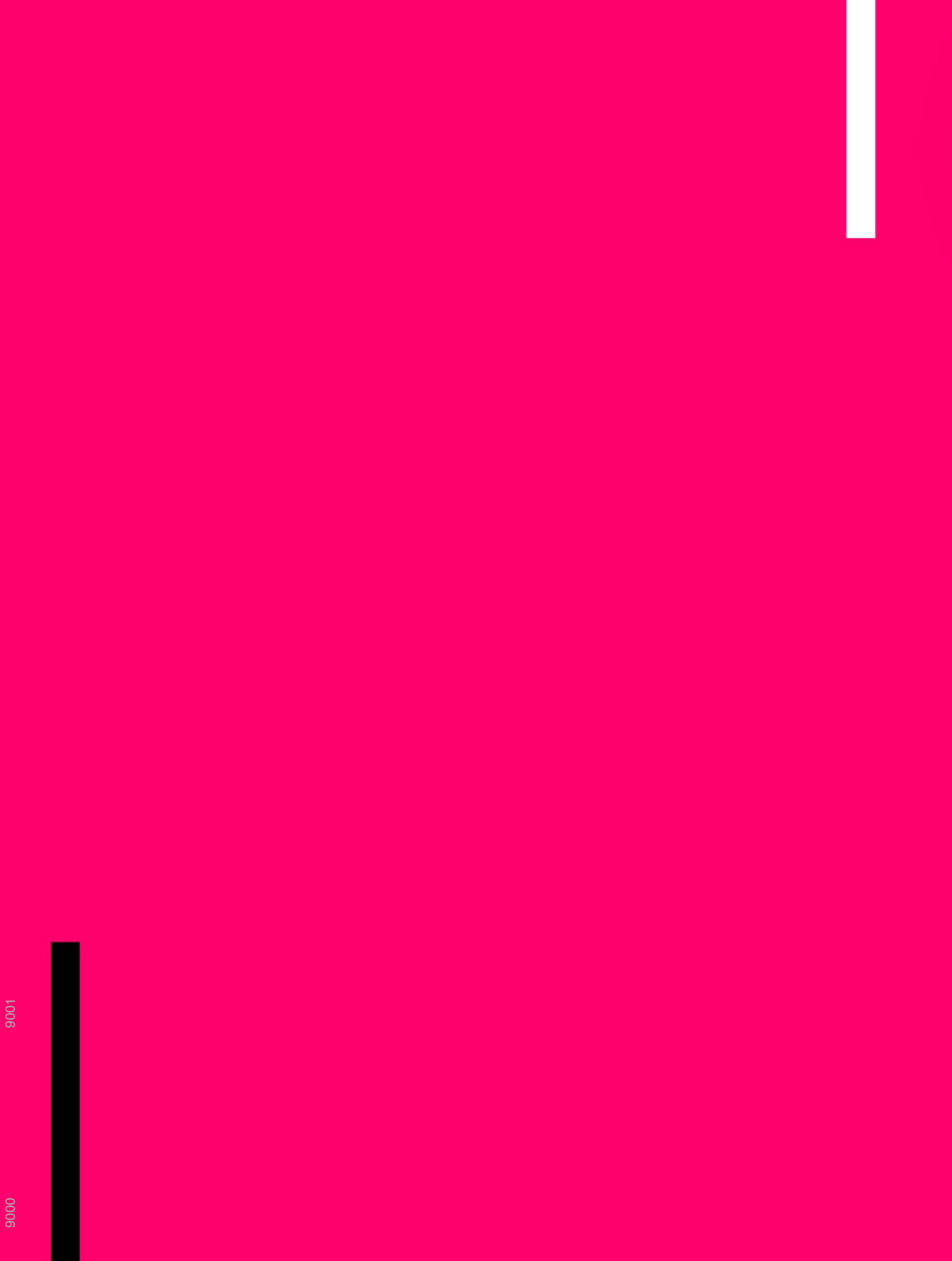




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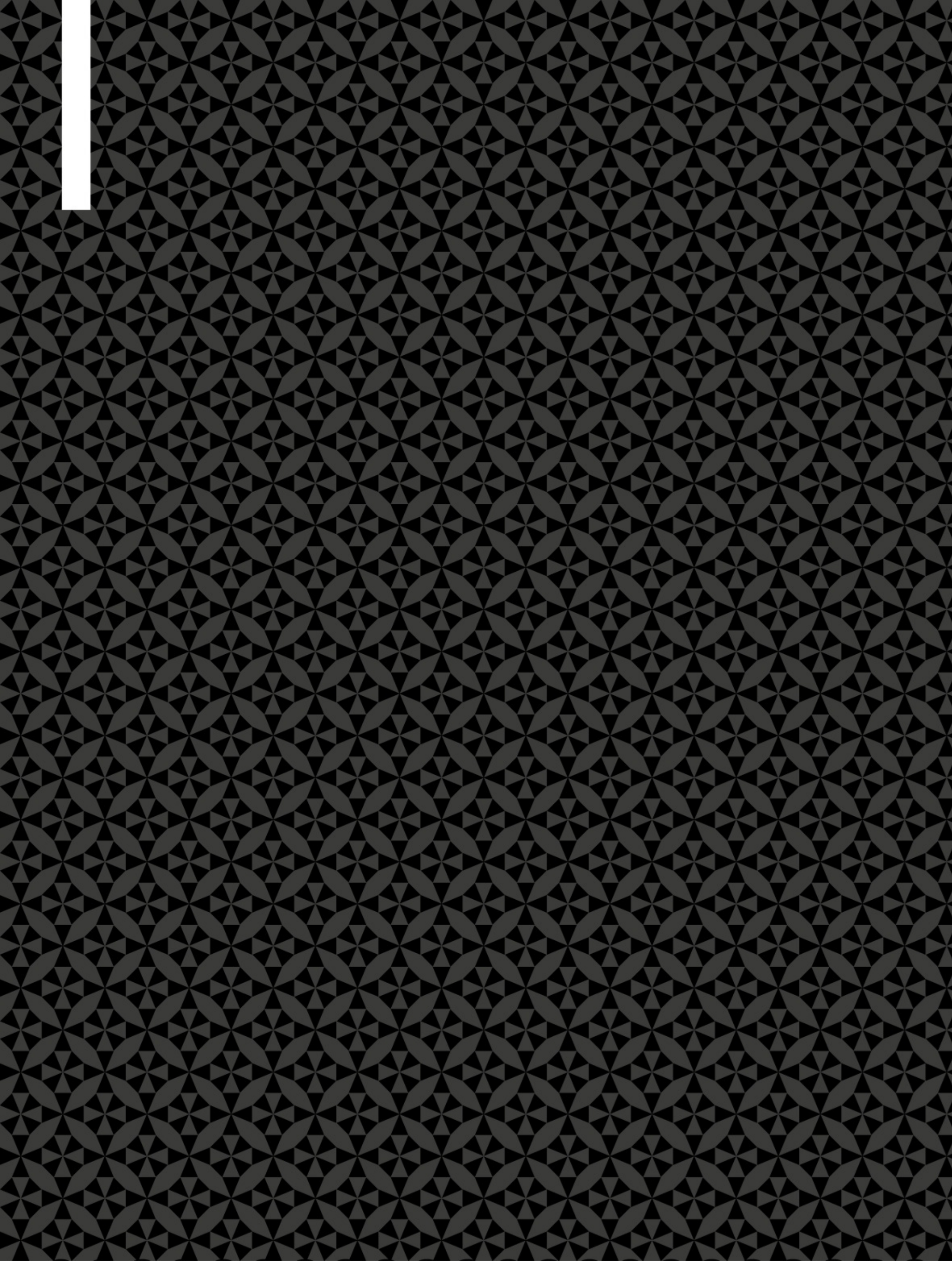
THE FUTURE OF ENTERTAINMENT

RESIDENT EVIL 3

THE STORY BEHIND THE REBIRTH OF
A SURVIVAL HORROR CLASSIC

#343

APRIL 2020



Don't change a hair for me, not if you care for me

As the sun begins to set on a generation of consoles, our thoughts inevitably turn to its legacy. The era of PS4 and Xbox One was one of unprecedented change. Walls that previously felt unbreakable came tumbling down as cross-platform multiplayer became a reality. Mid-generation hardware refreshes came with hefty power increases; consumer VR actually happened. Brick-and-mortar retail was rendered as good as irrelevant by the rise of digital sales, with frequent storefront discounts crushing the secondhand market. And the concept of the game-as-service dramatically increased a title's staying power.

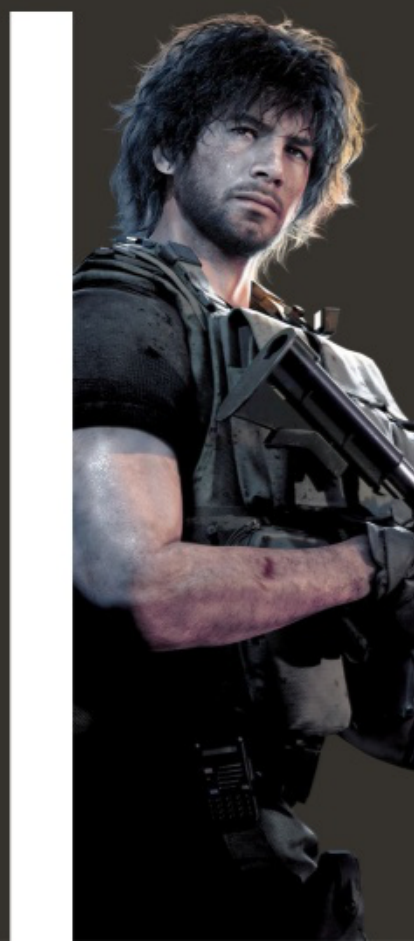
Yet for all the forward progress made, it was also a generation defined by nostalgia, in which we proved to developers and publishers our undying eagerness to revisit the classics again and again. That's certainly something Yu Suzuki, who stars in *Collected Works* this issue, can appreciate: Kickstarter quickly proved itself the natural home for developers seeking to bring back forgotten favourites, and Suzuki's *Shenmue III* remains the most successful Kickstarter game to date.

The addition of backwards compatibility with Xbox 360 was the turning point for Xbox One – the moment at which Microsoft embarked on a generation-long campaign to restore the goodwill it lost at the console's miserable unveiling. Today, compatibility defines the Xbox project. It's just one of the issues that makes the coming generation so different to what has come before. In *Knowledge*, while we wait for concrete details on the new consoles to emerge, we try to make sense of it all.

Over the course of this generation, the phrase 'remaster' has come to mean many things, and not all of them are positive. But there is no faulting Capcom's handling of the *Resident Evil* back catalogue. After last year's winning remake of *RE2*, it is now turning its attention to the third game in the series – and from what we've seen, it's a fitting swan song for one of the great generations of hardware. The story begins on p58.



Exclusive subscriber edition



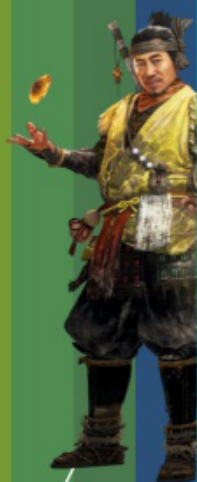
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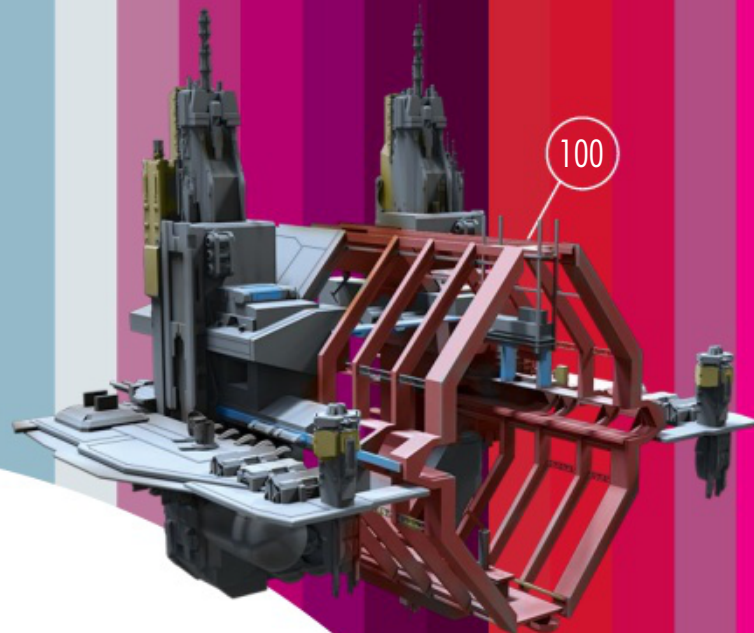
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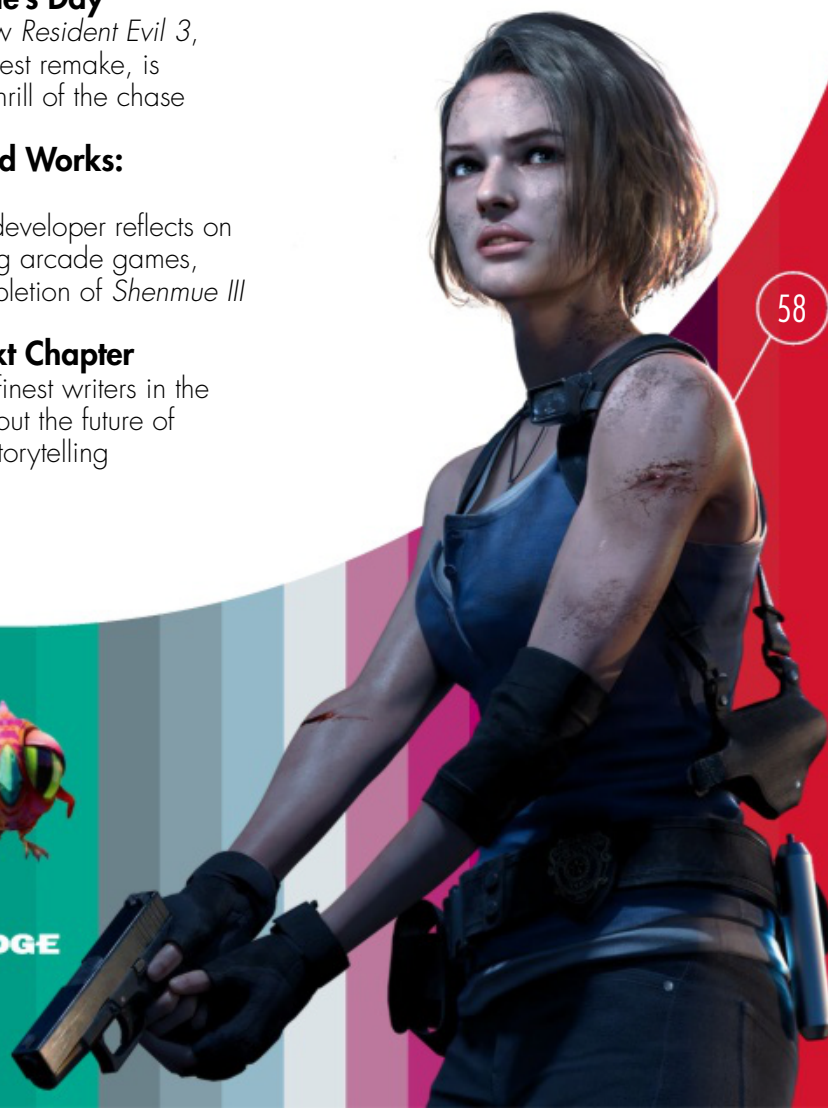
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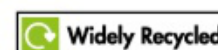


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Fighting talk

With a new round of consoles drawing near, we examine the battlegrounds on which the next generation will fight

Two months in to 2020 and news of the next generation of consoles is tantalisingly thin on the ground. By this time of year in 2013, we'd already had our first look at PS4; as we send to press, at least, Sony is still saying nothing of substance about PS5, and it appears nothing is imminent (though rumours of an imminent Wired cover continue to circulate). Microsoft is similarly keeping its powder dry until, current betting suggests, the week of GDC. Both companies are getting much better at keeping secrets – the bulk of the developers with whom we've had quiet words of late are also in the dark – and there's an element of brinkmanship at play, each side wary of giving the other an advantage by showing its hand first.

One of the defining moments of the battle for hearts, minds and wallets ahead of the launch of Xbox One and PS4 was Microsoft's terribly botched handling of the used-game issue. In the run-up to the console's proper unveiling in May 2013, rumours had swirled that Xbox One games would be single-use, shutting down the secondhand market – great for publishers who had spent the 360 era increasingly fretful about the roaring trade in preowned games, but terrible for punters. Sony's response at E3 the following month was an instant classic: a video explainer on how PS4 would handle used titles in which Shuhei Yoshida simply passed a game box to Adam Boyes. Microsoft had given its great rival an open goal, and it buried the shot.

No doubt both platform holders have that moment in mind as they assemble their marketing schedules for the coming year. Which makes it all the more baffling that Microsoft has, once again, left its goalposts unattended. Matt Booty, freshly minted head of Xbox Game Studios, told



Former Guerrilla CEO Hermen Hulst now heads up Sony's firstparty studios, and as such will have a huge role in how the generation plays out

MCV in January that there would be no Series X exclusives during its first year on shelves. At least the reasoning this time around is more consumer-friendly: the official line is that Microsoft doesn't want anyone buying into the Xbox ecosystem now to find their purchase obsolete when Series X arrives. But it once again means that the buildup to the launch of a new Xbox is being hamstrung by uncomfortable, and in some ways unnecessary, questions.

The Xbox division has a curious sort of form for this sort of thing – announcing a new product then swiftly giving you one less reason to buy it. At E3 in 2016, it unveiled the slimmed-down Xbox One S redesign at the start of its conference, and ended it by announcing the far more powerful Project Scorpio, which would later become Xbox One X. Project Scarlett's hype campaign was later compromised by airily vague talk about XCloud. At least this time around it's getting the bad news out of the way early doors. For all the nobility of Microsoft's intentions, you have to question the wisdom of how it chooses to talk about them. That is far from the only awkward question that the coming generation poses, however, and while we wait for concrete details to emerge, now seems as good a time as any to chew them over.

For all that the terms of engagement have changed since the launch of PS4 and Xbox One, the absence of any true Series X exclusives will make the console a very difficult sell for Microsoft. The hypothetical videogame enthusiast, who currently owns a PS4 Pro and Xbox One X

and only has the budget for one new console this year, simply has no decision to make. Everything available on Series X this winter will be playable on a 4K-ready console that already sits under their TV, while PS5 will launch with exclusive games built from the ground up around its processing power and feature set. Rare indeed is the new console that launches with a good old-fashioned 'killer app'. Launching one without any exclusive games at all is simply unprecedented. It means Microsoft will have to be creative in how it pitches Series X to consumers. It is, at least, something in which it has plenty of experience; it's spent most of this generation doing it.

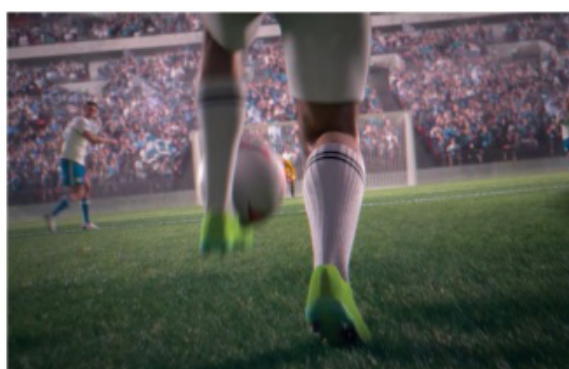
The announcement of backwards compatibility at E3 2015 was the turning point Xbox One – the moment at which Microsoft began to claw back goodwill after the console's disastrous start. Central to the feature's appeal is that it doesn't cost the user a penny: the box of old 360 or original Xbox games up in the loft is now playable on the latest machine. Microsoft's greatest challenge when it comes to Series X is making backwards compatibility alluring enough to be a hefty purchase incentive.

Certainly plenty of early adopters will be interested in backwards compatibility. How Series X handles the biggest live-service games will, therefore, be critical. Yes, you'll be able to log in to *Fortnite*, *GTA Online*, or *Minecraft* on Series X launch day. But will they look, or feel, different enough to justify the expense? Such has the landscape shifted over the course of the current generation that Microsoft doesn't just need to court ►

With no exclusive games, Microsoft will have to be creative in how it pitches Series X to consumers



For all that the coming generation is a very different one to what we've seen before, expect the platform holders to still lean heavily on the classics. That Microsoft should choose to use *Halo*, *Forza* and *FIFA* in its Series X announcement trailer is your regular reminder that the more things change, the more they stay the same



STONE CALENDAR

The wait isn't just about the what – it's the when, too



With Sony staying away from E3 for a second year, the usual rhythm of a new generation will be disrupted. Sony unveiled PS4 in February 2013, and Microsoft did likewise for Xbox One in May, with further details arriving at E3 and Gamescom. Over the course of the generation the industry has come to realise the value of doing things on its own terms. That Sony has so far used a US print publication to dribble out PS5 info is a rather odd interpretation of how things have changed, though we appreciate the spirit. Microsoft, meanwhile, appears to be playing things straight, stopping off at GDC before, rumours indicate, a blowout at E3.

SWITCHING UP Nintendo may not have a new console on shelves this year – it has already ruled out a 2020 release for the long-rumoured Switch Pro. But it can surely not simply stand back and watch as Switch is rendered a generation off the pace by the launch of Series X and PS5. After a quiet couple of years following an outrageously successful first 12 months on sale, the coming year will be vital for Switch. *Breath Of The Wild 2* is the star attraction, though we expect to see it on shelves before the new consoles arrive; in any case, Nintendo will need more than that if it is to keep its place in the headlines once the other platform holders' marketing machines spin into high gear.



developers to fill its new box with new games, but to ensure their old ones are brought up to snuff too. This in itself presents a problem. No doubt Series X could run *Destiny 2*, say, at 60fps. But given Bungie's nervousness about letting PC and console owners play together, how would it feel about players on the 30fps Xbox One line finding themselves matched against others running the game at twice the refresh rate? This is not just a Microsoft problem: Sony, so the rumour mill has it, is to offer backwards compatibility with the current generation on PS5. But it can at least distract would-be moaners with a shiny exclusive or two.

Less of a problem for launch, but potentially more of a concern in the long term, is Game Pass. The all-you-can-eat Xbox subscription service has been one of this generation's great innovations, raising the bar to such an extent it's hard to see any rival platform holder matching it. That in itself is instructive. Clearly the higher-ups at Microsoft have seen the rapid rise of Netflix, and decided that making its videogame equivalent should be the Xbox division's top priority. So many of the decisions Microsoft has made since Game Pass' launch have fed into it: the rush of studio acquisitions to ensure the content pipeline is well stocked, the big-money deals to get new or new-enough thirdparty games onto the service, even the way new hardware unveilings are always followed by the announcement of the next one. Wherever you go, your library will follow. Microsoft, like Netflix, wants to get you in its ecosystem, and keep you there.

Lovely stuff, providing you're prepared to overlook the extent to which Netflix's entire operating model is built on debt. By the end of September 2019, it owed over \$12 billion, and told investors it would continue to borrow to fund more content development – something which has grown ever more important in an increasingly crowded space that Netflix once had all to itself. Netflix may have been the most valuable US stock of the 2010s, with growth of over 3,000 per cent over the course of the decade. But it's an empire built on sand, and its first quarterly drop in US subscriber numbers last year prompted stock to fall more than ten per cent.

Yes, Microsoft's exposure is relatively limited; it has plenty more revenue streams

than just Game Pass. But the Xbox division is staking an awful lot on it, and none of its endeavours will have come cheap. The offering to consumers is outrageously generous, particularly if you take advantage of the ongoing deal that lets you convert up to three years' worth of Xbox Live membership into Game Pass Ultimate for £1 (a loophole, supposedly, that Microsoft is yet to close, months after it was discovered). The terms offered to developers are hard to resist, too, though we're told that a recent revision of the standard Game Pass deal tilted the balance back in Microsoft's favour a little. But if both players and developers are being made offers they can't refuse, presumably it's the one making them that's taking the financial hit – and you have to wonder what happens when Microsoft, or the investment community, decides that needs to change. Upset that parlous balance by giving creators or consumers a worse deal, and your service risks toppling quickly.

No doubt Microsoft

has priced all this in. And it has the unique advantage of having spent the Xbox One era firmly in second place; few would dispute that it seems well placed to turn things around. Sony's problems are different, and relate more to what's been going on at the firm behind the scenes. There's been so much shuffling of the corporate deck since PS4 arrived – Jack Tretton, Andrew House, Shawn Layden and John Kodera have all rotated in and out of big boardroom chairs over the generation, while Shuhei Yoshida has left the job of running the Worldwide Studios group to Hermen Hulst, and will instead look after indies – that it's hard, currently, to get too much of a sense of how things are going to go. Certainly, the company's conduct has given cause for concern, chief among it the hubristic abandonment of E3 and a sweeping round of redundancies among back-office staff. Until it shows its hand, however, we have no choice but to postpone judgement.

The jury is out in other respects, too. While the peaks of Sony's firstparty PS4

output have been stellar, there have been just as many misses. And in the latter part of the generation there's been a whiff of a template to Sony's internal exclusives: long, singleplayer, cinematic adventures in big open worlds. In that context, shuffling Yoshida offstage makes a certain sense, but given that his replacement steered Guerrilla through the development of *Horizon Zero Dawn* – a long, singleplayer, cinematic, you get the idea – you can't help but wonder how much appetite for change there really is. That Mark Cerny chose to show off the effect PS5's onboard SSD will have on data streaming by showing a sped-up version of *Marvel's Spider-Man* does not seem much of a harbinger of change.

And it is also playing catch-up in terms

of services. It seems an awfully long time ago that we thought Sony had stolen a march on the cloud-gaming boom with the well-timed (and, at \$380 million or so, attractively priced) acquisition of Gaikai. Almost eight years later, though, Sony has precious little to show for it. The PlayStation Now service is

quite plainly operated by a company that would greatly prefer to sell you something for £50 than let you borrow it for a tenner a month. While improvements to price and software catalogue have arrived, they've been half-hearted and often temporary, and much remains to be done if it is to see off the threat of Game Pass and XCloud. Microsoft, a software company at heart, would dearly love for the coming generation to be decided by services. Sony appears to be banking on the opposite.

The history of the game industry is a pendulum, the loser of one generation getting its house in order to perform better in the next while the winner fiddles around, high on its own success. This one may well be the same when all is said and done, but there are so many new variables – of support and services, of people and their priorities – that, sat in the dark as we are, it's thrillingly hard to see how it will all pan out. One thing's for sure, though: it's going to make for absolutely fascinating viewing. ■

Much remains to be done if PlayStation Now is to see off the threat of Game Pass and XCloud

Horizon Zero Dawn saw Guerrilla Games transformed from mere Killzone maker to one of the jewels in Sony's Worldwide Studios crown. A sequel is reportedly in the works



Grass warfare

An unlikely alliance with rugby union has lent legitimacy to grassroots UK esports

The esports machine of today is unrecognisable as the janky engine that powered the scene back in the '00s. These days, maintained by Blizzard and Riot, its pistons fire with practised efficiency. Yet the rattling part of the contraption dedicated to player recruitment is in need of replacement. Like the claw crane of an arcade machine, it picks up too little from a pool brimming with potential. "There's no clear path to pro right now," Excel Esports director **Kieran Holmes-Darby** says. "If you play football, you can enter a Sunday League, get promoted, and theoretically make your way to the Premier League. In esports, there's no clear link between grassroots tournaments and the pro tournaments."

You might wonder why esports needs grassroots support at all. Where would-be footballers might struggle to bring their street skills to the pitch without facilities, only a PC and a headset is required to play *League Of Legends*. That's the promise of esports: that what you do in your bedroom could one day be what you do on a stage, if only you can get good enough. Between the bedroom and the stage, though, lies a yawning chasm that can suck away all motivation.

The problem is more acute in some esports than others, Holmes-Darby suggests: while *League Of Legends* has a structure that seeps some way into the foundation of UK esports, *Dota 2* does not. "There's no way that someone can see that they and their team are progressively getting better," Holmes-Darby says. "Generally, esports are team-based, which means you have to have really strong communication and leadership skills. Online is a start, because it gets you

interested, but you don't have that same level of understanding as when you're actually sitting there next to someone."

Then, of course, there's the crowd – the aspect that most meaningfully differentiates tournament play from the bedroom. Local events can help players learn to ride that wave of attention to greater victories, rather than drowning in it. Excel is partnered with Belong, the esports arm of the brick-and-mortar retailer Game, which runs tournaments out of its stores. These events thrive on low pressure. Think of the hobbyist competition enjoyed by Warhammer players, showing up at Games Workshop at the weekend to throw their armies against each other. "It's the quintessential grassroots esports community," Holmes-

Darby says, "that comes together not necessarily wanting to go pro."

We meet Holmes-Darby at the Yorkshire Games Festival, where he's giving a talk at the behest of the British Esports Association – a body mandated by the government to strengthen esports infrastructure in the UK. His own interest is

more partisan, however, since Excel has its own team in the *League Of Legends* European Championship. Holmes-Darby's efforts to nurture local talent aren't simply altruistic, then, but part of a long-term strategy to ensure Excel's next generation of players comes from a flourishing scene.

"The UK is miles behind the likes of Denmark, Sweden and Germany in normalising pro gaming and providing paths for people to get involved in it," Holmes-Darby says. "I think we're pretty closed-off as a country and slow to react to trends." That limited pool is reflected in the professional sphere: Raymond



Kieran Holmes-Darby founded Excel with his brother, Joel

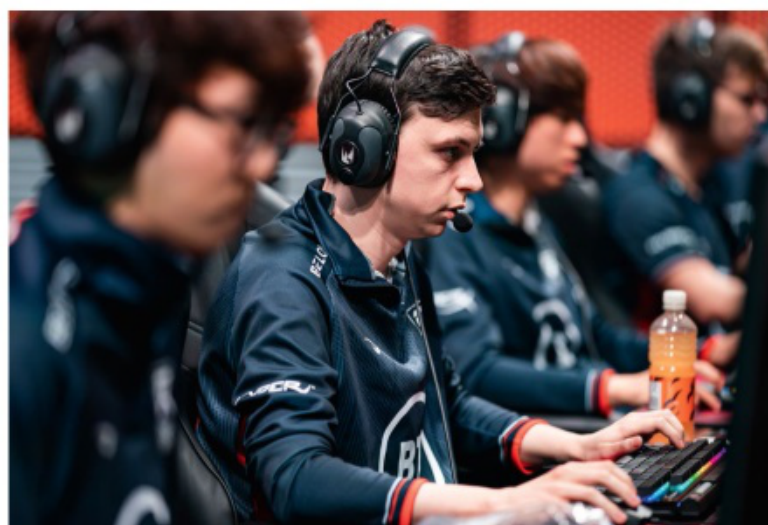
'kaSing' Tsang is the only British player in Excel's LEC team.

That's why Twickenham is so important. A year ago, Excel relocated to the home of English rugby, setting up its offices and training rooms inside the stadium. The marriage benefits both parties: rugby union from a youth injection to an audience that was "male, pale and stale", and Excel from the legitimacy implied by its new digs. "It validates the whole proposition," Holmes-Darby says. "If Twickenham and the Rugby Football Union, which is the most old-school organisation in the world, can accept esports, then anyone can."

The HQ at Twickenham is a clear rejection of the 'gaming house' system that has seen esports players isolated in the past – both from family and healthy routine. Twickenham's pros come to work, and they go home again. Excel has access to the stadium's gym, catering, and sports psychologists. It's a responsible model for fans looking to mimic the team's success. "Is it sustainable if your kid is playing 16 hours of videogames a day? No. Is it sustainable if they're doing some exercise after school and then playing four hours of an evening? Yeah, absolutely fine," Holmes-Darby says. "Parents need to understand this so they can manage it."

Since the move, school and university students have been invited to the facilities for tours. The stadium makes a career in esports visible – something you can leave the house for, as opposed to a black hole that threatens to swallow a child through their monitor. "It helps us because we don't want our brand to be demonised," Holmes-Darby says. "There is obviously a personal motivation to do that. But I think the overarching thing is educating an age group that doesn't understand, because they haven't grown up with it." ■

A long-shot application to the *League Of Legends* European Championship led to rapid expansion for Excel, which now has around 30 staff



Excel was the first *League Of Legends* esports team to run a ten-person roster, an idea that's caught on with other teams around the world since



FAKE GRASS

Can esports really thrive if it doesn't have roots?



Blizzard and Riot have succeeded in esports by actively shaping the tournaments that surround their games, building a thriving scene through sheer financial brute force. But Holmes-Darby is concerned that too much control at the top can leave games without the organic base any true sport needs. "I think you've seen a bit of that in *Overwatch*," he tells us. "They franchised the pro league and didn't really think about how they filter the ecosystem right down to the grassroots. There's definitely the worry that closing off the top end doesn't necessarily promote the bottom end."

Mod night club

Meet the mod team turning one of the most accurate car sims around into a **love letter to Japanese car culture**

Upon its release in 2014, few people thought *Assetto Corsa* would become a hotbed of cultural expression. Like most racing simulators, *Assetto Corsa*'s focus is on providing the most accurate driving experience possible, offering an obsessive level of detail that requires such elaborate efforts as meticulously laser-scanning the topography of real-world racing circuits.

While this devotion to recreating the experience of real-world performance driving results in a remarkably authentic simulation, its narrow focus comes at the expense of some of the bells and whistles we expect from more broadly accessible racing games. Many racing simulators don't even have a singleplayer campaign in the traditional sense (though *Assetto Corsa* does offer a very barebones one) and devs certainly don't spend a lot of time worrying about the culture and history of motorsports.

Sim-racing enthusiasts are happy enough – they come, and stay, for an accurate driving experience – but there will always be those who want something more. Into that niche-within-a-niche steps the modding community, and in the five-plus years since *Assetto Corsa*'s release, some modders have even managed to provide an injection of exactly the sort of cultural trappings that are missing from the necessarily rather sterile vanilla game.

Shutoko Revival Project is a mod that marries the hardcore simulation of *Assetto Corsa* to a nostalgic encapsulation of a defining moment in the history of car culture, and the extent to which it pulls this off – even in the early beta form in which it currently exists – is a sight to behold. Focusing on the early days of Japanese

street racing, SRP recreates huge sections of the freeway system that surrounds Tokyo, including the legendary C1 loop and Wangan-sen. The two developers who began the project about a year-and-a-half ago, who go by the handles Soyo and Trawa, are car-culture fanatics deeply familiar with the source material.

"I've been a car guy for a long time, and specifically I've always been interested in Japanese cars and car culture," says **Ryan 'Soyo' Egan**. "The Shutoko highway system, the Wangan and C1 – they're all just these iconic Holy Grails of driving."

To anyone familiar with the infamous Mid Night Club street-racing crew, or who has played such arcade-racing classics as the *Tokyo Xtreme Racer* and *Wangan*

Midnight Maximum Tune series, these locales require no introduction. It is hard to overstate how important these freeways, and the street racers who battled upon them, were to the birth of 'tuner' culture and the rise to prominence of JDM-style cars around the world.

The Shutoko Revival Project team knew this freeway system had been recreated in videogames before, but never in one with *Assetto Corsa*'s calibre of simulation physics. "Don't get me wrong, I love arcade racers, I love the *Tokyo Xtreme* games and stuff like that," Egan says. "I played those growing up like everyone else pretty much on the dev team. But I'm interested in real cars, so I like simulation because it provides a very realistic background."

The vehicles on offer in the mod are a grab-bag of iconic Japanese sports cars – the RX-7, Skyline GTR and so on – and one of the advantages of

building Shutoko Revival Project atop such a robust simulator is that it's able to convey accurately just how scary some of these cars would have been to drive. "They were pushing the limits. They were outright dangerous and not easy to drive, and that's the vibe we were going for," Egan says. To that end, driving some of the spicier cars in the mod's stable feels like trying to wrestle a bear on a skating rink.

The modelling of the freeways is as period-correct as possible, too. John Billios, a volunteer contributor to the mod, mentions that they try to keep everything looking how it would have between 2005 and 2007, and he frequently uses Google Earth Pro to pull up backdated satellite imagery of what the Shutoko highways looked like at that time.

All of this fealty to both history and the laws of physics comes together to form something far more than the sum of its parts. The feeling of being able to roam across 190km of Tokyo freeway, howling through tunnels and trying to keep these highly modified tuner cars under control at over 300km per hour, while your friends run alongside you and engage in impromptu battles, is manna from heaven to a certain type of car enthusiast.

In the future, the team plan to add proper competitive aspects to the world they've created. "We have ideas for a turf war system, where we would have zones of the map with timing objects, so that they would have their own separate leaderboards," Egan says. "Like a portion of C1 or something like that, where whatever team owned the top three times on that portion would own that territory, and teams could fight each other to try to dominate a certain route." For now, Shutoko Revival Project is simply a sandbox, offering you the chance to blaze across the Tokyo skyline at blinding speeds, reliving the Wangan dream. ■



Going for a spirited street cruise with your friends, in a convoy of iconic JDM rides, is one of Shutoko Revival Project's best use cases



ASSETS: COARSER

Assets from a PS3 game lightened the workload



Driving the sweeping curves and twisting on-ramps of the Shutoko system makes it clear why it's a favoured locale for street racers



As these highways have appeared in racing games before, the Shutoko Revival Project team was able to avoid modelling the environment from scratch. The original 3D assets were lifted from *Wangan Midnight*, a PlayStation 3 game released in 2007. The dated models required sprucing up, plus lighting maps to support *Assetto Corsa*'s dynamic day/night system. Egan estimates that about half of the *Wangan Midnight* assets are still in use in the mod, and that number will fall as the team make improvements. Shutoko Revival Project already has the most individual light sources and the longest drivable distance of any *Assetto Corsa*-based project.

CROSSING OVER

Two Peruvian art houses combine to break down the binaries of art and science, and life and death

Arrog's striking, monochromatic art style is about much more than visual impact: it's an expression of what art director Mateo Alayza hopes to achieve with this point-and-click experience. After drawing concepts while attending a game jam, the director of Hermanos Magia (one of Peru's first illustration studios) contacted Leap Game Studios. "For a long time, I've looked to do something that is different from what you can find in the medium," he tells us. "In Latin America there are not many examples,

and even less in Peru. From my experience, there's a strong tendency here for art and science to be divided by social prejudices from both sides. Working with Leap was key, as I felt games were the only space in which this barrier wasn't so thick."

The contrast of shades lends nuance to the story of a man accepting his death, Alayza tells us. "The colours are opposing elements that talk to each other constantly. When we talk about life, we make a binary separation with death – white is life,

and black is death. So I decided that the art in *Arrog* was the contrary." Strange, stark white scenes depict the metaphorical universe, whereas black tableaus signal that we're in the real world; as time passes, they begin to meld. "The idea is to have two recognisable elements that are integrating, and that they are one in reality, like life and death." Prepare to see in more than black and white when *Arrog* comes to Steam and smartphones shortly; it arrives on PS4 and Switch later this year. ■



Peruvian traditional art such as 'mates burilados' inspired *Arrog*, Alyza says, which depict "the events of a community through simple drawings. The humility takes the weight death usually has in art"

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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Instead of the story being '**this game looks neat,**' it became 'this is the game with the 'woke bro' trying to push his hacky politics on us'."

Cliff Bleszinski gets all revisionist about the failure of *Lawbreakers*. Hurry up with those memoirs, old stick



"We have a ton of respect for [Nintendo and Sony], but **we see Amazon and Google as the main competitors** going forward."

Quite right, Xbox boss **Phil Spencer**. Amazon and Google don't have any firstparty exclusives either



"Honestly, it's been a bit of a hard week. **Our community has come to expect really amazing things from us** and we've heard from them that we did not achieve that bar."

Blizzard boss **J Allen Brack** cops to the miserable launch of *Warcraft III: Reforged*

"Diversity isn't a nicety – it's a necessity if the industry is going to grow, thrive and truly reflect the tens of millions of people that play games every day in this country."

UKIE's **Jo Twist** pushes for change after a report finds that the UK game industry is still 70 per cent male and BAME people are underrepresented in senior roles



Getty Images / Claire Greenway / Stringer

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

Game Bust-A-Move Frenzy
Manufacturer Raw Thrills

These are fertile times for the coin-op scene. The rise of pay-per-play VR installations has breathed new life into the humble arcade, while the launch of the Exa-Arcadia platform has given small independent teams a route into an industry that was previously reserved for those with the contacts or financial muscle to put cabinets into production.

Not all is new and exciting, however, and the coin-op cognoscenti are still fretful about 'redemptification' – in which classic games are reborn as redemption machines, spitting out tickets that can be exchanged in great sums for physical prizes. Debate swirls over whether they should be classed as gambling machines – since they're notionally skill-based there's no legislation on average payout, as there is in the casino variant. But they're not going anywhere any time soon, with many arcade operators preferring them for the way they encourage spending across the entire floor.

All of which is to say that *Bust-A-Move's* return to arcades after two decades is not necessarily to be cheered. The work of Eugene Jarvis' coin-op company Raw Thrills, *Frenzy* reprises the cabinet design from its *World's Largest* series, tasks up to two players with aiming guns to pop bubbles on a 10-foot screen and, look, that's about it. It's the coin-op equivalent of a manufactured pop act sampling one of your favourite songs, a creatively moribund nostalgia play that embodies the arcade scene's split personality – needing to reinvent itself while being wedded to its past.

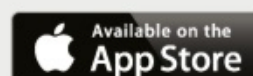


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COMIC

Assassin's Creed: Bloodstone Volume 1
bit.ly/acbloodstone

The *Assassin's Creed* games' forays into the modern world tend to divide opinion – into 'meh' and 'put it in the bin', in our experience. Still, the first volume of *Assassin's Creed: Bloodstone*, translated from French to English, takes a valiant swing at making Animus lore engaging. The story revolves around hacker Tomo Sakagawa as he sifts through the memories of fellow Assassin and CIA operative Aleksei Gavrani. The chilly blues of current-day Tokyo and the khaki greens of war-torn Vietnam background darker themes – the adverse effects the Animus can have on its users, for example. Complex stuff, then, and not all of it successful, but we hope Ubisoft is paying attention to the depth that these comics draw out of an underserved aspect of the games.



TV

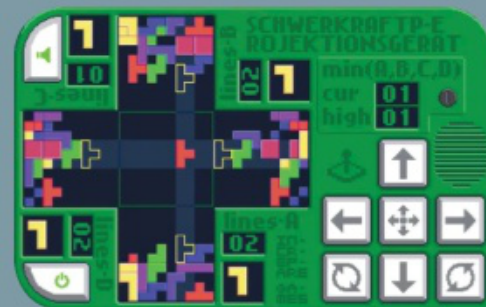
Mythic Quest: Raven's Banquet
bit.ly/mythicquestshow

With the dearly departed Silicon Valley leaving a gaping void in our lives, hopes were high for this documentary-style comedy about the development of a fictional MMO. While it's certainly well-observed – it's produced in partnership with Ubisoft, which has clearly lent more than just a hodgepodge of assets from *For Honor* and *Assassin's Creed* – it's missing that most vital of ingredients. Despite the presence of It's Always Sunny's Rob McElhenney and Danny Pudi from Community, it simply isn't funny. Back to the Valley we go, then.

WEB GAME

Schwerkraftprojektionsgerät
bit.ly/4waytetris

Stephen Lavelle, of *Stephen's Sausage Roll* fame, returns with another experiment that has the effect of making us feel ten IQ points dumber for every second we spend with it. *Schwerkraftprojektionsgerät* – or Gravity Projection Device – challenges you to play four simultaneous games of *Tetris*. Each tetromino spawns in the midst of four boards, patiently awaiting your placement: there's no time pressure, but you soon become entangled in the 360-degree logistics. Sure, that Z-block might fit snugly against the T-block on the rightmost board – but on the left, it sits on top awkwardly. Progress at one end often means disaster on the other, and so even mildly successful play means uncomfortable compromise, a sensation we've long since missed from the most familiar game on the planet. Our high score is three.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

LITERAL TIE-INS

Puma x Sonic Collection
bit.ly/pumasonic

The latest to feature in what is quickly becoming *Edge's* Videogame Fashion Corner is a line of Sonic The Hedgehog-inspired sportswear. Puma's collaboration with Sega, released to promote the new Sonic movie, features several surprisingly stylish T-shirts, hoodies and trainers (for men and children only, however: please try to contain your sorrow, ladies). With the exception of a garish all-over print tee exclaiming "You're too slow!", the references to the games are kept subtle: a suggestion of a golden ring in a grommet, scoreboard printed stats on heels. All credit to Puma, then, for doing something we thought impossible – actually making Sonic look cool.



continue

Freshly minted

A new *Animal Crossing* special-edition Switch is irresistibly clean

Fast and curious

The reviews are in: against all odds, the new Sonic film sounds like a winner

Platinum tier

The Wonderful 101: Remastered meets its Kickstarter goal in under four hours

Silver lining

Phil Harrison says a free streaming tier of Google Stadia is coming in the next few months

quit

Shodan death

The team making *System Shock 3* has been laid off. Thoughts to all affected

So long, cowboy

Dan Houser exits Rockstar after 20 years – a comfy retirement surely awaits

Blue Christmas

Anthem's festive decorations are still up in February. So much for regular updates

Grieving or grieving?

Virtual reality allows a mother to 'reunite' with her deceased child. Too bizarre to process



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DISPATCHES

APRIL



Issue 342

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an SN30 Pro+ controller, compatible with PC and Switch, courtesy of 8BitDo



A proportional response

Although not by any stretch a perfect game, *Life Is Strange 2* felt to me like one of the most important I've played in a long time and I felt **Edge's** review (E341) perhaps underplayed its significance. It's not unusual these days for games to be softly political, although there's still a sense of trepidation from most publishers – look at Ubisoft going through contortions last year to avoid the semblance of having any views on anything. But so many videogames still tell stories which are only abstractly connected with the world and how the current climate affects people, particularly if you happen to be part of a minority. Maybe that's not surprising – part of the appeal of playing is being able to escape the horrors of the real world – but it's probably more important than ever that those with the least power have representation in mediums that can tell their stories, and it's important videogames don't swerve that just because they're games.

It's true that one of the protagonist's superpowers in the game didn't really have a purpose, but in a sense those powers were the least interesting part of it. The game tackled all kinds of issues head-on – racism, class politics, police brutality – and did so in a broadly non-exploitative and empathetic way. One scene halfway through which, depending on your decisions, results in your character being subjected to a prolonged attack felt raw to the point of being almost unwatchable, partly because social media evidences the fact that this is happening right now in the US, and not in the context of isolated incidents. There are real-life cartoonish villains, and their agenda is becoming bolder. Perhaps the best example of this was (spoiler alert) the appearance of 'the Wall' at the end of the game which honestly just hit me like a ton of bricks. I mean, in a way it

was always going to be the end destination of the journey, and in that sense it shouldn't have been surprising, but seeing it for the first time in the setting of a game felt to me like that moment at the end of the *Wicker Man* when you finally get sight of the film's *raison d'être*. The fact that you were seeing this obscenely iconic physical structure from the literal perspective of a child (again to be separated at the border) was as shocking as anything I've experienced in horror games which are specifically meant to conjure up a feeling of dread.

Of course it's not that all videogames have to connect with the real world in such a literal way, but the ones that do are

important because it means that like other mediums we can tell the stories of our age just as effectively. I have to admit I cried at the end of the game for these boys – characters that in one way don't exist but in another way exist in their thousands. The hope is that Dontnod's confidence in telling this story, and indeed Square Enix's bravery in publishing it,

might encourage other developers to take more risks themselves in the future.

Mark Whitfield

Mark sent us a case of beer for Christmas, and the rest of you could all learn something from his example. We also like whisky, FYI.

Post hoc, ergo propter hoc

As 2019 drew to a close, I decided to put together top-ten lists for each of the past three decades to see how the industry and/or my tastes had evolved, and because I like making lists. TL;DR: adventure games disappeared in the 2000s, but made a prominent return last decade. However, rather than discuss that resurgence, I instead wish to share my thoughts on how *Dirt Rally* narrowly missed the cut. One argument against its inclusion in the list was the idea

"It's probably more important than ever that those with the least power have representation"



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that if the game had never received its VR patch, it would not have been a contender. In fact, without the VR mode, I am not sure if I would rank the game ahead of *Forza Horizon 4*, a game that I did not consider in my shortlist. Similarly, *WipEout Omega Collection* was shortlisted, while no other *WipEouts* were. *Dirt Rally* and *Omega Collection* demonstrate the significant degree to which VR can elevate the experience offered by a game, and consequently the perceptions of its qualities. This then raises the question of whether a VR mode has made the game itself better, or whether it has merely improved the experience of the game? After all, any of the games in my top ten could be patched or modded to add VR, possibly redressing the balance. And what of games that are only playable in VR? *Farpoint* is a long way from being the best FPS out there, but in PSVR, and with an acceptably calibrated Aim Controller in hand, there are few as exhilarating. Perhaps at some point it will become standard for all games to offer both VR and ‘flat’ options, so games could be analysed fairly in terms of their mechanics, design, writing, etc, irrespective of gameplay mode. For now, VR implementation seems to be a trump card, but I am not sure to what degree I should allow it to elevate my opinion of a game’s quality.

Ian Thompson

*Allow it, as we believe the kids say. After all, what would *Wii Sports* have been were it not played with the Wii Remote?*

The war at home

We’re gearing up for a new console generation, where we now at least know that Xbox Series X looks like a Dyson-designed air freshener and yes, the PS5 logo does look just like the PS3 and PS4 logos before it. While we wait for something more tangible, fever pitch has consumed any gaming-related information, including the coming and going of a great pretender in the form of Stadia. Or at least, as so many online news

outlets and Twitter feeds (both of whose job is to react instantly rather than reflect) would have you believe. The client choked under thousands of people attempting to play. There were concerns about software ownership. Sales volumes couldn’t come close to established channels. These three examples, however, aren’t from Stadia’s launch but from another online service which people may have heard of – Steam, which we now know is the biggest PC gaming distributor on the planet. Sure, it would’ve been nice for them but Google doesn’t have to get everything right at launch – it has more than the resources and data to iterate, far more so than Steam did. YouTube Gaming has just signed three major gaming (bleurgh) influencers from Twitch who have a combined subscriber base of 21 million. If or when Stadia starts working as promised, those three alone could post themselves streaming a game and link at the end for millions of others to instantly play it too. That still doesn’t mean that Google will make a success of its service but that alone is an early advantage that Valve, Microsoft or Sony could only dream of. We’d be fools to dismiss it in the long term – even if saying so does generate a few less hits.

Lee Hyde

We hope Stadia is here to stay. There are glimmers of hope – its acquisition of erstwhile columnist Alex Hutchinson’s studio suggests it hasn’t given up the ghost yet. Not the best of starts though, is it? Enjoy your new controller.

Celestial navigation

It’s been years since I stayed up late to continue playing a videogame. *The Witcher III*, despite being meticulously thought out, I had found to be a rather paint-by-the-numbers adventure. That was until I went after a map marker on a mountain I couldn’t seem to climb. Encircling it, I found a harbour with no boats, next to a vacant town with unseemly high level monsters. With my curiosity sparked, I spent considerable resources (and a couple of hours) trying to beat them. My reward? A door to a cave I could not unlock.

I am reminded of the first time I saw that yellow dragon in *Breath Of The Wild*. It flew in the distance, was huge, it changed the weather and music. It didn’t attack me, and I couldn’t hurt it. Best of all, the nearby NPCs didn’t even acknowledge its presence. It was so out of place! Later on a quest ordered me to shoot a blue dragon with an arrow to collect its scale. Ah, that’s what they’re for. When I came across the red dragon, I didn’t see a majestic, god-like entity, but an ore node with wings.

Perhaps my favourite place in all the virtual worlds I’ve visited is to the east of the Arathi Highlands in *World Of Warcraft*. Swim to the edge of the world, turn north around the mountain range and you’ll find a dwarven village. The buildings look like inns and stores, but don’t have their facilities. There are a bunch of cats. The dwarves greet you yet don’t give you any quests. As real estate, it’s completely useless. And that’s why I love it so much. I can’t help wondering if this was an unfinished project. Perhaps somebody at Blizzard just felt like creating a place for adventurers to relax and do nothing. I don’t know, and I don’t mind not knowing.

People lament *Castlevania II* for being esoteric as hell. To this day, its nonsensical mechanics, areas and dialogue leave me in an uncanny state. I like to believe FromSoftware does something similar. But everything in the *Souls* games tends to have an answer lying somewhere. This creates great lore, but as Neil Gaiman wrote: “It’s the mystery that endures. Not the explanation.”

Is there a name for such cryptic design? Is it a conscious part of videogame culture? I rarely hear anybody talk about this. Maybe it’s just me. Anyhow, I presume I will eventually come across a quest-giver who tells me where the key is and sends me back to that village, and the spell will be broken. But for now, I’ll enjoy *The Witcher III* with a new sense of adventure.

Robert August de Meijer

We could try making the magazine like this. Reviews spread across multiple issues? Oh, we tried that already. People seemed quite cross. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

One thing that was never foreseen by the early cyber-boosters of the 1990s was that in the long run, all the 'new media' institutions that supposedly disrupted the landscape – the tech giants, the social networks – would actually want passionately to become old media: specifically, television. Apple and YouTube are joining Amazon in the linear-narrative content game, jostling to compete with Netflix and the rest.

The videogame industry too increasingly aspires to be television. Not just in the way firms are devoting larger budgets to unskippable FMV sequences so that better-known actors can read out sophomoric lines that would be blue-pencilled by any HBO exec. And not just in the way that the IP borders between games and TV are increasingly permeable: witness the rapturous reception rightly accorded to the Netflix TV series of *The Witcher*, the star of which, Henry Cavill, was already a fan of the game series and so loaded his (brilliantly funny as well as effortlessly cool) performance with vocal and gestural Easter eggs for the aficionados in the audience.

Structurally, though, the really interesting way that videogames are approaching the condition of television is the phenomenon whereby seemingly every new tentpole blockbuster game also now comes with the offer of a 'season pass', so framing the initial game as simply the first episode in a TV-like series, and if you buy the pass you effectively give the publisher an interest-free loan in return for extra content that is not yet available. Nothing wrong with that, of course, if you like the game and want to support it. I personally was extremely happy to buy the whole season of *Sniper Elite 4*, to keep me in Nazi faces to shoot from a satisfying distance.

But it's not just extra levels, of course, that come with a season's worth of extra content. Every 'episode' must also give you more stuff. More skins, more gadgets, more guns. And it's arguable that this interminable profusion of collectibles inevitably dilutes



Isn't it strange how managing inventory is, in videogames, now such a central part of the experience?

the core proposition of the original game. Because if the new stuff is truly useful and an improvement on what you can acquire in the pilot episode, ie the standalone game itself, then it follows that what you are given when you first buy it is not really sufficient, or at least that your armoury has not been so intelligently designed and balanced as to cover all eventualities in creative ways.

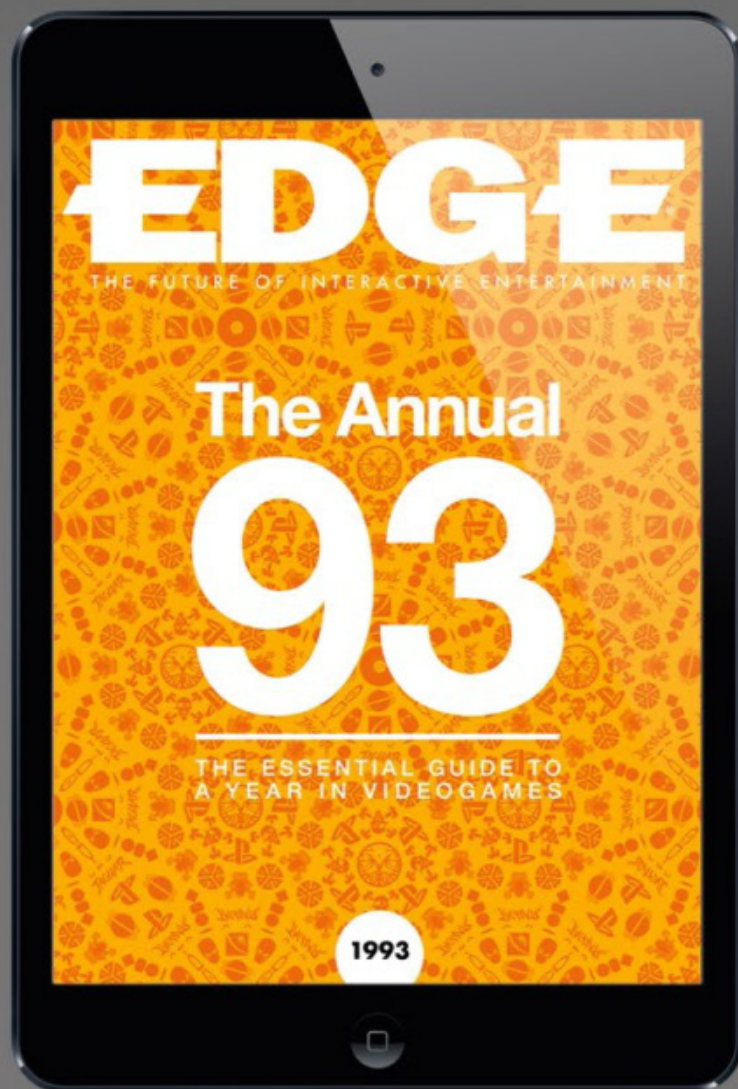
That, at least, was the opinion offered by *Doom* co-designer John Romero recently, when he told *The Guardian* that modern games give the player too many tools. "I would rather have fewer things with more

meaning, than a million things you don't identify with," he said. "I would rather spend more time with a gun and make sure the gun's design is really deep – that there's a lot of cool stuff you learn about it." But the new wave of 'season' releases incentivises developers to include more and more guns and whatnot with every episode, or fans will complain of being short-changed. The upshot is that all too often, in Romero's view, you end up playing "an inventory game", microscopically comparing stats among a hundred different pistols, instead of just having fun with what you're given.

Isn't it strange, come to think of it, how managing inventory – a concept borrowed from the retail and manufacturing business sectors – is, in videogames, now such a central part of the experience? The word 'inventory' itself came from the Latin for 'found things', and originally meant a list of someone's possessions drawn up after they had died; it was later adopted to mean the stock of products in a warehouse. It was a fateful moment when Will Crowther and Don Woods, authors of the original text adventure, *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1977), decided to use 'inventory' as the command to list all the items the player had picked up. You wouldn't watch a Netflix TV series about inventory management, and yet here we are in a world where reading numbers assigned to imaginary weapons and shuffling them around in slots is increasingly mandatory.

Some people love this aspect of games, and they should be able to do it if they want, but for the rest of us the firehose of added 'content' in modern games leaves us in a state of owning a hellishly excessive number of possessions that is, after all, rather countercultural in a world of decluttering and the new lifestyle minimalism. What would happen if we all did a Marie Kondo on our videogame lives? I think it might spark nearly as much joy as binging *The Witcher*.

Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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SAM BARLOW

Unreliable Narrator

Exploring stories in games and the art of telling tales

Hello! I'm Sam. I make videogames, most recently the literal videogames *Her Story* and *Telling Lies*. With the latter I showed terrible foresight by committing to a game name that would later become one of the more excruciating memes of the 21st century. No, papa.

For this first column I thought I'd take on the persona of *True Detective*'s Rust Cohle, and observe that time is a flat circle. It's often assumed that game stories are on a curve that arcs ever upwards, their complexity increasing along with CPU power. But such a graph excludes many forgotten attempts to do bold things with our medium. As an illustration, and a fun get-to-know-you icebreaker, let's kick off this column with a brief tour of attempts to push the envelope for interactive stories by embracing the literary, back in the 1980s — that magical era in which Martin Amis wrote a book about *Space Invaders*.

First stop is *Mindwheel*, a 1984 curio from future US poet laureate Robert Pinsky and developer Synapse. Dubbed an 'electronic novel,' like many attempts to fuse literary ambition with games it leans into dreamlike scenarios. But coming from the mind of a poet, it works for the most part. Prefiguring Double Fine's *Psychonauts* by 20 years, the premise is that you are — via a technogubbin courtesy of a Dr Virgil — exploring the minds of four dead individuals: a rock star, a poet, a dictator and a scientist. You progress by filling in the missing words of thematic sonnets, and the sights and sounds are memorable (horny insects, destitute baseball players). I have a soft spot for Synapse's ambitious text games; of all the forgotten text games, perhaps the most forgotten.

From there we move to 1986's *Amnesia*, not to be confused with the more famous game about running from nameless horrors. Electronic Arts released this text adventure, written by author Thomas M Disch, that foregrounds the ultimate videogame cliché, the amnesiac protagonist — here waking naked in a hotel. Its oil-and-water design awkwardly



I have a soft spot for Synapse's ambitious text games; of all the forgotten text games, perhaps the most forgotten

combines a fully mapped-out digital version of Manhattan and punishing hunger and stamina gameplay with nuggets of Disch's story. The latter is full of heady noir-ish turns and concepts still unexplored in mainstream videogames (marriage; male nudity; pharmaceutical conspiracies in Texas).

Next is *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, released in 1985. Another 'open-world' urban simulator, Infocom and Steve Meretzky's game is one of the greats. It has a frame story that lampshades its time-travelling simulation as an in-fiction simulation (hi, *Assassin's Creed*!) and is an example of a game engaging with

contemporary politics, directly critiquing Reagan's policies. Focused on the impact of a government plan on a simulated future Rockville, USA, your goals are completed by walking the open town and recording (with simulated eyes!) activities and events. This leads to a wonderful twist halfway through when the player realises that they can independently record and relay events to call attention to disturbing trends, a mechanic that predicts the modern citizen journalist.

On to *Portal* (not that one), released in 1986. (At this point you may be thinking that taking a name from a forgotten '80s literary game is a surefire way to have a hit in later decades, and you'd be right.) From Activision and writer Rob Swigart, this is a game I dug up when making *Her Story*. It is a murder mystery on a planetary scale — an astronaut returns to Earth to find everybody gone. What happened? To find out you must use an antiquated database (in 1986, fictionally antiquated; in 2020, *actually* antiquated). The game tells a story through nuggets of text served up as you bring the database back online, helped by an AI named Homer. Like most of the 'archaeological' story games that would follow (*BioShock*, *Gone Home* et al) you have the impression of discovering things out of order and in a disorderly state, but there is a gated arc that leads you towards the ultimate revelation. The game emerged from Swigart's observation that computers could do three things: word processing, spreadsheets and databases. He felt that databases offered up the most interesting way to tell a story. This is of course a terrible idea and could never work.

It's bracing to revisit these games and see that their characters, themes and formats still feel fresh. Let's build on their example, and use this decade to prove their supposition that an audience exists for grown-up videogame stories. The alternative is to embrace cultural amnesia and repeat the cycle, not merely playing the old cliché but living it.

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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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edition of Edge for
extra Hype content

What's next?

How do you make sequels meaningful? Japan's game industry is a past master at this sort of thing, home as it is to some of the longest-running videogame series around, but its answer to this oldest of questions is often a conservative one. Sometimes, you make them bigger; if you're lucky, they'll be better. Often they're just more of the same with some tinkering in the margins. This month's Hype crop shows how, for all that Japanese game development has seen a welcome resurgence over the course of the current generation, it finds those old habits tough to kick.

That should not necessarily be seen as a bad thing: the reason sequels exist is because people want more of something they liked. And *Nioh 2* (p36) is precisely that, a game that expands sensibly and smartly on the foundation of the wondrous original, adding to the formula without risking diluting it. It's a concept taken to its absolute extreme by *Persona 5 Royal* (p48): Atlus knows it doesn't even need to make a sequel, merely add some new characters and questionable fan service to separate its passionately loyal fans from their latest paycheck.

Yet when a company plays it *too* safe, it risks someone else swooping in. *Temtem* is not a Japanese game, at least in origin – its developers are based in Madrid. But its MMO spin on *Pokémon* is such a no-brainer of an idea that to play it is to wonder how The Pokémon Company has never made one of its own. Well, it's never had to.

You might not expect the riskiest Japanese game featured this issue to be the seventh in a series, but in the above context *Yakuza: Like A Dragon* (p30) is dangerously brave. We are part of the problem here: we'd happily spend 50 hours in Kazuma Kiryu's company every year until the sun explodes. But Sega has cast aside not only one of its most treasured characters, but dropped his replacement in a new city and a markedly different kind of game. That's what we call meaningful.

MOST WANTED

Half-Life: Alyx Index

Will *Alyx* do for Index what *HL2* did for Steam? Probably not, no, but if any game is going to give consumer VR its long-overdue killer app then this is surely it. Should the fates smile upon us we'll just about squeeze in a review next month.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons Switch

As anticipation reaches fever pitch, one *Edge* staffer gets a bit *too* excited, pre-orders a limited-edition Switch console, and has us figuring we can probably postpone that pay review for a while. The hour draws near; we're savouring other topics of conversation while we still can.

The Wonderful 101 PS4

Platinum's Kickstarter debut was an instant success, meaning its cruelly overlooked Wii U exclusive will get another chance to prove its chops. The mere thought of that action on a Switch screen makes our corneas ache; 4K on PS4 Pro will do nicely. Duly backed.

H | Y
P | E

YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON

A new hero rises in the most
exciting Yakuza in years

Developer/publisher	Sega (RGG Studio)
Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	Out now (JP), 2020 (EU, US)

Having thoroughly trounced a room full of thugs, we witness a familiar sight as a larger, better-armed group of toughs bundles through the door. Ordinarily, this would be the time for Kazuma Kiryu to crack his neck, loosen his shoulders and raise two clenched fists in preparation for taking them down single-handedly. But Ichiban Kasuga is no Kazuma Kiryu, and this is no ordinary *Yakuza* game. Kasuga isn't even alone, in fact — and yet he takes one look at the uneven odds and, perhaps sensibly, decides to get the hell out of there.

Despite their differences, the series' new lead has plenty in common with his predecessor. Both are orphans, raised by surrogate father figures in high-ranking positions within the yakuza. And both are incarcerated for crimes they didn't commit: in this case, Kasuga takes the fall for Masumi Arakawa as a way of repaying his debt to the man who took him under his wing as a wayward teen. He emerges after an 18-year stretch to find the Omi Alliance has taken over Kamurocho from the Tojo Clan, while worse is to come when he confronts Arakawa, who seems to have abandoned his former protégé. Shot and left for dead, he wakes up surrounded by garbage bags in Yokohama. It

might sound like a depressing start, but it's leavened by a familiar streak of fish-out-of-water comedy: echoing Kiryu's struggles with modern technology, Kasuga seems similarly baffled by this new world of smartphones, vapes and selfie sticks. Yet thanks to the help of a kindly homeless man, disgraced former doctor Namba, he's soon back on his feet.

It helps that Kasuga is seemingly more outgoing than the taciturn Kiryu. He's positively garrulous, in fact: charismatic and bristling with wide-eyed enthusiasm, he seems to make friends easily. Before long, he's formed a party of three alongside Namba and ex-cop Koichi Adachi, a bear of a man who has his own motives for staying friendly with Kasuga. They're later joined by hostess Saeko Mukouda, after a tragedy involving the owner of the club she helps to run, and that's your classic JRPG party of four. If Kasuga is the de facto lead, his companions get plenty of character development of their own: it makes for almost certainly the most dialogue-heavy *Yakuza* to date, but also a genuine ensemble piece.

But the biggest change comes when you engage a group of enemies. The new battle system suits Kasuga, whose affection for ►



The slow-burn story is happy to let its central mysteries simmer while Kasuga acclimates to his surroundings and hangs out with his new friends. You'll have to wait for Arakawa's apparent betrayal to be explained



YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON



JRPGs bleeds not just into the turn-based combat itself but in the way enemies and allies transform in front of his eyes. It feels almost like an elaborate delusion, or perhaps the result of an overactive imagination, prompted by the moment he pulls a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire from the ground as if it were Excalibur. Low-ranking yakuza and street thugs look normal from a distance, but adopt ever more outlandish guises when you engage them – from weirdos wearing binbags and seemingly nothing else to creeps with flasher macs that attack by thrusting their bottoms at you.

There's much more to the combat than simply selecting moves from a menu and watching animations play out. With active elements on top, its dynamism is reminiscent of the *Persona* series, but with a few recognisably *Yakuza* twists. Launch a standard attack, and if an object is in

Kasuga's path as he jogs over to his target, he'll either kick it towards them or, if it's large enough, pick it up and swing it for extra damage. Special attacks (essentially Heat moves, in old money) that consume MP can be boosted by mashing Square or tapping Triangle at the right time. You can defend for a turn to lower damage, and minimise it further by hitting Circle as an attack lands – though the timing window is surprisingly narrow, and for some multi-hit moves you'll need to keep pressing it. Though, particularly if you've equipped some gear to increase your evasion stat, you'll occasionally see them dash back out of harm's way.

As a result, fights still have the sense of thrilling energy and spontaneity we've come to expect. Though you can't move characters directly, they'll naturally shuffle around, bringing extra tactical wrinkles into play. Positioning becomes key – you



If you're facing a group of low-level opponents, you can enable a time-saving auto-battle option that gets you through the fight with minimal fuss





Despite all the changes there are a few fan-pleasing moments, including a nod to *Yakuza* spinoff *Judgment* during one side mission

can wait until your chosen target wanders next to a couple of others before launching an AOE attack, whether it's Namba breathing fire or Adachi swinging a goon around by their feet. Then again, it sometimes pays to act quickly – when an enemy is grounded, a regular attack from the next character in line will deal extra damage. Before it all

Fights still have the sense of energy and spontaneity we've come to expect

kicks off, you can attract the attention of a group on the street and kite them into the road. Approaching cars will come to a standstill, honking their horns, but with luck, you might be able to knock an enemy into a stationary vehicle for a massive chunk of bonus damage. The slapstick

If the combat seems more cartoonish than ever, the story doesn't stint on its violence, offering the occasional brutal reminder of the cost of transgressions in this unlawful world

doesn't end there – sledgehammer-wielding enemies will occasionally lean too far on the backswing and topple over, while oiled-up sunbathers carrying airbeds sometimes slip and fall flat on their faces as they sprint to attack you.

Alternatively, like Ichiban during that eye-opener of a cutscene, you can beat a tactical retreat. There's much more reason to do so than in previous *Yakuzas*, whether you've inadvertently stumbled into a gang of high-level enemies – or if you're simply low on HP and MP, having exhausted all your recovery items. Then again, perhaps that's because we're slowly adjusting to a game where, at least in the early stages, the restorative items we've come to rely on are too expensive for a man with a much smaller wallet. Still, if Staminan Royales are out of reach, we've always got rice balls to scarf down in a pinch. And once we switch things up a bit and start using Namba's healing powers – and equipping new gear that recovers MP after each turn – we're no longer having to stop by a Poppo every few battles.

Namba can still heal when you've recast him as a musician, strumming uplifting tunes to boost stats and turning CDs into deadly projectiles. These role changes are part of a job system, a well-worn JRPG idea that feels refreshed by its contemporary ►



Dragon sidequest

You'll find the usual glut of extracurricular activities in Isezaki Ijincho – the arcade games may be old but there's plenty of new stuff. Dragon Kart is a *Mario Kart* rip-off that nevertheless offers enough disposable fun to put it ahead of a few full-price clones. Elsewhere, you'll deal with Yokohama's rubbish problem by riding over discarded cans on a bicycle to deposit them in a trailer on the back, while boosting into other collectors to relieve them of their load. In another aside Kasuga helps a cinema owner by sitting through films while sheep pop up in the surrounding seats to put him to sleep; you hit the corresponding face buttons to shoo them away. It's whack-a-mole, really, but the surreal presentation makes it very funny.





A gauge above the minimap lets you know the threat level, giving you the chance to retreat from dangerous areas before you alert a mob

setting. Adachi, for example, becomes a tanky riot cop with a powerful shield bash and an elbow-drop finisher. After a brief flirtation with a B-boy outfit for Kasuga – giving him a move set that riffs on Majima’s Breaker style from *Yakuza 0* – we turn him into a gaudily suited, champagne-swilling host who sprays jets of bubbly over foes to leave them drunk and disorientated. Idol-class Mukouda’s most costly attack sees her call upon a trio of angry fans, who’ll repeatedly whack her assailants with neon glowsticks. There are summons, too, accumulated by completing sub-stories, though most require a fairly hefty payment, and there’s a cooldown on each of them. As such, you can only realistically rely on them as a last resort – at least for a while. Though we hesitate to give any of them away, we’ll just suggest you complete the sub-story involving a belligerent crayfish.

Sega has dialled up the silliness, then, but *Like A Dragon* is grounded by its setting.



After a brief glimpse at Kamurocho through new eyes, the district of Isezaki Ijincho is – despite its evident waste-disposal problem – a breath of fresh air. It’s also much larger, and starts out as an unknown quantity (much as it would be to Kasuga) requiring you to fill in the map by exploring. At first you’ll want to walk everywhere, and not just to take in the new scenery – in the early game, Kasuga is flat broke, and actively invited to forage around vending machines for loose change. After a while, you’ll be able to take the game at your own pace – if you need to grind a few job ranks against relative lightweights, then it makes sense to walk everywhere. But if you’re in a hurry to get to the next story mission, or simply fancy a shortcut to the weapon crafter, say, then a cab makes for a reasonably-priced fast-travel option.

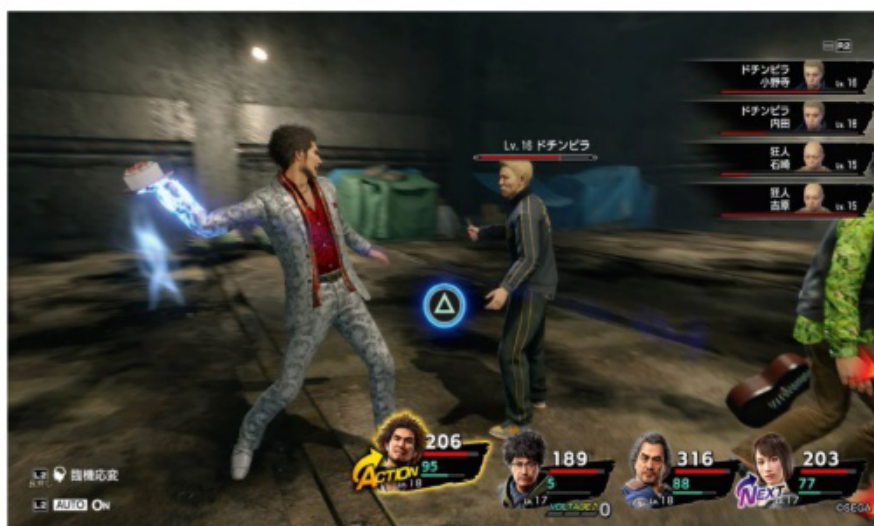
Though the city is a little sparser, it’s still dense with enjoyably distracting side-activities. The slow-burn plot presents



TOP Kasuga’s suit is the inverse of Kiryu’s, but deep down he’s not so different. He certainly takes himself less seriously, though he’s similarly good-hearted and deeply loyal.

ABOVE Given Sega’s arcade racing heritage, it’s no great surprise that *Dragon Kart* is one of the strongest asides





LEFT With the Host job class, you can 'present' enemies with a birthday cake – well, a good host makes sure their customers are well fed



ABOVE Kasuga's default class borrows a few tricks from previous *Yakuza* games. With a modded bat, some of the higher-level attacks can be devastating

plenty of moments of natural downtime, while you'll probably feel the need to take a load off after a boss fight or a lengthy trek through a labyrinth below Yokohama's streets – because yes, this is a *Yakuza* with dungeons, after a fashion.

The need to recover HP and MP between fights, meanwhile, gives you all the more reason to visit the district's various eateries, with set meals boosting your affinity with your fellow party members. Once that's reached a certain threshold, you'll open up conversation options at a local bar, your choices here boosting Kasuga's stats, while taking your friendship to the next level – in turn increasing the chance of automatic follow-up attacks in battle. And of course you can also indulge in a spot of karaoke.

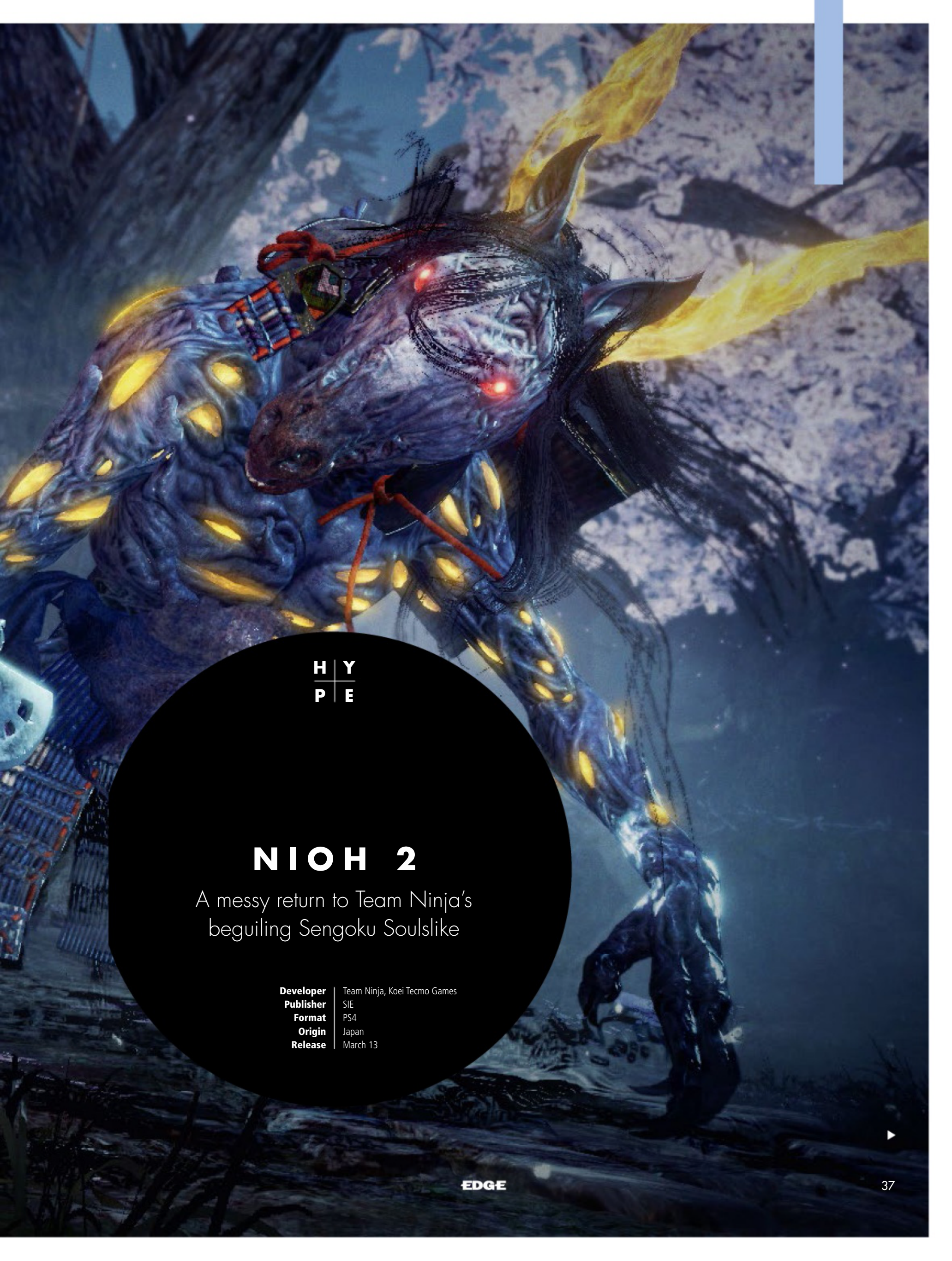
There's enough of the old to allay the shock of the new, in other words. But so far it's those differences that help make *Like A Dragon* the most purely enjoyable entry in this series since 0. Perhaps the best thing we can say about it is that we don't miss

The differences help make this the most purely enjoyable entry in this series since 0

Kiryu nearly as much as we imagined we would. It might be a while before we can say the same for Kamurocho, but there are signs already that, just maybe, we'll come to love Yokohama as the new home for this weird and wonderful new breed of *Yakuza*. ■



This is a prequel to the first game in story terms. Team Ninja did not plan *Nioh* as the first game in a series; since it was set the end of the Sengoku period, it's had to wind the clock back this time around

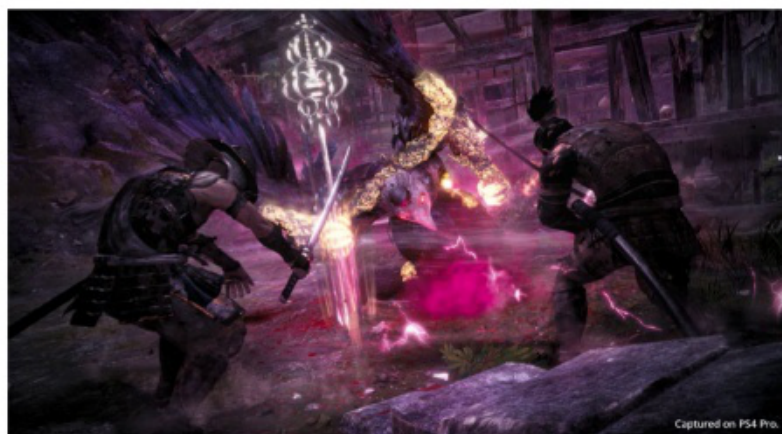


H | Y
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NIOH 2

A messy return to Team Ninja's
beguiling Sengoku Soulslike

Developer	Team Ninja, Koei Tecmo Games
Publisher	SIE
Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	March 13



TOP The first game was one of the earliest to properly support PS4 Pro, and the sequel is even prettier. We'd take a slightly uglier version, if we're honest – all those fancy after effects make it easy to lose sight of things.

ABOVE With no fixed protagonist this time around, a flexible character creator has been added



TOP The Yokai Counter, and the demon transformations in general, help offset the first game's prevalent sense that you were an annoying insect hacking away at the ankles of some giant demon.

ABOVE Team Ninja has acknowledged that the first game suffered somewhat for enemy variety, and promises that each new locale will introduce new opponents.

LEFT The Yokai moves are certainly strong, but can't be simply thrown out: they're slow to start up and leave you wide open if they miss



NIOH 2

There's a rather pointed warning from our demo handler as we sit down. If it's been a while since we last played *Nioh*, we might want to spend some time in the tutorial: while we'll be dropped straight into the game, after our first death we'll be given the choice of loading into it instead of respawning. We smile and nod, intending to do nothing of the sort. It takes all of 30 seconds for the hubris to evaporate. As we chuckle ruefully from our watery grave — we were too distracted by the guard with the rifle to notice the bridge under our feet was riddled with holes — we figure that, yes, it might be worth revisiting the basics. It *has* been a while, after all.

It doesn't help that our demo is set around halfway into *Nioh 2*, though at least we've got a suite of appropriately powerful gear. It's also rather awkward to feel our FromSoft muscle memory take over, stabbing the block button *Sekiro*-style at the moment of impact as if it's going to make any difference, tapping *Dark Souls*' R1 to try to attack in a game that uses the face buttons instead. We've got excuses for days, honestly, but we don't really need them. *Nioh* was punishingly difficult. *Nioh 2* is, on this evidence, no different.



Indeed, if our two hours with the game is any guide, this is classic Japanese sequel-making: the same game in a new setting with an additional central mechanic and a few scribbles in the margins. The signature addition is the Yokai Shift, through which we can briefly take the form of the very demons to whom we died so many times in the first game. Fill the new, third meter that sits beneath the health and Ki (stamina) bars and you can transform into a yokai for a spell: like its obvious inspiration, Devil Trigger, it not only dramatically increases your attack power but also nullifies incoming damage while it's active. In between transformations you can perform individual Yokai-boosted attacks, each governed by a cooldown meter, or a counter. The latter is best used to head off powerful enemy attacks signalled by a *Sekiro*-style red flash,

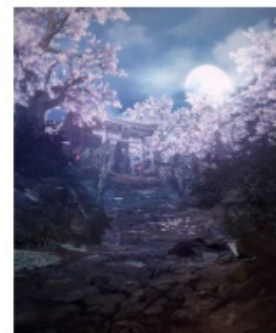
where in addition to hefty damage it has a devastating effect on the opponent's Ki bar, potentially setting them up for a finisher.

The Shift system adds yet another layer of complexity to a game that hardly needed it — that first death, and many of the ones that follow it, are due not solely to enemy strength but also the forbidding button layout. The style of game may evoke FromSoftware's work, but it has none of its elegant simplicity of control: face buttons are modified by trigger presses, then again by the stance system — the high position's dodge-roll turning into a flighty dash when your weapon is held at your hip. One new weapon, the Switchglaive, transforms *Bloodborne*-style depending on your stance. A rather messy UI — the Yokai move cooldown meters are a little too tucked away

With the Yokai Shift, we can briefly take the form of the very demons to whom we died

— complicates matters still further. It takes a while, and more deaths than we'd like to admit, to reacquaint ourselves with it all.

When it does, however, we are reminded of *Nioh*'s inherent magic, and come to appreciate how the new additions render it more magical still. The fulcrum of it all, as before, is the Ki Pulse, where a tap of R1 at the right moment after a combo string restores a chunk of spent stamina. The same button, in conjunction with a face button, changes your stance, allowing you to maintain your combo at a moment where most other games of this time insist that you back off to catch your breath. Fold in the new Yokai moves, an expansive suite of ranged and melee weapons, and additional gear — there's now the possibility opponents will drop enemy-specific Soul Cores, which can be equipped for a range of passive buffs, a vastly expanded take on *Dark Souls*' rings — and you have quite the recipe. The results are as tasty as ever, even with all the blood we shed along the way. ■



And yet so far

Once again, *Nioh* is rooted in real-world Japanese history, which not only helps ground the outlandish supernatural fantasy but also allows Team Ninja to winningly describe the game as 'Sengoku masocore'. Our demo is set across the burning grounds of Kitanosho castle, which was set ablaze in the Battle Of Shizugatake. The commander who lived there, Shibata Katsuie, committed seppuku when it became clear the battle was lost. The game's events take place before those of the first game, meaning there's no return for protagonist Edward Kelley; instead you'll create your own character, gender and all, before first setting out.

H | Y
P | E

THE FALCONEER

How a troubled developer
found a future in the sky

Developer	Tomas Sala Games
Publisher	Wired Productions
Format	PC, Xbox One
Origin	The Netherlands
Release	2020

Around five years ago, **Tomas Sala** experienced a period of terrible burnout, brought on not just by overwork but the stress of being part of a team. “I realised that I’m shit at working in groups, and I’m not a good leader,” he says. “I’m always the guy who does feature creep, who can’t get the focus. That led to a lot of conflict.” Some of Sala’s turmoil found expression in a “very dark” solo project, developed during his recovery. But as he put his life back together, finding new love and becoming a father, the darkness gave way to something hopeful – the image of a bird, swooping and plunging across the water.

“It represented a much lighter stage of my life,” Sala goes on. “But it’s also about dealing with your past.” Birds are symbols of aspiration, Sala notes, but in order to really resonate, that symbol can’t be fully separated from what it’s trying to escape. “It’s always that interplay.” Sala eventually abandoned the game of darkness in favour of one that lives this interplay between bird and darkness, the joy of release and the memory of pain.

The Falconeer is a work of deceptive levity. Primarily, it’s an open-world air-combat game in the spirit of *Crimson Skies* – a blend of World War dogfighting and briny steampunk, in which ace pilots do battle aboard giant falcons, hurling fireballs and lightning. But it’s

also a work of introspection, comparable to Jo-Mei’s *Sea Of Solitude* – a game that seeks answers and catharsis in the depths. “Even though you’re in the air, being lofty, elegant or combative, all the secrets, all the things you really need to confront, are always below the ocean,” Sala says. “They’re tied to the deep.”

The game’s ocean itself speaks to this duality. It’s a heaving grey monster, at first glance, sucking at the edges of cramped island towns and fortresses. But it also teems with activity. Bottle-sized, gold-trimmed sailboats trundle from port to port. Leviathans burst from the waves, tempting you to fly beneath them. Airships push through knotted cloud. The world’s mood and texture are continually changing, as day gives way to night and duelling falconeers are swallowed up by storms (which serve as a risky but convenient energy source for your weapons). If this ocean harbours bleak truths, it is also a place of wonder and adventure – to say nothing of ancient relics and bubbling conspiracy.

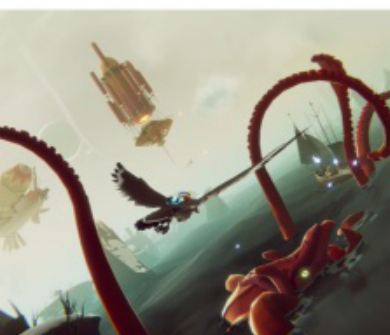
The Falconeer’s story is broken up into five memories, one for each faction vying for possession of the ocean and its trove of submerged, long-forgotten technologies. Presided over by a mysterious shaman narrator, they form a tale that ultimately deals with the origin of this world. Each faction ►



It's not clear how they're found or triggered, but these magical structures allow you to visit ruins on the seafloor. Beware – other factions may take an interest in what you find



THE FALCONEER



has its home ports and story objectives within the grander narrative. Ports are where you'll buy ammo such as armour-piercing lightning rounds – stored in neon canisters on your mount's back – and take on missions that range from bounty hunts through racing and fishing to escort missions and area defence.

The settlements themselves are lovingly wrought, lent personality by snowglobe flourishes such as market stalls and lines of drying clothes. "I like to make worlds, and then the worlds need to be inhabited and correct," Sala says. "That's super-soothing for me." He compares the making of these ports to kit-bashing, the art of cobbling together pieces from different miniatures, but admits he has no taste for physical model-making. "I have ADD, so I'm a fidgety person – I'll break everything, and then you have to wait for the glue to dry. But I love watching model makers on YouTube, and it's very much the same

The feeling of delving into a box of models is amplified by the clean art direction

process." The feeling of delving into a box of models is amplified by *The Falconeer's* clean art direction, which emphasises proportions over intricate surfaces. "It's not really 'low poly', but I don't use any textures – the snow and all the noise you can see, that's Perlin noise. Everything is [made up of] shaders with sine waves and geometry."

The Falconeer's air combat feels as graceful as its art direction. Steering your bird in thirdperson, you stoop to fill up an energy bar that is drained by gaining height, boosting and performing evasive rolls. A lock-on lets you pinpoint individual pieces on larger targets, whether to sabotage a dirigible's engines or set off a chain explosion by destroying a turret.

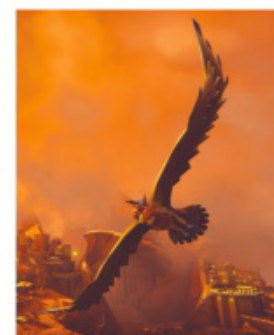
These skirmishes are most gripping when they border on overwhelming, with projectiles crowding the screen and AI wingmen yelling at you for instructions. Classic arcade sims such as *Wing Commander* aside, Sala has taken copious inspiration from vintage war movies. Some islands are decked with barrage balloons, plucked from the beaches of Saving

Private Ryan to deter the would-be Stuka. Other defences can be turned against their owners – sea mines, for example, can be scooped up and hurled at cliff-top artillery, providing they don't explode in your talons.

Each faction is crisply defined by its ships, costumes (there are animated character portraits redolent of *Star Fox*) and architectural style. There's an imperial faction modelled on the British and Napoleonic empires of the 19th century, all bristling ironclads and gleaming brass. "I might have seen too much Adam Ant when I was younger," Sala notes of their outfits. Perhaps the strangest faction is a group of exiles who ride flying seabests, strapping cockpits to the spines of eels and manta rays: even their ports are constructed atop giant crabs. The most sinister are the Mancers, a high-tech monastic order comparable to the Brotherhood Of Steel in *Fallout*.

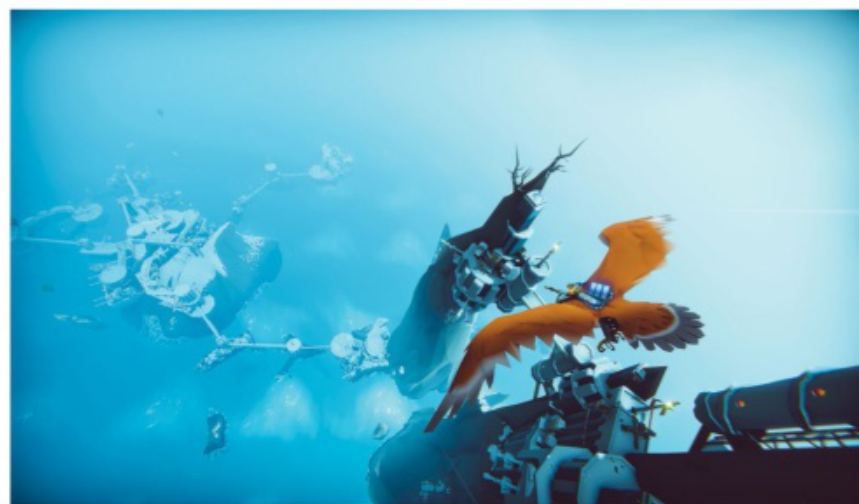
"They're kind of nerdy, but they've got their marketing down, so they look really badass," Sala comments. "They fly on dragons and they have more exotic ships." The Mancers are the Ursee's Machiavellians, playing all sides against each other, bestowing choice gadgets on those who carry out their designs. "They're not interested in running the place, but they are steering it towards a certain goal." The Mancers are the creators of the Maw, a watery canyon running the length of the Ursee, as though left that way by an absent-minded Moses. It's one of many nods in *The Falconeer* to the Bas-Lag novels of China Miéville (in this case, his eerie nautical epic *The Scar*). "I love his worlds, because they're very believable, but there's lots of mystery and it's always really weird."

There's at least one piece of Sala's previous, abandoned game to find in *The Falconeer's* ocean – the statue of an animal resembling a weasel, crushed by what looks like an enormous, gnarled fist. It's an important memento for Sala, a reminder both of the suffering he felt and how far he's come since. Today, he looks back on that difficult time with equanimity and perhaps a certain thankfulness. "[In a way] it's been the best thing in my life because it allowed me to do this – to do something new." ■



Lab animals

There's not much customisation in *The Falconeer*, but you can boost your mount's speed, agility and health with mutagens. This isn't the usual carefree upgrade process, however. "I want to mess around with the trope in gaming that better is always bigger, faster, stronger," Tomas Sala explains. "You can use mutagens but they will make your bird sick, like they used to with old racehorses – you know, injecting them with horrible steroids." There's no actual penalty for using mutagens, but your mount will deteriorate visibly, and the game's story will feed back on your cruelty. This forms part of a wider investigation of the entangling of heroism with violence in games, Sala says. "It's not super-deep, but I enjoy having these little hints about it."



TOP Wingmen are awarded to you in certain missions – they follow till you give them an attack order.
 ABOVE Grand monoliths betray Tomas Sala's past as a *Skyrim* modder.
 LEFT It should take around 15 minutes to fly across *The Falconeer's* world.
 BOTTOM Landing requires you to glide in at the right angle, but you can't damage yourself on buildings

H | Y
P | E

OUTRIDERS

People Can Fly gears up for its first post-Epic release

Developer	People Can Fly
Publisher	Square Enix
Format	PC, PS4, PS5, Series X, Xbox One
Origin	Poland
Release	Winter

Though nearly a decade has passed since its release, the game most of us think of when we think of People Can Fly is still *Bulletstorm*. Which is remarkable given the Polish studio worked on *Fortnite*, back in the days when it was a long-brewing tower-defence shooter rather than one of the biggest games in the universe. At the time, it was part of Epic Games, a satellite studio helping out on *Gears Of War* and other properties that didn't offer much chance for the developer to imprint its own personality on the final product.

"We worked with Epic and it was a great collaboration, but we were working on *their* games – so we decided we want to do something that's *ours*," game director **Bartosz Kmita** says. "Okay, let's break with Epic and let's start a new journey." So, in mid-2015, three years after it was acquired and two years after it was rebranded as Epic Games Poland, the studio flew the nest to develop its own IP, where its identity could shine through. Four years later, this project emerged as *Outriders*, a thirdperson co-op shooter-RPG hybrid which lead level designer **Rafał Pawłowski** calls "our most ambitious project to date, for sure".

Not that you'd know it, playing the game for the first time. *Outriders* is immediately familiar, the kind of experience best described in terms of others you've already had. Imagine a *Gears*-style cover shooter married to *Destiny*'s cooldown timers, bottomless arsenal of

lootable weaponry and obsession with numbers that keep getting bigger. Those same influences come through just as strongly in the visual design, with a touch of *Mass Effect* that hints at the game's RPG ambitions. In the opening section, we catch a welcome glimpse of *Halo*'s Pacific-Northwest-turned-alien landscapes – all greens and blues with outcrops of grey, populated by fauna just a couple of steps into the uncanny – but this gets quickly trampled by the inciting incident of *Outriders*' story.

You play as a human colonist, fleeing a doomed Earth for the uncharted but seemingly inhabitable planet of Enoch. All is going well, until the colonists encounter a phenomenon known as the Anomaly, a sort of metaphysical storm which causes everything it touches to go a bit Annihilation. While most of their crewmates simply spark out of existence, your character is infected by it, and is put into cryosleep. The game fades to black, you pick a character class – and wake up 30 years later.

"We wanted to put the player in an environment where the character and the player are learning at the same time about what happened and why everything looks this way," senior narrative designer **Szymon Barchan** says. It's an effective trick. The game snaps from the world before to the world after, and reintroduces characters from the prologue who have lived through three decades, all in the passage of a single loading screen. This ►



The simple but robust character creator puts the emphasis on making sure you've picked the perfect beard and/or scar



OUTRIDERS



makes for a striking contrast, but leaves you with a world that's less colourful and distinct. Pawłowski drops descriptors like "brutal" and "savage", but in truth this is yet another muddy *Mad Max*-inflected wasteland, with masked bandits and metal plating strapped to every surface. (At least, in the section that's being demoed — we glimpse some more interesting landscapes in the game's various trailers.)

Kmita offers a different way of looking at *Outriders*' familiarity. "Making a cover shooter, we knew we would be compared to *Gears Of War* — but if we make a firstperson shooter, we'll be compared to *Bulletstorm*," he says. "We decided, 'Okay, let's use our experience from all those games to give the player a possibility to choose how they play, so they can almost make their own shooter in this game'"

The implication is that, if you're a fan of cover shooters, you can approach *Outriders* that way — but it's equally possible to ignore cover

Part of the developer's old-school positioning is a refusal to dirty its game with lootboxes

completely. It's not clear how exactly you can balance these two to make the experience satisfying for both sides, but we quickly find ourselves abandoning the waist-high walls in favour of a classic strafe-and-blast approach. Clearly, the People Can Fly we remember from *Bulletstorm*, and before that *Painkiller* — which came of age in the glory days of Id Software, yearning for a return to that era's guns-and-gibs shooters — is still in here somewhere. "We think old school is still cool," Kmita says.

As if to underline that point, the end of *Outriders*' tutorial section hands us a rifle that causes its victims to explode so hard their bone shards turn into shrapnel, slicing the skin and armour of nearby enemies so they gradually bleed numbers. It's an excellent gimmick weapon, of the sort you'd see in shooters of old. In the context of a *Destiny*-style loot game, it's also the kind of characterful perk that helps a single gun stand out from the endless conveyor belt of weapon upgrades. Alas, this is also the only such example we discover in three whole playthroughs of the demo, and it

gets cruelly snatched away the moment the tutorial is over.

Instead, *Outriders* largely relies on players' class abilities to spice up combat. See, it turns out that when your character came into contact with the Anomaly, it gave them magic powers, in one of four flavours. There's a Trickster, capable of warping space and time; Pyromancer, equipped with area-of-effect fire powers; Devastator, the muscle of the operation; and a fourth class yet to be revealed. (All four will be available at launch, Kmita confirms — part of the developer's old-school positioning is a refusal to dirty its game with lootboxes or any monetisation hooks.)

We only get to explore the shallows of these characters' skill trees — each class has three, letting you guide their development however you choose — but it's clear that their abilities provide the bright spark the rest of *Outriders*' combat huddles around. We initially plump for the Trickster, won over by their description as a hit-and-run assassin type, but struggle to find room for their abilities amid the chaos of threeplayer combat. The Devastator proves to be more our speed. As first glance, it's your standard tank class, but its powers have just enough specificity to enliven a tired archetype.

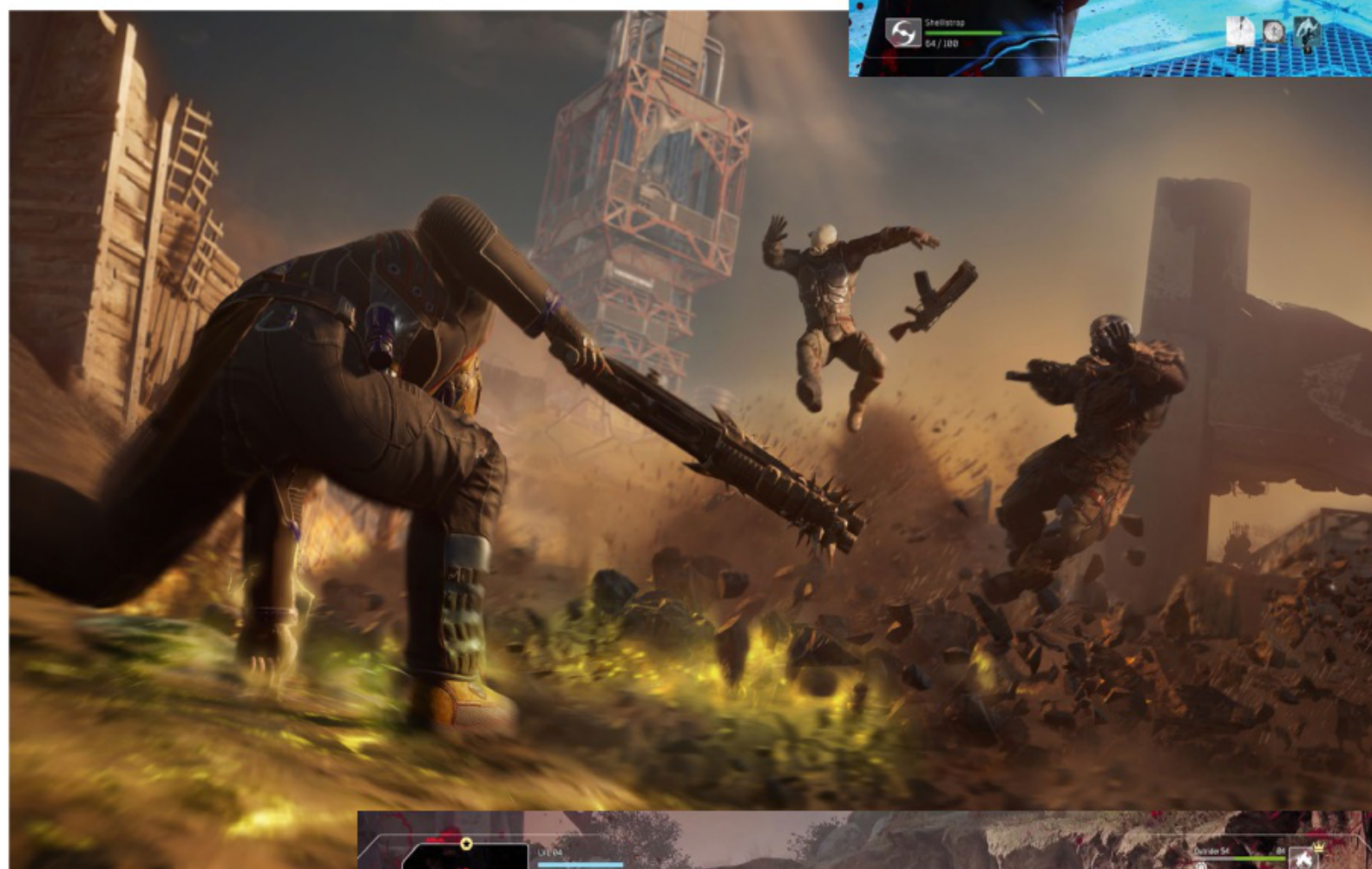
The Devastator has control over gravity and earth. In practice, this means one ability where you pull back into the sky and then slam into enemies, like a lethal version of Mario's ground pound, and another where they coat themselves in a golden exoskeleton of rubble. For us, it's the clearest fulfilment of Kmita's promise that you can simply avoid cover, especially as the Devastator can only heal by killing enemies at close range. Every class has an equivalent condition — the Pyromancer must mark victims with fire, then finish them off to receive a health boost — and it helps differentiate them from one another, and from similar characters you've played a dozen times before.

We'd hesitate to say any of this feels new, but the class powers do give *Outriders* a splash of identity that, on first impressions, is sorely lacking. It remains to be seen whether there's more under the surface, but it's clear that People Can Fly — having divorced itself from Epic and opened three new offices to support *Outriders*' development — believes it has found the project that can finally supplant *Bulletstorm* and become its signature game. ■



The magic number

Traditionally, co-op games have been designed for a maximum of two or four players, likely a vestige of their split-screen origins. But as sharing a sofa and single TV with squadmates becomes an increasingly distant memory, *Outriders* is freeing itself from the tyranny of even numbers and opting for a player count of three. "We had previously a version of the game with four-, even fiveplayer co-op," Kmita tells us — but as the developer emphasised speed and freedom of movement, combat became overly busy. "When you have a class like the Trickster which is teleporting all over, with four or five players all playing this class it was chaos — so we wanted to tune it down, give you the multiplayer experience but with more control of the battlefield."



TOP The campaign has you moving back and forth across Enoch in a convoy, encountering hub levels spoked with main missions and optional sidequests. RIGHT The level system means enemies above your paygrade have a certain sponginess – shooting a humanoid in their exposed face for the eighth time never feels great



TOP The Trickster class is able to drop a bubble which slows the passage of time – it's a rare treat to see bullet time being deployed in a multiplayer environment. ABOVE Your appearance can be switched at any time; once you've chosen a class, however, it's set forever. MAIN Powers like the Devastator's stomp and Trickster's teleport let you close the distance quickly, lending *Outriders'* particular brand of cover shooting a distinct flavour

Developer
Atlus, P Studio
Publisher Sega
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release March 31



PERSONA 5 ROYAL

The world's most stylish JRPG gets the royal treatment



We've never been so happy to hear trumpets. After sliding between cover spots in Kamoshida's palace, we ambush a patrolling Shadow, and *Persona 5 Royal*'s wonderfully brash battle theme kicks in. 'Take Over' is a perfect addition to *Persona 5*'s acid-jazz soundtrack, an audible strut of a tune that might well trump 'Last Surprise' (just as *Persona 4 Golden*'s 'Time To Make History' upstaged, er, whatever the other one was). Then again, after having heard the same song for 100 hours on our original playthrough, almost anything else would be music to our ears.

Royal is the next refresh in a series tradition, an enhanced edition of the turn-based-battler-slash-life-sim which adds a wealth of things to see and do – mechanics, activities, story arcs, endings, places, characters and, of course, jams. Our demo starts in *Persona 5*'s first dungeon, giving us an overview of how much difference *Royal*'s additions make. Which is to say: not a huge amount, but enough. As we fight through the gaudily decorated corridors of the lecherous gym teacher's psyche, the protagonist's hand occasionally glows blue; it's a sign there's a grappling point nearby. Activating our Third Eye (read: Eagle Vision) ability allows us to spot it, then press X to zip up towards it. This new mechanic adds an extra layer of exploration to *Persona 5*'s palaces, and might offer useful shortcuts to returning players keen to speed up their runs – as well as granting access to skull-shaped hidden items called Wild Seeds, though our protagonist can't seem to figure out what they're used for just yet.

When it's time to face Kamoshida himself in a 'new' boss fight, we find ourselves disappointed, however. The clash is, beat for beat, largely the same: we prevent the lolling-tongued monstrosity from healing by attacking his goblet, then choose a party member to steal his crown while he's distracted. The only



additions are brief mid-fight cameos from two of Kamoshida's victims. The first is Yuuki Mishima; the second is a bunny suit-wearing Shiho Suzui, and a stark reminder of many of *Persona 5*'s more uncomfortable directorial choices. Suzui, who suffered sexual abuse at the hands of Kamoshida, is so dressed because she's a mental projection of Kamoshida's objectification of her (Ann's projection appears as a bikini-clad, cat-eared Valley Girl version

LEFT Kasumi's Confidant rank only goes up to a possible five stars out of ten. *Persona 5* has transformed tarot cards following big plot events before, though: we can't help but think there'll be a twist in her tale

Adds a wealth of things to see and do – mechanics, activities, story arcs and endings

of her), but this inclusion as 'extra content' in *Royal* feels a little exploitative.

A new real-world location in the form of Kichijoji is a far more welcome, and compelling, addition, offering a new place to explore with Confidants and to buy helpful items. The stylish Tokyo commercial suburb is brimming with charm, its warren-like streets – lined with chattering people, food stands, and secondhand clothing stores – cosied up against an imposing



LEFT Newcomer Kasumi fights with a rapier and rifle, and her abilities favour physical attacks and the Bless magical element.

BELOW Randomly generated dungeon Mementos gets a refresh, too, with new missions, 'dark' areas with stronger enemies – and flowers and stamps to collect



Kasumi looks elegant swinging a rapier, but *Royal* updates gunplay by allowing you to buy elementally charged bullets that can inflict status effects on foes

Buddhist temple. In a bar called Penguin Sniper, we rank up our Baton Pass ability (which allows us to cede a move in battle to another teammate) with Ryuji by playing darts, which we throw using the DualShock's motion controls. The higher the Baton Pass level, the more of an advantage we get: our current standing gives us a boost to damage and lets us recover some HP. And, of course, there's a new character to recruit to the Phantom Thieves. Kasumi Yoshizawa is a student at Shujin Academy and a fiercely competitive gymnast with a troubled past – her new palace, with its seated audience and battle stage, appears to nod to the pressures of performing.

It's something Atlus must surely be feeling. *Persona 4 Golden*'s Vita-exclusive release provided an irresistible incentive to revisit Inaba or discover it for the first time, in stolen moments on planes, trains and automobiles. It seems that *Royal*, however, will remain exclusively on PS4 – notably, it's still absent from Nintendo's console-slash-handheld hybrid. Currently, it's hard to imagine a few grapple-points and a round of darts being enough to tempt us into another 100-hour-long time investment, let alone paying another full-price entry fee. Should that Switch announcement ever come, there'll be good reason to sound those trumpets. ■

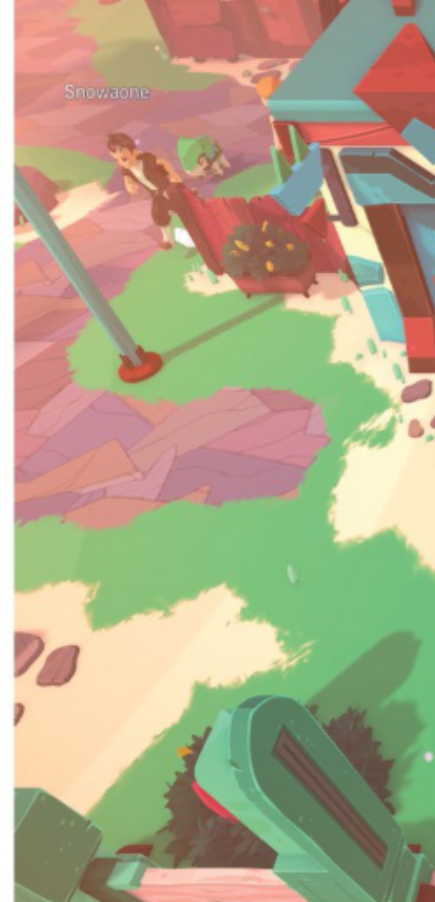


Jung money

The Thieves' Den is, essentially, a glorified gallery. Accessible from the menu wherever, whenever, it's a physical space – presided over by a strange being who's taken the form of a young boy called Jose – where you can revisit cutscenes, play music from the soundtrack, change your appearance, and even play a card minigame called Tycoon with your fellow Phantom Thieves. By interacting with a vending machine, you can buy and furnish the place with recreations of in-game real-world locations, and themed decorations unlocked by beating each dungeon. Our stint at Kamoshida's Palace grants us access to smatterings of rose petals and a giant statue of him in his pants, naturally.



Developer Crema Games
Publisher Humble Bundle
Format PC
Origin Spain
Release TBC



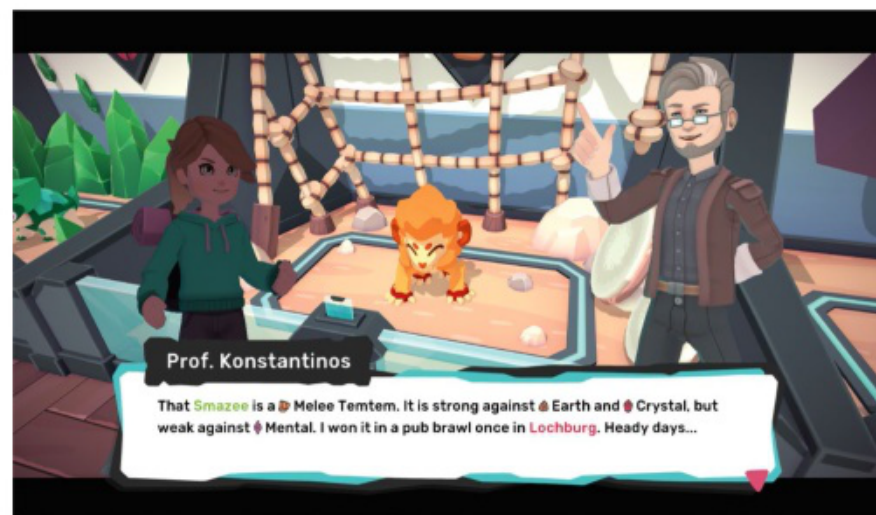
TEMTEM

This MMO aims to be the very best, like someone definitely was

Someone, somewhere, was bound to make it at some point: Crema Games, an indie team from Madrid, has gone ahead and done it. *Temtem* is, to all intents and purposes, a massively multiplayer *Pokémon* game playable on your PC. Its developer isn't shy about its main inspiration, invoking Nintendo's super-franchise on every bit of promotional material out there. But our first clue that this monster-collector may not be exactly what we're used to is when we choose our starter Temtem, as Professor Konstantinos tells us how he acquired each creature. As we study Melee-type monkey Smazee, the professor proudly announces: "I won it in a pub brawl." Nintendo fans, we're not in Kanto any more.

Still, much of *Temtem* is a one-to-one recreation of *Pokémon*, from the evolvable creatures you hunt and catch in tall grass, to the turn-based battles in which you command them, to the special buildings you visit to heal your team via weird computers. Pokéballs may be replaced with Temcards, and the word 'trainer' with 'tamer'; but it is hard not to call a spade a spade — despite the fact that *Pokémon* is now more genre than game, its fundamentals up for reasonable trade in the marketplace of ideas. And even harder, we find, to wrap our heads around an entirely new — if smaller — series of type matchups. Nature-type Temtem being strong against Water and Earth types feels familiar, but Digital beating Mental, Digital and Melee is tougher to remember — as is the fact that our bright green, amphibian starter is absolutely, categorically not a Bulbasaur but a crystal-type Crystle, and therefore strong against Electric and Mental. Obviously.

Never before have we realised just how much we rely on our innate — okay, accrued — knowledge of type matchups to breeze through *Pokémon* games. Fortunately, *Temtem* makes a more concerted effort than its forebear to



explain the nuances of battle. While the tutorial covers the basics and is over mercifully quickly, you'll find that tips pop up regularly during fights, and can be opened for more details on certain mechanics. 'Hold' moves, such as our Tuwai's Shrill Voice, require a Temtem to be on the field for a turn before they can be used and then have cooldowns; 'Priority' moves can be executed before an enemy's turn and are indicated by yellow arrows when we right-click

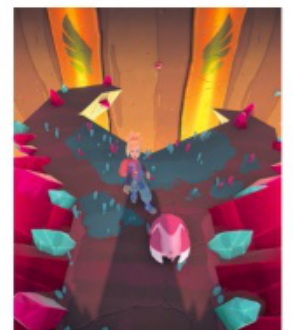
ABOVE *Temtem*'s creatures look far more generic than *Pokémon*, and it can often be difficult to ascertain their type on first glance. Smazee's pretty clearly a Fire type, but is the weakest of all the starters

To all intents and purposes a massively-multiplayer Pokémon game playable on your PC

a move to show its stats in a pop-up window. Then there's the stamina system, which unlike *Pokémon* quickly prevents you from relying on one creature too much: if you run them down, they'll become 'overexerted' and won't be able to use a technique on their next turn. With *Temtem* battles being mostly two-on-two, it's this — alongside a neat synergy system that rewards the use of certain moves with extra damage or status effects if your second

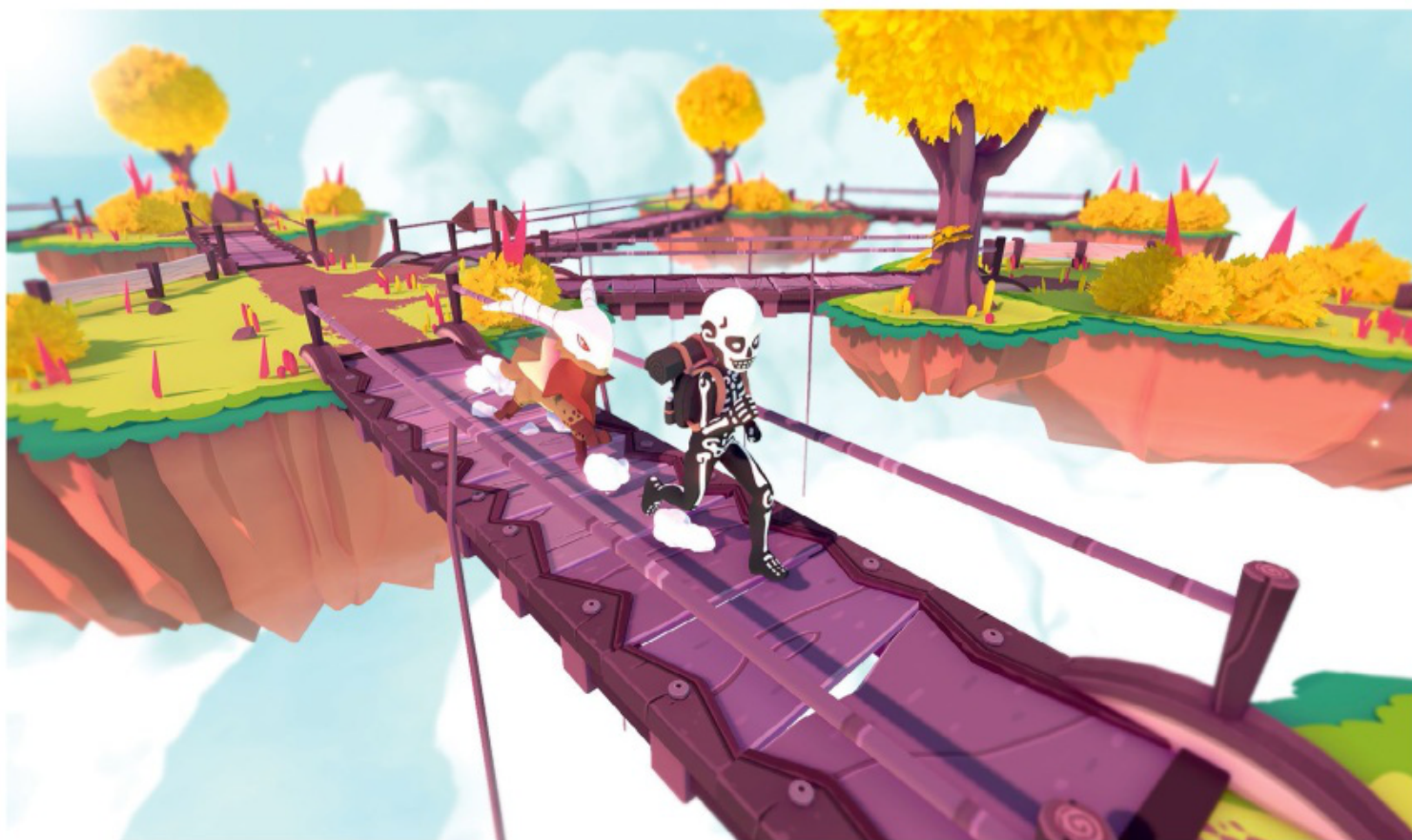


LEFT All encounters in long grass being random feels outdated after *Pokémon*'s move away from it. But the excitement of finding a Luma (or 'shiny') Temtem is even more potent – they're much rarer than in *Pokémon*. BELOW Being able to decorate your place adds a welcome dash of life sim



Gotta match 'em all

Back in the summer of 2018, *Temtem* smashed its Kickstarter goal of \$70,000, raising \$573,939 towards its development. Stretch goals, all of which were reached, included a specific 'nuzlocke' mode (a popular, player-created way of introducing permadeath to *Pokémon* games to make them more difficult), an arcade bar with minigames (some form of brawling *essential*, Crema Games, do you hear us), new mythical Temtem, guilds, weekly in-game tournaments, a replay system that lets you watch matches back – and a Nintendo Switch version of the game.



The main town, Arissola, is your first opportunity to buy some new outfits – they're all prohibitively expensive, however, going for tens of thousands of Pansun, the in-game currency

Temtem is of a particular type – that encourages more dynamic, strategic play.

And, thanks to a simple-to-use co-op system, you can partner up with another player to fight other, ahem, *tamers* together. You each contribute the first three Temtem from your party to a combined team: you'll find yourselves identifying which pairings are the most effective, and battle with an eye to protecting those core members while making well-timed and coordinated switches to maximise your attack power. Refreshingly enough, you'll *have* to learn quickly, or rope in a friend to help you travel across the Airborne Archipelago: things quickly get tougher than Nintendo's monster-battler. When was the last time you lost your first battle against the NPC

rival in a *Pokémon* game? The tone is well and truly set in *Temtem*, as Max will happily one-shot you and your brand-new best buddy the moment you wander out of the Professor's lab.

It is, in other words, the kind of *Pokémon* game that many of the series' oldest fans have long been clamouring for. And while it's undeniably basic right now – not to mention wobbly, with unprecedented demand overloading the servers to the point where we suffer a fair bit of slowdown and black screens during our time with it – its current early-access structure will serve *Temtem* well, should it continue to capture *Pokémon* fans' imaginations with continual updates. Make those pub brawls playable, Crema Games, and you may just be onto something special. ■

Developer
Arc System Works, Cygames
Publisher
Cygames, XSEED Games
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release March 27



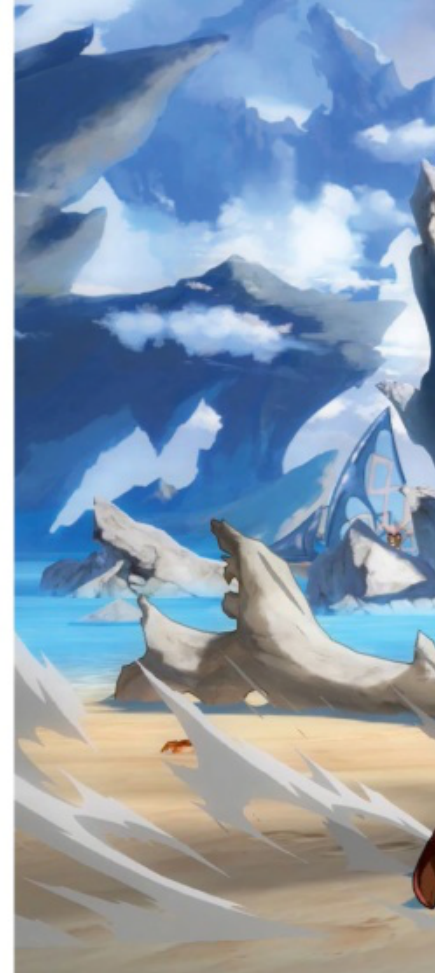
GRANBLUE FANTASY: VERSUS

The most promising 2D fighter in years is Skybound for glory

You wouldn't think that a Japanese mobile RPG and an anime fighting game would make for a particularly accessible combination, and yet here we are. *Granblue Fantasy: Versus* brings the bizarre cast of the gacha game to the West, planting them in a typically gorgeous-looking Arc System Works 2.5D brawler — and somehow, we feel more at home than we ever have in an ArcSys game. Sure, we may not know who exactly the kid with the wolf ears is, or why he's suddenly holding a cornucopia at any given moment. But given the fact that we are winning, and more importantly are crystal-clear on why that is, we are not sure we mind.

Still, *Versus* is making a valiant effort to get us up to speed on all things *Granblue*. Our demo focuses heavily on the RPG mode included with the game: its dialogue (all fully voiced in both English and Japanese by the anime's voice actors) helpfully highlights the names of places, characters, animal-eared races and magical MacGuffins, indicating that we're able to press a button for a short explanatory pop-up. In this way, we're able to scabble together an understanding of what's going on: the Sky Realm, it turns out, has fallen into chaos, and pretty-boy protagonist Gran suddenly finds himself having to fight against his former allies. We're taken through

The RPG mode can be played through entirely in local or online co-op with a friend

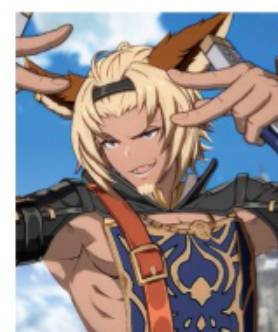


ABOVE The online lobby — set on an airship — takes cues from *Dragon Ball FighterZ* with its chibi player avatars





LEFT The pace of fights is, in general, much slower than in other anime fighters. The emphasis sits firmly on playing the basics cleanly and purposefully – we’re reminded more of *Street Fighter* than we are *Guilty Gear*, which suits us just fine



a basic tutorial, tapping the usual string of face buttons up close (and we mean very close, which feels much less cheaty) to AI goons to perform auto-combos, learning to dash back and forth, and block.

So far, so anime fighter. And then come the twists. For a start, all special moves have a simplified input reminiscent of those in *Super Smash Bros*. Pressing the right shoulder button

A fascinatingly flexible system that grants the amateurs and pros alike a suite of options

while pushing the stick in a direction will throw out a fireball or dragon punch no problem, no zero quarter-circles or Z-patterns required (we can also add a face button for a souped-up version of the move). Here’s the catch: all special moves are also on cooldowns, visible to both players. Executing the more complex manual input rather than the R1 shortcut rewards the player with more damage and a shorter cooldown – particularly useful when using EX moves, with their lengthier recharge times. It’s a fascinatingly flexible system that not only rewards beginners for improving their skills while still allowing

them to compete, but grants the amateurs and pros alike a suite of options. When there’s a high-pressure situation in which our uppercut just *has* to come out, or a combo just *has* to connect, we have the option to revert to the shortcut – safe in the knowledge we aren’t about to commit an input error.

The same flexibility can be found in *Versus*’ blocking system. Usually, the merest whiff of a dedicated block button would be enough to send us flouncing out of a room. but this one functions slightly differently. Holding back to block is still an option, but squeezing the right trigger and holding back allows you to perform a *King Of Fighters*-esque dodge, while pushing the stick forward has the added benefit of allowing you to close in on your foe as you dodge but leaves you vulnerable to low attacks. Both evasive manoeuvres can be the difference between winning or losing, as all of *Versus*’ attacks deal ‘chip’ damage (a reduced amount of damage that still counts if a player blocks). It’s up to you, then, to make high-level decisions as to whether a situation is worth the added guesswork of a forward or backwards dodge to save a few hit points. We can’t recall the last time a fighting game’s inclusion of a block button made fights more interesting, and yet *Versus* has managed it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our enemies in the side-scrolling, brawling RPG mode don’t really threaten to test our knowledge of the finer details of combat: progression largely relies on a gentle gear game, with loot drops letting you equip Gran with new types of weapon. But it’s likely to be an effective tool in encouraging newcomers towards a fighting game that might just be the most digestible effort in years – despite all the corncobs. ■

Sky’s the limit

Granblue Fantasy: Versus’ super moves come in two flavours: Skybound Arts, and Super Skybound Arts. The Skybound Art uses a full bar of super meter to unleash a sumptuously animated and frequently very funny takedown upon your opponent, while the more powerful Super Skybound Art is *Versus*’ version of a comeback mechanic, requiring your health to be below 30 per cent. There’s already a balancing issue with one character’s Super Skybound Art: he of the corncob, Lowain, calls upon the goddess Yggdrasil, who covers the floor in lava and fires projectiles that deal huge chip damage. Quick-fingered use of *Versus*’ dodge mechanic appears to be the way to escape unscathed – still, beginner beware.

Katalina is usually the protector of Lyria, a blue-haired being who’s wanted for her great power. In the RPG mode, she turns on Gran for unknown reasons, and becomes a boss fight





ROUND-UP

YNGLET

Developer Nifflas Publisher Triple Topping Games Format PC Origin Sweden Release 2020



Next up from Nicklas 'Nifflas' Nygren – he of *Affordable Space Adventures* and *Knytt Underground* fame – is this gorgeous side-scroller which casts you as a graceful swimming creature in an arresting hand-drawn world. There's more than a slight whiff of *Electroplankton* in the way your movements shape the soundtrack, as our jellyfish-like hero sets out to rescue its friends, who were scattered after a comet hit their home. Originally conceived for the No More Sweden game jam, Nygren is bringing the game to life with backing from Indie Fund. Look out for a deeper dive (we can only apologise) in a future issue.

HOKKO LIFE

Developer/publisher Robert Tatnell Format PC Origin UK Release 2020



The latest game to toe the increasingly faded line between loving homage and cynical clone is this *Animal Crossing*-like from Robert Tatnell, a former Lionhead designer striking out on his own. Given how successfully Eric Barone took the *Harvest Moon* formula and ran with it in *Stardew Valley*, it's no surprise to see others follow his lead. But where Barone's game was an evolution of a concept, this looks more like a shot-for-shot remake. It'll sell regardless, sure.

MOVING OUT

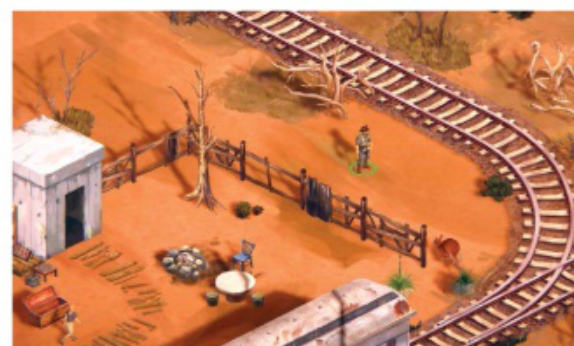
Developer SMG Studio, Devm Games Publisher Team 17
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Origin Sweden Release April



First *The Sims 4* reminded millennials they were never getting on the property ladder; now Team 17 satirises how they'll be moving house every six months until they die because the landlord's jacked the rent up again. The elevator pitch is simple: *Overcooked*, but with sofas. All together now: pivot!

BROKEN ROADS

Developer/publisher Drop Bear Bytes
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Origin Australia Release 2021



Setting apart *Broken Roads* from an increasingly crowded CRPG field is its pedigree – recent hire Colin McComb's 25-year career includes credits on *Fallout 2* and *Planescape: Torment*. Set in a postapocalyptic Australian outback, with a novel take on the morality system, this is one to watch.

INSCRIPTION

Developer/publisher Daniel Mullins Games
Format PC Origin Canada Release 2021



The phrase 'deck-building Roguelike' is still catnip at *Edge Towers*, but the realisation that there's only one *Slay The Spire* means it's lost a little of its potency. Arresting that decline is this from *Pony Island*'s Daniel Mullins, blending cards, escape-room-style puzzling and psychological horror. Ah, go on then.

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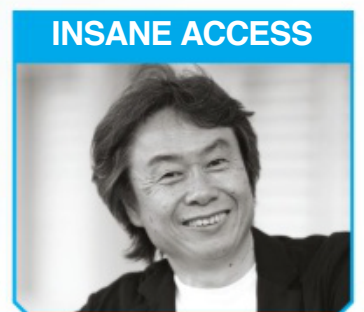
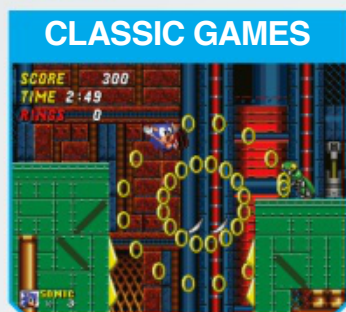


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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



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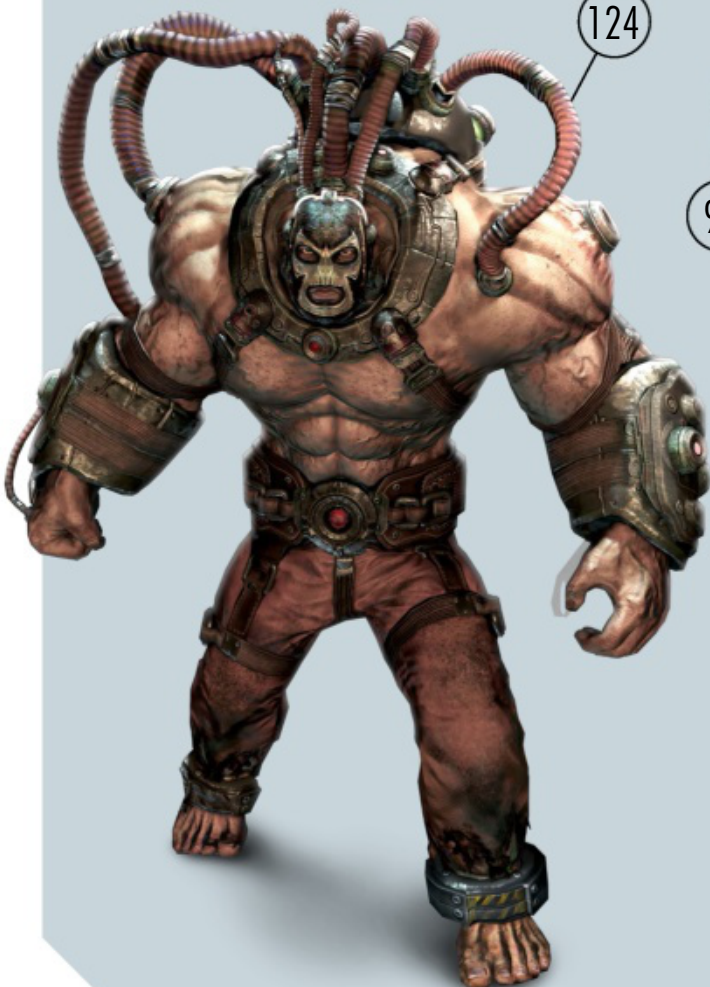
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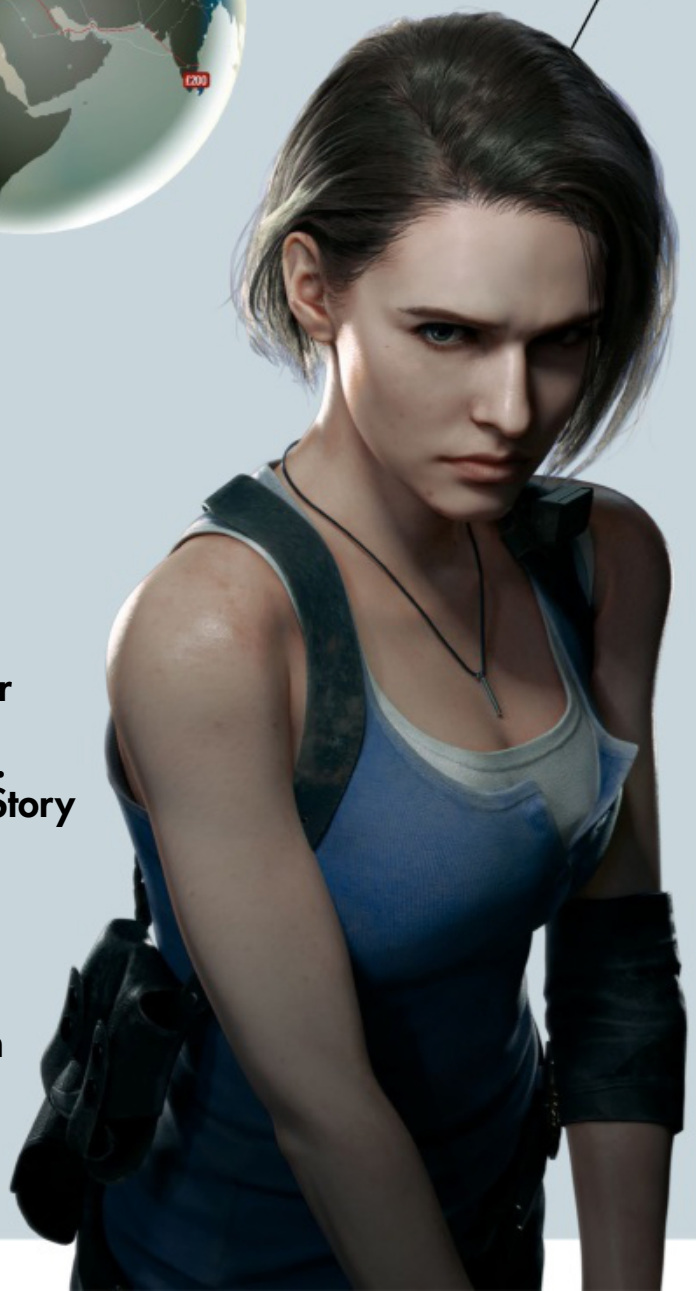
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V A L E N T I



Capcom's latest remake revives
the thrill of the chase

By CHRIS SCHILLING



N E ' S D A Y



The chase is on. Shoulders hunched, her free arm clutching her injured stomach, Jill Valentine jogs down an alleyway strewn with junk. With every step, she's putting more distance between herself and her pursuer. Or so she thinks. Suddenly, a large mass whooshes past her ear; she reflexively ducks and holds both arms up to shield herself. We flinch too, as Nemesis lands, skidding to a stop and turning to face Jill — and us — in one ominously swift movement. It takes a single step forward before launching a haymaker that sends her staggering backwards. We're used to the whole bursting-through-walls thing with Nemesis, even if his first arrival here leaves us with our heart somewhere near our throat. But this? This is new — thrillingly so.

You would think the best reason to remake *Resident Evil 3* is the chance to bring back one of the all-time great videogame enemies. Indeed, Nemesis was so crucial to the series' third instalment that, until 2017's *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* combined the series' English-language and Japanese names, it was the only numbered entry to have a subtitle. That's perhaps because it was first conceived as a spin-off, developed by a relatively inexperienced team as a last hurrah for the series on PlayStation, while a larger team led by Hideki Kamiya started work on the original — later aborted — version of *Resident Evil 4* for the next console generation. Yet if the game was in any way lacking next to its predecessor, it had an ace in the hole: the Nemesis itself. Here was a pursuer as relentless as the movie villain that inspired it, T2: Judgment Day's T-1000. You could say the original game is still the finest unofficial Terminator videogame ever made. Until now.

Revisiting Nemesis seemed a natural next step for Capcom after the success of last year's *Resident Evil 2* ►



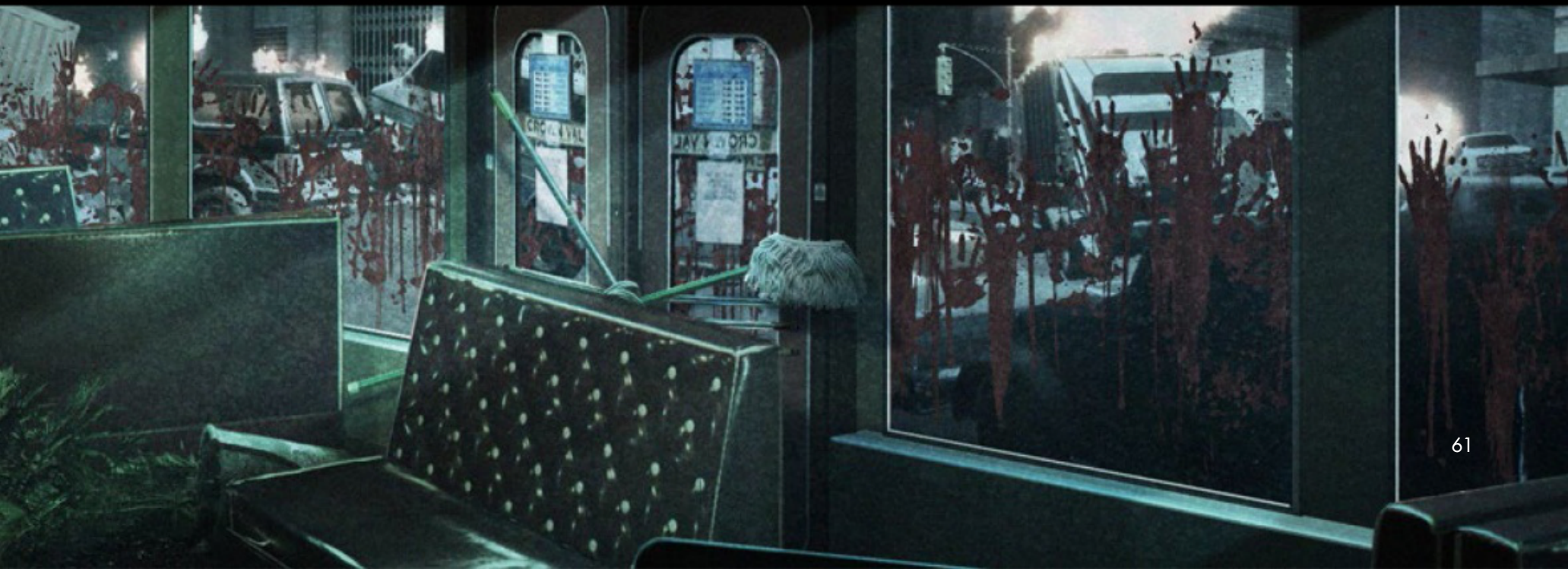
REVISITING NEMESIS SEEMED A
NATURAL STEP AFTER THE SUCCESS OF
LAST YEAR'S RESIDENT EVIL 2 REMAKE



RACCOON CITY LIMITS

The original *Resi 3*'s fixed camera angle shrewdly evokes the sense of a ruined city through forced perspective without having to fully realise it. These days, there's no room to cut corners with a camera the player can control, and when you can walk up to everything and examine it in detail. Still, Kawata says his team has relished the opportunity to flesh out Raccoon City. "We love and respect the original game, so to have the chance to take that framework of the city layout and use that as a jumping off point for our own ideas has been a pleasure for us as developers." Amid the charming – and occasionally sad – glimpses into a world before the T-virus, we're struck by an open box of doughnuts, abandoned before anyone got to take a bite. "It was really fun to come up with all these background details that give you a sense of the slight tragedy of people going about their lives just moments before all this happened," Kawata says.

There's naturally a greater variation in lighting this time, with gloomy interior locations looking all the murkier in contrast to the vibrant signage (and the raging fires, for that matter) outside



VALENTINE'S DAY

How do you defeat an enemy that doesn't seem to mind being ablaze? You'll want to keep a few explosive rounds and plenty of shotgun ammo in reserve for this fight, though you can buy yourself time to scoop up more by paying attention to your environment



remake — though it turns out this was actually planned some time ago. “There’s been some overlap with the development of *Bio 2*,” says co-producer **Peter Fabiano**, referring to the series’ Japanese title. “In terms of how long we’ve been in development, all told, it’s been approximately three years.” As one of the most popular and acclaimed games in the series, *Resi 2* was always an obvious candidate for a remake. Taking the original’s unusual development circumstances into account, is there perhaps a little more room for improvement this time? Co-producer **Masachika Kawata** is careful not to be too critical of the original game. “Even bearing in mind what you said, we had something great to work with — the combination of the character of Jill Valentine, who’s one of the most beloved series heroes, with Nemesis, who is one of the most iconic villains in the franchise history,” he says. “Working out how to approach remaking those elements and bringing them into the modern era with this remake was a really challenging, but really enjoyable process for us.”

Getting Nemesis right was crucial, then, and yet Kawata’s team already seemed to have had a dry run with *Resident Evil 2*’s Mr X. The producer doesn’t quite feel the same way. “Mr X definitely served as the first chance to work on that kind of ‘pursuer enemy’ — at least within the remake context — but it’s not really the case that he was a practice run,” he says. “I think Mr X is incredibly well designed and executed, and then with Nemesis we wanted to go one step beyond that — to take the terrifying nature of Mr X and see how far we can push the concept of the pursuer enemy.” Either way, he acknowledges that with Mr X, Capcom had set itself a high bar to clear. “We’d already upgraded the character compared to the original game, to the point where he was almost catching up on how Nemesis felt in the original *RE3*. We knew we had to learn from that, but also make it so they don’t feel like just two versions of the same character — so they feel quite distinct as experiences.”

Kawata may be reluctant to say it’s an improvement, but anyone concerned that Nemesis might be defeated by circling a piece of furniture, say, can rest easy. Unlike Mr X, it is not confined to a single (if large) location; it can arrive at any time and pretty much anywhere. And you won’t necessarily hear it coming. Sure, you’ll know when it’s around, even when it’s a little way behind — the soundtrack swells to remind you that you’re still being chased, leading to that spike of anxiety when you know you’re in trouble, but can’t see where it’s coming from — but at times it seems as if he drops out of the sky. We ask about the technical challenge of realising an enemy that isn’t restricted by location, nor confined to interior settings. Kawata doesn’t go into precise detail — perhaps he’s keen to preserve a bit of the mystery of Nemesis — but suggests the overarching approach is not dissimilar to last time. “There isn’t a massive difference in how we

N E M E S I S H A S M O R E W A Y S T O
C L O S E T H E G A P B E T W E E N I T S E L F A N D
J I L L . I T F R E Q U E N T L Y L A S H E S O U T
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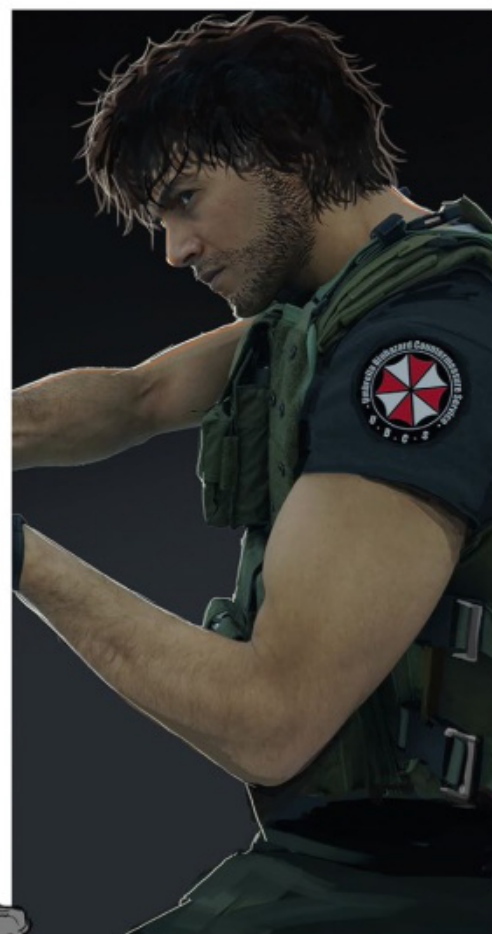
think about this rollercoaster ride of tension we want players to have,” he says. “You need to have moments of relief and then moments of sudden fear and surprise whenever he comes after you. It’s really about balancing those out.”

Sustaining the level of threat — and the element of surprise — for a full-length game will indeed be a challenge. But the early signs are extremely encouraging. Nemesis’ design has changed a little to reflect its increased agility: it’s the same towering mass of muscle and sinew, but a little more tightly packed this time, its arms and legs wrapped in black bindings. That face, needless to say, remains one only an Umbrella scientist could love, contorted as it is in a permanent grimace that looks pained and angry all at once. Though the absence of the original game’s fixed perspectives means you lose the shiversome sight of seeing it round a corner behind Jill as she runs toward the camera — and the subsequent horror when it disappears from clear view — the remake compensates in other ways. It’s hard to say whether Nemesis is faster or just feels that way, but it certainly has greater range. Beyond those sudden leaps that force you to double back (or else raise your shotgun and grenade launcher and brave a direct confrontation) Nemesis has more ways to close the gap between itself and Jill. It frequently lashes out with its tentacles from range, tripping her up and dragging her within easy reach. Like any classic villain, it gives you a fighting chance, but that brief moment where you pull yourself to your feet as it towers over you makes it more imposing still — it could kill you, sure, but where’s the fun in that when it can drag out the ordeal instead? There’s just enough time to move out of the way of its next attack — hammering the buttons doesn’t speed up the animation, but to us it feels like the right thing to do when we’re a single hit away from game over. And that’s before the sequence where Nemesis picks up a flamethrower and, with dramatic elan, slowly turns the barrel towards Jill’s face as she scrabbles to her feet.

Until that moment, which prompts a thrilling rooftop set-piece shortly after, we learn to improvise. As ever, the environment can be your friend — we’ve already shot a conveniently-placed red barrel to clear a group of zombies, so we take aim at a sparking generator, which releases an electrical charge that temporarily incapacitates Nemesis. The monster’s stunned long enough to put a bit of distance between us and it, yet we’re soon reminded not to get complacent. As we take refuge in a nearby garage, the soothing strains of the save-room theme ►

VALENTINE'S DAY

It almost goes without saying that the dialogue and the quality of the voice acting in the remake is a vast improvement on the original. The script still has a campy edge to it, but the writers are clearly playing up to it



invite us to take a breath and pause by a handy typewriter, perhaps drop off an item or two in the storage box to free up some inventory space. Then the door is barged open and we realise that, even here, the pursuit isn't over.

As with Mr X, Nemesis' very presence turns standard zombies into more of a threat, because you can no longer take your time killing them: in the middle of a chase, it's all too easy to blunder into their grasping arms. Otherwise, they're naturally a little easier to deal with in the more open exterior environments, though on Raccoon City's ruined streets Capcom has plenty of detritus with which to create bottlenecks, so you've rarely got as much room as you'd assume – or as you'd like. There are more undead, too, of course, and while we wouldn't advise wasting bullets on them all, weapons and ammo do seem to come more easily than in *RE2*. Less than three hours into the campaign, we've already got a handgun capable of firing more than 30 bullets before reloading – courtesy of an expanded magazine dropped by Nemesis the first time we bring it to its knees – as well as a shotgun and a grenade launcher. It reflects a tangible shift towards a more action-focused experience, and a reminder that *Resident Evil 4* wasn't actually the game that first tilted the balance away from slow-burn horror. There's a proper dodge now, too – squeeze the right trigger in conjunction

with the analogue stick and Jill will take a quick step while ducking. Time it perfectly as a zombie lurches, or Nemesis takes a swing, and the screen will flash as she rolls forward, triggering a brief period of slow-motion and a window for a retaliatory attack.

Elsewhere, a pair of returning monsters make a real impression, even if they're barely recognisable from their original incarnations. Charged with reactivating four breaker switches to bring the city's subway back online, Jill ventures into the heart of a bug's nest: the substation is covered in a pulpy mass, with pulsing sebaceous growths bursting open to reveal a familiar insectoid foe. The Drain Deimos are deadlier and more disgusting here – should one of them grab hold of Jill, it will prise open her mouth and release a flurry of wriggling larvae, forcing her to seek out a green herb or first-aid spray so she can vomit them out. She's vulnerable when activating the breakers, too: the camera shifts to a more distant view as you hold a button for a few seconds that feels much longer. Should you spot a Deimos skittering towards

NEMESIS' VERY PRESENCE TURNS
STANDARD ZOMBIES INTO MORE OF A
THREAT, BECAUSE YOU CAN NO LONGER
TAKE YOUR TIME KILLING THEM



VALENTINE'S DAY

BULLETS FOR MY VALENTINE

If this is, as Kawata says, a rollercoaster, then it's a ride that doesn't slow down too often. Still, once we've got our hands on a lockpick and a pair of bolt cutters, we make time for a spot of backtracking to pick the map clean and stockpile as much ammo as we can. A stock for the shotgun will no doubt come in handy later, while a hip pouch gives us extra room for the large battery packs you'll find in the sewers. You'll ferry these between doors as part of an extended puzzle; this follows a sequence where you need to plot a valid, unobstructed route for the now up-and-running subway car to help survivors escape the city. These moments make a pleasant break from the heart-pounding pursuits. Here's hoping for more throughout the campaign.

The obvious question: are any more remakes planned after this one? Fabiano translates for his fellow producer: "We're all pretty damn tired from working on *RE3*. All we want to do right now is go home and take a bath!"





her, you'll want to release it quickly, which gives you *just* enough time to lift your shotgun for a point-blank blast.

Then, as Jill escapes from Nemesis into the sewers, you'll encounter the Hunter Gammas. Formerly a frog-like prototype for the Alpha equivalent, they're much larger and more dangerous now: blubbery masses that are essentially giant mouths on legs. They'll gobble you whole if you let them get close enough, but when opening wide you can toss a grenade in there and stand back while they go through their death throes. After the first batch, we locate a note from their creator that suggests their legs are a weakness, euphemistically described as a "character flaw". Elsewhere, there's another grimly amusing reference to the horrors to come in a drugstore owner's diary: "This new hair tonic from Umbrella is flying off the shelves!"

It's a reminder that *Resident Evil's* storytelling approach, for better or worse, has progressed somewhat from the kitsch, camp quality of the older games. We're a long way from Jill's opening inner monologue in the original *RE3*: "Farewell to my life. Farewell to my home. This is my last chance for survival..." She's soon delivering a less polite kind of farewell, in fact, as mercenary Carlos Oliveira — sporting a mop and stubble that sets him apart from his immaculately groomed PS1 counterpart, even if his tendency towards casual sexism remains — suggests she can reach the power station through an alleyway that's currently on fire. "Baby, surely a tall drink of water like yourself can put out a few flames," he smarms over the radio. "Fuck you," is Jill's curt response. Later, she displays her wry sense of humour as she splashes down into the sewers: "I'm definitely burning these clothes."

Indeed, she's more practically attired than last time, with a look that's closer to latterday Lara Croft than her ►

RESIDENT EVIL'S STORYTELLING
APPROACH, FOR BETTER OR WORSE,
HAS PROGRESSED FROM THE KITSCH,
CAMP QUALITY OF THE OLDER GAMES



original guise. That will inevitably displease some people, much as we doubt any of them are reading this, but Fabiano acknowledges it was a necessary step. “When we approached Jill, if you look at the original we had to do what we needed to make her stand out,” he says. “But with this game, everything is on a photorealistic level; it’s more of a believable atmosphere we’re trying to create. We want to have a Jill that fit in that, but still stayed true to her original personality and essence. And that’s really how we came about the new Jill.”

These new scenarios and more progressive characterisation point to a stronger commitment to expanding the original’s story, for which Kawata pays enthusiastic tribute to director Kiyohiko Sakata, whose involvement with the series stretches back to the 1996 original; more significantly, he was the chief programmer on the original *RE3*. “I want to highlight what a great job the director has done of making adjustments and rearranging elements to create what I think is a deeper and more consistent game story through the whole campaign. It’s going to be exciting for people to play if they’re comparing in their mind to the original but also just exciting in its own right as a standalone *Resident Evil* storyline,” he says before laughing as he acknowledges his

bias. “Obviously I’m the producer, so I would say that, but I think it’s a really well-made game.”

It’s an improvement, no doubt. And yet with so many changes from the original, at times this feels more of a complete reimagining than a remake. Our time with the game begins a little way into the campaign, so we can’t compare the opening, but beyond the setting and returning enemies, this could almost be a different game. So is Capcom wary of changing too much? “It’s always the best approach to take what you’re familiar with as a basis,” Kawata says, “to make it a launching point for the remake to build upon and add in new surprising elements that will help you not just feel like you’re playing the same thing, but that enriches and brings a new depth to the experience.”

It’s certainly not your dad’s *Resident Evil 3*, right down to the loss of its subtitle – though that in itself speaks volumes about the kind of remake this is intended to be. For all that Capcom seems to have got the game’s most vital ingredient right, perhaps the most exciting thing about remaking *Resident Evil 3* is not Nemesis himself, but everything around it. In other words, one of the great videogame antagonists may finally be getting the game it deserves. ►



VALENTINE'S DAY



It's a shade tougher than *RE2*, we say. Kawata suggests the increased focus on action makes it feel different: "The original fixed-camera version wasn't just the same game with a different setting... It isn't just *RE2* part two – it's its own thing"



VIVE LA RESISTANCE

Replacing The Mercenaries mode from the original is Resistance, an asymmetric multiplayer game that pits four Survivors against one Mastermind in what is framed as an Umbrella experiment to research the human response to fear. The Survivors need to work together to complete a series of challenges in order to escape. Meanwhile the Mastermind must keep tabs on them through a network of security cameras, spending action points on cards that correspond to a variety of hazards, to stop them.

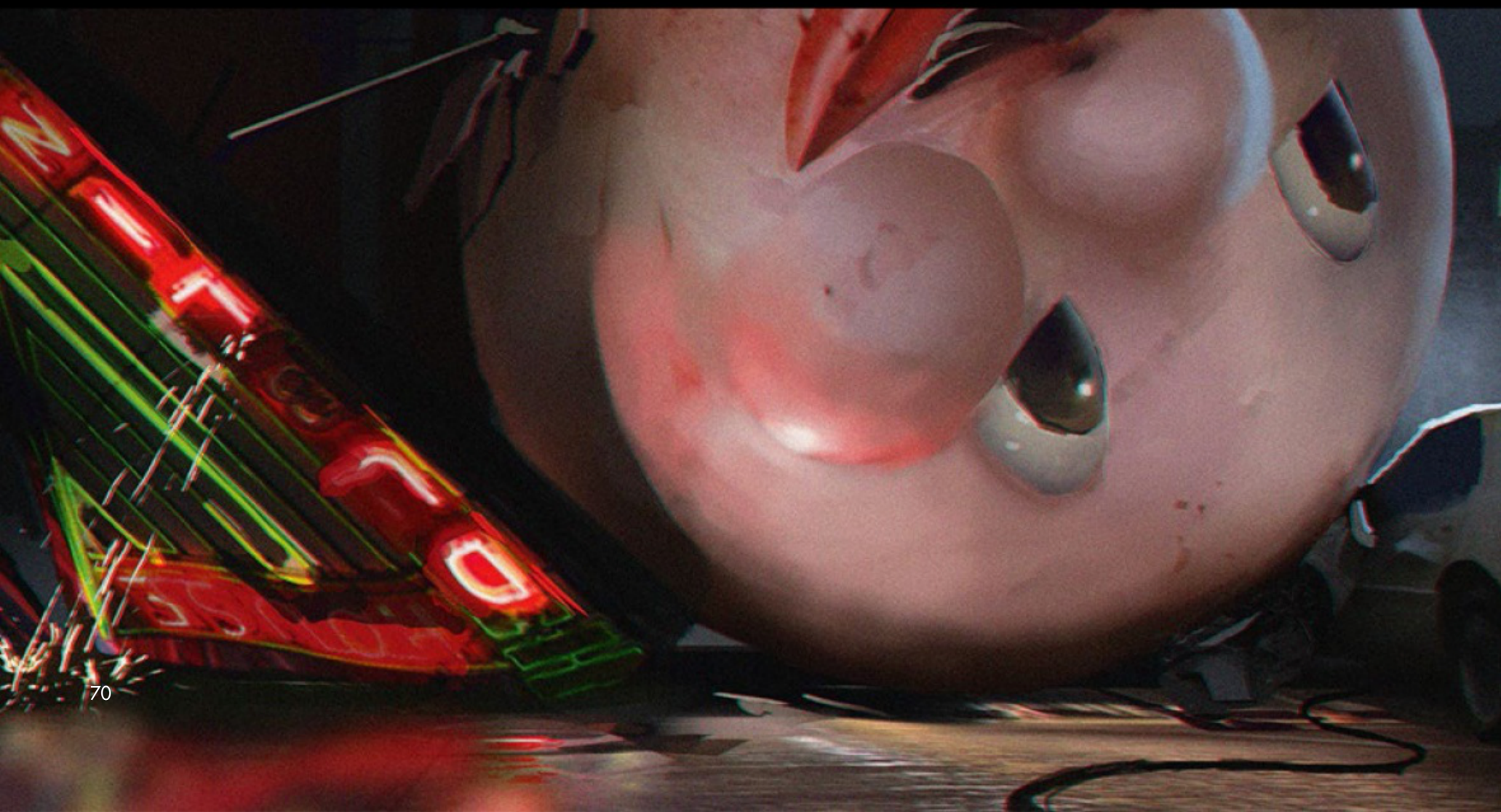
It's a smart idea that reminds us a little of the sadly scrapped *Fable Legends*. Each Survivor has their own passive skills and two actives bound to cooldowns. Martin, for example, is an engineer who can disarm traps without tripping them, with a flash baton that can blind enemies. Hacker January can disable a feed rather than waste time shooting the camera – either way, the Mastermind will temporarily be forced to shift to another view until it resets, a potentially valuable window to get things done.

At first, it seems scrappy and chaotic, with objectives hard to parse, but over a few games it begins to click. Sticking together seems like the logical move, and yet in the labyrinthine casino stage, at least, it sometimes pays to spread out. Sure, you're at risk of being cornered, but it also gives you a better chance of locating (and alerting your colleagues to) the position of mission-critical items, whether it's a key to open a puzzle lock or a specific zombie holding a card that can deactivate security devices. The time limit might seem tight, but it can be extended by completing objectives, and you'll get more for having

everyone alive when each part of the three-stage escape is completed. Reviving allies might be risky in crowded rooms, but letting them die and respawn incurs a 15-second penalty.

Playing as the Mastermind, meanwhile, is initially overwhelming, but soon becomes second nature as you flit from camera to camera, placing enemies and hazards into the world. You learn by playing *and* watching – figuring out each player's strengths and weaknesses to work out how best to surprise them. And it offers moments of direct control, too – attach a turret or a grenade launcher to a camera and you can aim and fire as you would in any FPS, albeit from a static position. And if you're bored of being in a single spot, you can assume command of certain enemies, from souped-up zombies to special units – and yes, that means you can stomp around as Mr X, who makes for an 11th-hour game-changer.

Entertaining stuff, then, but what does it have to do with the campaign? “We simply wanted to take a new challenge of creating this super-intense, online multiplayer experience,” Fabiano says. “On a conceptual side, both games have people trying to escape something in some way, so it's thematically consistent.” A bit of a reach, perhaps, though it does have something in common with The Mercenaries in that both are a race against time where you can top up the clock by achieving certain goals. Though any similarities, according to Kawata, are purely coincidental. “We were more focused on just thinking how we could create a fun and unique multiplayer game.” ■



VALENTINE'S DAY



Becca is one of Resistance's more capable combatants – her Sentry Stance ability sees her crouch to boost her firearm damage, while her Bullet Storm special affords her a brief period of infinite ammo, ideal for last-ditch sieges



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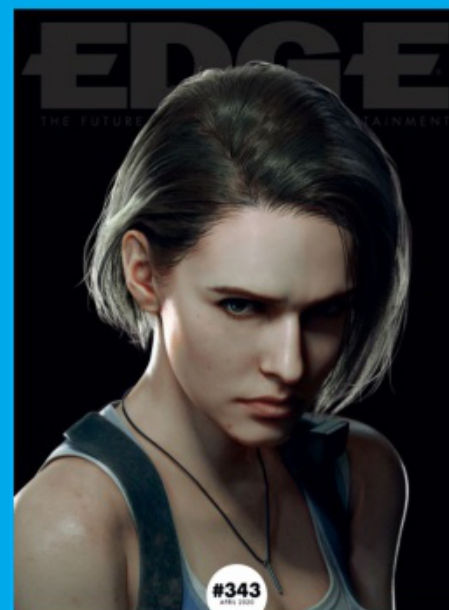
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COLLECTED WORKS

YU SUZUKI

HANG-ON

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1985

SPACE HARRIER

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1985

OUT RUN

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1986

VIRTUA FIGHTER

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1993

SHENMUE

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Dreamcast Release 1999

SHENMUE III

Developer Ys Net Publisher Deep Silver Format PC, PS4 Release 2019

The veteran developer reflects on his pioneering arcade games, the challenges of crowdfunding and the completion of Shenmue III

By **NICK THORPE**

Photography **Will Ireland**

COLLECTED WORKS

During the 1980s and 1990s, the commercial potential of an arcade game often relied as much on technological innovation as it did on carefully considered game design. This was an ideal situation for the man in charge of Sega's AM2 team, **Yu Suzuki**, as he was given priority access to new technologies that allowed him to pursue his interests in simulation. Utilising motion cabinets and 3D graphics hardware, Suzuki created games that pulled off a tricky balancing act, providing a sense of realism without sacrificing the instant gratification so important to arcade success.

As home consoles caught up with the power of arcade boards, Suzuki developed the *Shenmue* games, RPGs featuring his most ambitious simulation effort to date: fully functioning towns. Though popular, the series was unable to recoup its budget and Suzuki's focus since 2001 has primarily been on creating the third game in the *Shenmue* series, a challenge that had often seemed insurmountable. With *Shenmue III* now finally in the wild, here Suzuki takes a retrospective look at some of the highlights of his 35-year career in the game industry.

HANG-ON

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1985

Hang-On started with a project brought into Sega, which was the company I used to work for. The technology was a torsion bar, a metal bar that would come back to its original form if twisted. That sort of technology – what if we could utilise it to simulate a bike? If you pulled it down, it would come back up, that was the idea. That was that kind of project that was brought in, but at that point we had only considered the details of the cabinet itself and we needed to add some sort of software to it, which I was in charge of. Ultimately, that torsion-bar technology wasn't able to be utilised for *Hang-On*, so in the end we opted to use springs for that motion of the bike coming up.

What I wanted to do was make the kind of game where you straddle the bike



Besides its cabinet, *Hang-On* was notable for being the first game to use one of Sega's popular Super Scaler boards, which were among the most advanced of the 80s

"I'M GLAD THAT
IT SUCCEEDED,
BECAUSE IT
WAS SO MUCH
FUN TO DO
SOMETHING NEW"



– straddle the cabinet itself to play – rather than facing a table and playing like that. That had never been done before, that was the thinking behind it, but I remember hearing so many negative opinions being voiced. For example, some people were saying that Japanese people tend to be very shy, so they'd never want to straddle this huge cabinet in public. Girls wearing skirts, would they be able to do that? That sort of cabinet is very large, which means cost – that means higher risk, so hearing that kind of negativity being expressed is what I remember from that time. I'm glad that it succeeded, because it was so much fun to do something new, and I had a great time taking on that challenge.

For the game itself, I used 2D graphics to represent 3D calculations. When I was in university, I did research into 3D architecture, so I was very interested in graphics in the first place. I wanted to continue researching, because I was aiming much higher than what I could achieve during my time as a student. So when I joined Sega, I wanted to continue researching 3D technology at the same time I was creating games. But at the time arcade boards could not do 3D calculations, it was impossible. So internally it was 3D, but display-wise, it was conveyed in a 2D environment. We couldn't carry out development using Sega's hardware at the time, so we simulated it on a PC, then transferred it to the arcade hardware. Back then what I was trying to do in terms of simulating the movement was just using a line, to depict the way the bike would lean over. The evolution is such that starting with the line, it became triangular; then we could show triangles with colour inside, then the number of triangles multiplied. That's how 3D developed over the years.

SPACE HARRIER

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1985

The original concept for this game was based around the Harrier, a fighter jet which can take off vertically and attack both aerial and ground targets. But that game was very difficult to realise, as simulating the way an aeroplane moves ►



COLLECTED WORKS

requires many animation patterns. In turn, we'd have to draw more graphics, and the memory would be eaten up. We needed to limit the number of sprites we used, so instead of the plane, we decided to fly people instead. But if we were to fly people, that had to be a sci-fi situation – people don't normally fly! So what I did was rewrite it as a fantasy game and removed the aircraft completely. The only remaining part from the original concept is the word Harrier in the title. The inspirations behind the game's visual style are firstly the art of Roger Dean, who did the album covers for Yes. I love that kind of fantasy world. Secondly there was the movie *The Neverending Story*, something that gives a child a dream. We wanted to pay homage to those two.

In a 3D shooting game like *Space Harrier* distant targets obviously appear smaller, and it's difficult to successfully shoot that kind of small target in the distance. That's why competing games weren't often very successful. What I thought of was using homing-missile technology, where you lock on, and even if you roughly direct the shot it will hit anyway. If you create that kind of algorithm, the player can shoot much better than they could even in a 2D environment. That's one of the reasons why it was popular.



Space Harrier's fantasy theme marks it as an outlier among Suzuki's directorial works, as most of his games have been based on realistic situations and concepts



The sunny beach setting of *Out Run's* opening course is among the most iconic examples of the classic Sega arcade aesthetic, defined by its bright colours and clear blue skies. Who wouldn't want to roar down that road in a convertible?

OUT RUN

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1986

Before *Out Run* came onto the market, the majority of games with cars were racing games where you competed against each other. What I wanted to focus on was making a driving game in such a way that you could enjoy driving as an experience in itself. That meant open-top cars driving in nice scenery, such as Monaco and the south of France. We did sort of follow that racing format, but the objective isn't getting to number one. In this case you're the hands-down number one, the second car is way behind and you're the only one going through the course – maybe you're only driving with one hand, you've got the beautiful girl next to you. That sort of sense of pride and superiority, where you're number one in the long run, is what I wanted to create.

When I was researching locations for *Out Run*, I went on a road trip across Europe that was full of unusual incidents. When I was driving in the south of France, I found that at that time the people in the countryside couldn't speak English. We needed to eat so we dropped by a restaurant, but it's not like a Japanese restaurant where the menus have pictures, and it was in a language I didn't understand. But we needed to order something, so I pointed at the menu and said "this, this, this and this," and selected some at random. The waiter looked kind of puzzled, and gave us a look as if to say "are you sure?" When the dish came, it was just four different kinds of soup. What I learnt from that is that when you order from a menu in a language you don't understand, you need to space out your selections – choose something from this side and something from that side, otherwise everything will be from the same section. When I got slightly more used to the trip, further down the road, the next time I went into a restaurant I got the waiter to walk with me through the restaurant. I secretly pointed at some of the dishes that the other customers were eating to show him what I wanted. That's how I found a sure way to order something that I'd really like.

I can't remember whether it was in France or not, but definitely in a country where I didn't understand the language,

I really wanted to go to the toilet. So we found a public toilet, but the problem was I couldn't tell which one was male and which one was female. I was so desperate, but I decided to wait until someone came along so I could tell which one was which – so of course in that moment of desperation, nobody came along for a long time. But that kind of real experience is so valuable when it comes to creating a game such as *Shenmue*.

Going back to that sense of feeling superior to others, that sort of sense of superiority, the epitome of that is Ferrari. In terms of the brand image, it's something that all the boys would aspire to, and that's why I thought it was symbolic in that sense. The Ferrari Testarossa that is used in *Out Run* doesn't actually have an open-top version in reality. But when I saw an open-top Testarossa in front of the casino in Monaco, probably one that someone had illegally customised, I said, "Oh, that's what I need."

VIRTUA FIGHTER

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Arcade Release 1993

Back when we started *Virtua Fighter*, the president of Sega was always asking the people around him, "Why does our company not have a strong fighting game? What's going on, why don't we have such a thing?" At the time I thought that as long as I made one, that would take care of something the company required – I recognised it as something that needed to be done. That's the real story! The technology at the core of this product was made solely by myself – carrying out the testing using computers and talking to the hardware engineers in charge of 3D boards at Sega, remaining in close communication with them. Initially we could only achieve 300 polygons per frame, but we managed to improve that to 3,000 per frame, or 180,000 polygons per second, by talking to the hardware designers and improving the Model 1 design.

When trying to figure out how collision would work when the 3D fighters made contact with one another, it was all about trying out different algorithms available. When something hits another thing, it's not a simple matter of two things colliding – one object might get pushed aside, an arm



"THAT KIND OF
3D IMAGING WAS
ONLY REALLY
ACHIEVABLE
BY MILITARY
SIMULATION
COMPANIES"



The way that the likes of Akira, Wolf and Lau move is particularly remarkable as Suzuki and the AM2 team were unable to use motion capture to animate them



might be knocked that way; so many different types of complicated calculations had to be taken into account, so it was all about experimentation.

For example, if I swing my arm from left to right and there's a solid object at the central point, there's a frame before where no contact is made between the two models. If that momentum carried on with two humans, there would be a definite hit. But by the time the next frame is drawn, there's a chance that the arm has already passed through the other character model and again, there's no contact. So what I would focus on is the space the arm would have to move through to get from the first frame to the second frame, and checking if an object is present there. Then, even though there's no collision in realtime, an impact is made so the object must move in the direction of the arm. It wasn't like it is now. There were no physics engines so I had to manually calculate that sort of thing – everything.

Despite the fact that the character models were very primitive, their movement was very smooth, and I think that gap was part of the reason for the game's success. From everybody else's point of view, I think people saw it as something very innovative. That kind of 3D imaging was only really achievable by military simulation companies – at the time, I believe there were only three such companies. That's why it had a huge impact on the industry. ►

SHENMUE

Developer/publisher Sega (AM2) Format Dreamcast Release 1999

As you know, my background was in creating arcade games. In arcade games, the duration of play ideally had to be about three minutes, because what you do is you put in your coin – 100 yen in the case of Japan, or quarters in America. If that coin takes you over that three-minute threshold, that means the game's income will decline, so we were supposed to conclude the game within that amount of time. In terms of monetising the game effectively, there was a need to adopt that kind of short-term mindset. In consumer games, you don't have to worry about that sort of time limitation, so no matter how long it takes for the player to play the game, it will be okay. On a home console you can enjoy games that take plenty of time, and maybe games that carry strong messages. That's why I decided to make a consumer RPG.

It's difficult to say how I dealt with the pressure of *Shenmue*'s importance to the Dreamcast as a platform. All we could do was do our best. When it came to working with the huge number of staff that you have to manage in order to make a game like this, because they're human beings, sometimes it's very difficult to control them. That definitely presented me with some challenges. But beyond that, it's difficult to talk about.

I don't think *Shenmue*'s Yokosuka is particularly small, but when it comes to designing an open world, to me one of the important keywords is 'density.' What's most important, as opposed to how big an area is, is how dense it is. Of course, if you can pursue the greatness of being big that's good, but in some cases being relatively small is beneficial – as long as the area is utilised in an effective manner. The best size for an open world is one that's the right size for the game, that's what I believe. I applied the same concept of density in *Shenmue III*, too. ►



Shenmue's depiction of Yokosuka, filled with residents who behaved as though they truly had lives of their own, was a revelation in 1999







SHENMUE III

Developer Ys Net Publisher Deep Silver Format PC, PS4 Release 2019

There were plans to make *Shenmue III* long before 2015. There were so many different methods, so many avenues we were trying to pursue, but we couldn't really go ahead with any of them because there were certain things that were insufficient to proceed with development. When I became aware of Kickstarter, I did some research and then I realised that perhaps we could finally start this project, so that's why I chose to use crowdfunding.

I think I understand now what crowdfunding is all about. In the past, everything about the development of my games has been very confidential, even until three to six months or so before the launch date. Even though the project itself takes three years to make, up until that point everything had to remain a secret. But when it comes to Kickstarter, we need to create games together with backers, so at each stage we needed to disclose the contents of the plan. That was something quite different.



Shenmue III still holds the funding record for Kickstarter games. Its scale has made it unusual among crowdfunded games, which are usually smaller in scope, while the need to communicate with backers has posed challenges for Suzuki and his studio Ys Net



Because we used Kickstarter, our number-one priority was to meet the demands of the backers. In order to please the fans you need to give them some sort of nostalgic element, whether it be through the characters or the gameplay, that reminds them of the existing games as part of the fan service. Having achieved that, of course it's still a business, we need to gain new users. But if we were to carry on exactly the same way as we did 20 years ago, we cannot expect to expand our audience and gain new fans. The new kind of fan needs more stimulation, so we needed to evolve in that sense as well, in the same way as the movies of 20 years ago wouldn't work now. We did research with regard to playability, and we found that when the player experienced stressful situations they would stop playing the game, so we needed to change structures so that they wouldn't feel stress. That was something to enhance the usability, which was there from the basic concept stage.

I'm so pleased that *Shenmue III* has been completed. You know, there is a time jump system in *Shenmue III*, and I've wanted to use that in real life – I couldn't wait for that launch to finally happen. ■





THE NEXT CHAPTER

The industry's finest writers plot out the future of videogame storytelling

BY SAMUEL HORTI

Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale* and current joint holder of the Booker Prize, told Time magazine in 2012 that storytelling was “built into the human plan.” “You’re never going to kill storytelling,” she said. “We come with it.” And as it survives, it adapts. Since Atwood first won the Booker Prize in 2000, videogames have, for many people, become the primary route into other worlds. A January report from the Entertainment Retailers Association showed UK consumers spent nearly £3.8bn on games in 2019, more than the country spends annually on books.

Yet videogame narratives languish behind their counterparts in print. Novels sell on the strength of their plot, characters and writing; in games, story is often secondary to action. For every *Life Is Strange*, there’s a *Fortnite*. For every *Telling Lies*, a *Gears of War*.

Thankfully, videogames adapt too, and the 2010s offered reasons to be optimistic. *God Of War* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* proved a huge appetite still exists for traditional singleplayer stories. Despite the challenges faced by new indie studios, ambitious story-driven debuts, from *Disco Elysium* to *Firewatch*, found success. And it’s no coincidence that some of the biggest failures of the decade were games with giant holes where their narratives should’ve been, such as *Fallout 76* and *Anthem*. The new decade brings with it a new generation, and leaves the story of videogames delicately poised. What do the coming ten years have in store?

Independent studios tend to be more willing to experiment with their stories than larger developers. They don’t have to answer to publishers, or find huge audiences to cover their costs, and can therefore – in theory – take more risks. With notable exceptions, blockbuster stories have stagnated. The big-budget formula, as explained by a senior narrative designer at one of the world’s largest studios who wishes to remain anonymous, is a singleplayer campaign inspired by Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey (a

protagonist goes on an adventure, triumphs over adversity, and returns home a changed person). It is heavy on pre-rendered cinematics, and limited on player choice. The structure is easy to understand and replicate, says the developer, and because of that it’s attractive to executives.

“There’s a faith that the structure will work, because everyone has seen it work,” they tell us. “Often, that faith is more valuable than whatever cool ideas you’ve cooked up for your story. Ideas are cheap. Team cohesion and interdisciplinary trust are gold.”

A further source of stagnation is that writers and narrative designers aren’t given the respect they deserve. They’re seen, by some studios, as “inexpert, non-collaborative, or inessential,” the developer explains. “This means narrative-focused people are often not in the right rooms at the right times, where important decisions get made, which has a whole host of predictable and depressing outcomes. This is a major difference from the way narrative is treated in film and TV, where everything flows outward from the original script treatment and story bible.”

This attitude, combined with the constraints of telling massmarket stories – and therefore avoiding divisive topics – can make writing for a large studio demoralising. “I have many friends who have left the industry out of frustration over this issue.” But they’re hopeful that can change. As companies begin giving more respect to storytellers, those writers will stop worrying about their own survival, and tell stories with renewed confidence. The indie scene will innovate fastest, but the era of big-budget, long-running live-service games – *Fortnite*, *Destiny*, *The Division* et al – could yet prove a valuable creative outlet to studios of all sizes.

These games essentially follow the business models of old MMOs or MUDs, which provide fewer narrative touchstones. The rules are therefore still unwritten. *Fortnite*’s seasons are merely a first draft, and it’s only a matter of time before a studio cracks storytelling in the genre. “*Fortnite*’s black-hole stunt last year really ►

impressed a lot of people, and I think it will inspire a lot of copycats,” the anonymous developer says. “I’d love to see people start resurrecting roleplaying mechanics from MUDs and MMOs to put devs in more direct conversation with their players. Anything that gives players direct agency to interact with the story — whether that’s making their actions in an event or scenario canonical, creating situations where they are able to respond in realtime to a story-critical NPC, or fusing ARG-like elements into the game to create a transmedia story where players can, say, call an NPC’s voicemail.”

It’s hard to say exactly what that looks like, because it requires developers, both individuals and companies, to unlearn the industry’s traditional approach to singleplayer storytelling. “This doesn’t just mean adjusting your mental model or aesthetic taste. This means a willingness to invest in retooling your engine to deliver nonlinear or calendar-gated content. This means re-educating your entire player base. It is a big commitment with many unknowns and few

It’s really positive.” That diversifying of ideas is not just desirable: it’s unavoidable. “I don’t think it will be driven by creative directors or marketing decisions, it’ll just be driven by the fact that more people are playing and making games.”

As stories change, Contreras believes the way players interact with them will shift: that the 2020s will see an influx of stories that could only be told in videogame form. That might mean blockbusters with more interactive, extravagant set-pieces: a Naughty Dog game where players have more agency over the story, but are still in awe of the spectacle. Or, it might mean more games like *Return Of The Obra Dinn*, which creates a story completely out of player interaction; out of manipulating time and exploring memories. “You’re going to see more of that: ‘There’s no way you could do this inside another form of art’. To me, leaning into that is really exciting.”

To make those sorts of games, studios will have to hire more narrative designers with technical skills, Contreras says. “Pure writers” will have a role akin to that of a concept artist, whose original ideas can spawn entire games on

THE EVER-EXPANDING GAMING AUDIENCE MEANS MORE STORIES — AND MORE LEADING CHARACTERS — ARE VIABLE THAN EVER BEFORE

common cross-industry best practices, so it’s naturally quite scary to many people.”

The skillset for live-service games is so different that **Aaron Contreras**, Respawn Entertainment’s narrative lead, believes a new generation of developers, many coming from outside of games, is required. He points to Respawn writer Tom Casiello as an example: he learned his trade on TV soap operas and the WWE, two unlikely sources of valuable experience for his role writing *Apex Legends* storylines. “He’s been thinking about continuing narratives in this format for probably longer than they’ve existed inside videogames. He’s a great example of somebody who’s going to be shaping the way the industry does that going forward.”

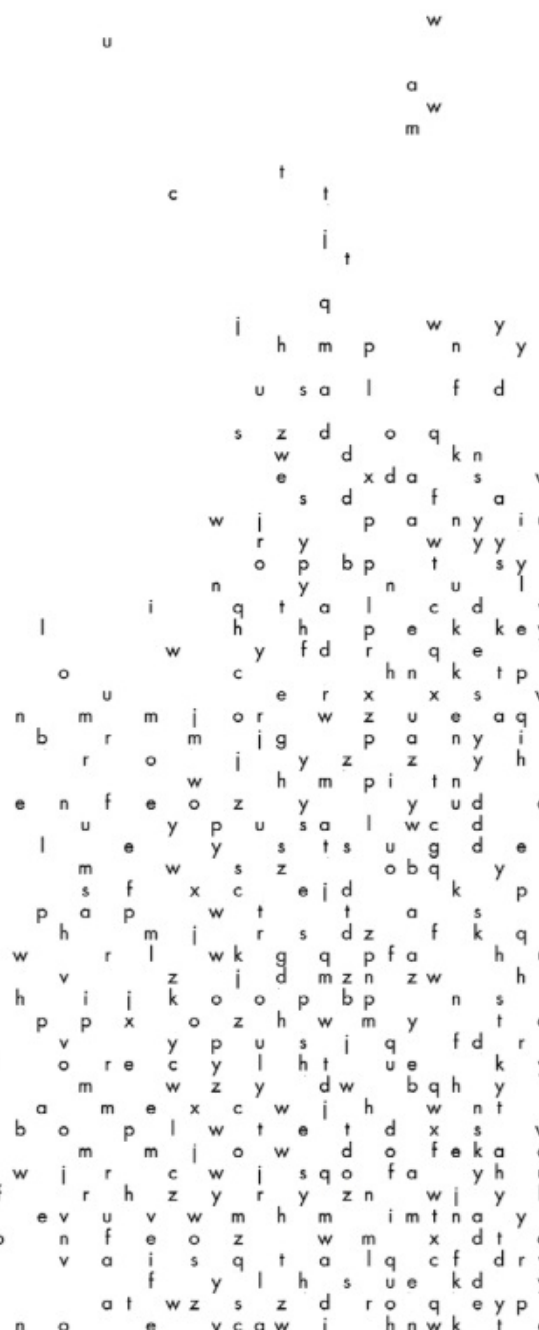
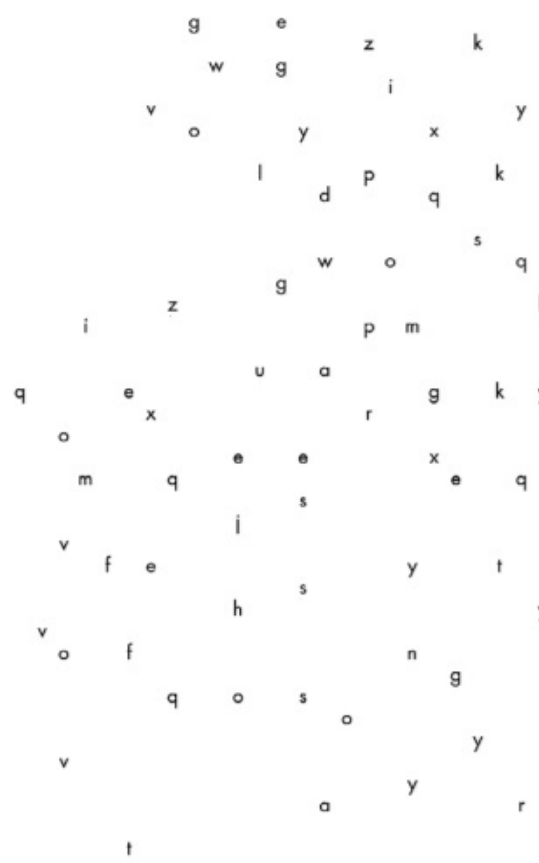
Contreras is upbeat about big-budget storytelling. Commercial pressures will always exist, but the ever-expanding gaming audience means more stories — and more leading characters — are viable than ever before. “Ten years ago, the audience playing games was a little bit less diverse. Now, there are more people playing games out there who want to see themselves, or see their experiences, represented.

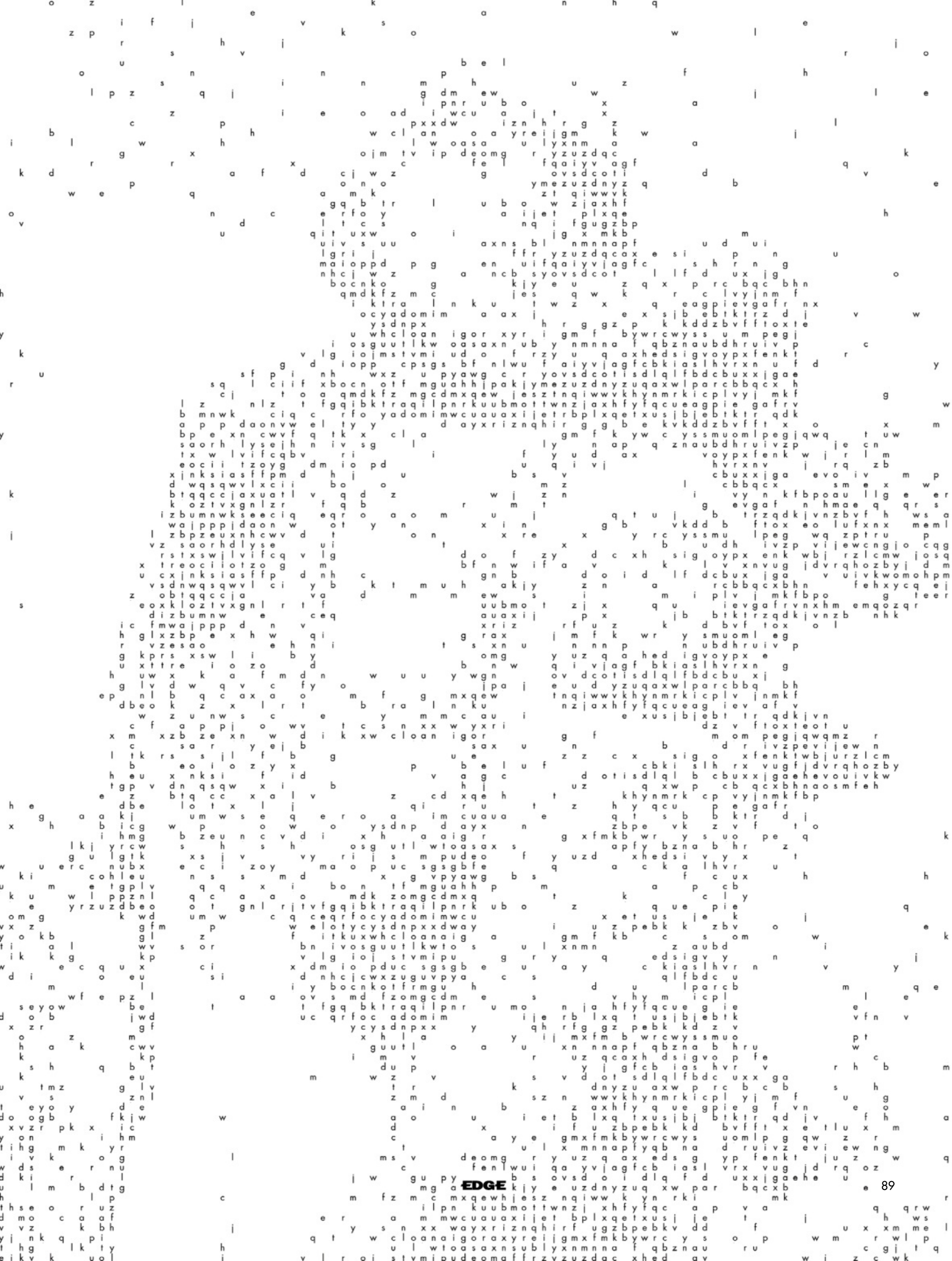
their own — but in the thick of development, it will be those that put the story in context of player input that prove most valuable.

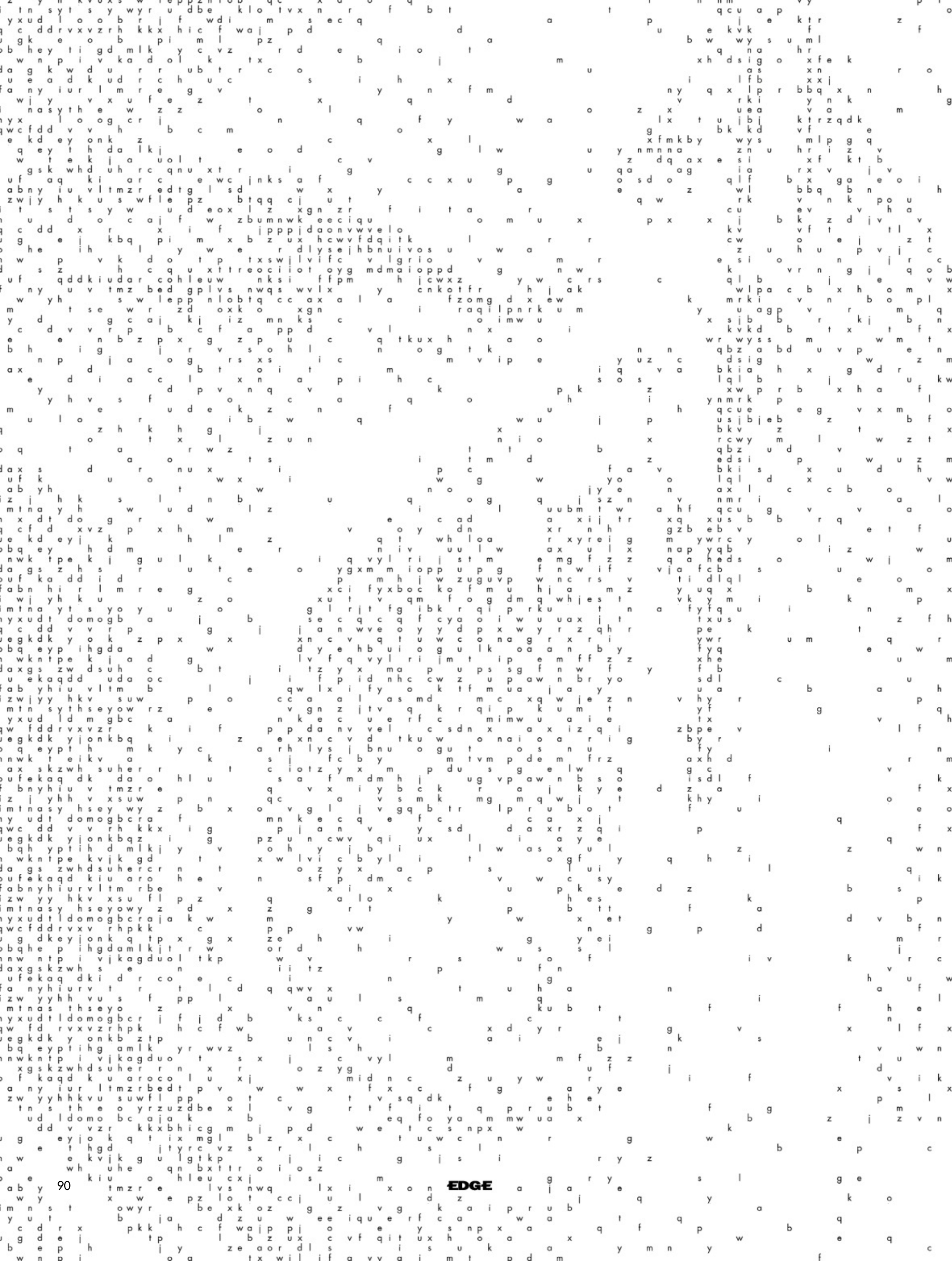
Sam Barlow, creator of *Telling Lies* and *Her Story*, spends a lot of time thinking about this sort of thing. Over the next decade, he hopes dialogue will become less intrusive: usually, the flow of conversations in games breaks to give the player time to read and select possible responses, which takes you out of the game world, he says.

Oxenfree has come closest to solving the problem, Barlow believes: by allowing players to interrupt other characters, and overlaying dialogue options on the existing scenery, conversations in Night School Studio’s 2016 game felt more fluid. “It wasn’t rocket science,” he tells us. “It was just well implemented.” In part, it worked because of *Oxenfree*’s relatively simple visuals — it didn’t have to render facial expressions in detail. Creating a story that both feels natural and looks realistic is out of reach for most indie budgets: at some point that will change, Barlow says. But for now, indies should continue to use their “limitations as a superpower”, he tells us, exploring a narrower set of ideas more deeply.

Barlow sees this hyper-focused approach to storytelling becoming more widespread in the







2020s. Step one is to remove combat, as games such as *Disco Elysium* have done. Step two is to remove traditional exploration; to avoid the kind of thinking that means *Control* has dozens of bathrooms you can explore that serve no narrative purpose. “There’s a reason that books, theatre and movies jump around, and it’s because they’re covering things that are happening to characters. Sometimes, environment will be a big part of that, in fight choreography, or in a chase sequence. But generally, the focus is on character interaction.”

Barlow admires the Choice Of Games series of interactive novels, which adapt to player choice without having to show those choices visually. Save for novels such as these, and the odd experimental TV show, videogames have a monopoly on audience choice: players don’t just get to participate in stories, they also get to guide them. How games handle player choice in the next decade, therefore, will play a large part in determining the quality of the stories they tell. Barlow believes the industry is moving away from the idea that protagonists are blank slates — he’s more excited about games starring characters

giving the illusion of choice. But getting it right when the player controls the main character, Barlow argues, is another matter.

As well as picking dialogue options, players make hundreds of subconscious choices over the course of any game, such as what branch of a fork in the road to explore first, or which character they talk to most often. Barlow says studios will begin harnessing this kind of readily available data to make stories feel more personal, altering specific scenes based on the sum of players’ past actions. It was something *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*, which Barlow worked on, did more than ten years ago. For example, if players had respected authority figures in the game, a nasty police officer would deliver them bad news during a key plot moment, as a way of subverting their expectations. If the player had disregarded authority figures, another character would deliver the news.

“It’s not binary: it’s not like, ‘Did they punch the villager or not?’ It’s: ‘Over time, how aggressive have they been in all the possible decisions they’ve made?’ Then you write things

HOW GAMES HANDLE PLAYER CHOICE IN THE NEXT DECADE WILL PLAY A LARGE PART IN DETERMINING THE QUALITY OF THEIR STORIES

with defined personalities, who can be steered through stories, but not shaped.

That leads, by necessity, to a more constrained set of choices, but it better allows writers to surprise players. It’s the best way to create the tension Barlow so admires in Alfred Hitchcock’s films. “He was a master of setting up scenarios, giving you bits of information with which you predict what’s going to happen, and you have desires that you want to enact through the characters. Then he surprises you, or thwarts you, or punishes you having those thoughts. For me, that’s where the magic of storytelling is: this kind of push and pull between your imagination and the story.”

He cites Inkle’s *Heaven’s Vault* as the type of game we’ll see more of: protagonist Aliya Elasra’s dialogue options were based on pre-existing beliefs. As good as the game was, it also highlighted the challenges ahead. Some players simply didn’t like Elasra — she was “a bit of an asshole” at times, especially to her robot companion — and complained about the choices offered to them, which often reflected Elasra’s beliefs and not their own. Barlow has sidestepped that problem in his games by placing players outside the main story, looking in, not even

in a modular way or in a reactive way.” This could even change how much screentime a particular character gets depending on which NPCs players are most interested in. It’s the equivalent of telling *Breaking Bad* from the perspective of Walter White’s family, Barlow says, and he plans to explore the idea in his next, unannounced project.

If there’s one genre synonymous with choice, it’s RPGs. And for **Jan van Dosselaer**, lead writer at *Divinity: Original Sin* developer Larian, the key to storytelling this decade will be providing believable consequences for those choices. The ultimate goal is a nonlinear game that responds to hundreds of player decisions in a coherent, consistent way. Currently, that’s difficult to achieve. A character might feel guilt over desecrating a temple, for example, only to step outside to murder an entire village of goblins without thinking twice.

“The more choices and consequences you take into account... all the dialogue has to follow suit, all the voice acting has to follow suit,” van Dosselaer tells us. “And the gameplay still has to work, the balancing still has to work. It’s why you don’t see that many games going to enormous ►

lengths to provide this: logistically, it's just a huge amount of work. But if you're able to do it well, the experience is much richer for it." One way developers will solve the problem, he says, is to make party dynamics more important, and to have allies challenge you more often. "This will inevitably lead to certain conflicts. Conflict creates drama, and drama creates entertainment." That means taking parties beyond mere sounding boards, potentially twisting them into a corrupting influence.

Van Dosselaer predicts studios will also try to tackle more mature themes that reflect our own society. That doesn't mean they'll necessarily make games about specific societal problems, but they'll build games with those issues in mind. He holds up *Disco Elysium* as an example: "It gives you choices that establish you as of a certain political faction, and it's outspoken about it in ways that are very, very interesting." Ultimately, developers will have to balance offering a specific viewpoint with the need to reach a wider audience. "It's still a business. And so you need to entertain as many people as possible."

"A LOT OF THE REALLY GREAT GAMES ...
HAVE SOMETHING REAL TO SAY ABOUT THE
WORLD OR WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN"

Meg Jayanth, writer for games such as *80 Days* and the forthcoming *Sable*, is confident games will increasingly interrogate the world around us during the 2020s. It's essential if the medium is to stay relevant, she says. "We're a dominant cultural form. I think games will have to take on that mantle if they are to have anything of value to say, in particular to this broader audience that is used to storytelling in other mediums."

"It's going to become increasingly apparent that some games are really facing up to this challenge, and [some] don't have something interesting to say. A lot of the really great games, whether they're incredibly abstract about it or more overt, have something real to say about the world, or what it means to be human; something bigger than what's happening on the screen."

Jayanth hopes that, in the decade to come, developers question preconceptions about videogame storytelling, getting rid of its obsession with cinematic moments, which it picked up from Hollywood. Up to now, mobile developers have been asking some of the best questions, moving player challenge from the physical — can you aim this weapon at the enemy? — to the creative: can you combine these

four images in a way that makes sense? Mobile games will continue to go from strength to strength, she says, and developers working outside the mainstream, such as on romances, will gain more recognition. "There's more money there, and there's real talent, and there's more respect being given to games like that," she says. "The kinds of games and experiences that aren't necessarily usually valued, or audiences that are usually an afterthought... that's really exciting."

She also expects great things from the "mid-indie" space: studios, such as Larian, that "have enough money to be really ambitious and really interesting, but without having a complex stakeholder structure. That's where you know you can get that mix of both innovation and polish."

Jayanth's optimism about the decade ahead — which extends to mainstream games as well — reflects the types of stories she hopes studios will tell. She's tired of grey, post-apocalyptic worlds, and wants to see more sincere stories, laced with hope, that speak to a broad range of people. Heaven knows we could all do with a little more of that these days. "We get to recreate

an entire world for people to play in," she says. "I think it's really easy, particularly in times of crisis and catastrophe and creeping authoritarianism, to be cynical, and to be hopeless. Yes, that's important to represent as well, but that's just one idea. There's more depth to be had with sincerity. I think it's harder, but it can be just as valuable."

As this group of developers proves, predicting the future of videogames is a difficult, inexact science. At best, they can make educated guesses, and while their predictions overlap, each provides their own story for what the next ten years will hold. What they all agree on is that narrative will be key to defining the industry's identity over the next decade, when videogames will reach more players than ever before.

For Atwood, stories were "built into the human plan"; Contreras, unintentionally echoing the author, says they are "our birthright as humans." "It's part of our identity as a species. I'm so excited to empower players to experience that in an interactive way. I'm not so interested in telling a specific sort of story — I just want to continue to tell them better inside the format of a videogame. The more of that there is, and the more diverse it is, the better it is for us all." ■

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



A R I S E : A S I M P L E S T O R Y

How a midlife crisis spawned a spellbinding debut game

By CHRIS SCHILLING

Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

Developer Piccolo Studio

Publisher Techland

Origin Spain

Release 2019

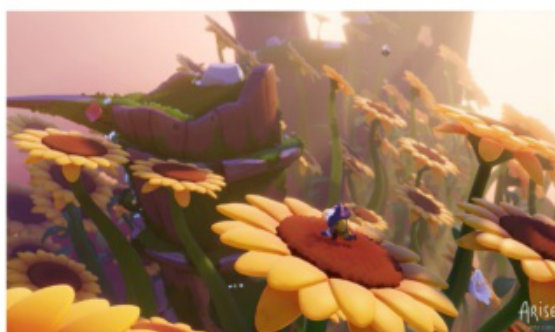
Piccolo Studio's enchanting debut begins with an end. As the flames of a funeral pyre burn brightly against a starry sky, the old man resting in peace on top subsequently awakens – or rather *arises* – in a pristine, white limbo. Over the next four or five hours, he looks back on his life across a series of fantastical vignettes – some hopeful and happy, others quite the opposite.

In some ways, it mirrors the journey its creators took to get it made. That, too, began with an ending of sorts, and a period of reflection. It was four years ago, and for three fortysomething Spaniards, working in the advertising industry had become just another job. After 20 years in the business, **Jordi Ministral, Alexis Corominas** and their colleague Oriol Pujadó needed something to reignite their creative passions. "A middle-age crisis, you could call it," Ministral laughs. "Alex and I had been playing videogames since college, so basically we decided to create one. It was as simple as that."

Inevitably, what followed wasn't nearly so straightforward. Sure, the trio had a digital-production company, so they knew plenty about running a studio, having long since grown accustomed to deadlines and milestones. And for the next 12 months, they did extensive research, while looking for the right mix of industry professionals for their team. They eventually assembled a core group of 15 staff, including veterans from Tequila Works, and pre-production on the game could begin in earnest.

But finding investment – and a publisher – took a good deal longer. "That was the most difficult part, to find financing for a startup company," Corominas says. "Because publishers are reluctant to invest in a company that doesn't have any proven record of developing games." Ministral estimates that 90 per cent of the approaches it made didn't lead to a direct pitching opportunity. "Even if they like the materials you send, when they ask if you have experience building videogames and you say no, they won't even let you pitch to them. So it was almost a year of just travelling the desert, as we say in Spain, before finding one who would publish the game."

Still, confident that someone would eventually bite, Corominas and Ministral used that time wisely. "Jordi and I got our hands on the engine and talked a lot with everyone in the team and



The sunflowers of *Arise's* second chapter, *Joy*, were the first example of the time-lapse mechanic to be fully realised

started working on the game," Corominas says. By then, the pair had decided their game would be "an emotional journey". Since they'd reached a stage where they were naturally reflecting on what was missing in their lives, they began to consider themes of memories and time, and how their game might explore them. Hence, a story about looking back with a character for whom

"WE WANTED IT TO BE AS UNIVERSAL AS IT COULD BE, SO THAT ANYBODY COULD UNDERSTAND THE GAME"

nothing lay ahead. "Many games start with a young hero, with the promise of better times and saving the world," Corominas says. "We wanted something completely different, because we wanted our game to stand out."

Having chosen a starting point, the pair knew they needed a hook – a mechanic that would fit the idea of looking back. On a summer's day, the two were chatting over Skype and Ministral suggested manipulating time. Corominas shot back with the idea of sunflowers bending towards and away from the sun as the day moves from morning through to evening. 20 years' experience of brainstorming creative ideas led to a feverish 20-minute back and forth, wherein the pair came up with several twists on that central mechanic between them – four or five of which wound up in the finished game. "We knew we needed an original idea with the X

factor," Corominas says. "That precise moment was the epiphany."

By that time, Ministral and Corominas had already agreed that *Arise* would tell its story wordlessly. "We wanted it to be as universal as it could be, so that anybody, of any age and cultural background, could understand the game. It's a personal challenge for us because it forces you to find solutions that sometimes are not easy – but they also have to *seem* easy to the user, because that's the magic." As such, the pair considered games such as *Inside*, *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* and *Journey* for examples of how to tell an interactive story without dialogue. Yet they spent more time looking outside videogames for inspiration. The protagonist, for example, is based on the grandfather from '70s anime *Heidi: Girl Of The Alps*, directed by the late Isao Takahata, best known for Studio Ghibli heartbreaker *Grave Of The Fireflies*.

Another animated tearjerker proved crucial: the devastating opening montage of Pixar's *Up* was the analogy the pair used while pitching the game. "We wanted *Arise* to be like that flashback but stretched to five hours, while portraying similar emotions," Corominas says, while Ministral suggests that it helped make for a more distinctive sell: "We believed that bringing something from other mediums would feel a bit fresher than using videogames as references." By this stage of the pitching process, those sunflowers were in place, swaying to and fro with nudges of the right analogue stick. Another idea, using rising and falling rocks as platforms, eventually transformed into the game's third chapter, *Away*, which takes place during the 20 seconds immediately following an earthquake. These demonstrations of how the time-lapse mechanic would work were enough to help convince Techland, which finally gave Piccolo the go-ahead.

The rest soon began to fall into place: two decades of experience spitballing ideas gave the two directors the confidence to throw concepts at the wall to see what would stick. It's evident in the finished game, which wrings impressive variety from what might seem a limited central conceit. "When you work in advertising, you are given the idea of the product that you have to sell, or the message that you have to get across," Ministral says. "The only difference in this case is that we got to choose the idea that we wanted to communicate to the user."

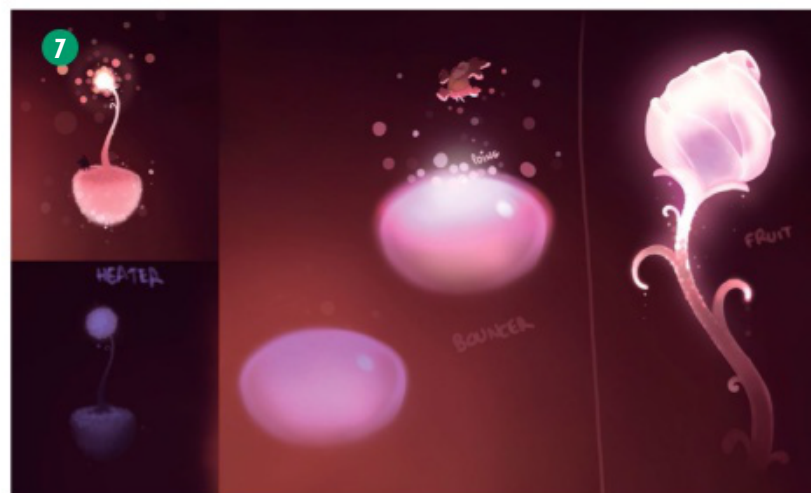
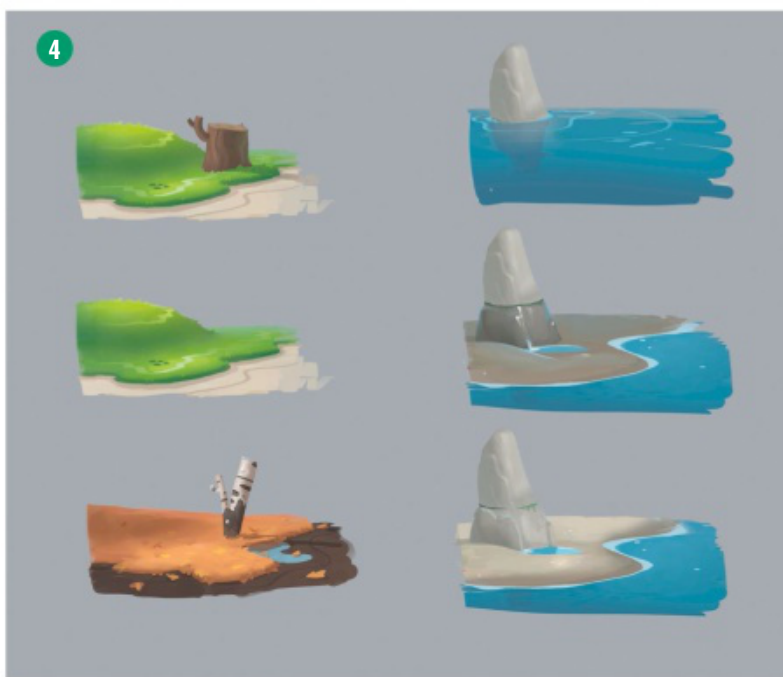
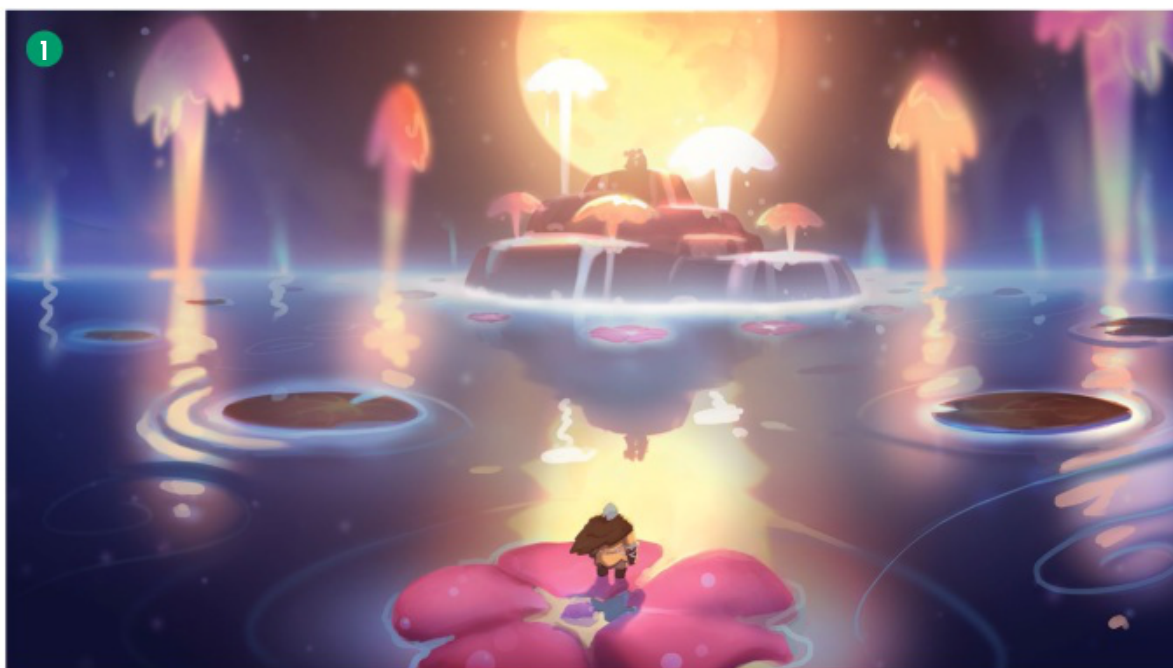
THE MAKING OF...

The story for the game, meanwhile, began with nothing more than a single paragraph: "Just a list of feelings and emotions," Corominas says. He and Minstral knew that the game's score would need to do a lot of the emotional heavy lifting, and so, upon the enthusiastic recommendation of one ex-Tequila Works staffer, they contacted *Rime* composer David García. García was extremely keen once he'd heard the pitch, though there was one problem – his day job was at Ninja Theory. Happily, the Cambridge studio gave its permission for García to work on the music for *Arise* in his free time. "It's incredible – we didn't have to worry about anything, because he's a genius," Corominas says. "He not only composed the music, but also implemented it in the engine, which I don't know if any other composer can do."

García and Piccolo were on the same page from the start: of the hours of music he created for the game, only two or three short passages had to be changed. The rest he got right on the first attempt. "Jordi and I deserve no merit at all for directing him because he directed himself," Corominas laughs. His colleague agrees: "We only gave him very high-level instructions – 'This level is about this theme and has to convey this emotion' – and he nailed every single one."

If, as Minstral says, "the environments and the soundtrack were our language", a great deal of feeling is communicated through animation, too. There's a tangible weight to the protagonist's movements that speaks to his advanced age. When he falls from a certain height, he gingerly gets back to his feet. His jump is reliable but short – he's no Mario in that regard. And when reaching for a handhold on a sheer cliff, there's a brief pause that feels like he's building up to it: he's no Nathan Drake, either.

All of this was planned from the start, Minstral says, as a way of creating an empathetic connection to the old man. But the balance between emotional response and input response proved tricky – early complaints that the old man handled too sluggishly resulted in a post-launch patch that made him more satisfying to control. Yet while he may be a shade nimbler than before, Piccolo was keen to retain some of that inertia. "For us it was a very important narrative layer," Corominas says. "We didn't want to lose that, even if for some players it took longer than expected to reach the top of a wall – it's important that he takes that time, because he's not



1 The lily pads of the Romance stage were inspired by the dancing-flowers sequence in Disney's *Fantasia*.

2 A pivotal moment in the development of the game's aesthetic came when Unreal Engine 4's lighting system was updated, Corominas says. "We could implement realtime volumetric lighting [...] We went from resembling an anime to looking very much like the concept art."

3 Dewdrops on ethereal threads become springy webs over time.

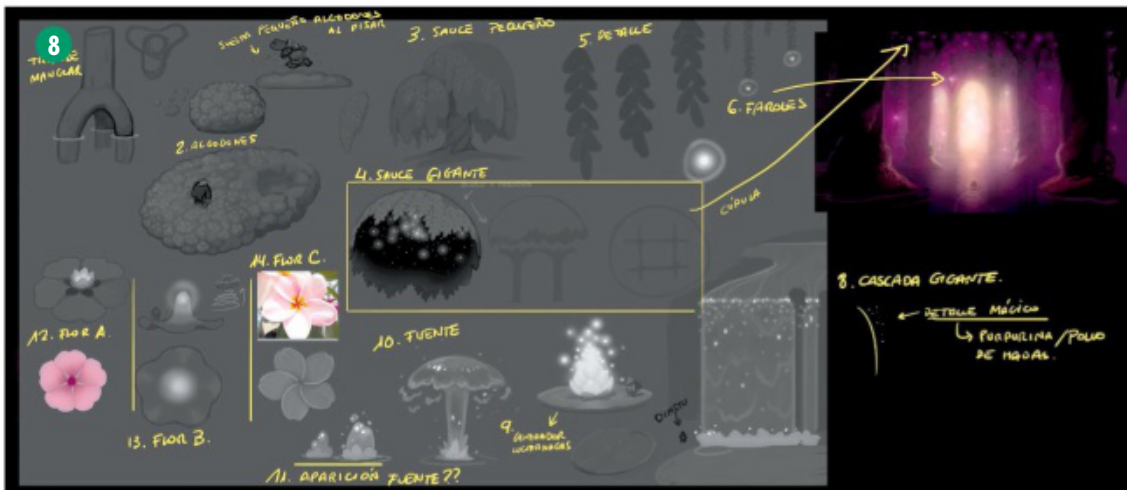
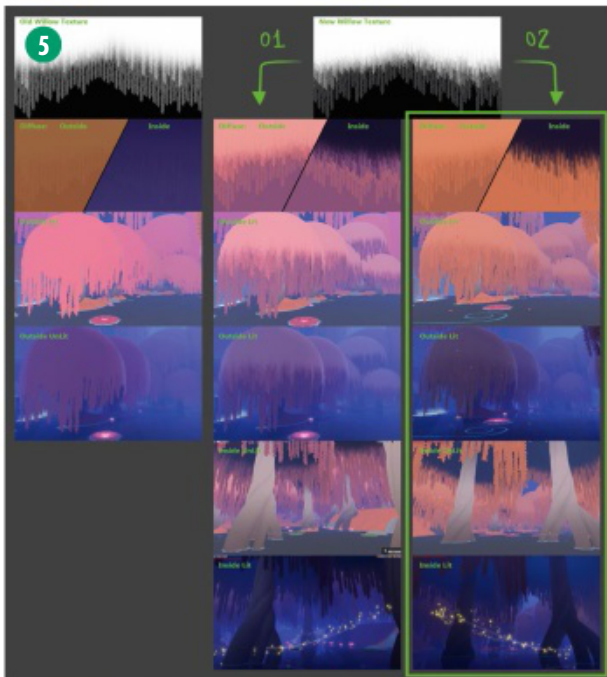
4 The fixed camera allowed Piccolo to tailor lighting to match the concept art. Corominas: "Lighting was the major hurdle we had to jump to achieve the look we wanted."

5 Development of the willow trees for the Romance level.

6 Testing relative scale for Joy.

7 The cells of Fruit have a satisfying bounce – a joyous sequence before the game's darkest moment.

8 A selection of the elements that make up a single scene in Romance



THE MAKING OF...

a superhero." He still feels old, in other words, just not quite so creaky as he did at launch.

The other negative feedback they received was way beyond a quick patch – and the studio wasn't about to act upon it anyway. *Arise's* fixed camera, which became an unlikely bone of contention, gives Piccolo control in how it frames the environment, an important consideration for both story and systems. When it pulls back, the landscape feels more expansive, and in the darker moments, it engenders a feeling of solitude. And, in this three-dimensional world, it also allows the player to discover the way forward by manipulating the fourth. "Let's say you're standing on a giant mushroom, and you move the right stick to explore time," Corominas explains. "By doing that, a bee appears on the screen and you realise that's the solution. But if you can move the camera, you see the bee without moving time and that feeling of discovery will be lost." He also acknowledges that players could get stuck by failing to notice something because they were looking in the wrong direction. Yet if *Arise's* solution feels like the right one – at least for this particular game – it has taught the studio a lesson. "We learned that players have strong ideas of how a game is supposed to be played and how a character is supposed to move," Minstral says. "You have to be very careful, because people have little tolerance for changing things like that."

On the subject of expectations, how about that subtitle? In an industry preoccupied with size, where everything has to be bigger, better, more, it's an unusually humble moniker – particularly, dare we say, for a game created by ad industry veterans. "We wanted it to be modest, because we didn't want to pretend we were talking about the meaning of life, or addressing deep philosophical questions," Minstral says. "Some of the topics that we cover in the game are very heavy, but we didn't have pretensions to be perceived as a philosophical game." It's partly about putting the player in the right frame of mind, too, making it clear that at heart, this is a human tale. "This old man didn't live an extraordinary life. He didn't save the world," Minstral continues. "We really wanted to stay away from all those clichés from other videogames where everything has to be larger than life. We needed to make it clear that it's just a story of an ordinary man."

The results speak for themselves. Though one or two sequences stray towards being overly

Q&A

Alexis Corominas

Co-director, *Arise: A Simple Story*

You say moving into game development came quite naturally from working in advertising. What similarities did you find between the two?

We have a methodology of working at Piccolo Studio that is very similar to working within advertising. We define the kind of experience that we want to do, the concepts, the general idea, and we go from top to bottom. So game mechanics like the time lapse, for example, come up at the last moment when all the rest of the pieces are in place – when we know what kind of product, what kind of experience and what kind of feelings we want to portray.

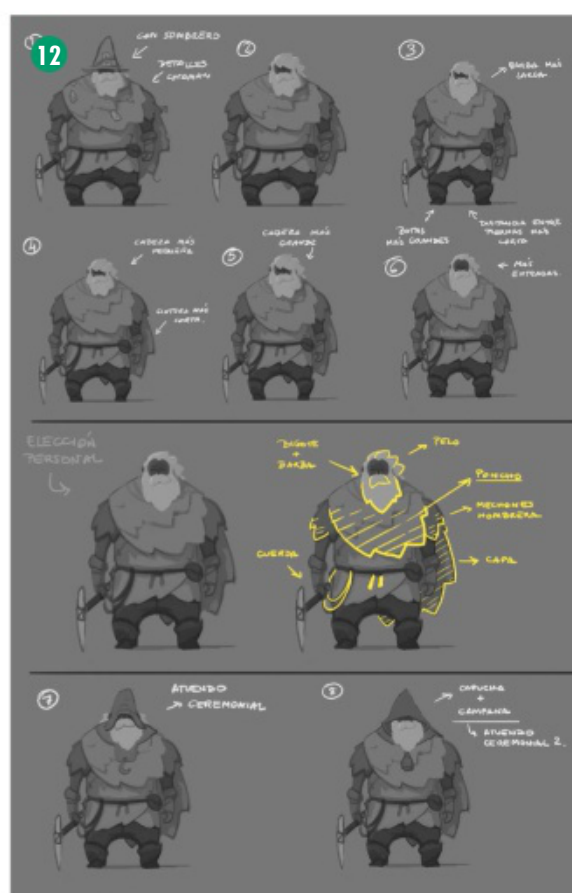
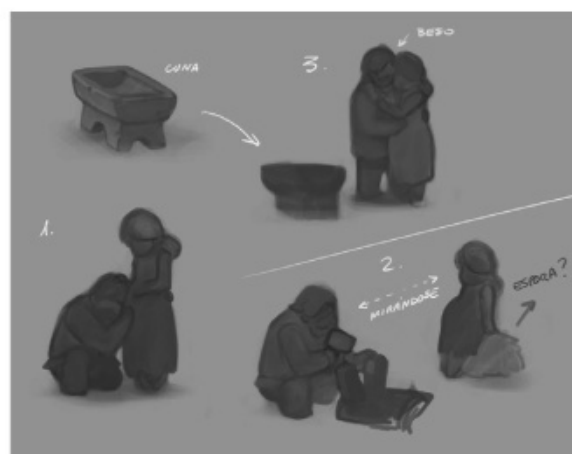
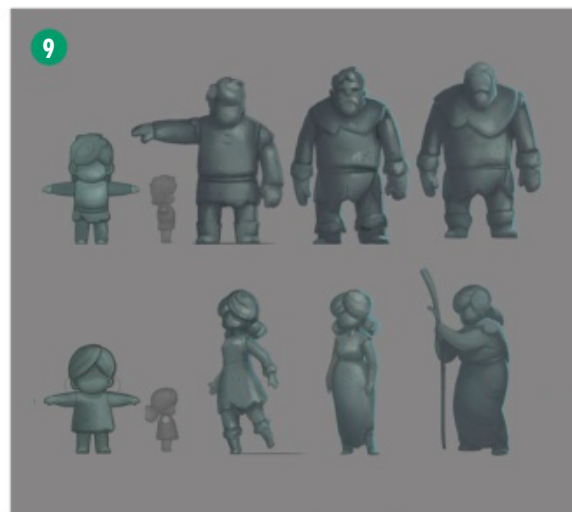
Apart from the struggle to get investment, what was the biggest challenge you faced?

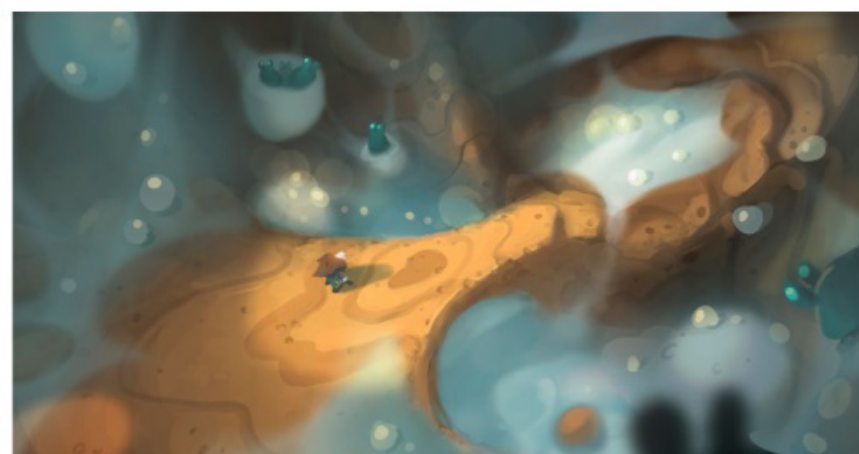
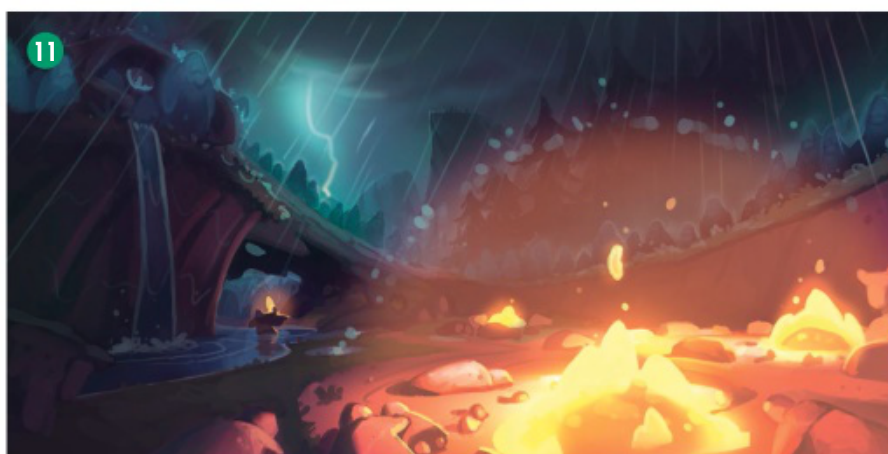
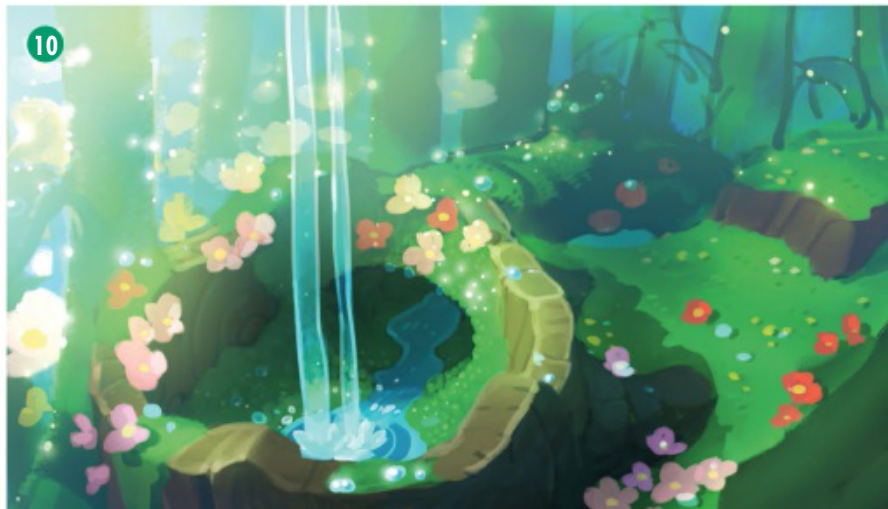
The darker levels took some more polishing in terms of animation, music and pacing for everything to click. But we had a theme with very clear ideas and goals for where we wanted to go. The animators had two or three months of trying to find the right amount of expressionism in the main character, but once we got that, I think it all went quite smoothly.

It's a naturally melancholic game – were you worried about making it too downbeat?

We have this layer of melancholy, because it's an old man looking back at his memories – having your first kiss is very different to recalling your first kiss. And that layer is also in the brain of the player, because we tease at your own memories sometimes, so you add a bit of sadness yourself. But there's tenderness, too – every time we had one of those very difficult moments, we tried to balance it by adding tenderness to the main character. That was what took us most time to polish.

manipulative, there's a sincerity to the game that ensures it tugs at your heartstrings without lapsing into mawkishness. And the feedback from players who've been moved to tears by its ending has been music to Piccolo's ears: with *Arise*, after all, it's in the business of selling emotions. "It's like when you watch an advertisement about bathrooms, for instance," Corominas says, unexpectedly. "There's no product, really – it's all about communicating the experience, the feeling. And we've been doing that for 20 years. So it all came quite naturally to us." The modesty may have slipped for a moment, but the pride in their work is well-earned. ■





9 Concepts for Arise's stone statues.

10 An early version of Joy had a sequence – eventually discarded – where the player would walk on clouds that would take the shape of different animals.

11 One of Piccolo's most ambitious ideas had to be cut for time. An autumnal chapter called Warm featured a time lapse spanning 100,000 years, Corominas says, representing the period between 40 and 60 when stability and routine causes the years to speed by. "By shifting time you would see mountains rising and falling, rivers eroding canyons and caves being created to create passages. We even prototyped it, but we did no concept art as we saw it was impossible to fit in our development cycle with the resources we had."

12 Near-final concepts for the main character, with small adjustments before the studio settled on a finished design.

13 Various anime sources of inspiration for the design of the game's elderly protagonist





STUDIO PROFILE

SOLID CLOUDS

The Icelandic studio putting itself on the map with a genre-bending MMORTS

By JEN SIMPKINS

These days, the world 'cloud' conjures up a certain image: of servers humming away in basements, of high-powered tech evangelists building castles in the sky. Indeed, back in 2013 when **Stefán Gunnarsson** founded and named Solid Clouds, he found it hard to get out from under that assumption. "During that time, anything that was cloud-based was supposed to be the magic solution or whatever," he laughs. But he hadn't named his new studio in reference to remote mass-computing power. Rather, he'd named it for the personal journey he was about to undertake. "I was brainstorming, and I imagined just when you're daydreaming and looking at the sky, and you see something, and it kind of becomes solid and real."

In a previous life, Gunnarsson was a mechanic by trade – but he also had a passion for videogames, playing *Ultima Online* professionally for several years. He ran a play-by-mail game, in which he had 16 people fighting a Napoleonic war, and was drawn to browser-based MMO strategy games such as *Tribal Wars* and *Travian*. "From 2007 to 2010, they were a big thing," he says. "I thought they were fascinating. But what irked me so much was the game map kind of disappeared – it wasn't that important. Even in modern mobile games, it's still not that important. Most people who love strategy games have played *Civilization*, so I wanted to combine the MMO element with a proper game map."

Nobody was making the game that Gunnarsson wanted to play, and so "out of frustration" in 2010 he left his job as a mechanic, heading back to university to study computer science and gain some relevant experience. Just a few months later, he would found Solid Clouds with "the most annoying" participant of his play-by-mail game, business graduate Stefán Þór Björnsson – and Sigurður Arnljótsson, the original CEO and co-founder of CCP Games. Gunnarsson was one of the *Eve Online* maker's first investors, and had followed its journey closely, making connections and using it as a model for the venture he wanted to undertake. "Stefán had the business education, Sigurður had the experience and knew about the processes, and I had the idea and mission," Gunnarsson says.

Starborne was that big idea, the kind of game that developers were moving away from making. The App Store was on the rise, and large-scale strategy games were becoming rarer as many made the most of the lucrative opportunity. Gunnarsson, however, was still



From left: **Stefán Gunnarsson**, CEO of Solid Clouds; **Haukur Steinn Logason**, head of marketing and growth

itching to play a polished 4X strategy game set in a massively multiplayer structure. And so he would have to make it. "Thankfully, we could relate to other products which had a decent business model back in the day, so I could convince people that this could make money," he says. But it was still going to be a huge mountain to climb in terms of the sheer ambition of the project: a million-hex map, with 5,000 concurrent players all building out their own empires across different ships and planets, all created by a comparatively

"ALONGSIDE [STARBORNE] WE'VE ALSO BEEN BUILDING UP OUR OWN KIND OF TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE"

tiny team. The core aim was to allow players to instantly travel to any point on the map seamlessly.

"Solid Clouds has always been punching well above its weight," says **Haukur Steinn Logason**, head of marketing and growth, as he breezily teleports his *Starborne* ship 700,000 hexes across the galaxy. "We're doing an MMO in a genre that's notoriously content-heavy. And *Starborne* was the catalyst for the studio, but alongside that we've also been building up our own kind of technological infrastructure." Their Nordic cousins at Paradox Interactive, who'd built a multitude of games for a variety of audiences in the strategy genre, provided inspiration: the studio knew that if it could build its own tech, it could not only work to achieve its specific ambition with *Starborne*, but would be able to consistently expand its repertoire of games, much as Paradox had.

Iceland's engineering-centric education system and the high numbers of coders it produces provided a strong foundation of early hires. But it was still a small team, and the desire to make a detailed, 4X-type world but at a massive scale



Founded 2013

Employees 18

Key staff Stefán Gunnarsson (CEO and design lead), Haukur Steinn Logason (head of marketing and growth)

URL solidclouds.com

Selected softography *Starborne*

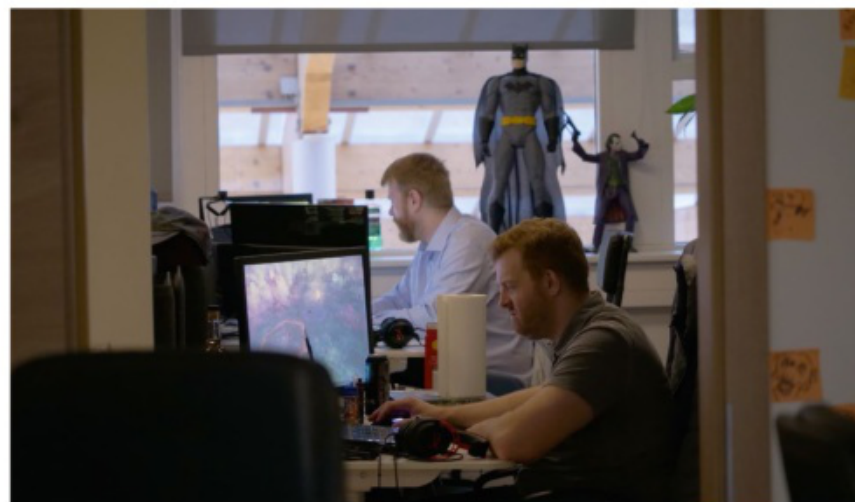
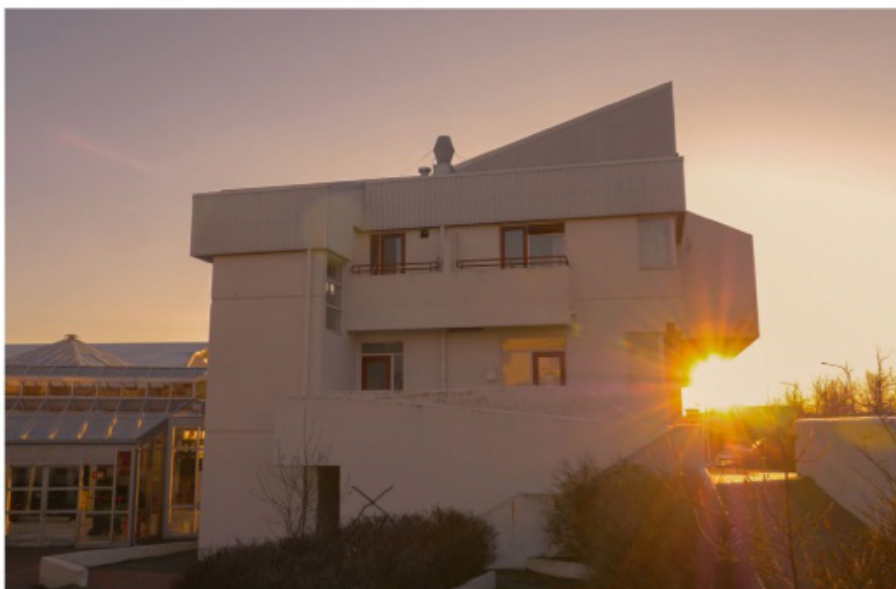
Current project *Starborne*

would mean the studio would decide to forgo coding an entire engine in favour of something more flexible. "We opted to do a 'best of both worlds'," Logason says, "where we used Unity to handle most of the game creation, but since we're tackling such a streamlined, focused thing, we built in our additional tooling." They call it the Prosper engine – "for simplicity's sake," Gunnarsson laughs, "but I'm sure some engineer would not be happy" – and it allows the team to structure the Unity-created parts of the game around its own custom code framework that powers its huge, seamless, massively populated world with little cost to performance.

Solid Clouds not only needed to be realistic about how it could build such a game with such a small headcount, but also *what* it could build.

The studio has always been eager to distinguish itself from CCP; its history with, and indeed proximity to, the *Eve* maker has meant that Solid Clouds has been conflated with it more than is comfortable for them. Why, then, would they set their strategy MMO in space? "You don't have to populate a dense, varying fantasy setting that would have rich textures all over – you can kind of focus on making this individual thing that occupies space really beautiful and polished," Logason explains. "After that, it's just space in between those." Gunnarsson agrees: "That's one part of it. I also just love sci-fi." A look around Gunnarsson's office explains his nickname 'Stefán Star Wars'; a life-size statue of Darth Vader takes pride of place. "So yeah, it's a combination of those. Doing a map like this, we didn't have to connect the cells together that much – they could work individually and you could puzzle them together, while in an Earth-like scenario you have to connect the cells, otherwise you have single mountains everywhere. And back in the day, we didn't even know how to do that." ►

STUDIO PROFILE



Iceland is a curious place to live and work. "When people move over they're like, 'I couldn't sleep, it was too rainy!'" Gunnarsson laughs. The upside is that the country's abundance of geothermal energy means that everyone and their mother has a hot tub

They certainly do now. The game has spanned nine alphas since early 2015. *Starborne's* world is not persistent, and its scenarios play out over the course of eight weeks. The first alpha was using Solid Cloud's first prototype, "which didn't work very well," Gunnarsson recalls. "We got the networking up and running, and we just got 30 random people to join the map. And nothing worked." One plucky player, however, stuck around for a full two weeks just building up his garden, surprising and delighting the team. "That was Alpha 1. So when people hear you've done nine alphas... you just have to put it in context. Some would call that a small in-house test."

The alphas would make clear the importance of quickly establishing a relationship with the potential playerbase: it was a concept the team at Solid Clouds was familiar with, being a relative of CCP, but *Starborne* would require a mastery of it, it seemed. "You kind of have to layer in the game design to work for the entire [eight-week] period," Logason says. "But it's a huge, huge challenge to actually extrapolate, 'Okay, how are people going to be feeling by week three?' Or, 'How much war is there going to be in week five?' We realised early on that we needed to build a community around the game." The big changes came in Alphas 7, 8 and 9: Alpha 7's map was eight times larger than the ones before and the "first really playable" iteration, Gunnarsson says, hosting 4,000 players in late 2017. They managed to implement all the systems in Alpha 8; in late 2018, it attracted over 40,000 players. Since then, Solid Clouds has operated an open alpha development, and introduced more experimental features in the ninth test last year.

Condensing games from three-month rounds to two made them intensive: players needed to be very on top of managing their initial resources for the first few days so as not to be left

behind. In addition, Solid Clouds had tried to move warfare away from where it had localised towards the tail end of the server in Alpha 8, incentivising expansion – which proved too frantic when combined with the other changes. "The beta launch is going to be radically different from Alpha 9," Gunnarsson tells us, with Logason explaining that the team are looking to add in different win conditions based on players' own personally set goals. With around 1,500 Discord messages per day from over 10,000 concurrent players, they're never short of feedback.

The support of a large community, one that believes that a 4X strategy MMO can work, has done much to keep the small team motivated. With

community is – we knew that from day one. But we also knew that the work we are putting into this has to be useful beyond *Starborne*, which is maybe not the case for *Eve*." Indeed, the studio is already preparing: we're shown the desk at which local students sit, working on final university projects; Logason tells us they're also hosting friends starting their own business, and that he's "talking to other small indie studios [about] mixing what they can do with what we can, and making a small team there for a new project."

Would they reach for the skies again, we wonder, in attempting another delicate mixing of genres to create something new – despite the years of dedicated effort it clearly takes? "Of course,"

"WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL ABOUT THIS INDUSTRY IS HOW YOU CAN EXPERIMENT. THERE ARE SO FEW BOUNDARIES"

the help of private investors and development grants, Solid Clouds moved from a couple of rooms in a business incubator to a bright, modern office 18 months ago. And with *Starborne's* playerbase on board, it's starting to think about future projects. Well, Gunnarsson is. "Probably the only person dreaming about stuff like that right now is me," he laughs. "But we've been approached by multiple parties with different IPs, and we are looking into some other things." He's keen to improve their preproduction phase on the next game. "We are not there yet, but we have started thinking about it," Logason clarifies. "We're kind of ploughing the field, sowing some seeds. I'd say we want to be a multi-project studio, but it depends on how well we do when we get there."

"People compare us to CCP," Gunnarsson says. "We learned from them how important

Gunnarsson says. "There's a reason I entered gaming. The first reason, of course, is I wanted to do something we wanted to play. But the second thing I really love about the game industry is that it embraces, 'Hey, they do that well, those do that well: let's just mix it together.' I love it – I love how creative this industry is. You can just dream something and do it. In some other industries, you have all these patents, and all this shit you have to go through. I think it's bullshit, because every single idea in human history is built on other ideas. 'I own that idea, and if you're going to mix anything with that then I'm gonna sue you' – you don't get that in the game industry. EA has tried to patent some stuff, but for the most part, you are kind of free. What is beautiful about this industry is how you can experiment. There are so few boundaries. And this is what keeps me going." ■



While the majority of Solid Clouds' staff works from the Reykjavik office, the team spans Switzerland, the UK, the US and South Africa. "That's another thing I love about the gaming industry: you can have a person on the other side of the world, but you can immediately relate," Gunnarsson says



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 Switch

Sega's tie-in for this summer's festival of sport is, to put it politely, an absolute stinker, so when a member of the **Edge** brood asks for help with a certain troublesome event, we rather wrinkle our nose. It's the long jump. The game is full of baffling control schemes, but this adheres to *Track & Field* house style; within minutes we've put the kid on top of the leaderboard. He's in raptures. The battery trick's going to blow his mind.

Hades PC

Well, so much for that New Year's Resolution we made to kick Roguelikes. We thought we knew what to expect from Supergiant's first foray into the genre, and those expectations have certainly been delivered. But the way the studio uses the heroes and demons of Greek mythology as sources of mechanical inspiration is genius, as is the way it weaves a coherent story around our many, many deaths. A marvel.

Splatoon 2 Switch

Another devastating effect of the loss of Splatfests: we're no longer able to repeatedly 'scrub' its free T-shirts at a deep discount to farm abilities for our new silk bomber jacket. Scrubbing anything else costs ten times as much. Thus, we decide to put multiplayer on hold to finally try the lucrative PvE Salmon Run mode – and are immediately transfixed by the hard-as-nails boss rushes. If you need us, we'll be over here popping Steelheads.

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PC

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Switch



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

The best medicine

We expect games to tax the brain and test the reflexes, but only rarely do they tickle the funnybone while they're at it – not for the right reasons, anyway. Yet this month's Play crop yields a selection of games that not only make us laugh, but also remind us how hard a thing humour is to get right in a medium where the player can't help but get in the way. If, as they say, timing is truly everything in comedy, delegating control to an uncooperative thirdparty is simply asking for trouble.

In *Lair Of The Clockwork God* (p120), developer Dan Marshall returns to the classic point-and-click adventure stylings of his early Ben and Dan games. This was one of the first genres to really get humour right, and little wonder: player input is minimal, and the script is everything. Similarly, in *Zombie Army 4: Dead War*, (p114) a schlocky B-movie setting, to say nothing of the gruesome Nazi

nut-shot cinematics it borrows from the *Sniper Elite* series, all but mandates that it be played for laughs. Layer in the sort of hilarity that naturally emerges in co-op when guns and goo are involved, and Rebellion is on to a winner.

We find a similar spirit in *Bloodroots* (p110), a game of serious difficulty that lightens the tone with a script peppered with swearing and an improvisational weapon toolset that lets you use everything from a fencepost to a cabbage to stove the enemy's heads in. Yet when it comes to pure comedy, none of the aforementioned can hold a candle (or four) to *Journey To The Savage Planet* (p106). Typhoon's debut game uses humour as a foundational principle in every aspect: its script, its mechanics, its look and sound and feel. It's not perfect, certainly. But it is quite the proof of concept. In a real world that gets bleaker by the day, the more that videogames can lighten the tone, the better.



Journey To The Savage Planet

We've been unsure about 505 Games for a while, to be honest. The Italian publisher has a fine eye, no doubt, but after the deal has been signed its games have always seemed a little underpromoted. At E3 last year, *Control* was one of the big hits among the assembled press, but it was quietly tucked away in a meeting room upstairs; the eventual torrent of end-of-year awards that rained down on Remedy's game had little to do with how much it was, or rather wasn't, promoted. Yet the messaging around *Journey To The Savage Planet* has been pitch perfect. When we first touch down in Typhoon Studios' debut, we know exactly what to expect — and the game is all the better for it.

Quite how much of that is down to 505 is open to question, admittedly. After all, Typhoon co-founder and creative director Alex Hutchinson has spent the past couple of years detailing *Savage Planet*'s creation in these very pages in his column, Hold To Reset. Perhaps, therefore, we come to the game better informed about his intentions for the project than the wider game-playing public. But out on the press circuit Hutchinson has been measured and consistent in explaining what the game both is, and isn't, proving that game development isn't just about what you make, but how you talk about it too.

Landing on a planet that looks like it's been generated by the *No Man's Sky* algorithm naturally invites a certain set of comparisons; likewise the knowledge that this game was directed by a developer who, at Ubisoft, was at the helm of *Assassin's Creed III* and *Far Cry 4*. *Savage Planet* certainly bears those games' hallmarks, but this is not a game built by procedural happenstance, nor is it an intimidatingly large and busy open world. This is just as Hutchinson promised: a modestly sized, handcrafted game that respects the player's time and rewards their investment. Unlike so many of the games it will remind you of over its 12-hour runtime, it feels not so much built as it does *designed*.

Indeed, if there's a comparison to be made, it's to *Metroid Prime*. One of your first tasks in the game is to use your visor's scanner for your AI companion to identify and catalogue, and the theme continues throughout a game of gentle, gear-gated exploration, careful platforming and puzzling, and a healthy dose of gunplay. The latter is among the more undercooked elements: your pistol may be upgradeable but it's the only weapon in your arsenal, handling is woolly and the negligible zoom of the aim-down-sight function is barely deserving of the term. Upgrades include bounce shots, a charged blast powered by an active-reload-style timing meter, and larger clip and reload times. But most of the game's weaker moments happen when you're shooting at — or around, in our experience — something that's trying to kill you.

Developer Typhoon Studios
Publisher 505 Games
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

If there's a style here, it's *Borderlands*, if *Borderlands* were as funny as it thinks it is. It's a treat

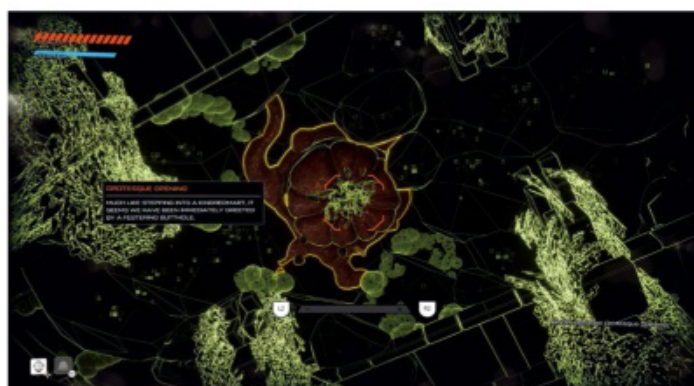
Happily, there's plenty more than that on the menu. Dropped on planet AR-Y 26 and cast as an employee of Kindred Aerospace (proudly the fourth-best interstellar exploration company in the galaxy), your task is twofold: first, to do Kindred's bidding and scan the planet for resources and signs of life; second, to find enough fuel to get yourself off this godforsaken rock and back home, since your ship was damaged on arrival. Doing so involves finding a number of tucked-away fuel sources. Find them all, and you can bring the game to a close immediately.

Hutchinson and Typhoon have made much of their desire for *Journey To The Savage Planet* to have that rarest of videogame qualities: an actual sense of humour. That ambition is made clear even before you get off the ship, the cheerily corporate-dystopian vibe of Kindred and your AI accomplice rattling off the gags from minute one, and most of them landing well. The biggest laughs come from video messages sent to you by Kindred's president and CEO Martin Tweed, and from a series of live-action commercials that unlock as you progress through the game and play when you return to your ship (one of which has bestowed unto us the immortal phrase 'nose broth'). If there's a style here, it's *Borderlands*, if *Borderlands* were as funny as it thinks it is. It's a treat.

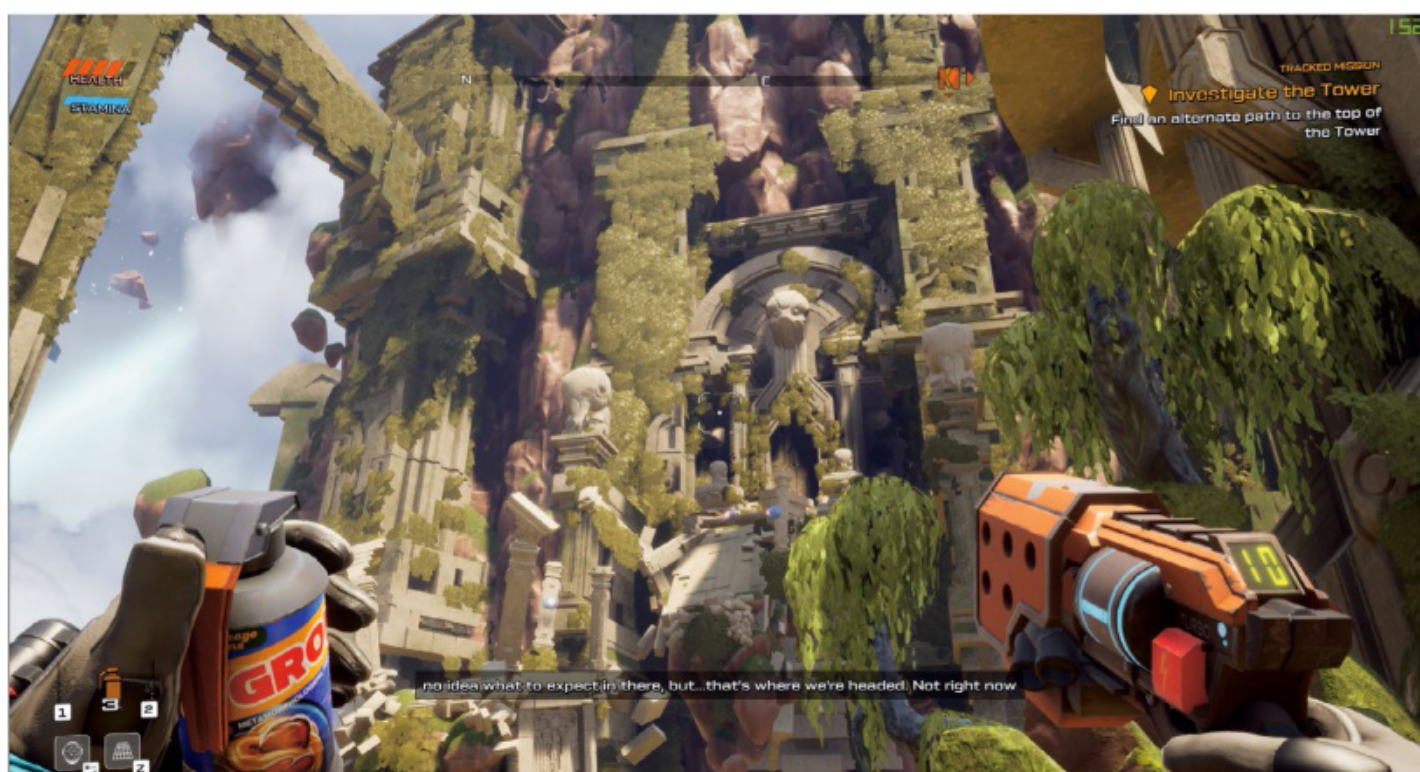
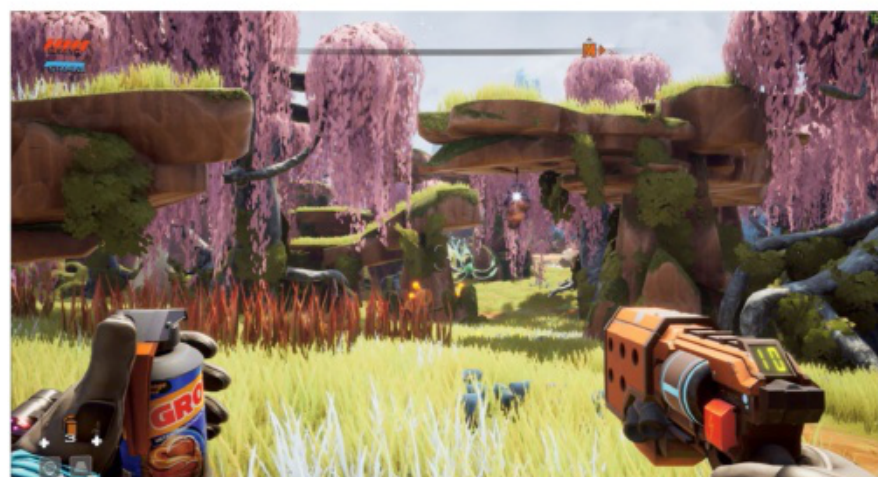
Typhoon doesn't want the fun to stop with the script, however. Animations, enemy designs and sound effects all do their bit to keep the tone as light as possible, and even many of the game's mechanics are played firmly for laughs. Your melee attack is a hefty boot that sends smaller enemies flying; the charged version is a slap that makes them explode. The Gelatinous Blob, one of many throwable items, turns into a jump pad when it lands, and you suspect the only reason Typhoon put it in the game was for the bulbous 'sproing' it emits as it launches you skywards.

The first thing you do in the game is use a disgusting food substitute, Grob, to kite around a small group of pufferbirds, an initially passive enemy type found throughout the game. Shortly after feeding on the gloopy substance, they'll poop out carbon, an essential crafting material. You'll throw down some more, taking advantage of the bottomless Grob barrel nearby, with the same results. You carry on for a while, getting the hint. But then you get it wrong: perhaps your aim fails you, or a pufferbird wanders in front of you as you press the button to throw. Instead of hitting the floor, the Grob hits the creature. Its cutesy, friendly little pals — at least 50 per cent eyeball, as the game's in-menu bestiary acknowledges — set about it eagerly, eating it alive. It explodes in a shower of carbon and lurid green goo. It was, we assure you, entirely accidental. The first time, anyway. ►





ABOVE Only rarely are you forced to use your scanner on something, but it's always worth doing, and not just for the subquest that tracks your progress. This example smartly previews one of the game's smartest gags

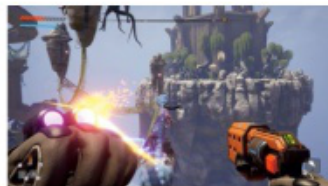


MAIN The planet spans multiple biomes, and is surprisingly large. Fast-travel points are dotted around the place just generously enough to keep a snappy pace.
ABOVE The green flying creature in the distance is the irritating Jellywaft. Their wayward flight paths make them hard to track down, and later in the game tougher variants show up and attack you in numbers.
LEFT Signs of civilisation are a worrying surprise to Kindred, whose CEO decides that the safest course of action is to nuke the planet from orbit. Despite that, and the *Pikmin*-style need to repair your ship, there's no time pressure



Indeed, we find ourselves back there in the late game when, short of carbon for an essential upgrade, we're in need of an endless, and endlessly icky, source of the stuff. This is, however, a rare occurrence. Given Hutchinson's Ubisoft past, the sight of *Journey To The Savage Planet's* upgrade menus, accessed through a 3D printer on your ship, rather sets the teeth on edge. Yet this is a gag in itself: most of the available unlocks and improvements are acquired naturally through the course of the game, meaning the menus are just an oddly intimidating visual representation of the planet's gear-gating. You'll unlock a new toy when the game needs you to, not a moment before – at which point, as is tradition, you'll remember all the unreachable places you passed earlier which your new tool can access.

Said upgrades are nothing out of the ordinary – a double jump, a grapple hook, a ground pound, a rail-grind – and it's not a toolset you're meant to use creatively, more a grab-bag of specific tools for individual jobs. Hence the sense of a designed world. This is not a place where improvisation wins the day, rather one where every enemy, chasm or sheer wall has a defined solution, where if it feels like you can't get somewhere yet, you definitely can't. That's not to say there's no scope for exploration: heading off the beaten track might net you a health upgrade, a stash of minerals, or a good laugh. A suite of nonessential, but thoroughly enjoyable upgrades are locked behind a shopping list of tasks, dubbed Field Research, that insist you go off and muck about for a spell (killing enemies while they're airborne after a boot to the face; catching a large group in the blast radius of an explosive pufferbird). In any case, the game's linearity is no



THROWAWAY GAGS

With your right hand busy holding your pistol throughout the game, your left does the heavy lifting, deploying your grapple hook and an ever-growing suite of throwable items. Grob lures small creatures, while Binding Bile roots bigger threats to the spot for a spell. Bombgranates are grenades used for blowing open walls and foes; acid bursts melt away amber that's hardened around scenery or enemies; a shock blast short-circuits doors, while a grapple seed instantly sprouts something for your hook to latch on to. On it goes – to such an extent that by game's end scrolling through them with D-pad directions becomes a chore that might just get you killed. Given Hutchinson's Ubisoft heritage, was a radial menu really too much to ask for?

It's certainly a handsome game – perhaps too much at times, when you're struggling to pick a Jellywaft out against the scenery. Happily there's enough downtime for you to soak up one of the many pretty vistas

negative. It gives proceedings the sort of forward momentum and focus that is all too rare in this longitudinal age, particularly among the kinds of game that share *Savage Planet's* aesthetic.

The result is a game that is never at risk of outstaying its welcome, though it can certainly test the patience in places. The aforementioned gunplay is a frequent culprit. Some foes can be hard to pick out against the busy, colourful scenery; controller users will curse their lack of turning speed when fighting the more flighty enemy variants; and we get hit by one creature's charge attack we were convinced we'd dodged more times than we'd care to remember, much less admit. The final third of the game is perhaps a little too exacting, both in terms of the precision required to complete the tasks at hand and the number of enemies Typhoon throws at you along the way. That turns out to be appropriate training for an infuriating last boss – if only we'd got that explosive upgrade through Field Research. The payoff that follows the eventual kill elicits just enough of a belly-laugh to save the game ending on a downer.

Yet even when we're cursing *Journey To The Savage Planet*, we still enjoy it. This is a generous game in both deed and spirit, and, as such, one it's tremendously difficult to dislike. It's a curious proposition, even a risky one, to try and make a comedy game. After all, what makes a bunch of game devs think they can be funny? We've met a fair few over the years, and the odds seem stacked against them. Typhoon has cracked it at the first time of asking.

Post Script

Alex Hutchinson, creative director

He may have quit his **Edge** column after selling Typhoon to Google, but we managed to persuade **Alex Hutchinson** to talk to us one last time before he disappears into the motherbrain to help drive Stadia's firstparty efforts. Here, Typhoon's co-founder and creative director talks about how a group of gamedevs go about making something funny.

Comedy is subjective. Could a game like this get made in the approval system of, say, Ubisoft or EA?

I really don't think so. Even with 505 Games we had discussions about, you know, is it funny? 'I don't find this funny. I ran it past the French team, they didn't find it funny, but the Germans did.' It's the death of comedy, to overwork it. Trying to keep that sense of spontaneity was something we worked hard on; the process of reviewing, a lot of cooks in the kitchen, would make it very difficult.

Did you ever even try to do it?

Well, often you work within a brand, and there's a tone that's been established. *Far Cry 4* is a black comedy to me: we spend time mocking the tropes of games where you're sent on some very earnest mission. But really, you know that pretty much the entire audience who buys your game is just there to shoot everything that moves. There was a comedy accent to the game, but you had to disguise it behind a veneer of seriousness so that a chunk of your audience wouldn't notice it.

The script was written in-house, almost entirely by you. With respect, you're not a writer by trade. How did 505 react when you said you'd be writing it?

Well, I wrote big chunks of *Far Cry 4* and *Assassin's Creed III*. I didn't feel terrified of telling them but yes, I don't know that they were necessarily enamoured with the idea coming in. At a certain point they asked, can we get someone in to punch it up, in Hollywood tradition? I said yes sir, of course. You don't ever fight this stuff. You go limp, like it's a bear attack. You lie on the ground. For me it's like, if they write funnier jokes, I'll take them; my name is still in the credits. It's not like I'm going to be shuffled off the project.

Game developers don't tend to have writers' rooms. What was the scriptwriting process like?

It's a bit like a writers' room in a sense — the idea of bouncing ideas off people, seeing how they react and incorporating them. For us it's more of a developers' room: we'd come up with a feature, then throw it to the animator, say, 'Make the melee a backhand slap' or whatever. We trial it in front of everyone; if people laugh you know you're onto something. So I don't think the



"Most comedy movies are disposable. It's very hard to write something that's funny and has any sort of weight to it"



EDGE

process would have been radically different to a writers' room: it's about putting ideas and trying them. If you get an early laugh then it's a process of clinging to that idea long enough to see it to fruition.

It must have helped that you were working with people you've known for years. Put friends in a room together, they'll just try to make each other laugh.

Exactly. I'd read out chunks of the script as I was writing it and they'd laugh or they wouldn't. Also, the script is only one part of the comedy: I talked about this in the column, but the mechanical humour is as interesting to me as the textual humour. The idea that the world itself could be funny, that what was happening with the creatures could be surprising — the actual engineering of the scene was as important as the script.

So do you take a design idea, and work out how to make it funny? Or do you have a funny idea then design it into the game?

It's a bit of both. Take the melee: we were like, it should be unusual, like a slap. And then our art director, Erick Bilodeau, said, "They should just *burst*. There should be goo everywhere." Then he pushes our graphics engineer to come up with a solution for goo splatter. You know, you try features, you embrace them, and then you polish them, and you keep going. Humour is important to such an extent that being funny was more important than being mechanically tight. So therefore if it was funny — even if, like the bounce pads, it's only marginally useful — it's a feature worth keeping, as opposed to saying, 'There's only three puzzles you can solve with it before you get the double jump, what's the point?'

Of all the elements you put into the game in service of its humour, what was the hardest to implement?

Probably the script. It's all one-shots, it doesn't persist. That it is still a game with a meaningful ending, with some sort of structure and shape, was the hardest thing to get right. There's a reason why most comedy movies are disposable. It's very hard to write something that's funny and has any sort of weight to it.

So, is comedy now Typhoon's calling card? Or was this a one-off, just to prove it could be done?

I would love it to be. That's the goal, to maintain some sense of identity within Stadia, the idea of being jokey and fun and upbeat and sort of *positive*. I think those are great things to persist with: whether we make a romance game or a horror game or whatever, keeping the player as an agent of humour is a really strong principle. I think we did well enough on this first one to persist with it. Who knows where we could end up? ■

Bloodroots

Revenge is a dish best served cold, which makes ultra-violent Weird West action game *Bloodroots* positively frosty. The first minutes see you, as the hulking Mr Wolf, running through a village strewn with corpses, before the perpetrator – the terrifying Black Wolf – brings down a hatchet upon your head. By some miracle, you survive, and set out on a quest to avenge Tarrytown. And, for a game from an indie studio we've never heard of before, there's an unexpected richness to almost everything – animation, sound and level design in particular – that inspires an insatiable bloodlust.

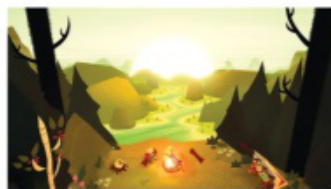
That might all sound rather sanguinary, and it is. But *Bloodroots'* sense of style and slapstick humour affords it a wonderful lightness. Its cartoonish setting looks like papercraft; fully-destructible towns are decorated with die-cut trees and houses, and lit with a textural warmth. And nearly everything within them, from the buckets to the fenceposts, can be picked up and used as a weapon. Guards stand motionless, flesh-skittles waiting to be bowled over by our vicious choreography – until we come within range, and they charge.

Each item-slash-weapon has its own quirks that play into a successful run through a level. A small pot can be thrown quickly and from a distance, whereas the few frames longer it takes to swing an axe at a nearby head must be accounted for. The pot can only be deployed once, while the hatchet will last for three kills (or more, should we manage to bag multi-kills). Spears are very handy: our only three buttons are assigned to picking up an object, using an object and jumping, meaning there's no dash to speak of. A spear, however, lets us shoot forward like a human needle, threading kills together effortlessly. Charging forward with a ladder is an effective way to splat a foe; jumping with one springs us up onto higher ground, and spinning it grants us an area-of-effect attack – and even flight while in the air. Items such as lanterns and rifles are less common, but powerful: flames spread quickly in *Bloodroots*, and shrieking guards are wont to accidentally set each other on fire, or shoot a comrade who's in their line of sight.

Even when we can't find cutlasses, harpoons or fireworks, it's critical that we keep something to hand, even if it's just a post torn from a nearby fence. Mr Wolf's default punch works in a pinch, but is slow and doesn't come with any perks. And levels are designed as semi-platforming puzzles that require resourcefulness. From the coastal climes of the first act to the searing desert and frozen tundra of the second and third, little breadcrumb trails are laid: a hatchet ahead of a tree, a harpoon gun in front of a gap too wide to jump, a barrel near some spikes and a small group of guards. It's so clear: we grab the axe, chop down the tree and sprint up its trunk to the next ledge, thunk the harpoon into the chest of the enemy across the gap to pull ourselves over it, then hop onto the barrel and roll it to avoid the spikes

Developer/publisher Paper Cult
Format PC (tested), PS4, Switch
Release Out now

There's an unexpected richness to almost everything that inspires an insatiable bloodlust



CARRY ON CAMPING

You begin each level at your base camp in the forest, where you can talk around the fire with the creatively potty-mouthed ghosts of your adversaries before setting off on your next slaying session. There's also a station with a map and compass: interacting with it allows you to replay any previous level and try to improve your ranking on the online leaderboards. Mr Wolf's many collectible hats, drying charmingly on a rack in the sun, are the key to this. They can only be used in levels you've already completed, but grant you additional abilities: a deer hat gives you a double jump, for instance, while the boar hat has your punch double as a dash move.

and squash two enemies before kicking it into a third.

There are always a few viable alternative routes in the open-ended levels to take when we tire of messing up a lengthy sequence (checkpoints are sometimes meted out too strictly). Often, they're even more entertaining: improvising new approaches keeps things fresh, and Paper Cult has clearly worked hard to ensure that levels work from a variety of angles: we rarely ever have to restart due to having used up all available ways to cross a chasm, for instance. And the number of hilariously animated, often referential finishing moves – triggered by timing an attack perfectly with particular weapons – is dizzying, and encourages us to switch things up, whether this involves suffocating someone with a tuna or paying homage to a certain shovel-wielding Knight.

As the story rolls onwards, you meet and fight the three irresistibly wacky, smack-talking Beasts – each of whom gets a distinctly designed, fairly checkpointed and thoroughly enjoyable boss fight, and whose ghosts haunt you your camp every night. More complex regular enemy types appear, and more outlandish weapons are introduced: no spoilers, but our favourite might be the bizarre kind of gun that heralds the eventual appearance of Mrs Crow. It's her third-act setting, however, that frustrates most. The tundra introduces some of our least favourite environmental hurdles in games – strong winds, slippery ice and deep snow, the first two of which consistently ruin our carefully planned choreography for no reason, and the last so poorly visually communicated as to catch us by surprise when we're trying to run from danger. Then again, even without a gale blowing us off-course, a select few scenarios are teeth-grindingly difficult to clear, thanks to *Bloodroots'* slightly too-loose controls. There are large areas of spikes that must be cleared by balancing on barrels or giant cannonballs, which break after three kills or one accidental bump; landing Mr Wolf safely on the next barrel or ball seems to us to depend entirely on luck. It's in these moments that *Bloodroots'* excellent core conceit wears thinnest.

Overall, there's a general feeling that – despite its generous efforts to introduce new, surprising weapons up until the final moments – *Bloodroots* is a shade too long, with many areas feeling like slightly reconfigured repetitions of ones that have come before, instead of meaningful evolutions. Then again, when it pulls out all the conceptual stops towards the end, it's unforgettable: one sequence that's by turns gut-busting and chilling rivals even Rockstar's substance-addled vignettes. It's perfectly timed as Nick Suttner's writing begins to hint more aggressively at the truth of Mr Wolf's thirst for revenge, and Paper Cult's cartoon cinematography approaches the sublime in revealing it once and for all. Much like its hero, then, *Bloodroots* is perhaps a touch bloated in the middle – but the gore-soaked trail it'll trace in your mind will leave a lasting mark.



ABOVE The blood smears you leave in your wake are grimly satisfying – as are the humorous war cries of your foes turning to gory gurgles.

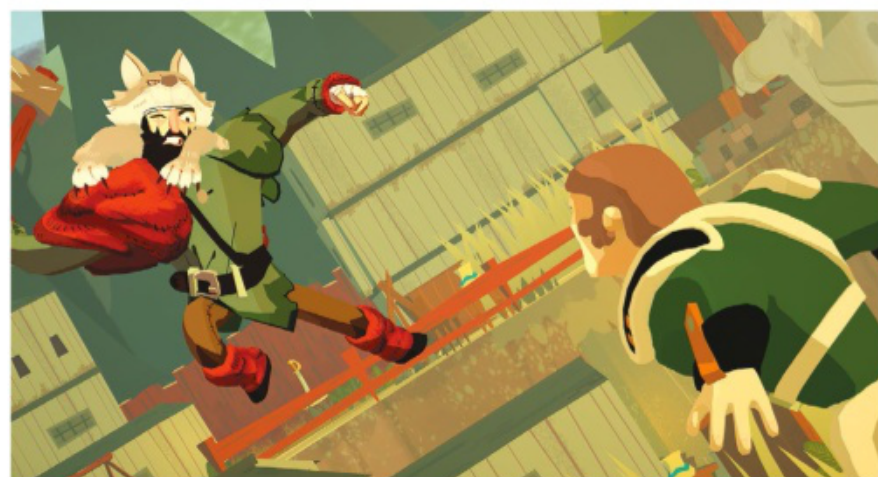
LEFT Should things ever get too chaotic to handle, an accessibility menu offers two options: an invincibility mode so that you can play without fear of death, and the ability to instantly clear an area of enemies so you can proceed



BELOW Daniel Côté's wonderful animation work makes for eye-popping finishers, and memorable boss fights: watching Mr Boar chug along throwing soldiers out of his vehicle like confetti is a treat



ABOVE Behold: the little green target that briefly indicates 'perfect timing', and an opportunity to trigger a finisher. Alas, with heavy golden axe in hand, it's not possible in this instance. Our kingdom for a harpoon gun



Post Script

Raphaël Toulouse, creative director and co-founder, Paper Cult

Back in 2014, **Raphaël Toulouse** and his friend and collaborator Michaël Emond founded Montreal studio Paper Cult. They were looking to prove themselves: *Fat Mask* was their first game, a basic-looking but mechanically inventive arcade puzzle brawler that won them the government grant they needed to set their sights higher. *Bloodroots* is the result. Here, Toulouse discusses making the switch from filmmaking to indie dev, and the dangers of wearing too many hats.

We weren't aware of Paper Cult as a studio before *Bloodroots*. What's the history there?

Before being in videogames, I was working in cinema for about five years. And I always had in my mind that I would switch to videogames at some point. I was fed up: you need a giant team to make a big movie, like you need to be at least 50 or 75 people. And I didn't like the structure. So that's the reason I decided to switch and do games. I had the opportunity to work as a designer right away in a small indie studio, doing a mobile game. I did that for about a year-and-a-half, but I felt like a fraud, so I decided to do a one-year programme in design at university – but what I really wanted was to find someone with whom I could start a studio afterward. I think on the second day, I met Michaël [Emond], and I knew right away. I was pretty straightforward with him: 'Let's start a studio.' We made our first game, *Fat Mask*. But we were working at another studio while doing it: it was mainly meant to prove we could ship a game and get some funding. So then we finally had a studio: a team of six in-house, and a couple of freelancers.

Where did the idea for *Bloodroots* come from?

At the end of university, we brainstormed about 50 ideas. Michaël and I were prototyping about a project a day. We did that for a month. At the end of the month, we had around 30 prototypes: we did some voting and decided, 'Okay, we'll do this one'. *Bloodroots* was one of those ideas.

Your background in cinema is very apparent in the game's style. From which films or directors did you take the most inspiration?

We were inspired by Quentin Tarantino, and how he makes his movies: he kind of does, like, a patchwork of many influences and inspirations. There's obviously a lot of Tarantino in the aesthetics, but the story is inspired by *Kill Bill*. There's some *Samurai Jack* also in the visuals – for the gameplay, one of our main inspirations was Jackie Chan. You know how Jackie Chan uses everything around him as a weapon? We wanted to make a game where you're constantly shuffling from one weapon to the other.



The thing about having a small team is that, me and Michaël mostly, we end up doing so many jobs at the same time



Also, I was inspired by music videos, because I did a lot of them when I was in cinema. You want to change the pace like every five, ten seconds so that you keep the attention of the viewer. We felt that the genre which we were in, a lot of the time after like an hour, you've seen pretty much all the content. But we wanted to keep surprises throughout the game, so that's why we have so many different weapons – there's over 150 of them.

The 'perfect timing' isn't overtly explained in the game – what exactly are the conditions that need to be met to trigger the finishers?

The game is pretty straightforward – like, there's no tutorial, you pick it up and it's pretty instinctive. But that's one of the things where we were unsure, but we kept it in the game because we thought it was interesting. When you're in reach of an enemy there's a little circle under them. Right when it appears, if you attack, you get a perfect timing – but it's like, 0.2 seconds. And when you do a perfect timing, you get a small speed boost, so it kind of dashes you forward towards your enemy. It's a bit made for, you know, speedrunners, so they can have a small edge against each other.

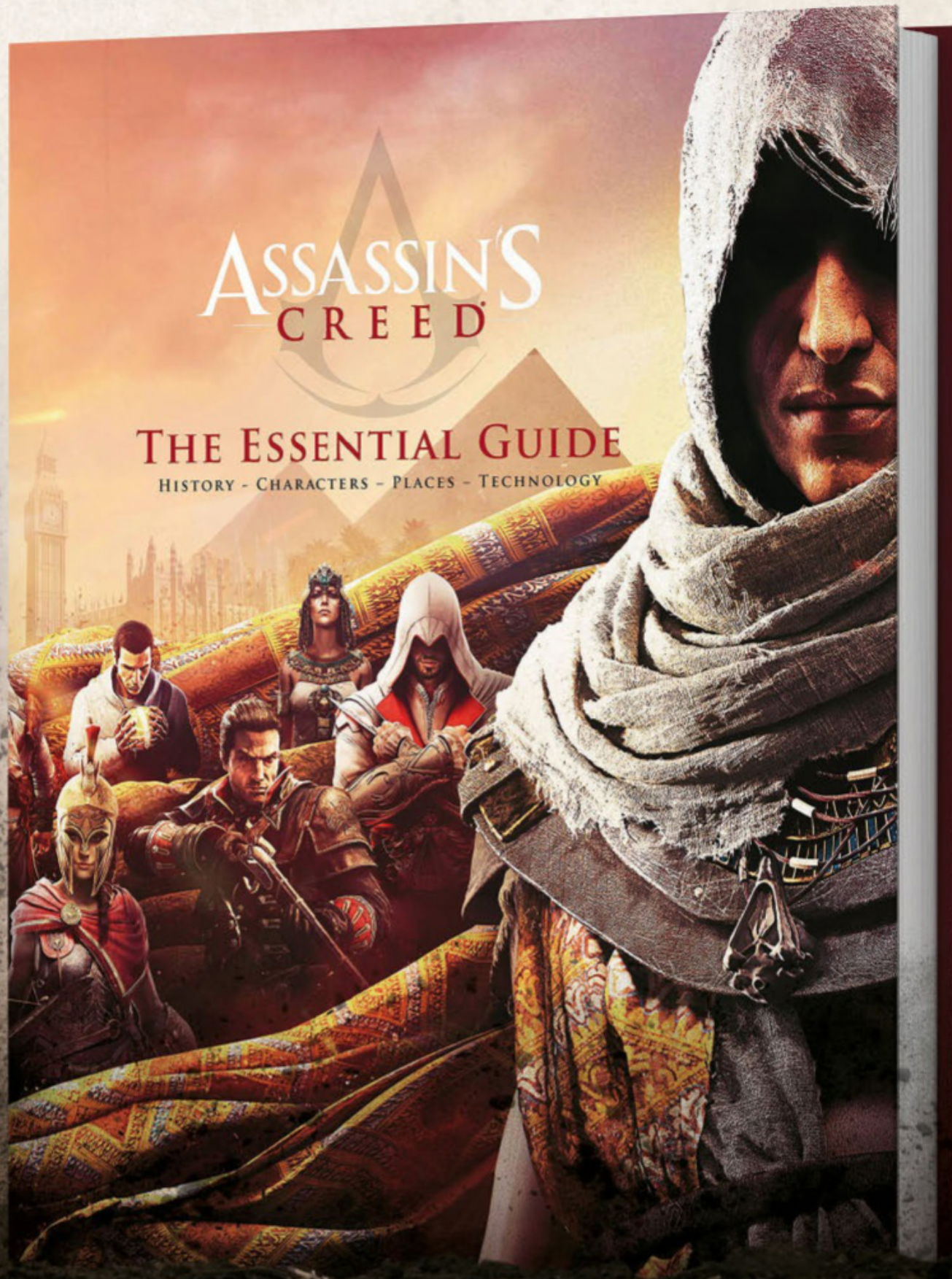
After three years of development, how are you feeling? Would you change anything, looking back?

I have the blues of finishing a project, but I'm really proud of what we achieved. If I had to do it again – first off, it would take like, half the time for sure, because I already know what the game is. We were in preproduction for about a year. At first, we had a parkour system a bit like *Assassin's Creed*, and we scrapped that after a year of development [laughs] so we had these kind of crazy things. The thing about having a small team is that, me and Michaël mostly, we end up doing so many jobs at the same time. And I think we hear that often from indies, but I don't think it's said enough that it's really not a good thing to be wearing so many hats. We didn't have a full-time designer, so the design was improvised a lot of the time. Having a full-time designer right from the get-go would have spared us that *Assassin's Creed* parkour system, for example. It's a budget thing, also. Having a producer would have been amazing.

What does the future look like?

The next project is a bit different – completely opposite to *Bloodroots*, in fact. It's Michaël's idea: it's a narrative game about being a cat! [laughs] I think it's a good thing that we're not just making *Bloodroots 2* right away. The nice thing about being indie is that I don't feel it's a dangerous business model to change from one genre to another. ■

ESSENTIAL READING

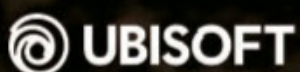


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Zombie Army 4: Dead War

From Romero to *The Walking Dead*, zombie stories are hardly ever actually about the threat of the shambling horde. They're about the threat of us, the ways we turn against each other in times of crisis. Man is the real monster, and all that – and rarely is this more evident than when you're knee-deep in a multiplayer session of *Zombie Army 4: Dead War* with a squad of people you would previously have called friends.

Dead War is nominally a cooperative game – the four of you are fighting back the same waves of enemies, working towards the same end-of-level objective – but there's not a huge amount of teamwork involved. Perhaps this stems from *Zombie Army*'s beginnings as a spin-off from the *Sniper Elite* series. While those games did introduce co-op modes, the fantasy they traded on was always about being the lone sniper in his nest, separated from the rest of the world by the glass of a scope. *Dead War* brings you closer to the action, taking foes that for the most part need to be within clawing distance to pose a threat and then throwing them at you by the dozen, so that individual headshots quickly become impractical (though never anything less than satisfying).

With a full squad and a seemingly endless horde to manage, multiplayer can get very busy, and your primary interaction with fellow players is generally getting in each other's way. An ally walks right in front of that shot you've been lining up, or worse, blows your target back to hell themselves with a lucky shotgun blast. There's no friendly fire to worry about, at least not where bullets are concerned, and while this is handy for keeping the peace it can make it feel like you're all ghosts, haunting the same spot but on separate planes of existence.

Of course, in the grand tradition of co-op shooters, there is that one moment when players do have to rely on each another. Your character is downed, the colour draining from their world at roughly the same rate their life is trickling out of the red bar at the bottom of the screen, and so you shout into the microphone for help. Suddenly, you're all comrades again... until you remember the Second Chance perk that lets you revive yourself by popping a nearby zombie, or the medkit that lets you self-revive, zapping any enemies in the vicinity in the process. Playing skilfully, with the right tools, players can become largely self-reliant – which means that, on the few occasions those options have been depleted and you do genuinely need each another, you'll most likely find no one is especially prepared to help out.

This might, we admit, be partly down to our choice of companions. But *Dead War* never encourages you to work together. Instead, it plays – gloriously – to your worst instincts. A large swathe of UI real estate is eaten up by a combo meter and a mini leaderboard, constantly updating with each player's score. These feed into a progression system, a series of levels that unlock new

Developer/publisher
Rebellion Developments
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The solid fundamentals of its design shine through more clearly when you're playing alone



MOB MENTALITY

Dead War's Horde Mode is pretty much business as usual: waves of progressively tougher enemies, and a dripfeed of supply drops to help you meet the challenge. But it does a good job of condensing the entire game into manageable half-hour sessions. The unlocks of the progression system are largely set aside, with supply drops handing out upgraded weapons every few minutes, and the waves offer a bestiary of all the zombie varieties you'll meet in the campaign. While levels gradually open up as you play – a spontaneous zombie combustion blowing open a section of wall or, more prosaically, a locked door swinging open – they're tight enough to encourage more symbiosis between teammates. It sweeps away most of our reservations about multiplayer and, honestly, might be the single best way to experience this game with friends.

weapons, cosmetics and perks. We wish we could tell you we held the moral high ground and resisted the simple charms of a number getting bigger. The truth, though, is that chasing this score becomes all that matters.

Maintaining a solid combo is as gratifying as doing keepy-ups with a light plastic ball. A timer ticks away between each fresh kill, but slowly, giving you the chance to line up the next headshot, pull the trigger, punt the ball back into the air. Hitting 50, or 100, is a thrill. Letting that trickle away, then seeing all your exponentially inflated points land on the leaderboard in a single chunk, is possibly even better. With no numerical reward offered for helping your fellow man, it quickly falls down the list of priorities – especially when your fellow man is already a few levels above you and their score is leaving yours in the dust. So maybe you turn a blind eye, let them bleed out, just while you catch up. It's not a mindset we're proud of, but it's one *Zombie Army* nurtures.

Dead War is clearly intended to be played with friends, but the solid fundamentals of its design shine through more clearly when you're playing alone. There's more time to find your sniper nest, set up trickshots that will pierce multiple skulls with a single bullet or lure zombies into carefully prepared traps, then revel in the gruesome X-ray killcam that follows. This is the game's inheritance from *Sniper Elite*, and in multiplayer it all but fades away. Individual shots, and even kills, can feel inconsequential but for the resulting uptick in score.

Playing solo, you're able to prod the nooks and crannies of each level, packed with visual gags and XP-boosting collectibles, without fear of getting left behind. The campaign's range is more evident too – there's a decent tonal variety here, from the odd jaunt into survival horror to all-out slapstick, that gets flattened out when you're rushing through with friends.

The strange thing, though, is that none of this – the elegance of design, the inherent awfulness of other people and how much harder they make it to lie to yourself about your motivations – really matters. Because, as much as we might like to pose as a misanthropic hermit, the simple presence of other humans elevates any activity you do together. The tone gets flattened, yes, but into something that's reminiscent of crowding around a communal television in the pre-Netflix days, watching whatever late-night movie is available just to talk over it. *Dead War*'s (intentionally, we assume) wonky dialogue and Monty Python-level European accents are perfect fodder for jokes, as is setting off an explosive trap – one of the few exceptions to the 'no friendly fire' rule – just as your comrade rushes past it. Especially when said comrade's score is bigger than your own. So perhaps we are all monsters deep down, and *Dead War*'s multiplayer will bring out a side you probably ought to be ashamed of – but there's something inherently funny about that. What's a little depravity between pals, eh?



ABOVE Find the Summoning Shrines tucked away in campaign levels and you can trigger a few bonus waves of enemies, increasing the challenge and adding some bonus loot.

LEFT The game takes you across Europe, from the canals of Venice to sewers and zoos, but for the most part, wherever you are in the world, levels retain the same muddy brown and grey palette

BELOW The inevitable suicide bomber, somehow imbued with the speed of a 28 Days Later zombie. Exploded at a distance, they're a great way of racking up multikills



ABOVE After dying, your character will rise again as a zombie. You can't directly control them, sadly, but your companions can earn an achievement by killing you a second time. We'll try not to take it personally



The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics

We're only in February, but the 'unlikeliest tie-in' category for this year's **Edge** awards has surely already been sewn up. Following its effortful adaptation of the third season of *Stranger Things*, Bonus XP is back with another game based on a Netflix original, in this case the lavish prequel to Jim Henson's '80s fantasy classic. But where *Stranger Things 3: The Game* launched mere hours after the series' premiere, this is a spin-off whose story runs parallel to a show that debuted six months ago; one that, despite glowing reviews, never quite seemed to capture the cultural conversation. And while *Stranger Things*' 16bit style was in keeping with the series' retro fetish, it's harder to understand why a turn-based tactical RPG was deemed the right fit for *Age Of Resistance*. We suppose it's likely to be similarly overlooked – though in this case, that wouldn't be much of a surprise.

An underwhelming intro – betraying a significantly less generous budget than its parent series – welcomes us to the planet of Thra, where all is not well. A phenomenon called The Darkening is turning friendly creatures hostile thanks, seemingly, to the tyrannical Skeksis, the ruling overlords whose cavalier use of capital letters appears to be the least of their sins. A group of Gelflings, the Dark Crystal's central elf-like race, foment a rebellion, gathering their fellow clans in an attempt to overthrow the Skeksis. It's a simple story at heart, but ideas and names are tossed around with casual disregard; some are explained through clunky exposition while others are presented without any kind of context. If you haven't watched the series, you'll likely be left baffled at times – not that you're missing much. Little effort has been invested in differentiating these characters; here, one Gelfling is pretty much indistinguishable from the next. That's particularly true when you glance at the turn order at the top-left of the screen – or, rather, squint if you're playing in handheld mode on Switch, which suggests the developer didn't bother accounting for the size of the tablet display.

What follows is a generic isometric turn-based strategy game that pinches a trick from *The Banner Saga* by putting you in charge of different groups scattered across the world – in theory to make its battles more varied. Yet regardless of the makeup of your squad, in these boxy arenas you're often facing the same kind of opponents and relying upon the same strategies. Besides, almost everything here has already been done better elsewhere. You'll find different points of elevation, with attack bonuses for units that have claimed the high ground. There are hazards such as pits of carnivorous plants to knock enemies into, and missions in which you're charged with rescuing allies and escorting them to safety. Over time, you'll end up with more than a dozen characters, though in several cases you have limited control over team selection. In the early stages

Developer Bonus XP
Publisher En Masse Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

If you haven't watched the series, you'll likely be left baffled at times – not that you're missing much



FIZZGIG ECONOMY

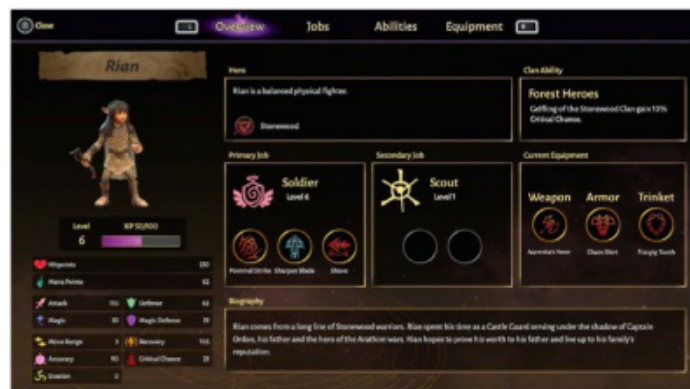
Selection limitations mean you'll end up with units at uneven levels, though you won't be able to replay previously completed quests to grind for experience. Instead, to get other characters up to speed, you'll have to take on bonus encounters that feel anything but optional. Don't let the suggested level put you off – at the lower end, the incremental gains pale into insignificance compared to the boosts you'll get from weapons, armour and trinkets. It's only when you unlock the second- and third-tier jobs that the stat changes make a noticeable difference. As such, you'll want to take on as many of these encounter missions as possible so you can afford to gear up – although you won't know what reward you're getting until you complete them.

you're frequently only able to choose one or two units, with the rest predetermined – which is a bit much when you've spent your stingy supply of pearls (the game's main currency) on gear for characters you can't use.

Three self-explanatory classes are available to begin with – scouts, soldiers and menders – though as you progress, you'll unlock new jobs, letting you mix and match abilities from primary and secondary roles. In theory, this gives you more options, letting you have a powerful attacker that can also heal their allies. And yet these hybrid classes end up making each unit less distinctive than they were. Other races such as Podlings and the yappy, dog-like Fizzgigs come with job types of their own, although the more unusual ones take too long to unlock, with most moves having analogues elsewhere. They can, however, open up some intriguing combinations, even if few seem quite as effective as one you'll discover in the early game, whereby you can shove a stunned opponent to reduce both their physical and magical defence. They're also contingent upon turn order – the idea that ending a turn without attacking shifts you forward in the queue is a fine one on paper, but in truth no tactic makes as big a difference as the quality of your equipment.

It adds up to a game that doesn't seem to know its audience. Despite the (eventual) breadth of options, this doesn't really have enough depth for serious genre fans. Beginners will likely struggle, too: some concepts aren't explained well, while at other times it introduces new elements without warning and expects you to figure them out through trial and error. There's no reason to believe the mid-mission arrival of a new enemy unit is going to be a major problem, until you watch in horror as an attack registers as barely a tickle. The RNG often seems firmly tilted in the enemy's favour – the number of glancing blows you'll land, dealing a fraction of the estimated damage, seems to be in direct proportion to the enemy's luck with critical hits. On one occasion, four in a row are enough to do for a crucial unit that would otherwise have comfortably survived, with our healer next in line. As such, it discourages risk-taking or experimentation for safe, dull, attritional strategies.

Even so, *Age Of Resistance Tactics* would merely be tolerably mundane, were it not brought low by a UI as cumbersome as the game's title. Choosing an action involves navigating the least responsive radial menu we've ever encountered; little wonder it prompts you to confirm that you want to end a turn, since it's easy to inadvertently select that option while trying to use one of the moves to either side of it. The result is a game that becomes a chore to play, with little of the dark magic of Henson's original, nor the storytelling nuance of the Netflix series. If this is the world we're expected to save, the Skeksis can have it.



ABOVE Different Gelfing clans come with innate perks that carry more significance than the game would have you believe. Some other mechanics are only mentioned in passing as loading-screen tips



TOP A few missions introduce objectives that aren't simply routing the enemy or reaching the exit, though they usually amount to hitting something that isn't an enemy – even picking up a book involves standing next to it and giving it a whack.

MAIN The Hunter's leaping AOE attack stuns any units within its large range, giving you a turn to get everyone out of the way.

RIGHT Several maps encourage you to lure enemies towards hazardous areas before shoving them in. It's effective against stronger units, but not worth the effort for the rank and file



The Suicide Of Rachel Foster

Let's start with that title. Pretty much everything you need to know about *The Suicide Of Rachel Foster*, good and bad, is right there in those five words. Take the peculiarly specific naming convention it adheres to: one that places it alongside *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter* and *What Remains Of Edith Finch*. Firstperson adventure games, their stories led by mystery, set in the northern states of the US, where you do a lot of walking around... The game very much does what it says on the tin.

More importantly, though, there's the matter of the S-word. There is certainly room for thoughtful handling of the topic within videogames, but advertising the suicide aspect up front has a certain tabloid luridness that makes us wary. That is disarmed by an opening splash screen that warns of "sensitive subjects" ahead, advising you approach with care. It's a level-headed, if vague, content warning – one which makes it all the more baffling when the ensuing story makes decisions we can only describe as wildly irresponsible.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. *The Suicide Of Rachel Foster* casts you as Nicole, the freshly orphaned inheritor of a hotel in the mountains of Montana. It's the home she grew up in but hasn't set foot in for a decade, since her father was revealed to be having an affair with a teenage girl who subsequently killed herself. She returns to the hotel, just long enough to sell it, and gets trapped in by a blizzard. It's a solid enough premise for a thriller, one that mashes together pieces from a dozen stories you've seen before.

The game isn't shy about its influences. In case you missed where it got the 'snowbound in an abandoned hotel' idea from, an early cutscene mimics *The Shining's* helicopter shot tracking a car as it winds along mountain roads. The rest of *Rachel Foster's* opening is borrowed from other sources: a letter that, like the text-adventure opening of *Firewatch*, gives you just a little say over how past events played out, intercut with a funeral sequence that, similar to some of *Edith Finch's* set-pieces, pulls you out of the firstperson perspective and into a top-down view so all you see of your character is the canopy of their black umbrella. Not a moment of any of that feels new, but it rearranges familiar ideas in an interesting way, a demonstration that the game understands the sources it's borrowing from. This isn't always the case.

Nicole is alone in the house, but early in the game she finds a portable phone with a direct line to a FEMA agent, Irving. Think Henry and Delilah's walkie-talkie conversations in *Firewatch*, down to the same tone of blossoming friendship. This game is structured the same way, too: you make day-by-day trips out from home base, punctuated by phone chatter. But where *Firewatch* had woods for you to get lost in, *Rachel Foster*

Developer One-O-One Games
Publisher Daedalic Entertainment
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Feels like parts of other games, borrowed and mashed up without any consideration of how they fit together



OBJECT PERMANENCE

As in *Gone Home*, you can pick up almost every object that sits on the shelves and tables of Rachel Foster's hotel and turn it over in your hands. But while the genre – and one of the game's loading screens – encourages you to study these items, doing so rarely yields any fresh discoveries. They're well-made 3D models, but don't expect details to give you a sense of the characters who used them. More effective are the written descriptions, which aren't always as literal as 'screwdriver' or 'button'. A painting of a wolf is labelled 'murderers' eyes', a row of trophies as 'self-esteem'. These are neat little hints at the character's inner life and her history with this space – exactly the kind of thing we could have done with more of.

is set in a single closed-off building, much like *Gone Home* or *Edith Finch*.

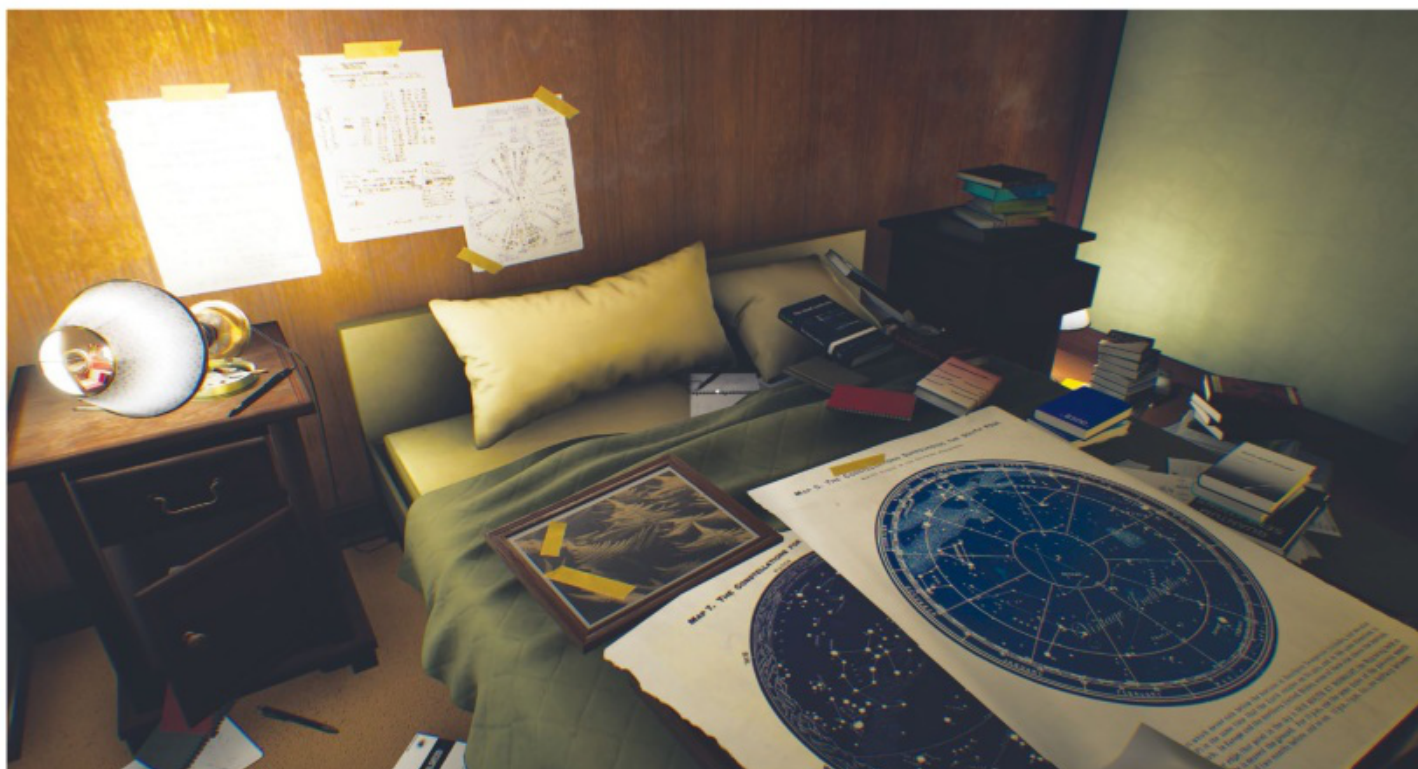
The environments are nicely rendered, and occasionally show a good eye for detail – Nicole's teenage bedroom is trapped in the amber of the 1980s, the last time she slept in it, with posters and stickers and hand-labelled tapes for you to study – but those details are clustered in a few rooms. The spaces in between are largely featureless, just rows of unlockable doors with nothing behind them. This means getting around is rarely interesting, and the game drags you along the same stretches of hotel corridor over and over.

It ends up feeling like parts of other games, borrowed and mashed up without any consideration of how they fit together, what made them work. Take those conversations, which are the meat of the game – they're not scoped to fit the space you're moving through, so often you'll arrive at your destination and have to look around awkwardly as another minute or two of dialogue plays out. But these are all minor niggles. Ultimately, the game is just a delivery mechanism for the story – and, while there are occasional moments of promise, this is where *Rachel Foster* makes its worst missteps.

It takes a little while to become apparent what kind of story you're in. It could be a drama about going back home and facing past trauma, or a horror story about being trapped in an empty house where you're not sure you are alone. It gradually reveals itself as a mystery, but again it's unclear which one you're trying to solve: whether Rachel actually committed suicide? Whether she's really dead? Whether she's a ghost? Whether your father was having an affair with a 16-year old child?

The story flits between these questions, but by the end it turns out that only one of them really matters. It feels like the game is trying to wrongfoot you, pile on the red herrings, but in practice this means you never settle long enough to ponder an answer. So when the shocking conclusion arrives – make that plural, actually, the final half-hour is a boss rush of revelations and plot twists – there are no expectations to undercut.

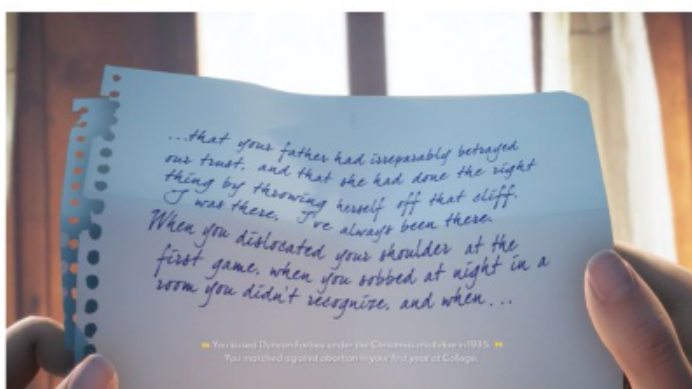
Jaws might well have dropped during that finale, but not for the intended reasons. For all the story's willingness to flip tables and pull rugs, *Rachel Foster* never once interrogates the relationship at the centre of its mystery, between a grown man and a 16-year-old child. There's no twist on that, and the conclusion assumes some kind of redemption for the man. It shows a remarkably casual attitude towards – to put it politely – a problematic sexual power dynamic. Likewise the game's closing moments, which toy with suicidal imagery in a way that's both distressing and completely unjustified. These are the very worst examples, but they're symptomatic of a larger problem: the sense that *The Suicide Of Rachel Foster* is messing around with borrowed ideas it never quite understands.



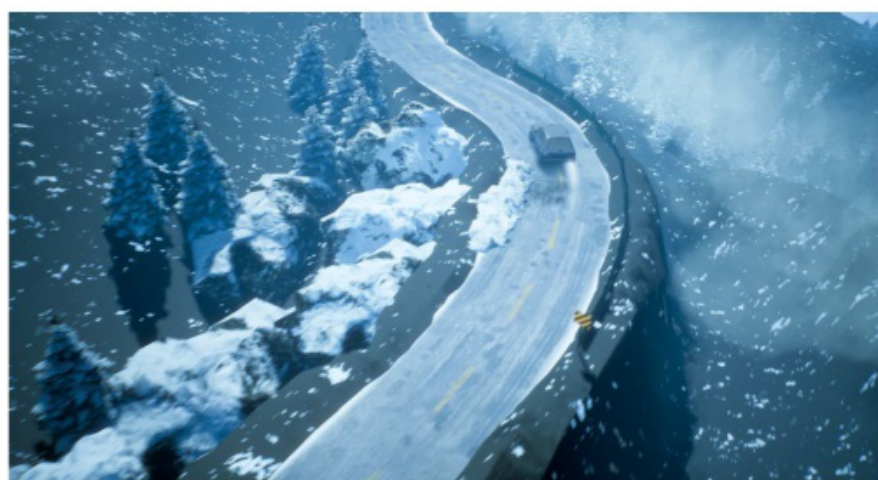
LEFT The game is almost entirely UI-free, without any HUD to clutter up your view. This is a blessing, especially in rooms which are busy with environmental storytelling.

BELOW Nods to *The Shining* abound, from the white-on-black title cards that announce the transition from one day to another to patterned carpets seemingly lifted straight from the *Overlook*.

MAIN A zoom button lets you inspect every inch of the game's lovingly crafted posters and books. There's no lorem ipsum here



ABOVE One of the very few chances you're offered to characterise your version of Nicole gives you two options: she can be someone who kisses boys under mistletoe, or someone who is anti-abortion. Tough one



Lair Of The Clockwork God

Within minutes of starting Size Five's latest we steal a dead man's shoes. That is far from the worst thing to happen to a corpse in the third Dan and Ben game, which is as scorchingly rude and abrasively funny as its predecessors. But don't expect a conventional point-and-click adventure this time. Designer and co-writer Dan Marshall's in-game alter ego has decided, in his desire to stay relevant, to become an "indie darling platformer", and that the two must embark upon a "poignant quest". Ben, however, is keen to stick to tried-and-tested techniques: talking to people, picking up objects, and occasionally combining two of them. The pair reach a compromise on the latter: Dan insists that, in keeping with modern gaming parlance, it must be called 'crafting'. It may have been more than a decade since *Time*, *Gentleman Please*, but as these two bicker their way through this ambitious hybrid, it's clear neither has really grown up. Good.

Still, for a while we're concerned that this cross-pollination of genres might not quite come together. The controls are a recurring issue – the need to accommodate platform-puzzler and point-and-click in a single interface leads to moments where you need to hold the D-pad and the right analogue stick simultaneously to select actions for Ben. And at first, the puzzles revolve around a familiar idea, as you use Dan's sprightliness to clear a way for his less agile friend. Ben, for his part, combines – sorry, crafts – objects that become abilities for Dan, such as a double-jump, while pulling levers that Dan's meaty fingers can't grasp. Ben's slow walk seems like it might be a problem, though after a while you can use Dan to give him a piggyback. And just as you're thinking even this might be too much of a faff, another ability arrives that makes getting around much easier.

Any minor hiccups are forgiven thanks to the dialogue, which sneaks in exposition and instruction under the guise of flippancy and toilet humour. Dan and Ben's verbal jousting jogs your memory about objectives and key items you might have picked up a while back and haven't used yet. They'll sometimes act as an extra pair (or two) of eyes, nodding towards critical items and environmental features you might've overlooked. That's easier done than you might think – while piggybacking, you might hurry by an object you didn't know you could interact with. It pays to slow down where possible, then, not least because missing something almost certainly means skipping a gag. Occasionally – if not quite often enough for our liking – their exchanges double as a more direct in-built hint system. If you seem to have exhausted all avenues, then simply stopping and chatting might nudge you in the right direction.

And if not, you'll get a laugh from the exchange nonetheless. Much of the humour here centres on Dan and Ben's clash of tastes, which results in a series of

Developer/publisher Size Five Games
Format PC
Release Out now

When it isn't engaging in playful (self-) mockery, it finds ways to explore videogames' quirks in witty, insightful fashion



SCUMM VN

Lair Of The Clockwork God comes with a short, free bonus game, *Devil's Kiss*, which provides the solution to one of the main game's puzzles within its first two minutes. Set in 1996, it's a prequel of sorts that explores Dan and Ben's first meeting through the prism of an anime-style visual novel, with faux-earnest dialogue and a sudden lurch into fantastical silliness. At no more than half-an-hour long, it's mostly an excuse for a lowbrow Saved By The Bell gag and an affectionate discussion of LucasArts' adventures, but it's a charming extra nonetheless. Speaking of unexpected bonuses, we'd like to take this opportunity to highlight the game's accessibility options – from dyslexic-friendly fonts to a colour-blind mode, it puts bigger games to shame.

jabs at other games. The gags aren't specific enough to feel like they're hurting anyone, yet Ben in particular mercilessly rips into current indie trends and traits. It's sometimes affectionate – there are clear nods to *Celeste*, extending to some inventively tricky platforming sequences, which become all the more delightful in light of Dan's boundless exuberance for his new-found agility. He's even pleased when his jumping ability is removed, during a sequence that amounts to a walking-simulator simulator, and enraptured by pretentious passages of floating text that Ben dismisses as "disparate chunks of waffle". So yes, there's a dig at how we critics write about these games, too – safe to say, we may need to extend our banned-words list.

All of this could so easily fall into sneering cynicism, but when it's poking fun at "platformers about feelings" you can hardly say it's punching down, when that's what it is in a very literal sense: after the opening, the story takes a turn for the apocalyptic and the two end up as subjects in a series of tests based on human emotions as an AI harvests their data in the hope of saving humanity. And when it isn't engaging in playful (self-) mockery, it finds ways to explore videogames' strange quirks in witty, insightful fashion. An extended riff on the procedure of respawning imagines a layer of bureaucracy between death and rebirth ("No wonder platformers are so emo if they have to go through that every two minutes," Ben grumbles) while finding room for a wonderful Jurassic Park joke.

Only occasionally are we reminded that platformers aren't Marshall's wheelhouse, with one or two annoyingly fussy sections. Then again, checkpoints are generous enough that any frustration is fleeting – well, outside the chapter where exasperation is intentional, which results in a barrage of in-game swearing that hits embarrassingly close to home. This is just one of several ingenious comic set-pieces. An unlikely perspective shift becomes an amusing excuse to gaslight the player. The Disappointment chapter is a brief but wonderful subversion of a videogame cliché. That common developer maxim 'it's not a bug, it's a feature' is referenced in a barnstorming late-game payoff, while a punchline to a seemingly callous running joke left us unsure whether to groan or applaud. And typically, the Grief chapter, certainly for those with a more twisted sense of humour, is probably the funniest of the lot.

The surprises keep coming in a game that occasionally buckles under the weight of its ambitions, built as it is upon slightly unsteady foundations. Yet it's hard to mind. There's a sense that Marshall is taking a bold swing for the fences in the knowledge that this could well be his studio's last game. We can only hope that *Lair Of The Clockwork God* finds the audience it deserves, but if this really is the end, then at least Ben and Dan have gone out on a hilarious high.



ABOVE A charmingly incongruous boss fight has you swapping back and forth between the two leads. Since friendly fire is not only a possibility but a likelihood, it's a good job there's no punishment for death – aside from a withering put-down from Ben.

RIGHT The Feeling Old sequence is a highlight, as the pair are forced to demonstrate that they're down with the kids to get into a club



BELOW A verbosity slider lets you cut Ben and Dan's chatter to get to the critical information quicker – useful if you're time-poor, perhaps, though the waffle is part of the fun



ABOVE In a steadily expanding hub area, you'll gather RAM upgrades to power the various simulations. These convenient portals mean you don't need to repeat some of the trickier platforming sections

Puzzle & Dragons Gold

Boy, does this one sting. At various points over the past seven or so years we've wanted to shout from the rooftops about our love of *Puzzle & Dragons*. Yes, it wants your money. Yes, the waifu-collection aspect is off-putting. But it's one of the all-time great puzzle games, one of unrivalled strategic depth and flexibility. A colossal hit in Japan, it's never quite stuck overseas, and we'd hoped that *PAD Gold*, the series' Switch debut, would remedy that. In the unlikely event it has any effect at all, the opposite seems more likely.

In fairness, this is not quite *Puzzle & Dragons*. The chief sources of inspiration are the moderately successful spin-off anime, and *Puzzle & Dragons Radar*, a Japan-only mobile app that combines geolocation-powered treasure hunting for goodies that can be transferred to the main game, and a reinterpretation of the core *PAD* mechanics in a PvP setting. Each team's health pool is split into four; each player blind-picks which of their team members' skills they want to use, then solve their boards simultaneously, denting each other's health pools with the resulting damage. That continues until one player's health bar is emptied or eight rounds have passed, at which point the combatant with the most HP remaining is declared the winner.

The UI is appalling. Your total damage, often the most satisfying thing in the game, is a tiny number that flashes up for a nanosecond. At least the combo count is nice and big – and yes, we're showing off a bit in this shot

Developer/publisher
Gungho Online Entertainment
Format Switch
Release Out now (JP, US), TBA (EU)



ALL THAT GLITTERS

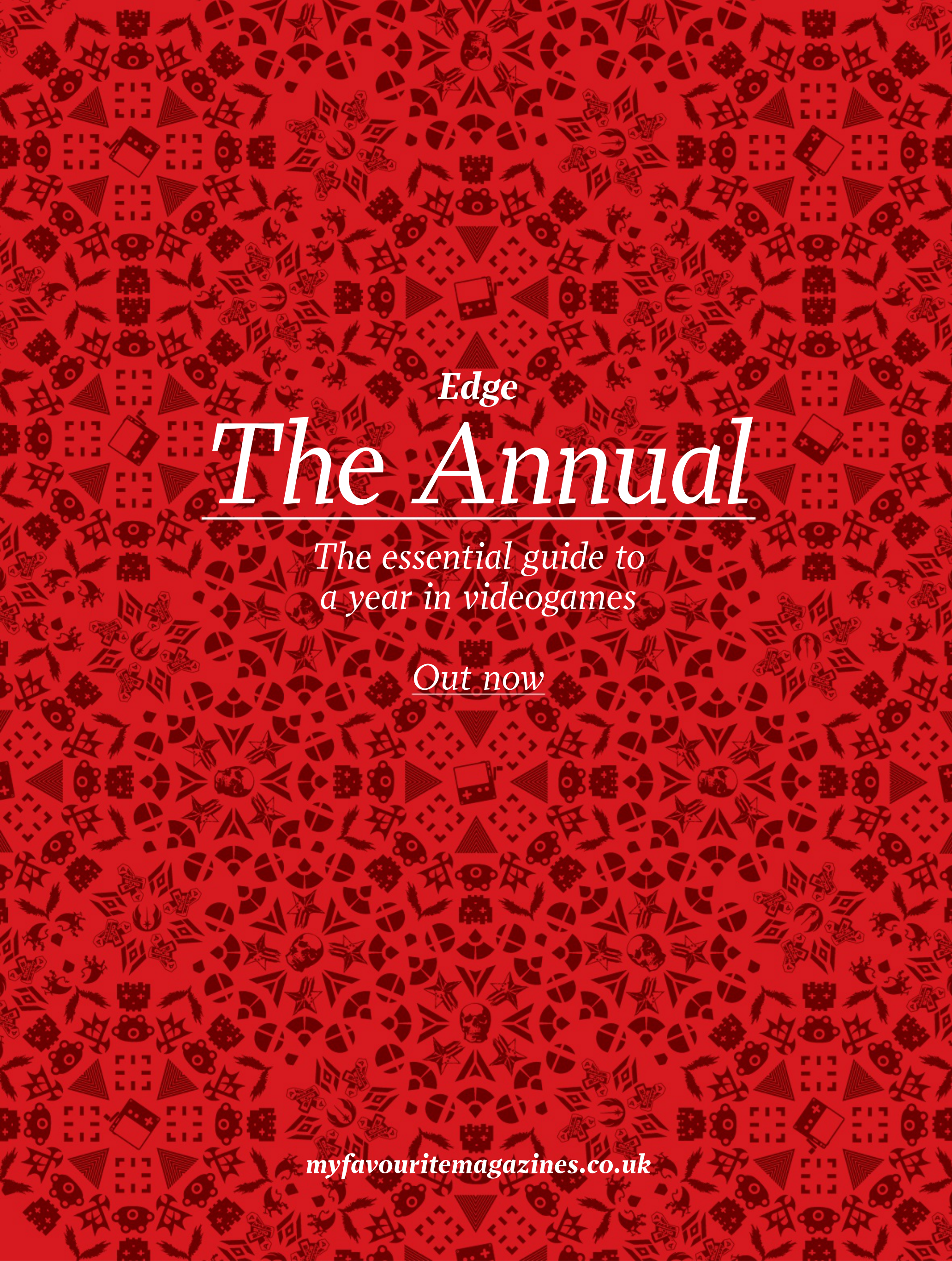
One key to *Puzzle & Dragons*' longevity is its collaborations with other storied Japanese IP: our current favourite team is comprised of characters from *Yu-Gi-Oh*, *Samurai Showdown*, *Shaman King* and *Final Fantasy*. There's none of that here, at least at launch; your selection is limited to characters Gungho has either created itself, or reimagined from mythology. That may change – *PAD Radar* has collab characters – but given the empty servers, we'd advise against holding your breath.

New players – which, for the western release, is just about everyone, given *Radar*'s Japanese exclusivity – are woefully underserved by a whisper of a tutorial and a miserable UI. Online matches are the focus, but we find the servers barren barely a week after launch, and when we do find a match it's not a fair fight, since we already know more than the game is prepared to teach us. The rematch option might as well not be there; we retire undefeated, but unsatisfied. A singleplayer story mode is there to pick up the slack, but it's barely two hours long and seems to exist solely to load you up with currency for the game's monster-collection gacha machine.

This is where *Puzzle & Dragons Gold* truly falls apart. As *Radar* proved, PvP is a poor fit for a game whose success has been in large part defined by its lack of balance; the best way to monetise a PvE game longterm, after all, is with power creep, and *Puzzle & Dragons* has that in spades. Yet here everything must feel fair, and so nothing is exciting, and the sprawling teambuilding options of the main game have been neutered in the name of balance. There are just 20 team leaders in the game; the 500 subs available from the gacha can only bring so much variety, and pale in comparison to the almost 6,000 available in *Puzzle & Dragons* itself. We've been playing that game for seven years, and it still finds new ways to excite us. That this barren, boring work should share its name is an outrage.

3





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Batman: Arkham Asylum

Lauded on release, the passage of time
reveals a curious lack of character

By **SAMUEL HORTI**

Developer Rocksteady Studios **Publisher** Eidos Interactive **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2009

The thing that defines our caped hero, he posits in 2005 film *Batman Begins*, is “not who I am underneath, but what I do”. If you judge 2009’s *Batman: Arkham Asylum* on those skin-deep terms, it was an unequivocal success. Its fluid fistfights kickstarted a new brand of thirdperson action, and you’ll still hear developers talking about “Arkham-style” combat today. It reversed the fortunes of Batman games, which up to that point were mostly forgettable tie-ins. And it transformed Rocksteady, then an unknown team with a single game under its belt – the obscure *Urban Chaos: Riot Response* – into one of the UK’s hottest studios.

Judging *Arkham Asylum* by what’s ‘underneath’, however, is trickier. It pits Batman against a host of his arch-enemies, including the Joker, Harley Quinn and the Scarecrow, but reveals nothing new about these characters. It toys with deeper themes of grief and trauma, but fails to explore them. In other words, Rocksteady doesn’t appear to say much about Batman other than: here’s how you make a good Batman game. That was fine at the time, but three other good Batman games later – *Arkham City*, *Arkham Origins* and *Arkham Knight* – *Asylum* looks less like a revolution. The deeper you dig, the more it looks like a missed opportunity.

Combat remains the highlight, and it’s not hard to see why so many games, from *Shadow Of Mordor* to *Sleeping Dogs*, took cues from it. *Arkham Asylum* wasn’t the first brawler to let you bounce from enemy to enemy (*Spider-Man 2* did it five years earlier), but its system was the best, and remained the best until Rocksteady iterated on it. Upper cuts, knee strikes and flying elbows blend without a hitch, and no matter how late you press the counter button, Batman’s body is always in a natural position to catch an enemy’s fist. It’s wizardry.

Initially, *Arkham Asylum*’s combat was designed as a rhythm action minigame, as senior gameplay programmer Paul Denning described for GamesRadar+ in 2009. “Batman would fight... in time with music,” he said. “As the camera would cut, a new guy

would come in and you’d have to punch him on the beat to connect or you’d end up getting hit. If you had two guys running at you, you’d have to branch off into another piece of music that would seamlessly blend into a combo attack.” Those roots show through: the challenge isn’t in directing Batman to the next enemy, but in timing his attacks to build up a combo meter, pressing the button as the previous attack lands.

It’s not perfect. For example, you can’t cancel finishing moves on downed enemies, and those moves are interrupted if you’re hit, killing your momentum. But if you chain a few punches together, Batman begins to charge and flip between enemies with grace, as well as a certain inevitability. He’s a train, and they’re caught in his lights. The crack, crack, crack of his attacks make you feel like you’re reading a comic panel by panel, just without the whams and kapows.

Batman can strike equally as well from the shadows during stealth sections, dropping down from a gargoyle to string up an unsuspecting enemy, or detonating sticky paste to blow up a weakened wall, crushing goons with the rubble. Using the detective mode overlay, which shows enemy skeletons through walls, you can track movement patterns and plan your approach, prioritising gunmen, who will kill you in seconds if they see you. Once you start picking them off, you can sense the dread in the room. Enemies cast glances over their shoulder and begin to patrol in pairs, inching around corners and covering each others’ backs. “Wake up, do you hear me? Wake up,” they’ll scream at their unconscious squad mates in a panic.

The world itself holds up well, and it’s full of details that create a sense of place. The showers in the penitentiary building are coated with grime. Metal grates cover the windows and cracked, faded tiles line the floor, their pattern broken only by drains. An extractor fan the size of a jet engine hangs from the ceiling. You can imagine the inmates filing in under guards’ suspicious eyes, showering, and filing out again through the white plastic curtains that separate this room from the main facility.

But it’s neither the detailed world nor the combat that provide *Arkham Asylum*’s best moments. Instead, these arrive on ►

the rare occasion Rocksteady delves into Batman's psyche. Two sequences stand out: about halfway through, after leaving the library in Arkham Mansion, Batman walks a seemingly endless corridor and rain falls from the rafters, the voices of his parents echoing off the walls. With every clap of lightning, the rain worsens. We hear a man accosting the couple, his voice demonic, distorted by Batman's memory. An argument. A struggle. Two shots ring out. Batman is no longer in a corridor but an alleyway. When he looks down he sees his parents' bodies, his mother slumped across his father's stomach. His unnaturally stiff posture shatters, and he folds to his knees. Another flash, and we're controlling the newly orphaned young boy, Bruce Wayne.

Later, *Arkham Asylum* fakes a crash. An error message appears, the screen fades to



should, be telling. In the corridor sequence, young Bruce talks to a policeman in the aftermath of the shooting. "Why did he do it, officer?" he asks. "Why?" It, like the other important questions, goes unanswered, and you're left longing for a deeper exploration that never arrives.

That tease is made more frustrating by the fact the comic that most heavily inspired the game, 1989's *Arkham Asylum*:

Ten years on, *Arkham Asylum* remains a looker. While characters lack detail, the wider world looks as good as many modern games

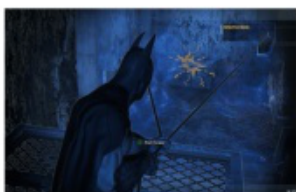
THESE SUBVERSIVE MOMENTS BEGIN TO ASK PROFOUND QUESTIONS ABOUT BATMAN. JUST HOW DAMAGED IS HE?

black, and the game's opening repeats. But this time, the roles of hero and villain are reversed: it's the Joker bringing Batman to the asylum, strapping him to a restraining board and wheeling him through the lobby. "We really should feel sorry for him," says the Scarecrow, examining Batman. "He never fully got over his parents' death. It left him quite insane." Later in the sequence, when Batman fights a giant Scarecrow, the stand-in warden claims Batman is "a classic case of split personality".

These subversive moments begin to ask profound questions about Batman. Just how damaged is he? What, if anything, will bring him peace? Is he that different to the supervillains he spends his life chasing? But they're just teases: a taste of the kind of story *Arkham Asylum* could, and arguably

A Serious House On Serious Earth, remains one of the most thorough examinations of Batman's character you can read. Long-time nemesis the Mad Hatter even suggests the entire story is taking place in the caped crusader's head. "Arkham is a looking glass," he says, "and we are you." It's a dream of Batman's creation, his enemies an exploration of his own trauma. Batman's epilogue in the comic reads: "Mommy's dead. Daddy's dead. Brucie's dead. I shall become a bat."

Rocksteady clearly picked up on those themes, but was happy to cast them aside after a glance. From the game crash onwards, *Arkham Asylum* is a series of unimaginative boss battles. Sneaking over wooden boards in Killer Croc's underground lair and spamming batarangs whenever he appears feels repetitive. So does the fight with



Detective mode lets you spot breakable walls and trace power lines from locked doors. Hack the circuit box and you're in



ARKHAM ANATOMY

Arkham Asylum's commercial success convinced Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment to buy a majority stake in Rocksteady, and the studio has made Batman games ever since. *Arkham City* was set across an open world five times the size of *Asylum*, and introduced Catwoman as a playable character. *Arkham Origins* was a prequel that added multiplayer, while 2015's *Arkham Knight* brought in the Batmobile, and put an emphasis on story. It was billed as the series' finale, but Warner Bros teased a new Batman game last year, and rumours arose that it would be called *Batman: Arkham Legacy*. Rocksteady has remained silent on its next game since the release of *Arkham Knight*.

When you face the Scarecrow, *Arkham Asylum* turns into a stealthy sidescroller in a dreamlike world. If the Scarecrow sees you, you're instantly dead



Batman's miniboss fights all roughly follow the same formula: get the big boss to charge you, dodge out the way, and watch them crash into the wall

Poison Ivy. The Joker's decision to inject her with Titan, a chemical that turns people into monsters, has transformed Arkham Asylum, filling previously explored corridors with snaking plants and pink buds that fire glowing orbs. But when you face her, it's an anticlimax: you simply win by dodge rolling and – once again – spamming batarangs.

The Joker, the big climax, is the most disappointing of all. When Batman confronts him, the Joker aims a dart of Titan at Commissioner Gordon, who's suspended from the ceiling by ropes. The Joker's plan is to make Batman battle a monster version of his own friend. It's a tantalising prospect not just for the villain, but for the audience, too. Such a fight would place emotional strain on Batman, and perhaps let us examine those wounds we merely glimpsed earlier. Instead, Batman jumps in front of the dart, the Joker

shoots another at himself, and the finale is condemned to be a formulaic fight against a muscular brute, who could be anyone save for his wide smile and green mohawk.

At the time, critics and fans were generous in forgiving these late-game sins. They were blips in an otherwise transformative game. But that analysis only holds up if you take each element of *Arkham Asylum* – combat, stealth, setting – on its own merits, and ignore the lack of themes tying them together. You could argue the same for the sequel, *Arkham City*. It was better than *Asylum* in almost every way, but it too failed to advance our understanding of Batman, the mask, or of Bruce Wayne, the man. It wasn't until 2015's *Arkham Knight* that Rocksteady began to say anything new about our gruff hero. If the series had started on a different, character-first note, we can only imagine the heights it would've reached.

If this criticism feels harsh, that's only because of the lavish praise heaped on *Arkham Asylum* at the time. It won numerous game of the year awards, including Best Game at the 2010 BAFTAs. Nobody would argue it didn't deserve it – just that its failings, as seen ten years later, highlight how far our expectations for story have come. In 2008's *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent, aka Two-Face, tells Batman that “you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain”. *Arkham Asylum* is certainly no villain, but history has shown that it's perhaps not the hero we thought. ■



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T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



The Sims 4

Developer Maxis Publisher EA Format PC, PS4, Xbox One Release 2014

Maxis' life simulator has always been a reflection of the times. When the first game released in 2000, it gave us control over a pint-size suburban America in which kids on bikes delivered the newspaper every day, and a cordless wall phone was the height of modern sensibility. These two items were how your sims would find employment. Boot up *The Sims 4*, however, and there's nary a landline to be seen: each of your sims has a smartphone with which they can look for jobs, take selfies, post to their Simstagram story, and browse social media while on the toilet. And the daily paper? A print publication, in 2020? Don't be absurd.

While the series has revelled in the bizarre and unlikely – being able to date the Grim Reaper springs to mind – the real joy of *The Sims* is in creating, observing and messing with recognisable facsimiles of ourselves. And so, over the past 20 years, the series has had to evolve in tandem. The current state of *The Sims 4* gives us a glimpse of how much our world has changed through the lens of Maxis' simulated one. Frequent base-game updates and a traditionally aggressive release schedule of paid DLC mean where once our sims pursued careers in medicine and law enforcement, now they're using sketchbook tablets to eke out a living as freelance logo designers. They don't need a wicked set of pipes to become a superstar – just a computer, as

they broadcast their gaming sessions to thousands of followers for thousands of Simoleons. (There's no option to be bought out by Mixer yet, but our virtual streaming pro Blinja lives in hope.)

The latest 'stuff pack', Tiny Living, is emblematic of this new era of *The Sims*. It introduces a new 'tiny home' lot type that grants sims living on it a bill reduction, alongside all manner of wildly optimistic buffs. (These include boosts to mood, relationships and skill-learning, which any flat-dwelling millennial will tell you is drivell.) The latest pack is a long-overdue acknowledgment of the game's active community, members of whom have been setting themselves challenges to build the smallest, cheapest homes possible for years now. But this trend appeared because of the proliferation of *real* tiny homes appearing in the media, as young people increasingly construct their own affordable and stylish tiny homes to both escape the exploitative renting market and reduce their impact on our struggling climate.

It's a fascinating causal chain, developing the series' previous subtle criticism of consumer society into something actively encouraging. With *The Sims*' appeal so tethered to representing humanity in microcosm, we can't help but wonder what else we might see reflected back at us via our videogames in future – and whether it might possibly have an effect on its players. ■

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