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#391
CHRISTMAS 2023



Readily distracted minds and alternative timelines

This month our 30th anniversary celebrations continue with a calendar featuring a year's worth of classic game artwork. (If you're reading the digital edition, here's the opportunity you've been waiting for to double up on the old-fashioned physical version – it's worth it.) As we looked back across the decades to pick out a series of iconic visuals, we also discussed how the game industry might have turned out differently. Where would Sega be nowadays had it stayed the course with hardware production? How much healthier would Microsoft's console business be had 2013's Xbox One reveal not been such an abject disaster? (Would it still feel compelled to scabble together \$69bn to acquire Activision Blizzard? Would Phil Spencer even be running the show?) And what about if that Sony and Nintendo PlayStation partnership had actually worked out?

On a broader level, the 'what if' has been the foundation of many a quiet afternoon's pondering ever since the human brain evolved beyond the capacity for simply steering the body towards food. Surely we've all spent the odd hour idly considering what might've transpired had we summoned the balls to tell Mr Sutcliffe in Computer Studies that he was a bully of the most contemptible variety, and that he really should consider taking his admonishments and sticking them up his stupid arse. Haven't we? OK, so your own what ifs are obviously unique to you and therefore extremely personal – which is what makes them so engaging.

It's the endlessly fascinating appeal of what might've been that exists at the centre of this month's cover game, *The Alters*. It's easy to convince ourselves that things could go better if we had the opportunity to just try that bit again – just one more time – and 11 Bit Studios' game tests the theory via lead character Jan Dolski (pictured right), in all of his many manifestations. Since this is a game, though, with challenge built in, it's safe to assume that there's no guarantee of a happy ending, even with retries. Our report from 11 Bit, also taking in *Frostpunk 2*, begins on p52.



games

Hype

- 30 **Dragon's Dogma 2**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 36 **Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 40 **Pacific Drive**
PC, PS5
- 42 **Helskate**
PC
- 44 **Balatro**
PC
- 46 **Rusty Rabbit**
PC, PS5
- 48 **Hype roundup**



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for additional content



Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online

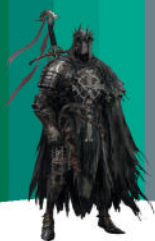
Play

- 98 **Super Mario Bros Wonder**
Switch
- 102 **Lords Of The Fallen**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 106 **Marvel's Spider-Man 2**
PS5
- 108 **Assassin's Creed: Mirage**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 110 **Forza Motorsport**
PC, Xbox Series
- 112 **Counter-Strike 2**
PC
- 114 **Saltsea Chronicles**
PC, PS5, Switch
- 116 **Jusant**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 118 **The Lamplighters League**
PC, Xbox Series
- 119 **El Paso, Elsewhere**
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 120 **World Of Horror**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch
- 121 **The Fabulous Fear Machine**
PC
- 122 **Subpar Pool**
Android, iOS, PC, Switch
- 123 **Hellboy: Web Of Wyrd**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series





70



#391

sections

CHRISTMAS 2023



92

Knowledge

8 Shifting foundations

What happens when the game industry encounters engine trouble?

12 Paper talk

Introducing Zach Gage's *Puzzmo*, with exclusive print-friendly puzzles

14 Pockets of time

Blaze's Hyper Mega Tech Super Pocket puts coin-ops in the palm

16 360-degree murder

SFB Games caws back to PS1 survival horror in *Crow Country*

18 Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls, featuring Amy Hennig

20 This Month On Edge

The things that caught our eye during the production of E391

Dispatches

22 Dialogue

Edge readers share their opinions; one wins an exclusive T-shirt

24 Trigger Happy

Steven Poole points his viewfinder toward videogame photo modes

26 The Outer Limits

Alex Spencer's voyage to the fringes of interactive entertainment lifts off

Features

52 Branching Out

11 Bit Studios introduces us to an army of clones in *The Alters*, and its keenly anticipated *Frostpunk 2*

70 Collected Works

From musician to game designer and back again: you've gotta believe it's Masaya Matsuura

78 Hit Factory

How the many trials of *Hitman* development have prepared IO Interactive for a multi-project future

86 The Making Of...

How a change of tempo saw Tango Gameworks take a break from survival horror in *Hi-Fi Rush*

92 Studio Profile

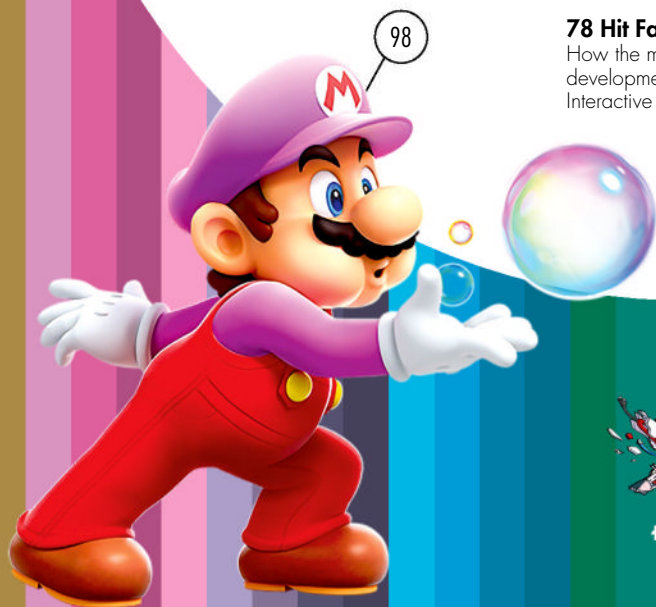
From a divisive debut to critical acclaim: why success was always on the cards for Deconstructeam

124 Time Extend

Did cruel fate deny MercurySteam's intriguing *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow* the legacy it deserved?

129 The Long Game

Taking our virtual bat and ball back into space as *C-Smash VRS* receives its post-launch upgrade



98



78



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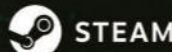
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Shifting foundations

Game engines are the bedrock on which the game industry is constructed. **What happens when cracks emerge?**

When engine specialist Unity announced in September that it was going to leverage a runtime fee, making a charge to developers every time one of their games was installed, a PR omnishambles ensued. Developers were quick to highlight scenarios where the fee would be unworkable, or even ruinous. What about free-to-play games? What about subscription services such as Game Pass? What about charity bundles? What if a single purchase was installed on multiple devices? What about uninstalling and reinstalling the same purchase? What if the runtime fee was used to target vulnerable developers, with malicious individuals reinstalling games multiple times to rack up fees? And how would Unity even track installs? That these problems hadn't been considered before the announcement was met with disbelief.

Unity scrambled to address the issues. Uninstalling and then reinstalling a game would trigger a fee, it said, only to later backtrack and say it wouldn't. Charity bundles wouldn't count, but the developer would have to tell Unity if its game was appearing in such a deal. Distributors would be charged the fee instead if the game was on a subscription service such as Game Pass. But precisely how installs would be tracked remained mysterious, with Unity only saying that it would rely on its own "proprietary data model".

The answers didn't satisfy a frustrated development community, who were particularly annoyed that the fees seemed to be retroactive, with games released years ago still subject to fees as of January 1, 2024. It felt like changing a deal long after the ink had dried. Faced with an increasingly untenable position, Unity revised its position weeks later, announcing a revised plan in which fees would only be applicable to games

THE META GAME
Rami Ismail acknowledges that, following the layoff of 830 staff at Epic, some developers are worried that Unreal Engine might be facing the same travails as Unity. "But I think what Unreal did feels less like desperation, and more like misguided megalomania on Metaverse nonsense," he says. "[Epic CEO] Tim Sweeney is known as a particular person who's set his eyes on the Metaverse: he had to apologise that that didn't work out the way he wanted to, but he's going to do it anyway. So the layoffs are less like, 'This company is going out of business' and more like, 'No, Tim really wants the Metaverse, and he's willing to sacrifice 16 per cent of his company to chase this dream'."

created with the forthcoming 2024 version of Unity, and that charges wouldn't be applied to games made with a basic Unity Personal account. Perhaps most importantly, developers would self-report their own figures, and had the choice of either tracking installs or opting for a 2.5 per cent revenue share.

The new plan was more acceptable, but the damage was done. Trust in Unity had been shattered. How could it change its terms so drastically, apparently without consideration for how its thousands of partners might react? **Gregorios Kythreotis**, co-founder of *Sable* developer Shedworks, was particularly alarmed at how small decisions at the top can have a catastrophic effect for the countless developers that rely on Unity for their living. "It's like a whale wagging its tail, and you're a fish at the back and you've just been sent flying," he says. "They could just crush us unwillingly and unknowingly." Importantly, he thinks that the Unity management's flawed plan

to track installs betrayed a lack of understanding of the technical challenges involved, as well as of the game engine itself. "Once you've accidentally shown me that you don't really understand how game engines work, no amount of apologising is going to fix that."

Unity announced that CEO John Riccitiello would be retiring "effective immediately" a month after the runtime fee was revealed, the exec's departure widely interpreted as a blood sacrifice to make amends for the damage done. But more worrying, says indie developer and consultant **Rami Ismail**, is that Unity felt

the need to implement the sweeping charge in the first place. "You don't want to see God bleed," he says. "And that's what happened – Unity admitted that, where they are now, they can't run their business. So they did what seemed like a fairly desperate move, and then they had to run that back." It was essentially an admission that Unity is not a profitable endeavour, he says, which is "terrifying" for developers thinking about committing to the engine for the next five to ten years.

Clearly, having a stable platform over the long term is essential. Ismail gives the example of his own game, *Ridiculous Fishing*, created using OpenFrameworks. "Then OpenFrameworks stopped being maintained a year later," he says. "So in 2015 we found ourselves wanting to update *Ridiculous Fishing* but just not having an engine to do it." It would be catastrophic if a similar fate befell Unity, undermining the structure of the modern game industry. "If Unity becomes unstable, less maintained, or goes out of business," Ismail says, "your game is done."

"If Unity becomes unstable, less maintained, or goes out of business, your game is done"

One thing that made Unity's runtime fee all the more unpalatable is the sense among developers that the company's engine has been deteriorating steadily in recent years. For some, the notion that the community was now being asked to pay more for something that was less desirable was the final straw.

Shedworks' **Daniel Fineberg** gives the example of Unity's rendering pipeline, which the company announced was receiving a much-needed overhaul about five years ago. But the process has taken years and is still incomplete, he says. ►

This *Lords Of The Fallen* image from game photography specialist Shinobi (@Shinobi_Space) shows what UE5 can do. The game's launch was beset by technical issues that couldn't be solved entirely within its dev studio, but with results of this kind of quality, could the pain be worth it?





Shedworks founders
Gregorios Kythreotis
and Daniel Fineberg

"They keep touting it as production-ready. Every time they release a new update, it's like, 'Oh, this one is safe to ship a commercial videogame', and it just never is. It's always missing things."

It's a similar story with other functions across Unity, including physics and UI. The result is that developers often have to choose between legacy versions that might be stable but are somewhat out of date, or take a chance on updated, work-in-progress versions that might lack stability or certain features. At the same time, Unity has been introducing new, experimental features and expanding into areas such as film, car manufacturing and defence contracts. This comes at the cost of neglecting the basics, Fineberg says. "They've been splitting their focus across so many different things, and the changes that people are desperate for are just dragging on."

Meanwhile, developers, including **Timothy FitzRandolph**, creator of *JellyCar Worlds*, say that Unity has been getting slower as more functions have been added. FitzRandolph was an early adopter of Unity, and was drawn to it partly because of its speed, allowing users to adjust a piece of code and then almost instantaneously switch to playing their game to see the effects in action.

"Nowadays, that is absolutely not the case," he says, noting that it might take 20 to 30 seconds to switch between adjusting the code and playing the game. "It doesn't sound like a lot, but it is a lot because it's compounding." FitzRandolph says that Unity's original speed was attributable to the fact the application itself was written efficiently in C++, while developers coded their games on top in the more user-friendly C#. But what has happened since is that Unity engineers have begun coding parts of the engine itself in C#, which "doesn't scale very well," he says. "As you add more code, the compile times take longer. And so, every time you make a change, it has to recompile all that junk, and just takes forever."

There's also a sense that Unity might be falling behind the competition. Massive Damage has transitioned to 3D for its next game, *Fera: The Sundered*



Indie developer and
consultant Rami
Ismail, and Toyful
Games co-owner
Timothy FitzRandolph



Sable has been a great advertisement for Unity, but its developers at Shedworks seem unlikely to use the engine once work is complete on the studio's current project, following the tech provider's recent missteps

Tribes, and co-CEO **Garry Seto** says the studio initially started out in Unity, but moved over to Unreal. "We saw the writing was on the wall for Unity when UE5 came out, with all these cool, pretty, shiny toys," he says. Co-CEO **Ken Seto** agrees: "What we were seeing in Unity just wasn't up to the level we wanted to get to. Our choice was to completely write our own shaders in Unity, which is not easy to do, or just move to UE5."

Unity and Unreal have helped to make game development more accessible, removing a lot of traditional spade work, but plenty of developers still use homegrown solutions, tending to them and expanding their capabilities, sometimes over decades. It is a big job in itself. Remedy has in the region of 60 people working full time on its in-house engine, Northlight, while IO Interactive has 50 staff dedicated to its Glacier engine – a team known as Backbone within the company, illustrating the importance of their work. The advantages of an in-house engine are many, including that they tend to be very good at specific things required by the particular games the developer makes. "If you look at some other engines out there, they cannot have as many NPCs as we do," says **Cristina Vega**, executive technical producer at IO's Backbone team.

Mika Vehkala, technology director at Remedy, emphasises the freedom of using an in-house engine: "You have complete control to define how your tools work, what are your content pipelines like, what thirdparty software you use and how you use it, and then define in detail what parts of a game engine runtime you want to push boundaries with." He also notes the advantages of having support and knowledge available in-house.

Anton Lindgren, technical artist at IO, agrees. "If you need to learn things, you basically just go to someone who knows how to do it – or sometimes the people who wrote the feature," he says. "That's a nice perk, to be able to actually go to the authors of the code directly." He adds that IO is able to precisely tailor its in-house engine to the games that are in production at the studio, "which also makes it more lightweight, because it's not loaded with a bunch of things we don't really need."

But what happens when you want to make a different kind of game? That's a pain point IO is experiencing with its RPG *Project Fantasy*, which it is building at the same time as *Project 007*, the latter a more natural extension of the *Hitman* template. The teams on both games want different things out of the engine, pulling it in the direction of their own needs. "Then we play cards, we negotiate," Vega

The forthcoming *Eve Vanguard* adopts Unreal Engine, despite CCP using its own graphics tech for the venerable *Eve Online*



says. “And sometimes one [side] needs to let go of their darlings.”

For others, switching genres has led to abandoning in-house tech. CCP has been using its in-house Carbon engine for *Eve Online* over the past two decades, but the company switched to Unreal to develop firstperson shooter *Eve Vanguard*. “*Vanguard* is a multiplayer shooter, and it fits very well into what Unreal was originally written for with *Unreal Tournament*,” says **Tom Woodhead**, technical director on *Eve Vanguard* at CCP London. “It suits our needs.” As a bonus, it’s relatively easy to find developers who’ve trained in Unreal.

But switching to a thirdparty engine also means giving up control. “People just think you pick it up and use it, and that’s it,” Woodhead says. “But we’re constantly feeding stuff back to Epic: ‘This is broken’, or ‘This doesn’t work in this scenario’, or ‘Why did this change?’ And it can be a bit nerve-wracking.” There’s also the worry of what he calls “the fragility of the tech in general”. How might potential troubles at the engine maker disrupt the tech that sits at the heart of your game, and thus your business? He says the recent Epic layoffs made his

“We saw the writing was on the wall for Unity when UE5 came out, with all these cool, pretty, shiny toys”

team nervous. “Anything could change,” he says. “Not only business decisions like that – they could deprecate features that we’re using, for whatever reason.”

Such considerations haven’t stopped other developers discarding in-house engines, however. Sports Interactive has said it will switch to Unity for *Football Manager 2025* in order to deliver improved visuals, while 11 Bit ditched its in-house Liquid engine in favour of Unreal Engine for *The Alters* and *Frostpunk 2* (see p52).

In reality, we have been witnessing the slow death of the in-house engine since serious middleware solutions emerged in the ‘90s. Big studios might continue to develop and maintain their own proprietary technology, but it comes at a cost, and the convenience of switching to Unreal or Unity is especially tempting if your in-house approach doesn’t suit a change in genres. At the same time, the financial barriers to creating a new engine are formidable. “If you have to develop your own engine, you’ve potentially just eaten into half of your game development cost,” says **Ben Hunter**, senior dev director on CCP’s Carbon engine. Consequently, a game pitch is much less attractive to a publisher

if it involves spending a couple of years building engine technology from scratch.

That leaves developers stuck with a choice between Unreal and Unity, and crossing their fingers that both engines will remain stable for the long term. But there is another alternative: the open-source Godot, whose profile has been heightened by the troubles at Unity.

Kythreotis says that Shedworks is too far into its current project to switch now, but if the studio did leave, it would move to Godot. He adds that Godot isn’t quite in the place that Shedworks needs to create the kind of thirdperson 3D games it makes right now, but it’s “pretty close”. He’s hoping that “all the extremely accomplished, pissed-off staff that Unity laid off over the last few years have a passing interest in getting that engine off the ground. Who knows? We’ll see.”

Kythreotis imagines that Godot could eventually evolve along the lines of the open-source 3D tool Blender. One benefit of open-source software is that the community retains control. “Even if the Blender organisation itself wanted to go on a crazy, ridiculous path, someone could just take the current version of Blender and take it in their own direction,” Kythreotis says. In an idealised future, the security and stability of the industry as a whole could rest in the hands of developers themselves. ■



Tom Woodhead, technical director of *Eve Vanguard*, and **Ben Hunter**, senior dev director for CCP’s Carbon engine

Paper talk

How Puzzmo aims to **beat the New York Times** at its own game

Zach Gage plays *Apex Legends* “almost every day”. (He’s a Bangalore main, if you’re curious; hence his development partner **Orta Therox** chipping in with “Lifelinel!”) That fact might seem tangential to the developer’s latest project, but it’s key to how it all began, with Gage thinking seriously about games that have become more than games; the kind that become habitual. “*Minecraft* or *Roblox* or *League Of Legends* – these are all games that have really substantial platforms,” Gage begins. “They’re a social space you can go to and interact with people. *Roblox* in particular is a place you go to hang with your friends, and there happens to be games there.”

He considered how he might create something similar for the type of game he makes: puzzlers such as *Knotwords*, *SpellTower* and *Really Bad Chess*. “A platform for a very specific kind of game, and a kind of game that I feel has been under-platformed,” he elaborates. Just before he shares his screen over Zoom, we notice his smile has reached his eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more excited to be showing a thing that I’ve been working on.”

Seconds later, we get our first glimpse of what he’s been teasing. Puzzmo is not a game, but a platform for games – specifically Zach Gage-developed puzzle games. Anagram puzzler *TypeShift* is there, alongside *SpellTower* and *Really Bad Chess*, each subtly altered in presentation or mechanics for daily play in a browser (it’s playable on mobile, too, though an app is in the offing next year). The newly designed *Flipart* invites you to rotate shapes to fill a rectangular grid,

while *Wordbind* gives you a long word in which you can identify shorter ones.

Perhaps most significantly, there’s a crossword at the top, which ties into one of the most important things about Puzzmo: the layout. We’re immediately struck by the fact that it resembles the puzzle page of a newspaper, a design choice Gage recognised was crucial from the start. Pitching a puzzle game is difficult, he says, “because the only thing that’s cool about it is the rules. And that’s doubly hard if you’re trying to pitch a game to people who don’t care about [traditional] videogames, which is like the *Wordle* audience or the *SpellTower* audience. So it was like: ‘How do we build this thing in a way that gets people to be interested in this type of game?’”

The solution came when he started to think about the types of game his mother would play. “All the games she plays are newspaper games, and she got into them because she read the newspaper and they were just *there*,” he says. “She would play the crossword and next to the crossword

would be a sudoku, and eventually she tried the sudoku. That moment of just having something be present is really, really important for how people play these games.” Hence the elegant configuration of three columns – or fewer, the layout adapting to your device.

That desire to mimic a print publication ties into other design choices: fill in part of the crossword and exit back onto the main page and your progress will be visibly reflected. One consideration when adapting existing Gage games for Puzzmo was a consistency of aesthetic,



Puzzmo developers Zach Gage and Orta Therox, who have supplied an exclusive page of print-friendly puzzles for Edge readers to solve (see opposite), featuring a surprise cameo

so they all feel like part of a cohesive whole. The desire, ultimately, is to give you a feeling of completion. “When you solve these puzzles,” Gage says, “you get this experience of having solved an entire page of puzzles.” As opposed to other publications, which feature daily puzzles but feel like “just a list of links to things”.

Bullishly, Gage is treating the *New York Times* as Puzzmo’s main competition, and there he sees room for improvement. “It’s not really a place or a platform. It’s not really doing the things that most people who are into videogames get to do. And I felt like the audience of people who enjoy this kind of newspaper game deserve something that’s at least as good as the *New York Times* print games page, if not substantially better.” Which means taking advantage of everything a digital space can offer: the top-right corner, titled ‘yesterday’s news’, offers headlines for your and your friends’ accomplishments, which can be expanded via a drop-down. Scroll down and you’ll find leaderboards and other stats for every game. It’s been designed not to be too obtrusive for those who don’t have that competitive streak, but they’re present for those who do. Gage grins as he notes his mother is in sixth place in the daily-score rankings.

Most of this will be free for everyone, but only paid subscribers will get access to leaderboards, archive puzzles and bonus ‘experimental’ games. Gage and Therox are banking on social features to help grow the platform: beat a *SpellTower*, for instance, and it will create a shareable word jumble of your best word, creating a puzzle your friends can solve and discuss with you via Puzzmo’s chat channel. Word of mouth will be crucial, Gage notes, if he’s to take on such a giant. But from everything we’ve seen, our money’s on this metaphorical David. ■

Unplayed 🗂️ 2

Typeshift

Find five hidden words in the grid below which fit the clues.

- Every word uses exactly one letter from each column.
- Each letter in the grid is only used once.

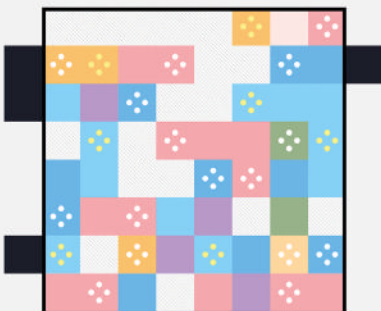
T	E	A	A	I	E
P	A	B	S	E	R
R	N	R	K	L	Y
B	U	S	T	A	T
S	O	E	B	K	L

- _____ Clue: Long-eared and fluffy tailed animal.
- _____ Clue: Elusive and clever.
- _____ Clue: Physical alteration.
- _____ Clue: Lab container.
- _____ Clue: Magical doorway.

Unplayed 🗂️ 92

Flipart

This one is only playable online!
Visit puzzmo.com to try it out.

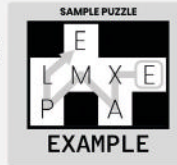


In progress 🗂️ 2

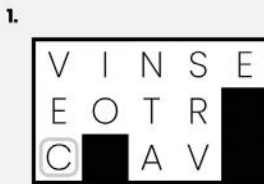
Unplayed

Spelltower

You are looking for one long hidden word in each puzzle that fits the clue.



Starting at the marked letter, you may move up, down, left, right, or diagonal to connecting letters. Each letter is only used once, and every letter is used.



CLUE: A person who supports keeping things as they are or reverting to a previous state.

2. EXTRA TOUGH: Hidden start!



CLUE: The act of exploring to gather information, often in military or medical contexts.

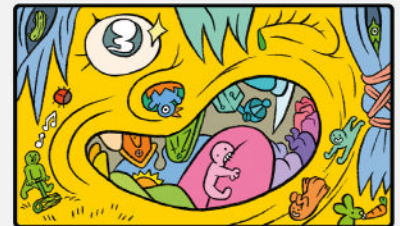
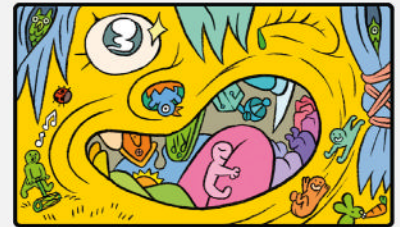
Yesterday's news

- 🗂️ You came in 5th place with 3,830 on the Crossword leaderboard: Highscore
- 🗂️ The toughest clue in the crossword was 10D: More pink, in a way . 19% of players requested a hint for [RARER!](#)
- 🗂️ [rulesattorney](#) got the longest word in SpellTower: 8 letters ([EXPELLER](#)).

Unplayed 🗂️ 345

Spot the difference

Can you spot the five differences in the images below?

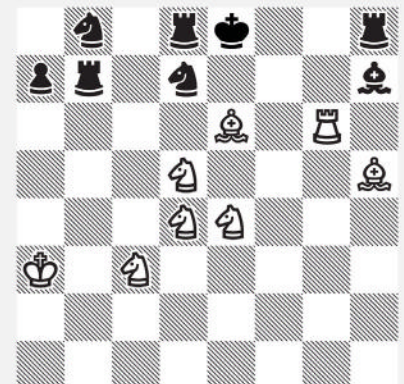


Art by Pendleton Ward

In progress 🗂️ 102

Really Bad Chess

Can you find the right move to checkmate the black king?



Groups

Puzzleners — 5,230pts

Puzzmo Staff — 2,230pts

Unplayed 🗂️ 2

Cross|word



Pockets of time

A new handheld retro series offers vintage arcade action with pick-up-and-play appeal

For those who appreciate the classics, there are more ways to play games from past decades today than there ever were at the time. Recent years have delivered a dizzying number of new retro-focused machines, among them capable offerings such as the Analogue Pocket and the MiSTer project, each of which uses an FPGA-based approach that brings impressive accuracy, in return for a considerable investment of funds or effort. Alternatively, you might set up a ROM-packed Raspberry Pi rig, or simply buy a low-rent thirdparty 'system on a chip' emulation console – options that might get your more games for your buck, but at the cost of frequent controller mapping issues and inconsistent emulation quality. And this is without mentioning diminutive retro machines such as the Neo Geo Mini, or the individual ports for sale on digital storefronts across console, mobile and PC. Could there possibly be a need for yet another approach?

The team at UK retro hardware outfit Blaze Entertainment clearly think so, as they prepare the Hyper Mega Tech Super Pocket handheld for a mid-November launch. Born in part from the success of Blaze's Evercade range, which uses a cartridge format to bring old titles to a modernised platform, Super Pocket is a very different proposition from other contenders in the space.

At launch there are to be two Super Pockets: one preloaded with a dozen Capcom games, the other with 18 Taito

titles. Each game is the arcade original, and that will be the focus of the range. "Accessing original arcade games can be complicated these days. Following the popularity of the Evercade, we wanted to make things simple," Blaze CEO **Andrew Byatt** tells us. "We saw this wider audience that we could expose to arcade gaming with a pick-up-and-play approach. Existing arcade players know that, essentially, with arcade originals there's this higher quality, but most people don't always know that. We wanted to share that experience, but through

something meaningfully simple and also portable."

Simplicity certainly seems to be Super Pocket's product design mantra. The units are streamlined, with no frills. That's not to say, however, that they feel cheap. For the price of a new console game, you get a robust unit that can cope with life in a pocket.

The buttons are responsive and the screen puts out a crisp, vibrant spread of pixels relative to the price point. Just don't expect to be overwhelmed by extra features such as HDMI output or the ability to attach an arcade stick. There's a scattering of modernisations, such as the addition of pause and save functions. The most profound update might be the addition of an 'easy' setting with each Super Pocket.

"The easy version of each game is entirely based on the original release," Blaze marketing manager **Sean Cleaver** explains. "We flip the DIPs – those physical settings switches on original

"Accessing original arcade games can be complicated these days. We wanted to keep things simple"

MEMORY CORRUPTION
When the Super Pocket team were developing the Evercade systems, they stumbled upon a curious phenomenon. As precise as emulation might be, it could still contradict a player's distant memories of that game, leading to a sense of disappointment that's impossible to solve technologically. "With arcade gaming, however, we're finding that things do hold up to memories a little more," Byatt says. "We've sat people down in front of these games and they enjoy themselves. They're not thinking about how the graphics don't match their memories."

arcade boards – to offer the lowest difficulty available, or the highest health or lives, and stuff like that. So that is a modern feature that wasn't really possible originally." The thinking behind the feature comes back to the strategy of bringing old games to new audiences.

The most striking distinction between Super Pocket and other retro consoles is the fact that Super Pocket owners cannot add any more games. There's no slot for a Micro SD or similar, and no recognition of any potential to sideload extra ROMs. The idea is that the handhelds provide a curated selection that will always match the onboard controls. But isn't that a cart slot on the back? That, it turns out, is for Evercade cartridges, meaning Super Pockets provide access to the 500-odd games that have made it to Blaze's existing platforms.

In the future, other Super Pockets may be released containing libraries from other companies with arcade legacies. In this era of over-consumption and limited supply, that approach could feel a little excessive – though the notion of building a library of handhelds, each presenting a different contribution to arcade history, will surely appeal to collectors.

There are more authentic ways to play these games. You could invest in original arcade hardware, or tinker with a MiSTer setup. But to focus on those options is to miss the point of these machines: to bring immediacy, simplicity and portability to nostalgic dips into gaming's past. And if you're into collecting costly arcade PCBs, Super Pocket provides a far less risky option to hand to a curious friend. ■



Blaze CEO **Andrew Byatt** and marketing manager **Sean Cleaver**



With a tough screen and solid construction all round, plus robust buttons, the hardware feels like decent value at £50



While further Super Pocket editions have yet to be confirmed, the idea is that each will contain games from a specific coin-op label



ALL THE ROM QUESTIONS
Isn't MAME all you really need?



Platforms such as Super Pocket are often greeted by a chorus of voices eager to point out the relative ease of simply downloading ROMs into a fan-made emulator such as MAME. So how can even a console priced as low as Super Pocket compete? "I've certainly been asked about it in person," Cleaver says. "That question is always, ultimately, 'How do you compete with crime effectively?' I know it sounds like a very simple answer, but you just have to do better. You have to provide a better experience. That can mean not asking the player to do any tinkering, or providing an official, legally licensed ROM."

360-DEGREE MURDER

SFB Games puts the die in diorama with throwback survival horror *Crow Country*

The next game from the sibling duo behind *Tangle Tower* will have been announced by the time you read this. But with no details public when we catch up with **Adam Vian** and brother Tom to learn about their forthcoming projects, they kindly share their pitch deck – one that, were we in a position to greenlight projects, would have had us metaphorically throwing money at the screen. Promising “a strong, tangible sense of place” with a “small but memorable cast”, “engaging puzzle design” and more, *Crow Country* sounds a lot like 2019’s detective

adventure. But it looks and feels different, with an aesthetic and tone designed to evoke survival horror’s heyday.

“Something about those chunky characters works for me,” Adam says. “I feel like keeping them behind that layer of abstraction increases the connection and empathy felt by the player.” The background art might look prerendered, but these are dynamic 3D spaces around which you can rotate the camera, while pixel-crunching filters capture the “dreamlike energy” of the Vians’ PS1 favourites. It’ll land on PlayStation and PC next year. ■



"If you crunch and soften the pixels and colours in just the right way, you can tap into that [PS1] energy, but it's really sensitive," Adam Vian explains. "It's well suited to survival horror because it slightly obscures what you're looking at, meaning the player still has to fill in some gaps with their imagination"



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"We have to get our act figured out... The problem is that the ante keeps getting upped... **It's an arms race that is unwinnable and is destroying people.**"

Perhaps raising the bar by shooting for such ambitious production values with the *Uncharted* series was a mistake, **Amy Hennig** admits



"For a while now, **we've been spending way more money than we earn...**"

Yep, time to bin off 830 staff, **Tim Sweeney** concedes as he looks at Epic's bank statement



"There's **an evident lack of comparable reduction** in total compensation packages for executives."

As belts are tightened, IDG Consulting's **Emilie Averva** can't help noticing a disparity

"Make things so amazing and innovative that people forget about guys like me..."

Don't settle for rehashes... Show me things I've never seen or done before."

As he clocks up 40 years in games, **Warren Spector** has some simple advice for younger designers: just be, like, completely revolutionary



CC: (Dennis Stueber/GDC Europe)

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game This Is Spinal Tap
Manufacturer Homepin

If you thought pinball only appeals to Men Of A Certain Age, well... the release of *This Is Spinal Tap*, based on the 1984 mock rockumentary of the same name, isn't about to change your mind. We're not sure quite how many customers exist for some silver-ball action with such a specific theme, but it isn't messing around, with a 27-inch backglass LCD monitor and a cabinet constructed of "100 per cent AA-grade plantation-grown eucalyptus plywood". Crucially, it doesn't skimp on the small details, with "exploding drummer" listed among its features. For just £4,000 you can discover for yourself how well it all negotiates that famously fine line between stupid and clever.





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ANTHOLOGY

Super Rare Mixtape: Horror Edition
bit.ly/deadtape

Horror games are ten a penny on Steam and particularly Itch, so during a mid-October store trawl it's probably harder to find something that *doesn't* go bump in the night. It's a rare treat, then, to find a properly curated selection of scares in the form of Super Rare's latest mixtape, which includes 30 hand-picked indie games and eight demos (with extras such as developer interviews, OSTs and concept-art galleries), all contained within a cassette-shaped USB drive. Each of the games we've sampled so far is at least unusual and at best genuinely worth your while. Card-collecting adventure *Apocrypha* offers an affecting mix of earnestness and humour, while the seemingly wholesome *Bonnie's Bakery* isn't quite as out of place among this haunting company as it initially appears.



VIDEO

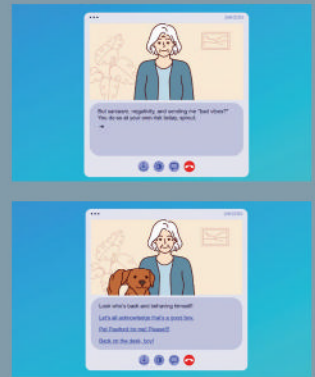
Sumo Rewind Pt. 2 – OutRun 2006: Coast2Coast
bit.ly/blueskiesforever

Sumo Digital is celebrating its 20th anniversary by taking a series of trips down memory lane, inviting staff to play through its back catalogue. Naturally, we're drawn to the studio's finest hour: the arcade port that is officially the 95th best game of Edge's lifetime. We'd welcome a deeper dive, but this short video captures what makes it so special. In making you "unquestionably the fastest thing on the road", *Coast2Coast* transforms you into a veritable force of nature – albeit one brought down to earth by your partner's demands in the gleefully silly Heart Attack mode.

WEB GAME

Fix Your Mother's Printer
bit.ly/turnitoffandonagain

We've all been there: a relative is experiencing computer issues, and you're the closest thing they have to free tech support. Geoffrey Golden's witty browser-based visual novel is essentially a playable Zoom call, capturing the exasperation of guiding a bewildered parent through the process of resolving a technical problem (preventing the protagonist's mother from printing an important document in this instance). As you proffer solutions, you'll see the family dog appear in the frame, while responding to personal questions that perhaps say more about your own state of mind than the character you're playing. By the affecting conclusion, you might be tempted to give your own mum a bell (while looking up PC World's number just in case she has a technological issue requiring attention).



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

Some of the other things on our minds when we weren't doing everything else

HARDWARE

Meta Quest 3
bit.ly/zucksrowthethird

Inevitably, Meta's review unit arrives on the very last possible day, limiting the time we get to explore its feature set. But it makes an excellent first impression, the hardware feeling like a class act from the moment we slip on its fabric head strap. The full-colour passthrough is crisp enough to evoke an out-loud gasp, especially when paired with its finger-tracking capacity. Not having much time is at least ameliorated by the fact that, well, there's nothing new to play on the thing. This first batch comes bundled with *Asgard's Wrath 2* for free, perhaps the nearest thing Quest 3 has to a big-deal launch title – and not actually out for another two more months.



continue quit

Blotted out

Shiny Shoe pledges to remove all in-game monetisation from indie RPG *Inkbound*

It's-a him

Voice actor Kevin Afghani confirms he's the man behind Mario (and Luigi) in *Wander*

Amphibian trilogy

All three *Frog Detective* games hop over to console with bonus scooter minigame

Collective responsibility

Die Gute Fabrik spotlights carbon footprint of ensemble drama *Saltsea Chronicles*

Crap shoot

Report of *Hyenas'* cancellation sees source lament Sega's fumbling of 'metaphorical turd'

Sorry state

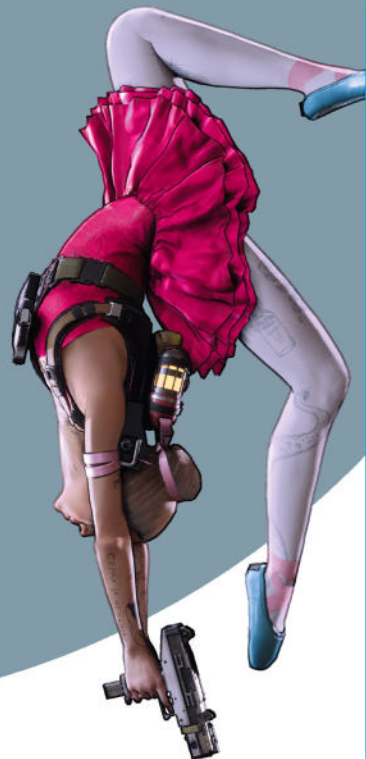
Daedalic staff say Nacon's apology for *LOTR: Gollum* bugs was written in ChatGPT

Big bad wolf

Telltale announces swingeing layoffs, including "most of" the team behind *TWAU2*

Final Frontier

More redundancies at *F1 Manager* creator, which cites "challenging conditions"



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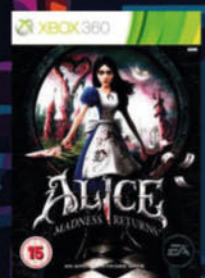
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DISPATCHES CHRISTMAS



Issue 390

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an exclusive **Edge** T-shirt



Push the bloat out

Something that often goes unremarked upon is the unspoken pact between player and game developer. The pact says, 'If you pay X for this game, you will have fun. It will stimulate the joy receptors in your brain, and release the fun hormones'. But as games sprawl ever wider, I have found myself more and more apprehensive of starting a new game. Not because I don't enjoy the genre or the developer, but because do I really want to spend 100+ hours in one world, in one game space, cycling through the same rote actions? *Starfield* is a prime example. Do I want to play a game that forces me into busywork? Do I want to play a game where people tell me that actually it only really gets going in New Game ++? So now I have to complete a game three times to get to the good stuff?

I first experienced this sensation of bloat when I was playing *Persona 5*. As it began, I genuinely loved it. In the middle, I enjoyed wondering where things were going. But around 80–90 hours in, I hit a wall. I had to grind to be able to survive any boss encounter, I constantly felt like I was making the wrong choices of who to hang out with, and then, when I completed a mission, I thought, 'Oh, this will be the endgame', and it continued to expand, and not contract to give me the power fantasy and story resolution I wanted. There was only a finite amount of monstrous things I could stomach before I was like, 'I'm actually bored – why am I forcing myself to try and finish this?' And so I didn't. I walked away.

Some might say that is sacrilegious: how dare you not finish! But why should I? I wasn't having fun. And I think I was right to. Games that mitigate this idea of boredom are those like *Baldur's Gate 3* and *Tears Of The Kingdom*. You don't spend your time hoovering up markers or doing errands.

You spend time because the scope and possibilities for play are near endless. I think a lot of big game developers have lost sight of this. I think back to something I read once, maybe even in **Edge**, from Miyamoto, which stated that even the act of traversal should be enjoyable. When so much of the current triple-A output is a joyless trudge through misery-inducing landscapes, is it any wonder people look for more small-scale gaming?

I believe this is why indie games have had such a renaissance. Smaller teams equals smaller scope, but also focus. If you focus on the original pact and bring people joy, you can find that. But when you approach games as a box-ticking exercise, bloat is inevitable.

Anand Modha

We're with you. A good amount of triple-A games could benefit from the ludic equivalent of a high-fibre diet.

"There was only a finite amount of monstrous things that I could stomach"

State of the artform

Baldur's Gate 3 has folks complaining about using save states again, so here are my arguments why they're still totally awesome and cool.

First, the medium of videogames is all about interactivity. There's nothing more interactive than trying out different outcomes to your choices. If you want a narrative that is stuck on rails, you've got other media. Heck, even real life.

Second, games are about self-expression. The medium is only partially directed by the designer – the rest is written by the player. If you want your character to fulfil a certain fantasy, it only makes sense to try out different narratives and choose which one you like best.

Third, unlike other media, videogame stories can run in parallel, back and forth. It's possible to process a story that branches out and rewinds, while still making a coherent whole. Not only is this unique to



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games, but it also allows you to get more narrative out of a single playthrough.

Finally, concerning the arguments for not using save states, from what I understand, the point is to play along, if not live with, the choices you've made. Indeed, a game where the player has full control ceases to be a game, since they require a level of pushback, which in turn stimulates creativity and excitement. However, dialogue options are one of the worst ways to experience this. Most game systems work with movement and resources, which can facilitate a broad range of possibilities.

Mistakes can often be steered again towards success. For example, you can afford to die every once in a while as long as you grab enough green mushrooms. Or: it's OK to miss your opponent a couple of times if you still manage to get that headshot. Dialogue trees, on the other hand, are limited in their choices, and static in their outcomes. We don't really play with them. We don't get enough chances to learn the language of the encounter, nor do we get to improve on what we've said. We make one choice, and that's that. This is where save states can help. Finding out what the cause and effect is of our actions is what fundamentally constitutes play.

That's not to say there is still a certain thrill, if not purity, of avoiding save-scumming. We're all free to enjoy games in that fashion, and I encourage that possibility too. But to say that's the better way of playing *Baldur's Gate 3*? Nah, it's just a different experience.

Robert August de Meijer

[Yep. When games offer multiple ways to play, it feels wrongheaded to suggest that only one of those options is the 'right' one.](#)

Wake in fright

I've got to say, I believe there is a massive underappreciation for narrative-driven singleplayer games. Not to undermine the existence of multiplayer games – I love *Sea*

Of Thieves – but it feels like a game either needs to be a multiplayer game or a triple-A open-world RPG, whereby the game is driven by its systems over its narrative, to receive wide appreciation and/or hype. Maybe it's a bit controversial to state this after the release of *Baldur's Gate 3*, but there we go.

Take Remedy's upcoming *Alan Wake 2*, which feels like a microcosm of the studio itself. Personally speaking, the hype for *Alan Wake 2* is greater than any I've felt for a while. It boasts probably the best graphics of 2023, and promises to push all the dials to 11 in terms of its signature weirdness and nonlinear narrative design. Add in some smaller but incredibly exciting features, such as the integration of live-action footage, and this game could be a masterclass. Yet despite all that, I feel quite alone in my hype. Obviously there are people who share my anticipation, but we're still in the minority.

Unless a miracle occurs and a single game revitalises a widespread love for these games, many of them will often go underappreciated. Don't get me wrong, these types of games still have their fans, but I wouldn't mind not feeling in the minority when I look forward to a game that is a narrative-driven one.

Corey Bearne

[This year's Edge Awards will provide a fair snapshot of what's hitting the mark for us nowadays. We can guarantee, at least, that there'll always be a place for narrative-driven singleplayer games right here.](#)

Pep talk

For over ten years I've been obsessed with an immensely infuriating MMO strategy game. Boasting over ten million players, its allure lies in trying to find patterns in chaos. The key to success comes from treading a gentle line between risk and reward. It offers an often heartbreaking narrative by deftly folding reality into its storytelling; a poor week in the game can coincide with a poor week IRL.

Conversely, it can be the sweetener to a particularly bitter pill. It has become

customary for my squad to arrange a meet at the end of each season and discuss the highs and lows; to relive the jokes and the drama. It has its own economy, an official Web series, and regularly features on the BBC news site. Perhaps best of all, this game is absolutely *rammed* full of puns.

If you've ever been in an office on a Monday morning, you'll probably know that I'm talking about Fantasy Premier League. A deeply compelling game of forward planning, deadline management and #banter. Despite being based on a sport, I'm not convinced that forward knowledge completely helps. It's certainly not necessary. A friend of mine once managed to sweep to victory in our league despite not really following a team. The friend who regularly finishes last is too invested in his club, letting his heart cloud his judgement. This is a transgression I've been only too guilty of myself this season in my objectively baffling decision to stick by Mykhailo Mudryk – like Homer Simpson and his airborne pig.

There's always one. "Is it really a videogame?" I'll concede it's borderline, but I can't help but think certain gamey elements of its structure are why it appeals. There's the social aspect, with WhatsApp threads across the globe grinding to a halt during an international break. There's the delicate balancing of resources and strategy that brings to mind something like *Civilization*. Then there's the leaderboards and the eternal quest for bragging rights high scores can offer.

I'd say the lines are blurred enough to warrant discussion within **Edge**. Any prospective Peps on the team? Most importantly, what are your puns? The last three team names for me have been 'Monumental Mason', 'De Jong Trousers' and 'ImSorryNickJackson', thanks for asking.
Jason Scott

[Frankly, the level of withering sarcasm that slops around here during deadline week would put even Guardiola to shame. Anyway, have an Edge T-shirt \(which, coincidentally, features the score we're awarding to those puns\). ■](#)



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

A aficionado of Hideo Kojima's Twitter feed will notice that he regularly retweets moody photographs that people have taken within *Death Stranding*. A photo mode, first introduced in games by *Gran Turismo 4*, works on several conceptual levels. First, it signals that the developer has confidence in the photogenic charm of their environments, and enhances the illusion of those environments' reality by providing a second-order way of experiencing them. Second, it enables a kind of free, peer-to-peer advertising of the game, as players share their favourite snapshots. Most abstractly, it deepens and complicates the relationship, or knotty equation, between videogames and art.

Like other modern photo modes such as that of *Ghost Of Tsushima*, the one in *Death Stranding*, which Kojima went so far as to claim before the game's launch would actually help people learn real photography, is partly a simulation of photography, in that you can change the extent of physical imperfections such as lens aberration which take a single given value on a real camera. But it is also partly actual photography. Using such a photo mode, you literally are a photographer: choosing a point of view and a frame in order to freeze a piece of the world and make of an evanescent moment an imperishable image. If photography is art, then a videogame is a place in which you can be an artist.

Does a game such as the forthcoming *Photography Simulator* work in the same way? I would argue not. Wittily, it borrows the vocabulary of the FPS in a firstperson view that has you tramping through the forest looking for avian targets to 'shoot', except that the tool you use is the barrel of a telephoto lens, not a gun. But the environments here are created only to be photographed: the game presents a series of models to be captured, rather than a world that is meaningful in itself even if never photographed.

The fact that taking photographs within *Death Stranding* is unnecessary, a gratuitous craft minigame, brings me to the limitations,



Would a modern player of *Call Of Duty* be better equipped to solve geopolitical conflicts in the Caucasus? Unlikely

as I see them, of the argument presented in Frank Lantz's slender new book, *The Beauty Of Games* (MIT Press). Games, for Lantz, are "the aesthetic form of instrumental reason", which is to say they allow us the pleasant exercise of reasoning orientated towards a specific goal (find the boss's weak points, and so forth). "Instrumental reason" is an odd phrase to choose, since Max Horkheimer, in his essays collected as *Critique Of Instrumental Reason* (1974), used it precisely to decry the modern world's increasing focus on reason as a means of achieving ends more efficiently ("instrumental") rather than as a

means of choosing which goals we should pursue in the first place ("objective" reason).

Lantz further argues that games are "the aesthetic form of systems", a form in which we may experiment with the dynamics of a system and come to know it and its limits; by doing so regularly we might become "systems literate" and so better able to negotiate the systems of large real-world problems. Well, yes and maybe. For all I know, *Farming Simulator* might really help some modern-day Jean de Florette cultivate his land. But it's notable that the examples Lantz cites here are not videogames at all. Card games and roulette influenced the mathematical theory of probability? Definitely. Poker influenced game theory and perhaps helped stop nuclear war breaking out in the 1950s? Possibly (though Lantz does not mention that the founder of game theory, John von Neumann, actually urged a pre-emptive nuclear strike on the USSR). Would a modern player of *Call Of Duty* be better equipped to solve geopolitical conflicts in the Caucasus? Unlikely.

Any argument that tries, quixotically, to present a theory about all games throughout history, not just videogames, is likely to contain bizarre moments such as that in which Lantz cites boxing – you know, the sport in which people punch each other – as another game that fits his argument. But boxers are not pleasantly exercising their instrumental reason. They are trying to inflict injury. Videogames are the opposite of boxing, because in them, nothing is at stake.

This is what is missing from Lantz's account: an endogenous theory of the pleasure of the videogame in particular, considered as an absolutely useless exercise, one that is not instrumental at all. Most people who play *Farming Simulator 22* will never drive a tractor. And why do we photograph a scene in *Death Stranding*? Just because, as the mountaineer once said about Everest, it's there.

Steven Poole is a writer, composer and author whose books include *Trigger Happy 2.0*, *Unspeak*, and *Rethink*

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ALEX SPENCER

The Outer Limits

Journeys to the farthest reaches of interactive entertainment

Unseen hands push me down into the beanbag, making sure I'm nestled deep into its folds. Then, from the dark, a reassuring American voice. "Just relax," it says. "You're about to have a mushroom-based experience." I spend the next ten minutes floating through forests, tracing lines of white light with my hands, watching explosions of pudgy molecules like fireworks made of clay... before coming back down to earth. Specifically, a repurposed warehouse along the banks of the Thames – the natural home, surely, of such happenings.

Today, this warehouse is home to the London Film Festival's Expanded programme, a collection of VR, AR, MR and other 'immersive storytelling experiences' that don't neatly fit into any of those neatly initialised buckets. On one hand, there's *Forager*, the aforementioned mycological VR trip; on the other, *Consensus Gentium*, an interactive film playing out on an iPhone suspended in front of me, with tracking technology that reads the expressions on my face and – to my horror – occasionally drops a live feed of it into the story.

Colored (Noire) uses Microsoft's HoloLens to tell the story of Claudette Colvin, a Black civil rights activist arrested in March 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a white person, in the same city but nine months before Rosa Parks doing the same sparked a movement. *Things Fall Apart* combines Yeats' *The Second Coming*, *Quest 2*'s passthrough capabilities and an enormous quantity of AI-sourced art into a terrible use of 25 minutes of your life. There are also AR-guided walks around the city, although, since these require going outside, I refuse to partake.

Taken as a whole, though, I couldn't have stumbled upon a more perfect encapsulation of what I'm hoping to achieve with this column. My predecessor in this slot reported from videogaming's borders. I plan to set up camp at those outer reaches and look to the horizon; out to all the weirdo stuff that technically falls under those words that greet



From the dark, a reassuring American voice. "Just relax," it says. "You're about to have a mushroom-based experience"

you on the magazine's cover every month, but never seems to quite fit within its pages.

The 'interactive entertainment' part of **Edge's** mission statement is a delightfully broad term, one that reaches far beyond the medium we tend to cover. To me, it simply suggests an artform that, when you poke at it, pushes back. Do boardgames fall under that umbrella? Immersive theatre? Virtual concerts? What about the Metaverse? That is what we're going to find out together – and, in the process, hopefully discover some things we can steal and bring back to this medium we call home.

So, what can we possibly learn from my being a mushroom for a while? Well, for one, that it is an incredibly relaxing way to spend a Friday morning. The beanbag turns out to have built-in motors, and I feel truly enveloped as *Forager* takes me beneath the soil, the Earth's heartbeat at my back. I wonder if Tetsuya Mizuguchi knows about this. It's like a Synesthesia Suit you can sit in. I'm sure he'd love it. The sensory effects pile on as, rising above the surface once more, I'm greeted by blasts from a wind machine and a scent diffuser. The smell it's going for is leaf mould, I suspect, though frankly I'd be more likely to describe it as 'solvents'. (Another contributor, perhaps, to the general lightheaded feeling I'm getting.)

As for where it fits more broadly, having long been fascinated by VR and its cousins, I've occasionally wondered if this might be their evolutionary endpoint: experiences that are careful not to outstay their welcome, and are tightly localised, throwing everything they have at you to provide experiences you simply couldn't have in the home. (Assuming, that is, you're not in the market for your own vibrating beanbag or wind machine – and no judgement here, honestly.)

This is a lot like the arcade model, of course, or even an art gallery. The latter comes to mind during *Colored (Noire)*, which plays out across two rooms, their specifications so tightly matched to the experience that, for example, you can join its holographic characters on benches when they take a seat. It's not a setup that could possibly be scaled up to commercial levels, but that's something I find fascinating about this other world that sits next to ours. We often talk about videogames as an industry, and the compromise they require between art and commerce may be one of their most intriguing facets. But what – and this might just be the mushrooms talking – what if there were other avenues we could explore?

Alex Spencer is **Edge's** features editor, and asks that you respect his ability to resist referring to himself as a 'fun guy'.

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H Y
P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

30 Dragon's Dogma 2

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

**36 Like A Dragon:
Infinite Wealth**

PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

40 Pacific Drive

PC, PS5

42 Helskate

PC

44 Balatro

PC

46 Rusty Rabbit

PC, PS5

48 Alan Wake 2

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

48 WarioWare: Move It!

Switch

48 Sentry

PC

**48 The Spirit Of
The Samurai**

PC, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

**48 My Work Is
Not Yet Done**

PC



Explore the iPad
edition of Edge for
extra Hype content

All systems go

LocalThunk, the pseudonymous developer of poker-themed deckbuilder *Balatro*, swirls their mouse pointer over a card as they share their screen with us during a Zoom call. “A lot of new players are very confused by this card,” they say, referring to a joker that means all cards in your deck are considered face cards. On its own, they explain, it doesn’t give you any points. It doesn’t boost your multiplier. It doesn’t help you score any more chips or earn any extra money by itself. But in conjunction with others... “It’s a *facilitator*,” they say, a degree of triumph in their voice. They sift through their card collection and pick out another. “Scary Face: all face cards give +20 chips. So put those two together and now *all* cards give +20 chips. Faceless joker: if you discard face cards, then you get three bucks.” Which means every single card you discard tops up your funds.

There’s much to be said for a meticulously authored piece of interactive entertainment, one that ensures everyone has a similarly optimal play experience. But we’re increasingly drawn to the games that build possibility spaces in which different systems can intersect to produce unexpected

results. See also *Dragon’s Dogma 2*: each player queuing up to spend 15 minutes with the game at this year’s TGS seems to come away with a different anecdote, a result of Capcom having built a game that prioritises rules and systems over hand-crafted set-pieces. Even director Hideki Itsuno finds himself surprised by his own game, regaling us with a story of a disastrous excursion with an unexpectedly uplifting ending.

Clashes of a different kind await in *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth*, which keeps a tighter rein on the player, even as its turn-based brawls offer dynamic elements of their own. Kazuma Kiryu, never exactly a stickler for the rules, gets to attack in real time – though his cancer diagnosis might well have players wishing they had the ability to rewrite the apparent conclusion of *his* story, too.

MOST WANTED

Lorelei And The Laser Eyes

PC, Switch
Simogo’s twisted mystery is, per the studio’s Twitter account, “content complete”. That’s exciting enough, but Annapurna co-head Nathan Vella’s follow-up suggesting “this game may be their best... a masterwork” is more tantalising still. He’s biased, sure, but just imagine. If it really *is* better than *Device 6*, *Sayonara Wild Hearts* and *Year Walk* – three 9s in these pages, no less – well, we daren’t say it out loud.

Banishers: Ghosts Of New Eden

PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Five blissful hours spent in the company of Don’t Nod’s delightful *Jusant* raises our expectations for the studio’s forthcoming action RPG. A friend of the show suggests we’re right to get excited.

Asgard’s Wrath 2

Quest
Well, we need *something* new to play on our Quest 3 headset, after all. Though *Tetris Effect* will suffice until December 15.

H | Y
P | E

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

Capcom's fantasy RPG returns
with an emergent agenda

Developer/publisher	Capcom
Format	PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Origin	Japan
Release	2024

One year ago, deep into the development of *Dragon's Dogma 2*, the sequel to 2012's chaotically loveable action-fantasy romp, director **Hideki Itsuno** sat down to stream a playthrough of the game to his colleagues. The pandemic months had pushed Capcom's staff out of their Osaka office, and while Japan had started to tentatively reopen for business, many of Itsuno's colleagues still worked from home. He put on a head mic and, with the determination and glee of a Twitch streamer, began to play through an early build, commenting on what was occurring on the screen as his team attentively watched his exploits while taking notes.

Itsuno crested a hill together with his pawns – hired AI companions that fight alongside the game's protagonist, healing one another, and shouting archaic words of encouragement (“Methinks we shall explore today!”) – and made the reckless decision to attack a nearby cave troll. The troll was several levels above his ragtag band of adventurers and the ensuing fight bloody. Things did not go Itsuno's way. Soon his pawns lay bleeding out in the tall grass while his own character's health bar had been chipped away to a sliver. Itsuno turned to flee. The troll gave chase.

“I was just running away for a lack of anything better thing to do,” Itsuno recalls.

“But it kept following me. I didn't know how I was going to survive.” Soon, Itsuno arrived at a town. He sprinted through the front gates. It was an irresponsible, self-serving decision. Itsuno's character would find safety in numbers among the terrified villagers. But in leading the troll back to the settlement, he had imperilled the community. Still, as his character entered the village, Itsuno was met not with fear or judgement, but with an act of collective courage. In *Dragon's Dogma 2*, characters can clamber onto larger enemies, finding handholds in the rough skin of their prey, a mechanic that echoes the giant-felling work seen in Fumito Ueda's *Shadow Of The Colossus*. The villagers rushed the troll and began to launch themselves at their attacker, overwhelming it with sheer force of numbers, drawing the beast to its knees. “It felt like a scripted event,” Itsuno recalls. “But *Dragon's Dogma 2* doesn't have scripted events. There are no invisible flags or triggers that cause certain events to occur. Everything that happened that day happened dynamically, because of how the game's rules and systems interact with one another.”

Emergent forms of gameplay are fashionable in videogames, but truly unscripted clashes such as this are often impractical within the triple-A sphere, ▶





As well as a map estimated to be four times that of the original, *Dragon's Dogma 2* introduces a new beast race to its universe. The Beastrans hail from the nation of Battahl



TOP Some enemies have critical weaknesses. For example, the lizard-like Saurians lose their will to fight if you can cut off their tails.
 ABOVE Mages need time to cast their spells; the more powerful the magick, the longer the preparation required

TOP The story begins in Vermund, the green-hilled kingdom of humans which the Arisen has ruled over as king for generations.
 ABOVE Medusa, one of the standout enemies Capcom has highlighted ahead of the game's release, is resistant to poison attacks and, as per Greek myth, can inflict petrification on the party.
 RIGHT The Mystic Spearhand job is available only to the Arisen character, and offers a well-balanced combination of melee and magick, which can be used to paralyse enemies and hurl objects





DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

where directors need to exercise a degree of control over what happens when, and how the player views and experiences a particular scene. In that sense *Dragon's Dogma 2* feels quasi-revolutionary: here is an exquisitely rendered, carefully polished possibility space where, as a player, you are never quite sure what is going to happen next, or how things might play out. Leaving Vernworth, the town where your character has been recruited to join the border watch, you are free to head off in any number of directions. You might engage a screeching harpy or a tasked troll, only to have the sounds of battle attract the attention of a band of passing goblins or a pack of wolves. Within moments, a simple skirmish has evolved into a nightmarish showdown featuring multiple participants. The goblins might trap one of your party members in the mouth of a cave, while a wolf drags another of your pawns hundreds of metres away, to begin ravaging them in the reeds. Who will you save? These split-second decisions often have catastrophic consequences.

Behind closed doors at the Tokyo Game Show, where we have the chance to play the game for an hour, every journalist appears to be having a unique experience. Chaperones in Capcom-branded polo shirts loiter, ready to intervene if we wander off and stumble into as-yet-unrevealed parts of the game's world, with its tumbling hills, rocky crags and dense forest thickets. But otherwise there is an overwhelming sense of freedom. "Even on the show floor, where people can queue up to play for 15 minutes, we keep seeing unexpected things happening," producer **Yoshiaki Hirabayashi** notes. "Fifteen minutes is a relatively short amount of time, but when we were playtesting this brief segment, team members kept coming up to me and saying: 'Come and see what just happened to me!' Even within such a tiny portion of the game we keep being surprised by what's happening, even though we're the ones who originally designed the possibility space."

The opportunity to create a formal sequel to *Dragon's Dogma* was not, however, a surprise to Itsuno. The original game and its add-on chapters, released together in 2013's *Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen*, sold several

million copies, perhaps benefiting from a surge in interest toward Japanese-made but European-inspired fantasy worlds driven by the popularity of FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series. 2015's Japanese-only MMORPG followup, *Dragon's Dogma Online*, ran for four years – a more modest success, certainly – but the series' international following meant that, as soon as *Itsuno* became available, Capcom commissioned a formal sequel. The team's ambition was to evolve the aspects that distinguished the first game. "We weren't going to shake up the core of *Dragon's Dogma* with this game," Itsuno admits. "But we certainly wanted to take what made the original game so unique and beloved and develop those characteristics."

Itsuno and key members of the team first booked a team retreat in a private, Capcom-owned residence close to Osaka. "We holed up for three days and two nights and literally

"Of course, we couldn't use every idea we had because there were so many of them"

pledged to not leave this place till we figured it all out," Itsuno recalls. The team jotted down ideas for things they would like to see in the game: not set-pieces, per se, but moments they wanted players to have the potential to see and experience, by virtue of the systems and rules the team had established for the world. Hundreds of specific small situations or concepts emerged from the sessions. "For example, we wanted to player to be able to shatter a bridge while enemies were standing on it, and to have the physics react naturally and dynamically, and the enemies to fall into the river to defeat them," Itsuno explains. "Of course, we couldn't use every idea we had because there were so many of them and they weren't all feasible, but it was by combining these little ideas together that the overall concept and shape began to emerge."

Playtesting such a dynamic playpen has proved to be a significant challenge. To help uncover any of the thousands of edge cases that might cause issues in the game, the developers created a dynamic, automatic





DRAGON'S DOGMA 2



testing environment. "The game essentially plays itself," Hirabayashi explains. "The main character makes different decisions and then plays out those different possibilities or branches of every scenario until an error occurs." At this point the developers check the logs and retrace the choices and combination of events that led to the bug. "With a game like this, it's the only way to explore the range of interactive possibilities. It means that [the team] don't have to personally figure out everything is possible in every situation. It's necessary in a game of this scope."

As well as these grand, sweeping set-pieces, *Dragon's Dogma 2* delights in the little details. Shoot an ice spell at an enemy and ice cubes and icicles will form on the branches of nearby trees and bushes, before dropping to the ground and shattering. A persistent day-night cycle has grave implications: as dusk falls, you

"Each vocation has something unique that will appeal to different kinds of players"

will need to stop picking strawberries and find a campsite, as the darkness that accompanies nightfall is profound. Progress at night is only possible with a lantern, and even then can only be made slowly and riskily, as the world's nocturnal monsters begin to emerge.

In the hands, too, the team has worked hard to provide a variety of experiences via its unfurling job system. Your character can play as a range of distinct roles, which profoundly alter the experience of moving through the world. As an archer, for example, you'll be fighting from the sidelines, lining up long-range precision attacks by aiming down the bow's sights. Fighters, as expected, excel in melee combat, interspersing blows from their short sword with manoeuvres that shield allies from attacks. Thieves wield a dagger in each hand, dealing rapid, consecutive attacks. "It's probably not possible to make every vocation equally enjoyable to every player," Itsuno admits. "But each vocation has something unique

about it that will appeal to different kinds of players." And if you grow tired of playing as a certain kind of character, new roles unlock as you progress down one specialisation, as per *Final Fantasy's* old job systems, so there's always a new role to master.

Balancing your pawns' abilities with those of the main character is essential to constructing a successful team, which comprises your character, their 'main' pawn, and two supplemental characters you take on as hired hands. While you soon become attached to your fellow adventurers, the game encourages you to hire and fire your supplemental pawns at regular intervals, since they do not level up alongside your character and the main pawn. This design decision means that, after a few hours, your character will have essentially outgrown their support staff. Balancing the desire to make players grow to love their companions while still being willing to set them free has been a challenge for the team. "As the creator, I would like you to change the pawns quite regularly," Itsuno admits. "The two support pawns don't level up with you, which is by design, because it means that gradually, the more you play, the greater the gap that develops between you all. There's a point at which you need to recognise you've left them behind, thank them for their service, and bid them farewell."

Pawns wander the world, and there's a sense of intimacy to the hiring process. You might come across a travelling knight, listen to his story, learn about his specialisations, then choose to hire him. And if you have an especially close bond to a pawn you need to dismiss, it is possible to favourite them. When they leave your team, they will be sent off to assist other players via the online pawn system. While adventuring in someone else's game, the pawn will level up, at which point you might reintegrate them into your squad. "While they're away from you, the pawn will have developed different knowledge from the other worlds it's been to," Itsuno explains. "So there's a more meaningful reunion when you come back together – the sense of wondering, 'Where have you been, and what have you been up to?' When they rejoin the party, you feel like you're seeing an old friend again." ■



The way of the red dragon

Dragon's Dogma 2's world feels unique – a significant achievement in this crowded genre, where audiences have already been dazzled by the vistas seen in *The Witcher*, *Elden Ring* and the recent manifestations of Hyrule. In contrast, *Dragon's Dogma 2's* environments are craggy and knotted, with few clear views of the surrounding hills and flood plains. Instead, this is a world of cramped valleys and steep-banked forests, the scenery seemingly cleaved and shaped by the wintry arm of a long-vanished glacier. Where the development team had planned to visit rustic European mountain villages for inspiration, the pandemic forced them to return to the material gathered a decade ago for the first game, on the hills and valleys of Wales. Perhaps for this reason, *Dragon's Dogma 2* hums with Celtic resonances.





TOP You can issue commands to your pawn using the D-pad: up to fight away from your position, down to call them closer, right to order them to avoid combat, and left to prioritise healing and supportive actions.
 ABOVE Execute a dash before you launch onto an enemy and it may serve to knock them off balance



TOP Every job class comes with unique weapon skills – powerful abilities that require stamina to use. Bow users can also raise the weapon to aim for more powerful, precise shots.
 ABOVE At the start of the game you wake to find yourself held as a slave at a dig site among ruins, with no memory of who you are or how you came to be there. Your quest, once you escape, is to regain your memories.
 LEFT Chimeras are three-headed monsters that embody a lion, a goat and a serpent. Each head imbues the beast with a different ability: to bite, to cast magick, or to poison foes



H | Y
P | E

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

Yakuza's paradise

Developer/publisher	Sega (RGG Studio)
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Origin	Japan
Release	January 26



The yakuza families were disbanded in Japan at the end of the previous game, but it's a different story in Hawaii as you'll encounter both yakuza and Chinese mafia, which might explain the relocation



ABOVE Evidently, RGG Studio is continuing to find new ways to push the idiom of jumping the shark. TOP RIGHT Apart from the ability to move within a ring before selecting an action, the battle system and UI is the same as its predecessor. MAIN Kasuga and Kiryu are joined by newcomers Chitose, a housekeeper formerly trained as a ballet dancer, and Tomizawa, a not-so-trusting taxi driver. BELOW LEFT This minigame doesn't just require speediness but the ability to pull off tricks and QTE-prompts to earn a 'Super Crazy Delivery' rating. BELOW RIGHT The jobs system returns, with wackier classes. In addition to samurai (pictured), they offer a local flavour, from a Hawaiian dancer in a grass skirt to an aquanaut armed with a surfboard





LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH

While Kamurocho and the iconic red arches at its entrance have become synonymous with *Like A Dragon* during its almost two-decade history, it's also true that plenty of instalments have taken place across other locations in Japan. Still, it's uncanny to see the series uprooted from its native turf entirely as *Infinite Wealth* takes charismatic underdog Ichiban Kasuga and his friends to Hawaii. But if there were any fears that the growing global appreciation of a once-niche property has eroded its identity, the Pineapple State appears to be the perfect environment for RGG Studio to double down on *Like A Dragon's* zaniness.

While Kasuga's reason for coming to Hawaii is to find his birth mother – previously assumed to have been murdered by the yakuza – the plot quickly takes a back seat as we're let loose on the game's incarnation of Waikiki to effectively go on a jolly. That is, after we've run through the obligatory battle tutorial with some local thugs not versed in aloha welcomes. Like its predecessor, *Infinite Wealth* is a party-driven, turn-based RPG, which makes sense for a leading man such as Kasuga who fights alongside his friends – including co-protagonist Kazuma Kiryu.

This time, you can freely move each party member in a ring before committing to an action. It's not exactly *Mario + Rabbids: Sparks Of Hope*, but it's more meaningful than *Dragon Quest XI's* 'free' movement. For instance, while you can choose to attack any enemy, you'll get a damage bonus if you position yourself in close proximity to your target, while you can select an object in the environment to use as a weapon rather than hoping it happens contextually.

The combat system nonetheless remains as dynamic as before, with timing-based button prompts adding bonus damage to your attacks, while knocking down an enemy often sees an ally following up with a free booting. For those pining for the traditional brawls, however, a concession has been made for Kiryu, whose status as Dragon Of Dojima lets you switch between fighting stances at a tap of the D-pad, a mechanic present in the series since *Yakuza o*. More importantly, when the necessary meter has charged up, holding down the right trigger activates Dragon's

Resurgence, which for a limited time breaks the turn-based rules entirely and frees you to move and pummel anyone in your path in preposterously overpowered fashion.

The real riches are, of course, found in exploring the city, which is made easier thanks to a Segway that materialises beneath your feet at the tap of a button. Visit the beach and you can venture into the water and go for a swim, diving at select spots for various trinkets – although you'll want to avoid getting hit by speedboats. This may be foreign soil for Kasuga, as reinforced by the English voices heard in a demo set to Japanese audio (owing partly, perhaps, to a lukewarm reception to Kiryu's new voice actor for the English dub), but given Japan's longstanding ties with Hawaii, there's still the sense of a home away from home. One sidequest we happen upon involves a class of Japanese

The plot takes a back seat as we're let loose on the game's incarnation of Waikiki

high-schoolers on an academic trip, while karaoke remains a reliable pastime.

But it's the new minigames that threaten to take up most of our hands-on time. With successive instalments, the series has become an almost accidental archive of Sega's coin-op heritage: *Gaiden* includes a fully playable version of *Daytona USA 2* (renamed *Sega Racing Classic 2* owing to licensing issues) while *Infinite Wealth* includes the Nagoshi-directed *SpikeOut*, its brawling action making it a spiritual predecessor to *Like A Dragon*. As evidenced by a Deliveroo spin on *Crazy Taxi* that tasks you with collecting food and performing tricks on a bicycle to deliver to hungry customers, and another diversion taking pictures on Hawaii's tour trolleys in an activity we can only describe as *Pokémon Snap* for perverts, Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio is keeping Sega's arcade spirit alive. *Infinite Wealth* is due to arrive at a phenomenally busy time for Japanese RPGs; those who don't have infinite time could do worse than pick the option promising infinite jest. ■



Exit the Dragon

Kiryu's return is an act of fan service that has involved jumping through convoluted hoops to bring him back into the playable fold – which makes it all the more cruel that cancer is what may finally bring down the Dragon Of Dojima. It's a subject likely to be treated with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, although Kiryu's Japanese voice actor Takaya Kuroda has spoken about channelling his own experiences with serious illness into the role. Whether this means he's going to be a less problematic version of Walter White remains to be seen, but there's a genuine sense of finality in *Infinite Wealth* as Kiryu tells Kasuga, "I'll take on the yakuza's past, but I want you to take on their future." Frankly, we're not sure we're emotionally prepared.

Developer
Ironwood Studios
Publisher
Kepler Interactive
Format PC, PS5
Origin US
Release TBA 2024



PACIFIC DRIVE

A survival game worth rallying around

When we first laid eyes on *Pacific Drive* last year, we were shown one climactic way in which a run through this vehicular Roguelike can end. We watched from the back seat, hands-off, as our designated driver sped through a supernatural storm, bouncing over terrain as the world closed in – and escaped to safety, seemingly without a second to spare. It's a moment that lingers in the memory, but one we put down to well-directed demo choreography.

It's certainly not representative of how our first hands-on ends. Dropped straight into the Olympic Exclusion Zone (*STALKER* meets Annihilation, but with all the conifers and fog suggested by the game's title), we ignore the urgency of the situation and spend far too long fussing around our station wagon. Which is, to be fair, in need of some TLC. Applying a blowtorch heals dings from some unseen previous journey – a process as entrancing as a session of *Power Wash Simulator*. We've barely finished refuelling, DualSense haptics conveying the chug of petrol, when more advanced car parts pop into existence, such

It's only by emptying our reserves of nitrous that we stay ahead of the storm

as generators that can synthesise energy out of rainwater or wind, and a nitrous boost that can even be attached in a backward configuration, allowing for hasty retreats.

Every part of the chassis, it transpires, can be stripped off and replaced. Putting this to the test means we're still on the garage forecourt as an 'Instability' timer in the screen's top-right corner begins its countdown to zero. This triggers the aforementioned storm, which closes in one segment of the map like *Fortnite*'s shrinking circle. The world turns a dark red, a Geiger counter on the dashboard issues its ceaseless staccato warnings, and we soon slump in the driver's seat.

We approach our second run with fresh determination. The Zone map mounted in the passenger seat highlights 'Anchors', which must be collected to summon the exit gateway before this Instability sets in. Our pursuit of them, however, is undone by unfamiliarity with the weighty inertia of the station wagon's handling, and by the low-level dangers of our environment. Pelting rain and gale-force winds that manifest without warning, the roadside mannequins that seem to move when we shift our gaze, and the simple knowledge of the Zone's other inhabitants – as yet unseen – are enough to send us careening off the road.

The sightings begin on our third attempt. Miniature peaks of rubble that travel across the tarmac like the trail of a cartoon mole. Twin hovering creatures, connected in the air by a single umbilical strand. Something halfway between a scrap-metal UFO and an angler fish, casting out a spotlight for prey then suckering them with a kind of magnetic crane arm. We escape an initial encounter by yanking on the car's handbrake before it can be carried away. Encountering the thing again on a fourth sortie (the third having ended in radiation poisoning), it approaches as we're on foot, to snatch a vital tool out of our hands. We could swear we catch a deep, distorted – but human? – laugh as it scoots off.

At least it didn't get the Anchor orb we were trekking towards – the final one needed to summon our escape hatch. There are just seconds on the clock as we load it into the car's reactor. We check the gateway's location on our map and speed in its direction, the radio going haywire, red skies billowing in the rearview. It becomes a frantic cross-country race, and it's only by emptying our reserves of nitrous that we stay ahead of the storm. It's enough, just, to skid into the blinding light before the car is torn apart. As we're warped back to our home base, our heart is pumping. It wasn't just hands-off trickery, then. If *Pacific Drive* can consistently deliver such moments, we could be in for something truly special. ■



Kit-bashing

You won't always be gripping your car's steering wheel. After you exit your vehicle (which is possible at any time, if not always advisable), *Pacific Drive* takes on the rough shape of a firstperson shooter, with a variety of tools occupying the spot where you'd usually find a gun. The Scrapper's whirring saw blade, for example, crunches up just about anything at which it is pointed, turning old TVs and spare tyres into chunks of rubber and metal which you can then suck up with the Hand-Vac. Every tool, it seems, has multiple uses: it's easy to imagine how the Liberator, which uses explosive charges to strip parts from abandoned cars, might prove useful in a combat situation. The next time that laughing UFO thing comes for us, we'll be ready for it.



TOP The quality of light is fundamental to *Pacific Drive*'s visual identity. We won't reveal how long it took us to discover the lever for our car's headlamps.

ABOVE You can have four tools equipped at once, each assigned to a cardinal direction of the D-pad.

ABOVE LEFT An armored bumper will help your vehicle in getting through bracken and small trees.

LEFT The way that futuristic structures sit against a mundane landscape recalls the work of *Tales From The Loop* artist Simon Stålenhag

Developer/
publisher
Phantom Coast
Format PC
Origin
The Netherlands
Release TBA 2024



HELSKATE

Sword and board



Your character is Anton Falcon. Wordplay aside, he's something of an enigma at this point – especially when it comes to the question of how he ended up in Vertheim

Muscle memory is a powerful thing. There hasn't been a new *Tony Hawk's* game for the best part of a decade – nor a worthwhile one for considerably longer still. And yet, within minutes of sitting down with **Steve Swink** – who “a million years ago” worked on *Tony Hawk's Underground* – and his game, our fingers are dancing their old patterns, chaining grinds into grabs into manuals and tapping out the input for a varial heelflip.

Thwack. A thick chain, crackling with green magic, darts towards our skater and sends him flying. It's a rude awakening from old habits, as *Helskate* reminds us that this is not only a game about skating, but combat, too. While face

buttons stick to the layout established by Neversoft all those years ago, on the controller's shoulders it transmutes into something more akin to modern FromSoftware, right bumper and trigger unleashing light and heavy attacks respectively, partnered with a lock-on and a dodge that blesses your skater with a few precious frames of invincibility.

That, though, is where the comparison ends. There's none of the complexity nor deliberation of those games' combat here – at this speed, that would be impossible. Instead, the challenge comes from juggling action and skating, which are united by a combo system in which certain tricks can boost your attack



It's relatively early days for *Helskate's* development, and the afterlife we skate through features plenty of grey boxes. It's a testament to the game's fundamentals, though, that it's still a joy to navigate in this form





Erin Robinson Swink, whose 9-to-5 job is at Guerrilla Games, is collaborating with partner Steve Swink to provide *Helskate*'s script

power. Depending on your skater's build, pulling off a kickflip might launch a homing missile, while a particular grind could infuse your weapon with poison.

Since breaking the combo will remove whatever buff you've earned, good play means never neglecting either half of the equation. Roll7 tried something similar in last year's *Rollerdrome*, except there it was done with guns

We double-jump over a giant skeletal serpent, then grind along its exposed spine

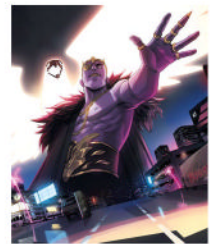
and rollerskates. In that game, though, combat got in the way too often, which Swink is keen to avoid in *Helskate*. "The goal is that, when you're in the regular levels, it's sort of a flow-state zone-out, where the enemies pressure you just enough that you have to pay attention," he says. The game will throw in the occasional boss or high-score competition to really test your mettle, but, as Swink puts it: "Sometimes I just want to vibe for a bit. That's something I think *Hades* did really well, and *Binding Of Isaac* – that interplay of required attention."

Those comparisons are worth noting, since *Helskate* is also a Roguelike, hewing close to

the former example in particular. After wiping out for the last time, you wake up back at base (in this case, an infernal mall) where a few demonic companions are ready to chat with you, with "a bucket [of lines] that try to recognise what you've done in the world, or in your last run, and comment on that." A couple of them also run shops where you can spend the currency you gather on each run to unlock weapons (defined by the deck of your skateboard) and character upgrades (tattoos etched onto your body).

The upgrades add a layer of persistence to the game, but in our experience – over a dozen or so dips into the abyss – this never overpowers the decisions made from run to run. Those trick-triggered buffs are decided by tapes, which you collect in the world and are wiped on death, while winning competitions rewards you with temporary skill-point boosts to trick speed or attack damage – or simply the number of jumps you can do without touching the ground. Which brings us back to Swink's Neversoft days. "As we were working on [*Underground*], I thought, man, this is really a lot like an RPG – but these stat points really don't do that much. It would be really interesting to try to make a game with all of these same mechanics – like a proper skateboarding game, where all this skill was there – but not bound by reality."

If there's any temptation to point out that those are games in which Shrek can pull off 1080° air tricks, the urge is lost as we double-jump over a giant skeletal serpent, then grind along its exposed spine, popping each of the creature's eyeballs in turn with our flaming katana. Truly, a skating manoeuvre worth committing to memory. ■



Tony Hawk's Underworld

Heaven might be a halfpipe, but, *Helskate* suggests, so is the rest of the afterlife. "Vertheim is like skating purgatory, for people who died doing a skateboarding trick," Swink says of the game's setting. While it is in part a love letter to the pastime – extrapolating a world from the graphics on boards' undersides – Swink also wants to reflect his concerns about its current state. "The corrupting influence of capitalism on something as pure as skating for the joy of it" is one target, along with the effect social media has had: "It drives skateboarders to do dangerous things and film themselves doing it for, like, a hundred views – these young kids ripping off overpasses and stuff with no helmet." At least now we know where they'll end up.

Among the gear you can collect on each run is clothing from fictional skate brands, each specialising in a particular kind of elemental damage



Developer LocalThunk
Publisher Playstack
Format PC
Origin Canada
Release 2024



BALATRO

The joker in the deckbuilder



Roughly two hours into what we had assumed would be a 'quick go', we wonder whether **Edge** might have to temporarily rebrand as **Balatro Monthly**, such is the grip exerted by LocalThunk's deckbuilder. Little wonder the naturally private developer behind it would rather we refer to them by their nom de plume: they are aware that this is going to bring plenty of attention their way. The buzz is gathering pace; the Discord community is growing. Ordinarily we'd resist parroting the party line, but it's hard to disagree when PlayStack's **Wout van Halderen** notes, "It's overwhelming enough to make a game that is gonna change your whole life, right?"

The reception might have been more overwhelming still had LocalThunk gone with their original title, one that more immediately sums up the type of game this is. Alas, *Joker Poker* was already taken. Yet its replacement, and how it was chosen, speaks volumes, too. "I had a list of like 20 different names and had some close friends go through them," they tell us. "None of them picked *Balatro*." But something about the name spoke to them. "It

The real trick is to stack your deck of cards so you're laying down illegal hands

means 'joker' or 'jester' in Latin," they explain. "So thematically it kind of fits. It's also a word that no one really knows, so anyone can prescribe meaning to it. And it doesn't come with a bunch of baggage, like adding 'rogue' to the name – or 'survivors' for a newer genre."

That feels apropos for a run-based game that's something of a wild card in its field – but then LocalThunk admits when they started making it, they hadn't played any Roguelike deckbuilders. They acknowledge *Slay The Spire*'s map as "a great design element", but until recently they weren't aware it even existed. Instead, *Balatro* was based on Big Two, a Cantonese card game with similarities

to poker; having played it with friends from a young age, they decided to create an online version so they could "enjoy it with the same group of people during the pandemic".

As they tinkered with the design, they decided to add a scoring mechanic. Inspired by run-based games such as *Luck Be A Landlord* and *The Binding Of Isaac*, they decided jokers were a natural way to supply that Roguelike element of unpredictability. As for that all-important numbers-go-up progression, they reckoned poker's small and big 'blinds' (forced bets, essentially) were the perfect fit. Then, to fulfil the archetypal videogame rule of three, they introduced a boss blind. These impose certain restrictions, such as denying discards or dealing one in seven cards face down. Beat those three and the ante is upped.

Between rounds, a shop offers ways to boost your deck, from single-use modifiers that raise card values or change suits to jokers. These have more powerful effects, multiplying individual cards or hands, and you can hold up to five of them. Find the right synergies and you can beat a blind in a single turn – although the luck of the draw is a crucial factor. Smart players will mitigate for that, perhaps boosting pairs or triples so that weaker hands can still score reasonably highly, though it's tempting to risk it on higher-value straights or flushes. Indeed, the real trick is to stack your deck so you're laying down illegal hands: in *Balatro*, five of a kind is eminently possible.

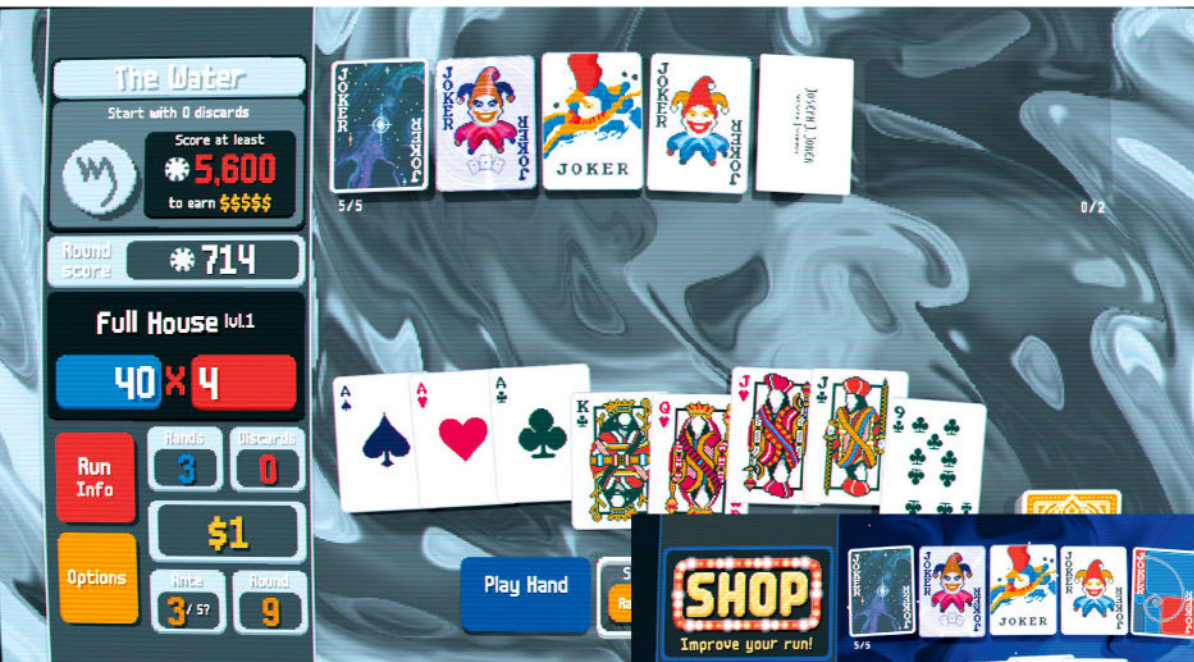
Between its dulcifying soundtrack and the lazy movement of its backdrop, *Balatro* has a hypnotic quality that contrasts beautifully with its crisp gamefeel. It's a pleasure simply to interact with. And the characterful art heightens the allure of one more run: sighting a new joker variant in the shop or applying a glass or foil veneer to a card you're holding delivers almost as potent a dopamine hit as watching that score multiplier tick upwards. *Balatro* might encourage you to stack your deck with jokers, but as *Spire*-likes go, this feels very much like the ace in the pack. ■



Art of the deal

There are several variants on the traditional joker, and many other card designs that don't look like jokers at all. Coming up with fresh art, LocalThunk tells us, has been one of their favourite parts of the process, adding that it's "a chicken/egg situation" regarding the art determining the effect or vice versa. Pareidolia, reflecting the phenomenon of being able to see faces in things, affects face cards, which on the card's image are arranged to form eyes, nose and mouth. A fibonacci spiral, meanwhile, boosts the multiplier for Ace, 2, 3, 5 and 8. The developer's favourite is Gros Michel, a banana with a one in ten chance of being destroyed when played – inspired by what was once the most popular variety of the fruit, until the 1950s when a fungus ruined the plantations.





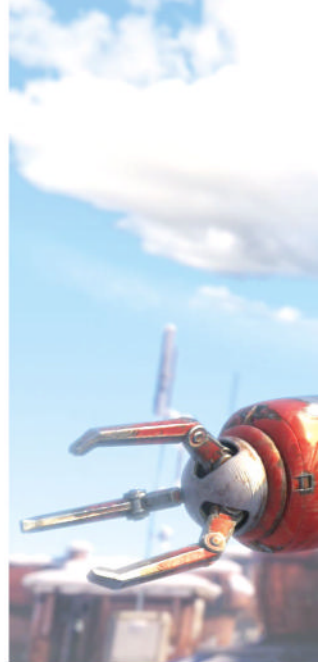
LEFT Playing with zero discards feels like quite the handicap – unless, of course, you have the joker which grants you a substantial multiplier with none left. BELOW LocalThink: “Very rarely do I have an item that doesn’t synergise with anything else in *Balatro*”



ABOVE An early glimpse at two shop vouchers that you won’t find in the demo. RIGHT A few combinations, albeit rare, are grossly overpowered, LocalThink admits. “That’s the fun part, seeing how high you can get the numbers,” they say, but they’re keen to balance things out. “You can make it so people can’t just replicate the same run over and over, or make cards and items interact with as many other parts of the game as possible. So the next time you do a run it might be overpowered in a slightly different way, or might steer you in another direction”



Developer Nitroplus,
Chime Corporation
Publisher NetEase
Format PC, PS5
Origin Japan
Release 2024



RUSTY RABBIT

Look, that rabbit's got a vicious streak a mile wide

When considering which creatures are most likely to inherit a postapocalyptic Earth, the humble rabbit isn't exactly the first to spring to mind — though perhaps their insatiable reproductive habits have given them an edge in terms of sheer numbers. Either way, when Nitroplus's game is first revealed to us alongside its protagonist, a gruff middle-aged rabbit called Stamp that pilots a robot known as Junkster, our first question to creator **Gen Urobuchi** is: why rabbits? And what compelled the writer, perhaps best known for magical girl series *Madoka Magica*, cyberpunk thriller *Psycho-Pass*, and light novel *Fate/Zero*, to develop an action game?

Urobuchi is only too pleased to share with us the original inspiration, holding out his phone on which we see an image of a rabbit and a robot he first discovered via Twitter (the artist responsible goes by @Almighty0404). "That picture is from about eight years ago, and I had it set as my wallpaper for a long time," Urobuchi explains, evidently tickled by the juxtaposition of the cute with the hard-boiled. "After I kept looking at it, I was like, I want to make a story about this character." Again going off-script, Urobuchi reveals that while he is professionally a scenario writer, he also dabbles in making games in Unity as a hobby. Taking out his laptop to show us a 2D game featuring a rabbit in a mech, we can see in its rough edges how it grew from a leisure-time pursuit to the much slicker presentation we're here for.

At this point, our handler defers us to the game's producer, **Yuichiro Saito**, to walk us through *Rusty Rabbit*'s overall game loop. While it uses 3D visuals — with fuzzy fur textures you want to reach out and run your fingers through — the premise is similar to



that of *SteamWorld Dig*. At its core, this is a side-scrolling action game in which you descend into perilous ruins; you'll face tougher adversaries the deeper you go, but also acquire all manner of junk that can be used to upgrade the robot suit you're piloting.

In the build we're shown, Stamp and his mech have already unlocked the full suite of upgrades, from hookshots to boost jumps, to better showcase the range of tools at your

The presumably mountainous village that serves as your base camp is populated by other rabbits that will also function as questgivers or vendors, with new interactions as you continue into the story

If it's a Metroidvania at heart, Rusty Rabbit also has the ingredients of a Roguelike

disposal. Naturally, these are accrued more gradually in the full game, after "Junkster gets into an accident and becomes broken, which is why it [initially] has zero functions," Saito explains. The archetypical *Metroid* setup, in other words, and we certainly get a sense of that through the exploration: making your way through these labyrinthine ruins often requires you to break blocks in your path, with different tools required depending on





Perhaps the bunny emblems in the mech belonging to *Overwatch*'s D.Va were some inspiration, though Stamp has a charm all of his own, including using a carrot as a cigar



Navigating these grid-like underground spaces involves jumping and also making use of a surprisingly powerful jetpack, allowing you to move vertically at speed

the nature of the obstacle. For instance, you can't smash blocks made of leaves but you can use a blade to cut them down, while you can drill through one made of rock. The same applies when engaging the enemies lurking in these ruins: a hammer is no good against flying opponents, so you'll need to switch to a gun to get the job done.

If *Rusty Rabbit* is a Metroidvania at heart, though, it also has the ingredients of a Roguelike, with its optional randomised dungeons and the fact that death means losing all your gear. (As expected, Stamp's personal progression – with upgrades including the ability to break through

multiple objects at a time – is retained.) And this is just as much an RPG: experience is accrued not only via defeating enemies but with every block that is destroyed, giving equal weight to combat and exploration.

As much as its unusual combination of ideas, we're struck by the way NetEase has generously humoured this highly regarded Japanese writer's game concept – which bodes well for the more experienced Japanese game talent it has been recently recruiting. At the very least, Urobuchi seems delighted that his part-time tinkering has produced something tangible. "This was just a hobby," he smiles, "and now it's a real game." ■

Scrapped together

Given that Nitroplus is a studio that primarily plies its trade in visual novels, *Rusty Rabbit* is being developed with a smörgåsbord of collaborators. Besides NetEase's backing, the core game development is being handled by Chime Corporation, whose work includes *Danganronpa* but also *Made In Abyss: Binary Star Falling Into Darkness*, an action game with a similar loop of heading deep underground. The character design is the work of Kanaban Graphics, principally artist Aguri Miyazaki, who has a reputation for designing cute characters, while audio design is being handled by Gin (Busted Rose), an up-and-coming sound producer hailing from the anime industry.



ROUNDUP

ALAN WAKE 2

Developer Remedy Entertainment Publisher Epic Games Publishing Format PC, PS5, Xbox Series Origin Finland Release Out now



We had hoped to have a verdict sorted for Remedy's eagerly anticipated sequel in this issue, but after 13 years in development it's *still* not quite review-ready as we go to press. That needn't necessarily be a red flag – such is its significance to Finland's finest that the studio is obviously keen to ensure the game reaches us in the best possible condition – but that doesn't make the disappointment sting any less. On the upside, it gives us more time to put it through its paces when we get our hands on it, and to soak up those visuals. Give us just four more weeks and we'll share our views on whether or not the wait has been worth it.

WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) Format Switch Origin Japan Release November 3



We often joke that Nintendo likes to refer to Edge's publishing schedule before announcing Directs and release dates, but this is ridiculous. With code arriving on deadline day and a launch 24 hours after E391's on-sale date, it's enough to make a magazine paranoid. This spiritual successor to Wii's *Smooth Moves* similarly invites you to assume specific positions before each minigame starts – a proactive spin on a series traditionally defined by reaction.

SENTRY

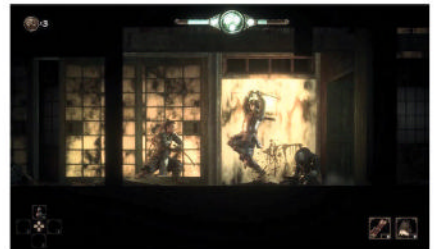
Developer/publisher Fireblade Software Format PC Origin UK Release TBA



A tense, challenging firstperson take on tower defence, this casts you as a robot defending a station against monstrous incursions. You need to prevent a certain number from escaping the subsystem: land mines and explosive barrels will thin their numbers, while shock plates will stun them as you take aim.

THE SPIRIT OF THE SAMURAI

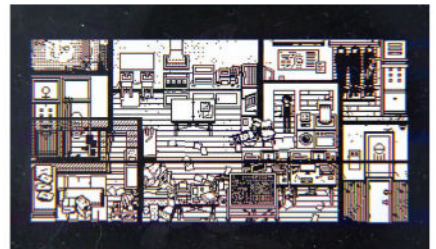
Developer Digital Mind Games Publisher Kwalee Format PC, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series Origin Spain Release 2024



Trek To Yomi meets *Stray* via Ray Harryhausen in this tripartite side-scroller, in which a swordsman repels tengu invading his village, with assistance from a diminutive warrior spirit and a stealthy cat. The stop-motion enemies stand out; likewise the unusual controls, mapping sword swipes to the right stick.

MY WORK IS NOT YET DONE

Developer Sutemi Productions Publisher Raw Fury Format PC Origin US Release TBA



Between its busy pixel-art environments, deliberately unwieldy controls and frictional design ideas (*Death Stranding's* toilet visits have nothing on this), Spencer Yan's horror adventure casts a distinctive chill. You're the sole remaining member of a cursed expedition, compelled to finish her unfinishable job.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



- 52 **Branching Out**
- 70 **Collected Works:
Masaya Matsuura**
- 78 **Hit Factory**
- 86 **The Making Of...
Hi-Fi Rush**
- 92 **Studio Profile:
Deconstructeam**
- 124 **Time Extend:
Castlevania:
Lords Of Shadow**

Game The Alters
Developer/publisher
11 Bit Studios
Format PC, PS5,
Xbox Series
Release 2024

B R A N C H



I N G O U T

How the developer of Frostpunk is exploring new worlds – and alternate timelines

By **ALEX SPENCER**

All of us, at some point in our lives, have surely wondered: what if everything had gone differently for us? *The Alters*' game director, **Tomasz Kisilewicz**, certainly has. "I could be richer, happier, healthier if I took that opportunity, or if I didn't split with my girlfriend, or if I stayed in my hometown and worked in the family business with my father," he says by way of example. "The questions and points of life are different for everyone, but we all have this tendency to think, 'I would probably be better off.' But the truth is, it wouldn't necessarily be better or worse — it would just be different."

It's hard to imagine, though, how things could be anything *but* better for Jan Dolski, the game's lead character. All his decisions have led him here: to a mining vessel, crash-landed onto a desolate planet, close enough to its system's star that sunrise will be fatal. Woken unexpectedly from cryo-sleep, he finds that he's the only surviving member of his crew, left all alone on this planet. For a little while, at least.

Jan soon discovers a way to grow clone bodies, versions of himself that can help man the base and help him dodge the sunrise. But these 'alters' are not exact copies — each one is implanted with memories and a personality from other possible timelines. In other words, Jan Dolski no longer needs to wonder 'what if': the answer is looking him right in the eye.

"The Miner is a version of Jan who never left their hometown, who stayed to become a miner, just like his father," Kisilewicz says, gesturing towards a man on the screen. He has the same face as *our* Jan — he's got those same piercing eyes — but wears his hair shorter, with a close-cropped beard, and a telltale scar above his left eye. This version of Jan had an accident while working in the mines, Kisilewicz explains. "And that led to him losing his arm. But right now, his consciousness is in a direct copy of main-Jan's body."

From the Miner's perspective, he has been reborn into a new reality with an arm that doesn't feel like his own, leaving him with a kind of reverse phantom-limb pain. Or, as he more succinctly puts it, "I feel like shit." The Miner is asking our Jan — who has become captain of the ship through, essentially, eldest-sibling rules — for painkillers. Which seems a reasonable request, until Kisilewicz cuts in with one important little detail about his life: "The Miner has a history of abusing opioids, connected with losing his arm."

So: this man is in pain, he says he can't work without drugs, and you need his help to survive the approaching dawn... but giving them to him could lead him back down the path to addiction. This is exactly the kind of hard decision that has long marked out 11 Bit's games. *This*

War Of Mine and *Frostpunk* present the player with their own 'what if's, dropping you into an awful scenario — a fictionalised conflict in which you are non-combatants, an Ice Age that strikes during the Industrial Revolution — and asking what you'd be willing to do to survive. Would you share food with a starving person if it meant you might not have enough to get by yourself? Would you put children to work in factories if it means they (or at least most of them) will live to see another day?

This is an 11 Bit tradition, then, which *The Alters* is picking up and running with. Yet, as we spend more time with this game and its makers, it becomes increasingly apparent that the studio's determined to do things differently. In just about every other way, *The Alters* is not the game you'd expect this developer to make next.



After the enormous success of 2018's *Frostpunk*, there's an obvious path for the studio to follow: staff up to make a sequel, bigger and better, with a built-in audience ready and waiting. And 11 Bit is doing that, as we'll get to on p62 — but it's also exploring a different fork in the road.

"We wanted three independent teams, with new directors," explains CEO **Przemysław Marszał**, who previously served as art director on *This War Of Mine* and *Frostpunk*. "Three games that aren't in the same genre and are all completely different to one another, that all have this meaningful, idea-driven approach. It's a crazy, ambitious idea." Which raises the question: why do it?

"When there is only one team, one director, there is a glass ceiling for people," Marszał says. As he and Michał Drozdowski (previously design director, now CCO) ascended to executive roles, and with 11 Bit growing from around 30 people to 300, the studio wanted to encourage the growth of its next generation of talent. This three-pronged approach also means that 11 Bit isn't betting everything on a single blockbuster success, allowing it to take the kind of creative risks that paid off so handsomely with *This War Of Mine* and *Frostpunk*. And, Marszał points out, it's an opportunity to gain experience in multiple areas at once. While *Frostpunk 2* advances in a familiar direction for the studio, at least at first glance, the third title (see '8 to the party', opposite) has been designed to explore new territory: a console-friendly third-person narrative-driven action game.

"For two of those teams we wanted to specialise, honing in on particular genres," Marszał says. "But for *The Alters*, they were not constrained." Kisilewicz's team were given no genre boundaries, nor any other guidance on what the game should be. "We were told, 'Figure out your ideas,'" he says. "If that fails, we will talk about something else. But it didn't fail."

While their colleagues finished work on 2019's *This War Of Mine: Final Cut*, a for-posterity update and



Tomasz Kisilewicz, game director

THESE ALTERS ARE NOT EXACT COPIES – EACH ONE IS IMPLANTED WITH MEMORIES AND A PERSONALITY FROM OTHER POSSIBLE TIMELINES



8 TO THE PARTY

Thinking of the right codename for a project can be a lot of work – which is perhaps why 11 Bit sticks to a simple numerical naming convention. *The Alters* was ‘Project 9’, for example, *Frostpunk 2* ‘10’. It doesn’t take the most mathematically gifted mind, then, to figure out that the studio’s third, still-unrevealed game – ‘Project 8’ – has been in development longest of the lot. “It’s a very ambitious game,” Marszał says by way of explanation. “As you will see next year.” For now, all we’ve got to go on is a ten-second tease from 2021 – a UE-powered tech demo showing a fantastical ruin, with pieces of rubble hovering in the dark sky overhead – and Marszał’s description of the loose genre and format, which suggests something in the Naughty Dog mould. “If we want to do bigger games, we need to gain experience in these genres first,” he says. As for making a console-oriented title, he admits: “We want to gain some knowledge in that space. We are not so strong there.”



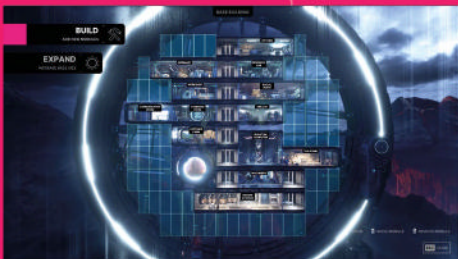
TOP The planet on which Jan is stranded recalls *Alien*'s LV-426, with its loneliness and sense of danger. ABOVE Finding voices for each alter was a challenge, Kisilewicz says. The mantra was “OK, if I close my eyes, I still need to hear that it’s a different person” – but without being “cartoonish and over the top.” LEFT Jan is played by British actor Alex Jordan (*CP2077: Phantom Liberty*), but the game isn’t using his likeness, instead giving a Jan a face of his own. Well, *their* own

“WITH EACH DECISION WE ARE BECOMING A DIFFERENT PERSON. SO, HOW AMAZING WOULD IT BE IF WE COULD MEET THEM ALL?”

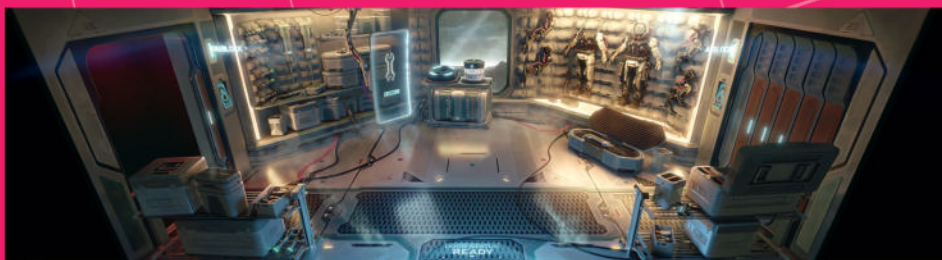
The planet's various biomes have been inspired in part by *Interstellar*, Kisilewicz says, and the way its locales toyed with the laws of physics in different ways

CARD MODE

Kisilewicz mentions that *The Alters'* development began with a paper prototype. As we watch Jan trek across the surface of the planet, it's hard to imagine how such a thing was possible. "It was like a boardgame," he explains, with decks of cards to represent the various alters and crises that can crop up – which helps us understand how the game's emergent storytelling might work. Planetside, meanwhile, infrastructure building took the form "blocks of cardboard" being played onto a map board. Kisilewicz adds that early in-engine prototypes of the game didn't use the thirdperson perspective at all. "We started with more of a top-down approach, actually. But the camera was very limited, and we wanted to have these wider vistas, to give you the sense of really being on the planet. And the ambition of the team was rising."



ABOVE *Circles* – the defining shape of both Jan's mobile home and *Frostpunk's* generator-hugging city – are something of a recurring image in 11 Bit's games. ABOVE RIGHT Clones are grown in an artificial womb in your base, their growth to adulthood accelerated using *Rapidium*. RIGHT Alters can be assigned to any job on the base or in one of your planetary outposts – but naturally they'll each be better suited to some tasks than others



remaster of 11 Bit's breakthrough hit, Kisilewicz and two others began to seek the right concept for, hopefully, its next one. It was a process that, by Marszał's estimate, took about nine months and produced "a large number of [potential] games". One stood out: 'Project Dolly'.

"With each decision, we are becoming a different person," Kisilewicz says, describing the foundational idea of this project. "So, how amazing would it be if we could meet them all?" The specific feeling the team wanted was of going for a drink with your alternate self. "Depending on what time it is at the bar, maybe you're asking about fun stuff. Like, 'You stayed in our hometown — are you still hanging out with our garage band? Are the guys still in town?'" But in time — as tends to happen as the evening goes on — things might get a little deeper. "I'm really curious how it felt when you decided to stand up to our father, because I never had that courage. What did that mean for our mother? Did it change anything?"



Our demo doesn't begin in a bar, however, figurative or otherwise. It begins out on the surface of the planet, where Jan is alone, the camera pulled low over his shoulder. This perspective is new to 11 Bit, which has tended to present its scenarios from a remove, but it seems the developer

has already mastered the art of the vista. Stretched out before us is a sea of lava, topped up by fiery waterfalls, hazy godrays among the smoke that rises from it.

Here *The Alters* plays a little like a survival game, with Jan mining resources and placing down infrastructure. Seeking an underground deposit of precious metals, for example, he deploys a Polygonal Scanner. The task has a pleasingly physical edge, as you drop pylons to draw out a shape on the ground, essentially cutting a translucent window in the rock to provide a topographic map of what's beneath Jan's feet. But how, we have to ask, did Kisilewicz and team get from that initial idea of a conversation with your alternate self to this?

"We needed a looming danger," Kisilewicz says, referring to the lethal sunrise, which a bar at the screen's bottom-right tells us is currently 11 days away. "We needed Jan to be really pushed to what he does, because it is really quite extreme. I mean, we're not hiding the fact that creating alters of yourself is a little effed up." That story requirement lent itself to survival mechanics, not dissimilar to those that formed the core of *This War Of Mine* — a comparison that comes to mind once more when Jan returns to his mining vessel, and the camera pulls out to a side-on cutaway view. "We were not limited by any genre, but with our experience from *This War Of Mine* and from *Frostpunk*, of course there are elements of those games apparent in *The Alters*."

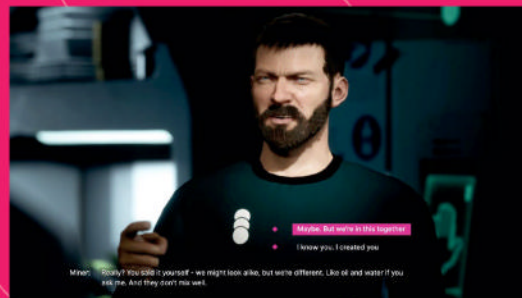
However, he's keen to point out the ways that this game differs — and not just in its graphical fidelity. "We

had this experience, from *This War Of Mine*, with the player being in shelter and going out to scavenge. But we wanted to reverse it, in a way," he says. "Of course, there are dangers outside, but it also allows you some time for reflection. While you're taking in the views of this planet, you have some time to think. And then, when you go back to the base, yes, it is safe harbour in some ways, but there's also a lot of internal tension, a lot of things happening between the alters." Kisilewicz laughs: "It's like coming home after work, and your kids are fighting." We soon see what he means.

Once inside the base — which resembles a bunch of shipping containers suspended within an enormous wheel, all presented in the same ant-farm fashion as *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*'s headquarters — *The Alters* becomes a management game. You're using materials gathered out on the planet's surface to build rooms and manufacture equipment, deciding how best to utilise the limited hours before that sunrise and, most importantly of all, managing your crew.

Having cloned them into existence, it's now your responsibility to keep the alters happy, through a system that Kisilewicz calls "empathetic management". "We tried many different approaches — first as paper prototypes and then in-engine — and what we always struggled with was this feeling that the alters are just NPCs, or they're just like units in an RTS game," he says. "We wanted you to build relationships with them." Part of the eventual solution is that, while you can set jobs for each alter from the safety of a menu, the real management has to be done the hard way: face to face.

Inside the base, you retain direct control of Jan, steering him from room to room, where his crew are playing out their individual routines: drinking coffee, working in the kitchen, grumbling about the lack of space. When you choose to strike up a conversation — or are cornered into one — the game switches into a BioWare-ish dialogue mode. "That was a very tricky part for us, because we had to build that skillset from the ground up," Kisilewicz admits. "We'd never done facial animation before. We built *The Alters* animation team from zero." 11 Bit



While the game covers heavy concepts, Kisilewicz promises "elements of humour", helping to distinguish its tone from the rest of 11 Bit's output

BRANCHING OUT



Przemysław Marszał,
11 Bit CEO

doesn't have any mocap facilities of its own, leaving that option out of the reach of the game's budget and requiring some technical "workarounds", he adds. "And this is also our first fully voiced game, with thousands of lines, most of them from one actor."

We get to see the results in action as Kisilewicz, steering the demo on our behalf, relents to the Miner's demands for drugs. The framing of the shots is perhaps a little static, but the performances are naturalistic enough. Just to make sure, though, the game flashes up flags for each emotional shift – highlighting when, for example, a character's frustration level goes up or down. Their woozy presentation is a little at odds with the clean, stylish UI of the rest of the game, but Kisilewicz assures us they're a work in progress, as 11 Bit tries to find the best method to represent how you read a person's face in real life.

"It has been a very iterative process", he says – not just in how these emotional flags look, but how explicit they should be about the underlying systems. "We knew from the beginning that we didn't want numbers on screen, like '+28 anger', but we also saw that we can't rely solely on facial animation expressions, because that can be misleading to players. We'd have to go very extreme with the reactions, and then you end up in uncanny-valley territory." And it's vital that players aren't left with any ambiguity about how the alters feel, since these emotional states impact practically every other part of the game. They decide how efficient that version of Jan will be at any tasks you assign them, and what conflicts you might face in the story. An unhappy alter, depending on their individual personality, might decide to get drunk; another might smash up their workstation. And this is just the mild stuff. "If you push them to boiling point, they might rebel against you," Kisilewicz says.

BRAVING THE ELEMENTS

If you were to draw a timeline of *The Alters'* parallel universe, one of its most notable divergences from our own was in the discovery of Rapiidium. It's a semi-magical element that can be used to essentially press fast-forward on localised patches of reality. Rapiidium is the entire reason Jan has found himself on this planet in the first place, his vessel having been on a mission to find fresh veins of the stuff among the stars. "The Earth is depleting," Kisilewicz explains. "Grain is like gold – and so Rapiidium is super-valuable, because it can speed up the growth of plants." And human bodies, too, making possible the easy-bake cloning at the heart of *The Alters'* story.



This is the backbone of *The Alters'* emergent storytelling, as Kisilewicz describes it, drawing on your decisions in dialogue and management alike. Failing to deliver on a promised build, or setting "crunch hours" around the base in order to achieve it, are both likely to have negative consequences at some point. It seems there's an element of randomness in the mix here, with Kisilewicz saying that the outcomes "sometimes surprise even us".

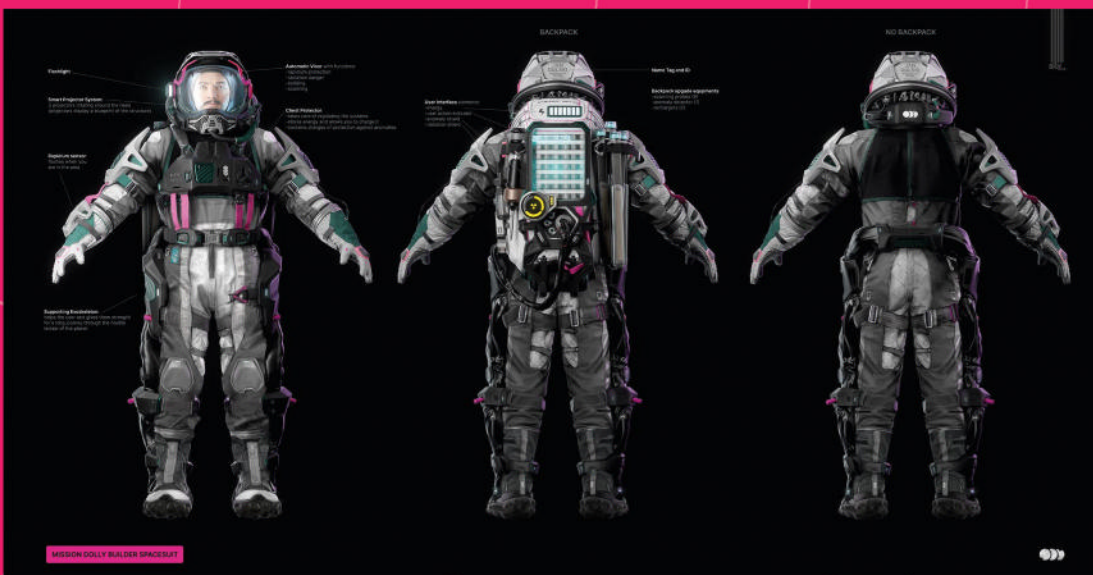
Earlier in our conversation, Kisilewicz told us how the early paper prototype of the game represented alters and story events with cards drawn at random from decks. We can't help but think of each decision as stacking the deck with things that could come back to bite you later on – such as the call we receive from the Miner, for example, reporting that he has hurt himself while working.

What follows is a difficult conversation: did this happen because of the opiodids? Jan is insistent that the Miner come off the meds, but his line of argument –



ABOVE Concepts for the various tools Jan can deploy. The Pillari-S pylons are manually placed in a manner reminiscent of objects in *Death Stranding*, the only external game we hear mentioned as a reference point for *The Alters*

“WE KNEW THAT WE DIDN'T WANT NUMBERS ON SCREEN, LIKE '+28 ANGER', BUT WE ALSO SAW THAT WE CAN'T RELY SOLELY ON FACIAL ANIMATION”



ABOVE A lot of work went into finding “the right face” for Jan, Kisilewicz says. “A little tired with life but still with this sharpness in his eye. The eyes were so crucial to it. They had to be captivating, because they’re the one element that never changes.” LEFT Jan’s protective spacesuit has a design rooted in current scientific fact – although we’re not sure actual astronauts rock this much hot pink

BRANCHING OUT

UNVERSED

When we ask Kisilewicz to explain the metaphysics of the Alteration process, he lands on a detail we weren't expecting: the quantum computer's Tree Of Life, from which Jan plucks the minds of his alternate selves, is only a simulation. "Those experiences, for them, are 100 per cent real – but it never happened. Because there's only one world. It's not like a multiverse situation when they want to go back to their home. It's not there. It's not anywhere. It's just a possible world." Which is interesting, given the multiverse's rise in pop culture since *The Alters* began development in 2019. "Each one that came out, I was very nervous to check it out – like, what if they did this same idea but better? I was so hesitant to watch *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. But once I did, I was happy. It's so different. It's an amazing film. But *The Alters* is something completely different."

peppered with an unfortunate assertion that the pain "is all in your head" – doesn't prove persuasive. The Miner refuses to work without them. Back in the room, Kisilewicz turns to us: "What do you think we should do right now?" We choose what seems like the safer option, and withdraw the drugs. "I really like that choice," he says with a grin. The Miner doesn't agree. "Go to hell," he snarls at Jan. Didn't need the emotional flags on that one.



The Alters' story mixes emergent plot beats with more firmly scripted ones. The overall structure of the game is set by that sunrise countdown, requiring you to complete enough tasks to get the base moving (there's a reason it's shaped like a big wheel) to the next location, as Jan tries

to reach the spot on the far side of this planet where his corporate overlords at AllyCorp promise they can mount a rescue. But there are smaller fixed moments along the way, it seems – such as a video call that comes in from the aforementioned employer, regarding what might be the biggest 'what if' of them all for Jan: his ex-wife, Lena.

Lena is worried about Jan and wants to speak with him; AllyCorp wants him to keep the alters situation secret from her; Jan is worried they'll get into a fight and he'll spill the beans. But with the call signal weak enough that everyone comes through as a staccato approximation of themselves, what if he could tag in one of his doubles, one who had a more successful relationship with Lena in their timeline? It's set up for a classic farce, with just one problem: no one on board quite fits the bill. The Miner's and Technician's lives broke away from Jan's before they ever met Lena, while the Scientist – a long-haired, cool-headed version of Jan who prioritised his career over everything except perhaps those luscious locks – broke things off before it could get in the way.

Ah, well. We'll just have to grow a new one: the perfect chance to see how the game adds to its cast of alters over time. Kisilewicz leads Jan to the base's quantum computer, lines of pink light dancing across its surface, and calls up the Tree Of Life menu – a very nicely presented flowchart of Jan's entire history to date, in essence. We think of the similar structures that underpin Twine games, and those that *Detroit: Become Human* presented at the end of each chapter, and how *The Alters'* core concerns feel perfectly native to the medium. After all, a series of branching decisions that lead down one of multiple possible paths equally describes the shape of real life and of most videogames, as anyone who has ever inherited someone else's save file in an RPG will tell you.

Anyway, this particular flowchart is realised in unsettlingly organic fashion, its gristly tubes knotting around certain pivotal events: moving out of home, meeting Lena, choosing a career post-university... Lena getting offered a job far away and asking Jan to move with

her. *A-ha*. This, it seems, is the root of the relationship problems that followed, and their eventual divorce. But what if things went the other way? We hit the button to 'Alterate', and a life flashes before our eyes.

Painted illustrations whip past, of Jan working in the garden, waving Lena off to work, and then taking a job on a hydroponic farm. This is 'the Botanist', bringing to the base a skillset that extends beyond his romantic abilities. "We want players to decide to create a new alter for economical reason, or for story reasons – like here – but also out of pure curiosity, of what this person might be like," Kisilewicz says. While the first alter is decided for you for plot reasons, from there the choice of who to recruit, and when, is left in your hands. But, he adds, "it's not possible to create all alters in a single playthrough" – and at any given time you'll have a hard limit on how many you can have on the base. Equally, you might choose to try to complete the game with the absolute minimum number of alters, which means fewer mouths to feed and to keep smiling. With so much to be done and such limited time, though, "it's going to be extremely hard".

It's not difficult to see why someone might take on that challenge, though. As we wait for our new clone's body to bake, Jan has a pile of alters-related problems to deal with. Grumbles about a lack of personal space; questions about why *this* Jan gets to sleep in the one good bed while they're all on the floor; an argument about the quality of cooking – the kind of stuff that'll be familiar to anyone who ever lived in a student house. What happens next, though, was fortunately absent from our university days.

First, a magnetic storm arrives, flooding the base with radiation that will kill everyone in a matter of hours if the Jans can't pull themselves together and install new radiation filters in time. And then, just as that process begins, we're hit with another notification, clean and simple: "Miner has hurt himself". This turns out to be something of an understatement. Remember that unwanted arm the Miner inherited along with his cloned body? Well, since being denied painkillers, he has taken things into his own hands, so to speak – and lopped one off with a meat cleaver. "I had to do something, since you wouldn't listen, brother," he says, with an eerie calm for a man stood over a severed limb in a pool of blood.

The camera pulls out, taking in the scope of the base one last time, and our demo ends. It's a perfect dramatic beat to close on, which means we can't help but wonder: *what if?* Would continuing to hand over the drugs have resulted in a happier ending? When Kisilewicz offered us that choice, and cheerily approved our answer, was there some sleight of hand at work? He promises us that this is "one of a few outcomes that could have happened here", but we'll have to wait to learn how else things might have gone. Quite how tantalised this knowledge leaves us is proof of Kisilewicz's core thesis with this game, and a sign that 11 Bit might have something special on its hands. ■

WE'RE HIT WITH ANOTHER NOTIFICATION:
 "MINER HAS HURT HIMSELF". THIS TURNS OUT
 TO BE SOMETHING OF AN UNDERSTATEMENT



The visual effect that accompanies Jan's Polygonal Scanner reminds us of the tools in *The Invincible*, a game that 11 Bit signed on to publish around the time of E371's cover story



LEFT Manufacturing items to aid your survival requires not only raw materials but also that most precious of resources: time.
 ABOVE A fun timelapse effect plays out while your Jan works, saving the tedium of watching him water plants or drill for the ore he needs, while also nodding to the properties of Rapiidium

B L A N K S L A T E

Going post-apocalyptic and getting political: Frostpunk 2 advances the agenda



Jakub Stokalski, co-lead and design director

Much like *The Alters*, there's a driving question at the heart of *Frostpunk 2*. It's just a single word apart, but that makes all the difference. "The big question," says design director **Jakub Stokalski**, "is: what now?" It's something the developers are asking of the first game's Frostlands setting, and the people who inhabit it – who, as Stokalski points out, have by the end of the original *Frostpunk* essentially survived the end of the world – but also of themselves, as they attempt to follow up the first game's enormous success with a pair of new directors at the helm.

This is a moment the studio has been preparing for, however. Przemysław Marszał, who was that game's co-lead and art director before becoming CEO, explains that it was specifically conceived as "a game that we could more easily make a sequel to", a decision made even before development on *This War Of Mine* was completed. "We already knew we wouldn't make *This War Of Mine 2*. Or maybe not that we won't, but we're not planning to. Because we didn't have anything more to tell."

For a *Frostpunk* sequel to get the greenlight, the team needed to prove that there was more to tell. Not only establishing that there was design space left in the *Frostpunk* concept, but figuring out what would be communicated via these new mechanics. "When we were setting out to develop a sequel – or even ask ourselves whether to – there was this question of, can we say something worthwhile?" Stokalski says. "And also, something that can be said best in this unique language that games possess, that other media don't. If we did not find any of those, we probably wouldn't have made a sequel." Art director **Lukasz Juszczczyk** agrees: "Silence can be golden, right? It can be smarter not to say anything."

Obviously, given that we're sitting here for an hour-long demo of *Frostpunk 2*, the pair eventually hit on an answer, the first part of which becomes apparent the moment we lay eyes on the game. It's set 30 years after the original, and advances its concerns accordingly. "Usually, you'd say that *Frostpunk* is a post-apocalyptic game, but when you think about it, it really isn't," Stokalski says. "It's more of an *apocalyptic* game, right? It's happening as the world is ending." So what if they were to make something genuinely post-apocalyptic, that looked beyond the questions of survival that have driven all of 11 Bit's recent work to ask instead: what now? Where next?

The part of the game Stokalski and Juszczczyk show us is its new 'Utopia Builder' sandbox mode. At its outset, the

screen is a field of white, with just a small cluster of civilisation visible at its very centre. Small as it looks, Stokalski explains that this city "is about the size of what you'd have at the end of a *Frostpunk 1* playthrough". Here, though, it's destined to be just the central district of a much larger metropolis. If *The Alters* is taking what made 11 Bit's previous work tick and pushing the camera in closer than ever before, then *Frostpunk 2* is taking the exact opposite approach.

"We really felt a change of scale was needed to support the core themes of the game," Stokalski says, explaining how, instead of building tents, you now plan out entire districts. Juszczczyk, at the controls, paints them onto the white powder underfoot, their contents falling into place in an organic, cobbled-together jumble that recalls the character of European cities, as opposed to the planned US-style grids of most city builders.

"Time is another thing that got the scaling-up treatment," Stokalski adds. "The game no longer plays out across days, but weeks, months, even years in longer playthroughs." With that in mind, "it makes little sense to ask you to stockpile, say, five wood, so we also changed the economy system that supports the game. It's no longer stockpile-based; now, everything is supply and demand." Each district you add brings its own flow of input and output, constantly feeding and taking from its neighbours.

For all that the sequel might have zoomed out, though, it also seeks to bring you closer to your city's inhabitants. We're taken briefly inside a single citizen's head, thoughts clouding around his next dreaded shift in the biowaste hothouse. This worker's name is Newton Wolf, and he is eight years old. Clearly, three decades hasn't been enough to shake off the old habits when it comes to child labour; if anything, given that those hothouses are powered by human waste, things have got worse. However, we have an opportunity to change that by introducing laws – another process that's been made more intimate for this sequel.

"In most strategy games, there's this power fantasy that 'I can do everything – I am the ultimate creator,'" Juszczczyk says. "Not here." And so, rather than unilaterally setting rules for their city, now you have a parliament to contend with. Opening up the Council Hall, we find a chamber whose radial seats echo the shape of the settlement itself, where a hundred delegates cast their votes by lighting lanterns, glimmers of hope in the dark. "After 30 years, the convenient excuse for any decision – you know, 'We have to do it or we are all going to die' – is really no longer valid," Stokalski says. ▶

"Frostpunk is at its heart a game about people," Stokalski says – which is why names and faces are being put to individual citizens and their problems



KERRY WORTH, 29, TRAPPER

BOILING WITH ANGER

This is enough.

Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me thrice and I cut out this lying tongue of yours.

So the Steward thinks he can just run with these lunatics, remaking the city to whatever flies their fancy. Bend over backwards to suit their every whim.

Like hell he can. We will defend what we believe in. And we will **make them** see our way.

ICEBLOODS radicalised because Steward negotiated with their enemies yet again.

"IN MOST STRATEGY GAMES THERE'S THIS POWER FANTASY THAT 'I CAN DO EVERYTHING – I AM THE ULTIMATE CREATOR'. NOT HERE"

FACED WITH A COMING STORM THAT WILL TIP THE CITY BACK INTO SURVIVAL MODE, JUSZCZYK PROPOSES PUTTING THE CHILDREN BACK TO WORK



TECHNOCRATS
NEUTRAL

21% OF THE CITY

TECHNOCRATS PROTEST PARENTAL DUTIES

Steward, the Technocrats have begun a series of protests in the Extraction district. Power gets disrupted as they hijack the broadcasting systems, angrily calling out Iceblooms, and you specifically. They agitate for a different path they want the City to take.

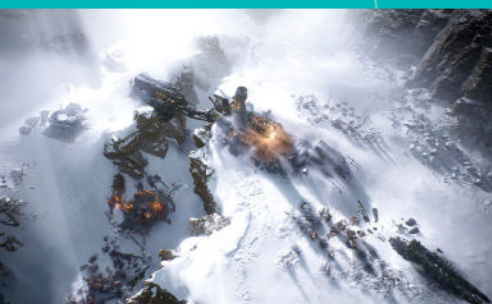
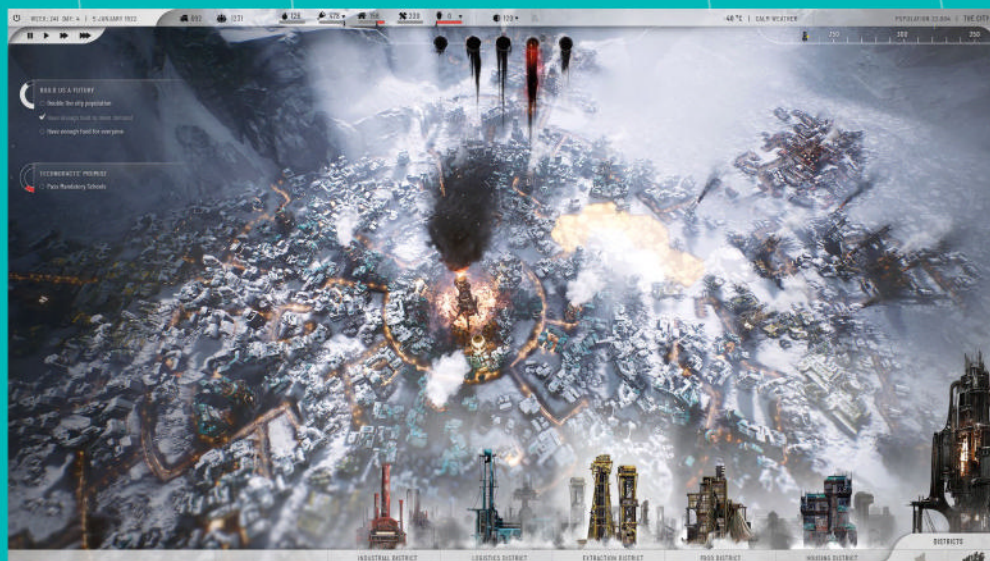
An excerpt from their broadcast: 'Our society must progress past mere survival! We need new rules so we can thrive! Our calculations are clear; the only logical starting point is to end the stagnation of 'Parental Duties' and train young minds in 'Mandatory Schools'.

The Technocrats refuse to stop their disruptions until their demands are met. What should we do?

-AGREE TO THEIR DEMANDS-

-WAIT THEM OUT-

-DECLARE STATE OF EMERGENCY-



TOP *Frostpunk* has a strong tradition of difficult decisions; this sequel is no exception. ABOVE Long-term survival will involve not just managing your city but also venturing out into the surrounding Frostlands. RIGHT Like 11 Bit's other projects, *Frostpunk 2* has moved from the Liquid engine to UE5. It is not designed with strategy games in mind, but the results speak for themselves

In line with 11 Bit's definition of a "truly post-apocalyptic game", this is our chance to forge a better world. Keep in mind the name of the mode we're being shown here. "We started thinking, 'When is utopia possible?'" Stokalski says. "Well, never, really. But if it ever was, it would be when you have a blank state. *This* is the moment to try to build a better future."

Just as we're starting to think that this all sounds terribly optimistic, Stokalski continues. "The trick is, though, that even though the world might be a blank slate, the people are not. They have been deeply touched by the ordeal of survival, by everything they had to do in order to survive the end of the world." In a way, this isn't too far from *The Alters'* view of humanity and the ways in which we're all shaped by our pasts, just blown out to enormous scale, its varied characters rendered as entire communities. In this demo, we get to meet two of them: the Engineers and the Foragers.

The former are the descendants of, surprisingly enough, the engineers who worked on the generator that powered your city in the first game. "And it's ingrained in them that technology is what enabled them to survive," Stokalski says. "If it wasn't for the generators, they wouldn't be here." The Foragers, meanwhile, had no such luxuries. "They were the ones who survived without the help of generators, out there in the Frostlands, at horrific cost, with horrific sacrifice." This experience hardened them, producing a libertarian-meets-Spartan mindset.

The tabled motion, then — to make education mandatory for all children in the city — is something of a hard sell. While the Engineers naturally support the idea, Stokalski explains, "Foragers would say that the responsibility for each child lies with the parents". With a 50/50 split between the two factions, as the player you have a few options. The first is negotiation, making backdoor deals to change other laws or guaranteeing their next proposal will be voted in (see 'Campaign promises'). Alternatively, you can just roll the dice.

After all, while these factions might have a distinctive character, they are nonetheless made up of individuals. There might be a couple of unannounced swing votes, or a renegade who breaks the party line, here represented by one of *Frostpunk 2's* few uses of randomisation. In this case, the gamble pays off — the first time in living memory that a 52/48 split has been worth celebrating. We're told, however, that the consequences will run deeper than this one moment of triumph. And so, to illustrate that point, our demo jumps ahead two whole years.

In that time, the city has gone from a speck in the snow to a sprawling, bustling thing that almost fills the screen. Basic survival problems have been solved, at least for now. "No one is cold, no one is hungry," Stokalski says. "There's some disease, but nothing major." Of course, it's not simply case closed. The city's size might bring



While the city-building aspect plays out at a grander scale, individual buildings still have value, as a way to modify or upgrade each district

new issues of squalor and crime, while further complications emerge from the ways its population has evolved. In reaction to the choices the player has made over those unseen years, two new communities have emerged, splintering off from the preexisting factions: the Icebloods and Technocrats.

Both are still relative minorities among the populace, but with enough members to be represented in the council chamber, meaning you can no longer rely on a simple flip of the coin to pass laws. Which proves difficult as, faced with a coming storm that will tip the city back into survival mode, Juszczuk proposes undoing that law of two years before, putting the children back to work.

The Icebloods, having taken the Foragers' credo of human adaptability to its Darwinist conclusion, are all for this idea. It would be easy to paint them as the baddies, but Stokalski promises this game has "no comic-book villains" — and besides, they're not the ones we're about to make enemies with. The Technocrats are ultra-rationalists who "believe you can figure everything out," he explains. "That you can calculate *everything* if you have the right algorithm. Even things like who you should marry, how many children you should have, etc." That equation does not include, you'd imagine, children shovelling excrement — and indeed, the Technocrats aren't best pleased when we negotiate with their more moderate cousins to get our proposal passed.

"To them, what we just did is unacceptable. It was the last straw," Stokalski says. "They'll go out into the city, try to gain influence in different districts and convince the people that theirs is the right way to survive and build a brighter future for ourselves." We're shown a heatmap overlay that works much like the first game's more literal temperature meter, instead dedicated to charting tension within the populace. If this is a kind of social thermometer, it seems the mercury is about set to burst the glass. Our demo ends before we can see how this plays out in the longer term, but according to Stokalski, unrest "can ultimately be the city's undoing, and lead to its downfall. This is the ultimate enemy in the game."

CAMPAIGN PROMISES

Frostpunk 2's vision of politics seems to be more *The Thick Of It* than *The West Wing* — and accordingly, any deals you make need not be honoured. "But, of course, if you break the promise, there will be consequences," Juszczuk says. Still, it might be worth the risk, since pushing a future law through might require negotiating on the other side of the aisle. "And then someone else, and someone else... It's quite easy to entangle yourself with a single promise." Politicians facing consequences for their inaction and deception? Maybe this is a utopian fantasy, after all.



Łukasz Juszczak, co-lead and art director

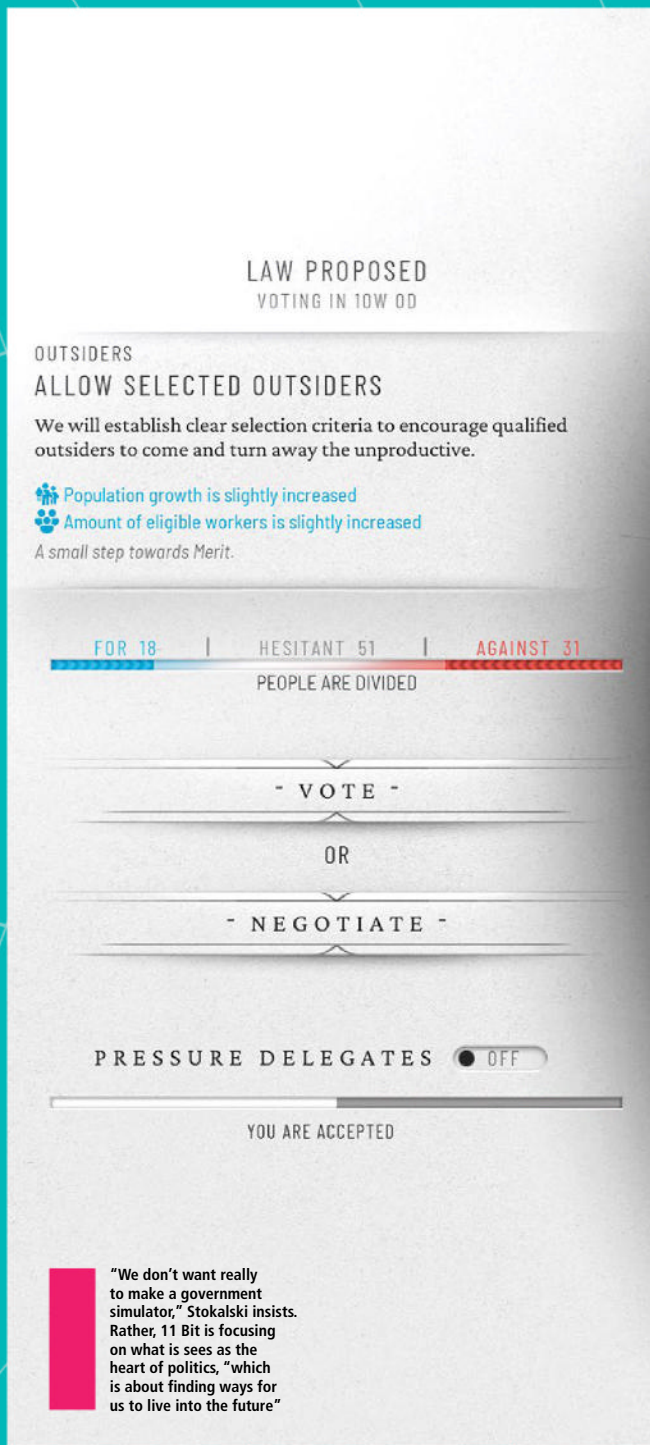
It's a fairly grim view of humanity for a game that started out with the aim of building a utopia. (Of course, people are always where these things fall down.) But it's core to what the game has to say, the big idea that convinced 11 Bit a sequel was worth pursuing. It's what Kisilewicz calls the "insight", something that's required for any of the studio's games to be greenlit, as it aims to produce what it has often called "meaningful games".

That latter term is one that Marszał feels has become a little overused, and perhaps strayed a little from its original intention. Ultimately, he says, 11 Bit just wants to make entertainment that can connect to people's real lives and experiences in some way. "We believe you will enjoy playing our games," he says, laying out the studio's new mission statement. "But we don't care if you become a better player. We care if you become a better person." Frankly, we'd like to think we sat down to our demo already reckoning that child labour was a bad idea. How we might rebuild society after a global crisis, though? Well, that feels like a terrifyingly relevant thing to be thinking about right now.

For *The Alters*, meanwhile, the insight is into the role that regret plays in human nature — and it's an attitude 11 Bit is trying to carry over to the games it publishes, too, which are gradually growing in number. We ask Marszał how this philosophy scales across multiple projects. "Let's meet again in a year and see where we are," he says with a laugh.

After a quiet few years, the studio is about to enter a period of proving out its ideas. It's publishing *The Invincible*, out in November, and *The Thaumaturge*, in December, as well as another unannounced game early next year, before the arrival of its homegrown offerings. "Of course, this wasn't the plan," Marszał says, acknowledging that it has created "huge pressure internally". But assuming it all goes to plan, and the way 11 Bit has rebuilt itself proves a success, what then?

The aim is for the company to reach a regular cadence of "three or four titles a year, internal and external", he says, with its internal teams sticking to the same format and carrying their knowledge onto similar projects: the *Frostpunk* team continuing to specialise in strategy, the Project 8 team focusing on thirdperson narrative games, and *The Alters* team on, well, "Cut loose, go crazy, no constraints". But the boundaries needn't be quite so firm, Marszał adds: "What if, for example, the Project 8 team, which will gain experience in this narrative thirdperson approach, took the *Frostpunk* universe and made a game in that style, in that universe? I'm not saying we are doing that — I'm just showing you the possibilities." He thinks for a moment, then laughs again. "Maybe we'll find a good idea for that game." Which is, ultimately, what the entire approach boils down to for 11 Bit: asking the right questions, and the search for a good idea. ■



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PLAYER. WE CARE IF YOU BECOME A BETTER PERSON”



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COLLECTED WORKS
MASAYA MATSUURA

TUNIN'GLUE

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Bandai Digital Entertainment Format Pippin Release 1996

PARAPPA THE RAPPER

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Format PS1 Release 1996

UM JAMMER LAMMY

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Format PS1 Release 1999

VIB-RIBBON

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Format PS1 Release 1999

RHYME RIDER KERORICAN

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Bandai Format WonderSwan Release 2000

PARAPPA THE RAPPER 2

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Format PS2 Release 2002

MAJOR MINOR'S
MAJESTIC MARCH

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Majesco Entertainment Format Wii Release 2009

A lesson from teacher: PaRappa's
creator looks back on his
transformative time in games

By SIMON PARKIN



EDGE

COLLECTED WORKS

As a young child, **Masaya Matsuura**, the Japanese musician widely hailed as the inventor of the rhythm-action game genre, struggled to find a place and identity. Born in Osaka City, his father worked for a shipping company, while his mother kept the family home. Matsuura attended a school in Abeno Ward that was popular with wealthy families (he describes his own family as “completely middle class”). One local mother invited Rod Stewart and his band to her home after a concert, where she held a dinner party for them and performed a duet of Sailing with Stewart. Matsuura didn’t fit in and, when his father developed a stomach ulcer that required surgery and a prolonged period off work, became so disruptive at school that his mother was summoned for an emergency meeting to discuss her “difficult child”. (When the teacher suggested Matsuura’s poor behaviour was a result of problems in his parents’ marriage, his mother stormed out.)

Soon, however, Matsuura found sanctuary and community among musicians. Having learned the castanets in junior school, he fell in love with keyboards and synthesisers. As a younger man his father had played the guitar in clubs around Shinagawa Station in Tokyo; performance, it seemed, ran in the family. After a stint playing in a punk band – the name of which Matsuura still refuses to reveal – in 1983 he formed Psy*s (pronounced ‘Saiz’), a progressive pop band fronted by the signer Mami Yasunori, which soon signed to Sony Music. Ten studio albums followed, as did an ever-keener interest in the overlap between music and interactive entertainment.

The designer’s contacts at Sony Music proved invaluable when, in 1994, the company entered the videogame industry, and Matsuura’s company, NanaOn-Sha, secured a budget to create a Simon Says-style rhythm game featuring an anthropomorphic rapping dog. *PaRappa The Rapper*’s success facilitated a slew of followup projects: the guitar-based *Um Jammer Lammy*, the experimental

wireframe project *Vib-Ribbon*, which created levels based on the player’s music CDs, and *Mojib-Ribbon*, a music game that played with calligraphic art.

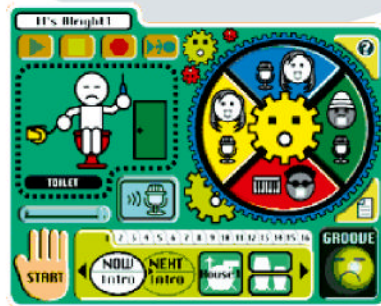
More recently, Matsuura has retreated from the videogame business, focusing again on his music, and live events where, in front of an audience, he plays rare and obscure vinyl records, including tracks from the games he has made. “Being a musician is my essential identity,” he says today. “When I started making videogames, I did so as a musician.”

TUNIN’GLUE

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Bandai Digital Entertainment
Format Pippin Release 1996

During the ’80s and early ’90s, a variety of music production equipment and tools found in recording studios had started to become computerised. At that time, I began to think that musical works themselves could be software programs, not just data. The *Tunin’Glue* prototype was born from various experiments around this basic idea. It allowed players to mix and match various audio clips to create original compositions. The Pippin was a Macintosh-based CD-ROM multimedia device that Bandai manufactured in Japan at the time. When the Pippin was announced in Japan, my connections as a musician meant that the game was selected to be one of the launch titles.

It was a relatively small production. There were about five of us on the development team in total, with



Following Pippin’s discontinuation, Nana On-Sha posted a downloadable version of *Tunin’Glue* on its website

responsibilities split between programming, UI design, music and composition. I can’t remember how many musicians contributed to the samples used in the program. Since the Pippin console was essentially a Macintosh computer, we developed the program on Mac, then ported it across to the Pippin, which has less memory available. The testing process was laborious: we visited Bandai in Kuramae, Tokyo, almost every day and burned test CD-ROMs to see if everything worked.

The idea of making a music game didn’t exist at the time. I don’t consider *Tunin’Glue* to be a true videogame per se, but for me it was an essential stepping stone to what came later. It sold hardly any copies at all. Even the hardware was considered something of a failure. In fact, by the time *Tunin’Glue* was released, the Pippin console had already been discontinued. This taught me a stern lesson: you can only sell as much as your installed base allows.

PARAPPA THE RAPPER

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Format PS1 Release 1996

PaRappa The Rapper is often referred to as a ‘Simon Says’ game, but it’s really a game of rhythm and improvisation. The order in which you press the buttons is almost unimportant, and the similarity is minimal. With my band, Psy*s, I had done some experimentation with sampling the human voice. I thought we could play with this idea via call-and-response in a videogame. It was clear from the beginning that the game would be focused on vocals and rhythm.

Rodney Greenblat, an American artist, was under contract with Sony Creative at the time. He had also designed a project for the Macintosh. When we started coming up with the idea for *PaRappa The Rapper*, he was recommended to me as the character designer. We settled on PaRappa as the character’s name right from the first proposal. No other candidates were considered. Some of you may have noticed that the syncopated rhythm of the game

title is the rhythm that gives you the highest score in the game.

PaRappa The Rapper was not originally going to be created by my company, NanaOn-Sha. However, just before Sony was about to start production, the studio that was pencilled in to build the game pulled out of the deal. I became discouraged. I felt I had no choice but to develop *PaRappa The Rapper* at NanaOn-Sha. So I rented a room in an apartment, and bought in several Silicon Graphics machines and other equipment for the graphics staff to use there. With so many high-powered machines, it soon became clear that the condominium's power supply capacity was insufficient to cover the power consumption we required. An electrician visited and informed us there was only one solution to the problem: we would have to redirect the air conditioner's power to the computers.

I underestimated the amount of time it would take to develop the game. I had supposed that we would be finished by the following summer, but, as we weren't finished, I ended up having the graphics staff spend two summers without air conditioning. They would have to work in their underwear to make it bearable. This completely shameful episode is funny because of the success of *PaRappa The Rapper*, but it gives me chills just thinking about what would have happened today, when summers in Japan are much hotter than back then.

PaRappa The Rapper changed my life, but not all the experiences around the game were positive. Bringing something new and unknown to the public can be frustrating for a creative person. Looking back, it can seem as though *PaRappa* was always popular, but in fact it took time to find that success. In the early days following the game's release, scores varied depending on the reviewer. Several reviewers gave the game an extremely low score. Worse still, some of the Sony executives struggled to pronounce the game's title. They would say it as "Pappara Pappa", which ruins the effect of the syncopation built into the game's title. Other Japanese people pronounced the word as "Papparapa", which means 'idiot' in Japanese. Because of this, in the early days



Prior to commencing work on *PaRappa The Rapper*, artist Rodney Greenblat worked for Sony Creative Products, a licensing division of Sony Music in Japan where he designed cartoon characters for lunchboxes, T-shirts, stationery and keychains

"SOME PEOPLE WOULD REFER TO PARAPPA THE RAPPER AS 'THE IDIOT GAME'"



Greenblat would typically draw five options for each character. The licensing team chose PaRappa's final design

some people would refer to *PaRappa The Rapper* as "the idiot game".

Some of those involved in the game's release didn't understand *PaRappa The Rapper's* mechanics properly, either. One executive would refer to it as a karaoke game, which was very frustrating. I thought she really had no taste. Others referred to it as a dancing game. I suppose I quickly learned that people can only talk about new concepts by referencing things they already know. I appreciate that nobody was being malicious with these mistakes, but it was still frustrating.

It took about 18 months for the game to pass a million sales. There are many unusual factors behind *PaRappa The Rapper's* success, but this success is certainly credit to the people involved in sales. In many ways, I was just a bystander by that point in the process. The company continued to manufacture and ship products to meet the back orders from retailers that came in every week. There was never a massive, reckless shipment; because Sony came from the music industry, they were used to manufacturing only enough to meet demand. This way, the company could ►



reduce the risk of having mass returns from stores. For this reason, I think sales were slower – nobody knew what to expect. When we passed the million sales mark, *PaRappa* became a mainstream success. At that point, the executive started to say the game's title correctly.

I would like to end my complaining by mentioning the issue of intonation. This is a phenomenon that is almost never seen in Europe and the United States, but in Japan, about 30 per cent of people pronounce the rhythm of the game's title differently than I imagined, which was "dada-dah-dada-dah." It was a source of some frustration for me, and that is part of the reason my next game was titled *Um Jammer Lammy*, which I think is a foolproof title from a rhythmic perspective.

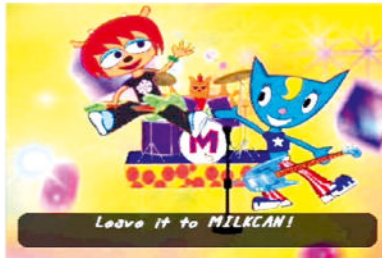
UM JAMMER LAMMY

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Format PS1 Release 1999

PaRappa The Rapper's success gave me lots of opportunities, but also much to reflect on. I approached *Um Jammer Lammy* after much consideration. But because of the success of the previous title, expectations were much higher all round. I think we were able to achieve a lot – if not all – of my ambitions for the project.

Um Jammer Lammy also has gameplay that features rapping by PaRappa alongside a dedicated guitar track. The interplay between the guitar and vocal call-and-response was an interesting challenge. We would record the improvised guitar part first, then add lyrics to the phrase and sing it back. I don't think there is any other music created using such a unique compositional method. If I had to say it, I feel like it would have been more interesting to have a different lead guitarist for each stage, but in a game that featured characters, I didn't think it was a clever idea to do that. This may be the fundamental difference from music games like *Guitar Hero*, which have little to no story or character and are just played by replacing music tracks in various ways.

It was interesting switching to a rock-based game. When *PaRappa The Rapper*



To present 'flat' characters in a 3D environment, the team put a gap between the front and rear sides of models

"I WAS ASKED
SO MANY TIMES
WHY I HAD
CHOSEN TO MAKE
A HIP-HOP GAME"



CD-ROM XA enables switching between audio tracks in real time, a way to facilitate low-latency playback

first came out and I visited America and the UK to talk about the game, I was asked so many times why I had chosen to make a hip-hop game. It seemed to me that at that period in history there were many people who didn't like the fact that hip-hop was the subject matter. I think things would be different today.

Despite the success of *PaRappa The Rapper*, I didn't feel pressure from Sony. No one could have imagined *PaRappa's* success. I believe that no matter how selfish I am with what I want to do, there will always be a role given to me by the universe; my mission is to exercise that role to the best of my ability. This isn't a religious view, but it is something that drives me.

VIB-RIBBON

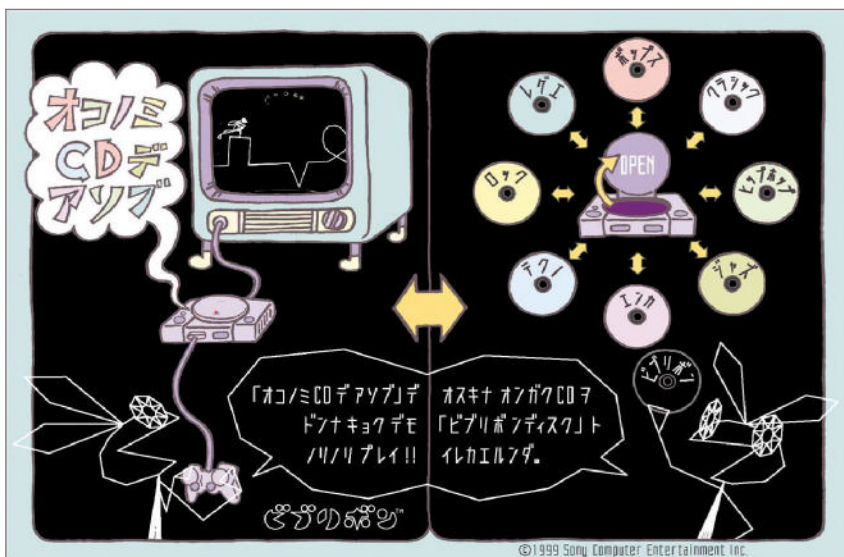
Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Format PS1 Release 1999

This was originally a sponsored project, intended to turn the Mercedes Benz A-Class car into a character and feature it in the game. The car manufacturer hoped that a videogame would help the brand appeal to a younger audience. We decided that the backbone of the game would be to have the car trundle along a visualisation of the actual audio waveform. At the time, you could see examples of audio waveform visualisation in SGI's C Sound program, which is where the idea came from.

The travel course was designed to resemble a normal road, but during the early days of production there was an accident in which an A-Class rolled over due to a crosswind. The accident exposed structural defects in the product, which was then redesigned. As a result, the project was cancelled. Just when I was about to give up, Sony suggested we turn it into a different kind of game for them.

After the success of *PaRappa The Rapper* and *Um Jammer Lammy*, I wanted to distance myself from committing to the issues of working within a single musical genre. The idea here was to make a game that could analyse any audio CD's data and create not only a soundtrack for the game from that data, but also a level design. We knew that with *Vib-Ribbon* we had to ►

COLLECTED WORKS



Matsuura considers the original PlayStation to be the ideal development environment, a system with both useful capabilities and limitations. "You could say that it's impossible to uncover everything that is truly possible with a console," he says. "By the time you figure out what can be done, new hardware is already hitting the market. In that sense, new consoles spoil things"

make it so that once you started the game, you would almost never have to re-insert the game disc. To do that, all of the game data had to fit onto the PlayStation's limited memory. The only way to make that work was to build the game world from a series of simple wireframes.

The game just kind of formed into what it became as we were developing it. With *Vib-Ribbon* it was important to me that members of the development team were able to share their own ideas for the project. I feel that we incorporated each idea well into the game. In fact, that's the thing of which I am most proud. It was a complicated game to build, but in creative terms things went very smoothly as by this stage my staff and I had a clear idea about what our games were all about.

The development was a total roller-coaster. There were so many happy days and so many sad days. We'd often work into the middle of the night. No matter how hard we tried, the connection between music and gameplay always seemed to end up feeling somewhat ambiguous. We struggled so hard to get over this hurdle, and that was even before we began to think about how to reduce loading times, create interest and variety in the game



Launched in 2000, Wonderswan Color was designed by Koto Laboratory, founded by Game Boy creator Gunpei Yokoi. Matsuura and his team played with its unusual features, including vertically aligned directional pads

course designs, and introduce special set-pieces to appear based on specific intricacies in the music.

Unlike with *PaRappa The Rapper*, by the time we released *Vib-Ribbon* there were some hardcore fans of our work right from the beginning. But while the game had a strong start, it was never really a big hit in Japan. I wonder if that matters, really? This culture of always feeling the need to make huge successes in the videogame industry reminds me of the music industry in the '80s and '90s – at least in Japan, anyway. I feel that that mindset can be dangerous. It's important to back interesting, inspirational projects, not just ones that sell hundreds of thousands of copies.

RHYME RIDER KERORICAN

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Bandai
Format WonderSwan Release 2000

Because we had a relationship with Bandai from the time of making *Tunin'Glue*, we were asked to create a title for the company's new handheld, the WonderSwan Color. We all felt excited about this device, because it had a colour display, which would expand the opportunities for graphical expression.

Since players would be tapping the buttons a lot, we decided to have them hold the device at an angle to make the interactions more comfortable in the player's hands. Therefore, the graphics we chose to use were diagonal to the screen. It's quite a unique effect. I don't think the game sold very well, but it did cement our relationship with Bandai. Later on, we collaborated to create *Tamagotchi Corner Shop*, the first non-Nintendo title to sell a million copies on the Nintendo DS.

PARAPPA THE RAPPER 2

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Format PS2 Release 2002

Why did we decide to make a sequel to *PaRappa*? I can only say that it was

because there were requests coming at me from all directions, all the time. Developing for the PlayStation 2 had many challenges. On the other hand, there were also issues with the technology that people were using in the home to play games. In particular, with the advancement of liquid crystal displays, the way images are viewed had drastically changed. In a rhythm-based videogame, this increase in latency made it harder for the player to time their button inputs with the music. Early LCD screens had more subtle colours, too, so it was difficult to express the vivid colours that were associated with PaRappa. I think that even now, with 4K and 8K screens, things appear different from the CRT era, when colours appeared to be so vibrant on the screen.

From a business perspective, *PaRappa The Rapper 2* didn't reach the heights of success we had seen on the PlayStation. But there was one aspect to the creative process I enjoyed: the opportunity to manufacture a small amount of vinyl for recording purposes. I think this was one of the triggers that led to the production of other vinyl and the live vinyl-listening events that I have been holding in Japan during recent years.

MAJOR MINOR'S MAJESTIC MARCH

Developer NanaOn-Sha Publisher Majesco Entertainment
Format Wii Release 2009

After various discussions, we arrived at the idea for a marching-band game for the Nintendo Wii. It was a difficult decision to make as we still didn't really understand what kind of device the Wii Remote was, and what capacities it would have. In my opinion, the platform provider did not adequately explain to third parties the device's functionality – there was a lack of transparency that hurt developers like us. The platform holder kept adding new and subtle features, and amending the design as time went on, which changed the scope for us.

Although I haven't talked about this publicly before, my intention was to have young staff take the lead in



PaRappa 2 featured practice segments because Rodney Greenblat struggled to finish stages in *Um Jammer Lammy*

“IT WAS NEVER REALLY A BIG HIT IN JAPAN. I WONDER IF THAT MATTERS, REALLY?”



Major Minor's Majestic March featured 30 marching band tunes. It blended ideas pioneered in both *Tunin'Glue* and *PaRappa The Rapper*: the performance would change depending on which of the 15 instruments the player included in their band

developing this particular game. Partly it was because I was feeling older, and wanted to pass the baton to the younger generation. But allowing inexperienced staff to take the lead also had its issues, of course. My passion had always been to design games and write music, not run a company, so for *Major Minor's Majestic March* I reduced the number of staff I was working with. I wanted to create a studio environment that was much more like a classic design office. To achieve this, the actual development of the game was outsourced.

By comparison to NanaOn-Sha's previous games, *Major Minor's Majestic March* was poorly received. On reflection, I don't think it was complete enough as a game. I thought we did our best under the circumstances, but I fell short in various ways.

After this, I made four more games: *Winta* for iOS, *Tamagotchi Corner Shop* for Nintendo DS, *Haunt* for the Xbox Kinect, and *Furusoma*, which was a Unity project. Since then, I have focused on my music again. I never stopped being a musician all through my game-making years, so it didn't feel like a switch. I always held onto the idea that people would get the same kind of feeling from playing my games that they get when they are listening to their favourite kind of music. Creating games or creating music, it's all the same thing to me. ■



HITFACTORY

How IO Interactive beat the odds to regain its agency

By **ALEX SPENCER**



Visiting IO Interactive's Copenhagen headquarters, Agent 47 is a constant presence. At reception we're greeted by a life-size model, helium balloons bobbing against its glass case, celebrating the same anniversary that has brought **Edge** here. Across the room, looping clips from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* follow a villager whose bald head, suit and red tie make us fear for the life of Tom Nook. Even in the bathroom you can't escape him, those cold blue eyes peering out of picture frames on every wall.

It can feel, at times, like walking around a shrine. Not that we'd blame anyone. Since the release of its debut game in 2000, IO has been synonymous with *Hitman*. And without Agent 47, the studio might well never have seen its 25th birthday – nor, indeed, its 20th. This is the story that CEO and co-owner **Hakan Abrak** is telling when he pauses for a moment, to pick up yet another effigy from the conference table – a big-headed chibi rendering of the studio's mascot – and attempt to rub a smudge from its shiny plastic pate.

Abrak is telling us about 2006, the year he joined IO, just a few months after the release of *Hitman: Blood Money*. "A transformative time," is how he remembers it. "IO was fully embracing being multi-project, making multiple games at the same time – and growing very, very fast." While it was working on a *Hitman* game the entire time, Agent 47 disappeared from public view for six years, and IO gave other things a go, including the *Kane & Lynch* games on which Abrak got his start. Not that he has any rose-tinted glasses there. "We've done other IPs but, let's be honest, they haven't stuck around like *Hitman*."

Looking back on those days now, something dawns on Abrak. "I had thought about this before, but now it's crystal clear," he says. "We've kind of come back to the same place." IO is once again preparing to put Agent 47 on the shelf, instead focusing its energies on two new games, Project 007 and Project Fantasy, being made across five countries. "We have a dream that we can be not only 'the *Hitman* studio'."

But getting back to that same place, where it can once again attempt to realise that dream, has been a long and painful journey for the studio. Within the space of a decade, it gained and lost an owner, had to shrink and grow back on three separate occasions, and found itself just weeks from bankruptcy. How it survived all that is a truly unlikely story – and one that, for Abrak at least, begins with the disastrous development of 2012's *Hitman: Absolution*.

Absolution arrived right at the tail end of IO's prior attempt to vary the kind of games it makes. With *Mini Ninjas*, it had attempted a family-friendly approach; with *Kane & Lynch*, it had gone in quite the opposite direction. Neither set

the world on fire, and after another Microsoft-funded project collapsed, in 2010 the studio suffered two waves of layoffs. It was at this point that Abrak and **Christian Elverdam**, who would eventually buy this entire company together, stepped onto their first *Hitman* game.

"*Absolution* was a tough, tough production," Abrak says. "The game took seven years. It was completely over budget. I was put on in the last two years, when the executive producer was let go. It was like, 'Either we make this work or *Hitman* is not in Copenhagen any more'." Those troubles can be traced back to two things, he reckons: an underestimation of the technological leap required to make an HD-era game, and a misguided attempt to break the series out of its niche. The latter was born "on one hand, of external pressure to make a more mainstream version of *Hitman*," Elverdam says. (It might be worth noting at this point that IO gained a new parent company, in Square Enix, during development.) "But also maybe an internal desire to do more story-driven games."

Either way, the project's reference points were "*Max Payne* and *Gears Of War*," Abrak says – and the result, as he and Elverdam joined: "It didn't feel like *Hitman*. We did everything we could, literally breaking down walls in the levels to make it more open, while at the same time trying to deliver a game

that, when we came on two years before launch, was *nowhere*. Mechanically, the core systems, they were *nowhere*." What followed, he says simply, "was two years of brutal crunch."

And at the end of it all, those efforts were greeted with hostility from

the series' longtime fans, and a lukewarm reception from the new players it was chasing. "Over those years, whatever was hot back then had changed. People wanted open-world games," Abrak recalls. "It was DOA." He recalls how the release felt: "Having worked so hard, and having *made* people work so hard – and then that dissatisfaction, feeling that it was our fault. All that production work, all those assets... just to be thrown away."

This moment clearly stuck with Abrak, even as he and Elverdam were moved onto an R&D incubation project. The next year they got their chance at, well, *absolution* with a pitch for a new *Hitman* game. "I called it 'the original assassin', because it was all about getting back to the series' roots," he says. Both in genre, walking back the attempts to force Agent 47 into a story-driven action game, and in the character himself.

"47 is rather elegant – or at least he used to be, before *Absolution*," Elverdam says. Later, elsewhere in the studio, we spot a heavy concept bible for '*Hitman 5*' on a coffee table. It shows the original direction for *Absolution*'s story, with concept art showing 47 as a "down and out" drunk, living on the streets, with a three-legged dog for a companion. It ▶

**"WE'VE DONE OTHER IPs
BUT, LET'S BE HONEST,
THEY HAVEN'T STUCK
AROUND LIKE HITMAN"**

BY NICK SPENCER FOR EDGE



couldn't stand farther apart from the man who, in 2016, would stalk into Paris Fashion Week.

They wanted to "elevate" Agent 47, which meant taking him from the streets to more luxurious environs, Elverdam explains. "He's kind of a blank slate. The circles that Agent 47 moves in, and the targets that he is hunting, they very much define who he is." We're shown a pitch video from around this time, a kind of sizzle reel of cut-together movie footage. It's all cityscapes and glass-fronted offices, stock footage of police protecting the rich from the masses, and Wall Street graphs plummeting, firmly establishing an elite who consider themselves above common law, and 47 as the great leveller. Representing the man himself, we recognise – in a perfect, accidental moment of foreshadowing – a close-up of Daniel Craig's Bond straightening his suit. It's easy to see flashes of the game that would eventually become 2016's *Hitman* reboot. "We sent that to the studio management," Abrak says. "And, unfortunately, it was turned down."

"Then, some things happened at Square Enix." Six months after *Absolution's* launch, the publisher announced the game hadn't met sales targets (some things, it seems, never change). "There was, yet again, a change in game management, and a bit of downsizing," Abrak says. Layoffs cut the studio in half, and all other projects were cancelled to focus on the studio's defining property. "And Chris and I were put on *Hitman* again."

This time, the pitch was given the green light – and the pair started thinking about other mistakes that had been made on the previous game. "How can we make something that is more sustainable? That is just more sane?" Abrak says, returning to the feeling that so much work on *Absolution* was just "thrown away". Elverdam compares this way of developing to "a nuclear submarine – you stay below the surface for many, many years, then you come up, launch the game." He makes a missile sound effect with his mouth. "And you disappear."

"Coming out of *Absolution*, we knew we didn't want to do that any more," Elverdam concludes. The idea was instead to make an "ever-expanding game". *Destiny* had recently been revealed, while just half an hour from IO's office, across the water in Malmö, Ubisoft Massive was attempting something similar. More than any other, though, IO's target was the game to which the trilogy's *World Of Assassination* cheekily winks. Even past its peak, Blizzard's MMORPG monster hit was still bringing in millions of players every month. Abrak remembers telling IO's engineers, who were understandably sceptical: "We need to build this game like an MMO."

While the series has never quite managed to sustain a true multiplayer component, there are more parallels than you might

expect. "At the end of the day, *Hitman* is a session-based game," Elverdam says. "You jump into this sandbox level and you're supposed to play it many, many times. So that's actually, in its architecture, much closer to a multiplayer game – where you jump into, like, a *Counter-Strike* match and play it over and over again – than a more linear, story-based game."

The approach was further shaped by decisions beyond IO's control. "Square Enix had released *Life Is Strange*, and that was episodic, so they asked if we could we apply some of that to a triple-A game," Abrak says. "It wasn't a creative or technical production vision – but it could work together [with the design], so we embraced it." Indeed, the episodic format proved a surprisingly good fit for what IO was trying to achieve, putting the spotlight on one location at a time.

Abrak, for his part, saw a business opportunity here: "The idea was, we could do a Trojan horse strategy, right?" The first episodes would be sold relatively cheap, but with all the production values you'd expect from a full-price game. "Would that be a good way of breaking the barrier of the niche and making a bigger [selling] game?" Not quite, as it turned out.

"Commercially, it was absolutely shite." Abrak puts this down to player suspicion regarding the episodic model, and whether IO could be trusted with the series after *Absolution*.

"I really hated hearing over and over again that IO had lost the ability to do a *Hitman* game after *Blood Money*," he says, the frustration still evident in his voice. Even as IO managed to build that trust again, especially after the arrival of Sapienza and the game's

first Elusive Target missions, many players opted to wait for the full release, and inevitable discount. "So our Trojan horse was burned down before it even got into the castle."

Nevertheless, the team were confident that they had succeeded in their aim of finally topping *Blood Money* – an assessment confirmed by the 100 Greatest Games Of **Edge's** Lifetime, where it sat as the series' sole representative at #57. "Making the right *Hitman*, a true *Hitman* game, was our redemption," Abrak says. "We believed that we'd made the best *Hitman* game, and we knew that this was just the start." He pauses. "Square Enix didn't think so."

Abrak stepped into the role of CEO in early 2017, after the departure of former studio head Hannes Seifert. "I didn't even have 90 days after taking over, and then I got the call from Matsuda-san: 'We have to divest IO.'" It was, to say the least, "a shock".

Today, Abrak accepts that the decision was totally "reasonable" from Square Enix's point of view. "They'd had some setbacks. *Deus Ex* and *Tomb Raider* and *Hitman* did not sell as they expected – and *Absolution* did not sell before ▶

"OUR TROJAN HORSE WAS BURNED DOWN BEFORE IT EVEN GOT INTO THE CASTLE"





1



2



3

CONTRACT LORE

When Elverdam joined *Hitman: Absolution* as gameplay director, "one of the first questions I asked was, 'Could we maybe do some multiplayer?'" Having hitmen working side by side was deemed impossible – but, while on holiday together, a group of designers had an idea, and started fiddling with a prototype for storing all the data from one player's session so they could send it to another. "That became Contracts mode," which has been a feature of *Hitman* games ever since. "Some of these outside-the-box ideas come from liberating yourself from the limitations of the day-to-day," Elverdam says IO started to experiment with occasional days when staff were encouraged to toy with personal projects, which is how *Absolution's* Sniper Challenge spin-off was born. This approach has now been enshrined in the studio's culture as 'IO Week', the third instance of which coincides with our visit.

- 1 The plan was never to make a *Hitman 2*, according to Abrak – it was a result of Sony's backend being unable to compute a change in publisher partway through a game.
- 2 *Hitman Absolution's* Sniper Challenge mode became a preorder bonus.
- 3+4 Chongqing, the megacity setting for *Hitman 3's* fourth mission.
- 5 Even in low lighting, Agent 47 is unmistakable



4



5



Hakan Abrak, CEO and co-owner



SIDE QUEST

Think of IOI Week as a distant relative of Double Fine's Amnesia Fortnite game jam – but everyone is free to pick their own project. We hear about a team repurposing donated hardware for charity and someone building a staircase for mocap purposes. This year, one of the writers has created a boardgame based on the lore of Project Fantasy, and is running daily sessions to experiment with ways the game's quests could develop. This is just one way these projects feed back into IO's games. Senior technical sound designer Gabriel Johannesson tells us about a project for which he supplied audio: "It was a part of Bond that had been cut, but then a group of people got together and did it for IOI Week, proved that we can do this. And now, I think, it's back in the game." Which goes some way to explaining what is, as Malmö studio manager Sandra Mondahl says, "a huge investment from the management side."



Christian Elverdam, CCO and co-owner

- 1 An experimental IOI week project in action.
- 2 Agent 47 behind glass.
- 3 The Bond movie prints we spot on the walls are all taken from the Daniel Craig era – at least in Malmö. Copenhagen's slightly older crowd seem to appreciate a bit of classic Connery too.
- 4 IOI Week ends with a presentation of everyone's projects, plus a party.
- 5 IO estimates it takes a year for a new office to get up and running smoothly.





that," he says. "You have millions of dollars' monthly burn running a studio like this. And obviously, looking at the books, IO had not made money for almost ten years in a row." That brutal maths set the tone for the discussions that were to follow, as Square Enix tried to find someone to take IO off its hands. "Some companies would offer \$1 to take over IO, because of the responsibilities and running costs and whatnot."

Other offers were just as unappealing: "Can IO be a fifth of the size and just do free-to-play with *Hitman*?" Abrak remembers responding that "if that's what Square Enix want, I will do everything I can to make the transition as smooth as I can – but I don't believe in this and I will not be part of it." Finding a deal that satisfied all three parties seemed impossible, but shutting down the studio would cost Square Enix dearly in redundancies. That bought IO a little time, as an idea started to form between Abrak and Elverdam: "What if we could get just enough runway for us to pave our own way? Could we forge our own destiny?"

They made Square Enix an offer: a management buyout of the company. "We couldn't pay anywhere near what, potentially, a big company could." Abrak hesitates, laughing. "Not the \$1 – *that* we could pay! But we paid more than that. We paid what we could, and we came up with a deal where they kept a minority part, kind of a lottery ticket for them, and we got everything that was registered by IO before 2009 [when Square Enix bought Eidos]. *Freedom Fighters* – and *Hitman*, which is the important one." It's one of those deals that has always seemed improbably in IO's favour, but it didn't instantly solve the studio's problems. "When we went independent, we had three months," Abrak says. "We would be bankrupt after three months."

IO needed to buy itself some time, in the most brutal way. Abrak gestures out beyond the glass wall of the conference room, to the office's central 'pixel stairs', designed by Elverdam himself, which double as a kind of mini auditorium for meetings. "I remember standing in a town hall just here, and having to let go of almost 50 per cent of the studio."

Bjarne Kristiansen was among those laid off that day. Unsurprisingly, his memory is clear: "An email went out calling an emergency meeting, which is never good news. And then the news broke on Kotaku, I think, an hour before the meeting – so word kind of spread through the studio." Gathered on those steps for the official announcement, they were told: "Go back to your seats. If you get an email, you're out. If you don't, you're in." How did it feel when he finally got the email? "For me, it was a little bit of déjà vu. Before IO, I worked for five years at a company called Press Play that was owned by Microsoft, and we got shut down. And then a year later, almost to the day, Squexit happened."

Abrak's next move was to call Carl Cavers and Paul Porter at Sumo Digital. "Because we had about 50 people from Sumo working on *Hitman 2*, and I couldn't pay them, obviously." He asked them to travel to Copenhagen to hear his proposal: "Your people are going to work for us for free, for a couple of years, until we finish *Hitman 2*. But if we release the game, the money you would get, you'll get a sizeable amount on top of that. It's a bet to take on us, on our ability to turn things around. So you will potentially lose all that effort, but if you make it, then you can get more back." It's difficult to imagine anyone taking that bet. "They said yes."

Meanwhile, IO returned to that Trojan horse idea, repackaging *Hitman*'s tutorial prologue into a free-to-play 'Starter Pack'. "We expected maybe half a million, a million people," Abrak says of that initiative. "We got more than four million – and a good percentage of those upgraded and bought the game. So all those things gave us another day to survive. Those three months turned into six months."

Around this time, Kristiansen joined the company again – "I think I was the only one that was rehired," he acknowledges – and found things much as they were before. "When Squexit happened, I was working on Miami."

In the intervening months, the reduced team had been busy with the Patient Zero expansion, which remixed four of *Hitman*'s levels into a new campaign. "So I was basically coming back to the last thing I touched, and nothing had changed.

And then we were just, like, back in production. It felt like I hadn't gone anywhere else. It was a little weird."

One thing *had* changed: "We were delivering *Hitman 2* on a fairly reduced budget, to put it mildly." IO was yet to sign a new publisher for the game, and had to find ways to save money while committing to its biggest maps yet. "Sometimes we'd need to talk about what is actually possible to do. Like, what can we pull off?" However, COO **Martin Buhl** points out, IO was building on a solid foundation. "For the second game, with a lot of the pipelines and processes, the craftsmanship had been refined. So it was a different process. It was simpler in some ways." Which is how *Hitman 2* was made for 60 per cent of the first game's cost, Abrak tells us.

That perhaps helped him turn down some of the more tempting deals being waved under his nose. "We had, at that time, some offers from companies that would come in and show us all these millions of dollars. But they would be handcuffs, pretty much. We'd be locked into some really heavy publishing deals." It eventually struck a "light distribution deal" with Warner Bros, expiring after three years, "so we could retain our independence long-term". ▶

"LOOKING AT THE BOOKS, IO HAD NOT MADE MONEY FOR ALMOST TEN YEARS"

BY JONATHAN HARRIS





When it came to the final game in the trilogy, IO took things further still, deciding to self-publish. “*Hitman 3* is the first game where we didn’t have to go, as all publishers want, ‘Could it be a little bit more mainstream?’” Elverdam says. “And I think you actually find an audience by doing the opposite. Other games, like FromSoftware’s, prove that if you stick to your guns, you can find an audience. It won’t be *Fortnite* – it never will be. But you can really resonate with the people who like what you’re doing.”

It was another gamble that paid off for IO. “*Hitman 3* was 33 per cent of the [already reduced] budget of *Hitman 2*, and done in just under two years,” Abrak says. “And it’s the one that scored the highest on Metacritic.” Kristiansen remembers sitting on those pixel stairs once again, this time for a happier occasion, watching *Hitman 3*’s review scores come in: “Hmm, pretty good!” The game outperformed its predecessors commercially, too, something that we variously hear attributed to the Trojan horse effect eventually paying off and the moment at which it released: mid-pandemic, at a time when most big releases had been delayed *and* people couldn’t travel, making a virtual trip to an Amalfi coastal town or Berlin nightclub all the more appealing. IO won’t be pinned down on numbers but, vitally, it didn’t need to give away any proportion of sales to an external publisher. No wonder, then, the studio is feeling confident about rolling the dice on that dream once more.

“There’ll be more chapters written in the *Hitman* story, that’s for sure,” Elverdam says. But

for now, 47 is preparing to put down his weapons for a little while. Support for *Hitman* has started “ramping down”, we’re told, and is now the smallest team in the company. “After the launch of *Hitman 2*, we decided the strategy is to not be a one-trick pony,” Buhl says – hence the two games IO now has cooking. The biggest production in the works, and the most advanced in terms of its schedule, is Project 007. It’s a natural fit for IO’s experiences and expertise, Abrak admits: “We’ve kind of been in training for the agent fantasy for 20-plus years.” Project Fantasy, meanwhile, described as an “online fantasy RPG”, is a very different pony indeed.

Exactly what “online” means there remains unconfirmed, but an IO job listing last year mentioned “emergent multiplayer” – something that would seem to fit with the single piece of art that’s been released so far, showing three adventurers setting out on an adventure together. We might note, too, that IO’s very first game – before it began work on *Hitman*, and long before any of its current staff were here – was set to be a fantasy MMORPG.

Whatever the case, the game’s online aspect definitely encompasses *Hitman*’s ‘living world’ approach. “The story of

[*World Of Assassination*] is a story of doing it in spite of – or at least having to reinvent – the franchise,” Elverdam says. “So one of the conversations we had is that it would be lovely to have a world that, from the get-go, was conceived to be a living universe.” Other than that, the game is being kept even more closely under wraps than 007. While we manage to catch the odd, brief glimpse of IO’s Bond in action on developers’ monitors, and pick out the occasional familiar name over the hubbub of the cafeteria, there are parts of the office we’re not permitted to see, where Project Fantasy is under construction.

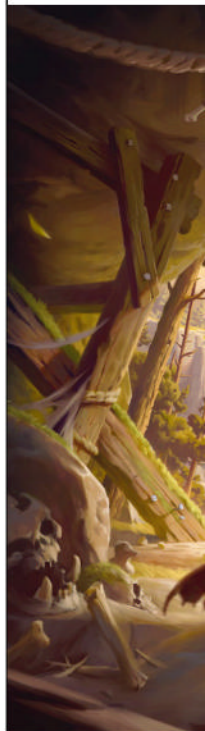
So what do we know about 007? Well, it’s no secret that IO is casting its own Bond and rewinding to the character’s youth to tell an origin story. The few other breadcrumbs we’re able to pick up during our time in the office suggest a tone closer to Daniel Craig than Roger Moore, and perhaps a more scripted experience than *Hitman*’s freeform jaunts. It’s been pitched as “the ultimate spycraft fantasy”, which suggests gadgets – and perhaps a step away from the murderous objectives of Agent 47.

This final point seems to be supported by the way IO convinced James Bond owner Eon Productions to hand it the licence. “Our impression was clearly that they were *not* looking for a game,” Abrak says. “And I think it’s fair to say that they might not have been super-happy with some of the later games.” Moving away from “action-oriented shooters”, in Elverdam’s words, seems to have been part of his pitch, presenting *Hitman* as a game in which violence is actually discouraged – with the exception of one or two very specific murders per level, of course. “That helped us convince the Eon Group that there’s a sophistication in how we treat the agent fantasy.”

There’s one final connection to *Hitman* we need to investigate. Given that Abrak and Elverdam’s big idea for *World Of Assassination* – and the thing that, ultimately, rescued the whole operation – was to deliver it gradually, over multiple years, do they have a similar vision for 007? “Yeah, absolutely,” Abrak says. “I mean, that’s the dream. That’s the ambition. And it’s also how we always talked about it.” IO isn’t interested in making a licensed game just “to score some money”, he says, adding that it’s turned down offers from “several other IP holders”. It all depends on how the first game performs, of course, but Elverdam is clear about his hopes. “I would love players to look back on multiple Bond games by IO and go, ‘Wow, that was quite a journey!’” Standing up from the conference table – its chibi Agent 47 still bearing marks of wear and tear that won’t quite rub off – it occurs to us it’s a sentiment that could just as easily apply to the first 25 years of IO Interactive as a whole. ■

“AFTER THE LAUNCH OF HITMAN 2, WE DECIDED THE STRATEGY IS TO NOT BE A ONE-TRICK PONY”

BY DAVID J. PHILLIPS





1+2 "The [original] vision was that it would be like an MMO," Abrak says of the *Hitman* trilogy. "They will all be one game." With this year's rebrand to *World Of Assassination*, IO has finally achieved that goal.

3 Bjarne Kristiansen on Project Fantasy: "[The engine is] very much a *Hitman* engine, built for that purpose, so it's cool to see what else it can do."

4 Kristiansen: "There's this big bank of suggestions for 'what would be a fun location?' Particularly for *Hitman 3*, we involved everybody in that process"



Martin Buhl, COO, IOI Copenhagen

MÖ MONEY

Today, as well as its native Copenhagen, IO Interactive has opened offices in Malmö, Barcelona, Istanbul and Brighton. But it's done cutting ribbons for now, Abrak tells us. "For the foreseeable future, I would be surprised if we open another studio." After all, IO has covered more or less the breadth of Europe. But it all began with a rather more timid step, just across the Öresund bridge – the same one that lent its name to Nordic noir series *The Bridge*. The two are so close that from the office's roof garden we can just about make out its neighbouring country in the distance. That's one reason for choosing Malmö, but, as studio manager Sandra Mondahl explains, "the games industry in Malmö is big." Malmö alone is home to Avalanche, Sharkmob and Ubisoft Massive. It's no surprise that everyone we meet while visiting the Swedish office joined either straight from The Game Assembly, the city's game-dev school, or from one of those neighbouring companies.

T H E
M A K I N G
O F . . .



H I - F I R U S H

From needle drops to shadow drops: the story behind Tango's surprising smash

By **CHRIS SCHILLING**

Format PC, Xbox Series
Developer Tango Gameworks
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Origin Japan
Release 2023

The rhythms of the triple-A videogame hype cycle are now so firmly established that anything that disrupts them is bound to stand out. But even if not for the remarkable nature of its arrival – revealed and launched at January 2023’s Xbox Developer Direct – *Hi-Fi Rush* would surely have made a splash. Here was a game that applied blockbuster production values to something other than photorealism; a character-action game that was also a rhythm-action game; and a Tango Gameworks release that seemed a world apart from the most famous works of its soon-to-be-former CEO, Shinji Mikami.

But then *Hi-Fi Rush* was born from a desire to do something different. Very different. **John Johanas** had graduated from designer on 2014’s *The Evil Within* to director on its sequel, having also helmed the first game’s two downloadable expansions. By the end of 2017, in other words, he’d just come off four horror projects in a row – and the prospect of another, in the form of the in-development *Ghostwire: Tokyo*, was not wildly appealing.

Fortunately, his mentor had already asked him for new ideas, and invited him to pitch them internally. “For a long time, I’d had this idea for a musical action game in my mind,” Johanas recalls. Mikami hadn’t specifically requested something outside the horror genre, but Johanas decided it was time for a change. He presented a pitch which, he notes, is remarkably close to the finished product: “A game where everything syncs to the music. It’s colourful, it’s funny, it’s over the top. And it’s just, like, a *fun* action game.” Johanas was not confident that his idea would be accepted. “The first thing I said was, ‘This is probably not going to make it past this table. But if I have one shot to do this, I’m gonna do it now’.”

Since it was so different to anything the studio had made before, there was a collective understanding that this would be a hard sell. What worked in Johanas’s favour was that he had a clear idea of how the game would play. But there was one lingering question: “Will this actually work?” And so Johanas and lead programmer Yuji Nakamura, with a little outside assistance from the studio’s sound and VFX teams, spent just under a year finding out. They built a prototype focused exclusively on



Remote working added visual complications. Sakai: “We had to make sure everyone’s monitors were properly aligned”

the combat mechanics, to prove out the concept of fighting in time to a soundtrack.

“It didn’t even have any graphics – it was all greyboxed,” Johanas remembers.

Graphics or no, it got positive feedback within Tango, and was duly passed on to

THE PROTOTYPE BEGAN CIRCULATING AT BETHESDA, LIKE A SECRET BEING PASSED ON BY WORD OF MOUTH

Bethesda in the hope that the publisher might be interested in pursuing the idea further. What happened next was unexpected: the prototype began circulating internally at Bethesda, like a secret being passed on via word of mouth. Since the text was in English and the prototype wasn’t labelled, no one at the publisher knew that Tango was behind it. Its distinctiveness was key, Johanas explains. “Probably the reason why we were able to make it was because people at Bethesda were excited about doing something new and different. And it was already fun, which was the big one.”

Johanas’s vision can be distilled into three words: “kinetic action comedy”. That, he says, was primarily inspired by the films of Edgar Wright: “They’re fast-paced, the conversations are very quick, and they feel fun, which is the most important thing.” A particular

inspiration was the scene in *Shaun Of The Dead* where the title character and his friends fight zombies in their local pub to the strains of Queen’s *Don’t Stop Me Now* – yet, as the game progressed, it drew comparisons to another of Wright’s films. “This was before *Baby Driver* came out, remember?” Johanas laughs, recalling how that film’s action set-pieces are cut to match the rhythm of its various needle drops. “Everyone was like, ‘Oh, you just watched *Baby Driver* and thought of this’.” He pulls a face. “But it was great, because it helped us sell the idea even better. Because if you can make a full movie like this...”

Of course, making a game in which the action syncs to the beat is very different from making a film that does likewise, with one extra chaotic element in the mix: the player. *Hi-Fi Rush*’s approach to the rhythmic part of the equation is more carrot than stick – you are rewarded for attacking, jumping and dodging to the beat rather than punished for whiffing your timing. That was partly informed by working with Nakamura, Johanas says: his programmer “didn’t know music”, and so his own suggestions, rooted in music theory, had to be adapted to make it work. Watching live concerts proved key, he recalls. “It’s like, what does anyone do when they see a band? If the band is clapping, everyone claps along. But more complex stuff, like triplets or dotted quarter notes [one and a half beats], that’s difficult.”

As for the music itself, audio director **Shuichi Kobori** explains via Johanas, pulling double duty as translator: “The initial pitch was that it would have a rock-type feel, so that’s where we went with the soundtrack. The direction [I was given] was not to go too electronic-sounding, and just pay tribute to this rock feel.” It was easier, he says, to emphasise that once the graphics came in.

In defining the look of the game, Johanas reaches for another three-word descriptor: “colourful, sharp and clean” (like “kinetic action comedy”, even the phrases used to pin down the game’s direction have a certain rhythm). He wanted a “nostalgic” look that nodded back to the PS2 and Dreamcast era – “just games that looked fun.” There was no one specific piece of art that inspired the game’s cartoonish visual design, art director **Keita Sakai** elaborates, ▶

THE MAKING OF...

again through Johanas: "It was like there was this general idea of making something that's visually unique and impressive, but also kind of nostalgic for that sort of era that we talked about." We don't need a translator to understand the words 'Jet Set Radio' as Sakai speaks, but as Johanas details his full response, that's just an example of "games that did a lot with less – that didn't use [detailed] texture work and looked sharp and clean and simple."

Johanas's pitch for the game's aesthetic was, to his mind, straightforward. "It should feel either like you asked a Japanese team to draw an American comic book or you asked an American team to draw a Japanese anime – something in between that's not quite either." He smiles. "It made sense to me." Was it, then, a conscious decision to reflect the makeup of the studio: an American director working with a Japanese team? "The only thing I specifically said was, 'Let's not just make it look like it's from Japan'. We didn't want people to look and be like, 'Oh, that's just another anime game'." Johanas knew the artists had nailed the brief when he saw people playing *Hi-Fi Rush*, he explains with a laugh: "People were reacting like, 'Japanese people made this game?'"

This stylised approach proved perfectly suited to the game's environment – because it's not only the player and action that are infused with music here. Every city has its own rhythm, as they say, and *Hi-Fi Rush*'s spaces feel like the ultimate manifestation of that idea, the whole place vibrating to the beat of Kobori's score. "We asked ourselves: 'How can we take this world that we designed and [make sure] it moves to the rhythm?'" Sakai explains.

The pace was set by the first area. "It's very mechanical – you've got these green pipes, and we played with the idea of this cartoonish distortion, like they're pulsing out," Sakai continues. "From then, we would look at every piece – the design was already exaggerated a bit, but then it was all about: how can we move it so it doesn't feel unnatural? That was partially why we had a lot of machinery, because there's a natural rhythm to it. Then we kind of spread that out to the other levels. And over time the team organically figured out: OK, *that* should move, and *that* should move."

Making everything move was one thing. Making it *seamless* – to allow gameplay to flow

Q&A

John Johanas

Director, *Hi-Fi Rush*



People tend to disapprove of QTEs, but *Hi-Fi Rush* integrates them well. How do you feel about using that kind of shortcut as a designer?

We never saw that as a shortcut. We said *Hi-Fi Rush* is an action game with rhythm game elements to it – and what are rhythm games, but QTEs? So we actually saw that as strange that people would say, 'Oh, there's so many QTEs in this game'. It's like: no, you're playing *on the rhythm*. Plus, they feel good when you nail them.

Tell us about Chai – how did you go about defining his personality?

It was a big push for me to have a protagonist in an action game that wasn't a super-cool, godlike hero character. Originally that was one of the biggest feedbacks I got – Mikami-san was like, 'Oh, he looks like a loser'. And I was like, 'He is a loser' [laughs]. You know, that's the point. But it let us put him in a lot of weird, goofy over-the-top situations that a regular hero wouldn't find themselves in.

Talking of Mikami, what was it like to work together? And what did you learn from him?

I went into the game industry not knowing anything. And he's been the only person who taught me the basics of doing it, the biggest of which is just, like, *being there* – like, being involved in the game development process. He didn't have an office, he was just on the floor with everyone. He was there designing the game with everyone, talking with everyone. And that's something that I still do – I don't want to be in an office, and you have to get permission to talk to me or something like that. Basically, everything I learned was from him.

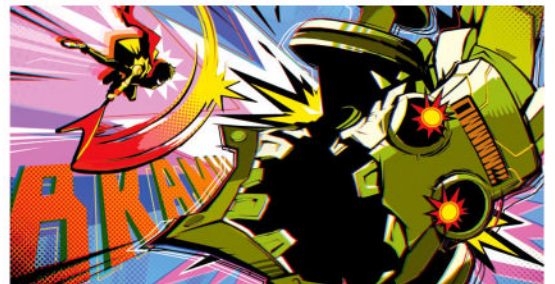
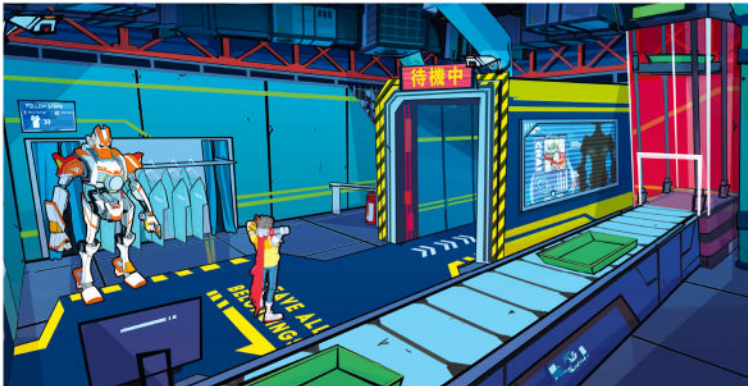
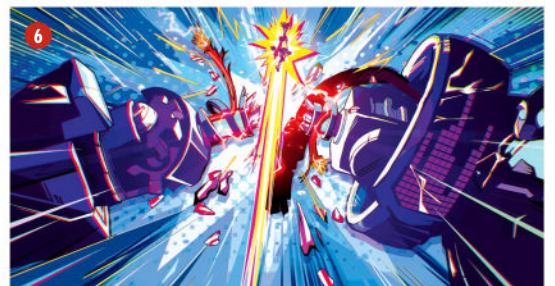
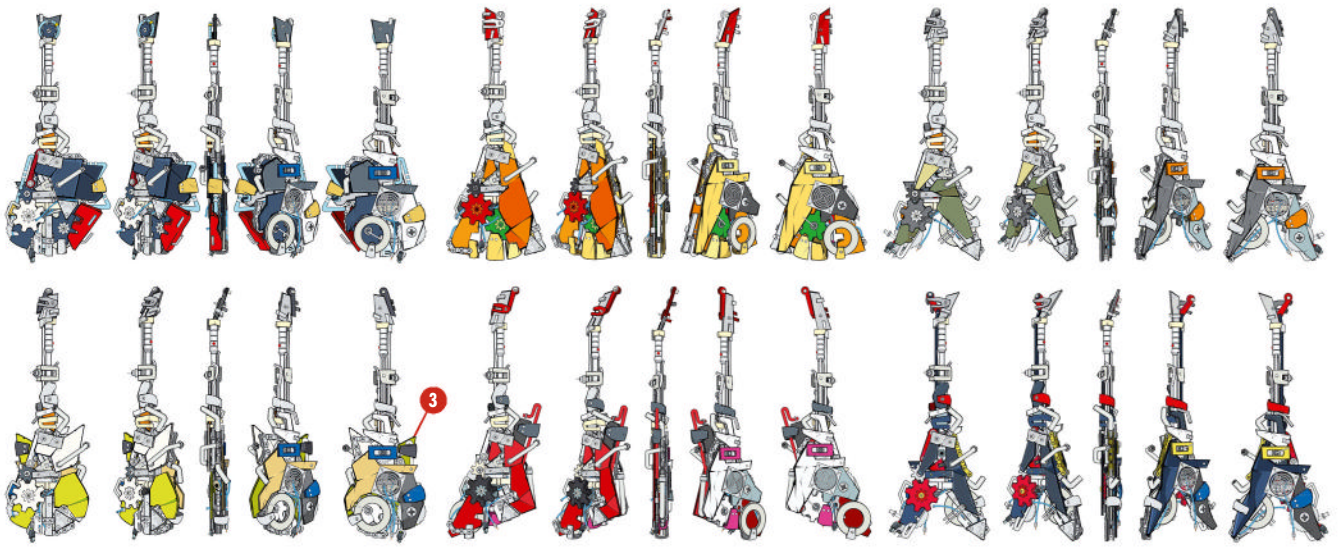
into cinematics and back again without delays or hitches – was quite another. From the start, Johanas was insistent on one thing: the music couldn't stop. Even as the game segues between platforming sections, climactic battles (which Johanas likens to "the chorus") and dialogue scenes, it could never break the rhythm – even skipping a cutscene requires waiting for the next measure, to ensure the game can seamlessly transition to the next scene. "The whole thing should feel just like a song," Johanas says. As you might imagine, all this presented a stiff challenge behind the scenes.

After a lengthy response from Kobori, Johanas begins his translation by saying, "The last ▶



- 1 Designs for marketing head Mimoso's robot assistants.
- 2 A pair of initial visual concepts from art director Keita Sakai.
- 3 Artist Kazuya Matsumura was behind these guitar designs.
- 4 Further concept art from Sakai, taken from early development.
- 5 *Hi-Fi Rush*'s first boss fight against QA-1MIL might be a relatively gentle one, but when it enters 'serious mode', you know you're in for a sterner test.
- 6 More Sakai concepts. "Every aspect needed to be uniquely designed as opposed to using existing resources," he says, describing it as "super gratifying but an incredible amount of work"





THE MAKING OF...

thing he said is, he wound up hating me by the end of it," to much laughter from his colleagues. "A good example of [avoiding cuts]," Kobori's more expansive explanation begins, "is if we're in a song with lyrics, we don't want to cut or jump forward while the lyrics are still playing." One example he gives is the way a boss's health bar is gated, depending on how much of the song remains. "So you can't forcefully make the song sound terrible. And in the same way, if we had some sort of stage gimmick and we needed to stretch it out depending on when the player activated it, we would theoretically have to make multiple routes or multiple animations that would take different lengths of times, that would always sync up depending on when the player performed an action." Johanas gives us a look as if to say, 'No wonder they hated me'. "It was a huge amount of time and effort for no one to notice what we did, basically."

If at times *Hi-Fi Rush* works its musical magic by avoiding drawing attention to itself, though, the opposite is true of its show-stopping needle drops. Boss battles and other major set-pieces are soundtracked by the likes of Nine Inch Nails, The Joy Formidable and, perhaps most memorably of all, The Prodigy's *Invaders Must Die*. "We liked the idea that there'd be these climactic moments in the game – just like in a movie, when sometimes a song kicks in and you're like, 'Oh, yeah, that feels awesome'," Johanas says. Licensing brought its own share of headaches, he adds, though all of the songs in the game were on his longlist, and in most cases Tango was able to secure his first choice.

Once the soundtrack was firmed up, though, designing sequences to match demanded almost the exact opposite approach to the rest of the game. "For unlicensed tracks, the idea was that you're the lead player in a song – like, you're playing the lead guitar part. So there's this background track almost, and you're adding that layer on top," Johanas says. But with a licenced track, it was essentially about paying tribute to the original. "We had everyone listen to the song [and then ask], 'Visuals-wise, what do you think matches with it? If it's a boss fight, say, can you use that riff as the enemy's attack?' So we reverse-engineered [the design] from the song. It was two completely different ways of making it."

Talking of completely different ways of doing things brings us back to that release strategy,

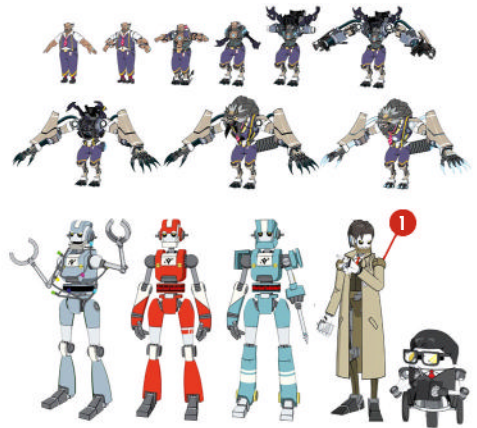
which was by no means as spontaneous as the launch itself. "We were always consciously thinking about the messaging," Johanas says. "We didn't want people to be upset that it wasn't an *Evil Within* game." Internally there was concern, too, that because Tango hadn't made a game like it before, the reaction might be negative. A decision was made to tease it at E3 2020. But when that event was cancelled, the can was kicked farther down the road. Likewise when Microsoft purchased Bethesda. "We were looking at times to announce it so we wouldn't get overshadowed by something. We wanted to hype it but not get people *too* excited, or give *too* much of a chance to jump on it. And then that period just got shorter and shorter."

When the Developer Direct came around, the idea of a shadow drop was mooted – an almost unheard-of suggestion for a game that had been in development for five years. "We were freaking out," Johanas admits. "Is this gonna work?' You know – what if something happens that day? But I think it went as well as anyone could imagine."

In hindsight, however, does he wonder how the game might have been received without the surprise release? "I mean, I was glad that people were enjoying it, you know? But it makes you think, could it have been different if we announced it earlier? I guess we'll never know."

The surprises weren't over for Tango, either, with Mikami announcing his departure from the studio he had founded 13 years prior. Johanas speaks warmly about his mentor (see Q&A) even as he acknowledges that *Hi-Fi Rush* was his attempt to both pay tribute to Mikami and step out of his shadow somewhat. "Making this game was sort of my way of saying, 'OK, this is my spin on things that you've taught me. It's not a copy of what you were doing'. It's like, I want to take the things I've seen you do, what we've talked about, and I want to say, 'Well, here's how I would do it'. So it's different, but I like to think that there's some sort of that DNA – the learnings of the past being passed down."

If you can detect traces of the master's fingerprints in *Hi-Fi Rush*, then, they're faint ones. Certainly, we say to Johanas, it feels very much its own thing: his name might appear in the credits, but it's demonstrably not A Shinji Mikami Game. "Which is weird," he says with a smile, "because you go online and see reviews, and it's like: 'Shinji Mikami does it again!'" ■



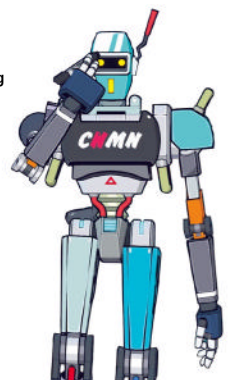
1 If Vandelay Technologies' HR investigator looks familiar, that's because he's styled after *The Evil Within* lead Sebastian Castellanos.

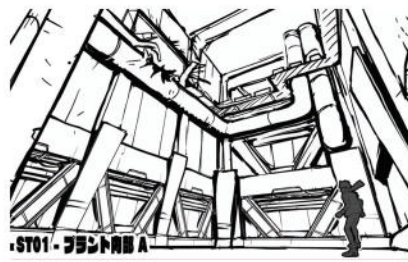
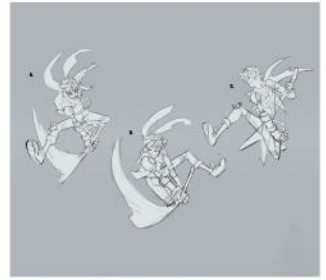
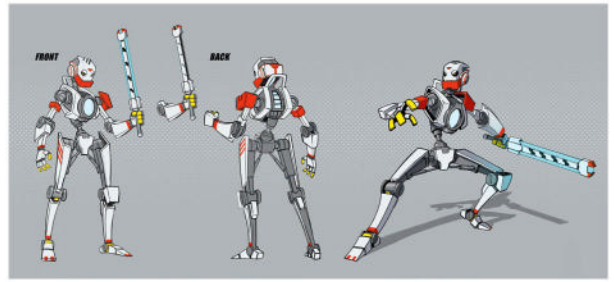
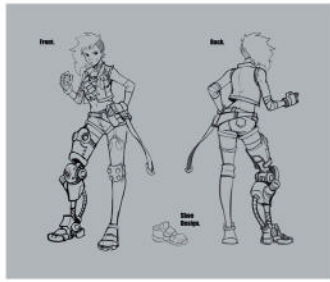
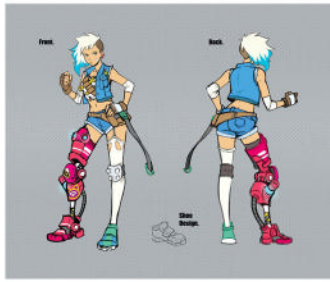
2 A rough sketch by Sakai, outlining the construction of Chai's hideout.

3 Sketches for Chai's facial expressions. Johanas: "He's a wannabe rock star, which is like every kid's dream growing up, and usually they abandon it. But he's 25 and still hanging onto it. People are like, '25 years old – what an idiot', but if you look at yourself when you were that age, you were probably still secretly hoping. And a lot of people accepted that – they're like, 'Oh, that guy's like me', you know?"

4 Character and enemy designs.

5 An early concept from Tango Gameworks' production department







STUDIO PROFILE

DECONSTRUCTTEAM

Jams, overdrafts and finding a voice: how a difficult decade turned into magic

BY RACHEL WATTS



deconstructeam

Founded 2012

Employees 3

Staff Jordi de Paco (game design, writer), Marina González (lead artist), Paula Ruiz (music composer and sound effects)

URL deconstructeam.com

Selected softography *Gods Will Be Watching*, *The Red Strings Club*, *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood*

Current projects TBA

Finding your community is vital for any developer, large or small. And for beginners, that process often begins with seeking out likeminded collaborators – something that, for Deconstructeam, began in the game dev section of an online forum back in 2012. It was a branch of the website that game designer and writer **Jordi de Paco** started himself, where a handful of Spanish indie developers discovered a shared interest in creating avant-garde games. “It was a gathering of friends and artists,” says Deconstructeam artist **Marina González**. “We were experimenting and trying this new thing that none of us knew how to do.”

At the time, the Spanish indie scene was booming, thanks to Indie Game: The Movie, with its story of small developers making it big. “Lots of people quit their jobs or studies and started making games,” De Paco says, adding that this wave of enthusiasm soon came crashing down. “We were one of the few who survived that, uh, madness.” This was in part thanks to the team’s willingness to start small. “We knew it was going to take us two or three years to get to the level to be able to make commercial releases,” De Paco says, “so we kept it humble. Just making small browser games, entering game jams – it was always small things, never trying to do a big project.”

Yet it was a game jam that led to Deconstructeam’s first commercial opportunity. The team – at the time composed of González, De Paco, composer **Paula Ruiz** and some friends – began participating in Ludum Dare events, starting with the appropriately titled ‘Deconstructorium’ in April 2012. A year later, they enjoyed their first major success in the competition with *Gods Will Be Watching*. The game came second, behind an early game from Mark Foster and David Fenn (the pair who would go on to make *Death’s Door*), and went viral online. That got the attention of (now longtime collaborator) Devolver Digital, which agreed to help fund a full commercial release, expanding the original game-jam prototype into a gritty point-and-click thriller.

“At the time, we were so small that we only wanted money to buy our own computers,” De Paco says. “We would often run into the problem of, ‘Today I cannot work because my father is using the laptop for his job’.” Ruiz remembers spending her last €40 to travel to meet the rest of the team in person: “‘All right, I’m gonna spend all of my money just so I can earn something’.” With the added support of a successful Indiegogo campaign, the team released a full version of



FROM LEFT Lead artist **Marina González**, game designer and writer **Jordi de Paco**, and composer **Paula ‘Fingerspit’ Ruiz**

Gods Will Be Watching in mid-2014 – but this wasn’t the end of their financial woes. “We finished the project with negative numbers in our bank accounts,” De Paco remembers. “We had a spreadsheet in which we were adding, like, ‘Pasta: €1, Coffee: €2’ – always watching the numbers. We released the game with minus €14 in the bank account.”

Gods Will Be Watching was released to a mixed reception, to put it mildly. It sold well but wasn’t received well by critics (**Edge** included) and accumulated an ‘Overwhelmingly negative’ review

“WE’RE NEVER GOING TO GROW BECAUSE I LOVE MAKING GAMES AND DON’T WANT TO PAY PEOPLE TO MAKE THEM FOR ME”

rating on Steam. “People were playing – we could see the numbers,” González says. “It was just that the game wasn’t what they expected.” De Paco elaborates: “It was called the *Dark Souls* of point-and-click games.” It wasn’t necessarily a compliment, referring to the game’s punishing difficulty, which many found frustrating. “Marina and I left our home at 2am and started walking through the city under the lamplights and just feeling like we were lost. It was devastating.”

The game did find an audience, however, among people who connected to its themes of personal sacrifice versus moral justice – something the team held onto during the difficult times. And so, after delivering on their Indiegogo campaign promise of releasing DLC, in 2015 Deconstructeam decided to expand. “We invested in an office, hired a bigger team, and became more ambitious to make more money,” De Paco says. “Because that’s the rule of how capitalism works, and how companies work.”

With this growth, however, came fresh problems. During a stint collaborating with

publisher 11 Bit Studios, the team began work on a commercial version of one of their game-jam entries, *Atticus VII*. Midway through 2016, however, the project was “not in a good place”. After running out of money, the team broke ties with 11 Bit, closed the office, and decided to shrink to three: González, De Paco and Ruiz.

During that “black period”, the team never stopped participating in game jams. “We were consistently getting gold medals and other rewards in Ludum. For music, worldbuilding and game narrative, we were consistently getting to the top,” De Paco says. “After *Gods Will Be Watching* and *Atticus VII*, we decided we’re never going to grow because I love making games and I don’t want to pay people to make them for me. I want

to make them myself. So we’re going to stay the three of us and enjoy making games, and that’s it.”

Despite this heartfelt philosophy, by the beginning of 2017 reality had bitten: the team were once again out of money, and if they continued only to release free games, they’d have to close for good. In a last-ditch attempt to save the studio, they decided to approach their contact at Devolver Digital, Andrew Parson, to pitch an idea that incorporated some of their more popular game-jam entries. “We knew the games had potential,” González says. “They resonated with people.” De Paco recalls the discussion with Parson: “‘It’s a game that combines bartending, pottery, and impersonating people on the phone’.” And he said: ‘Sold. How much do you want?’”

Less than a year later – a short turnaround necessitated by financial desperation – *The Red Strings Club* was released. It incorporated the consciousness-crafting pottery game *Zen And The Art Of Transhumanism* and the corporate-espionage phone conversations of

STUDIO PROFILE



Counting game-jam entries, commercial releases, browser games and collaborative projects, Deconstructeam has created and released a total of 38 games over the course of a decade, with *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* being the studio's biggest and most ambitious to date

Supercontinent Ltd into a scrappy cyberpunk story about conspiracy, morality and transhumanism. The final flourish was a psychological cocktail-making minigame in which the player character manipulates a patron's emotions with drinks.

The game was much more warmly received than the studio's debut and, while it didn't initially sell very well, *The Red Strings Club* has consistently made money, selling month after month even five years on. More importantly, its themes left a mark on the personal philosophies of its makers. "It made us more open about diversity, other people, and empathy," De Paco says. "It wasn't the plan originally, because it was a project born from emergency, but doing it transformed us."

While waiting to alight on their next project, the team returned to the game-jam scene. *Eternal Home Floristry*, in which a hitman works at a flower shop while his injuries heal, was made for Ludum Dare 43, whose theme was 'Sacrifices must be made'. *11:45: A Vivid Life*, the story of a girl who learns that her skeleton isn't actually hers, began life as an entry for 2018's A Game By Its Cover jam, but development spilled beyond its bounds. *Interview With The Whisperer* experimented with chatbot technology, casting you as a journalist interviewing a man who claims to have built a radio that allows him to speak to god.

"I think it's my favourite year of all of the team's history," De Paco says. "We were in the zone, especially because removing the pressure of having to deliver something commercially viable allowed us to just play and enjoy what we did. We've always had the philosophy that since we cannot compete with bigger studios in the matter of quality and technical prowess, we need to innovate."

By the end of this "golden year", work on the team's next commercial release had begun. *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* was originally pitched as a mobile game about witches brewing tea, but

after being rejected by their intended publisher, it was rescued by an old friend – Devolver, which, along with Deconstructeam, decided to make the game much larger. It morphed into a PC and console title starring Fortuna, an exiled witch who uses a tarot deck to regain her freedom and shape the destiny of the community that cast her out.

It wasn't just the game that changed. Its makers underwent a personal shift themselves, as De Paco, González and Ruiz were now in a romantic relationship. "It changed our art forever. By the end of *The Red Strings Club*, we were in love and it stayed like that," De Paco says. "*The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* is the product of love.

"SINCE WE CANNOT COMPETE WITH BIG STUDIOS IN THE MATTER OF TECHNICAL PROWESS, WE NEED TO INNOVATE"

We have a deeper connection than ever and it allows us to get to this point of craft."

Given that development coincided with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the team faced a familiar problem, as the lines between work and home dissolved. "I started thinking, 'I don't know if we are going to finish this'," Marina says. "Because, for me, it seemed impossible to work on something so emotionally heavy." It was Deconstructeam's most ambitious release to date, and with themes of trauma woven into it so intricately, continuing to work was causing the team emotional stress. "I was afraid of being broken again," De Paco says.

Once more, Deconstructeam's game-jam work saved it. To keep the studio afloat, the team released *Essays On Empathy* in 2021, a curated collection of their jam entries. Work on *The*

Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood was still ongoing, and the team slowly found their footing again – and were rewarded with an "unreal" reception to the game upon its release this year, from both critics and players. The team are still processing the overwhelmingly positive response. "It's been such a hard development, like, mentally and emotionally," González says. "I have to survive that trauma, to survive in a mental way, and to release myself from all those things and enjoy it."

Looking back over the years, how do the trio reckon they've changed? "With *The Red Strings Club*, I feel like we were in like our queer teenage years," Ruiz says. "We've worked through that angst of hating everyone, and feeling

like everyone doesn't understand us, and you feel super-lonely about it. But I feel like in *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* you can really tell that we are more at peace and more comfortable. We know we have a community of people who get us."

And with that community behind them, the team are looking to the future. They've found a new collaborator in fellow Spanish indie studio Selkie Harbour. The plan is to recover and heal, after a challenging few years – while this collaboration means that the three can rediscover some of the spirit of those early days, recultivated on forums and in game jams. They're experimenting with 3D for the first time, making prototypes for games about figure skating and driving a garbage truck. "It's been fun because we are not good at it," De Paco says. "We are, like, finding our voice again... and I'm enjoying being clumsy again." ■



- 1 *Behind Every Great One* follows the daily life of an unhappy housewife.
- 2 The majority of *The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* takes place in protagonist Fortuna's homely prison.
- 3 *The Red Strings Club* fuses contrasting themes, including a bit of mixology.
- 4 *Gods Will Be Watching* won second place at Ludum Dare 26 in 2013



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING/ NEAR MISSES

Storyteller PC

Offering effusive praise for Daniel Benmergui's puzzler in E384's Trigger Happy column, Steven Poole reminded us of the important truth that the devil is all in the detail. Well, now he's in the game, too, mischievously interfering with existing tales to provide a generous helping of bonus objectives. After such a long gestation, we found Benmergui's opus a little on the slender side; an update coinciding with its release on other platforms resets our completion percentage to around half of its former total, inviting us to fulfil variants on previously completed levels and complete brand-new ones besides. With a stamp collection incentivising further creative storytelling, it's now arguably the game it should have been on its initial release. In 'Friedrich Takes Revenge', meanwhile, it delivers perhaps 2023's finest videogame punchline.

Resident Evil 4 PS5

The *Separate Ways* expansion was, lest we forget, a freebie back in 2005, an add-on designed to make the PS2 version more appealing months after its GameCube launch. At roughly six hours long, you'd be hard pushed to say this updated version represents poor value, not least since Capcom has taken the opportunity to reinstate some set-pieces conspicuously absent from the main campaign. At least, that's the idea. In reality, it highlights a slightly uncomfortable truth: despite the efforts of Lily Gao, Ada Wong works better as a supporting character, mopping up after Leon's failures, than a protagonist. Shoehorned in, the returning elements feel like clumsy pandering; the rudimentary 'stealth' merely amounts to enemies inexplicably having their backs turned.

Neurocracy 2.049 PC

There are multiple casualties during the production of every issue of *Edge*, most notably the games we set out to include but run out of time, space or both. This ARG-adjacent game (its ten-part live campaign is now over, but it lives on as a kind of interactive epistolary novel) is one we'd like to revisit should the opportunity arise for an end-of-year catchup. Taking place within a futuristic Wikipedia, it asks you to investigate the murder of an obscenely wealthy tech magnate, with clues extending through to page edits.

A separate app allows you to assemble your own evidence board as you descend down this fearsomely complex rabbit hole, your mind racing with theories.



Explore the iPad edition of *Edge* for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

- 98 Super Mario Bros Wonder**
Switch
- 102 Lords Of The Fallen**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 106 Marvel's Spider-Man 2**
PS5
- 108 Assassin's Creed: Mirage**
PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 110 Forza Motorsport**
PC, Xbox Series
- 112 Counter-Strike 2**
PC
- 114 Saltsea Chronicles**
PC, PS5, Switch
- 116 Jusant**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 118 The Lamplighters League**
PC, Xbox Series
- 119 El Paso, Elsewhere**
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 120 World Of Horror**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch
- 121 The Fabulous Fear Machine**
PC
- 122 Subpar Pool**
Android, iOS, PC, Switch
- 123 Hellboy: Web Of Wyrld**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

Journey planner

When developers start crafting a game world, one of their earliest considerations is how players will navigate it. This month's Play selection features all manner of different traversal mechanics. In *The Fabulous Fear Machine* your choices determine the spread of paranoia and terror, represented by a purple inkblot that metastasizes outward. And if *Strange Scaffold's El Paso, Elsewhere* is effectively a one-way descent into hell, you'll spend a good deal of that trip diving backwards in slow motion. The elevator might be more efficient, but it's not nearly as stylish.

Serendipitously, our review code for *Jusant* arrives after we've spent 20 hours with *Assassin's Creed: Mirage*, juxtaposing two distinct approaches to a familiar game activity: climbing. In Ubisoft Bordeaux's game, reaching a Baghdad rooftop is in some ways even more straightforward than moving through its crowded streets: as you nudge the analogue stick upwards, would-be assassin Basim Ibn Ishaq follows your directions with little effort, performance-captured animations communicating his preternatural agility. Don't Nod's unnamed protagonist is a similarly seasoned clamberer, but their ascent requires more effort on the player's part, involving triggers, buttons and sticks in combination if they're to reach their ultimate destination. But then in *Mirage*, traversal is a simple means to a more complex end; in *Jusant*, the climb is the end.

The creators behind the two biggest games of the bunch are clearly already happy with the way their returning heroes get about, but have seized the opportunity to expand their movesets. Peter Parker and Miles Morales now come with a wingsuit that allows them to stay above New York's streets for even longer than before, while the videogame icon who pioneered running and jumping isn't yet too old for a few new tricks. Mario with a grappling hook? We wonder how he'd get on climbing *Jusant's* mountain.



Super Mario Bros Wonder

Wait a minute. Mario's an elephant? This might not be the plumber's most startling metamorphosis to date – the one to which we similarly referred at the start of E312's *Super Mario Odyssey* review would lay strong claim to that title – but the first power-up on the opening level of his new game indicates a readiness to play fast and loose with series convention. Even before we've had our first interactive encounter with the magical bloom referred to in the title, it's clear we're in new territory, and we're not just talking about the change of kingdom (from Mushroom to Flower). For starters, Peach hasn't been kidnapped; she's here alongside Mario, Luigi, Daisy, two Toads, a gaggle of Yoshi, and the enigmatic Nabbit in the playable cast. Bowser's Castle is no longer a level but a plot summary. As we swat Goombas aside with our trunk, we can't help but admire the chutzpah: in handing us such power so early, Nintendo must be confident it has more exciting developments in store. And goodness, does it ever.

Forgive that indulgent callback – it is, in fairness, in keeping with the spirit of decadence that pervades *Super Mario Bros Wonder*. You can surely understand our surprise, since we're not accustomed to this from Mario's recent 2D outings. His adventures in three dimensions have been defined by their invention, generous with new ideas, seldom explored to their fullest extent before being cast aside in favour of the next novelty. By contrast, since 2006's *New Super Mario Bros*, his side-scrollers have been characterised by their conservatism, as if the loss of the Z axis has left Nintendo's mascot feeling constrained. No more: it feels as if director Shiro Mouri (an experienced programmer finally getting to properly flex his creative muscles) and team have smuggled in the transformative spirit of *Super Mario Odyssey*, sprinkling it liberally across these bountiful worlds.

Even setting aside the Wonder Flowers which, when collected, have profound effects on your environments, opponents and yourself, there are surprises in abundance. At times you might think *Super Mario Bros Mischief* would have been a more accurate title, such is the impish glee with which it challenges Mario staples. When, in the time-honoured fashion, we kick a Koopa shell at a new enemy, we're shocked (and thrilled) to see it booted back with similar force. When we descend into a pipe, we smile as the camera doesn't cut away but stays where it is, as we see Mario – now barely a speck in handheld mode – emerge from another in the background. Then, as we bump into another pipe we're taken aback as it moves sideways; more so as we continue to shunt it along and find ourselves in a contest with another new enemy, straining to push it in the opposite direction.

If plenty of old favourites are present, these newcomers are frequently inspired, with several riffing delightfully on existing foes: a Piranha Plant variant springs out of its pipe and waddles toward you, while the Flower Kingdom's

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release Out now

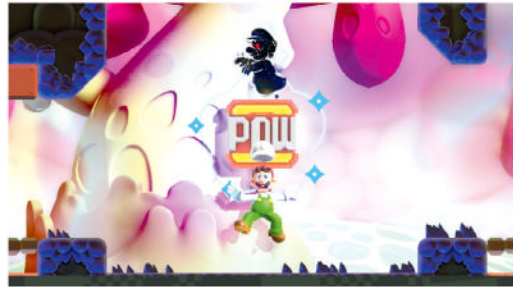
It's clear we're in new territory, and we're not just talking about the change of kingdom

Koopa Troopas have learned how to rollerskate. Klonks, a new member of the Thwomp and Whomp family, can slide laterally before trying to crush Mario, and some are found on the floor rather than the ceiling. Blewbirds shoot out slow-retracting poles that can be clambered up or used as platforms. Bloomps are piscine fliers that deflate like balloons when bounced upon. The charging Bulrushes are effectively tracksuited triceratops. The aptly named MawMaws open their gaping mouths to alarming heights as they slide toward you. Chunks of sentient corn pop when they come into contact with hot rocks. If these often seem more characterful than the old guard, even the returnees highlight the game's more expressive animation: there's something particularly cruel about disturbing a Goomba's nap by sending it flying with Elephant Mario's trunk. As for the Skeddaddlers, you'll forgive their habit of spitting seeds at you when you see their expression of terror as you approach and they sprint away, looking over their shoulder in fear, pupils anxiously tracing the arc of your leap as you give chase.

That hint of cruelty – elastic tendrils and bandaged mummies swung from and unravelled in Mario's gloved hands – is emblematic of a game that slaughters sacred cows left, right and centre. We've grown accustomed to Mario weather being either gloriously clear or ominously dark, yet the goal pole on one level has a flag fluttering beneath Manchester-grey clouds and light drizzle. Two other power-ups feel faintly iconoclastic: a drill allows you to tunnel *beneath* stages – or bypass threats from above if you can reach the ceiling – while bubbles let you reach coins and enemies through walls. (Spare a thought for Billy Basso, whose forthcoming *Animal Well* is no longer the only platformer we've played lately to use liquid spheres as temporary platforms.) Though Nintendo would surely deny it, during one early set-piece we feel as if we're playing through an homage to Playdead's *Limbo*.

Either way, it's clear Nintendo has been looking beyond its own bubble. Heck, *Wonder's* badge mechanic, which gives you the opportunity to select from a range of purchased or unlocked perks before entering a stage, makes this the first *Mario* game with *loadouts*. You can start over after dying with an auto-use super mushroom to ensure your first pickup doesn't just make you bigger, attract coins from afar or gain more from defeating enemies, to further incentivise a disregard for minion life. Others have more pronounced effects: a wall-climb jump effectively lets you mantle up the edge of a platform, but you might prefer the crouch high-jump that gives you more air when you bend your legs before taking off, or the parachute hat that lets you glide over longer gaps. A dolphin kick helps you speed you through underwater courses. And if you've wondered what a *Mario* game might feel like with a grappling hook, now's your chance to find out. Bespoke badge challenges invite you to





ABOVE Cosmic Clones make a cameo, though they seem to give you more of a head start here. Our character choice is instructive: the playable cast's newfound expressiveness seems to take cues from *Luigi's Mansion*



TOP Warp pipes inching along like worms might seem the most striking element here, but check out that palette. There are colour combinations here we'd never have expected from a Mario game. The skies in particular are glorious.

MAIN Super Mario Bros: The Musical, anyone? After *Wonder*, it doesn't seem such a bad idea: this is a game with a song in its heart and music in its very bones.

RIGHT In all honesty, we don't find those talking flowers as irritating as we feared we might. After *Spider-Man 2*, though, almost any game would seem less garrulous





master these, with expert stages for the variants that have a more pronounced effect on movement. One that sees you bounce with every step brings back memories of *Mario Galaxy*'s spring power-up, while another takes the notion of coyote time to invigorating extremes.

Which brings us to the Wonder Flowers. These seldom lie in the open, but can usually be discovered without too much trouble, a glow telling you they're contained within a piece of level furniture or released by a defeated opponent – though the best tend to require extra effort to unearth. After a psychedelic transition that suggests Mario has finally moved onto a more hallucinogenic brand of mushroom, something (or things; it's rarely singular) will have significantly changed. Gravity, perspective, the size and/or form of yourself or your enemies: just about everything is fair game. Since that element of surprise is so crucial, we shan't give away too many: suffice it to say that in one stage you might suddenly find yourself in freefall; in another you'll use swimming controls to flail through a thunderstorm; in a third, the background becomes the floor. You'll use one adversary's imitative ability to remove obstacles in your path before morphing into one of them yourself. And who knew Piranha Plants could sing? When you spy the Wonder Seed that brings everything back to relative normality, you'll grab it with no small reluctance.

There are moments of delight in the way it forces you to adapting to a fresh challenge, though in some cases these changes make things much easier, offering a useful injection of pace or throwing a preposterous number of invincibility power-ups at you. In places, it feels positively *unruly*, though such strangeness in a 2D *Mario* game is not entirely unprecedented. Think of *Super Mario Maker*'s Weird Mushroom that turns Mario skinny (and



DEATH STANDEE

One of the more minor acts of developer vandalism: the face buttons do four very different things, rather than two simply providing alternative options for jump and dash. These feed into the game's multiplayer component – the Y button gives you access to emotes, while holding X button while crouched lets you place a wooden standee, from a broad selection available from the Flower Kingdom's various vendors. Greyed out on approach, once touched these can revive ghost players who've perished during multiplayer games, while offering power-ups to those who pass by them while still corporeal. Happily, online mode is optional: such accoutrements add extra visual noise to what is already an unusually busy *Mario* game, particularly if you're playing with four. Removing player collision means you're not constantly bumping into one another, at least.

Missile Megs outpace Bullet Bills, emblematic of an overall speed increase. With boost strips and sections that transform you into a ball, hurtling down slopes and up ramps, it manages to feel like the best 2D *Sonic* in years, too

that connection is made explicit on more than one occasion here) and you can't help but detect a similar bug-becomes-feature energy. Not since the SNES era has a 2D *Mario* felt quite so *irrepressible*. Though there are trade-offs, with courses tending towards the short side and the difficulty verging on easy, these feel like a price worth paying for the sheer exuberance on show. Besides, it's not as if it's entirely without challenge: after the credits roll, you'll discover why Flower Kingdom vendors are offering 99 1Up mushrooms for such a bargain price. And the tests that lie beyond are not just tests of skill but curiosity, with plenty of secrets to tease out – and not just within levels. The overworld map, the best since *Super Mario World*'s, contains plenty of hidden elements, some revealed by locating bonus exits within courses.

Since the turn of the century, the 2D *Mario* games have struggled to live up to their billing, that 'New' indicating a fresh coat of paint but suggesting a level of novelty that turned out to be absent. You cannot say the same thing here. Purists may denounce its gimmickry, and at times you can't get away from the idea that these surprises are pulling double duty, dazzling you to distract from the brevity and simplicity of some stages. But for long periods the game feels transformative in the best way, and in the moment it's frequently sensational, doing more than enough to earn both the prefix it's lost and the suffix it's gained. By the time you reach a climactic encounter that puts on a show in every sense, you'll realise why Mario's pachyderm persona is such a fitting introduction: this is the most unforgettable side-scroller Nintendo has put out in three decades.

Post Script

Is it time Nintendo left the Mushroom Kingdom behind forever?

To anyone who's been playing *Mario* games for a long time, *Wonder*'s cheerfully subversive spirit might not come as too great a shock. Certainly, it is far from the first Nintendo game to take a sideways look at the conventions of the series. The *Mario & Luigi* and *Paper Mario* RPGs, for instance, have regularly poked fun at the plumber's platforming adventures, offering irreverent commentary on ideas that might make sense within the games themselves but have little truck with real-world logic. Yet they do so from a position of relative safety: as spin-offs, they're not bound to the same kind of restrictions we associate with mainline entries, and are thus free to take as many liberties as they like. In other words, they're not *proper Mario* games, and as such, all bets are off.

Then again, we only need to look back a little more to discover a *Mario* platformer that achieved similar results, albeit via different methods. The rebellious, verging on mutinous, nature of 1989's *Super Mario Land* can be largely attributed to its stewardship: taking charge of Nintendo's mascot for the first time, the veteran R&D1 team conceived a villain in Wario who was the anti-Mario, as a way to reflect their feelings towards a character who wasn't one of their own. True, its distinguishing features were in part determined by the limitations of the technology of the day. Even so, its world and enemies are practically unrecognisable from what we expect from a *Mario* game; likewise its soundtrack, Hip Tanaka's themes entirely distinct from the work of Koji Kondo.

With that in mind, it's hard not to wonder what might have motivated the key figures behind *Wonder* to similarly indulge in such creative iconoclasm. Shiro Mouri has served his time at Nintendo: since 1998's *F-Zero X* he's largely been involved in programming *Mario* and *Zelda* games. Mouri's last project at the helm was *New Super Mario Bros U Deluxe*, an enhanced port of the Wii U game and its Luigi-starring spin-off, hardly the most creatively fulfilling of directorial debuts. Producer Takashi Tezuka surely needs no introduction; perhaps, after close to 40 years of *Mario* — and with former development partner Shigeru Miyamoto occupied with expanding the *Mario* brand into theme parks and films — he's all the more prepared to cast out the old and bring in the new.

Regardless of who's chiefly responsible — and, in all likelihood, it's a collective effort — there's something telling about *Wonder*'s desire to *properly* escape the Mushroom Kingdom. It's not simply that the environmental features and inhabitants shared by these two principalities are so often twisted in some way or other, but that the range of new elements and enemies is

so vast. We struggle to think of a recent *Mario* game where quite so much feels quite so new. It makes for a refreshing change, both of scenery and of approach to design. For all their undoubted qualities, the *New Super Mario Bros* games felt staid, as if hemmed in by the need to conform to the unspoken rules of their setting.

True, the Mushroom Kingdom's appearance and topography isn't consistent on a game-by-game basis — you need only set *Super Mario Bros 3* next to, say, *New Super Luigi U* to see that it's flexible enough to accommodate multitudes. But it's quietly revealing that all the best *Mario* adventures involve getting away from it all. *Super Mario World*'s Dinosaur Land is a big part of the reason why it still feels somewhat out of step with the rest of his 2D adventures (setting aside *Doki Doki Panic*, hastily reworked into *Super Mario Bros 2*, which it hardly seems fair to count), even after *Wonder*. As for the 3D games, it says much that almost all of them take place elsewhere — from *Sunshine*'s Isle Delfino to the interstellar voyages of the two *Galaxy* games, *3D World*'s Sprixie Kingdom to *Odyssey*'s globe-hopping journey. The latter game (as well as *Galaxy 2*'s tellingly titled *Throwback Galaxy*) perhaps proves the notion that the Mushroom Kingdom is best reserved for nostalgic cameos. Consider, too, the fact that *Super Mario 64* constantly encourages you to leave it behind, the paintings in Peach's castle providing warp points to entirely different realms. In some way or other, those in charge of *Mario* have been giving him excuses to leave the place for decades. (Talking of the princess, it's something of a relief that in space year 2023 she's no longer forced to spend an entire game as a hapless damsel, twiddling her thumbs waiting for a moustachioed knight in shining dungarees to come to her rescue. It feels about time.)

Of course, you could always argue that, in a series which — like *The Legend Of Zelda* — demonstrates Nintendo's utter lack of interest in narrative consistency, there's no need for something quite as drastic as waving goodbye to the Mushroom Kingdom for good. Why not take cues from those RPGs and (as *Wonder* does on several occasions) find ways of confounding our preconceived notions of its identity as a videogame setting? But then again, with such a cornucopia of brand-new discoveries in the Flower Kingdom alone, why bother going back at all? As long as there is a castle and a princess with extremely lax security, the *Mario* series perhaps risks falling back into old habits. The proof that the plumber, his brother and his friends are better positioned than ever to expand their horizons — and Nintendo's designers to likewise stretch their legs and redefine what a *Mario* game can be — is right here, and it's a persuasive case indeed. ■

The New Super Mario Bros games felt staid, as if hemmed in by the need to conform to the unspoken rules of their setting



Lords Of The Fallen

The brightest idea in *Lords Of The Fallen* is also its darkest, like something itching beneath the skin.

Its name: the Umbral, a ghoulish alternate plane that lingers parallel to the everyday dimension of Axiom. You can peer into it with the aid of a magic lantern, cross to explore it voluntarily, or fall down dead and resurrect there with a last chance to destroy whatever killed you. From inside or out, the Umbral's presence remains an admirable achievement in HexWorks' mission to produce, in the words of creative director Cezar Virtosu, a "*Dark Souls 4.5*" (E381). If only it wasn't joined by other creeping irritations.

The Umbral itself is a conceptual rerun, of course, most notably of *Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver*. But the active simultaneity of its existence here opens up new potentials. Whether you're looking or not, this other landscape, washed in gloom grey and decorated with enormous tortured forms of petrified limbs and heads, continues to function. Faceless zombies, malevolent moth demons and more stumble and flutter behind and around you, watching you when you're not watching them. You meet a moment of genuine horror as you raise your lantern and a grim reaper stands staring from the murk, scheming to pull you in.

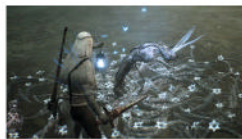
And, like it or not, you will raise the lantern, to overcome Axiom's dead ends. See that iron gate? It's not there in Umbral, so hold the lamp aloft and step on through. That chasm? A broad spinal column forms a makeshift bridge to the other side. But looking in through the blue lamplight only gets you so far. You can't fully interact with the Umbral – to pick up treasures, for example, or climb ladders – unless you properly dive in. Yet once you transfer, the demons come for you, spawning incessantly, and you can't return until you locate an effigy. As long as you stay, the pressure mounts, and with it the desperation for salvation – although it's also useful for grinding 'vigor', the game's equivalent of souls.

As tense as the otherworldly back and forth is, however, *Lords Of The Fallen* stumbles in more mundane areas. In several ways, its Soulslike design clicks off beat by a telling fraction, a tone set by the name of the opening area, the Defiled Sepulchre, which sounds more like a parody of a *Dark Souls* location than the real thing. But it's during combat that the problems begin to add up, despite weapon swings and impacts offering an overall sense of solidity. Character movement, conversely, can feel skittish, emphasised by sword strikes that send you bounding forward and dodge rolls that ape John McClane diving from machine-gun fire.

Meanwhile, enemies are prone to magnetic tracking, teleporting lunges, and animations that trigger while they're reeling from hits. Not that they need to cheat to cause you grief, thanks to a lock-on system that seems convinced you'd prefer to focus on a monster patrolling

Developer HexWorks
Publisher CI Games
Format PC, PS5 (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now

Human, animal or undead, they hunt in packs, often covered by a sniper, occasionally covered in turn by another



SOUL POWER

The lantern does more than switch you to the Umbral, although its auxiliary functions are a mixed bag in terms of usefulness. Soul flaying is the signature technique, as you thrust the lantern forward to trigger Umbral switches or yank the very spirit out of an opponent, although the advantages of doing so – attacking the spirit to lower the body's defences – feel somewhat marginal. Siphoning, meanwhile, sucks up loose vigor and, crucially, eradicates tiny spirits that latch onto some enemies, rendering them invincible. Finally, you can shine the lamp on occasional Umbral flowerbeds to plant a seed and grow a temporary 'vestige' to provide a rest point. Seed supplies are limited, though, and on a first visit to an area there's little way of knowing when it's worth using one.

a far-flung plateau rather than the threat directly in front of you. This kind of wobble lays bare the fact that this is HexWorks' first stab at the genre, despite the game ostensibly following on from the 2014 release.

The lock-on issue is exacerbated by the frequency of hostile threats in these lands. Whether human, animal or undead, they hunt in packs, often covered by a sniper, occasionally covered in turn by another. This gang mentality can feel overwhelming early on, turning checkpoint-to-checkpoint journeys into spirit-sapping gauntlets. In the Umbral, it feels more logical to expect hordes, but in the Axiom, too, it sometimes feels like a challenge to merely take a moment in which to scan your surroundings without getting clobbered in the ear.

Ultimately, the level of difficulty on display is more about numbers than the abilities of individual adversaries, a factor illustrated when fighting bosses, most of which fall with relative ease. In a focused fight, you dodge and parry as the dark gods intended, making light of telegraphed attacks and long windows of opportunity. As backwards as it may sound, the lesser bosses provide welcome respite from the badgering elsewhere. Some of the marquee baddies, meanwhile, show sparks of originality, such as the giant Spurned Progeny, who vomits up a lake of lava to stop you jabbing at his feet, forcing you to higher ground.

At about a quarter of the way through the game, we equally begin to fully appreciate the kingdom's dramatic painterly vistas and some flexible character building, with generous equip-load bands affording us a plate-armoured dual-wielder without unduly slowing our roll. But as we also begin to make allowances for the rougher edges, patterns have already started to repeat, level design routines now established, leaving little room for surprises. Many of the foes we encounter in new environments are repeats of earlier enemies, too, and inflated HP pools don't change how we approach them. We also become aware that we've lost track of where we are in the world, and in relation to our objectives – five beacons that beam red light from the horizon to the heavens, like pots of gold at the end of the rainbow. We trek from swamp to gorge to burning town, but we couldn't tell you the significance of these places within the fiction, or why the houses are on fire.

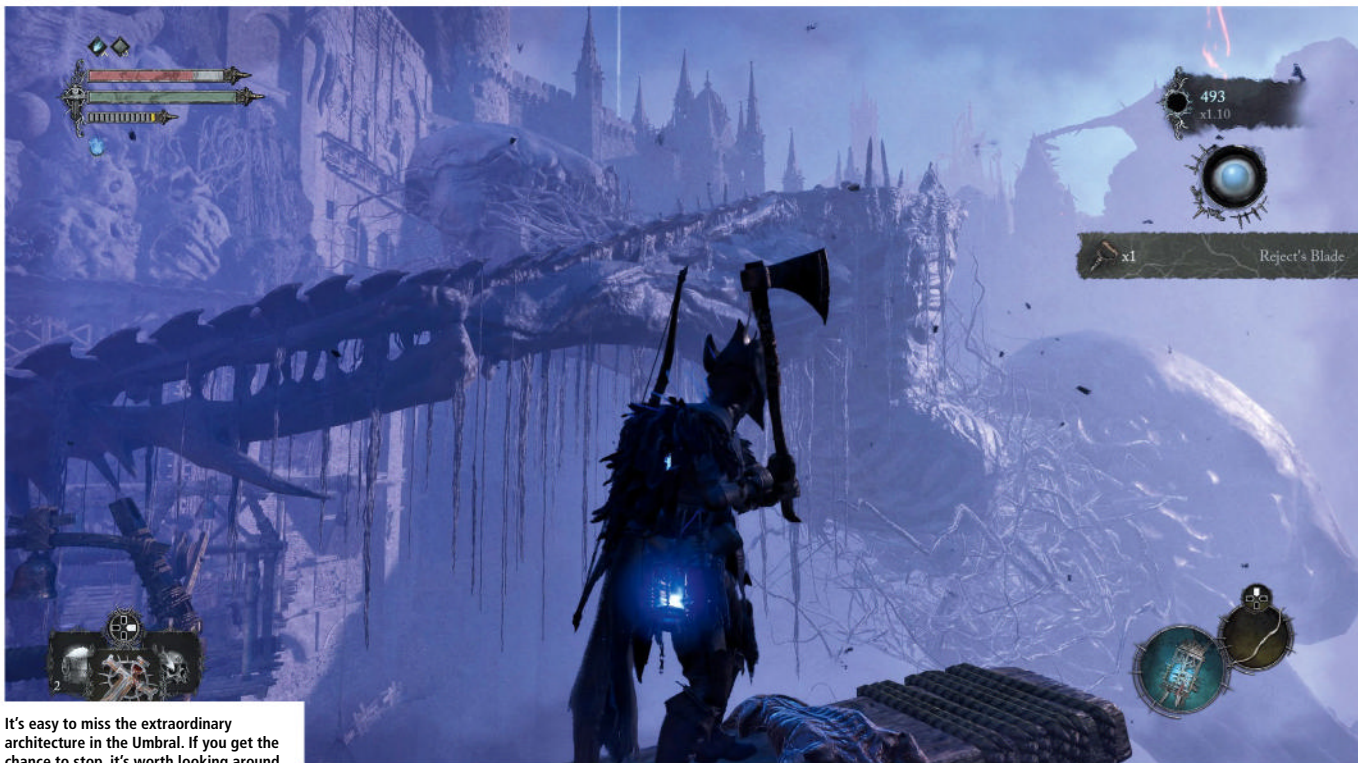
One thing is certain, though: wherever we are in the world, the Umbral doesn't change. The same brand of lurking creatures, watchful eyes and mild puzzles cycle around until it's all part of the furniture. The idea itself is a great one, and its implementation is a success in terms of design and engineering, but its appeal wanes over time. There is, at least, plenty to build on with the inevitable sequel, retaining all of this instalment's finer points and knocking the obvious dents out of its armour – a *Lords Of The Fallen 2.5*, perhaps.



RIGHT Blocking attacks or crossing to the Umbral leaves you with 'wither' damage, a grey portion of your life bar that can be reclaimed by striking enemies before they strike you, adding another layer to be weighed up during combat.
MAIN Several paths open up off the main track, although many are best left unexplored until later in the game, once you're levelled up



Early performance issues have been addressed, but enemies still sometimes get stuck on scenery or float in mid-air. More annoyingly, console crossplay has been disabled at the time of going to press, due to teething issues



It's easy to miss the extraordinary architecture in the Umbral. If you get the chance to stop, it's worth looking around

Post Script

Breaking the Soulslike code

Just how like *Souls* should a Soulslike be? Judging by *Lords Of The Fallen* and *Lies Of P*, the answer is very (although technically *Lies Of P* hews closer to *Bloodborne*). And they aren't alone. Fourteen years on from *Demon's Souls*, many games that might fancy themselves 'Soulslike' have stuck closely to From's original rules and regulations. "Miyazaki is our daddy and granddaddy," Cezar Virtosu joked in E381. And indeed, there seems to be a reverence for the founding father and his crew here that's less evident in equivalent design styles such as Roguelikes and Metroidvanias, one that perhaps leaves developers reluctant to reinterpret the sacred texts.

While other subgenres have become more liquid concepts in the past decade, the Soulslike design tends to be a wholesale choice. There are exceptions – looter-shooter crossover *Remnant* and its recent sequel, for instance, and Team Ninja slowly leaning back towards its *Ninja Gaiden* roots with *Nioh 2* and *Wo Long*. But more often than not, Soulslike feels like a formula rather than a school of thought. How else to explain that *Lies Of P* and *Lords Of The Fallen* share near-identical approaches to levelling up, weapon scaling, stamina management, parrying and more? You could argue that the particular form of

these elements is central to any Soulslike, but From's output might disagree. *Sekiro* remains very much within the legacy of *Souls* in terms of structure, exploration and challenge, but does so without a stamina bar, stat numbers, weapon scaling, or a European fantasy setting. *Elden Ring* is more traditional, but includes a dedicated jump button that eliminates the artifact of knee-high boundaries in level design, something still leant on by *Lies Of P*. It also provides maps, countering years of mentally storing connections and layouts.

From thus makes ostensibly the same kind of game without slavish adherence to its component parts, and in that respect some developers have stopped following the lead of granddaddy Miyazaki, like Christians caring for the Old Testament over the New. It's notable, for instance, that in *Lords Of The Fallen* stamina and equipment load become less important than in *Souls* games, so there's a reduced need to prioritise levelling up your endurance stat. As such, though, this mechanism almost feels like a dead branch that could be lopped off altogether or reworked, if it weren't so vital to the ritual.

More problematically, the old process of retrieving dropped currency after death feels like a short-sighted inclusion in a world so packed with enemies. Up to an hour can go by

in which you kill dozens upon dozens of enemies and then, due to a wrong turn into a late-game area or some rash judgement, you can end up with zero vigor to show for the effort. In such moments, the system feels like a twisted perversion of the concept of experience points. You've had the experience; now where's the point? What was once audacious design feels a lot more punitive when the game is balanced towards slower progress and more frequent death.

At the same time, one of the smartest touches in *Lords Of The Fallen* shows how diverging from traditional *Souls* systems can offer room for more flexible play. Different kinds of arrows, bolts and throwable items are treated like spells: once you collect one, that type is added to your repertoire permanently, and using those you have assigned merely depletes an ammo bar that refills at a rest spot. This adjustment cuts out item farming, but also turns throwing things into a genuine build choice, an alternative to magic use, especially when the available items include a holy javelin you can spear into the ground to create a healing ward. Similar to *Lies Of P* enabling players to create hybrid weapons, it leads us to imagine what heights might be reached if such heretical thinking was applied to every piece of the Soulslike ideal. ■


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Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Being a superhero must be *exhausting*. We're feeling a degree of cognitive overwhelm ourselves as we swing above New York's streets, rarely more than three seconds away from some new distraction. If it's not pulsing signals from stray Spider-bots, it's swirling sands marking a crystallised memory of Flint Marko, better known as Sandman, the subject of the game's opening scrap. Green lights lead us toward Quentin Beck's Mysteriums, augmented-reality experiences that need debugging by completing combat encounters in specific ways. Pink-purple outlines Prowler stashes, hidden by Miles Morales' uncle. Other icons let us know we're in the vicinity of Hunter Blinds, the cloaked rooftop hideouts of antagonist Kraven's PMC underlings, while later on we're charged with clearing out Symbiote Nests. Pop-ups deliver alerts of nearby street crimes.

If it's not sights, it's sounds: your phone buzzes constantly, as, between messages from various allies, you tune into Danika Hart's podcast or listen to J Jonah Jameson's conspiracy-theorist diatribes. And, of course, you spend time talking to the *other* Spider-Man, since here you get two for the price of one; whether you're playing as Morales or Peter Parker, you'll exchange info and quips with the other. Sometimes, when tackling a minor incident, your fellow webslinger will join in.

The velocity at which you traverse this metropolis is undoubtedly a factor in the pace at which these myriad distractions are hurled at you. But even by contemporary sandbox standards, the frequency at which you're pulled this way and that is extraordinary. It's also entirely fitting. Consider its title characters' heightened awareness and the sensorial overload is understandable. The maximalist approach to triple-A game design has, in many respects, found its ideal subject.

Indeed, in most regards, Insomniac's sequel is superior to its predecessors. For long stretches it's perhaps the finest PlayStation Studios release since *The Last Of Us Part II*, leaning into the most successful elements of its forerunners and coating it in a luxurious sheen you can almost see your face in. The seamlessness with which it flows between interactive sequences, cinematics and cutaways – the camera darting in close and the action slowing to emphasise both the force and dextrousness of finishing blows – puts many MCU set-pieces to shame. The movesets of the two Spider-Men feel more cleanly distinguished, between Morales' bioelectrical abilities and Parker's Venom-enhanced attacks, with two separate upgrade trees and a third that enhances the clutch of skills they *do* share. While the latter's bludgeoning power has its advantages, we switch to the former for missions that don't demand the OG webslinger's input – that spark reflected in lightning-fast movement that makes one supposedly challenging late-game encounter a thrillingly acrobatic cakewalk.

Developer/publisher
SIE (Insomniac Games)
Format PS5
Release Out now

The maximalist approach to triple-A game design has, in many respects, found its ideal subject



ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR
Though you spend the majority of the game controlling the two Spider-Men, the story endeavours to make better use of Laura Bailey's Mary-Jane Watson, whose struggles to make a name for herself as a journalist form a minor subplot. You get to play as her during a couple of tense but charitably straightforward stealth sequences, during which she's equipped with a stun gun to incapacitate anyone (or thing) in her path, as well as an ill-judged late-game sequence that plays out like a rudimentary thirdperson shooter. Still, these work both as welcome pace-breakers and to give the typically excellent Bailey more to do. A protracted, one-note sequence featuring a fourth playable character, on the other hand, is a notable misstep.

It's a minor pity, then, that Morales' side of the story is quite clearly the B plot. His enmity towards the man that killed his father (Martin Li's Mister Negative) is nicely played – among a series of robustly effective lead performances, Nadji Jeter remains the MVP – but comes second fiddle to the shifting dynamic between Parker and best friend Harry Osborne, painted here as a tragic figure whose terminal illness plays into a fresh interpretation of Venom's origin story. Meanwhile, Sergei Kravinoff's muscular predator arrives in the Big Apple to seek out someone worthy of a final battle before he, too, succumbs to his incurable condition.

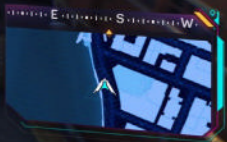
With unhinged cultists and regular street thugs besides, combat gets a stern stress test and passes with merit, if not distinction. Between gadgets such as the upshot and web grabber that help free up space when surrounded and outnumbered, special abilities that take time to charge but produce devastating results, and the evolving skillsets of both webbed wonders, there's no shortage of options when it comes to fighting back. Occasionally, you don't even need to engage directly: sporadic infiltration missions invite you to thin out enemy numbers before you're detected, and the ability to create your own tightropes – to which you can drag guards isolated by well-timed distractions – never palls.

For roughly two-thirds of the game, Insomniac finds just the right combination of these ingredients, regularly introducing new elements to freshen things up: an extended pursuit of a cameoing Black Cat eventually sees you fight alongside one another, an artefact that allows her to conjure portals producing one particular flourish worthy of applause. Rare moments of downtime allow you to appreciate what it means for a superhero to have a day off – though a night out at a fairground eventually feels like a familiar blockbuster trope taken to its logical extreme. But even as the game's writers endeavour to combine personal stakes with world-saving peril (battling a creature while arguing about mortgage payments is a new one on us), it succumbs to the malign influence of its own symbiote. In a final act stuffed with protracted boss fights, there's a telling line in which one Spider-Man says to the other that fighting a new enemy type is "like punching molasses". Towards the end, particularly during a needlessly prescriptive climactic encounter, that rings true a little too often.

Still, faced with a game whose story is ultimately about forgiveness – of one's own past misdeeds, and those of others – we're willing to look kindly on its few shortcomings. Yes, occasionally it's a bit too much, its 'everything, everywhere, all at once' MO meaning it's better experienced in shorter play sessions. Whether this is the best Spider-Man *game* will likely be debated at length, but in so vividly capturing the intensity of the superhero experience, it is unquestionably the best Spider-Man simulator.



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Attend Brooklyn Visions Academy's Club Fair.
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ABOVE Both Spider-Men are equipped with a new wingsuit that makes traversal even more enjoyable. Some streets act as wind tunnels, prompting glowing rings to appear: passing through these makes you fly even faster.
LEFT QTEs are largely used to emphasise physical effort. Your fingers are sometimes made to dual with the springy DualSense triggers, though in one instance of exertion that makes little sense

BELOW By and large, Insomniac likes to keep things in 12A territory, but there are moments that suggest the developer may have a great survival horror in it



ABOVE This sequel has a stronger emphasis on parrying: timing is tricky to master when you're attacked from multiple angles, but it's worth it since you'll briefly stagger your opponent and accelerate your ability cooldowns



Assassin's Creed: Mirage

Sitting in the central bazaar of ninth-century Baghdad, we watch children playing in a fountain while merchants hawk their wares, sheltering from the sun at cloth-covered stalls. Later on, we walk through the Great Bimaristan, its courtyard teeming with plants and butterflies, before hijacking a boat to travel to the hammam along a river, drinking in the urban landscape surrounding us. Such moments of historical tourism prove a highlight of *Assassin's Creed: Mirage*, and represent a course correction for Ubisoft's long-running series, stripping away many of the action-RPG and open-world elements of recent entries in favour of urban exploration and stealth combat. Returning to these fundamentals is refreshing. Yet in its dedication to tradition, Ubisoft Bordeaux has inadvertently highlighted just how shallow the roots of this series are.

We assume the role of Basim, an apprentice assassin hunting down leaders of the Order Of The Ancients, an Illuminati-like group attempting to construct a doomsday device. First, each of these mysterious figures must be unveiled through detective work. To gain access to a private auction attended by an Order member known as Al-Pairika, for example, we must retrieve stolen goods from a corrupt harbourmaster in exchange for a seal granting us entry to an inner chamber at the bazaar, and infiltrate the mansion of a tax collector preventing merchants from entering Baghdad. Acquired clues populate an investigation board in the manner of *Outer Wilds*, yet these sequences fall short of the standards set by Mobius Digital, rarely asking more of you than to speak to NPCs, eavesdrop on conversations, or loot pieces of intel highlighted upon activating Eagle Vision.

Where investigations leave little room for deduction, however, there are typically multiple ways to infiltrate strongholds – large areas resembling *Far Cry* outposts. Scouting out locations with your eagle Enkidu allows you to mark hidden entrances, tag items and monitor foes, but a more direct approach can be taken by, say, bribing musicians to distract guards, releasing caged animals, or throwing a knife into a spice sack to create a smokescreen. This expanded approach to mission design is complemented by the series' signature parkour, allowing you to weave your way through multi-tiered areas leaving a trail of corpses in your wake. Items such as noisemakers and proximity mines can also be smartly combined to lethal effect. Successful stealth kills charge your Assassin's Focus meter, allowing you to target and eliminate multiple enemies at once. This ability embodies the aggressive approach to stealth encouraged by *Mirage*, allowing you to cut through large groups of enemies before retreating to the shadows.

As enjoyable as it is tearing through these areas, they merely serve as a prelude to the assassination missions themselves, which present you with large, heavily guarded areas to infiltrate, reminiscent of

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Bordeaux)
Format PC, PS4, PS5 (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

Ubisoft Bordeaux has inadvertently highlighted just how shallow the roots of this series are



TOOLS OF THE TRADE
 When he's not busy toppling oligarchies, Basim can indulge in sidequests to obtain tokens – used to curry favour with various groups in Baghdad, such as merchants, and to gain crafting materials. The stat-based gear system present in recent *Assassin's Creed* games has been jettisoned, with outfits and weapons differentiated by their passive abilities, such as making assassinations quieter or slowing down time after a successful parry. Enemy levels have been removed, making all areas of Baghdad fair game to explore at any stage. Your items can be upgraded too, with higher tiers unlocking secondary functions. Fully upgraded throwing knives can be augmented to dissolve corpses, for example, or to pierce the armour worn by certain enemies.

Hitman contracts. Unfortunately, these challenges pale in comparison to the obstacle courses presented to Agent 47, funnelling you down one of several predetermined lines of inquiry until you encounter your target in a scripted sequence.

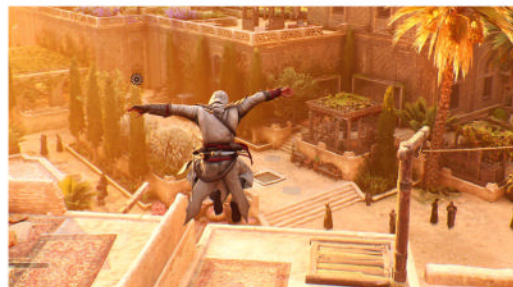
Options for improvisation are similarly limited, an issue exacerbated by threadbare social stealth mechanics. Basim has only two disguises, for example – not that you'll need to do much to outsmart the enemy AI, one of the more unfortunate relics inherited from the first *Assassin's Creed*. Guards have the observational capacity of a mole rat, consistently failing to notice the deaths of their comrades – or, indeed, the presence of a cloaked man ten feet in front of them. Not that getting caught adds much excitement to affairs. Combat has been stripped down to the single-button fundamentals of the series' earlier entries, revolving around carefully timed parries. There is a satisfaction in stringing together kills in quick succession, but encounters are all but invalidated by throwing smoke bombs, which allow you to instantly assassinate any nearby enemies. Fatigue sets in as we reencounter the same varieties of soldiers ad nauseam, while bog-standard environmental interactions offer little incentive to change your approach from mission to mission – think explosive containers and precarious weights hanging over hapless guards.

It's hard to find motivation in the narrative, either. Basim is likeable enough, particularly in quieter moments shared with his childhood companion, Nehal, but the supporting cast are too thinly sketched to make a real impression. The conspiracy-laden central plot is similarly weightless, the motivations of the cartoonishly evil Order so heavily obscured that we lose interest long before the finish line. All of which is compounded by static cutscenes, stiff facial animations and spotty voice acting. At least we find solace in exploring the rooftops of Baghdad, lapsing into a flow state as the auto-platforming whisks us across the city. And close to 20 years into the series' lifetime, the sensation of scaling a tower, being rewarded with a panning shot of your surroundings, and leaping into a crate of hay below remains unparalleled. We feel similar pangs of nostalgia upon tearing down 'Wanted' posters to decrease our notoriety, and when we unlock Altaïr's outfit. *Mirage* is a celebration of history, both of the Islamic Golden Age and of the *Assassin's Creed* series. At its best, exploring evokes the thrill we felt when stepping through the gates of Jerusalem for the first time. Yet for a story centred on revolutionaries, *Mirage* is oddly conservative, mired in the middle ground between honouring tradition and embracing innovation. Ubisoft has seldom felt closer to delivering on the power fantasy promised by Patrice Désilets in 2007; equally, it has never felt farther away from its contemporaries.

RIGHT While some eavesdropping opportunities are appropriately low-key, others are comically blatant, placing Basim opposite his targets in an empty room.

MAIN Fast-travel points are unlocked by 'synchronising' certain locations, typically historical landmarks such as Baghdad's House Of Wisdom or Great Mosque.

BOTTOM Targets selected while using Assassin's Focus are simultaneously eliminated once time unfreezes, with Basim teleported straight to the location where the final victim awaits



ABOVE The fundamentals of *Mirage's* platforming are borrowed from past entries. While we occasionally run up the wrong surface in the heat of the moment, it's intuitive to string multiple acrobatic actions into a fluid chain

Forza Motorsport

There's a strange atmosphere hanging over your first couple of hours in *Forza Motorsport*. You clear a sequence of introductory races, bookended by cutscenes that wouldn't feel tonally out of place in a *Microsoft Flight Sim*, and then you look for the next big thing to chip away at. The automotive Everest to climb, the challenge that's going to put the meaning into the 500-strong car collection. And then you realise: you're going to have to define those parameters yourself.

Turn 10's eighth release in *Forza*'s stately, Polyphony-baiting *Motorsport* series handles like the figments of Clarkson's fever dreams. It's a feast of vivid, violent interactions between you and the vehicle, the best it's ever felt to drive. But it's so conservative about how it packages that wondrous physics model and exhaustive vehicle list into actual experiences that it comes off as a motorsport platform more than a driving game.

The structure of solo racing feels particularly safe and over-familiar. *Forza* hasn't been shy about mimicking *Gran Turismo* over the decades, but as Polyphony's series experiments with different routes into conveying car culture – cafés, endurance racing, bizarre excursions such as *GT6*'s lunar expedition – it's disappointing to see that the Builders Cup in *Forza Motorsport* doesn't. Instead it relies on the usual to-do list of mini championships with vehicle performance and category restrictions. *The Crew: Motorfest* at least tried to dress these up with live-action cutscenes and influencer collaborations, and rolled the dice with its 28-player online Grand Races, where the throng of competitors swaps vehicle types three times over a ten-minute point-to-point. With this one good idea, it felt like the genre had been nudged forward a tad. The Builders Cup doesn't have anything near as adventurous, and other than free races it's the whole serving of solo content.

Considered on a more granular level, though, the Builders Cup has its moments. It benefits from vastly improved AI drivers, which take varying lines into corners, fight each other viciously and lend a human unpredictability to racing. To watch three cars take three different lines into Laguna Seca's corkscrew, knowing one or more will not still be on the track with a working car by the next straight, is a genuine thrill. And there's a moment like that in nearly every offline race.

There's small but impactful tinkering with the race format, in which practice sessions are all but mandatory but qualifying is reimagined as a risk-reward mechanic. You're strong-armed into completing at least three practice laps before each race, and although technically you can skip the session, you don't. Because that would mean missing out on the XP you get for completing laps, driving clean sectors and being an immaculate driver. And since that in turn would mean fewer upgrades to apply to your vehicle and thus slower performance, you drive the practice laps. But you choose your grid position

Developer Turn 10 Studios
Publisher Xbox Game Studios
Format PC (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now

The aim is to get you out on the track more often and for longer, but it's the joyous feel of the cars that does that



HARD LINES

2023 has seen AI take up a position in popular culture somewhere between 'hit Netflix show' and 'the new coronavirus'. Some of its subtler and more additive implementations, such as smarter videogame drivers, have been lost in that fray. Turn 10's deep-learning AI opponents rival the convincing behaviour of *Gran Turismo 7*'s Sophy AI, which was built in collaboration between Sony, Polyphony and the University Of California. In each case the driver isn't following a racing line drawn by a developer but making decisions based on information about the car, the weather, other drivers, and a sporting code. *MotoGP* developer Milestone also uses a neural AI for opposing drivers. Overnight, it's become the standard for offline racing opponents.

in a menu afterwards, anywhere from P3 to P25, with higher credit payouts for achieving a podium finish the farther back you start. It's an odd blend of simulating a full race weekend and then reimagining it as something more gamified, but it gives *FM* some personality.

The RPG-like car levelling makes less of an impression. The cycle of menus encouraging you to install newly unlocked parts following a race quickly gets repetitive, and in the name of simplicity a fairly detailed upgrade system is boiled down to pressing a button to make stats go up and feeling the benefits on the track. The aim is clearly to get you out on the track more often and for longer, but it's the joyous feel of the cars that does that, without the need for mechanical assistance.

There's impressive nuance between the models in Turn 10's vast garage, too. Roadgoing hatchbacks feel out of their comfort zones at high speeds, top-heavy and reluctant, totally different in your hands from track cars laden with aero trimmings. It takes many laps to get to know the eccentricities of each car, and there's longform enjoyment in doing just that. This is *Forza Motorsport*'s strength as a platform. BMW 850CSIs sitting alongside Aston Martin Vulcans. Vintage F1 cars and early LMPs ready to do battle. Prosaic hatchbacks and automotive high concepts, all waiting to be added to your collection, painted in levels of fidelity that match stablemate *Horizon*'s, albeit seen through a more muted camera lens. The roster of tracks, on the other hand, feels light. There are 20 locations in total, a mix of fictional and real-world ones, and there are different layouts within those. But when you consider *F1 23* has a bigger track list, and *Project Cars 2* managed 60 locations in 2017, it's a flimsy offering for a marquee motorsport release.

In the spectacular, chaotic and compulsive online races that compose the game's better half, though, all is forgiven. Here you can really enjoy the process of learning a car and track in combination, finding every spare hundredth in practice sessions and racing with a penalty system guiding everyone towards clean, sporting moves. In the lobby creator you find the key to using *Forza* as an automotive sandbox, a place where you can dream scenarios and manifest them with the weather conditions, day-night progression and tyre-wear rate of your choice. Turn 10-created events follow the Builders Cup's rough structure and vehicular themes, giving you a reason to build a wide collection and tune them to race-ready track beasts. Here it matters less that there aren't fresh new ideas because you can implement your own. Thanks to the feel, the car collection and the online toolset, *FM* achieves a victory by a fine margin. This is the series the industry looks toward to break new ground. This time it seems keener to follow familiar racing lines in its search of perfection, but the result is satisfying enough.



ABOVE Somehow, the vehicles in 2021's *Horizon 5* look sharper than the models here, and their colours assault your screen that bit more. **RIGHT** There's no sympathy in motorsport, nor in *Motorsport*, only the scraping of bodywork. **BELOW** You spend a lot of time racing in slow and steady machinery such as these hatchbacks before the Builders Cup really cranks up the pace



ABOVE Cockpit cam is often more an exercise in empathy than visibility, especially when the weather is poor or the light is unhelpful – how real-life LMP drivers manage to function in this environment is a little bit beyond us

Counter-Strike 2

For the first time, the arrival of a new generation of *Counter-Strike* heralds the death of what came before. With this latest incarnation released as a mandatory update for the wildly successful *CS:GO*, the beloved prior entry has been rendered all but inaccessible on PC. As release strategies go, it's a bold gambit that would represent an astonishing act of hubris on the part of almost any other developer. After all, if one lesson should have been learned from Blizzard's recent attempt to revitalise interest in *Overwatch* with *Overwatch 2*, it's that mandating major changes to a long-established formula risks not only failing to attract a new audience but polarising even the most dedicated playerbase.

In Valve's case, however, it is clear that this confidence was well-founded. *Counter-Strike 2* is an outstanding successor, building on the first-class foundations laid by its predecessor and standing as the cumulative result of an attentive ear to community feedback throughout *CS:GO*'s 11-year life. What to change and what to keep has been carefully considered, with every tweak and addition creating a more approachable, consistent and competitive experience.

From a cursory glance, it would be easy to assume that not much has changed. This is still ostensibly a high-skill shooter in which two teams of five (ten in unranked modes) go head-to-head in objective-based matches. The specific goal differs per your current map selection, but in the most popular mode, Bomb Defusal, the attacking side is tasked with planting and detonating a bomb. This simple formula has received some refinements. Matches are now slightly shorter – a fact that is easy to overlook when you're engrossed in such a tense game of cat-and-mouse. Decided by the best of 24 rounds (as opposed to *CS:GO*'s 30), this snappier pacing becomes most apparent in the rare crushing defeat. What was once an agonisingly protracted 15-round beating has been mercifully truncated.

Even some improvements that seem purely aesthetic affect the flow of matches in tangible ways. *CS2* benefits from a visual overhaul, a by-product of its namesake: the move from Valve's ageing Source Engine to Source 2. The reworked UI is sleek, while the roster of returning maps has been elevated by the addition of superior textures, improved lighting and more complex geometry. Layouts remain unchanged, but environments are brighter, dominated by vibrant yellows and swathes of pristine white that enhance readability by increasing the contrast between backdrop and foe. The implementation of universal realtime player shadows, alongside additional light sources trained on the key corners of several maps, leverages graphical enhancements to introduce a new element of strategic depth. Attackers who fail to consider the visibility of their shadows risk revealing their location to the enemy,

Developer/publisher Valve
Format PC
Release Out now

Every tweak and addition creates a more approachable, consistent and competitive experience



SIXTH SENSE

Knowing how to use flashbangs and smoke grenades to their fullest has always been an essential component of high-level play. Valve has removed skyboxes entirely from maps in *CS2*, allowing for more complex throws that, if mastered, could easily carry your team to victory. While previous entries had you relying on online tutorials to master the perfect throw, a new setting in practice mode allows you to perfect your own with visible guidelines and a picture-in-picture camera that show where each grenade will land in real time. The jump throw, a fiddly technique from *CS:GO* involving lobbing an object at the height of a jump for added momentum, has also been made easier, and, better yet, success is now signalled by a handy audio cue.

while defenders benefit from being able to quickly assess enemy presence at popular flanking routes.

Valve has also overhauled its implementation of smoke grenades, which are now rendered as 3D objects rather than a basic effect. As a result, they are finally consistent across every player's view – eliminating a minor visual irregularity that could lead to the odd unfair death. It also allows clouds to react to gunfire in more dynamic ways, shaping around bullets in a manner that sees sprays of fire provide a glimpse of what lies beyond. Likewise, a well-placed grenade can temporarily disperse an entire plume, rewarding coordinated teams with the chance to thwart a concealed enemy push.

These changes have clearly been made for the benefit of skilled players but there is a raft of concessions for newcomers, too. Any competitive *CS* aficionado will tell you audio is an integral part of any match, with gunfire and the patter of footsteps providing insight into an enemy's loadout and location. Fortunately the need to learn the precise distances at which you can hear each sound has been removed thanks to a revamped minimap that displays audible distance with a circle. The once-arduous task of learning each gun's unique recoil pattern is also smoother, with the option to have your crosshair follow the spray of bullets – an innovation that makes the complex gunplay much more approachable.

The inventory system has been similarly simplified, though this stands out as the one area where *CS2* falls short of its predecessor. Rather than allowing almost unrestricted choice, weapons are now divided into three categories: pistols, mid-range (an umbrella term that refers to SMGs, shotguns and heavy weapons), and rifles. You can bring only five of each category to a match, forcing you to consider your selection carefully. It's easy to see how this system helps steer newcomers towards wiser weapon choices, but for more experienced players it can prove frustrating. There is little reason ever to consider filling your slots with anything but the most conventional picks, leaving options such as the M249 (an expensive LMG previously useful for dishing out suppressing fire and little else) or SCAR-20 and GS3G1 (two highly situational automatic sniper rifles) in the dust – annoying when the rare occasion arises when they could be useful. Some choices also seem rather arbitrary under this new system. It may be wise to ensure that you always have access to at least one shotgun, but your decision between the granularly distinct Sawed-Off, Mag-7 and Nova boils down to little more than aesthetic preference when you can't predict the exact circumstances of each round in an upcoming match.

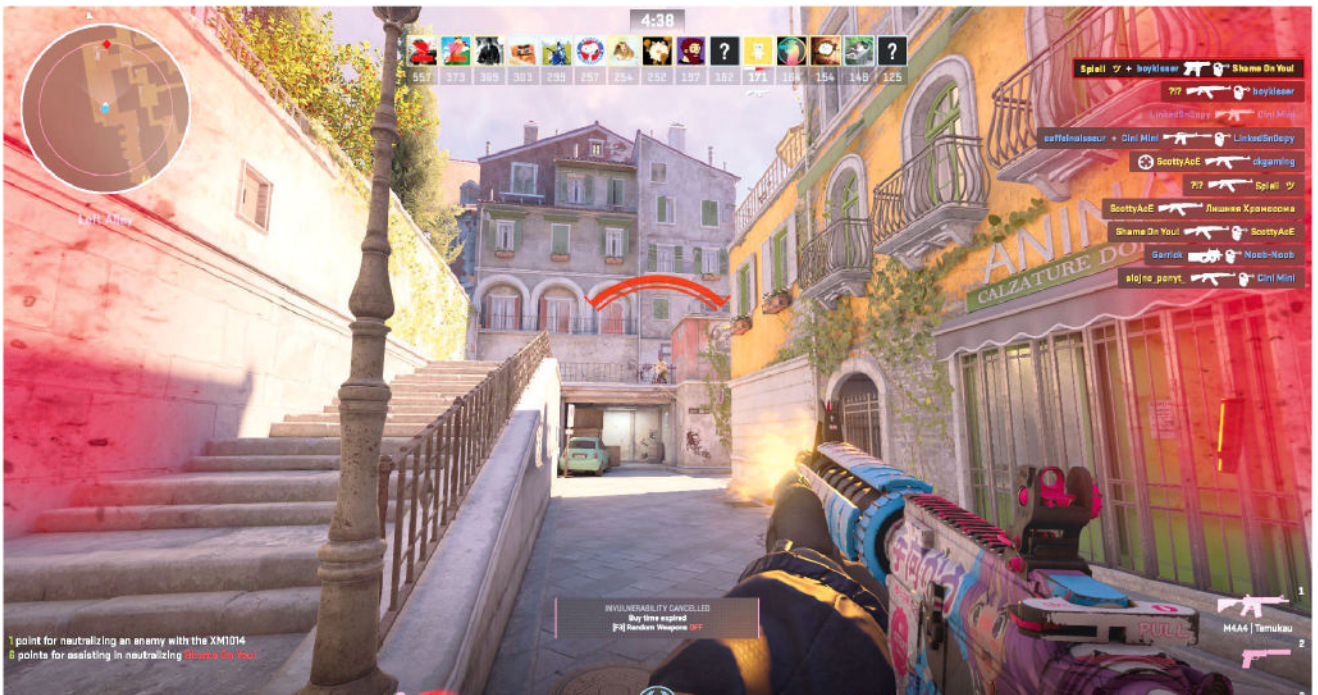
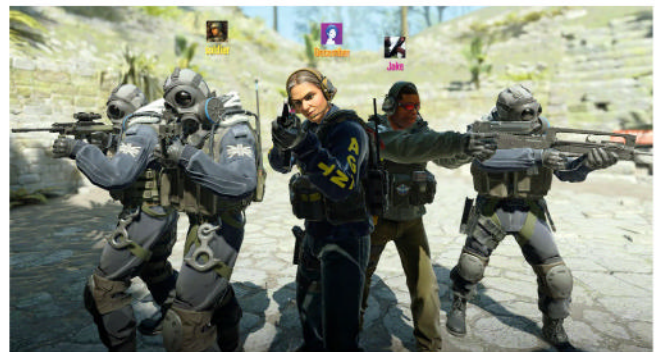
For this to be our only major complaint, however, demonstrates what a triumphant update this is. In an era of flagging service games, it is refreshing to see an old favourite so thoroughly rejuvenated. Blizzard, take note: this is how it's done.



LEFT Like the maps, your arsenal has received a new look thanks to revamped, higher-quality models. **BELOW** The addition of transition animations between halves lends matches a bit of cinematic flair. **MAIN** Skin enthusiasts can breathe a sigh of relief: any cosmetics you owned in CS:GO have made the jump into CS2. In fact, the overhauled lighting makes skins look better than ever before



ABOVE Whether it's to conceal movement, block major sightlines or create a diversion, mastery of smoke grenades is often necessary for success. In CS2, they have been reworked, introducing fresh tactical possibilities



Saltsea Chronicles

Die Gute Fabrik's narrative adventure wastes little time in delivering its boldest gambit, a plot development and design choice that informs almost everything about the deliberately meandering voyage that follows. On Njarfie Roust – a cold, wet and deeply insular island – it introduces its cast, a band of misfits about to be left behind by their charismatic but capricious leader. Maja's absence is keenly felt by her friends and loved ones who, confused, set out aboard their ramshackle boat to discover the reasons behind her departure. Just as significantly, it's also expressed through the narrative structure. Where the studio's previous game cast you as a single character helping a community, here you're in charge of the collective – speaking and acting as the crew of the De Kelpie, making decisions together before exploring the islands of the titular archipelago in player-selected pairings.

If the central horticultural simile of *Mutazione* likened the process of cultivating friendships to tending a garden, *Saltsea Chronicles*' nautical metaphors feel like a more convincing way of presenting the complex business of human relationships. Are we not all flotsam, it ventures, tossed around by life's fickle tides? (The splendid audio design seems to further that notion, your exploratory wanderings producing a succession of gentle but solid *thumps*, like a boat's hull knocking against a pier.) Meanwhile, the crew's interpersonal issues are represented as sailor's knots, indicating whether they're outstanding, resolved or permanently scuppered: a permanent reminder that not all disputes can be satisfactorily settled.

Tending plants feels like child's play compared to the juggling act involved in keeping the mood buoyant within such a disparate group. You're told early on that 'there are no wrong choices, only your choices' – which in this genre tends to be code for 'there are *absolutely* wrong choices, but you'll have to live with them'. But here it's largely true: given the diverse socio-cultural makeup of your crew, whether you're picking between potential destinations or choosing whom to disembark with, there will inevitably be disagreements. History enthusiast Murl might feel affronted if you ignore his advice, while even veteran diver and ship's cook Stew, considered the glue of the group, might occasionally come unstuck – particularly if your excursions result in extra mouths to feed. Newcomers board ship with their own passions, motivations and peccadillos to consider: each needs to settle in, yet they might have skillsets or backgrounds that come in handy at specific junctures.

For each excursion you have a de facto leader, and choose who to take along with them. Your choice adds distinct flavour to each playthrough, each character's personality and history not only determining the available interactions but often recontextualising

Developer/publisher Die Gute Fabrik
Format PC (tested), PS5, Switch
Release Out now

Interpersonal issues are represented as sailor's knots, indicating whether they're outstanding, resolved or scuppered



SEA CHANGE

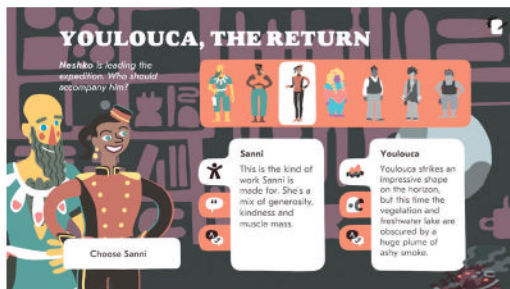
If you're curious about the islands left unmarked on your map (and the ones you do visit are so vividly portrayed it's hard to resist the allure of the road – or rather, the ocean – less travelled), you can branch your save file from any completed chapter. Starting at the end of an episode means you can pick an alternative destination; from the beginning lets you select a different investigative party. In both cases, there are fascinating differences *and* similarities: the former underscore the value of a fresh perspective, while the latter suggest you can't always avoid heartache. It also exposes the difficulty of building a divergent story with limited resources: we're overwhelmed when two very different characters leave our party in the same way at the same time.

events: one character might know a crucial detail about someone who's a stranger to another. If the central mystery of what happened to Maja sweeps you along – all we'll say is that an early suspicion of kidnap seems less likely the farther you travel – you'll also be pulled hither and yon by a string of minor currents, several of which end up flowing into the main narrative tide.

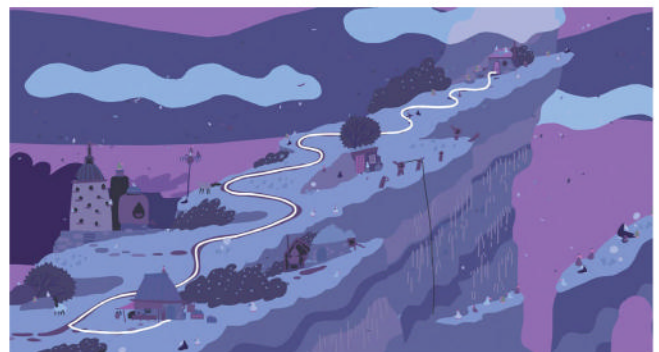
Meanwhile, the interface encourages you to pursue distractions – a snaking white thread marking your path lets you cross an island in seconds while still communicating a sense of movement and travel, as opposed to steering a character across empty tracts with an analogue stick. Stars mark key interactions while a clock moves the day along, the colour palette changing as time passes, leading to new interactions with characters whose routines dovetail with your own. In limiting tedious downtime, you're encouraged to talk to everyone and interact with everything. Conversations may lack the visual dynamism of, say, a *Mediterranea Inferno* or a *Goodbye Volcano High* (exchanges take place in a large text window flanked by expressively animated character models, accompanied by sporadic grunts, sighs and vocal outbursts), but the standard of the dialogue more than compensates. One striking detail sees different dialects distinguished via new typefaces, accompanied by melodic chimes – evoking the way unfamiliar languages have a certain musicality to the ear.

Further incentive to poke your nose into every recess is supplied by an almanac that persists across save files. This scrapbook offers a range of themed spreads to mark your journeys, encounters and souvenirs represented as stickers. There are several variants on a two-on-two trick-taking card game, too: Spoils asks you either to accumulate a higher score than your opponent over 11 hands or else tip them over the 100-point mark, since 'hoarding' is frowned upon, both here and in the overall game – a holdover from pre-flood days.

From a volcanic island occupied by scientists and spa enjoyers to a colony of cats and a shipwreck-turned-ballroom, *Saltsea*'s settings and communities are evocatively drawn. But it's individual exchanges that linger, from the sombre – the pain of discovering you mean significantly less to someone than they to you is especially well realised – to the lighthearted, with one tentative romance adorably underlined through repeated use of the 'progress' symbol (a knot that takes a good while to fully entangle). Between the punning headers for each exchange and the sharp stab of a late-game tragedy, it deftly charts a course through potentially choppy tonal waters to a finale almost as bold in its purposeful understatement as that opening. This isn't a game about saving the world, but rather achieving some peace within it. To accept you have limited control of when and where the ocean's pull takes you, but that there is meaning in struggling against the tide.



ABOVE *Saltsea* wastes few opportunities for seemingly incidental storytelling: it's worth lingering on the selection menu ahead of an expedition to see the reasons why people are keen to go (or stay behind)



MAIN Few individual places communicate the variation of tone here quite so effectively as Youlouca. It's party time during your first visit; the return trip is altogether more downbeat.

ABOVE We're reminded of *Oxenfree* in the way the camera keeps its distance as you explore. The main difference is that you get to see your gang in expressive close-up during conversational scenes.

LEFT Two very different groups vie for attention at Fort Alcazar: a colony of crabs and an artists' collective. Here you'll gain some valuable insights into Neshko's past, which lend extra meaning to *Saltsea Chronicles'* endgame

Jusant

Climbing is one of the most physically demanding activities a human being can do. Yet in the triple-A videogame space it's become one of the most straightforward. Think of how *Assassin's Creed* reduced it to pushing upwards on the analogue stick, Ezio Auditore and his ilk traversing vertical and horizontal spaces with similar ease. Or consider Nathan Drake, whose technique of smoothly moving between conspicuously marked handholds, with a grip suggesting self-chalking palms, has been copied by many other blockbuster adventurers since. Indie games have taken things to the opposite extreme: *Getting Over It With Bennett Foddy*, essentially an upwardly mobile *QWOP*, asked you to conquer a mountain with unconventional apparatus and no safety net. *Only Up* might be more about jumping, but the viral mascore platformer is defined by its verticality. What's missing is something in between, a game that communicates both the appeal and the challenge of climbing; that bridges the gap between the effortless and the stressful. Well, here it is.

Jusant takes place almost entirely on one mountain, as your androgynous protagonist charts its crags and ridges to discover what happened to the people who once called it home – and, perhaps, to learn what caused the drought that encouraged them to leave it behind (the title is a French term for a receding tide). The ocean's presence is felt through its absence: crabs scuttle aside as you approach; cages, nets and other fishing paraphernalia are strewn across the lower plateaus. You'll find conches, too: holding one up to your ear causes the camera to momentarily leave your side, cutting between closeups of the environment as you hear sounds from the daily lives of the peak's former occupants. It's both a welcome opportunity to pause and a reminder of whose hands we're in, redolent as they are of *Life Is Strange*'s contemplative breaks.

Otherwise, it's two other 21st-century games that *Jusant* brings most readily to mind. There's a bit of *Breath Of The Wild*, of course, in the stamina-management aspect of climbing, and in its stylised visuals, which fall somewhere between *Zelda* and Don't Nod's previous work. But elsewhere the closest comparison point is *Death Stranding* – and not just because you spend the journey with a diminutive ally, in this case a creature tucked inside a rucksack rather than a baby in a portable womb. (It can harmonise with the organic elements of the world, sending out a call that causes thick vines to snake upwards or roots to sprout from bulbs.) It's there, too, in its control scheme, which requires use of both triggers – not to balance yourself, but to reach upward and grasp the next handhold. And it furthers its kinship with Kojima Productions' game through the way it communicates a sense of melancholic yet peaceful solitude, and a deeper appreciation for –

Developer/publisher Don't Nod
Format PC, PS5 (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now

Even with a rope attached to you, the game's trickier manoeuvres can cause you to catch your breath



MOUNTAIN PEOPLE
This is a rare contemporary game of singular purpose, though there are a few optional side activities. As you climb, you find stone mechanisms that can be reactivated by hand; we locate a few but it's unclear what effect they have. Within caves you'll find wall art, illuminated by your travelling companion, telling a pictorial tale involving the game's more fantastical elements. Notes left by those who've abandoned their homes – and one character who decides instead to try to reach the summit – are presented in disappointingly rudimentary fashion. The occasional cairns upon which you're invited to place a stone feel more meaningful: rather than staking a claim, you're simply marking your presence in an unassuming way. Rather like *Jusant* itself.

and connection with – your environment. Nature itself is, after all, your toughest opponent. In fact, given the lack of ancillary threats here, it's your only one.

Unlike Norman Reedus's stumbling postapocalyptic postman, however, *Jusant*'s nameless lead moves with confidence. Clearly a practised mountaineer, they automatically clip their carabiner to attach points each time they reach for the first handhold of their next climb – though you'll manually reel it in, a little ritual that quickly becomes routine – and their stamina gauge drains more slowly than *Link*'s. You're always secured, in other words, the relative lack of peril helping focus your mind on the ascent. The lack of markings daubed in paint, meanwhile, encourages you to consider your route, not least when the only guide you have is the little fellow on your back, and they can only work their magic that points you in the direction of your next objective when you're standing on solid ground.

Besides, it's not like you don't *feel* the danger of your situation. One of *Jusant*'s greatest accomplishments is that, even with a rope attached to you, its trickier manoeuvres can cause you to catch your breath. Grab points aren't always within easy reach, requiring you sometimes to place both hands as you bend your legs by holding X, releasing it to launch yourself up or across, squeezing the triggers again to latch back onto a cliff face. On longer climbs, three pitons serve as player-determined checkpoints – these won't reset your stamina, but placing one means you won't have so far to return on the rare occasions your grip falters. And sometimes it will, when you extend your rope to run along a sheer face or swing across to a distant set of handholds and your leap falls just short. Even knowing this sturdiest of cords will arrest your fall, the scale of your environment and some splendid audio work – from rushing winds to grunts of exertion and panicked gasps – cause your stomach to lurch.

The challenge varies as you go: sunshine depletes your stamina more quickly, while winds affect the distance of your jumps closer to the peak. Together with a dynamic camera that communicates the scale of the task, *Jusant* fosters a deeper awareness of both your surroundings and your human limitations, making for a better class of climb: *mindful* not *mindless*, and not as exhausting as its indie counterparts. It's a game in which you always feel engaged, and sometimes intently focused: during one chapter we're concentrating so hard that we forget to take a screenshot, even as the view all but demands you extend a thumb toward the Share button. It's only afterwards that we work out its closest antecedent. Like the early *Tomb Raiders*, this is a game in which you truly get to know your environment, connecting with it physically and emotionally: a puzzle to be solved, yes, and a story to be unearthed, but also a space to respect and to feel humbled by.



LEFT You can throw out your rope to lasso protrusions marked with a Square-button prompt; double-tapping R1 lets you zip swiftly up to them. Sometimes you'll manually pull them down, which allows them to serve as shortcuts, letting you descend to areas you might not have fully combed for secrets.

MAIN The camera's position is always carefully considered. Rather than stay at your back, it drops beneath you to emphasise distance, or zooms out to underline scale.

BOTTOM Occasionally you need to go down to go up. Ziplines are scarce but enjoyable to ride



ABOVE The interface reminds you of all you need to consider without getting in the way. Sometimes it'll remind you to rest: tapping L3 sees you support yourself with one arm, wiggling the other to loosen tight muscles



The Lamplighters League

Harebrained Schemes quickly manages to distance its latest from its *XCOM* inspirations with a dose of individualism. The shady characters you recruit into your crew differ from one other radically enough that each new addition feels like a reward, and the threat of permanent loss a genuine worry. And smartly, while we get to know them a little between missions, where brief hideout chats fill in their backstories, their personalities shine through most of all when they express themselves in turn-based battle.

Ingrid, Lateef and Eddie are the first three introduced, strangers until a mysterious character known as Locke pays them handsomely for a package retrieval job. In the parlance of the game's 1930s America setting, Ingrid might be described as a 'tough broad' who lets her fists do the talking, while Lateef, self-nicknamed the Gentleman Djinn, is a sneaky thief who keeps a pistol handy, and Eddie a burly WWI veteran who blazes dual revolvers. Their talents dovetail effectively against the troops and monsters of a nefarious organisation known as the Banished Court. Eddie's skills can wound multiple targets, for instance, while Ingrid gets a bonus action each time she finishes one off with a thump. Movesets expand as you allocate skill points from a shared pool

Technical shortcomings prove quite irritating – not only raw performance issues such as a juddering framerate, but wonky AI that, for instance, sees enemies run when they should shoot – sometimes into damaging hazards

Developer Harebrained Schemes
Publisher Paradox Interactive
Format PC (tested), Xbox Series
Release Out now



IMMORAL DILEMMA

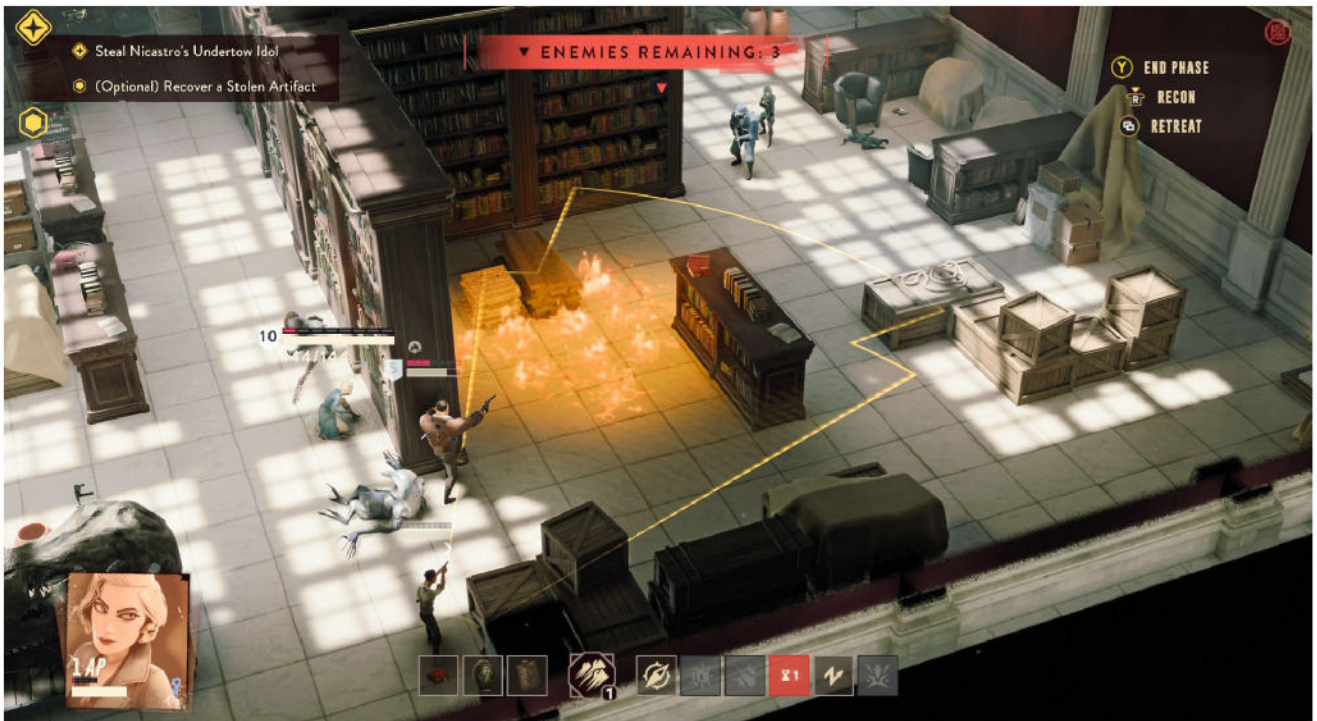
With three occult-powered villains making up the Banished Court, each with particular apocalyptic designs on the world, *The Lamplighters League* has us comparing different forms of evil. Nicastro is in tune with Lovecraftian gods and hopes to raise the oceans where they dwell. Industrialist Marteau would turn the planet into a factory powered by slave labour. Strum is a white supremacist looking to enforce his ideology. Pick your poison, as they say. Or make sure you stop them.

and equip magic cards that bestow further abilities and passive traits. Once the team grows, every combination of three you deploy prompts tactical adjustments.

It's unfortunate, then, that the world your dynamic team hopes to save is far more homogenous. Missions begin in a realtime stealth mode that bears resemblance to the *Commandos* series, and battles only trigger when you decide you're ready, or you get snared in an enemy vision cone. Until then, you pick off patrollers with three skills – a silent takedown, a proximity shock mine and a bull charge – and work your way into secluded areas with three more (lockpicking, climbing nets and vandalising weakened walls). In contrast to the turn-based fighting, however, your options here never evolve, effectively leaving you with the same puzzle in every mission. Nor does the level design increase in verticality or complexity – in fact, many locations are reused, differentiated only by a higher volume of enemies.

By the time we're ten hours into the campaign, we have a creeping sense that we're retreading ground. Non-critical missions – that are nonetheless essential to delay the count of a doomsday clock – become padding, while story missions are larger and present you with unique locations, but fail to introduce compelling objectives. Given all the admirable character work and tactical substance on display, it's a shame that individualism isn't spread more evenly.

6



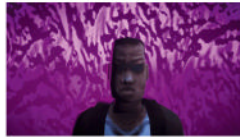
El Paso, Elsewhere

James Savage addresses you directly, in a gravelly voiceover inherited from Max Payne, who in turn inherited it from a hundred film-noir detectives before him. It could easily be just a pastiche of a pastiche, but this isn't some tough-guy snarl or ironic deadpan. Rather, it's a close-to-the-mic whisper, helping to create a sense of intimacy with a man whose facial expressions consist of two polygons rubbing together. It's an old trope given fresh purpose. If only the same could be said of everything that *El Paso, Elsewhere* borrows from its predecessors.

Approaching the game as a modern revival of the Max Payne bullet-ballet formula, you're likely to be disappointed. Those games were built around the player leaping forward into a room, picking out armed targets before they could react. Here, action generally plays out in tight corridors ill-suited to horizontal dives and rolls, while most enemies (vampires, werewolves, mummies) aren't packing any hardware more complex than their own claws, and will accordingly rush headlong in your direction on sight. *El Paso* might offer all the same bullet-time manoeuvres as Remedy's games, but in practice the backpedalling rhythm of its combat is more akin to an Id shooter from the previous decade.

The textures and models might be purposefully lo-fi – moreso even than its inspiration – but *El Paso's* lighting is top-notch, from long shadows playing across Savage's face to bright-coloured fog from which monsters emerge

Developer/publisher Strange Scaffold
Format PC (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now



MIN MAXING

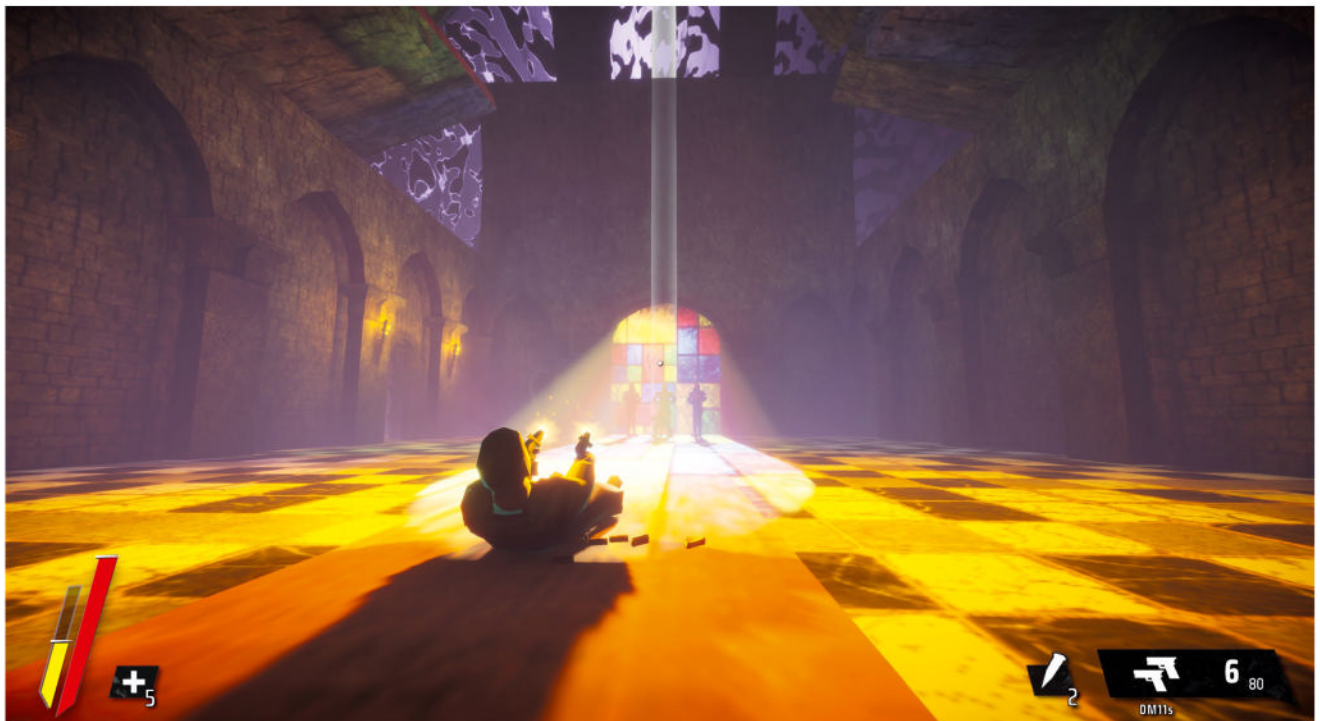
While Strange Scaffold has made no bones about this being a *Payne*-like, playing it as such results in frustration. Combat clicks into place a little more once we realise that triggering slow-motion *without* a dive is much better for lining up shots. The real game lies in managing your resources, not just the bullet-time meter but also ammunition and stakes, which never feel quite right but *do* have an AOE effect that reaches farther than seems feasible with human arms.

This doesn't prove an entirely satisfying mashup, not least since melee attacks never quite feel like they connect properly – neither those delivered by your enemies' claws nor your own, via a limited supply of wooden stakes that can be refilled by smashing up furniture. A more successful ingredient comes from farther along the Remedy back catalogue. With level geometry that rearranges itself in step with a custom soundtrack, *El Paso* often plays like an attempt to spin *Control's* Ashtray Maze out into an entire game.

It's similarly oozing style. The music is constantly shifting, techno beats giving way to a low tape hiss or, for certain set-pieces, a rap that reshapes itself around your progress. Early on, as the fresh ideas pile up – not just those tracks but also optical illusions and chunks of level that recur out of context – it threatens to be enough to offset the mechanical shortcomings.

Style can be substance, but it's fuel that burns quickly. And *El Paso* doesn't have nearly enough ideas to sustain its eight hours or so. There is, however, real substance in its story, which tackles topics of addiction and toxic relationships with surprising delicacy. As the voiceover flashes back to the early days of romance, it has more in common with Carrey's narration in *Eternal Sunshine* than Chandler or Bogart, the sound of a man pouring – or at least mumbling – his heart out. Low in the mix as it is, we'd recommend listening closely.

6



World Of Horror

Panstasz's much-delayed anthology of terror feels like it should come with a serving suggestion: this is, surely, best played on a CRT monitor, the older the better. It opens on a boot screen evoking the early IBM PC era, though its purposely abstruse interface is a little more Macintosh-coded: even for veteran players, this uncanny combination demonstrates the developer's understanding that what unsettles us most is what we don't fully understand. It's almost a game within a game, in other words, an idea that doesn't so much lend a further layer of remove as give you a presence within a world where the tendrils of evil that coil around this sleepy Japanese seaside town regularly threaten to stretch beyond the screen.

The game itself is another unholy hybrid: part visual novel, part tabletop RPG, part Roguelike. A standard playthrough asks you to investigate five different alliteratively titled mysteries, randomly chosen from a generous selection that has expanded throughout Early Access. Regardless of your choice – and the Old God whose maleficent influence directly impinges on your wanderings – you'll usually traipse between the various areas of your hometown, poking your nose into strange scenarios while trying not to lose your marbles.

If playing **Endless Mode** on **Cultist** difficulty is a recipe for frustration, the **Skeptic** setting lowers the peril too much, because this *should* feel like a desperate struggle you scrape through with body and mind a little broken

Developer Panstasz
Publisher Ysbryd Games
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch
Release Out now



PALETTE CLEANSER

Old computers have an inherently haunted quality, and *World Of Horror* plays up the more enervating elements of ancient hardware, with harsh sound effects and tinny music (at times arguably too grating) that add to the well-staged jolts and visual glitches that further the notion of the game itself being cursed. A range of 1- and 2-bit visual filters are offered, and whether you opt for black-and-white or a gaudier combo, these Ito-inspired MS Paint monsters are delightfully horrid.

That's *before* you bump into otherworldly forces (corporeal and otherwise) that try to cause you physical harm, too: combat is a turn-based dance that invites you to line up commands against a timeline, the range of options and speed of action determined by the weapons and spells you've picked up, the allies you've roped into following you, and the debilitating effects of the wounds already inflicted upon you. Fortune rarely favours the brave or even the mildly curious, and even when you're relatively safe, you don't feel it. Back at home you can run a restorative bath, or watch TV or collected VHS tapes for clues, but the fact that peering out through your peephole exists as an option at all gives you a sense that you're being watched.

The fear factor dissipates over successive runs, the Roguelike structure proving a slightly awkward fit, with luck given too prominent a role. Granted, it means subsequent runs are almost guaranteed to play out differently, even if you've seen all a story's endings before. But repeatedly failing skill checks can result in encounters becoming faintly comical as you flail at monstrosities that leave you teetering on the brink before you've barely got going. If its unpredictability is a double-edged sword, though, we can imagine ourselves returning to this as we would a beloved horror novel or film, albeit one whose macabre myths are capable of wrongfooting us even on the umpteenth revisit.

7



The Fabulous Fear Machine

Having invited us not to feed the monkeys in the title of its 2018 debut, Fictiorama Studios' latest leads us to wonder what the Spanish developer has against our simian brethren following a comic panel depicting the vivisection of an ape. But that's tame by the standards of *The Fabulous Fear Machine*, a narrative-led strategy game that revels in its tastelessness and is, largely, the better for it. Urged on by the eponymous carnival fortune teller, you're invited to fulfil the wishes of three unscrupulous characters: a lonely scientist turned pharmaceutical exec, a fretful opioid addict seeking to overcome the tremor that has held him back, and a fanatical televangelist. By implanting urban legends to stoke panic among the populace, you'll leave them more open to messages that will allow you to fulfil your ambitions. It's a queasily unsettling premise – a tabloid media simulator, if you will – but the knowledge that the monkey's paw will surely curl for the wishes of this trio compels you to guide them to the bitterest of ends.

In practice, it's less about strategy than time and resource management. Once you've planted a seed, you direct a pair of agents – resembling sentient crash-test dummies – to ensure its spread. Your main resource is Oleum, requiring the installation of refineries to keep

You needn't conquer all regions of the map, just enough to fulfil the goals that allow you to transmit your messages to the populace. But that purple patch doesn't always mean job done: rivals can still wrest territories back

Developer Fictiorama Studios
Publisher AMC Games
Format PC
Release Out now



THE NEXT EPISODE

Between chapters of each story you're given the chance to add an extra cog to the machine: you might be able to gain advance notice of your rival's next movement, for example, or refresh your selection of lucky cards, increase your agents' attributes, or delay the growth of your flame (which consumes more Oleum the hotter it gets). There's some crossover between the stories, too, with the payoff from the first leading to a chilling revelation right at the start of the second.

the flames of fear stoked, while you harvest essences and glean rumours to increase the potency of these tales of the unexpected – lurid stories that range from flesh-eating diseases to corpse desecraters to videogames that turn kids into violent monsters. Meanwhile, local events and rivals with conflicting goals must be dealt with – though digging up kompromat on a political opponent to scupper their plans, for instance, takes time away from exploring or resource gathering. And those resources might be better spent on levelling up your underlings, not least since unearthing their full backstories creates another free legend for you to seed further anxieties.

Watching the land steadily darken as terror spreads is troublingly compelling. And though Fictiorama struggles to square the fantastical nature of these legends with sociopolitical themes ripped from today's headlines, *The Fabulous Fear Machine* taps into uncomfortable truths about the spread of propaganda – not least in its second story, which shows it's not just sociopaths who can find themselves too far down the agitprop rabbit hole to turn back. True, attempts to add variety (region-specific myths with greater power, utopian legends that require subverting, a mysterious group seeking to reveal the secrets of the machine itself) amount to little more than moving resources in different directions. But this pulpy provocation has more than enough ideas to take root in your own monkey brain.

7



Subpar Pool

Strip down, and build back up: from *Rymdkapsel* to *Holedown*, Martin ‘grapefrukt’ Jonasson’s particular approach to game design has served the Malmö-based developer well. For your first few runs of this combination of pool and golf, though, you might wonder if that punning title is accurate in more ways than one. At heart, it’s the simplest imaginable pairing of these two pastimes: clear the table within a limited number of shots, else you’ll lose a life. With simple aiming controls (drag to aim, double-tap to shoot), a bounce line letting you know the immediate trajectory both of the cue ball and the target you’re striking, plus generous physics that mean a ball on the brink will almost always drop, it might seem too straightforward for its own good. But by then this ingenious game already has you in its pocket.

You steadily accrue a set of cards by completing challenges, though to describe this as a deckbuilder would be misleading. Rather, combinations of cards allow you to define the parameters of your next run, your selection doubling as a difficulty modifier. With more balls on the table you’re more likely to pot one with another, for instance, though in some cases the challenge is bound to cards or table settings purposely designed to make things trickier. With portals on two

Deliberately potting the white is a valid tactic, and not only because it lets you reposition – Hunter balls might well pursue you into the hole. Lockers, meanwhile, are fixed in place until you sever the ties between them

Developer/publisher

Grapefrukt Games
 Format Android, iOS (tested),
 PC, Switch
 Release Out now



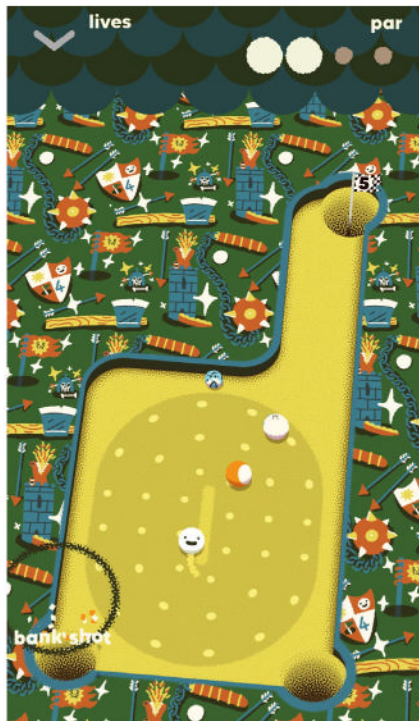
TABLE SETTING

Hats off to art director Sonny Ross – it’s remarkable how two tiny eye-dots and the odd micro-expression lend character to a set of balls. And credit, too, to Niklas Ström, whose soundscape nimbly hops from easygoing to ominous: all jaunty music and characterful chirps at the start of a run to jittery whimpers when you’re down to your final shot. And surely more golf games would benefit from vocoder score announcements?

cushions of the Gateways table (where holes are larger, too), it’s harder to avoid potting yourself to earn a ‘flawless’ rating; moreso to complete a set of five with fewer than 20 trick shots, not least with back-to-back pots counting toward your tally. Any remaining balls darken and reappear on the following table as an extra hazard – here, like the real thing, there’s a penalty for potting the black too soon.

Eventually, you can have up to eight cards active at once, leading to almost countless variants: with more room you’re less likely to accidentally sink the white, but long-potting a heavy Chonker ball won’t be as easy to pull off. On one run you might aim to preserve the fragile Crystal variants; during the next, deliberately launching them off the cushions to shatter them might just save par. On Links tables, one hole closes as another opens, leading to multi-pot accidents, happy or otherwise. Meanwhile, the ball-carrying conveyors of Belts demand pinpoint aiming; pair with Fast Run, where a timer ticks down as you spin your aiming line, and you’re in for a devilishly hard time, even with the rule-bending ability to take aim while the cue ball is still in motion. The challenges keep coming even when all the cards have been dealt, though no other motivators are required. Jonasson is evidently confident that his game has enough to keep you coming back regardless. He’s right to be.

8



Hellboy: Web Of Wyrd

The pitch sells itself. ‘Hades meets *God Hand* in an over-the-shoulder thirdperson beat-’em-up’ sounds appealing; factor in a protagonist with a right hand made of stone that hits like a sledgehammer and it becomes more appetising still. Consider, too, that developer Upstream Arcade’s *West Of Dead* borrowed the stark colours and shadows of Mike Mignola’s art, and *Web Of Wyrd* seems like an open-goal opportunity. As, of course, did the idea of a cinematic reboot starring David Harbour and directed by the man behind *The Descent*. And we know how that turned out.

Warning bells ring out from the opening moments of this listless brawler. Its cut-price presentation is immediately concerning: it’s a curiously ragged approximation of Mignola’s crisp linework, coming across as slapdash rather than appealingly simple, if close enough to just about pass muster. At any rate, the visuals are the least of *Hellboy*’s sins. Its setup and structure are lifted from Supergiant’s genre-leading Roguelike: you move between rooms of an otherworldly labyrinth, gradually powering up via blessings from mythical allies. Although here the selection of offerings is embarrassingly meagre, with few having any meaningful effect on how you approach its battles.

Stunning enemies with bullets or thrown masonry before launching light-punch combos is a failsafe tactic, since consecutive attacks boost damage output. Pin an opponent against a wall and they’ll take a pummelling

Developer Upstream Arcade
Publisher Good Shepherd Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, PS5 (tested), Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now



PARANORMAL INACTIVITY

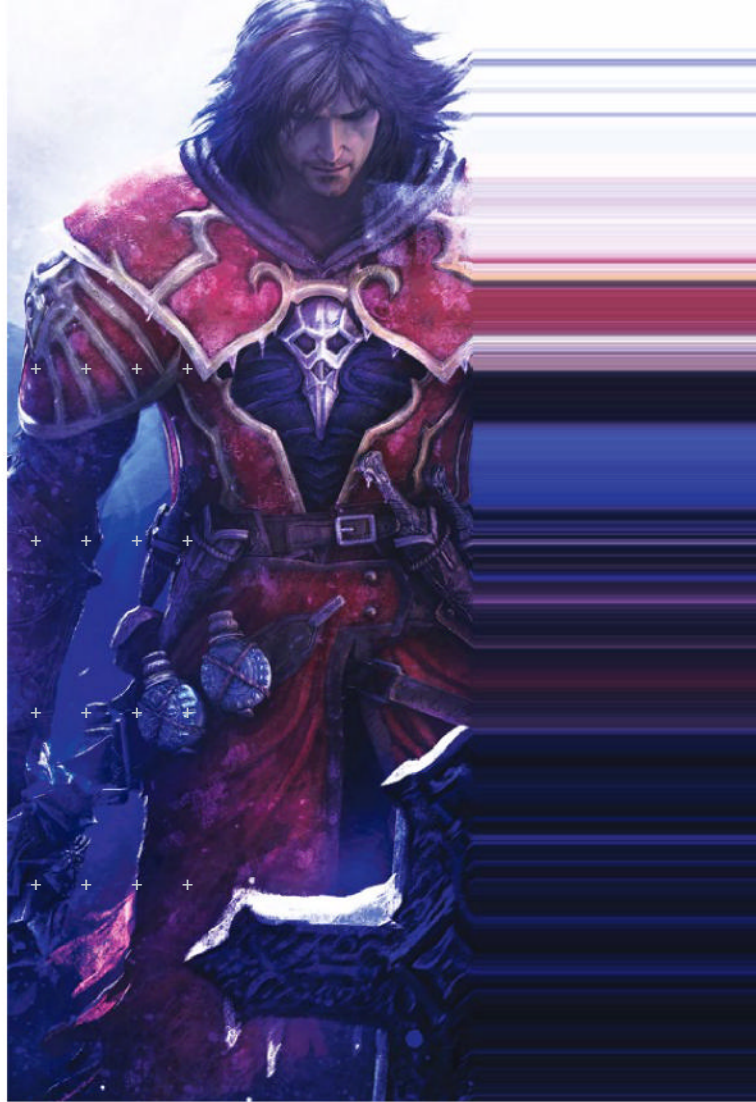
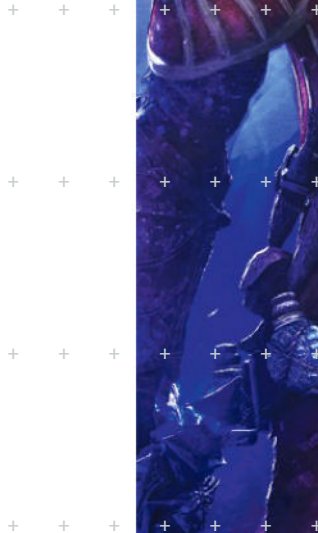
Between runs – early descents are cut short after beating each area’s boss – you’ll return to The Butterfly House, where you can chinwag with your fellow BPRD agents. The dialogue and performances are robust, though you’re given little reason to care about the story. Here, as well as spending the spoils from your last run on new weapons, charms and upgrades, you can inspect any artefacts you’ve found – alas, Hellboy takes up so much screen space he can obscure them completely.

It makes sense that Upstream Arcade should focus on its lead’s Right Hand Of Doom, but the result is deadeningly repetitive: every combat room contains a string of dull-witted ‘mooks’ that can be destroyed in a single punch, dropping gems that top up an armour gauge which enemies must break through to chip away our hero’s health. The same, alas, applies to *Hellboy*’s larger opponents, which makes the early stages profoundly tedious, particularly when they cower behind a shield or protective arm – a strategy that only prolongs the agony. The measured pace that encouraged precision and care in *West Of Dead* makes little sense for a brawler; the result is irritatingly sluggish, whether you’re wading in with fists or retreating to fire your pistol (which would be overpowered if not for its painfully slow reloads).

Web Of Wyrd does a terrible job of explaining itself, though once we get to grips with its combat, we wonder if that’s a deliberate ploy to extend its duration; likewise a narrative twist that requires you to trudge through the same four dungeons three times over. Soon enough we hit upon a couple of approaches that make mincemeat of any opponent, not that the lycans or walking bats of later stages represent any advance on the golems of the first. There is, at least, a pleasing weight to impacts as you thump enemies into walls or slam them into the floor. Good job, too, since there’s precious little else to enjoy here.

4





Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow

A dark night of the soul for a venerable series
– and one of its most intriguing instalments

BY JON BAILES



Developer MercurySteam, Kojima Productions **Publisher** Konami **Format** 360, PC, PS3 **Release** 2010

Gabriel Belmont is a classic conflicted hero, torn between light and dark. Sent out to discover why god has forsaken the world, the pious paladin of the

Brotherhood Of Light is set for a purity test of – quite literally – biblical proportions. *Lords Of Shadow* pushes beyond its 2D forebears' hammy, creature-feature approach to gothic imagery. Instead it adopts a Christian bent, one that's hard to miss as Gabriel journeys like Jesus into the wilderness. There our hero is beset not so much by temptation as armies of monsters. But fortunately – to mix our metaphors a little – the cross he has to bear is a very effective weapon.

Perhaps it was inevitable, as a Japanese series that always treated European mythology as a buffet of superficial delights fell into the hands of a developer more culturally invested in the setting – namely, Madrid's MercurySteam. But take into consideration that *Lords Of Shadow* didn't start life as a *Castlevania* game, and it becomes apparent that this reboot is caught in a conflict of its own, between the lighter fantasy of the series' past and its own darker, weightier vision.

Despite the change in tone, the connections to *Castlevania* history run far deeper than just the Belmont name, and into the game's structure. Split over 46 stages, Gabriel's journey is not only a near-parallel to Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights but also the format of *Super Castlevania IV* – and of the recent *Castlevania* animated series. It's easy to imagine each of these discrete tales of heroism as self-contained 20-minute episodes, with their own portentous titles: Gabriel Versus The Ice Titan, Gabriel In The Lair Of The Giant Spiders.

These heftier narrative ambitions are apparent in the star power of *Lords Of Shadow*'s cast – a sign, perhaps, of the involvement of producer Hideo Kojima. Narrating the chapter introductions, Patrick Stewart gamely reads his lines with ominous tenor. Gabriel himself – big, bulky, with fabulous hair – gains gravitas from Robert Carlyle, although playing the strong, silent type, the actor doesn't get that much to do.

(Assuming, at least, that he didn't also record the effort noises associated with combat and climbing walls.)

Further power then comes from a world and mythology that manages to cohere even as it's divided into canapé-sized chunks. The first leg of the adventure, in which Gabriel seeks out the Guardian Of The Lake – an old pagan god he hopes can help, since his own deity has gone offline – sets the standards. You don't merely churn through underlings on the way to a boss; you work through specific, godforsaken sites to reach a hermitted legend driven to the edge of existence by the rise of monotheism.

The first stage, a tutorial, sees Gabriel arrive at a village gate as the locals prepare for a Lycan attack. In grim rain and mud you repel hairless werewolves and a bearlike warg. Next you venture into the Lycan-infested forest, where a magic horse offers its back, turning the stage into a battle racer in which you swipe off the warg-riding Lycans that encroach from either side. That leads to the dead bog, with its goblins and green waters full of undead corpses that pull trespassers in. Only a few enemy types populate this whole sequence, yet as such each feels grounded in its location, as if it really does dwell there. By the time the ice titan emerges from the frozen Lake Of Oblivion, sending you into *Shadow Of The Colossus* mode, you can't ignore the sense that the action is being made to fit the lore, rather than the other way around.

Meanwhile, the action trundles along with thrilling proficiency. *God Of War* is the obvious influence on combat, as Gabriel smashes foes with the sharpened extremities of his battle crucifix (not quite, you suspect, what Jesus would do) and swings crowd-controlling arcs with the weighted chain that unravels from inside. Series-staple daggers make for replenishable throwing weapons. You block, dodge and parry, then deliver simple QTE finishing moves when a battered creature begins to flash. In time, the pull of conflicting forces is literalised into a magic system, where light lets you recharge health as you attack, while dark increases your damage output and ordinary attacks replenish your mana supplies.

The suite of upgrades Gabriel unlocks throughout his journey maintain the ▶





narrative texture too. New combat techniques, such as ferocious chain lashes and spins, embody his fury as his mind blackens, while the relics he collects along his way (in the finest traditions of the genre to which *Castlevania* lent at least half its name) are embedded in the lore of the world. When you're awarded a gauntlet that lets Gabriel smash statues around and whack pressure panels in the floor, or boots that give him the power to sprint, it's because you've acquired a unique holy treasure: precious, hidden and guarded, if not prised from one of the Lords Of Shadow themselves. Even a second projectile weapon, the holy-water flask, is a miraculous creation that you must recover, not something that randomly drops out of smashed candelabra.

The consistency isn't always maintained, however. After the first act, when Gabriel



Malphas, whose spell protects the undead's domain, she in turn guarded by an enormous ogre. Once inside the grand chateau, you encounter skeleton warriors in the sewers – perhaps ancient heroes defeated and flushed away – while in a great hall you yank at huge drapes to reveal sunlight, damaging the swarming bloodsuckers. Soon the lord's daughter will challenge you to a life-size boardgame, and you'll stumble through the

Konami deployed Hideo Kojima to work with MercurySteam in an advisory role. His input led to changes in Gabriel's character design, giving him a softer, more sophisticated visage

EACH TIME IT THREATENS TO BECOME PURE LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT, THE GAME REGATHERS ITS DARK STRENGTH

meets Pan, the Guardian Of The Lake, and the platforming and combat intensify, levels give way to routine. Venturing to dethrone the lord of the Lycans means more carving up werewolves, of which you've already done your share by then. At other times, smaller details stick out like a sore, wolf-bitten thumb. Why, for example, when you next head to the home of the vampires, is there a *warg* loose in the castle? Puzzles that have you punching and rotating mirror-holding statues to reflect beams of light can also feel contrived, as does the half-baked concept of returning to previous levels to collect items that were previously out of reach.

Yet each time it threatens to become pure light entertainment, *Lords Of Shadow* regathers its dark strength. The vampire realm is a substantial highlight, first tasking you with taking down the crow witch

lab of one Dr Frankenstein, packed with sparking Tesla coils and automatons. Finally, you scale the clocktower, a true slice of *Castlevania* in 3D, mercifully without the flying gorgon heads. The ideas don't dry up there, either, with one particularly memorable later puzzle inserting a shrunken Gabriel into the workings of a music box.

If *Lords Of Shadow's* dark-light balance is often harmonious in such stretches, however, it's ultimately tainted by some clumsy writing. On one side, that comes from overbearing parenting as the game guides you through each step, as if by decree that players should never have to figure out much for themselves. Thus, a new monster emerges accompanied by an intrusive message advising you to jump over its AOE attack, or you glance at an out-of-reach treasure chest only to be informed you don't have the



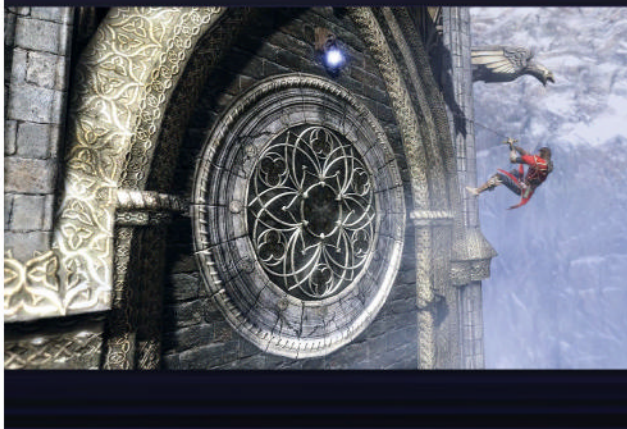
Everywhere you go, trials await to bar the unworthy, with bodies of fallen knights underlining the point



BROKEBACK MOUNTING

Surely cribbing from *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Lords Of Shadow* throws in the ability to hop aboard larger enemies when they're stunned. Ride a warg or a troll and you can turn it on its mates, wildly swinging fists or claws, and use it to batter down heavy doors or leap large gaps which gate progress from time to time. Once you're done, you can mercilessly snap your reluctant steed's neck with Gabriel's chain. What initially adds an extra, devilish dimension to proceedings, however, becomes overused to the point of slapstick silliness and, as the game seeks to vary the creatures at your disposal, gets more ridiculous still. Let's just say if we ever want to find gaming's equivalent of jumping the shark, mounting the spider is well worth consideration.

Monsters tend to have fairly similar attack patterns, with quick swipes and a jumping or dashing attack. The challenge is mostly in managing crowds



A combination of fixed and dynamic camera shots maintains an eye for the dramatic as well as the functional. Some platforming sections even venture into a classic side-on perspective

required ability to get there yet. Worst of all, the game's titan battles are directed by text at every stage. In a self-cohesive world, it's odd to see such non-diegetic interventions.

While a good Christian would forgive such sins, though, they may feel less charitable about the plot mechanism that stakes Gabriel's motivations on a pair of dead women. With the understanding he might be able to bring his executed wife back to life, he adopts a tunnel vision that forgoes all moral concerns. That 'darkness' leads to the death of another female character, a girl named Claudia who aids Gabriel for a few episodes before he apparently, unconsciously, bumps her off in his sleep. That these women exist purely to texture the protagonist is sloppy writing, and equally undermines the gravity of Gabriel's fall from grace. This paucity of finesse is often

matched by the script, as the Lords spout such hackneyed lines as "We're alike, you and I," and "Who's the real monster here, Gabriel?" You will pine for the days when a man was a miserable little pile of secrets.

Like Jesus before him, Gabriel ends his purgatory facing Satan himself. Unlike Jesus, he claims victory by beating the holy hell out of his adversary. With the devil banished, the ghosts of the slain women appear before Gabriel to forgive his sins, but he's left cursed with eternal life, which just leaves time for a present-day epilogue that reveals Gabriel has gradually morphed into Dracula himself. Sure, why not? More curious than this twist, though, is that *Lords Of Shadow* jettisons its light-dark struggle for plot developments that emphasise fate over free will, a strange reversal of its religious themes. Gabriel's inner conflict, so heavily emphasised throughout, becomes a triviality.

Then again, the legacy of *Lords Of Shadow* perhaps is one of cruel fate. Its release — sandwiched between those of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, games which took inspiration from this same series but reinvented it more thoroughly, offering the antidote to cloying guidance and irreversibly altering our expectations of dark fantasy in games — was surely unfortunate. In FromSoftware's unrelenting wake, and with a lacklustre sequel in 2014, the partial brilliance of *Lords Of Shadow* has become a footnote in the period. Like Gabriel, it may never ascend, the struggle to balance light and dark ultimately leaving it in the shade. ■





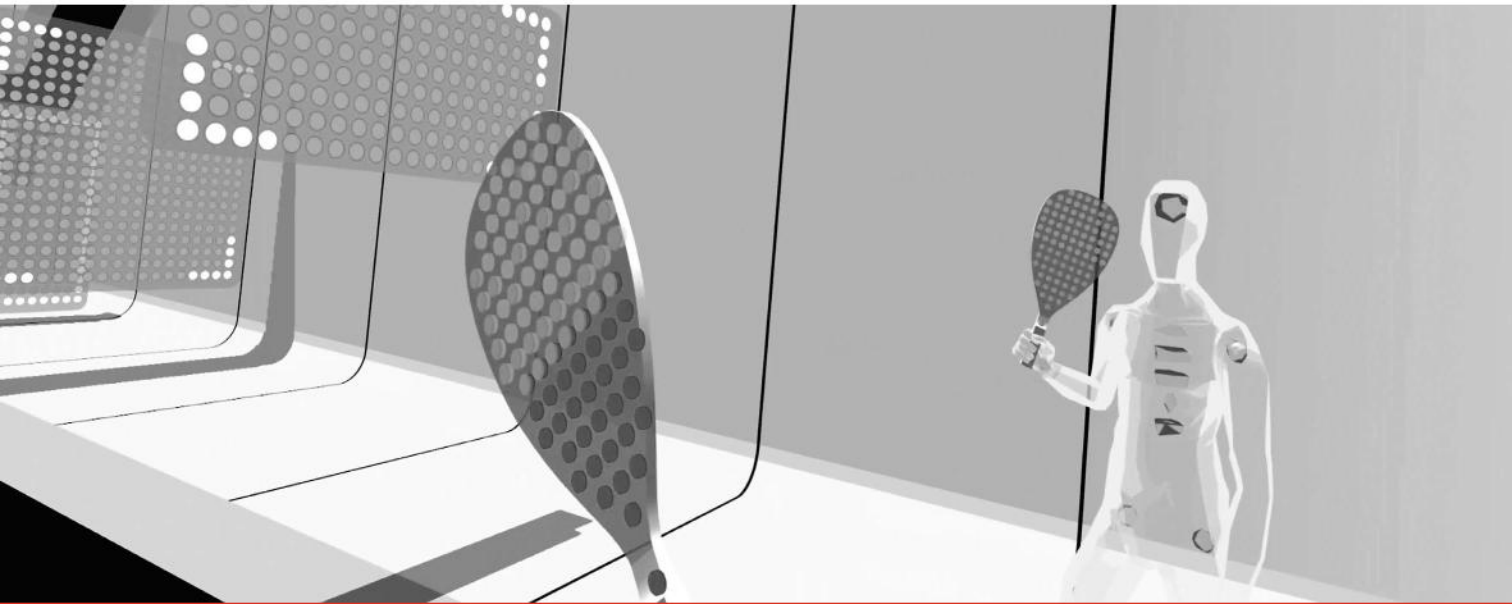
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A progress report on the games we just can't quit



C-Smash VRS

Developer Wolf & Wood Interactive Publisher RapidEyeMovers Format PSVR2 Release 2023

As told in E382's cover feature, *C-Smash VRS* was made in the spirit of its predecessor — which, in part, meant quickly. The game's big September update arrived around the first anniversary not of its release, but the beginning of its *production*. An admirable approach, for sure, in a world where development takes ever longer — but that brevity was a little too apparent in the initial release, resulting in a game that was less a smash than a slightly fumbled hit.

Size isn't the most important measure when it comes to a game's quality, of course, and *C-Smash's* slenderness could be passed off as further commitment to the clean minimalism seen throughout its visual design. This shortage does mean, however, that we've not been coaxed to don the PSVR2 headset and pick up our racquet in the intervening months. Until this update, with its promises of a near-doubling in size.

Unsurprisingly, that minimalist aesthetic remains *C-Smash's* strongest asset. Immediately, we're once more nodding along in our headset to Ken Ishii's electronica — or rather the new Unkle remix — and we still salute the space station's hazmat-suited DJ every time our platform whizzes past on the way to a match. Once play begins, though, the game reveals an old shortcoming. VR's field of view being less than total,

the point where ball meets racquet is in a blind spot, making it hard to judge if you're going to miss — and, when you do, exactly *why*. Lest this stray into the old idiomatic territory regarding workmen and their tools, though, we'll note that the ensuing sense of deflation is offset somewhat by the new action replay, with its record of how you fluffed a match's final shot, presented from a hard-to-argue-with thirdperson view.

But what of the new mode, Infinite, first promised in the aforementioned cover feature? It's a fine addition, arguably presenting the game at its purest: hitting balls off walls, for as long as you can, with a (literal) nod to *Beat Saber* as you duck under and around panels you've failed to eliminate. Still, we miss having someone to trade shots with — a prolonged rally, getting faster with every return, is as electrifying as the real thing — and, during our tests, it's a challenge to find a game online. The while-you-wait warmup sessions now offer an AI opponent to play against, yet we're disappointed to discover this isn't a humanoid-shaped rival but a flat block. The emotes that pass over its dot-matrix face are no competition for watching someone's body sag when they miss. We'll try again tomorrow. Perhaps inspired by sampling the game at EGX recently, more potential opponents will have tuned in. ■

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November 30







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