reason. I also add an amendment to the Constitution requiring vacuum cleaners in every basement. I assume this will, at some point, be of use.

STITCHED IN TIME

Freed from the tree, Laverne is locked up by tentacles. Releasing her proves surprisingly easy. Feigning sickness, I steal a chart of tentacle anatomy and send it back to Hoagie. He hands it to a seamstress who assumes it's the template for a new American flag. In the future, Laverne is able to retrieve the flag and wear it as a disguise. Did I say it was easy? I meant stupid. Free to wander the future mansion, I find the time capsule. Laverne can't open it with her bare hands, though. Didn't I see a crowbar back in Bernard's time?

I did! The crowbar lets me pick up the coin from the lobby, and also steal

a stack of quarters from a candy machine. What I can't do is send it into the future to help Laverne. Instead, I do more things that don't make sense. I use the dime to shake a fat man off a sweater. (Why?) I put the sweater in a tumble dryer and use my stack of quarters to send it spinning into Laverne's time. (Er?) Later, I tell Bernard to steal a hamster. (What?) I put the hamster in an ice box. (Oh, come on!) In the future, Laverne retrieves the frozen rodent and puts it in the microwave. (Seriously?) I place the thoroughly damp hamster in the dryer-shrunk sweater to warm him up. (WTF, adventure games.)

I CAN'T TELL IF THE HORSE'S DENTURES ARE GOLD OR GRUBBY YELLOW

tips line. For a while, I'd harboured dreams of completing the game without ever calling him – especially as he'll be billing me for every hint I receive. Alas, I'm at a loss. I email Andy and ask how to send the crowbar to the future.

"Thanks for calling the LucasArts hint line. Calls to this 1-900 number are charged at \$3 for the first minute, and \$1 for every additional minute. Your hint is as follows: there are other ways to open a time capsule. The charge for this call is \$4."

What a rip off! That is no help at all. I've already been through the rest of my inventory, and there's no other item that could realistically open a... oh, it's the can opener, isn't it? That

Doing things for no reason works for a while, but pretty soon I'm stuck. It's time to turn to my only hope: Andy Kelly, who is standing in for the LucasArts





would be the most nonsensical solution, and so it's clearly the correct one. I send Laverne the can opener that Hoagie is inexplicably carrying and, yes, it works. Vinegar acquired. Just the gold to go.

Elsewhere, I'm starting to understand what I must do in the other time periods. For Laverne, I need to lure away the tentacle guarding the grandfather clock that leads to the basement. To do that, I'll need to free the prisoners by offering their warden the free dinner that can be won from the tentacle's Crufts-like human beauty contest. Problem: I don't know where to get a human.

In Bernard's time, I engineer a situation that results in Fred sleepwalking to his safe. But every time I go to grab the contract secured inside, he sleepslams the door shut. What a sleeper.

GIFT HORSE

Back in Hoagie's time, I can't find the gold. It's probably the pen by the draft Constitution, but I can't tell if the horse's dentures are gold or grubby yellow. Oh, right, yes: there's a talking horse. I can't wait to discover what logical, grounded and not at all contrived puzzle he's involved in.

I attempt to get some value for money by tricking Andy into



revealing more than he should. "How do I get the gold?" I ask. "And, if it has anything to do with starting a rainstorm, how do I get the soap?" The latter has to do with a puzzle thread I don't really understand, but I'm convinced will make me angry once it's played out. I'm not even sure it's relevant to my current situation. Mostly, I'm just frustrated that there's an inventory item I can't pick up. Every time I try, the cleaner scolds me and walks off with it.

My hope is that by my questioning a link between the two puzzles, Andy will be a bit broader in his hints. It doesn't work. "You need to keep the maid busy long enough to grab the soap. As for the gold, the pen is mightier than the sword. \$6."

What a swindle! \$6 for information I (mostly) knew! I'd already figured I'd need to keep the maid busy, I just don't know how. The only interactive element in Washington's room is the bed, and I can't seem to use any item on it. In desperation, I try using the bed by itself. It works. Hoagie nudges against it, messing up the blankets. I call the maid and grab the soap.

As for the other hint, I suppose it at least confirms that it's the pen I'm after. Also, now I have the soap I can clean the cart to trigger a rainstorm. Let's not stop to consider how idiotic that last sentence is, and instead stop to wonder why I need to trigger a rainstorm. I have no clue. I do it anyway, and, as a result, Benjamin Franklin returns to the hotel. I guess that's progress.

Using a letter from the past, Bernard gains access to a flag gun which I swap with a cigar lighter so as to pilfer an exploding cigar without blowing my face off. Perhaps,

ILLOGICAL INVOICE

A list of Andy's earnings

- \$3 Catching the teeth
- \$3 Making the mummy laugh
- \$3 Acquiring the lab coat
- \$3 Accessing the VCR
- \$3 Engineering a prisoner escape
- \$4 Opening the time capsule
- \$6 Acquiring the soap
- \$9 Making the mummy smile

\$34 TOTAL

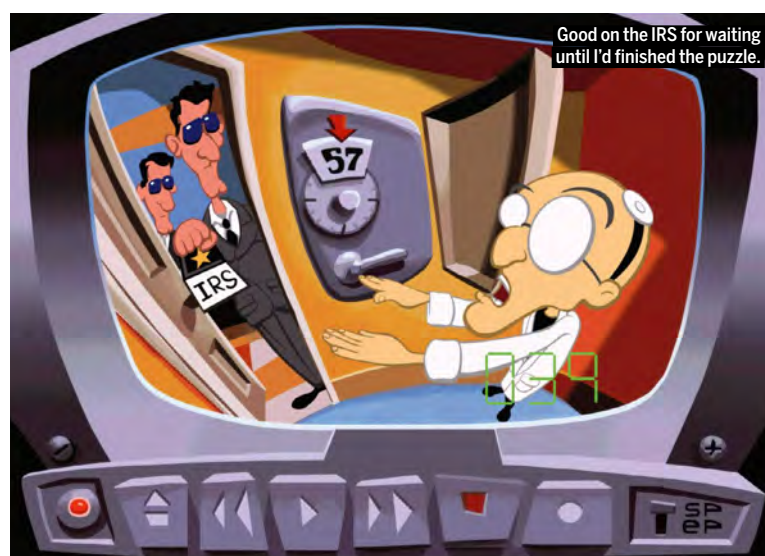
at times over the last two decades, you've wondered why adventure games died out. I'd argue that the answer lies within this paragraph. If you're au fait with the genre, you should be able to puzzle out the answer. No? Here's another clue: I then gave the exploding cigar to George Washington to blow out his false teeth.

Here I realise that I can use the chattering joke teeth from Bernard's time. If I can give them to Washington, people will assume he's cold and light the fire. I'm not sure how this will help, but I figure any puzzle to do with the founding fathers will get me the gold pen.

The trouble is I can't get the chattering teeth. They bounce away whenever Bernard gets near them. Once again, I try everything in my inventory to no avail. Fine, Andy, you win again.

"Catching the chattering teeth? That would be grate. \$3."

As a games journalist, Andy's idea of a cryptic clue involves puns. Still, I had previously tried to pry open the



grate. Unless, that is, I can just open it. I tell Bernard to open it, and, of course, it opens. Stupid verb wall.

I give Washington the chattering teeth and, lo and behold, a fire is lit. This gives me an idea. I go to the roof and place John Hancock's blanket over the chimney, filling the downstairs room with smoke. The founding fathers evacuate, and I pinch their pen. Sorry America, no Constitution for you.

I hand the pen to Red, who makes me a battery. It's uncharged, which finally explains the point of Benjamin Franklin. Besides the founding of a nation stuff, I suppose.

MUMMY'S BOY

It's time for some more sentences I'd never imagined writing. I have found an entrant for the tentacles' human show. It's Ted, the mummified corpse that exists in all three time zones. Progress is smooth, at first. I plop some wet noodles on his head, and use a fork to style them into a meatball laden hairdo. I also get my strongest competitor disqualified with some fake barf that, earlier, I'd rescued from a ceiling.

Hair is only one of the categories by which a human (or mummy) is

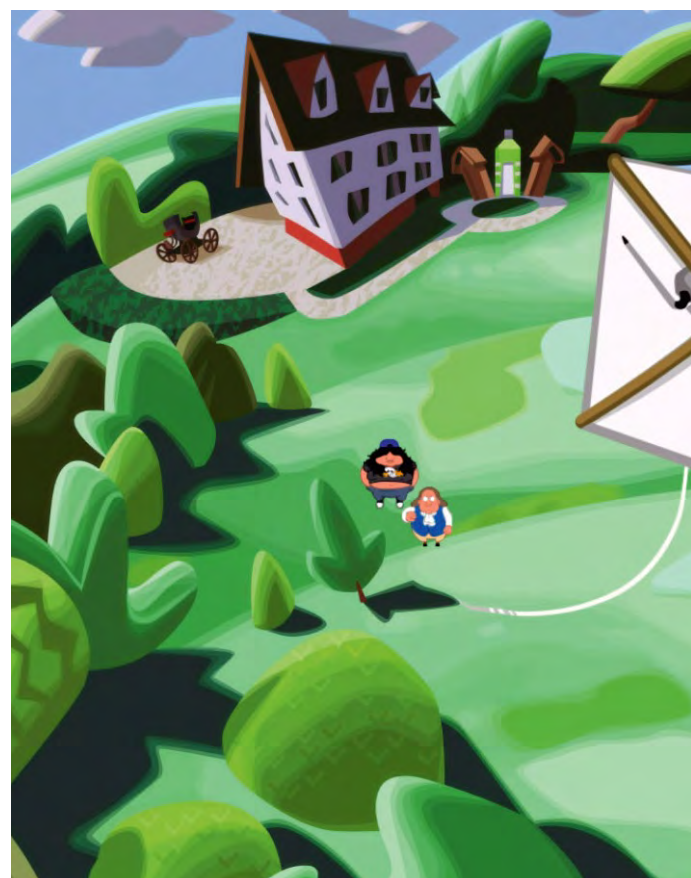
judged. The other two are smile and laugh. Once again, I am stuck.

"You can't use the chattering teeth, but there's another set somewhere around in Hoagie's timeline. I had to look that up myself, so that'll be \$6."

The horse! I knew it! The problem is, I've already tried to get the horse's dentures, and failed over and over again. And so, like some desperate puzzle addict jonesing for just one more hint, I go crawling back to Andy.

"There's a glass next to the horse. When do people put their dentures in a glass? \$3."

This makes me so frustrated that I involuntarily stand up in exasperation. That's when I remember that I work in an open-plan office. I grab the mug from my desk and walk off to make some coffee, thus creating a cover story for my sudden vertical outburst. The reason I'm annoyed is that, in previously attempting to learn the purpose of Bernard's book, I'd used it on just about every character. Each one had said that it made them feel sleepy. I'd come so close, but, for whatever reason, I hadn't considered using it on the horse. Back at my



Despite being a roadie, Hoagie doesn't lift with his knees.



desk, coffee in hand, I easily acquire the dentures. Great, my mummy has the best smile.

CLUE D'OH!

I still can't work out how to do almost anything else. My progress has halted in each time zone. In the past, I need to persuade Red to give me his lab coat so I can hand it to Benny Franklin. In the present, I need to persuade Nurse Edna to let me access the security room's VCR. In the future, I need to persuade a panel of tentacle judges that my mummy has the best laugh. Instead of the usual back-and-forth, I send Andy a bumper list of requests.

"An employee? Seems Red Edison wants help. Edna's a real pushover. Clowns often make people laugh. \$9"

That was expensive, but worth it. In the present, I use the scalpel on the fake clown, take out his chuckling voice box and send it to Laverne. All items in place, she wins the competition. Also in the present, I notice the "Help Wanted" sign. I pick it up and send it to Hoagie. Red assumes he made the sign and gives Hoagie the lab coat. I deliver it to Franklin, who makes it into a kite. I attach the battery to said kite and hurl it into a lightning strike. Grabbing the now charged battery, I



A memory from back when I thought this would be easy.



plug it into the Chron-o-John. I have completed the past!

As for Bernard, I wonder if it could really be so simple? I tell him to push Edna. He gives her chair a kick, sending her flying out of the room. Once again, I'm a bit annoyed. Bernard is so mild that he refused to use a scalpel to cut gum off a floor. Now he's kicking lecherous old women? It's completely out of character. Yes, that's right, I'm choosing to blame the game's inconsistent logic rather than my inability to use a verb wall.

I record Fred entering his safe code, and then watch as the IRS arrests him. I grab a contract out of the safe, and – through a complicated series of events involving an ink-stained stamp collection, a painted mummy and some light



dialogue puzzling – post it in the past. As a result, Bernard has access to enough money to buy the diamond he's needed all this time. I stuff it into the time machine and complete the present day.

Just the future to untangle now, and doing so involves a puzzle so infuriatingly nonsensical that this remastered edition has an achievement that makes fun of it. Having given the prison warden my dinner coupon, I must now cajole the prisoners into staging an escape.

Naturally, I have to consult Andy. He points me in the direction of the cat – specifically to the fence it's scratching itself on – and charges me another \$3. Eventually, I realise I must use

the correction fluid on the fence, which, as the cat returns for another scratch, leaves a white stripe along its back. Tempting the cat with a mouse, I grab him and take him to the cell. The prisoners naturally think he's a skunk, and make a run for it.

POINT AND QUIT

Look, I'm just going to say it: I'm glad adventure games died off. Fans used to lament the fact that mindless action had replaced their more cerebral pleasures. But *Quake* never asked me to paint a cat by proxy. That's not cerebral, just annoying puzzle design. *The Longest Journey*, an adventure game, has you use breadcrumbs to tempt a seagull into

attacking a rubber duck so that you can retrieve a clothesline. *Gabriel Knight 3*, an adventure game, has you style a moustache out of syrup and cat hair in order to disguise yourself as a man who doesn't have a moustache. Adventure games deserved to die.

With the tentacle guarding the grandfather clock lured away, Laverne can now access the basement. I go to put the hamster on the treadmill of Fred's old generator in order to power the Chron-o-John. As I do, a boxing glove attached to an

extending arm shoots out of the wall and punches Laverne in the face. This, I feel, is the perfect visual metaphor for my time playing this game.

The hamster scurries into a mouse hole, but I'd already amended the Constitution to mandate vacuum cleaners in every basement. I did this for no conceivable reason. Retrieving the hamster, I put him on his wheel and plug in the Chron-o-John.

All time periods are complete, and the three characters reunite for an epilogue. It is mercifully simple, requiring only that I hurl a bowling ball at some tentacles and talk another into firing his shrink ray at Fred's head mirror.

It's done. I have completed *Day of the Tentacle* without a walkthrough. I owe Andy \$34. More than that, though, I now hate adventure games. It's something of a pyrrhic victory. ■

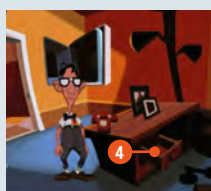
I'M JUST GOING TO SAY IT: I'M GLAD ADVENTURE GAMES DIED OFF

TIME TEAM *How to trigger a prison escape*



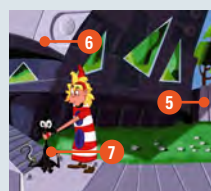
PAST

- 1 Swap mattresses so the squeaky one's at the far end.
- 2 Push the squeaky mattress to attract the cat.
- 3 As the cat walks over, run back and get the toy mouse.



PRESENT

- 4 Grab the corrective fluid. No puzzles here, just pick it up with your hands.
- 5



FUTURE

- 5 Paint the fence with corrective fluid.
- 6 The cat jumps up here. Lure him down with the mouse.
- 7 Take the cat to the prison cell. Re-evaluate your life choices.



“These skin-hugging onesies grant
superhuman powers”

Lovely. Shame about all the war and aliens and stuff.



CRYSIS

Revisiting Crytek's war-torn island paradise. *By Andy Kelly*

The last time I played *Crysis*, my computer exploded. This was back when I knew very little about building PCs, and had hooked up a powerful graphics card to an unbranded PSU below the recommended wattage. It worked at first, and I marvelled at the visuals. But then, after about ten minutes of play, there was a flash, a bang, and the faint smell of burning plastic. The screen went black and my brief love affair with the game was over. *Crysis*, and my own stupidity, had killed my PC.

Crysis was, and still is, famously demanding. Even now, with a GTX 970, I can't run it on max settings and maintain 60fps. For a game that's almost a decade old, that's absurd.

But that's always been *Crysis*'s 'thing'. "Yeah, but can it run *Crysis*?" became a joke in the PC hardware community. It's a game that has the fans in most rigs spinning and wheezing to keep up. But it's worth remembering that *Crysis* is also a really good first-person shooter. Well, for the first half of the game at least.

Set on Ling Shan, a chain of tropical islands in the North Pacific, the game stars a squad of elite US soldiers equipped with high-tech nanosuits. These skin-hugging onesies grant the wearer superhuman abilities including running really fast,

DRESSED TO KILL

The nanosuit and its powers

1 ARMOUR

Slower movement, but bullets do less damage.

2 STRENGTH

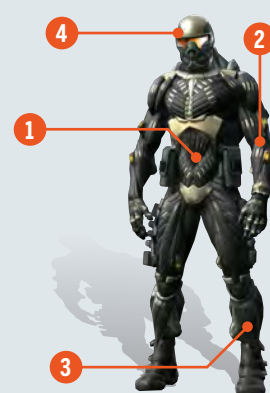
Throw things really far and punch people dead.

3 SPEED

Move really fast, knock enemies on their arses.

4 CLOAK

Makes you invisible, but drains a lot of power.



killing people with a single punch, turning invisible, and throwing chickens into the sea. The villains are the North Koreans, who have occupied the island and kidnapped a team of archaeologists who made a discovery that will, they say mysteriously, "change the world."

The game opens with you and your soldier pals, who call themselves Raptor Team, leaping out of a plane. »

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
November 2007

DEVELOPER
Crytek

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

LINK
www.crysis.com



It's night, but you can just about see the island through the darkness as you freefall. It's a great intro, showing just how massive the setting is. A tantalising glimpse of what's to come. You land and make your way through the jungle, taking out North Korean soldiers with a silenced rifle along the way. And as you travel, the sun slowly begins to rise. You emerge from the trees and get your first good look at the island, the sun burning orange on the horizon. But then you die.

HARD TIME

Crysis is a tough game, and most people will learn this the hard way when, drawn in by that sun-soaked vista, they stumble blindly into the soldiers below – and the gun-mounted patrol boat – and are instantly torn to shreds, even with their fancypants nanosuit. Your powers may be superhuman, but you definitely aren't. Perhaps this was by design? Because from that chastening moment onwards, you creep carefully between areas of cover, scan the horizon with your binoculars, and try not to bring attention to yourself.

But the genius of the nanosuit system is how it encourages the

occasional burst of bravery. Your abilities rapidly drain the battery of your suit, so you can only use them for a few seconds. If there's an enemy vehicle on the road ahead with a mounted gun, you *could* sneak past – or you could activate your super-speed, dash through the hail of gunfire, then quickly activate your strength boost, leap into the air, and punch the gunner so hard he dies instantly. Switching between powers on the fly like this elevates *Crysis* above what could have been a fairly plain, unimaginative FPS.

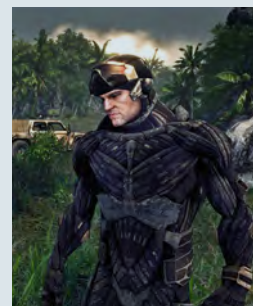
Using the cloak, which turns you shimmery and invisible for a short time, makes you feel like the Predator. Some of the best moments I had in the game involved sneaking through the jungle stalking increasingly terrified soldiers, picking them off quietly and unseen. If they catch a glimpse of you as you cloak, they'll fire hopelessly into the trees at the last place they saw you. It's brilliantly empowering, but the severely limited battery life of the cloak means you have to think carefully about when and how you use it. This balance of weakness and power is masterfully done.

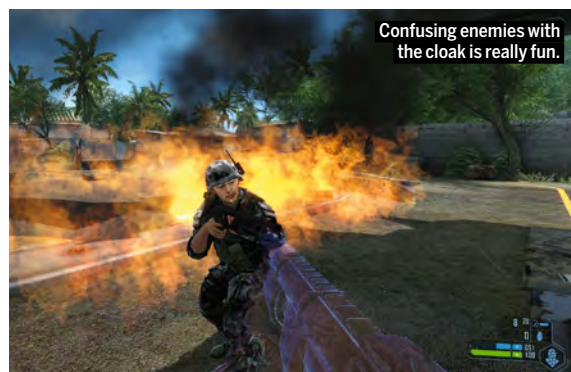
The first section of the game is my favourite. You have to make your way along the coast of the biggest island, and that's it. That's your objective. But it's a long, eventful trip, and along the way you have to deal with soldier patrols and vehicles, optional objectives, enemy-controlled towns and bases, and other distractions. And because of the richness of the nanosuit-powered systems, there are countless ways to approach every encounter. It's not a fully open world

SIDE BY SIDE

Is the expansion worth playing?

Crysis Warhead is a standalone expansion to *Crysis*, with a story that runs parallel to the main game's. But rather than being just a bunch of new missions and guns, it's an impressive refinement of the game's systems, AI, level design, and vehicle handling, and many regard it as superior. It stars a cockney called Psycho who has the same nanosuit powers, but can also dual-wield SMGs and use a big, scary plasma cannon.





YOU LEAP INTO THE AIR AND PUNCH THE GUNNER SO HARD HE DIES INSTANTLY

– you're still heading down a prescribed path – but the feeling of freedom and scale is powerful. Every time I play this section I do it differently, and on higher difficulty settings it's incredibly challenging.

Apparently someone playing a game will think an AI is more intelligent if the enemies call out what they're doing. The soldiers in *Crysis* are constantly yelling to each other about where they're going or what their next move is, which not only gives you convenient audio cues to adapt your tactics, but also makes them feel genuinely smart. Even if they probably aren't. Cleverly, on any difficulty setting above normal, the



enemy soldiers will speak in their native Korean, making things slightly tougher. I love sneaking up, grabbing one, and watching his face screw up in pain before I activate my strength power and toss him effortlessly off a cliff. I'm horrible.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

But the fun doesn't last. That thing the archeologists discovered turns out to be aliens, and their re-emergence on the island is when *Crysis* begins to lose steam. The aliens in question, later revealed to be called the Ceph, come in the form of giant squid-things and interrupt the fantastic pacing and flow of the you-versus-infantry missions. The aliens just aren't as much fun to fight, and a few later sections – including an on-rails trip through an alien spacecraft and a woeful boss battle on an aircraft carrier – strip away the compelling freedom that makes the

first half of the game so enjoyable. It turns into a generic first-person shooter, albeit a very pretty one, and reaching the end without quitting due to boredom is a test.

Crysis is, in many ways, a landmark PC game. People remember it as 'the one with the amazing graphics', but returning to it, I'm surprised by how fun it is as a game. The opening hours are up there with the best FPS experiences on PC, and it's a shame the series became increasingly focused on pushing its visuals, its daft story, and overblown cinematic set-pieces rather than the sandboxy shooting. But if you have a GTX 970 or lower and are expecting to effortlessly play the thing on mega-maximum settings now that it's almost a decade old, you might be in for a disappointment. *Crysis* might be ancient in game terms, but it'll still put most gaming rigs through their paces. ■



“Payne lives in a heightened, ludicrous world of neo-noir”

Sam Lake's face was swapped out for another in the sequel.

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE

Rediscovering the game that perfected bullet time. *By Samuel Roberts*

Whatever happened to bullet time? I think the death knell of the early noughties' most overused shooter idea was rung in slow-mo when *Matrix Revolutions* came out in late 2003. All the style established by the first *Matrix* film suddenly seemed a bit passé, a lesson no doubt learned by hundreds of virgins wearing long leather jackets to nu-metal gigs. *Max Payne* was the first game to popularise slow-mo, but *Max Payne 2* was commercially disappointing enough to put the series on hold for nine years. Bullet time gradually faded as the go-to idea for every third-person shooter.

When *Max Payne 3* arrived years later it was unfamiliar, and shaped by the more popular conventions of the

genre established in the meantime, particularly cover-based shooting. Bullet time and cover shooting are both solutions to the same problem: how do you create a sort of real-world logic to third-person shooting? Both are about making you feel more involved in the fight, not just strafing uncomfortably from behind a wall. Cover shooting's been around for so long now that we're never getting rid of it. Bullet time had a much shorter lifespan. Playing *Max Payne 2* again, or even the recent *Superhot*, I feel it's a bit of a shame that it faded away so quickly. I say it's *better* than sitting in

cover for five minutes while slowly clearing all the enemies out. You feel like a superhero. What's heroic about sitting behind a wall and blind firing?

BULLET BALLET

Bullet time wasn't just a gimmick when it was used properly, and Remedy was the master of it. *Max Payne 2*'s use of it is so elegant it turns every room into a puzzle. It's about learning the positioning of enemies and figuring out the perfect way to use your weapons and the quantity of slow-mo you've got left in the tank. In the back of your mind you're anticipating where the next medicine cabinet will be, so you don't blow all your painkillers after one scrappy firefight. This was a time before recharging health, after all. The need for strategy and precision ensure that *Max Payne 2* is still an empowering, exciting shooter today. »

PC PAYNE

Getting Max to work on modern PCs

Rockstar should salvage the first two *Max Payne* games and get them (and preferably the rest of their library) on GOG – I couldn't get the Steam version running on Windows 7, and while it worked when I upgraded my PC to Windows 10, it wouldn't run in

fullscreen until I tinkered with Control Panel. I can't get it working on two other Win 7 and 8 PCs, either. This is why GOG is more important to classic games than Steam – I'd pay £10 to own a copy of *Max* I can easily play on any OS in 10 years' time.

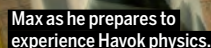
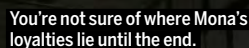
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2003

DEVELOPER
Remedy Software

PUBLISHER
Rockstar Games

LINK
www.bit.ly/maxpayne2



DEEPER PAYNE

remaining perps... it still feels fantastic. Max might be the most miserable man in the Americas but damn, he sure doesn't move around like a man with nothing to lose. Nothing's really aged about the way *Max Payne* 2 plays, because no one makes games like this anymore.

While the game offers nothing as visually memorable as the line-of-blood nightmare sequence in the original, there's more confidence in the cinematic presentation of the world. One segment lets you walk peacefully around the police station where Max works. I stopped to watch an episode of *Lords and Ladies*, one of the in-game TV shows, with two other cops in the rec room. When it was over and the ads came on, the cops started a conversation about nothing in particular.

One entire level, later revisited, is set inside an abandoned amusement park based on *Address Unknown*, a *Twin Peaks*-inspired fictional '90s TV show. It's a wonderfully specific choice for an environment, where your only frame of reference comes from watching the show on the various TVs found in the game. I love stuff like that. I can't see any triple-A developer but Remedy coming up



NOTHING HAS AGED, BECAUSE NO ONE MAKES GAMES LIKE THIS ANYMORE



with that framework for an important level of a game.

And then there's the story itself. Whereas *Max Payne* was a revenge story about the murder of Max's wife and kids, this is a fraught love story between Max and femme fatale Mona Sax, coupled to a narrative about the Illuminati-like Inner Circle. I couldn't fully work out what was going on with the conspiracy storyline this time, to be honest, but I have a real soft spot for the doomed Max/Mona coupling, and particularly the tense sequence where control flips to Mona and you're tasked with saving Max from swarms of enemies with a sniper rifle on a building site. The assured voice-acting helps – it's better than a lot of what was around at the time.

A KISS BEFORE DYING

I last completed *Max Payne 2* when I was 22, and I worried the romance might make this less naive version of me cringe years later, but not so – Remedy knew what game it was making, and the line at the close of the credits, 'Max Payne's journey through the night will continue' is very well-judged.

REMEDY TV Max Payne 2's in-game TV shows all parallel the main story



DICK JUSTICE

The premise

A Max-like drama about a fugitive cop.

Sample dialogue

"I had a permanent, constipated grimace on my face. I was revenge personified."



ADDRESS UNKNOWN

The premise

An homage to *Twin Peaks* set in the ludicrously named Noir York.

Sample dialogue

"You have a tumour in your brain. We're forced to operate... aggressively."



LORDS AND LADIES

The premise

A costume drama where the words 'lord' and 'lady' are used frequently.

Sample dialogue

"I can still hear the voice of my lord, calling out to me, saying 'My Lady.'"



CAPTAIN BASEBALL-BAT BOY

The premise

A demon-battling kid with a kidnapped girl pal.

Sample dialogue

"Can he save Bicycle Helmet Girl from the evil Maxwell's Demon lair?"

Max, of course, never gets a happy ending, and the finale is pretty brutal here. I think it's one of the best game endings there is, and even the choice of music got me. The song 'Late Goodbye' by Poets of the Fall that plays over the credits is heard throughout the game at different moments. The lyrics contain subtle references to the game, much as the same band's music (now billed as The Old Gods of Asgard) would later do in *Alan Wake*. Mona's last line, too, "I turned out to be such a damsel in distress" is a final demonstration of Remedy's self-awareness. They know this is a story awash with the conventions of other fiction. Even the

villain, Vlad, mocks Max for being so damned miserable all the time.

This self-awareness is what was missing from the third game, for me. It felt like a reboot in a lot of ways, swapping the heightened noir for the feel of a three-star action movie like *Man on Fire*, though it definitely has its moments. Bullet time aside, there's a real magic to the other touches that made *Max Payne* and its sequel so special: the mythical, forever nighttime New York backdrop, the feeling of being swallowed into the criminal underworld over the course of the story, and an understanding that irony offers plenty of leeway for purple scriptwriting. ■

“The peculiar whimsy of a sitcom
from the 1970s”

The backgrounds are all digitised paintings.



BENEATH A STEEL SKY

Before there was a broken sword, there was a steel sky. *By Andy Kelly*

After the success of its first adventure game, *Lure of the Temptress*, UK-based Revolution Software was ready for its next project. An early idea was to develop an adaptation of Alan Moore's acclaimed comic *Watchmen*, which led to a meeting between Revolution co-founder Charles Cecil and artist Dave Gibbons. The *Watchmen* game never came about, but Gibbons and Cecil became friends and decided to work on something original together.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
March 1994

DEVELOPER
Revolution Software

PUBLISHER
Virgin Interactive

LINK
www.revolution.co.uk

NAME DROP

Alternate titles that didn't make the cut

"SEARCH FOR MY
SILICON DAD"

"RAGE IN A DARK
MEMORY"

"ORPHEUS
ASCENDING"

"HEART
OF STEEL"

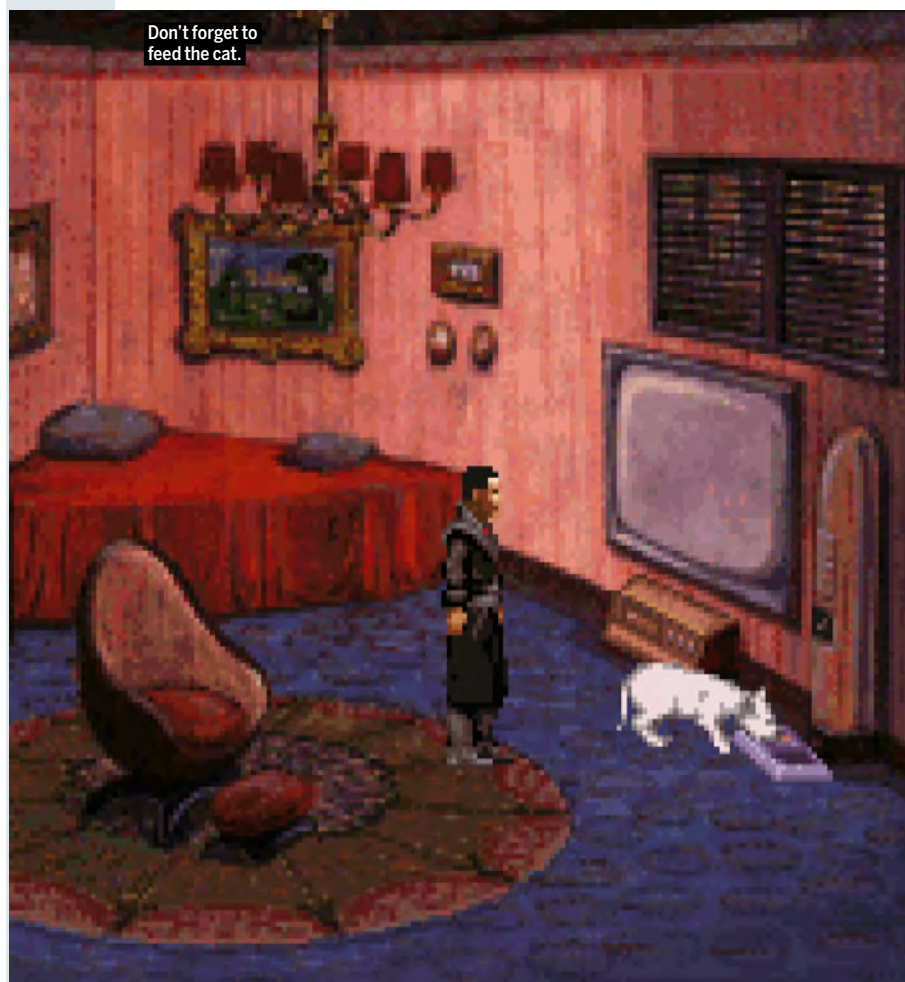
"THE MEMORY
THAT REFUSED
TO DIE"

"CITY
WITHOUT
HUMANITY"

Gibbons wrote a story outline, titled *Underworld*, which laid the groundwork for what would eventually become *Beneath a Steel Sky*. Set in Australia in the wake of some unspecified apocalyptic event, it's the story of a man named Foster trying to escape from a dystopian metropolis called Union City. A helicopter crash left him stranded in the Outback as a boy and he was raised by a group of aboriginals. At the beginning of the game, a jack-booted security force arrives in his village, kills his adopted family, and takes him to the city as a prisoner – and he has no idea why.

With such a dark premise and that evocative title, you'd be forgiven for thinking *Beneath a Steel Sky* was some kind of earnest, weighty science fiction story. In some respects it is, but mostly it has the peculiar whimsy of a sitcom from the 1970s. Inspired by the success of LucasArts adventure games such as *Day of the Tentacle* and *Monkey Island*, Revolution injected the game with a distinctly British sense of humour. And, honestly, it doesn't really work. The jaunty music, slapstick, and silly jokes jar with the bleak setting, and for a game supposedly set in





» Australia, most of the people you meet have stereotypical regional English accents. I can't think of a game with more northerners in it.

Union City reverses the dystopian fiction trope of an urban setting where the poor live in the slums and the wealthy tower above them in luxury. Here the underclasses live and work in the upper levels among factories, while the well-off live in the clean, safe lower levels. Foster tries to reach the bottom level, but finds himself hindered by the city's rigid social structure. To use the elevators, citizens must achieve a certain status – a way for the totalitarian government in charge to keep the poor and the wealthy segregated. It's no coincidence that, when the game was being made, Britain was experiencing similar division.

BIG ISSUES

"We were designing a dystopian future," says Gibbons. "So we looked at how society was in the present day and imagined how it could move forward. *Beneath a Steel Sky* was made at the height of Thatcherism. A consumer society with divisions that

were deeper than ever. And these ideas were floating around in our heads when we created the game." Cecil adds: "You had the rise of the yuppies, the mega-rich, and the ultra-poor. There was a lot of conflict, and that influenced our setting."

It's a politically charged game, informed by the era in which it was made. But they don't do enough with this aspect of the story, focusing mainly on Foster's immediate predicament. It feels like a missed opportunity, because dystopian fiction is often a great way to say something meaningful about our own society. True, there are some thoughtful moments in the game that touch on these issues. But in the next moment, you'll be solving an elaborate puzzle to flip a dog into a swimming pool. The humour almost feels like an afterthought; as if they wrote a serious, straight-faced sci-fi tale, then played *Day of the Tentacle* and thought "Damn, we better lighten this up with some jokes."

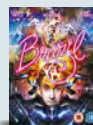
There was apparently some tension between writers Charles Cecil and Dave Cummins about the tone of the game, which may explain



its inconsistency. Cummins wanted the dialogue to be fun and flippant; Cecil wanted it to be more serious. They attempted to compromise and find a middle ground between the humour of LucasArts games and the "ridiculously earnest" Sierra adventures. Actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company were hired to

CALL SHEET

Films that inspired *Beneath a Steel Sky*



BRAZIL
Terry Gilliam's cult dystopian sci-fi thriller is set in a similarly bleak brutalist city, run by a totalitarian government obsessed with bureaucracy.



MAD MAX
They share a post-apocalyptic Australian setting, and artist Dave Gibbons partly based Foster on Mel Gibson's haunted road warrior.



METROPOLIS
Class division, social unrest, and the perils of technology loom large in this pioneering 1927 sci-fi epic by German director Fritz Lang.



BLADE RUNNER
Union City's urban sprawl is reminiscent of the grim, rain-soaked futuristic Los Angeles seen in Ridley Scott's neo-noir masterpiece.



Foster donates his lungs to science.

THE TEAM WOULD TOSS FLOPPY DISKS ACROSS THE OFFICE AT EACH OTHER

record the dialogue, but the writers were unhappy with the results and re-recorded the entire thing with traditional voice actors. The acting is decent, but the comical tone is, once again, at odds with the setting.

HIGH CONCEPT

When it came to designing the look of the game, Gibbons started with concept art in his familiar comic book style. He imagined Foster in his original *Underworld* pitch as “tall, tanned, and craggy, a mixture of Crocodile Dundee and Mad Max.” He sketched out the Nazi-esque uniforms of the security officers and the city’s jumbled, industrial skyline. Then, with only 500 colours and a 320x200 pixel resolution to work with, he began work on the game itself. He used Deluxe Paint II – bitmap graphics software designed by Electronic Arts – to draw the



characters pixel by pixel, while the backgrounds were digitised paintings with foreground elements added to give them depth. Finally, a team of animators at Revolution took Gibbons’ sprites and brought them to life. It was a huge undertaking, especially for a small team of only about a dozen people.

Beneath a Steel Sky was developed, according to Cecil, in “a grotty little office above an arcade in the town centre of Hull.” Instead of a network the team would toss floppy disks across the office at each other. The game was built using Revolution’s own Virtual Theatre engine, which would give NPCs rudimentary AI routines. This comes into play when Foster has to talk to a character, obnoxious factory owner Lamb, in a certain part of the city. He walks back and forth between the factory and his apartment, and could be anywhere inbetween. Simple stuff, but impressive at the time.

After the release of *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* in 1992, Gibbons’ original title for the game, *Underworld*, had to be changed. A list of ideas was shared

among the developers, but *Beneath a Steel Sky* was eventually settled on, which Gibbons wasn’t a fan of at first. The game was released in March 1994 for PC and Amiga and, thanks to marketing support from Virgin Interactive and Gibbons’ involvement, was a commercial success. The critics liked it too, with our own reviewer, Steve Poole, giving it 91% and calling it “well-written” and “challenging but fair.”

Two decades later, *Beneath a Steel Sky* hasn’t aged as well as some of its adventure gaming peers. It has its charms and some imaginative ideas, but it’s not on the same level as genuine classics like *Monkey Island* and *Day of the Tentacle*. It wasn’t until *Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars* (1996) that Revolution made its first truly great game, but *Beneath a Steel Sky* was an interesting step along the way. A slightly remastered version was released for iOS recently, but you can get the original for free on GOG.com. Time has been slightly cruel to it, but it’s worth experiencing if you’re a fan of Dave Gibbons’ art, or just as a piece of adventure gaming history. ■

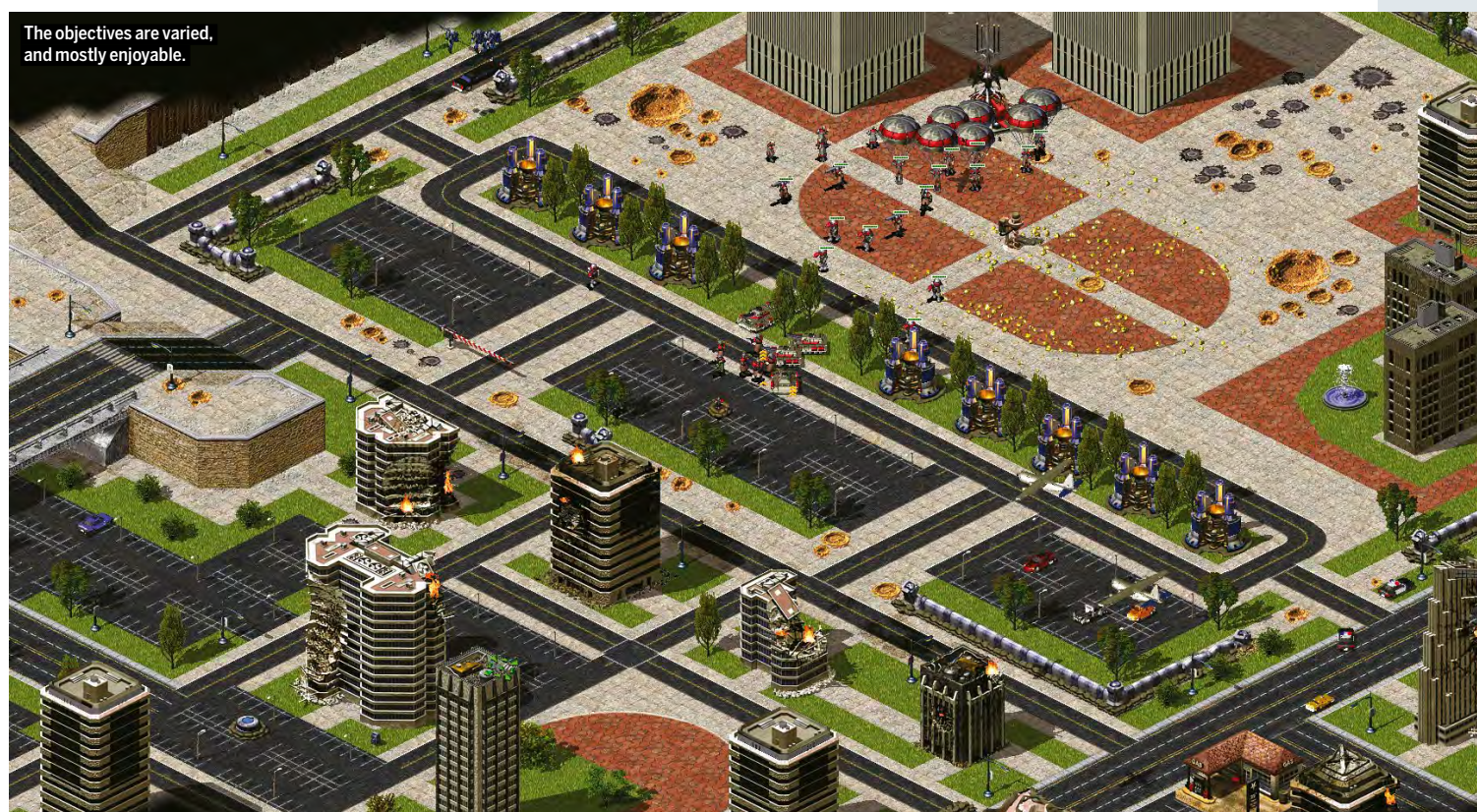


REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



“I started to misremember it as
dumb and lightweight”



The objectives are varied, and mostly enjoyable.

COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT 2

A hell of a march through the USA. *By Phil Savage*

In 2008, when EA tried to resurrect the *Red Alert* series with *Red Alert 3*, its marketing focused on the tongue in cheek, deliberately ludicrous story. Trailers showed George Takei, Tim Curry and JK Simmons chewing the scenery of their respective Empire, Soviet and Allied war rooms. Official descriptions heralded the return of the “humour” and “popcorn style story”. It’s fitting that *Red Alert*, of all series, should be the subject of such revisionist history.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
October 2000

DEVELOPER
Westwood Studios

PUBLISHER
EA

LINK
www.bit.ly/commconq

WELCOME BACK, COMRADE GENERAL

How to play on Windows 10



“American OS weak like turtle without shell. To bring glory to Mother Russia, download Aqrít’s ddwrapper from www.bit.ly/ra2wrap. Extract ddwrap.dll and

aqrít.cfg into *Red Alert 2* folder, then open aqrít.cfg in text editor and change ‘ForceDirectDraw Emulation’ from ‘0’ to ‘1’. Save, and play.” [Pokes turtle.]

The original *Red Alert* isn’t a comedy. While it opens on Einstein travelling back in time to assassinate Hitler with a fatal handshake – and let’s all take a second to think about that – the majority of its cutscenes are played straight. Its absurdities come through stilted acting, basic sets and questionable CGI. But the alt-history conflict between Allies and Soviets isn’t portrayed as a fun, campy romp. *Red Alert* isn’t a spin-off to *Command & Conquer*, but a prequel. The end of its Soviet campaign depicts the rise of Kane and the Brotherhood of Nod. In this light, it’s not surprising that its tone would match the more consistently serious main series.

It was *Red Alert 2*, released in 2000 – a couple of years after *C&C* sequel *Tiberian Sun* – that changed the mood and overarching story, ditching all ties to the *Tiberian* series in favour of a second war between the Soviets and Allies. Little attempt is made to dramatise events. In the first briefing of the Soviet campaign, Premier Romanov pokes a turtle named Uncle Sam as part of an extended metaphor about America being weak and cowardly. US President Dugan – played by *Twin Peaks*’ Ray Wise – is nervous and petulant throughout. The Soviet invasion itself is triggered when a psychic with a head tattoo mind-controls a soldier through a telephone. It’s all very silly.





The British can train a powerful sniper.



Bases look pretty nice before the tanks arrive.



It's like a sightseeing tour, but with armies.

Played today, this tonal shift stops *Red Alert 2* from feeling overly dated. The obvious comparison is to *Tiberian Sun*, which even James Earl Jones can't save from an awkward mix of drama, action and scantily clad mutant sidekicks. I don't remember *Tiberian Sun* being quite so embarrassing at the time, probably because I was 14. Now it's hard not to cringe through the cutscenes. *Red Alert 2* avoids that fate because you can tell its cast are having fun. It's a knowing nod to the camera; an admission that yes, it's a new

millennium and we're still doing FMV. Importantly, though, it's not ironic. It embraces the awkwardness. It owns it.

Despite this, *Red Alert 2*'s reinvention was likely a consequence of internal drama. Many Westwood developers left after EA purchased the studio, likely necessitating a much more different sequel than was ever planned. Certainly the loose story threads of *Red Alert 1* are left dangling. Is it stupid to expect continuity from a series featuring time travel? Maybe, but *Red Alert 2*

doesn't even try. It would have been easy enough to write in some brief, ridiculous-sounding time shenanigans to explain the new timeline. Instead, we go straight to the buffoonery and mind control.

COMMANDER CONQUERED

EA's acquisition and eventual destruction of Westwood is still a sore point among fans, and for good reason. But *Red Alert 2* finds itself in the sweet spot of the studio's troubled history. Those staff who left likely wouldn't agree, but the proof is in the product. This is one of Westwood's finest – a brilliant balance of fast action, inventive design and streamlined strategy. Its campaigns are memorable, and buoyed by the focus on familiar US landmarks. *Red Alert 2* also improves and polishes C&C's major systems far more than any of its predecessors. For all of *Tiberian Sun*'s visual and engine improvements, many of its planned features were scrapped – another consequence of EA's purchase, and the pressure for an earlier than planned release.

Not that any of *Red Alert 2*'s new features make a huge difference to

OUT OF CONTROL How the C&C games fit together



Timeline
'And also this'



COMMAND & CONQUER
GENERALS



IS IT STUPID TO EXPECT CONTINUITY FROM A SERIES FEATURING TIME TRAVEL?

the strategy. Garrisoning troops is a nice addition, but of limited use in a series that's more about production than micromanagement. And while capturing neutral tech buildings can grant useful bonuses, none of their rewards are so major that it's worth expending serious effort or resources to secure them.

It's the more subtle tweaks and additions that make *Red Alert 2* superior to *Tiberian Sun*. By organising the production sidebar into tabs, it becomes easier to find specific units and buildings – thus easier to react to the current situation. In fact, skirmishes as a whole feel more streamlined. *Tiberian Sun* doesn't have more units in total, but the greater focus on ground combat leads to an unnecessary level of obfuscation. Its units are all different, but rarely so different that they'd each form the cornerstone of a distinctive strategy.



Red Alert 2 has naval construction, and so spreads out its units over land, sea and air. As such, the battlefield feels cleaner, but also more varied.

As in any RTS, both sides have different units and buildings. But *RA2* feels like it embraces each faction's differences more completely than previous *Command & Conquer* games. Even the respective resource harvesters are different. The Soviet one has a mounted machine gun, finally giving the vehicle a defensive measure more effective than trying to squash soldiers under the wheels. The Allied one can teleport back to its refinery, shortening the amount of time it spends on the move. Both are interesting tweaks to an otherwise boring unit, and feel in keeping with the personality of each side.

SQUIDS IN

Somewhere in the mix of units – the unhinged Soviet explosive experts, the lightning troopers, the dolphins and squids, the teleporting legionnaires who delete things from time – *Red Alert 2* feels more like a cartoon than its predecessor. The tonal shift works for the mission briefings, but, looking at it now, not

so much on the battlefield. The first game felt bleak, conveying a sense of realism that hammered home the power and devastation of its weapons. The Tesla Coil was cool precisely because it felt so ominous and terrifying. But *Red Alert 2* is a fun romp, and so the destruction wrought by its superweapons feels ultimately less powerful.

That aside, I find myself surprised by how much I still enjoy *Red Alert*. In recent years I started to suspect that the *Command & Conquer* series wasn't as good as fans – myself included – made out. I started to misremember it as dumb and lightweight, devoid of any real strategy. That's not the case at all, despite the focus on speed and action. This is still a legitimately good RTS, filled with interesting and enjoyable decisions. Yes, it also lets you build a shitload of tanks, but that just speaks to the diversity of approach it offers.

I shouldn't be so surprised. After all, *Red Alert 2*'s lead designer was Dustin Browder, who would go on to lead *StarCraft II*'s development team. This remains a fine product from a fantastic era of RTS design. ■



There are countless ways to infiltrate Liberty Island.

DEUS EX

Revisiting Ion Storm's cyberpunk RPG. *By Andy Kelly*

In the earliest *Deus Ex* design document, written three years before the game was released in 2000, Ion Storm established the philosophy of their ambitious cyberpunk RPG. “The key to role-playing is giving players the freedom to act as they see fit,” it reads. “And a deep world simulation that allows them to solve problems in a variety of ways is the best way to do this.”

And that's the core of what makes *Deus Ex* a PC classic. The sheer breadth of its systems and the complexity of its level design is unmatched, even today. A lot of things were cut from that document – including a level set on a space station – but Warren Spector and his

team's original vision of a deep, rewarding RPG set in a rich, simulated world remained intact throughout development.

When *Deus Ex* was being developed, *The X-Files* was deep into its fourth season. And Chris Carter's cult show is an obvious influence on the game, with its government conspiracies, shadowy secret organisations, men in black, and bug-eyed aliens. The design document confirms this, describing the story as “leavened by its dark, mysterious, conspiratorial tone” and any tinfoil hat conspiracy theory you can think of, from Area 51 to the Bilderberg Group, factors into the story in some way. It's a world where paranoia about ancient secret societies pulling the strings of government is entirely justified.



In the ‘high concept’ section of the design document, Ion Storm asks: “Is it better to live free in a world of chaos or live safely in an ordered world of someone else's design?” And that's one of the major themes in the sprawling, labyrinthine story. You play as JC Denton, a government agent enhanced with augmentations that grant him superhuman powers.

When the game begins he's employed by a branch of the United Nations created in response to the growing threat of international terrorism. But after learning that his bosses have ties to a sinister Illuminati plot, he joins his brother Paul in the resistance against them. “*Deus Ex* plugs into two popular fantasies,” reads the document. “The millennial madness that's gripping the world, exemplified by *The X-Files* and a general fascination with conspiracy theories. And the desire to play with high-tech espionage toys.”

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2000

DEVELOPER
Ion Storm

PUBLISHER
Eidos Interactive

LINK
www.deusex.com



These creepy agents explode when killed.



NPCs will reveal secrets and alternate paths.



You can kill Leo Gold, but your bosses won't appreciate it.

AROUND THE WORLD *Key locations in Deus Ex*

1 NEW YORK CITY

Plagued by a mystery virus called the Grey Death and deadly street drug Zyme, this future New York is a bleak, dangerous place.

2 PARIS

The French capital is the base of Silhouette, a terrorist group with ties to the Illuminati, and is patrolled by Majestic 12 troops.

3 VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE

This base is the HQ of X-51, an MJ12 splinter group who disagreed with their shadowy plans for the world.



4 HONG KONG

Villain Bob Page's sinister VersaLife corporation is based here, as well as several warring factions of Triad gangsters.

5 AREA 51

The infamous 'top secret' USAF base in Nevada is secretly home to a mass surveillance system that's covertly spying on the world.

And it's these toys, as well as Denton's augmentations, that makes every playthrough of *Deus Ex* a wildly different experience. The first level, Liberty Island, showcases everything that's great about the game's open-ended design and how it rewards creative thinking. It's smaller than other levels, and I'm still finding new ways to infiltrate it. The statue not only provides a useful navigation

point, but her missing head, blown off by terrorists, is an evocative piece of world-building. A clue that maybe everything isn't totally cool in this dystopian vision of the future.

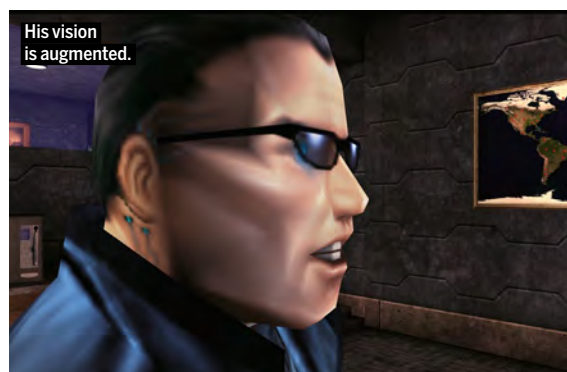
Terrorists have taken over the island, and you have to deal with them. But how you go about this is truly up to you. There are dozens of entry points into the statue, some more dangerous than others. If you

want to waltz in through the front door, you can. But you'll have to find a key, hack a series of cameras, and deal with a security bot. Or you can stack crates to climb up to the statue and avoid the security systems altogether, but will have to deal with a group of terrorists in an open area without much cover. You learn these things through experimentation, and that's part of what makes *Deus Ex* so compelling. You're presented with these big, complex puzzles and the game leaves you to figure out how to solve them by yourself. And when you do, it's hugely satisfying.

WALK AND TALK

But it's not all espionage and infiltration. Outside of missions you're free to explore, talk to NPCs, complete sidequests, and learn more about the state of the world through documents and news reports. *Deus Ex* is an enormous game, featuring three massive cities – New York, Hong Kong and Paris – and other locations including Area 51. You simply couldn't make a game this big today with the visual fidelity expected of modern games. In New York you witness the devastating





effects of the mysterious Grey Death virus, while in Hong Kong you team up with Tracer Tong and the Triads to investigate an Illuminati presence there. There are so many secrets hidden in these city hubs – and overwrought philosophical debates to be had with talkative NPCs – that a thorough playthrough of the game could easily take 50 hours.

But while the levels are huge, they're not big for the sake of it. This was another thing Ion Storm outlined in their design document as being important. "So many games simulate huge worlds and brag about it," it reads. "Witness *Daggerfall* with its hundreds of generic towns, its shallow conversations, and its randomly generated quests. We feel there's more to be gained by limiting the size of our simulation so we can increase the density of interaction."

And this density of interaction is another of *Deus Ex*'s many strengths. Its levels are filled with things to prod, poke, switch on, and mess with – from incidental details like flushing toilets to intricate security systems that can be manipulated to help you sneak through the level. "This gives the illusion that this is a real, vital

place," reads the design document. "It makes the levels feel like they have a life of their own, independent of player action."

And it has a sense of humour too, often as a result of this freedom and interactivity. If you stumble into the ladies' bathroom in UNATCO's Liberty Island HQ – which most players will as they hunt for secrets and hidden items – your boss Joseph Manderley (who recently appeared in *Mankind Divided*) will give you a stern talking to about it. Ion Storm knew players like to explore every nook and cranny of a level, and they made a joke in response to it.

It's a small detail, but one of countless tiny reactive moments that reinforce the idea you're having an impact on this world, not just existing in it. And who could forget mechanically-augmented agent Gunther Hermann ranting about getting the wrong soda from a vending machine, convinced the maintenance man has a vendetta against him. The story deals with some heavy stuff – mass surveillance, corruption, conspiracies, viral epidemics – but it offsets it nicely with some dry humour.

NEW WORLD ORDER

The Deus Ex series so far, from best to worst

1 DEUS EX

It's showing its age, badly in places, but the original's sprawling levels, deep systems, and conspiracy-laden plot are hard to beat.

2 HUMAN REVOLUTION

A worthy sequel with beautiful art direction, intricate level design, and two uniquely atmospheric, detailed future-cities to explore.

3 MANKIND DIVIDED

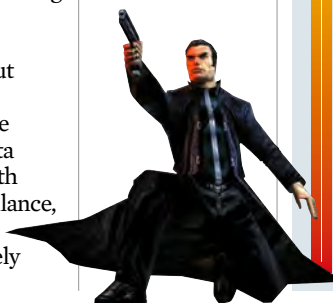
Definitely a great *Deus Ex* game, but the weak, aimless story and single city hub mean *Human Revolution* just has the edge over it.

4 INVISIBLE WAR

A confused, misguided attempt to streamline the *Deus Ex* experience for consoles. But, perhaps, not quite as bad as history remembers.

5 THE FALL

A horrendous PC port of an average mobile game. *Invisible War* gets a lot of hate, but this is the true nadir of the series so far.





THE ILLUMINATI SENDS A SQUAD OF MEN IN BLACK TO KILL YOUR BROTHER

A great example of the game's reactivity can be found in the Hell's Kitchen level. Denton's brother Paul, who ends up being hunted by the Illuminati, is holed up in a grimy hotel. It's called the 'Ton by the locals, referring to the fact it was once a Hilton, but the 'HIL' on the sign has faded away. After completing a few missions in New York, Paul's safehouse is compromised and the Illuminati sends a squad of 'men in black' agents to kill him.

These guys are armed with heavy weapons and can take a ridiculous amount of damage. Paul tells you to run and escape through the bathroom window, which most players will do when faced with these seemingly impossible odds. If you escape, Paul dies and never appears in the game again. But if you stay and fight, and somehow manage to kill the men in black *and* the UNATCO troops who've invaded the hotel, Paul

will appear in Hong Kong. It's unlikely that players at this stage in the game, especially on their first run, will have the skill or augmentations to win this fight, but the fact you *can* is precisely why *Deus Ex* is such a special game. It has a response, even if it's just a line of dialogue, for almost everything you do.

ALL MOD CONS

One part of *Deus Ex* that's really showing its age though, is the visuals. It's a hideous game, with blocky environments, blurry textures and ugly character models. But luckily there are mods that will sort most of these problems out, including the incredible *Revision*. This overhaul is free on Steam for anyone who owns the GOTY edition, and as well as fixing bugs and remixing several maps, it makes it look slightly nicer to modern eyes. But it does change quite a few fundamental things, so if you want to play the game as Ion Storm intended it's probably best to stick to the original version.

Then there's *Shifter*, a mod that adds further depth to an already deep game and exists to, in its creator's words, "remove the suck" from the

base game. It introduces a skill point system that rewards you for feats the vanilla game would ignore, like taking out a room full of men in black. It makes enemies smarter and tougher. And it gives weapons alternate fire modes, including launching napalm bombs with the flamethrower. Again, installing this will seriously alter the game, so think carefully before trying it – especially if it's your first playthrough. Some people don't like *Shifter* or *Revision* at all, but that's exactly what PC gaming, and *Deus Ex*, are all about: choice.

The game is still totally playable without any mods, of course. But you might have to dig through some forums to find out how to get it running at modern resolutions. The Game of the Year edition (whatever that means) is often on sale for a tiny amount of money on Steam, so if you've never played it before, there's really no excuse.

There's a long-running internet joke that whenever *Deus Ex* is mentioned on a forum, someone will reinstall it. And it's something you should consider. Because 16 years later, even if the visuals don't hold up, the game definitely still does. ■



“The way enemies explode into chunks is gruesomely satisfying”

Sometimes *Quake II* rendered over 17 polygons per frame.



QUAKE II

It's time to revisit id's legendary FPS. *By Andy Kelly*

The original *Quake* was a muddy medieval world of knights, Lovecraftian horrors, and grim castles. But the sequel, cleverly titled *Quake II*, goes in a different direction entirely. You're a space marine, naturally, who has crashlanded on an alien world called Stroggos. In a desperate attempt to prevent an invasion, Earth sent an army to the distant planet, but the Strogg knew you were coming and your arrival was a slaughter. The dropships were shot down by anti-air defences and pretty much everyone died, except you. And so, in true id Software FPS style, it becomes a solo mission.

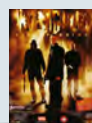
There's a chance you don't remember any of that. After all, *Quake II* is not a game renowned for its deep, complex sci-fi storyline. But the inclusion of a plot, and mission objectives, was

pretty unique for an FPS in the late '90s. As you play, a robotic voice regularly drones "computer updated" and gives you mission objectives. By modern standards that's completely unexciting, but back then it set *Quake II* apart from id's other shooters. It was more cinematic, and your actions felt somehow more meaningful. And by 'your actions' I mean 'shooting', because that's the beating heart of the game. Shooting things, and avoiding being shot.

At the time, *Quake II* was a technical marvel. Powered by the id Tech 2 engine, it boasted features that seem unremarkable now, but were amazing in their day. Hardware-accelerated graphics, coloured

SOURCE CODE

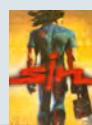
Other games that use the Quake II engine



KINGPIN: LIFE OF CRIME
A violent, foul-mouthed first-person crime caper with a Cypress Hill soundtrack.



SOLDIER OF FORTUNE
A forgettable shooter, made infamous by the ability to shoot individual body parts off enemies.



SIN
A cinematic FPS with detailed, interactive levels. One of the most impressive uses of the engine.



DAIKATANA
Not as bad as you think, but still a broken, ugly game that failed to live up to the ludicrous hype.

lighting, skyboxes, and the ability to return to previously completed levels were among its once groundbreaking features. After the release of *Quake II*, the engine powered several other games, including, in the early stages of its development, *Half-Life*. *Quake II* also had massively improved networking, making it one of the best early examples of an online FPS. Mod support also dramatically extended its lifespan for anyone lucky enough to have an internet connection with which to download the things.

NEED TO KNOW

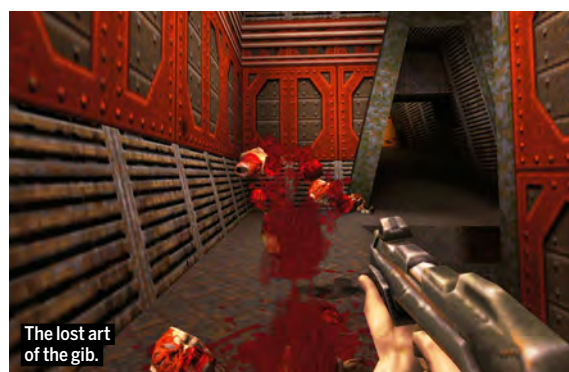
RELEASED
December 1997

DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
www.idsoftware.com





» People are still making mods today, in fact, including a few that let you play the game at high resolutions and with some graphical improvements. It'll still look like a game from 1997, but it makes it a bit more tolerable to modern eyes. Character movement is mapped to the arrow keys by default, but after some rebinding you can have it playing like a modern FPS. Although, weirdly, strafing is faster than moving forward and backwards. A strange sensation that took me a while to get used to. But for such an old game, *Quake II* is surprisingly playable.

A big part of this is its arsenal. It's still one of the finest collections of FPS guns on PC, and every weapon you wield has a distinct personality. The chaingun rattles at incredible speeds, getting steadily faster the longer you fire it. The super shotgun is like a handheld anti-aircraft gun, and you can almost feel the power as you unload it into an enemy and hear that echoing *boom*. The exaggerated kickback on the machine gun, which rises slowly as you fire, gives it a sense of physicality. And I love it when you fire the grenade launcher and hear the metal clink of the grenades as



they bounce around the level. Every weapon, except maybe the blaster, is a joy to fire.

But the best of the lot is the railgun. This metal tube of death fires depleted uranium slugs at extremely high velocities, which leave a blue corkscrew of smoke in their wake. The railgun is incredibly accurate – it's like a sniper rifle without a scope – and it can cut through several Strogg at a time. In fights with multiple enemies, a useful strategy is running around until a few of them are lined up, then firing a slug. Seeing it tear through a line of bad guys is one of the greatest pleasures in first-person shooting.

ENEMY TERRITORY

And the things you shoot are just as well-designed. *Quake II* has the standard FPS structure of starting you out against small groups of easily-killed grunts, increasing the challenge the deeper into the game you get. In the first few levels you're fighting shotgun-toting Guards, beefy Enforcers with chainguns, and Berserkers who lunge at you with big metal spikes – and later fire rockets at you. The way enemies explode into chunks of

bloody meat, or 'gibs' to use the parlance of the times, is still gruesomely satisfying. And there are other grisly touches, like when you don't quite kill an enemy and they squeeze off a few extra shots before they finally collapse and die.

But this is just to ease you in, and it's not long before id starts throwing its meanest creations at you in force. The Strogg are weird cyborg hybrids, with mechanical limbs and eerily human, grimacing faces. Gladiators stomp around on metal legs, firing their own version of the railgun at you. Mutants are angry, feral beasts who pounce on you, usually from dark corners. Brains, perhaps the weirdest enemy, attack you with tentacles and blood-stained hooked hands. There's a huge variety of things to kill, all with unique behaviours and weapons, which keeps the game interesting – especially when you're facing several types at once.

The hardest thing to stomach when revisiting *Quake II* is how brown it is. The switch from dark fantasy to sci-fi leaves the levels brutal, industrial, and metallic. There isn't much variety or detail in the environments, and the colour palette



Lasers and a cyborg dog.
Yes, this is a '90s FPS.

IT'LL STILL LOOK LIKE A GAME FROM 1997, BUT MODS MAKE IT EASIER ON MODERN EYES

is depressingly muted. The actual design of the levels is great, with plenty of secret areas and multi-level arenas to fight in, but the lack of colour and almost nonexistent world-building make it feel like a bit of a slog at times. But I remember thinking this back in 1997, and really it's a game about combat, not drawing you into its world. And since the Strogg live only for war, I guess it makes sense that their planet would be like one giant factory.

When you've fought your way through the Strogg and infiltrated the headquarters of their leader – a space station in an asteroid belt above the planet – it's time to complete your final objective: kill it. The Strogg leader is called The Makron, and it's a two-stage boss fight. Its first form is a powerful exoskeleton which comes equipped with a BFG10K, the most powerful weapon in the game. And, unlike your own BFG, it can fire it multiple times in quick succession.

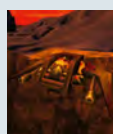
FINISH LINE

When you destroy the mech, it's time to kill The Makron itself, which also has a BFG as well as a blaster and a railgun. Luckily the arena is littered with power-ups, health, and ammo,

including a secret underground chamber that can be accessed by pressing a hidden switch. When the boss falls, you step into an escape pod, and that's it. 'The End' unceremoniously flashes up on the screen, and your only choice is to go back to the menu. Imagine if a game ended like that today.

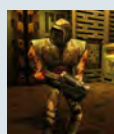
Quake II is still a great game, and I'm surprised by how well it holds up. There's something about the feel of the weapons, the way they're animated and how they sound, that makes them some of the best examples in the genre. Even the new *Doom*, which is a fantastic ode to this era of shooter design, doesn't have anything quite as enjoyably punchy as *Quake's* railgun. ■

STROGGS GALLERY *Some of the fiends you'll encounter*



FLYER

The inevitable flying enemy. Fires blasters, easy to take down.



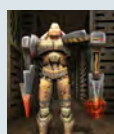
SHOTGUN GUARD

A generic goon packing a shotgun. A mere inconvenience.



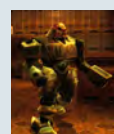
ENFORCER

A fat-headed grunt with a chaingun. Can soak up a lot of damage.



BERSERKER

Moves fast and lunges at you with a pair of robotic death-arms.



TANK

A lump of metal pain. Deals three types of damage including rockets.

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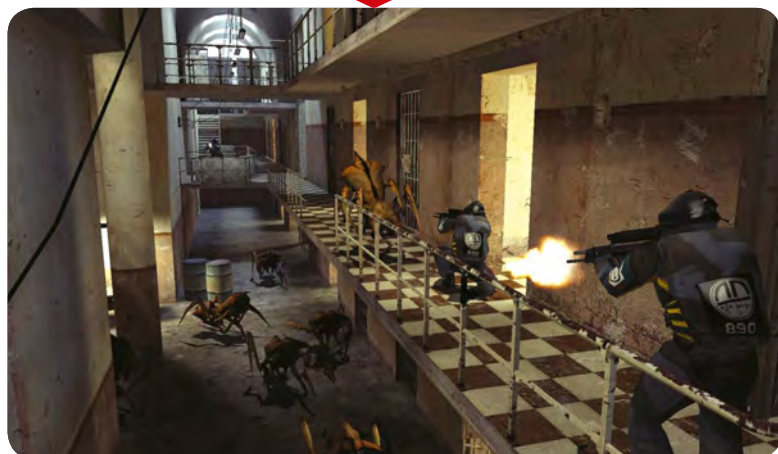
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