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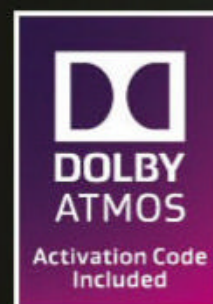
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APRIL 2020

MAGAZINE FOR ALL THINGS XBOX



XBOX

THE MAGAZINE

OXM INTERVIEW **DARKSIDERS**

Comics legend and Darksiders
Genesis creator Joe Madureira

FIRST HANDS-ON!

RESIDENT EVIL 3

Why this is the best game
yet in the **unstoppable**
survival horror series

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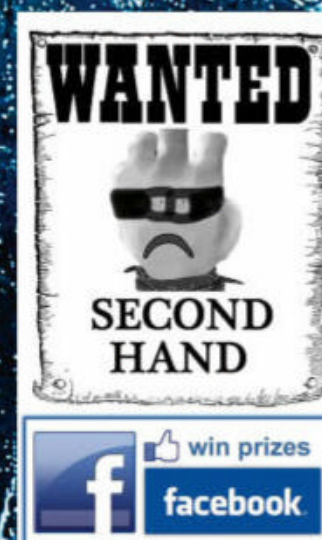
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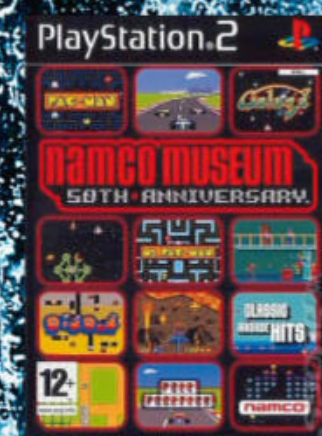
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Valentine's month...



Chris Burke
Editor

We had to sneak into Umbrella HQ to get our hands-on with *Resi 3* this month... but now we know too much, and the evil corporation has sent the Nemesis after us! Chris was the first to go, he tried to fight the creature off by chucking an OG Xbox at it, thinking the weight would squash its head... but that just made our pursuer mad.

Full disclosure, we're more than a little obsessed with *Resident Evil* here at **OXM**. We've played and loved every Xbox entry in Capcom's survival horror series, and we're such devoted fanboys and girls that we're dedicating an entire bonus mag to *Resident Evil* next month. Look out for that! But back to this issue, imagine how completely overjoyed we were to hear that *Resident Evil 3* was being remade, and so was coming to Xbox for the first time. We were so awestruck, you could have turned us into an **OXM** sandwich! We were lucky enough to get hands-on with the reboot of that 1999 classic this month, and it's never felt so good to go back to the '90s, even if the Nemesis is even scarier this time round. Read our exclusive hands-on impressions of *RE3* and the asymmetrical online multiplayer *Resident Evil Resistance* on page 46! Enjoy!

THE OXM TEAM



Adam Bryant
Staff writer

Adam thought the office lavatory was a safe room, but that didn't stop Nemmy. Our writer went out like that guy on the toilet in the first *Jurassic Park*.



Warren Brown
Group art director

Ingeniously, Woz hid on a train to Cardiff, assuming that the monster wasn't fast enough to catch him. He forgot Nemesis had a rocket launcher, though.



Drew Sleep
Production editor

Drew often complains that the office air conditioning is too cold, so Nemesis lent him a helping hand by introducing him to a flamethrower.



Dave Meikleham
Games editor

Lucky Mr Meiks managed to snatch the office magnum – which we keep for exactly this type of situation – and brought the creature to its knees... for now.

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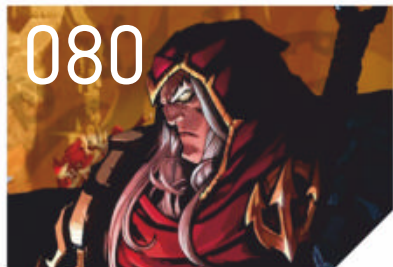
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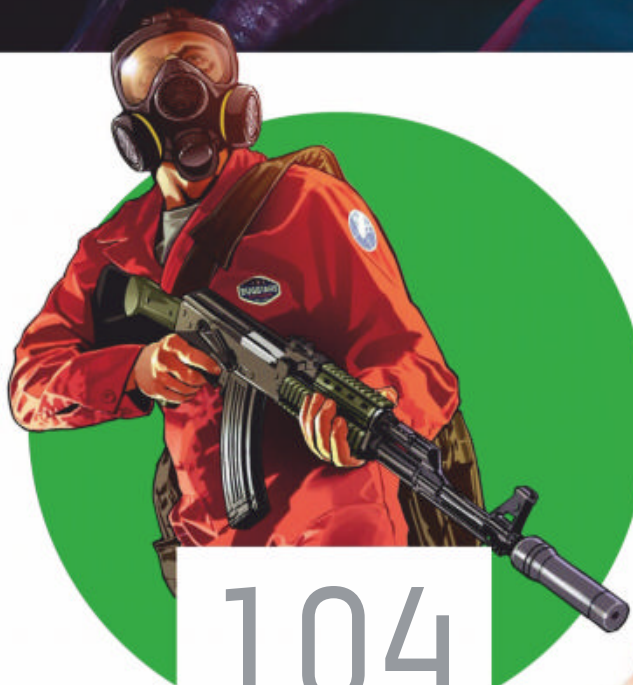
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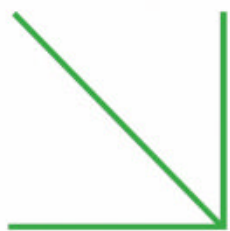


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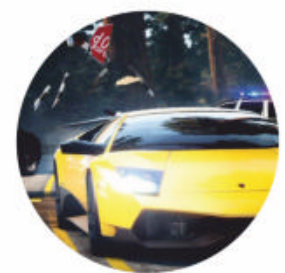
insider



Microsoft's next-gen console, the Xbox Series X, is still as futuristic and enigmatic as the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. At least until we actually get hold of one, and when we do you'll be the first to know all about it. Meanwhile, we're left pondering its blackness, and size, and all the incredible tech stats we know about. One new thing we found out this month has sent a few shockwaves through **OXM Towers**: there will be no Series X exclusives for the first couple of years. Find out more about this and other new info we've gleaned as we lift the lid on **Xbox Series X's Launch** on page 8 this month. One of gaming's great racing franchises, EA's **Need For Speed** (p12), is returning to the capable hands of British developer Criterion, of *Burnout* fame, for its next-gen iteration. As that studio previously did fan favourites *Hot Pursuit* and *Most Wanted*, we're excited about what it'll bring to the series. **Team OXM** discusses just what that lack of **Series X Exclusives** might mean for the future of the console in Hot Topic on page 18. Finally, we have opinions from **The Fixer** (p20) and **The Editor** (p22). Enjoy!



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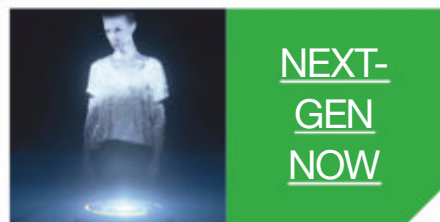
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Lifting the lid on Series X's launch

With the **next Xbox** set to hit shelves before the end of the year, **OXM** examines the next-gen console's launch and what it means for Xbox One

Before the clock ticks down on 2020, the most hardcore of Team Green gamers will be playing *Halo Infinite* on Xbox Series X. Wrap your head around that. It's a thought that somehow feels almost far-fetched, considering precise details about the next Xbox's release date, price and launch games haven't been finalised yet. As we wait for the new console's launch lineup to take shape, we've been pondering the big next-gen questions.

Just how good will Master Chief's new shooter look on the Series X? How will it differ from the Xbox One X version? Just how big a graphical upgrade should we expect Series X games to serve up? And how will your existing library of current-gen titles work on the incredible beefy new box?

We already know Microsoft is changing the game when it comes to hardware generations. The established model of buying a new console every five years is going the way of the dodo. In the past, you'd pick up an Xbox 360 at launch, and barring any Red Ring Of Death disasters, that machine lasted you until you were ready to buy an Xbox One. Yet the Redmond giant has shown it wants to pursue a different model; one that has more in common with how the mobile phone market operates. Where huge once-in-a-generation tech leaps were the norm, now it's clear Microsoft favours releasing iterative upgrades of the Xbox you already own.

The Xbox One X set the precedent. While the supercharged console is four times more powerful than the Xbox One S, every game you can play on the 4K machine can be enjoyed on its little brother. The Series X is following suit, with Microsoft confirming all of its first-party titles will play on both the next-gen system and existing Xbox One consoles for the first two years the Series X is on sale. This is a model that locks you into an existing infrastructure, where games you've bought for older consoles still work on bleeding-edge new machines, and vice versa. It's Microsoft saying "everyone is welcome", that no player is getting left behind, and that games are truly king, regardless of what device you play them on.

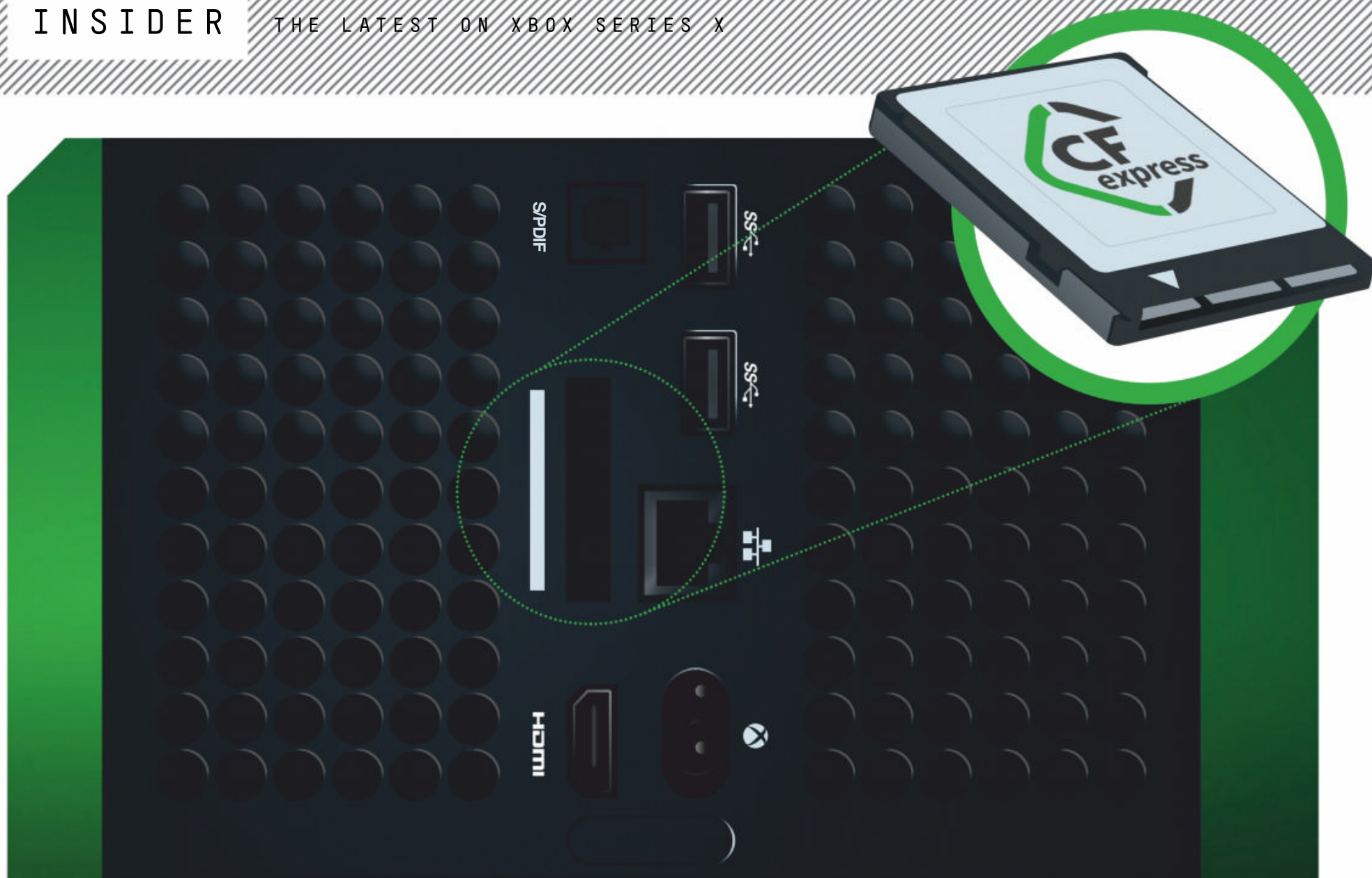
Xbox anywhere

Speaking to Gamertag Radio, head of Xbox Phil Spencer briefly outlined the philosophy behind the creation of the Series X, and how that vision ties into the existing Xbox One family. "We wanted to go build a gaming console that was going to be the absolute best that we could deliver on a television, and deliver unique capability to creators that they could use to go create the best games."

While the prospect of a console that can potentially play games at 120fps or even 8K is tantalising, Spencer is keenly aware there's a massive install base of existing players that still have

Get party

With game installation sizes ballooning all the time – we're looking at you, *Red Dead Redemption II* – the Xbox Series X is going to need some serious storage options. We already know it has an SSD, but a leaked image of the console suggests it also has a rear port that's compatible with speedy CompactFlash Express cards.



ABOVE Here's that mystery port again. Could it offer faster storage solutions?

to be catered for. Whether those users are quite ready to make the jump to the Series X or not, Microsoft isn't going to leave them behind. "You don't want to do that [introduce next-gen exclusives] to the exclusion of everybody else, and you also want to do that hand-in-hand with developers, because developers want to find the widest audience possible."

X appeal

Though the Series X won't have any exclusive first-party titles for the foreseeable future, that doesn't mean third-party games are going to follow suit. "I'm not gonna dictate to every third-party studio what they have to support," said Spencer in the same

"Don't be surprised if *Cyberpunk 2077* is on the Series X from day one"

interview. If Microsoft is open to letting publishers take their own approach to Series X exclusivity, it means we could well see next-gen exclusives in 2021, if not earlier. While it's unlikely a publisher like EA or Activision is going to announce a launch-day exclusive for the Series X, it's entirely possible upcoming third-party IPs will phase out Xbox One compatibility over the next couple of years.

Keeping with EA and Activision, it seems reasonable to assume each publisher's biggest property will grace the Series X's launch lineup. If there aren't next-gen versions of *FIFA 21* and the next *Call Of Duty* ready for day one, we'd be astonished. The Xbox One was released on 22 November 2013 with both *FIFA 14* and *COD: Ghosts* nestled into its range of launch titles. If the Series X's vague 'Holiday 2020' debut once again means a late November release date, *FIFA* and *Call Of Duty*'s newest entries should both

be playable on the next Xbox the day it hits stores. Historically, both series are always released between late September and early November.

As for other potential launch titles? Don't be too surprised if the likes of *Marvel's Avengers* and *Cyberpunk 2077* are available from day one. Both titles have been delayed until September, and while the official line from Crystal Dynamics and CD Projekt is that their games need a little more work to add polish, we wouldn't be shocked if that extra time was being used to get both titles 'Series X-ready'.

But just how much better will Series X versions of both first and third-party games look? After all, many triple-A titles already look incredible on Xbox One X. The only game we know definitively is going to be a Series X launch game is *Halo Infinite*, so how is the next-gen edition going to compare to the Xbox One versions? Considering the Xbox One X version will most likely output at 4K, don't expect *Infinite* to necessarily run at a higher resolution on Series X. 8K TVs may technically exist, but even with the next Xbox's custom AMD 'Navi' graphics tech it's unlikely Series X will have the graphical grunt to run games at that insane res anytime soon. Instead, the key tech difference between Series X games and their last-gen counterparts will probably revolve around framerate.



BACK IN THE 4K

Could older games get a new lease of Ultra HD life on Xbox Series X?

Stuffed full of amazing AMD tech, Series X is going to be a 4K monster. With such ferocious power on tap, the next Xbox could breathe new life into your old games. Just look at the Xbox One X. Microsoft's supercharged console has revitalised original Xbox and Xbox 360 titles thanks to 4K 'X-Enhanced' patches. Could the company replicate this strategy with the Series X and provide free Ultra HD updates to older Xbox One games? Given Microsoft's commitment to remastering its back catalogue, we wouldn't be surprised.

If Microsoft releases Series X 4K patches for the likes of *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Sunset Overdrive* and *Dark Souls III*, we'll officially lose our collective shizzle. If the rumours prove true and PS5 can actually run games from every generation of PlayStation, Microsoft would be wise to churn out Series X 4K updates for as many older games as possible.



Looking back, *Halo 5* hit 60fps but only because it often ran below 900p on Xbox One S – it took an X-Enhanced patch to get Chief's shoot-outs up to 4K. With that in mind, we could be looking at an Xbox One X version of *Infinite* that either runs at full-fat 4K at 30fps, or 60fps but with some form of dynamic resolution in play to make the shooter look like it's outputting at Ultra HD. Head-spinning tech nonsense aside, the bottom line is compromises will likely be needed to get *Halo Infinite* looking and playing its best on the Xbox One. Yet with eight times the power of the Xbox One S, the Series X version should be able to offer a compromise-free experience.

ABOVE *Sunset Overdrive* has never been treated to an X-Enhanced patch. We'd love to play it in 4K.

RIGHT Ubisoft has confirmed it's aiming to bring *Rainbow Six Siege* to Xbox Series X for launch day.



Infinite possibilities

Microsoft has said the Series X will support 120Hz, so could the next *Halo* potentially run at double the refresh rate of 60fps? If 343 Industries could produce such tech magic it would be hugely impressive, but seeing as so few televisions actually support signals above 60Hz, it seems unlikely.

What *is* more realistic is *Infinite* and most Series X games going forward will hit 4K/60fps. Even for the most powerful PC graphics card in the world, that's the gold standard. Aside from

FIFA, most 4K Xbox One X games run at 30fps. By contrast the Series X, which is said to be four times more powerful than the Xbox One X, should have the power to output games at 4K at framerates of upwards of 60. If next-gen games hit this magic combo, they'll feel a lot smoother to play than the majority of Xbox One titles.

There's also the question of how your current games will run on the Series X. If the example the Xbox One X has set is followed, older games could look sharper on the new console. Many

1080p titles look better on Microsoft's current 4K machine thanks to a process called supersampling, so it's hardly outrageous to suggest Series X may give your Xbox One games a further bit of spit and polish.

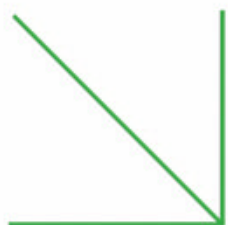
Whatever titles launch with the Xbox Series X, and however good they look, Microsoft has redefined the concept of distinct console generations. Whether you're buying the next Xbox on day one or sticking with your S, there's never been a more exciting time to be an Xbox player. ■

→ ARE YOU PLANNING TO BUY XBOX SERIES X? TELL US AT [WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/OXMUK](https://www.facebook.com/oxmuk)



Revved up and ready to go

EA hands the wheel of **Need For Speed** back over to Criterion Games



Do you hear that loud screeching sound coming from around the corner? That's the sound of the **Need For Speed** franchise

returning for another lap, with none other than Criterion Games back in the driver's seat.

Speaking with *GamesIndustry.biz*, EA confirmed *Need For Speed* will return to the famed UK studio. This comes after the publisher handed the series over from Criterion to Swedish developer Ghost Games in 2013.

It's about time, too. Criterion is known the world over for being the cream of the crop when it comes to racers. Its beloved *Burnout* series has become a household name, and the two *NFS* games it put out – *Need For Speed Hot Pursuit* and *Need For Speed Most Wanted* – are the best the franchise has seen in the past ten years. Hell, *Hot Pursuit* even ended up winning a BAFTA. Ghost Games' reign over the franchise, however, has been an underwhelming affair. While *Need For Speed Heat* was somewhat a return to form, the studio's other titles have failed to live up to the high expectations of fans.

Changing lanes

Interestingly, this doesn't seem to be the reason behind EA's decision. The publisher claims the switch is due to a shallow talent pool in Ghost

Games' home city of Gothenburg. For several years the studio had a hard time bringing in new team members with the right skills. Criterion's hometown of Guildford, on the other hand, is considered one of the UK's biggest gaming hubs, with talented developers pouring in from all over the country. Now with Criterion in the hot seat, Ghost Games will revert back to its previous studio name of EA Gothenburg and continue as

"It's the first time in seven years that Criterion has developed its own game"

an engineering hub, supporting the development of various titles across EA's portfolio.

Not only is this great news for *NFS* fans, it's a huge deal for Criterion. When Ghost Games was given the lead on the franchise, it ended up nabbing 80 per cent of the UK team. Criterion then began work on a new extreme sports title, only for it to be swiftly canned. EA chose to shift the studio's focus to assisting EA DICE in the development of games like *Star Wars Battlefront II* and *Battlefield V*.

The bad news...

Sadly, positions at Ghost Games may be at risk. While EA is looking to shift as many staff members as possible over to Criterion, not all will be able to make the move. "Outside of the engineers and those that we plan to transfer to other positions, there would be 30 additional staff in Gothenburg, and we would hope to place as many of them as possible into other roles in the company," says EA.

ABOVE A lot of *Burnout*'s DNA can be found in Criterion's *Need For Speed* games.

RIGHT For the last seven years, Criterion has been acting as a support studio, but now it's back behind the wheel.



Add in the departure of the Criterion's co-founders Alex Ward and Fiona Sperry the following year, and you've got a pretty sad story. This move marks the first time in seven years that Criterion has had the chance to develop its own game, and you can bet that the team is going to pull out all the stops.

"With a strong history and passion for racing games, and vision for what we can create, the Criterion team is going to take *Need For Speed* into the next generation," EA says in its statement. Given Criterion's expertise and the phenomenal power of the Xbox Series X, there's nothing stopping the studio from cooking up something extra special. The future of *Need For Speed* is looking pretty exciting indeed. Now while you're at it, Criterion, bring us a shiny new *Burnout* game too, dammit! ■



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PLAY/EJECT

THE THINGS PUSHING
OUR BUTTON (OR NOT)



A good feeling

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order has greatly exceeded sales expectations, according to EA. The game is reported to have sold more than 8 million copies.



Thriving wasteland

Fallout 76's delayed Wastelanders update is arriving 7 April. With it comes new NPCs, a questline, additional weapons, a new reputation system and more.



Play anywhere

Microsoft has expanded its Project xCloud service to iOS. For now, only *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* is available.



Sudden outbreak

Netflix accidentally published the plot details of its upcoming *Resident Evil* TV series. It's reportedly set 27 years after the T-Virus outbreak.



Shock to the system

Development for *System Shock 3* may be in crisis. A report via website VGC claims that staff are no longer employed by developer OtherSide Entertainment.



DAN
LEFT
AUTO



Red Dead Resignation

Dan Houser is leaving [Rockstar Games](#), so how will this affect *GTA VI*?

For the past 22 years Dan Houser has written some of the sharpest scripts in the biz. From *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* all the way to *Red Dead Redemption II*, Houser's writing has captured a sense of time and place that few films manage, let alone games. With the news that he's set to leave the studio he helped build from the ground up, could this put a criminal spanner in the works for *GTA VI*'s development?

Before we speculate on how Houser's impending departure may impact the open-world crime epic that's no doubt already deep into development, it's worth reflecting on the legacy he leaves behind.

A star is born

Founding Rockstar Games with his brother Sam way back in 1998, the film-obsessed writer and producer has helped transform the studio into a billion-dollar entity that consistently churns out critically cherished games. Alright, 'cherished' might be a stretch when it comes to *State Of Emergency*. Nevertheless, his sarcastic scripts

have helped *GTA* transform into one of the most successful entertainment brands on the planet. Not bad for a series that started off as a somewhat crude top-down caper, eh?

Though we don't know how long the next *Grand Theft Auto* has been in development for, the loss of Houser is significant. Whatever form the next *GTA* takes, and whichever criminal city it calls home, Dan Houser shaped the series' sardonic spirit more than any other individual. It's hard to believe his absence won't be felt. Let's hope *GTA VI*'s story can fire all on cylinders without Houser at the helm. ■



BARREL

WATCH

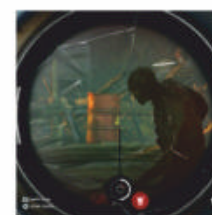
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Outriders

The shanty towns on Enoch are glorified slums, which make them the

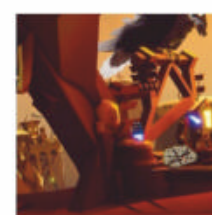
perfect place for some hot-and-heavy barrel-spotting. Someone get a bucket of cold H2O for the cooper.



Zombie Army 4

In the endless zombie war, nothing has acquitted itself with more

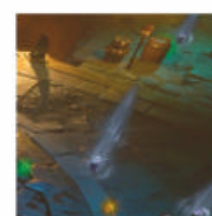
honour or killed as many undead as the Royal Container Commandos, also known as The Red Barrels.



The Falconeer

Who needs bird-watching when you can spend hours on end admiring

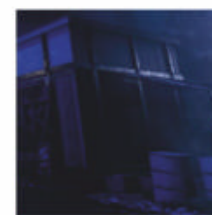
the fine cooper craftsmanship that goes into carving out a pristine videogame barrel. Do one, Big Bird.



Darksiders Genesis

Alright, so you may need the eyes of a peregrine

falcon to spot these two rotund customers, but our cooper is smitten with them all the same.



Those Who Remain

The scares in this indie horror aren't nearly as terrifying as the

prospect of a world without barrels. The cooper needs a stiff drink just contemplating such a dark thought.

RIGHT Houser has essentially written every single 3D *Grand Theft Auto* game. Will *GTA VI*'s script suffer without him?



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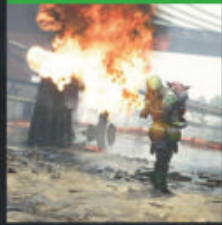


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Microsoft



FOR
LIBERTY

Going rogue

Ubisoft makes big changes to *The Division 2* with [Warlords Of New York](#)

If you've been sleeping on *The Division 2*, now's the time to jump in as the shooter has just received its biggest update yet. As the name suggests, *Warlords Of New York* will take you back to the Big Apple – the setting from the first game – and as Ubisoft loves itself a rogue agent, you're tasked with hunting down Aaron Keener, an ex-Division operative who's become a major threat to the rebirth of civilisation. He's not alone, however. As you explore the former Dark Zones of New York you'll be eliminating all the other turncoat agents who've joined him.

But it's not just about the story. Big changes have been made to the game based on community feedback, such as inventory management. Not only are stat roll ranges to your gear always visible, 'god rolls' make a return, allowing you to make better

decisions on which equipment is best suited to the build you're chasing.

Then there are Seasons. These three-month-long endgame events send you on manhunts, with new targets and a network of enemies to take out. Alongside these are Leagues, in-game activities that challenge players and reward those who complete them with new weapons and equipment. Taking part in all these events increases your Season level, which will unlock further rewards for your character.

Combine all this with the newly introduced infinite progression system (based around your SHD level), and this update is bursting with exciting new content. So what are you waiting for? Suit up, agents. ■

[Warlords Of New York](#) is available on Xbox One right now.



OXM
DISCUSS

Does the Series X need exclusives to win the console war?

Microsoft has confirmed all first-party games will work on Xbox One and **Series X** until 2022, but is this a mistake?



LEFT *Hellblade II* looks amazing on Series X, but it's also coming to Xbox One. Are sharper visuals worth a console upgrade?

In years gone by exclusives shaped (and helped win) console wars. *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Gears Of War*, *Crackdown*, *Blinx*

The Time Sweeper (alright, scratch that one); *these* are games that made the Xbox brand essential. Yet attitudes towards exclusive games are changing. Head of Microsoft Studios Matt Booty recently confirmed all first-party titles will run on both Xbox Series X and Xbox One until 2022, meaning the new console will have no real exclusives for its first year or so on sale. Does Team OXM agree with this bold strategy? Let's find out...

Dave: I can't lie, I'm a tad worried it's going to hurt early hardware sales.

Adam: At first it sounds like a recipe for disaster, but when you think about it, it's actually quite forward-thinking. Microsoft has made it clear the company is all about the games.

Dave: Yeah, it's definitely commendable no Xbox fan is going to be left out in the cold. I just worry a lack of next-gen exclusives makes pitching Series X as *the* must-have machine a harder sell.

Adam: I'm not sure that's going to be a problem. Everyone knows Series X will be more powerful, and if they want that little extra, they know where to get it.

Chris: No Series X exclusives is a bold and baffling move. Phil Spencer says he wants gamers, which is great, but surely as a business he needs gamers' cash? As a commercial model, I'm

struggling to understand Microsoft's long game.

Dave: It's hard to disagree with that. Looking back, what made previous Xbox consoles essential? I'd argue it was seismic graphical/tech leaps. Just look at the Xbox 360 and *Dead Rising's* huge crowds of brain-biters. There's no way the original Xbox could have coped with that game's shuffling spectacle.

Chris: I've bought so many consoles over the years because of their exclusives, but without Series X-only titles there's no unique reason to own the next Xbox... unless you're the kind of person who needs to own every new bit of tech. I'm looking at you, Meiks.

Dave: Yup, I can't deny I'm going to buy Series X on day one. Meiksy needs his shiny new gear. I'm a 4K-obsessed madman, so if the next Xbox can give

"Phil Spencer says he wants gamers, but surely he needs their cash too"

me games at 4K/60fps, Phil and co can have all my pennies.

Adam: There are many more people just like you, too.

Dave: I'm a niche market, though. The reality is, games already look amazing in 4K on Xbox One X. Sure, playing titles at 30fps isn't ideal, but I'm not sure the draw of playing games at 60fps is a sexy enough elevator pitch to get



OXM PANEL



Chris Burke
Editor

Chris is excited for Xbox Series X, he's just a little concerned Microsoft needs to do a better job trying to sell it.



Dave Meikleham
Games editor

Meiks needs all the tech, so buying Series X on day one is a no-brainer for him. Still, he would like next-gen exclusives.



Adam Bryant
Staff writer

Adam's glass isn't half full for Series X, it's overflowing. Our staff writer just can't wait for the next generation of Xbox.



Warren Brown
Group art director

Even though he didn't take part in this chat, Warren tells us he wants Series X-only titles. We hear you, Woz.

people dropping potentially upwards of 400 notes on a new console.

Adam: *Halo* and *Gears* will still feel like exclusives though, even if they're straddling generations. People are already used to that idea with the base Xbox One and Xbox One X.

Dave: True. We also have to consider this temporary lack of next-gen exclusives only applies to first-party titles. I'm sure there will be big-hitters from the likes of Ubisoft and BioWare you'll only be able to play on Series X.

Chris: That's a good point. But we won't know just how good Series X is, or what kind of difference playing *Cyberpunk 2077* on that versus the Xbox One X will be until we have one in our living rooms. It feels like that *whisper it* rival console will have the jump in terms of people buying it on day one. Eventually, Series X might align the planets with its power... but where's the hard sell this year?

Dave: We have to go back to Phil Spencer's recent comments about not viewing Sony as a direct rival anymore. Microsoft is more concerned about streaming competitors like Google and Amazon. Microsoft Azure is a huge deal for the future of the firm – just look at what it's doing for *Flight Simulator*. I think the harsh reality is, selling specific pieces of hardware is less of a priority for Microsoft than it used to be.

Adam: We're going to have to get used to the idea that perhaps consoles aren't king anymore. With the Azure network's cloud tech, games machines might be irrelevant in the future.

Dave: Microsoft's message seems clear: "We want you to enjoy our first-party games, and we're not overly fussed about what hardware you play it on, as long as you're *playing*." It's bold.

Chris: It comes down to the games. Xbox needs exclusive first-party titles, and that's more important than Series X exclusivity. Plus, I have little doubt that just as games play better on the Xbox One X, Series X will be unbeatable performance-wise. ■

Xbox Series X launches late 2020.



HOT TOPIC

WOULD A LACK OF NEXT-GEN EXCLUSIVES STOP YOU BUYING SERIES X?



"No, I plan to be an early adopter. Series X games should provide superior experiences to older-gen versions."

Phantaxus



"I can't wait for *Senua's Saga*. I don't mind that it will be on Xbox One. I want to play my games at their best."

Andrew Clark



"No, it wouldn't put me off buying one. I plan to play *Cyberpunk 2077* the absolute best way possible."

Colin O Leary



"I will probably hold off on getting one until there is something I want on it that I can't play on anything else."

Jim Reynolds



"Will I pass on driving a Ferrari because other drivers get to drive the same roads in their old Datsun? Probably not."

James0077



"Possibly. It might lead to people waiting until it gets cheaper – that's assuming the launch price is above £400."

Shifty Mongoose

Agree with the above? Have your own ideas? Tell us at facebook.com/oxmuk

Steve Hogarty is...

The Fixer

Steve tackles the **unpredictable nature of combat** in old RPGs



Hello again reader, and welcome to The Fixer, the monthly column in which I – the sentient ball of shimmering ectoplasm who lives inside the wall cavities

of the Future Publishing building, feeding off electrical signals and those little blue chips they put down to poison mice – set out to fix gaming's most stubborn clichés and tiresome tropes. In my storied career as the videogame industry's chief remedial officer, I've crafted ingenious solutions to problems as old as the medium itself. I'm talking about stealth missions in light bulb testing facilities, save points that constantly run away and hide under tables, and quests in which you have to escort somebody who walks at a pace that's slightly faster than your walking speed, but slightly slower than your running speed.

Did you know it was once standard practice in first-person shooters to have the camera pointing directly at the protagonist's face, rather than away from it, so that you had to guess what was happening based on the various sounds you could hear and the expressions the character was making? When *Doom* was in development, it was my idea to relegate this unhelpful camera angle to a small thumbnail at the bottom of the screen, before eventually getting rid of it altogether. The industry was so grateful for my sage input, that everybody chipped in to get me a £50 Schuh voucher, which I spen-

WHOA WATCH OUT!

Stop! Stop what you're doing, because we've been unexpectedly attacked by this month's problem, right here in the middle of a paragraph. Just when we least expected it, some intense techno music began playing and we were all yanked unceremoniously into some kind of cursed battle dimension. On one side of the screen is us – me and



“Random encounters have been used in all kinds of RPGs”

you, the best of friends – shifting our weight from foot to foot like we're on the night bus and our bladders are about to rupture. And on the other is the *problem*, which for the purposes of demonstration is, let's say, a kind of a crab-monster-looking thing. Reader,



we've been accosted by the very concept of *random encounters*.

The Problem

Infamously relied upon by the *Pokémon* series, random encounters can actually trace their origins all the way back to the *D&D* rulebook, that crooked tome of bad ideas that infects almost everything in games to this day. Random encounters have been used in all kinds of RPGs for decades, and while they've largely fallen out of favour in modern titles, there's every chance that – since almost every game in the *Final Fantasy* series recently came to Xbox Game Pass – you're actually seeing more of them today than you were a few years ago.

So perhaps, for the first time, you're discovering why they're so maligned. Random battles pull you out of the environment to force you to have a scrap with some wildlife, they discourage exploration as the more you run around the more likely you are to get into trouble, and their unpredictable timing creates an almost imperceptible degree of constant, low-level tension that I'm certain has taken a few years off my life.

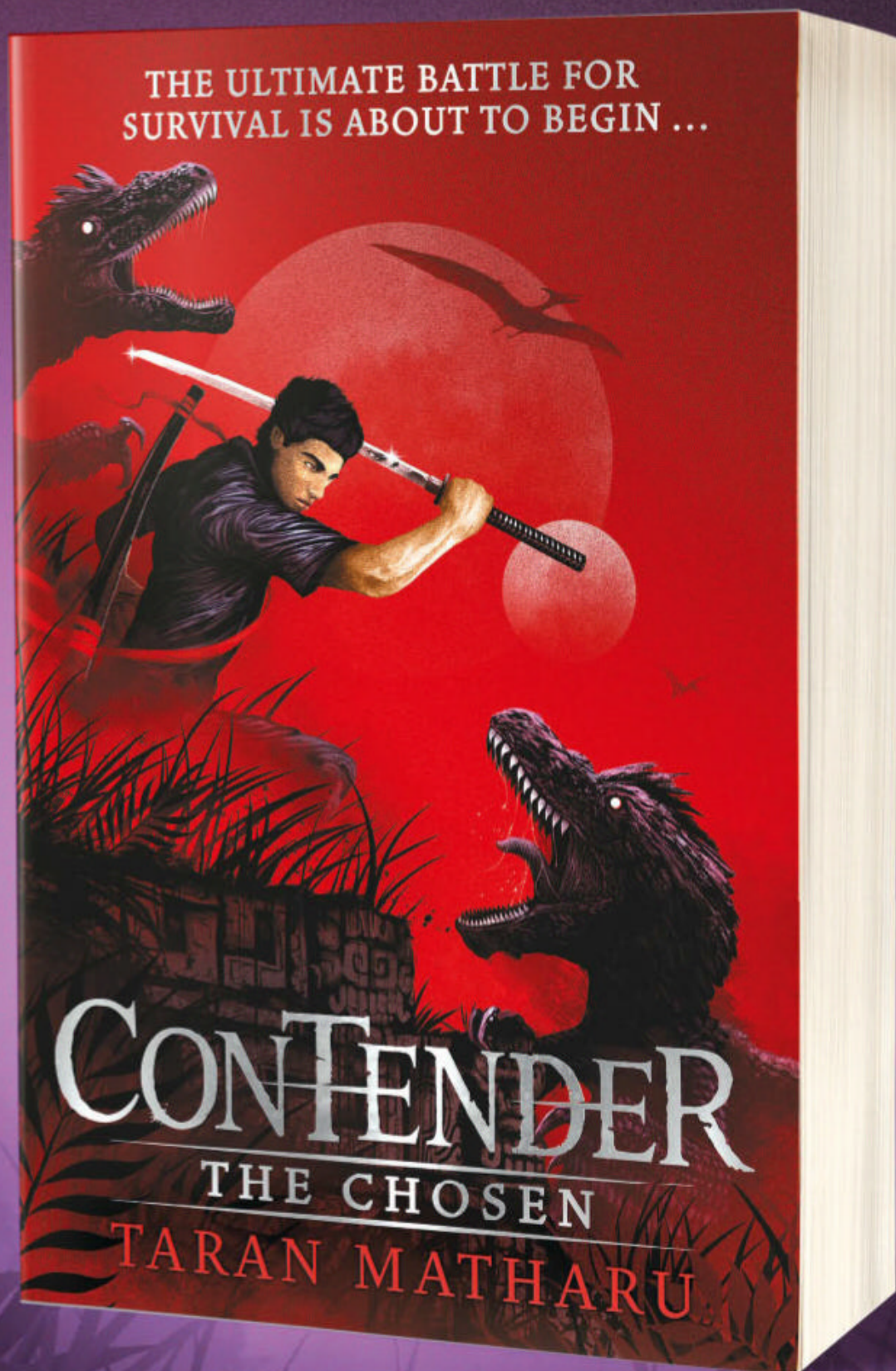
The Solution

Luckily for my tired Fixer Fingers, random encounters have all but fizzled out without any intervention required from yours truly. But steps must be taken to ensure they never return. Re-releases of old games featuring random encounters should come with health warnings, alerting players to the premature ageing caused by the persistent worry that the screen could melt away at any second and leave you battling to the death against a frog that can burp poison.

Replace the *Final Fantasy VII* art with a close-up picture of my haggard visage, along with the message “this is your face on random encounters”, and we'll never return to those dark days again. ■

Steve also writes for *City A.M.*

AN EPIC NEW TRILOGY



Illustrations © Matt Griffin



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Chris Burke is...

The Editor

This month, Chris wades into the topic of **videogame sewers**

This month's Editor column comes to you from a slightly dingy railway bridge arch in old London Town, where I am being trolled by a huge, ugly geezer who won't leave me alone because he thinks my name is Jill. At the same time, I'm actually being treated very nicely and fed nice food, because that's what happens when Capcom invites you to playtest its latest *Resident Evil* game. It's scary, but it's also very nice. Thank you Cappy, you survival horror videogame legend, you.

Well I say 'very nice', but I've become fixated with all the poop. Not in the venue, of course. We've done a lot of things, but playing a game while someone actually throws faeces at us isn't one of them. Not even that game about the monkeys. Still, a large part of my playthrough takes place in that staple of videogame exploration, the sewer, and trust me, the level of 4K brown detail in this latest *Resi* is actually quite stomach-churning if, as I did, you make the mistake of looking too closely.

Sewage systems are one of games' most frequently recurring tropes: expansive, labyrinthine corridors, some the size of cathedrals, and all packed with monsters, of the kind that were not laid there by a human on a high-fibre diet. For starters, fantasy RPGs are rife with them, from *Skyrim* to *Lordran* – even though, in the medieval settings of such games, sewers seem kind of redundant given that back then everyone just used to go number-two in the street.

Gutter press

Sewer levels are horrible, even in games where you can't actually smell them, and nothing good ever came out of a sewer. Only bad things, like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. And since its devs put one in just about every single game, when it comes to being the worst offender in



“Fantasy RPGs are rife with sewers, from Skyrim to Lordran”

videogame sewage tourism, we find the *Resident Evil* series guilty as charged.

I've been down a sewer, true story. In my journalistic life before **OXM** I once accompanied a sewage maintenance worker down one of Bazalgette's Victorian London sewers, for a story

about really horrible jobs. It was awful, it stank, but there was nothing down there like you'd see in a videogame. Actually, among the fatbergs from the central London restaurants, I saw *far worse* than you'd see in a videogame. But the Thameside sewer I was in was also cramped and small, and did little to evoke the idea of having a firefight with a reptilian menace, or chucking fireballs repeatedly at a spectral wizard until all his hit points are gone. The biggest threat was the photographer's electric shutter sparking up the methane and blowing us all to hell. So why is it in games there is *always* a bloody sewer?

In the latest *Resident Evil 3* reboot, as with the *Resident Evil 2* reboot before it, there are sewers. But the disgusting visual detail is not even my biggest problem with the ubiquitous gaming waste pipes. Sewers in videogames are my absolutely least favourite levels, because, with the possible exception of *Conker: Live And Reloaded*, they are always dark, oppressively claustrophobic and visually mostly the same sort of brown. Read: a bit boring.

If you were just forced to go through, say, a clean (but, importantly, clown-free) storm drain as a quick shortcut to that secret underground facility's back door, I wouldn't mind. But of course it's never quick, is it? You always need to backtrack several times to find levers to open sewer gates and search through virtual fatbergs to find a glistening key shaped like a heart, while using up all your ammo on a series of increasingly brutal, slimey things. But, unless you're an Italian plumber, what are you doing in a bloody sewer? I'll leave it to my esteemed colleague The Fixer to solve the ever presence of sewers in videogames, but back in my *RE3* playthrough, I have to get Jill past a bunch of slime-dwelling Hunter Gammies, and to be fair, even though I'm in a giant U-bend, it's still brilliant fun. So perhaps sewers aren't so bad. After all, where would we be without them? ■





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Wanted



PREVIEW

The games we want the most

Polish developer People Can Fly was also behind 2013 Xbox 360 exclusive *Gears Of War: Judgement*, which we rather liked

OXM'S MOST WANTED

> Chris' pick

Elder Scrolls Online: Greymoor

As a huge fan of both *Skyrim* and *Elder Scrolls Online*, I can't wait to put on a few extra layers, like a scarf and woolly jumper, and venture back to the frozen lands of the Nords.

> Adam's pick

The Red Lantern

This is right up my street. A narrative adventure with survival mechanics, and a bunch of cute dogs to look after? Sign me up.

> Meiks' pick

The Falconeer

Despite being terrified of aviation in real life, gorgeous indie effort *The Falconeer*, with its giant avian-based dogfights, is absolutely my jam.

We are big fans of the studio's *Bulletstorm*, so when we found out People Can Fly was making a new shooter called **Outriders** we hopped on a plane to Warsaw, where the studio is based, quicker than you can say, "**OXM** can fly! To Poland!" Read all about our exclusive behind-the-scenes reveal from page 26! The fantasy MMORPG *ESO* is now in its fifth year, and it's still giving us wonderful content, like **The Elder Scrolls Online: Greymoor** – the latest substantial chapter promising a ton of new content as part of the Dark Heart Of Skyrim year-long event. Hooray, we're going back to Skyrim! Find out more about this new Nords'n'vampires chapter on page 30! Finally coming to Xbox are **Yakuza 0, Yakuza Kiwami and Yakuza Kiwami 2**. Find out just why the Japanese mafia action-RPG series is worth all the years we Xbox fans have had to wait for it on page 32! If you love *Overcooked*, you're going to be besotted by **Moving Out**, Team17's latest party game. This chaotic couch co-op title involves moving furniture out of houses, by any means necessary. Read our hands-on impressions on page 40! Elsewhere, we have previews of survival horror game **Remothered: Broken Porcelain** (p34), we check out the multiplayer beta for **Disintegration** (p36), and play aerial combat adventure **The Falconeer** (p38).



026



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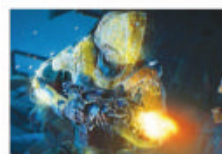


LEFT Though *Outriders* is X-rated, the swears aren't as creative as *Bulletstorm*.

RIGHT Though we didn't see it, the studio says your warrior will get their own customisable vehicle that acts as a portable hub.



People Can Fly has confirmed the game won't have any loot boxes or pay-to-win transactions



Outriders

The makers of *Bulletstorm* are back with a shared-world, (slightly) less swearsy shooter

Dave Meikleham

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER PEOPLE CAN FLY
ETA HOLIDAY 2020



It's been almost ten years since we last kicked a space mutant genitals-first into a cactus for a tear-inducing 'Pricked' Skillshot. A decade on, there's still no other shooter that revels in the sort of relentlessly inventive slaughter that *Bulletstorm* made its calling card. If you've been pining for Grayson Hunt's monster-mangling brand of pain, you're in luck. The showboat shooter's studio is back on its own, and ready to make a splash with a new IP that once again excels in creative carnage.

For years, People Can Fly was owned by Epic Games, leading to the Polish studio working as a co-developer on everything from *Gears Of War 3* to *Fortnite* DLC. Now that the team has bought itself out and is once again independent, the leash is off. Freed from Lancer-revving fan service and with a blank creative cheque at its fingers, People Can Fly has created a universe that feels unique and laced with fresh opportunity.

Outriders may share *Bulletstorm's* love for gory thrill kills and decapitations galore, but there are parallels with a certain Bungie shooter, too. Whether it's the almost carbon-copy menus or tight co-op firefights, *Outriders* is crushing on *Destiny* hard. Yet while this sci-fi third-person blaster has clearly taken cues from Bungie's *Guardians*, it's far from a slavish copy.

We recently went hands-on with an early build of *Outriders* at an event in Warsaw, and though certain aspects are a little rough, the potential is clear to see. Confirmed for both the

current family of Xbox One consoles and the upcoming Xbox Series X, this is a forward-looking title that takes the studio's esteemed shooter history and drops it into a shared online world spliced with RPG elements.

People Can Fly describes it as "a true genre hybrid", a game that combines "the intensity of a shooter with the depth of an RPG". Its savage sci-fi environments recall *Destiny 2's* Io moon; soupy air and aggressive skies coating each battle with alien dread. There are also clear influences from real-world history, with landscapes that parachute trenches and mud-caked WW1 imagery into jungles that otherwise look like they could have been plucked from *Avatar*. Lord would we ever like to punch a Na'vi right about now.

Attack the Enoch

Why are the remnants of mankind trying to eke out an existence on the aggressively unfriendly planet Enoch? Because we ruined Earth... for the 17,000th time this generation, by our count. With our spinning rock no longer able to sustain life,

"It shares *Bulletstorm's* love for gory thrill kills and decapitations"

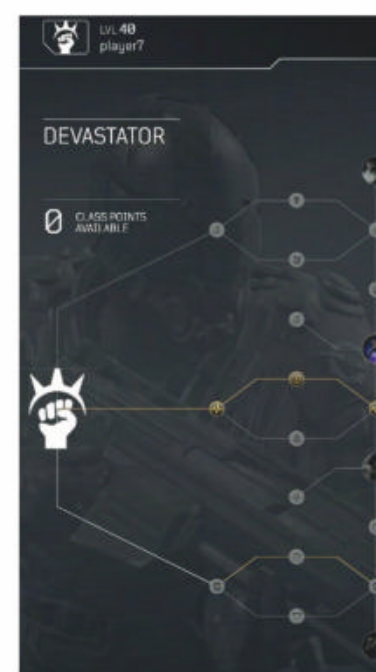
two species-saving arcs filled with squishy humans are blasted to the distant Enoch. To ensure civilians aren't immediately eaten by space tigers, highly trained mercs known as (wait for it...) Outriders are deployed to recon humanity's new stomping grounds. Cue a devastating McGuffin known as 'The Anomaly': a paranormal storm that coats the Outriders in an oily alien substance, altering their DNA and granting the guns-for-hire superpowers. Lucky swines.





ABOVE The spooky Anomaly isn't so bad. We'd gladly have our DNA violated by alien oil if it let us flame-grill dudes.

LEFT Enoch is both striking and kinda bland.





PREVIEW

This is the first time People Can Fly has been lead dev on a title since *Gears Of War: Judgement*

“You can unleash powers that would turn even the best Guardians green”

LOOT FROM THE HIP

Enemies and chests both spit out weapons as you unleash carnage on Enoch’s battlefields, with better weapons popping the more you level up. Just like *Destiny* or *Anthem*, it’s all about the numbers game – we swap out guns for weapons with slightly better stats damn near every five minutes during the preview event. While gunplay is mostly solid, we’d like to see *Outriders*’ arsenal show more teeth. Certain firearms currently feel too airy-fairy to fire.

After over 30 years in cryosleep, the newly juiced-up warriors awaken to a world already overrun by scheming bandits and opportunistic factions. The only way to restore order to Enoch? Unleash a range of paranormal powers that would turn even the most tooled-up Guardian an unattractive shade of green.

Like Bungie’s intergalactic heroes, *Outriders* fall neatly into three distinct classes – though People Can Fly hints a mystery fourth option will be available when the final game launches. First you have Pyromancers: medium-range cover fire experts who love to flame-grill their foes’ hides with toasty fire-based attacks. Next up are Tricksters: close-range hit-and-run specialists who can control space-time to bend the world around them through *Dishonored*-style teleporting and dilation bubbles that slow time to a crawl. Bringing up the superpowered rear are Devastators: a tank class that can shake the ground around them to make enemies tremble.

Class apart

After a lengthy prologue, that teaches you *Outriders*’ so-so cover system in between sections where herds of hairy alien rhinos try to trample you, you’re free to pick one of these classes. As with *Destiny*, you’re locked into this choice for the rest of your adventure; your chosen class spanning both a story-driven drop-in, drop-out co-op campaign and PvP modes that have yet to be revealed. Want to give one of the other classes a spin? Then you’ll have to start a fresh story, though at least *Outriders* allows you to store three characters at once. Must. Not. Make. *Destiny*. Comparison.

Each class further differentiates itself with unique healing powers that affect how aggressive you need to play in the field. Tricksters and Devastators both earn back HP by killing nearby enemies, while Pyromancers’ skillsets mean they have to be a little more defensive,

with health dished back for marking enemies with wide-reaching trails of flame. Regardless of what class you opt for, these complementary sets of powers prove to be the best of (super-murderly) bedfellows.

During our time with *Outriders* we squad-up with two friends, blasting through the first 90 minutes of the game, then immediately starting over so we can test out the classes we missed. Even at this very early state there’s are obvious benefits to pairing with players using different classes. A squad with a Trickster, Pyromancer and Devastator is much more balanced than one made up of a single character type, and each role’s powers prove to be naturally dovetail. If you play as a Pyromancer and decide to chum together with a Devastator, the former’s wall of lava – performed by holding LB and RB – can encase enemies in place while the latter steams in and annihilates your static foes with close-range rock attacks. It’s well-balanced stuff that shows People Can Fly has clearly put a lot of thought into how it can best marry together multiple skill trees of flashy moves.

Sleazy rider

What’s less encouraging is the unshakable sense *Outriders*’ world is in need of a slap-you-around-the-face hook. Currently, Enoch feels a little drab and downright generic at points. The one hub town we potter around in is kinda like *Destiny*’s Tower... if the Guardian architects blew their budget on a luxury year-long spa trip to Nessus then spent the remaining funds on ramshackle huts and slums. Videogame environments obviously don’t have to be opulent to come across as impressive, but large parts of Enoch’s battered interiors and samey compounds lack any real flavour. When you think back to how vibrant, how chock-full of personality *Bulletstorm*’s twisted intergalactic resort from hell was, it’s a shame People Can Fly has regressed to such bland level design.

While it’s great to see the Polish studio back developing its own IPs, *Outriders* clearly needs more work. Luckily, this ambitious shared-world shooter is still a way off from release, and even this early in development, we think those powers could make for one hell of a ride. ■



ABOVE The bones on the floor are a telltale sign that there are more skeletons coming.

RIGHT Okay so it's probably a priceless artefact that belongs in a museum... but think of the gold we could get for it!





PREVIEW

Lyris Titanborn is voiced by Jennifer Hale, who also played female Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series



The Elder Scrolls Online: Greymoor



Return to Tamriel's frigid North this summer

Chris Burke

PUBLISHER BETHESDA DEVELOPER ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS

ETA 2 JUNE



'MOOR TO EXPLORE

Fort Greymoor was a location in *Skyrim*, and could be found West of the town of Whiterun and north of Falkreath. OXM's resident cartographer (we keep him in a cupboard with the old 360 games) reckons the new region will include these towns and Lake Ilinatha in between. In *Skyrim*, Fort Greymoor was abandoned, but in the *ESO* timeline (set 900 years before the events of *The Elder Scrolls V*, we imagine it has more strategic importance to the local Nords.

We may all be waiting impatiently for news of the series' sixth full instalment, but in case you didn't yet realise, there is a wonderful way to enjoy more of the *Elder Scrolls'* imaginative world and deep RPG-ing experience on Xbox One right now. You may have to share your world with a bunch of other people running around the place, but then don't we all?

For those not put off by the very notion of an MMORPG, the world of Tamriel in *The Elder Scrolls Online* is actually a hugely satisfying single-player experience too, with so many quests and adventures to be had that not only is it an OXM favourite, it is also hands-down one of the best RPGs out there – and it gets better with every passing year.

ESO launched in 2015, and five years on it's still giving to the huge community that packs Zenimax's servers with fantasy characters, engaging in four-player dungeon delves, warzone PVP battles and 12-player trials – or just exploring and questing across huge, fantastically realised regions of a world that will be familiar to fans of the long-running RPG. For its fifth year, the MMORPG is expanding again – this time with a return to *Skyrim*, the snowy lands of the Viking-like Nords. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is still one of the most

popular entries in the mainline series, so *ESO* opening up a huge area of the frozen province has us reaching for the Honningbrew Mead. They do like a drink, the Nords.

Wise up, suckers

The bats have left the bell tower, and the Nords of Greymoor are being troubled by a powerful vampire lord. And by 'troubled' we mean they're being feasted on by this pale goth and his assorted minions. As you unravel the mysteries of this ancient evil and discover why it's back in Tamriel, you'll explore some pretty dark places, including an underground vampire city. The new story, which promises at least 30 hours of gameplay, also sees the return of Lyris Titanborn, a half-Nord, half-giantess who was one of the Five Companions at the beginning of the *Elder Scrolls Online* story. You can bet your horny helmet that Lyris will be calling on you to help rid Western Skyrim of the vampiric menace.

The latest chapter also introduces Antiquities. This collector quest-line will not only reward you with cool stuff, but give you even more reason to fully explore the vast, snowy region. There will also be a new 12-player trial called Kyne's Aegis, new delves, dungeons and quality-of-life updates, and mead. New world events called Harrowstorms – supernatural deadly storms sent to plague the Nords by the vampire lord – will also stir things up a bit. ZOS also promises loads of new and unique rewards, six new armour sets, new collectibles, achievements and more.

Zenimax has been committed to giving us a huge new chapter in the MMORPG annually for the last few years, with *Morrowind*, *Summerset* and *Elsweyr* all being chunky expansions that provided huge new areas, a ton of story and side-quests, arenas and dungeons. Last year's *Elsweyr*, besides giving us the Khajiit cat-people's homeland to adventure in, was also the centrepiece to the Year Of The Dragon event, and similarly, *Greymoor* will form a part of the Dark Heart Of *Skyrim* year-long expansion. While you'll have to wait until June for the full new chapter, things kick off this month with the Harrowstorm Dungeon DLC pack, featuring two new four-player dungeons. And did we mention there will be mead? ■

"The MMORPG is expanding again, this time with a return to Skyrim"



ABOVE Though they're famously offbeat, the *Yakuza* games can get pretty serious, too.

FAR RIGHT Kiwami's 'Majima Everywhere' feature sees Kiryu's rival pop up all over the place in Kamurocho.





PREVIEW

The original *Yakuza* was adapted into a 2007 movie, directed by Takashi Miike of *Audition* fame



Yakuza 0 Yakuza Kiwami Yakuza Kiwami 2



Triple trouble: Sega's crime drama trio brings glorious thug-thumping action to Xbox

Chris Schilling

PUBLISHER SEGA DEVELOPER RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO ETA 2020



BRAWL ABOARD

Yakuza's combat is built around fairly traditional light and heavy attack combos, with dashes, blocks and throws letting you mix it up a bit. It's not always neat, but carries the messy energy of a free-for-all, as you build up Heat energy to launch nose-pulping, spine-cracking special moves, often using your environment to your advantage. It's brutal and endlessly satisfying.

Being late has its advantages. If you didn't watch the first episode of *Breaking Bad* until all five seasons were over, or you've just discovered the films of Bong Joon-Ho after *Parasite's* Best Picture Oscar win, then a treasure trove of good times awaits. The same applies to the *Yakuza* series: formerly the preserve of other formats, it's making its belated bow on Xbox very soon, and once you start playing you'll realise what skull-cracking delights you've been missing. You lucky, lucky people.

Such a long wait is only fitting, really, for an action-RPG series that teaches you the value of patience. For all the crunching violence of their gloriously chaotic brawls, these slice-of-life gangster stories are full of slow-burn drama, with talky cutscenes and plenty of downtime, during which you're bound to get distracted by a wealth of side-activities – including authentic recreations of classic Sega arcade games – on the busy streets of Kamurocho. The place is technically fictional, but so closely based on the red-light district of Kabukicho in Tokyo that it might as well be real. And it's that attention to detail and atmosphere that makes it one of the all-time great videogame settings: as authentic as any *GTA* city, except you can navigate the whole thing on foot.

“Kiryu is a man who's not afraid to beat up thugs with traffic cones”

It's so good, in fact, that the series hasn't been able to stay away from it.

It's fascinating to see the place change and develop over three games through the eyes of Kazuma Kiryu, the other crucial ingredient that makes *Yakuza* special. Here is a man who's not afraid to beat thugs over the head with traffic cones, flick cigarettes in their eyes and deliver a swift kick where it *really* hurts when the need arises. Yet beneath that brutality is a badass with a moral code. He'll only ever punish the goons who foolishly start a street brawl with him, or those who threaten either his friends or his surrogate daughter, Haruka. Yes, the idea of a gangster with a heart is nothing new, but Kiryu makes the cliché his own (and besides, we'd never say that to his face).

Double Kiwami

So where to begin, now you have three games to choose from? *Yakuza 0* might come first in the series' timeline, though *Kiwami* is the ideal starting point. This remake of the first game is the start of Kiryu's story, after all. Here, he nobly takes the fall for a murder to protect his best friend, emerging after a ten-year stretch to find himself out of time and out of a job. Centring on a missing ten billion yen, which ruling underworld organisation the Tojo Clan is understandably keen to get back, it establishes the series' fondness for brooding, knotty drama interspersed with bizarre comedic interludes.

Expect similar tonal swerves in *Kiwami 2*, which shifts the action to Osaka for half the game, and sees Kiryu butt heads with one of the series' best villains: the ferocious Ryuji Goda. Then it's time to dip into '80s-set prequel *Yakuza 0*, which charts the rise of Kiryu, while showing us a different side to the hyperactive Goro Majima, the 'mad dog' who can't resist challenging our hero to a scrap.

It's probably the pick of the three, not least for Majima's classic introduction, which may – no exaggeration – be one of the most entertaining videogame cutscenes ever. Throw in a fighting style based on breakdancing and a moreish cabaret club management minigame, and you have one of the most purely enjoyable videogames in years. Like we say, well worth the wait. ■

PREVIEW

Rosemary Reed's look was inspired by Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling in *The Silence Of The Lambs*



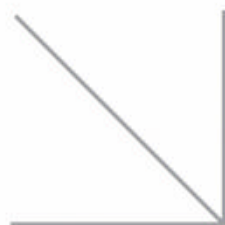
Remothered: Broken Porcelain

We're going potty for this cult classic survival horror sequel

Adam Bryant

PUBLISHER MODUS GAMES DEVELOPER STORMIND GAMES

ETA SUMMER 2020



FEAR IS THE MIND-KILLER

Many horror games inevitably lean on B-movie tropes, such as jump scares or gratuitous violence. For *Broken Porcelain*, however, Stormind Games wants to create something more mature and intelligent. The team's influences include *Jacob's Ladder*, *Psycho*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Silence Of The Lambs* and *Mulholland Drive*, so you can expect a more psychological experience.

When it comes to horror, few studios successfully push the boundaries of how to terrify us, but that's Stormind Games' entire MO. The first *Remothered* was an instant cult classic, and now the studio is looking to outdo itself with this follow-up.

Broken Porcelain has you playing as 15-year-old Jennifer, who finds herself employed at an old manor called the Ashmann Inn. This probably isn't the weekend job she was hoping for, though, as a sinister presence has been unleashed within its walls. Along with fellow maid Lindsay, Jennifer must uncover the manor's dark secrets and escape with her life. Joining them is Rosemary Reed, the protagonist from the first game, who arrives to continue her search for a missing girl, Celeste Felton, who seems connected to Jennifer.

"In the form of a sad and dystopian allegory, *Remothered* is about the eternal conflict between faith – when it becomes blind fanaticism – and [the] scientific vanguard that, with its extreme cynicism, breaks all the rules of human ethics," explains game director Chris Darril. "It's about all the things that happen to some characters who, to their detriment, are trapped in a web of lies and evil – a game of death and blood, goodbyes and old memories." While this may

"The mechanics have been redesigned to be more immediate and intuitive"

sound somewhat pretentious, it's clear that the developer is looking to explore a range of heavy themes for this horror sequel.

Although the key concept of the first game remains – it's still an action-adventure with stealth elements – the mechanics have been redesigned to be more intuitive. You can now perform more actions than you could in the first game. You can leap over obstacles, sneak into narrow tunnels, combine objects, spy from around corners, distract enemies and detect them if they're close by.

Creep show

You'll come across a variety of creature types, but the ones to watch out for are the 'stalkers'. These creepy, relentless hunters remain a constant presence in the Ashmann Inn, and they can turn up at any moment to chase you. You'll need to improve your abilities over the course of the game and discover the myriad ways in which to avoid or fight them to stay alive. But it's not just the enemies you'll need to use your wits against, as there will also be challenging puzzles for you to solve.

The studio has worked hard to make the game as realistic as possible by staying true to how people would react in certain situations. Of course, stealth will be crucial, and without the ability to use weapons, you'll need to utilise whatever you can find in your immediate vicinity to defend yourself and escape if you get caught.

Another change from the previous game is how the team is handling cutscenes. "We knew right from the start that we wanted to switch to real-time cinematics," says producer Antonio Cutrona. "We wanted to make the experience even more immersive, which is very important for a horror game." This means the transition between gameplay and cinematic scenes is seamless, rather than having sudden camera cuts or moments that fade to black.

From what we've seen so far, *Remothered: Broken Porcelain* has all the right components of a great survival horror adventure. "The experience of this game will stay with you for a long time," claims Darril. "I can guarantee it will be very hard to leave behind you." ■





ABOVE Everyone's first job is a bit of a horror story, but Jennifer's takes the cake.

LEFT The Ashmann Inn has a sinister Spencer Mansion-type atmosphere.

V1 Interactive's Marcus Lehto worked as creative art director while working on Bungie's *Halo* games. His initials even appear on Chief's boots!

Disintegration

Trying not to crumble as teams of brassed off androids launch murderous metallic warfare

Dave Meikleham

PUBLISHER PRIVATE DIVISION DEVELOPER V1 INTERACTIVE

ETA 2020



Why is doomsday always such a drag? Just once we'd like to play a dystopian shooter that doesn't let the apocalypse suck all of the fun out of the society-ending room. Well, good news: if you like your videogame end-of-the-world scenarios served up with a smile, V1's futuristic FPS has the tonic for the frowny-faced blues.

Not that *Disintegration* is really a first-person shooter. We recently got our hands on its closed beta, showcasing two of the final game's three multiplayer modes. And whether trying to dominate zones in Control or stealing and delivering nuclear cores in frantic matches of Retrieval, the almost unreadable on-screen chaos elicits the odd smile thanks to its sheer stupidity.

Disintegration's multiplayer really is very silly. While the story-driven campaign may end up aiming for the sort of gloomy pathos *Halo* used to lean on – which wouldn't be a shock considering V1 president Marcus Lehto's former ties to Bungie – the shooter's PvP action is unapologetically dumb... at least from

“The on-screen chaos elicits smiles thanks to its sheer stupidity”

a thematic standpoint. Though the game cleverly blends FPS elements with real-time strategy troop commands, the riotous action is super campy when it all kicks off.

Shoot for the sky

As your robo-person takes to the skies on *Disintegration*'s hovering grav cycles, your eye is immediately drawn to the squads of chunky sci-fi lackeys below. Commanding armoured soldiers and large-and-in-charge mechs with simple D-pad controls, the on-foot scuffles can quickly overwhelm the senses in these 5v5 duels. Gunfire is constant, and when you combine this unfiltered terra firma carnage with the seesawing grav cycle dogfights in the sky, it's hard not to grin at the unashamed daftness of all this bionic brutality.

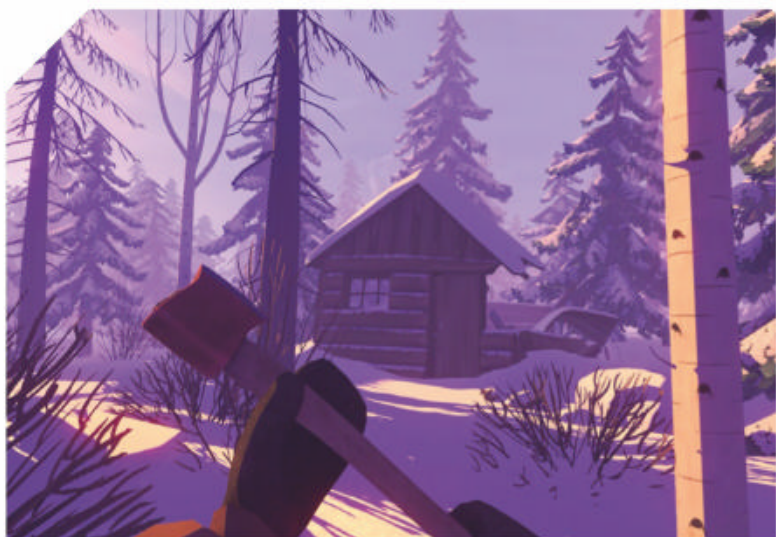
That each of the beta's seven Crews are also a bunch of robo-clowns, samurai and failed *Tron* players only adds to the disarming buffoonery. Sorry, robo-clowns, samurai and failed *Tron* cosplayers who were once human but then had their brains uploaded into metal exoskeletons.

Of the two modes we test, it's Retrieval that feels freshest. While Control's vanilla zone battles feel overfamiliar, directing your troops to steal mini-nukes then dunking them into holes like they were irradiated basketballs can be a frenzied hoot. It also helps grav cycle controls are gratifying. Controlling the pitch with LT and RT is easy to pick up, and the constantly weaving harum-scarum fights between rival hover-mobiles all pelting each other with missiles feels both warmly silly and unique. We're quietly excited for this one. ■

BELOW Our fave Crew at the moment is The Sideshow. We just dig killer clowns, alright?



Mitch Seavey holds the record for completing the Iditarod race in the shortest time – eight days, three hours, 40 minutes and 13 seconds



The Red Lantern

Are you prepared to do whatever it takes to survive in a frozen wilderness?

Adam Bryant

PUBLISHER TIMBERLINE STUDIO DEVELOPER TIMBERLINE STUDIO
ETA 2020



TOP Spending the night in an abandoned cabin in the woods has never, ever been a good idea.

You're sledding across the icy Alaskan tundra with your five sled dogs when suddenly your journey takes an unexpected turn. A grizzly bear bursts out of nowhere, launches itself at you, knocks you off your sled and attacks one of your dogs. What do you do? This is just one of the random events out of hundreds that can potentially occur in this first-person, roguelike survival adventure.

At first glance, *The Red Lantern* could be mistaken for a cousin to the spectacular indie darling, *Firewatch*. But instead of hiking in the warm

Wyoming weather and following a linear narrative, you're wandering the blizzard-filled wilderness, experiencing all manner of dangers to create an adventure that you can call your own.

You play a musher who's relocating to Alaska to pursue her dream of competing in the Iditarod sled dog race. Setting out on this new adventure, you head to your new home but soon get lost. How you survive and who you are once your journey has finished is up to you to determine. As Timberline Studio co-founder and CEO Lindsey Rostal explains, "*The Red Lantern* is very much a tale about figuring out what you're truly capable of, and defining who you want to be."

Win the wilderness

The team wanted to experiment with creating an emergent experience, and will let you create your own story based purely on your decisions. "Alaska is a place full of wonder and

"It's a tale about figuring out what you're truly capable of"

danger, and you never know what might happen next," says Rostal. "We tried to capture that adventurous and documentary-like feel, where you aren't sure if your next meal is around the corner, or if you're going to encounter some kind of threat."

As a survival game, there's a strong focus on resource management. A limited supply of ammo and first-aid kits, for example, forces you to make considered choices. These decisions relate more to the circumstances you find yourself in, rather than following a particular narrative path. Every random event that you encounter on your journey is contextualised based on your current situation, which leads to interesting and unique stories every time you play. One of the defining moments for the developers was after their first real playtest. "What happened to me was so different to what happened to my coworkers," explains Rostal. "We all recounted our different journeys and how they made us feel. I was incredibly excited to hear how different our experiences were."

The Red Lantern avoids the rigidity of most narrative games while offering you the same rich experience, granting you an opportunity to create truly unique adventures. This is definitely one to watch. ■

Before turning his attention to giant birds of prey, Tomas Sala made stunt game *Rekt*; a car-centric indie with a little *Rocket League* about it



Why choose between 'flight or fight' when you can have both? In this aerial, avian-loving indie, soaring through ominous skies is just as joyous as pelting colossal floating beetles with missile fire. A bit like a feathery *Panzer Dragoon*, developer Tomas Sala's airborne fantasy is one of the most exciting indies we've played this year.

Sala recently guided us through a brief demo of *The Falconeer* and hot damn if his giant birds aren't eye-alluring. Using a textureless, immediately striking art style, it's scarcely believable this steampunk fantasy is the work of one man. Contrasting the dream we all share of flying with the universal fear of water, *Falconeer* is all about succeeding

in the skies to avoid a soggy death below. The open world of The Great Ursee is also a morally murky land, with Sala deliberately weaving a narrative he describes as a "f**k you!" to the traditional hero's journey.

Take to the skies and it quickly becomes clear your rider's massive mount doesn't handle like an aeroplane. While aerial combat is graceful, your falcon isn't an F-16

"It's hard to believe this ace indie is the work of one man"

fighter jet. Making sharp turns takes time, and if your reflexes are sluggish you can expect your big bird chum to smash into one of the hundreds of jutting rock formations that pop out of The Great Ursee.

To make controlling your beaked bestie a little easier, Sala has introduced an "energy system" – he admits he's not given it a proper name yet – that lets your falcon perform barrel rolls and other useful evasive manoeuvres. Swoop down towards targets and your warbird builds up momentum that can then be used to break out the previously mentioned fancy flight techniques. Conversely, if you lose your nerve and ascend towards the clouds for cover, your energy drains. It's a feature that encourages aggressive play, which is exactly the right move for a game that lets you pilot a dirty great falcon that could peck King Kong's eyes out.

Bird time lucky

There's a real playfulness to how battles play out. *Falconeer* encourages you to experiment, and you quickly discover there are multiple ways to take out enemy ships. Faced with a battalion of schooners? Shoot their sails to stop them dead, or target their cannons in the hope a successful hit triggers enough splash damage to sink several vessels at once. You can even pick up mines using your mount's talons and drop them in front of ships, you naughty falcon fiend.

With five sets of story missions, a gorgeous ocean to explore and exhilarating mid-air clashes, the bird is most certainly the word for this ultra-ambitious indie. ■



BELOW Think the game looks good in screenshots? Wait until you see this beauty in motion.

Camel 101's first title, indie horror *Syndrome*, also featured beasts with glowing eyes. We're guessing its next title won't be a go-kart game



Those Who Remain

Shining a light on subversive frights with a horror that takes a page from *Alan Wake*

Dave Meikleham

PUBLISHER WIRED PRODUCTIONS DEVELOPER CAMEL 101
ETA SPRING



ABOVE Pro tip: get ready to play this horror in a dark room, or you won't see a damn thing.

If you're the sort of scaredy-cat who still sleeps with a night light, Camel 101's horror is going to shred your nerves big time. In this indie spook-'em-up your biggest problem isn't some drooling serial killer or impossibly ugly monster, it's the simple threat of darkness. Anyone got a big box of torches we can borrow?

Things most certainly go bump in *Those Who Remain's* night. Placing you in the shoes of everyman Edward Turner, there's nothing everyday about the spooky sh*t going down in the sleepy Washington town of Dormont.

Camel 101 recently demoed the game for us, and even after just 40 minutes with this chilling nocturnal creepster, we're in need of the warmest of hugs. As if the uncertainty of a dark and gloomy night wasn't unsettling enough, *Those Who Remain's* shadows are filled with shuffling ghouls that can instakill Eddy should he stray from the light. Like *Alan Wake*, this horror squeezes scares out of the premise of keeping the dark at bay. One puzzle may see you plugging in a set of Christmas lights adorning the rear of a sleazy diner, the next could ask you to rig up a generator to illuminate a nearby field of sunflowers. With zombie-eyed beasts that are only too happy to smother you with inky energy, finding the next light source becomes both critical and compelling. As a central hook for a puzzle/horror hybrid, *Those Who Remain's* party piece is easy to grasp and gripping to explore.

“After playing this chilling horror, we need a warm hug”

Not that kiboshing the dark is Edward's only problem. Conundrums are further spiced up by the inclusion of a disconcerting parallel dimension, which Camel 101 compares to the Upside Down from *Stranger Things*. In this spooky reality, which can be accessed through blindingly bright doorways, the spooky locales of Dormont behave rather differently.

Alone in the dark

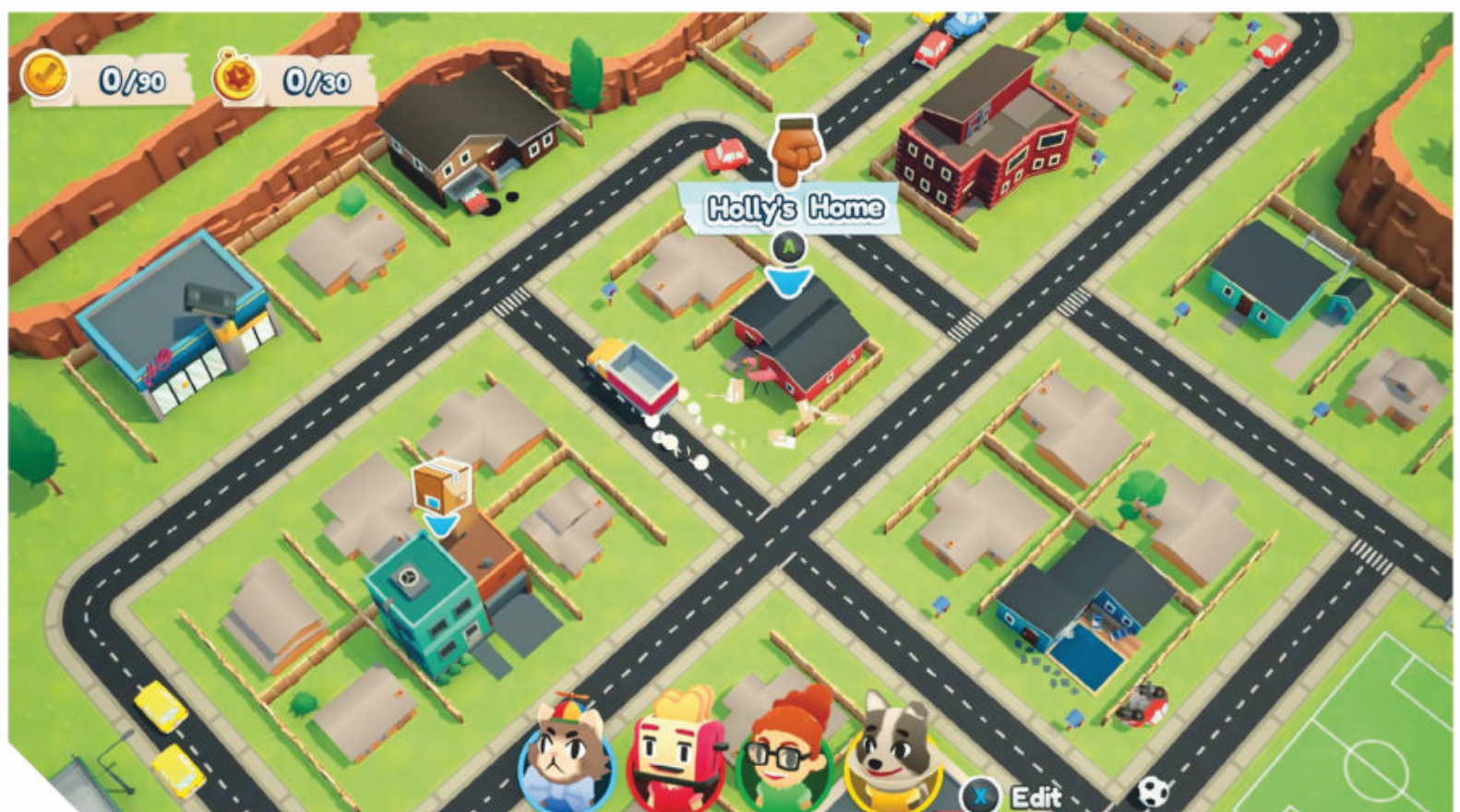
For one thing, these brief trips to bizarro-land play havoc with the game's physics. Example? A hulking crate that's blocking the headlights of a nearby car during one puzzle can suddenly be tossed aside with ease in Edward's alternate reality. Detours to this dimension can also reveal objects that can't be seen in the real world, like a system of creeping vines that might be invisibly blocking your progress. The interplay between the dark/light puzzles and these interdimensional sections is fairly elegant... even if the game's smudgy engine makes picking out details akin to spotting Wally in a crowd of wooly-hat-wearing Louis Theroux cosplayers.

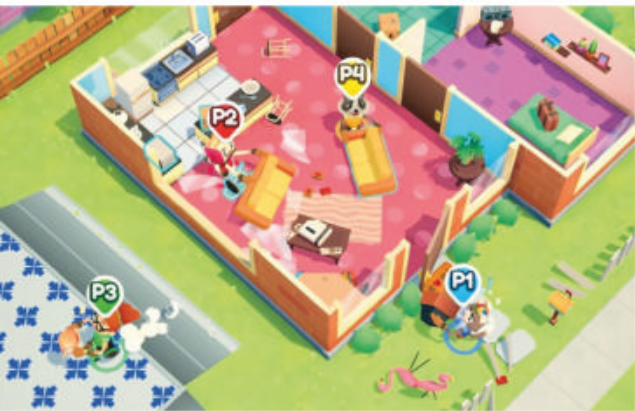
Despite its ugly visuals, *Those Who Remain's* inventive puzzles help this horror stand out from the crowd. We're sure Mr Wake can't wait for this one. ■



ABOVE Everything has to fit in the truck, so try to pack neatly.

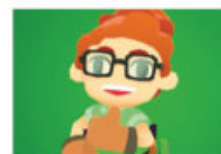
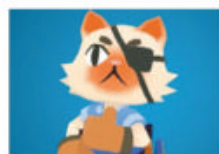
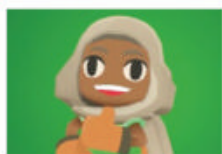
RIGHT Removal antics will take place in residential homes as well as businesses.





PREVIEW

Moving Out was conceived as a more serious physics-driven sim, before morphing into this silliness



Moving Out

We like to move it, move it

Chris Burke

PUBLISHER TEAM17 DEVELOPER SMG STUDIO/DEVM

ETA 28 APRIL

Moving house is the third most stressful thing in life, after divorce and, um, marriage. So imagine leaving the job of moving all of your furniture, your Xbox and collection of highly fragile *Halo* collectibles in the hands of a man with a potted plant for a head, a cone-of-shame-wearing dog, squid-face and a purple lizard?

Team17's latest party game quite literally puts the couch in couch co-op and will quite possibly involve all three of the aforementioned stresses. Like the publisher's wonderful *Overcooked* games before it, *Moving Out* thrives on the teamwork/discord of co-operatively multitasking within a tight timeframe.

Across a series of locations, your 'furniture and relocation technicians' (all about the acronym, that one) have to enter the property, pick up all the glowing items to be moved, take them outside and put them into a truck. Just like real-life removal companies, you mostly do this by taking stuff out of the nearest window and hoying it into the back of the removal van.

Some objects, such as sofas and beds, are two-person lifting jobs; moving corner sofas and other more awkwardly shaped objects will therefore result in 'hilarious' bashing of walls and each other as your pair of inept coworkers try to manoeuvre them through the tightest of spaces.

"You can smash everything in your path to get the job done quicker"

There's an awful lot of comedy value in the moving of furniture – see Laurel and Hardy's piano-moving sketch, and everything the Chuckle Brothers ever did. The "to you, to me"s aren't obligatory in *Moving Out*, but completing your moving job within the time limit, plus bonus objectives unique to the location and client, is.

You can smash everything in your path to get the job done quicker, but working effectively with your partner and getting maximum points for each level is no laughing matter, and don't be surprised if it leads to some choice words to each other. Especially since it's possible to stun your partners by bashing them with bits of furniture, thereby wasting precious time.

Breaking mad

The town of Packmore (course it is) is full of homes, offices, pizzeria restaurants and even haunted houses to be moved – the latter being made more difficult by playful spooks knocking stuff out of your hands. Between levels you get to drive the removal truck to the next location, exactly as you do in *Overcooked*.

Up to four players can play as a team, and you can choose from a roster of customisable removal technicians. That dog, for example didn't *have* to have that cone of shame on, but that kind of thing makes us laugh. Team OXM's choice of character, though, was Toaster Head – a man with an actual toaster for a head, who pops bread out of his bonce when he bumps into stuff.

Overcooked fans will love the similar style and humour. The gameplay is physics-based (even if the physics are slightly ridiculous), so you'll need to get a handle on how best to move furniture, and how far you can throw stuff. Need to chuck that sofa into the truck? You need to work with your lifting partner to swing and release the object at the same time. Things are made more complicated when the van starts to fill up, too. You can lob boxes on top of others to make room, but it's important to manage space effectively so you can get all those objects packed. It's just as well you don't need to worry about whether everything makes it to the destination in one piece. *Moving Out* will be arriving, hopefully unbroken, on 28 April. ■

roundup



THIS MONTH WE HAVE PIRATES, 'PUNKS AND PVE, WITH
A SIDE ORDER OF FIREPOWER AND SPACE TRAVEL **ADAM BRYANT**



ONE PIECE: PIRATE WARRIORS 4



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER OMEGA FORCE **DUE** 27 MARCH

One Piece fans rejoice, as the *Pirate Warriors* series is coming to Xbox for the first time. The gameplay follows a similar model to Koei Tecmo's *Dynasty Warriors* franchise, where you fight off waves of increasingly difficult enemies. You and all your buccaneer buddies will be able to do this in up to four-player online co-op across the game's 34 missions.

CYBERPUNK 2077



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER CD PROJEKT RED **DUE** 17 SEPTEMBER

CD Projekt Red's anticipated futuristic RPG may have been delayed until September, but we're still as excited about the game as ever. Speaking with the Microsoft community at OnMSFT, studio head John Mamais confirmed that there will be around 75 'Street Missions' for you complete. These quests will let you dive deeper into Night City and find out more about its citizens.

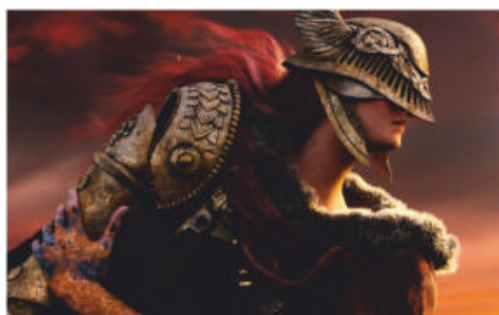
OVERWATCH 2



PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT **DUE** 2020

Blizzard's shooter sequel is set to shake things up when it arrives this year by bringing in a PvE component. Those hoping for a purely single-player experience, however, will be sorely disappointed, as Jeff Kaplan took to the Blizzard forums to answer the community's questions and confirmed the new PvE modes will be played co-op only, with no AI team-mates.

ELDEN RING



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER FROMSOFTWARE **DUE** 2020

One of the things Hidetaka Miyazaki and George RR Martin have in common is the ability to create enthralling fantasy worlds, so you can only imagine good things will come out of their collaboration on FromSoftware's upcoming RPG. New details suggest that we could be in store for some beautiful environments that will be inspired by Scotland's landscapes.

EVERSPACE 2



PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER ROCKFISH GAMES
DUE 2021

Rockfish Games' space epic might feel like it's light years away from release, but the studio is keeping us sweet with shiny new details. The list of drones – which function as weapons – is being expanded, and two have been revealed so far: the Outlaw Sniper, which fires lasers from afar, and the Outlaw Detonator, which homes in on enemy ships for an explosive impact.

SWORD ART ONLINE: ALICIZATION LYCORIS



PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER AQUARIA/BANDAI NAMCO **DUE** 22 MAY

Experience *Sword Art Online* like never before. Rather than a spin-off tale, this time you'll be able to play through a storyline from the anime, specifically the Alicization arc. Taking place in Underworld, a VR simulation where AIs act like humans, take control of Kirito as he heads out on an adventure where the destiny of a boy named Eugeo is intertwined with his own.

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MY BLOODY VALENTINE

OXM GETS HANDS-ON WITH THE LATEST *RESIDENT EVIL* REBOOT TO TAKE ON THE SERIES' BIGGEST EVER THREAT, NEMESIS **CHRIS BURKE**

T I N E

N

Nothing is sacred anymore. OXM is cowering in a safe room, sent back there by the click-clacking typewriter of our last save game, but with zero health and nada green herbs. There's a hulking brute with fists of concrete, a murderous demeanour and grabby tentacles between us and the subway station we're trying to reach.

This big bully can kill us with one hit right now, and there's a bunch of extra-mutated undead to contend with, too. Frankly, it's just not fair. The situation is desperate, but at least we can take a moment to gather our thoughts. Except we can't, because all of a sudden, Nemesis barges into the room. Into the *safe* room. That long-established *Resident Evil* oasis of calm, ink ribbons and item storage has been compromised.

Oh, *come on!* Even Mr X in the *Resident Evil 2* reboot couldn't chase us into a safe room!



Hard to believe it's been 20 years since Capcom's third game in what could be thought of as the 'Raccoon City trilogy' first appeared on the PlayStation. This was just pre-Xbox, and so while Team Green fans have been able to play a version of every other *Resident Evil* game in the legendary survival horror series, this timely reboot hot on the heels of last year's truly excellent *RE2* remake will be many Xbox players' first experience of the game.

So here's a quick catch-up. This was the game for which Capcom switched tracks from pure puzzles and jump scares to give us a much more action-focused game. STARS team member Jill Valentine was the protagonist, targeted by Umbrella after her part in the Spencer Mansion incident that kicked off the franchise. The evil monster-making corporation sent its biggest, scariest and most intelligent mutation yet to hunt her down. This big bastard, known as 'the Pursuer', was relentless and provided a game mechanic that not only kept you on your toes, it kept the action moving at a pace.

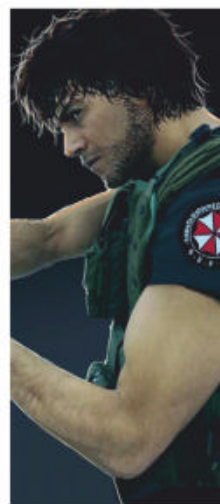
Naturally, after last year's *Resident Evil 2* success, *Resident Evil 3* was ripe for a reboot, too. It's arrived sooner than we expected – although the game has actually been in production for three years, meaning development of the titles overlapped. The games are

connected, companion pieces in a way, linked not only by the over-the-shoulder action and well-received gameplay mechanics, but also by the Raccoon City location and chronology. Jill's story in *Resident Evil 3* runs more or less concurrently with the events at the RPD, both before and then after, but centred on the same outbreak. But for all that *RE2*'s development and subsequent success must have impacted and influenced the making of *RE3*, its biggest tidal pull on this latest reboot is in the design of the Nemesis himself. Just as *Resident Evil 2*'s fedora-wearing Tyrant, Mr X, was scarier and more unstoppable than he was in the original, for the 2020 reimagining of this new relentless killing machine, the team needed to go bigger, badder and ballsier with the Nemesis' design.

"The director looked at what they had done with the Tyrant in *RE2*," explains Capcom producer Peter Fabiano, "and was like, 'Wait a minute! They've Nemesis-ified him!' So it was like taking it that one step further – we needed to make Nemesis ferocious and a real threat, and I think you'll feel that when you play the game."

Dodgy geezer

Yes, well we're definitely feeling that as we repeatedly succumb to death-by-Nemesis during our extensive



TOP The mocapped actors all look great in their roles.

hands-on time with the game. Jill is not entirely helpless. Nemesis can be stopped, briefly, by dealing enough damage to him – though it's going to take a *lot* of handgun bullets to do that. A grenade will certainly give him pause for thought – used sparingly, an explosive will bring him to his knee, giving you precious time to get away. Also, handily someone's filled the streets of Raccoon City with knackered generators. They're sitting innocuously sparking away, but shoot one and it sends out an electrical pulse that stuns Nemesis and any other monsters caught in its blast.

Central to the game's run-and-gun mechanic is Jill's ability to dodge. In the original PlayStation game, the dodge was incredibly hard to pull off,





"We needed to make Nemesis ferocious and a real threat"

but was often the only way to get past Nemesis. Yeah, we remember dying a lot in that one, too.

Here though, the dodge is thankfully a lot more player-friendly. Jill's all-new Quick Step move is useful for evading the lunges of regular zombies, too. It's a shoulder-drop and quick shimmy out of the way that is essential for ducking Nemesis' long reach, particularly from his prehensile tendrils that he uses to grab and drag Jill back towards him. Time the Quick Step exactly right and you'll pull off a Perfect Dodge – entering into a slight slo-mo roll past your enemy's grasp, providing you with a vital time advantage to get running again.

So, we persist – and eventually pull off Perfect Dodges, ducking past Nemesis, remembering to go the right way (it's easy to get disorientated and head down the wrong alley), making sure to load our shotgun for the next zombie that comes round the corner, and eventually make it to the subway. Phew.

Throughout the story there are some places into which the Nemesis

won't follow, to give you time for puzzling, exploration and story exposition – but in most sections the action is non-stop thanks to the Pursuer, while in others you're living on frayed nerves wondering when and where the big galumph is going to smash through a wall and give chase once more.

"Pacing is important," confirms Fabiano. "You need to make sure you have the right balance between having the player feel a little bit more relaxed, but also have that level of tension. You don't want it to just be constant balls-to-the-wall [action], we want to give players that little bit of respite, but at the same time always wondering where Nemesis is going to be, where is he going to come from and how do you deal with him. Do you run, do you fight?"

Fighting Nemesis is, most times, a bit of a waste of ammo – all you can do is slow him up just a little, to allow Jill to get clear. In the original game, we seem to remember the Nemesis showed damage as the game progressed, and you'd been chucking



ABOVE
Nemesis wields quite a lot of firepower... get it? Fire? Power?



grenades at him for the entire game. Capcom is tight-lipped about whether this deterioration will be a part of the endgame – after all, we recall Nemesis being practically just a blob by the end of the 1999 game. A relentless blob, but a blob nonetheless.

Aside from the Nemesis, though, there's the usual broad selection of mutations that will succumb to your weaponry. As in *RE2*, guns can be modded with extended mags, improved sights and stocks found around the place. Chemicals and gunpowder return, too, to be mixed up to make ammo, and fire and acid rounds. Again as with *Resi 2*, the combat is satisfying and brutal – zombie heads can be exploded with a lucky shot, but the undead mostly don't go down easy. Their limbs are individually destructible, and so aiming for the legs is as good a tactic as any to stop them advancing on you. A notable change from *RE2* is the absence of the get-out-of-trouble knife or grenade; this time you have a quick-time opportunity to spam your way out of a monster's grip – a device similar to that in *Resident Evil 6*'s action-fest. Jill does have a knife, but

must equip it to use it, even to slice open boxes that might contain ammo. This time there's no default melee mapped to LT.

Chasing status

The *Resident Evil* series divides opinion on the more action-focused titles, and undoubtedly Nemesis was the first to bring action to the fore ahead of exploration and puzzling. After the over-the-top thrills of *Resi 5* and *6* (remember Chris Redfield punching that boulder in *RE5*?), Capcom gave *Resident Evil 7* a more pure survival horror focus, for the first time in first-person. While the reboots are a return to the third-person, over-the-shoulder shooter style, both games strike the perfect balance between the resource-management and puzzling of a survival horror and all-out shooter action. Nemesis puts the 'survival' into the survival horror by introducing an unstoppable foe that cannot be destroyed in one convoluted boss battle. You need to think about how to avoid and evade the monster, and Capcom has put a lot of thought into balancing the game's action with its survival horror ethos.



"We certainly want to make it a fun experience," says Fabiano of the company's efforts to balance the key gameplay moments. "We do look at enemy placement and of course how they interact within the environment, and what that means for players, and how they can get through them. There's always things we can take from the RE Engine and looking at AI and what we've done in the past, and then advancing on that."

The dodge is one such advance, and it has been massively improved upon to provide a more instinctive way to evade Nemesis. Essentially, it's another type of 'weapon' in the game's all-action arsenal.

"In the original, we had the dodge mechanic, and in this one we have the Quick Step as well as the Perfect Dodge, so you can see that that has enhanced [the action]. So you can play it a lot more along the lines of an action game if you like, but through and through it's a survival horror game. I think people will have fun with the new mechanics that are driving it towards action detail, but it is still

ABOVE Carlos' role has been significantly beefed up from his 1999 appearance.

BELOW It's not just the undead you have to worry about. It's never just zombies in a *Resi* game...

"Capcom has put a lot of thought into balancing the game's action"



RIGHT The Nemesis is going to be a constant presence throughout Jill's escape.



survival horror, and we've tried to keep true to that essence and true to the original as well. The original was a step forward in terms of action but it was survival horror."

Stinking city

The city feels huge, and alive with, well, death. Zombies are everywhere, in bigger numbers than ever, sumptuously lit by burning cars and sparking electrical cables. Again, the game employs a Metroidvania-type approach; progress requires unlocking doors to move through shops, restaurants and apartment buildings – the streets themselves are blocked by burning vehicles. The locations are recognisable to fans of the original game, but obviously richer in detail. Shops and apartments are filled with '90s aesthetic touches – we haven't yet found a Blockbuster, but there's probably one around somewhere. At one point we can see the neon sign on the forecourt of the STAGLA gas station, a location we vividly remember from the original. We can't reach it yet, though, as it's blocked off, but we're pretty sure we'll end up there at some point.

The fixed camera angles in the original game did a decent job of hiding the limitations of the day; this time, even with the Metroidvania trick of revisiting areas, the game genuinely feels much more expansive. Despite the linearity of progress through the environments, there's certainly

enough freedom of movement to make it feel like a bigger play area.

"You can explore a lot more of Raccoon City this time," confirms Fabiano. "We have built it from the ground up, there is some reference here and there to the original, but it is Raccoon City reimagined. You can go into certain shops and see things you wouldn't have been able to see before. It's not an open-world game, don't get me wrong, but you can explore a lot more."

As with *RE2*, there are puzzling sections, though the ones we encountered are a little less obtuse than one involving chess-piece spark plugs (don't get us wrong, we loved all that). Jill uses the subway system to move around different areas of the city, and at one point, having restored power to the underground first, we needed to plot a viable route in the control room by figuring out the relevant code for each of the station waypoints. Similarly to *RE2*, we find ourselves backtracking a lot to different locations, either to unlock that weapons rack we clocked earlier, but now have a means to open, or to get electrical parts to open up doors to progress.

Having got the trains running, we meet up with

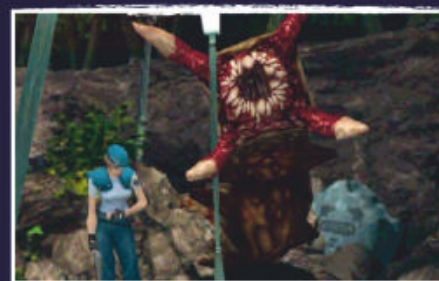
BELOW Jill's outfit has had a slight redesign for the remake.



PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999

The T-Virus mutations set to make a return

Monsters returning from the '90s original include Hunter Gammas, giant tick-like Brain Suckers and leech-like Sliding Worms. Here are some of our favourite fiends from the original that you can expect to make a reappearance in the reboot. Hold us.



GRAVE DIGGER

An enormous underground worm with mandibles. It can burrow fast, and could therefore pop up anywhere. Best pack grenades...



GIANT SPIDER

Spiders infected with the T-Virus scuttle all over the place, and they can drop on you from the ceiling. Oh no. No, no, no.



HUNTER BETA

Nasty, slashy reptilian things with claws on all four limbs. Sent into Raccoon City after the outbreak for battle-testing by Umbrella.



DRAIN DEIMOS

Take a flea, infect it with the T-Virus, stand back and see what happens. THIS HAPPENS, YOU IDIOTS! They latch on and drain your blood. Ugh.



Carlos Oliveira and his team of UBCS mercenaries, including hard-ass Nicholai Ginovaef, who's really quite rude to Jill. He clearly has no idea what kind of day she's having. Well, *year* she's having, what with the horrors of the Spencer Mansion recently behind her.

Merces and Spencer

Carlos, Nicholai and the other merces are returning faces from the original, but for the reboot Carlos' role has been expanded to that of the game's secondary character, who partners up with Jill and crops up occasionally to help. Unlike Leon and Claire's separate campaigns, while Carlos is playable, he's merely an ally who's on-hand for certain sections of the game – a bit

like Ada Wong in the last reboot. This is Jill's story, make no mistake.

"With Carlos, we really wanted him to feel like a reliable partner, Jill's equal in a way," says Fabiano of Carlos' expanded role and new look for the reboot. "He does come in and save her, he does come in and help her, and we want to make him feel like he can be reliable. He's got that rough-and-tumble look, and I think we've done a good job of making him feel like someone you can be partnered up with and go through this experience with."

For the final bit of our playthrough, it's time for us to return to that staple of *Resident Evil* games, the sewers. Yuck. The photogrammetry used by Capcom has made this reboot

just as stunning and rich in detail as the *Resi 2* reboot – the lighting, textures, characters' faces, clothes and environments are stunning on the Xbox One X – and that extends, horribly, to the city's poop-pipes. Really, it's disgusting; as Jill walks under a waterfall of cascading sewage, it briefly coats her hair with a viscous layer of brown sludge. Yeah, finally videogame kaka has been realised in all its glory.

Down here, of course, there's more than just brown fish. This is where we encounter the Hunter Gammas – weird frog-dinosaur creatures that are halfway to being actually cute, until they open their big mouths and extra mouths come out. Nasty, but by this point we've got a rocket launcher that fires flame rounds, and we are able to make short work of them – all of them, as they come tumbling out of the big pipes lining the sewer causeway. Back and forth a few times, wading through the nasty water to fetch batteries to open doors, we wonder why it is that we always seem to end up dirty in these games. Surely Jill could have asked her new friend Carlos to go into the sewers instead? Ah, but he probably didn't want to mess up his messy-by-design coiffure.

Trust us when we say this is another extraordinary game in the *Resident Evil* franchise. Finally, Xbox players will not only get to play through Jill's Raccoon City story, they'll be doing it in style. Right now, Capcom is on a roll as unstoppable as the Nemesis himself. ☒

BELOW Jill will team up with a squad of merces, and a doomed STARS survivor.





↓ POWERLESS TO RESIST

OXM got tentacles-on with Capcom's more-ish 4v1 asymmetrical online multiplayer *Resi*

So here's the deal. You play one of four dumb teenagers picked from a whole bunch of dumb teenagers, who have somehow got on Umbrella's radar and been kidnapped and thrown into some kind of sick experiment. Or, and this is the twist, you play as the Mastermind – an evil genius who is watching and controlling everything going on in the experiment, dropping zombies, traps, bioweapons and boss monsters into the meddling kids' lives.

If you've ever played *Dead By Daylight*, or *Friday The 13th*, you'll have a good idea how this works. This is the first time *Resi* has gone fully into online PvP multiplayer, and Capcom is billing this as an entire, full-fat game in its own right.

Each of the Survivors, like hacker January Van Sant, or engineer Martin Sandwich (really), has unique skills and traits, but the key is to work together to fight off the monsters the Mastermind throws at you, while completing tasks that will unlock an area's exit, such as finding puzzle pieces. The action is in a third-person,

over-the-shoulder perspective, similar to most *Resi* games, while the maps are unique to the game and include a casino, a theme park ride and a downtown warehouse. Each map funnels survivors through it like a maze, and controlling cameras in each of the map's rooms, your Mastermind has a deck of abilities with cooldowns to unleash upon the hapless teens. Zombies, undead dogs, traps and harmful biochemicals all crop up in your deck, plus all the while you're powering up an 'ultimate'. The different evil Masterminds, who will be familiar to fans of the series, have unique ultimate creatures they can bring into play. Annette Birkin can unleash the G-Birkin, for example.

Vive la Resistance

The Survivors aren't quite as daft as they look, though. In fact, park ranger Becca Woollett has insane gun skills, with an ability to take up a more effective stance to fire guns with greater efficiency.



BELOW
Masterminds
include Alex
Wesker and
Oswald Spencer,
and yes! You can
unleash Mr X!



Having made Becca our Survivor of choice, **OXM** and three other players proceed to absolutely fail miserably at surviving. We don't live through it even once. It's unforgiving. Why? Because real people are bastards, and give them a hint of power and they really do start cackling evilly and attempt to take over the world. On the other hand, trying to get gamers to actually work together effectively is like trying to herd cats. More than once, we make the classic horror movie mistake of splitting up, with someone always going off lone-wolf and coming a cropper at the hands of a big carnivorous plant.

Things are different once **OXM** becomes Mastermind, however [evil cackle]. It's a zombie throwdown as we chuck big fat Z's at the Survivors, surround them with hungry dogs, set traps in the most annoying of places and shoot chemicals at them until they're down. Playing as William Birkin's twisted form, we thunder about the place taking wild swings at everyone, and then decide we're going to victimise Martin Sandwich. Really, it's not fair of us, but hey, 4v1 is never fair.

Resistance is shaping up to be a lot of fun, and a great way to more sociably play our favourite ever single-player horror franchise.

"Your mastermind has a deck of abilities to unleash on the hapless teens"

RESIDENT EVIL 3

The events of *RE3* overlap with *Resi 2*, taking place both before and after Leon and Claire's nightmare



WE TALK TO PRODUCER **PETER FABIANO** TO FIND OUT WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S OLD AND WHAT'S EVEN SCARIER IN CAPCOM'S LATEST SURVIVAL HORROR REBOOT

You have again used the RE Engine for *Resident Evil 3*, what has this enabled you to do with the latest reboot?

With the RE Engine, we were building out *RE2* at the time as well, so we did take some of the things that they had done and we enhanced it or we adapted it for *RE3*. We did still have to make it for the game we were building out, but yeah the RE Engine is great - it is something that we can work with and adapt.

Sound design was a big part of *RE2*, presumably that's even more so with the threat of Nemesis around every corner?

We instituted a very similar sound design approach to *Resi 2*. Sound is very important in a survival horror game, footsteps and ambient or environmental sounds, that's still there - and playing with your headphones on is always fun, or with a surround sound system, so you get the full immersive experience. That's what we wanted to recreate. Sound

is very important to get that heightened feeling of tension.

The *Resi 2* remake introduced new monsters we hadn't seen before - the lab section's ivy monsters, for example. Should we expect new creatures for *RE3* that weren't in the original?

I think you'll experience new designs as well as some new creatures. You'll see that the Hunters are familiar, but also different, and you'll also notice once you go through the sewer areas, the Hunter Gammas, they look pretty cool. The director likes to call them 'cute'. I don't know if that's the word I'd use, but you'll see when you encounter them!

The reimagined Mr X for *Resi 2* clearly raised the benchmark for how scary Nemesis would need to be. Just how much more deadly is Nemesis than *Resi 2*'s stalking monstrosity? We notice he's carrying a flamethrower!

Nemesis can use weapons, he's more intelligent in that sense, he has tentacles he can use and his movements are much more nimble, even for someone as large as he may be! You mention the flamethrower, but that's actually a boss fight. The Nemesis was known as the Pursuer in the original game, and he's still that. So he's going to be relentless in his pursuit and you're going to need to get away, and there are different ways you can do that.

What does a survival horror game need to do to be effectively scary in 2020?

That's an interesting question. We're always challenging ourselves to make sure that there's that right balance. Audio design is important, lighting is important, the way the game plays and feels, and really it's all about the player experience. You want to get that pacing right, to make sure that the player feels they're going through this experience, and feeling there's that sense of [needing to





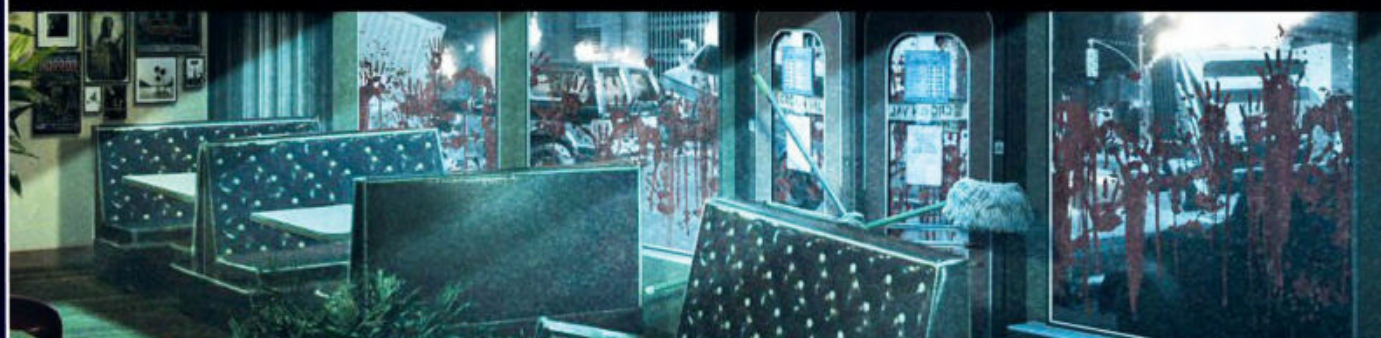
pay] attention – I can't stress that enough, I think that's really important.

How important was it to make sure players who remember the original have that nostalgic feeling when revisiting locations in RE3?

I think it's really important to keep the essence of the original, but also change things a bit so it feels fresh for newcomers as well as people who played the originals. I think that's one of the things we looked at when we were rebuilding this, and the director really wanted to tell a consistent story this time around, so you'll notice it's one consistent story through and through. It's really just the iconic Jill and Nemesis story.

Will any locations or characters from Resident Evil 2 crop up in Resi 3?

I don't want to give away spoilers, but first and foremost it's Raccoon City, so you have that connection in the first place, and it does take place before and after RE2, so there's that connection. I think as you play you'll notice some little things here and there.



go, 'Wow, one year after RE2!' but it wasn't like we just built it in a year. We took some feedback, but we were trying to go through with our creative vision, and we also looked at what we had done with RE2 and just built from there.

What will those who played the original be most impressed by with the remake?

Hopefully, they'll be very impressed by the reimagined Raccoon City. It's way more fleshed out, there's a huge attention to detail – you'll notice posters throughout the city and all these little homages to the '90s and the '80s, these little touches we put in there.

What are you most proud of with this reboot?

I think that we've done a pretty good job of reimagining Jill's story and what it means to tell that story, in terms of art and in terms of what the team has come up with, I'm really happy in the way it's been put together. I think players will be able to get through it and be satisfied with the story that we've told.

Tell us a little about Resistance, the asymmetrical online multiplayer game that's packaged with RE3.

With *Resident Evil Resistance*, we wanted to challenge ourselves to make an online multiplayer game and make it a survival horror experience, and have it set within Raccoon City in the RE universe. Although it's not a direct link to the story, it does have characters that will be very familiar to fans of the series. I think it's very interesting to play as some of the enemy characters; that's not something we've done before, to this level. Also I think it's a lot of fun to play as both a Mastermind and a Survivor. If you play as a Survivor you're going to have those *Resident Evil* mechanics, be able to play with friends, and it's a multiplayer survival horror experience. Right from go, you'll be used to it. Mastermind, in a way, it's like you're playing as one of the devs because you get to drop in enemies, decide where they go, you get to play with environments, you get to play with the enemies, and some of the iconic characters like G-Birkin for example, so we hope players will enjoy it as a separate experience, a multiplayer experience, and one that you can enjoy with friends – kind of pick up and play. There's a lot of replay value in it so I hope a lot of people get into it, enjoy it, and hopefully they'll keep coming back. ■

"The Nemesis was known as the Pursuer in the original game, and he's still that"

The visual detail is amazing – how many unique zombies were you able to bring to the game this time?

You'll see that we scanned some zombies, and some of them are actually employees [laughs], so I think you'll get a sense of the variety of zombies, and there are more zombies this time around.

The game seems to have arrived very hot on the heels of Resident Evil 2...

There was an overlap between RE2 and RE3, in terms of development. RE3 was in development for approximately three years, so I know a lot of people will look at that and

I think they're really fun for someone who played the original and grew up during that period, and of course, even for newcomers it's a little fun throwback, too.

Live Selection gave the original game some different endings based on player choice, will that be returning for the reboot?

No. One of the reasons they included Live Selection in the original is that the schedule was quite tight, there was a lot of limitations in what they could do and they wanted to add replay value. And one of the things they came up with was adding Live Selection, but this time round we're telling one consistent story.



THE BIG INTERVIEW

Madureira's most well-known comic run is *Uncanny X-Men*, which he drew from 1994 to 1997

Joe Madureira



King of the Hell

WITH *DARKSIDERS* SHIFTING GENRES
FOR ITS NEW PREQUEL SPIN-OFF,
OXM CHATS TO SERIES CREATOR JOE
MADUREIRA ABOUT HIS COMIC BOOK
ORIGINS, SURVIVING THQ'S DOWNFALL
AND MAKING HELLISH ACTION GAMES

AARON POTTER



THE BIG INTERVIEW

Genesis is the only *Darksiders* title to not take place in parallel to the events of the first game



aking the jump from one industry to another is a risky move, but it's one that comic-book-artist-turned-game-director Joe Madureira made look easy back when the *Darksiders* series kicked off in 2010. Initially beginning his career as an intern at Marvel Comics, he eventually worked his way up to drawing some of the publisher's most iconic characters, using the experience gathered there to influence the design and vibe of his own games and comic book titles. Following a brief period of uncertainty following Vigil Games shuttering, today he heads up Airship Syndicate which is focused on doing big things with modest resources.

Now that the newest *Darksiders* instalment has slashed its way onto Xbox One, we caught up with the artistic self-starter to find out how he tackled the franchise from a whole new top-down perspective.

First off, how would you describe your style for people unfamiliar with your comic book and concept design artwork? What were your main influences growing up?

Describing my style... that's an interesting question. I will often change my style slightly to suit the project at the time. For instance, I'll go darker on a character like Wolverine, whereas with someone like Spider-Man, I try to keep things light and fun. You'll notice those differences in my game stuff too, just looking at *Battle Chasers* and *Darksiders* as examples. I've always gravitated toward stylised stuff, realism isn't my thing. Growing up, I was influenced by everything from *D&D* fantasy illustrators, comic books and games, to manga and anime. Even films and animation for pacing and shot composition. Like most artists, I think I'm just influenced by basically everything I see that excites me!

What initially made you want to make the jump from comics to games, and were you a big gamer at all beforehand?

I think I was around five years old when I got my Atari 2600, and I've been obsessed



with games ever since. I started drawing around the same time. It was actually my career in comics that helped get me into game development. I would randomly meet game industry folks, and they'd tell me they were fans of my work and ask if I'd ever considered working in games, things like that. Eventually, the opportunity became too tempting to pass up.

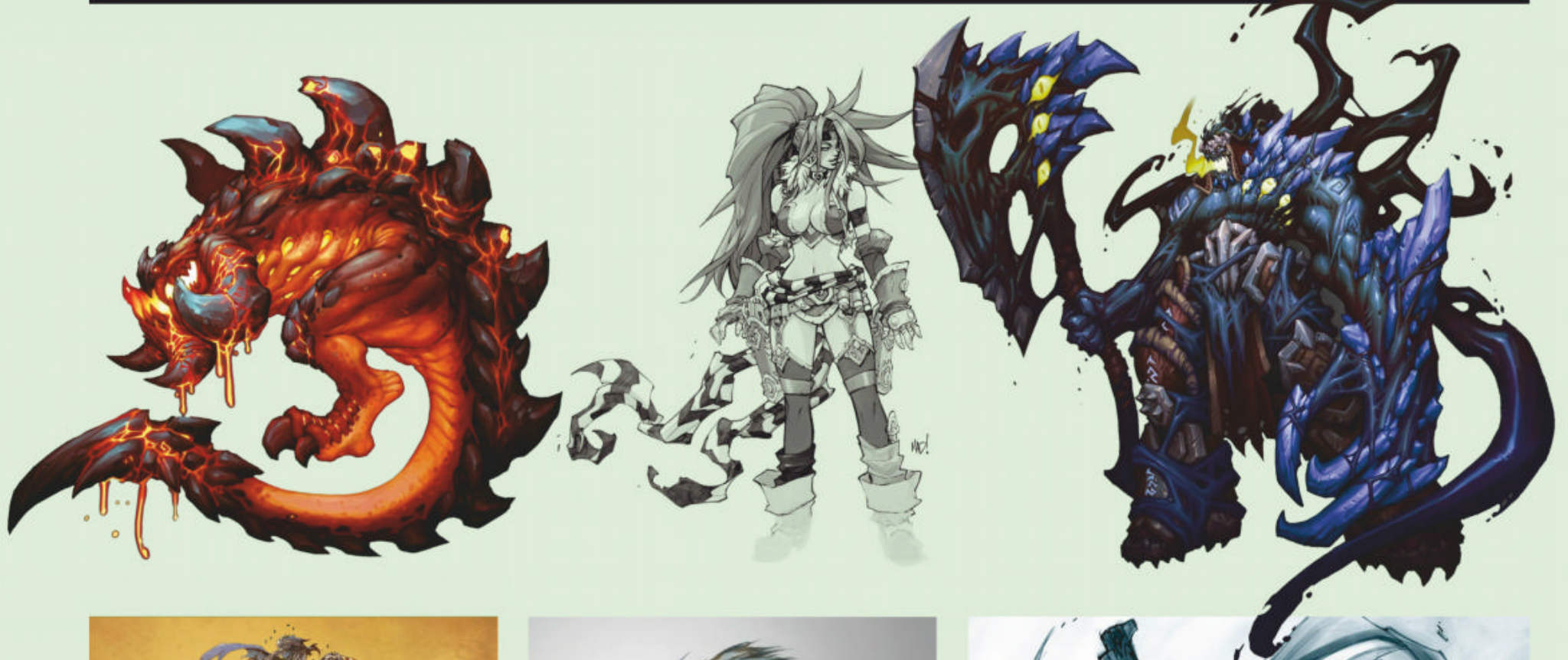
Where did the 'genesis' of the idea for *Darksiders* come from?

To this day, I'm not sure exactly what it was that sparked the idea. I'd meet with our other Vigil co-founders and we would just wrack our brains trying to find a theme or setting that excited us. All we knew for sure is we

wanted to make a *Zelda*-style third-person action-adventure. We liked the idea of it being a little more mature. On my drive home from one of those meetings, I had this thought that rather than create a new fantasy world, we could transform Earth into a fantasy setting. I called the guys from my car, and pitched the idea of angels and demons invading modern-day Earth, and the 'heroes' of our story being the Four Horsemen. More *X-Men* vibes than horror. I remember saying, "Imagine demons scaling the sides of buildings, throwing cars and buses, s**t like that." I think something clicked right then, and even though it went through a lot of refinement, we knew that was the direction we were taking. We were all just immediately excited about it.

"Rather than create a new fantasy world, we could transform Earth into a fantasy setting"





LEFT Chaoeater is War's trademark sword, don't get caught at the business end of it.

BELOW Madureira's artistic style permeates every game he has worked on.

ABOVE Strife is more of a wisecracker compared to his Horseman siblings.





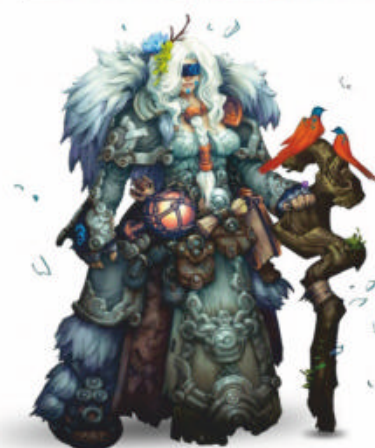
“The original concept for the first game was four-player co-op – which was completely insane, of course”

The first *Darksiders* game centred on the Horseman War, and it quickly became a cult classic. Thinking back to the development of it, what were your overall hopes and ambitions for the game, and do you think they were they met?

Absolutely. It was a huge learning curve for all of us, not just creating a new game, but building a studio at the same time. We wanted *Zelda*-style puzzles and exploration, and the visceral combat of games like *God Of War*, and I think we delivered on that. Which is kind of crazy, I think, for a studio that started out so small and had never made a console game.

Would it be fair to describe *Darksiders* overall as a bit of an underdog series, do you think? Every title released thus far reeks of an independent attitude not often seen on games of this level...

It's interesting to hear it described that way. I can see it. I think there are two major reasons for it. One, we only make games we're excited about, and we try to do things 'our way'. That's true at Airship Syndicate now, as it was back at Vigil when we made the first two games. The second reason is that we were lucky enough to have the support of publishers that trusted us, and let us do our thing creatively. Strangely, both those publishers were THQ – now, THQ Nordic. THQ Nordic especially, they just gave us crazy



TOP War is the protagonist of the first *Darksiders*. He returns alongside his brother Strife in *Genesis*.

MAGIC MOMENTS

DARKSIDERS 2010

The beginning of the series' life cycle, marking Madureira's first time serving as creative director. Centred on the exploits of the Horseman War, it's an apocalyptic adventure inspired heavily by the likes of *God Of War* and *Zelda*.

DARKSIDERS II 2012

Madureira further leaned into his artistic talents for *Darksiders II*, designing Death and helping to flesh out the wider scope of this sequel. In addition to the series' trademark combat, a loot system allows for character customisation.

BATTLE CHASERS: NIGHTWAR 2017

After THQ's dissolution, Madureira founded Airship Syndicate and returned to his comic book roots with a *Battle Chasers* game. Its top-down perspective ended up inspiring *Darksiders Genesis*.



freedom on *Darksiders Genesis*. Despite their size as a publisher, they definitely are not afraid to take risks, and I think that only adds to the indie attitude you mention.

Did any of Vigil Games' design priorities change in the jump to the development of *Darksiders II*?

I think the only question we had was taking all the lessons we learned making the first game into, "How do we make the sequel cooler in every way?" We definitely wanted more traversal and some role-playing elements, like random weapon and loot drops. We teased all four Horsemen uniting at the end of the first game, but in our hearts we knew we were nowhere near ready to make a game with all four Horsemen playable. To keep things fresh, we thought, "What if we focused on a different Horseman?"



THE BIG INTERVIEW

Darksiders III was developed by Gunfire Games, which is made up of former Vigil Games staff



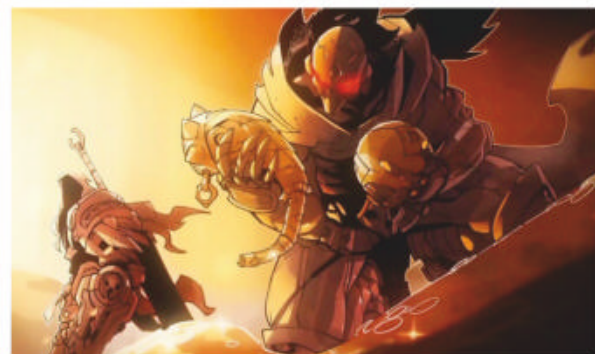
Had you always planned to tell the story of each individual Horseman Of The Apocalypse with their own game?

Not at all. The original concept for the first game was four-player co-op – which was completely insane, of course. It was hard enough just making a single character fun. I had them all visualised already though, and Death was kind of staring us in the face, just begging for his shot at the spotlight. All through development of the first game, one question we got a *lot* was, “Why did you pick War and not Death?” He is the most well-known of the Horsemen, after all. After exploring the idea a little, we got too excited about it to turn back. We’d make Death’s adventure take place concurrently to War’s, and pick up the ending of [the first] *Darksiders* later. I do think that when *Darksiders II* hit, everyone speculated that each Horseman was getting their own game.

How did THQ going bankrupt and Vigil’s closure affect those plans going forward, and were you pleased with how the franchise was treated by Gunfire Games with *Darksiders III*?

At the time, it really felt like the end of *Darksiders*. It was awesome that THQ Nordic reached out to Gunfire for the third game. Made up of so many Vigil people, there

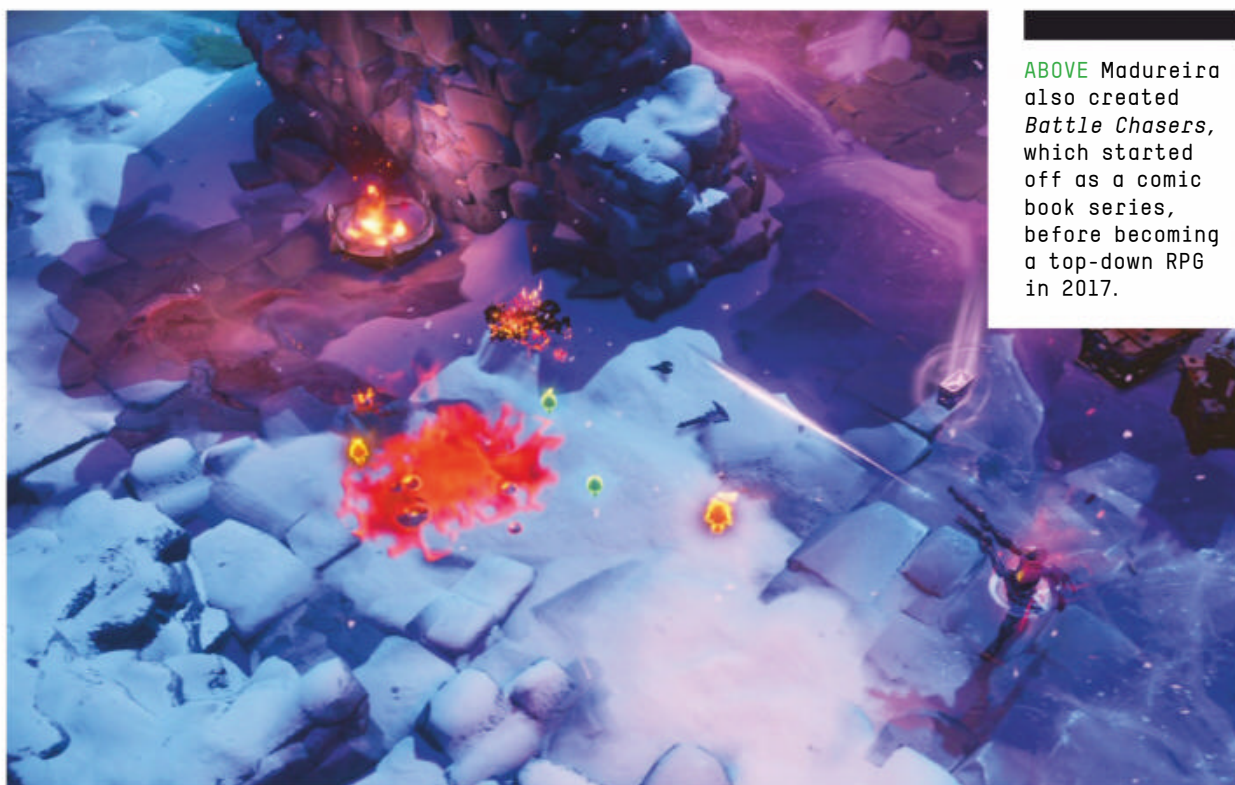
ABOVE *Genesis* adopts a top-down view but retains that *Darksiders* feel.



really wasn’t a better studio for the job – including Airship, we were way too small. I think they did a stellar job with *Darksiders III*!

Darksiders Genesis saw the series switch from third-person to an isometric perspective. What was the thinking behind that?

When we started *Genesis*, the team was only 11 or 12 people. We needed a game format that could be done with a smaller team, along with a way to send the clear message that this wasn’t a core *Darksiders* game. We thought the shift to an isometric camera might set the right environment for a ‘simpler’ co-operative experience, one that wasn’t even pretending to be the fabled ‘all four together’ project. And having just come off *Battle Chasers: Nightwar*, which had



ABOVE Madureira also created *Battle Chasers*, which started off as a comic book series, before becoming a top-down RPG in 2017.

isometric dungeons, we were confident we could make it look awesome.

We've enjoyed playing *Genesis* on Xbox One, and noticed that, despite the perspective shift, it's still very much a *Darksiders* game. What were some of the challenges you faced in trying to maintain that?

Combat-wise, it felt pretty natural. War behaves much as he did in *Darksiders*. Strife was a clean slate, so we felt a lot of freedom when building up his package of abilities. The biggest challenge was maintaining the 'adventure' that defined *Darksiders* and *Darksiders II*. Some things definitely worked better than others, but in the end, we're happy to say it still feels like *Darksiders*, moment to moment. The other challenge was going level-based without losing the fun backtrack rewards. That was less of an emphasis, but still something we felt had to be there. And it took a lot of time and balance to get it where it is now.

***Darksiders Genesis* marks the first time we're able to play as Strife. How did you go about crafting this new character for the game? Was there a lot of pressure to deliver a Horseman that was equally well-rounded and cool?**

There's always some pressure when introducing a new playable character into an existing franchise. We had already toyed with the idea of making him a little more 'fun' than some of the other Horsemen, who are pretty



“We had already toyed with the idea of making Strife a little more ‘fun’”

serious in tone. When we settled on War to be the other playable character, it made even more sense, since Strife’s such a perfect foil for his stoic brother. I was personally very nervous right up until launch about whether or not people were going to accept so much humour in a *Darksiders* game, but everyone seemed to really welcome it. Glad we did it! Chris Jai Alex really did a fantastic job bringing him to life and selling the jokes.

Does *Darksiders Genesis* give an indication as to where we might see the franchise go in the future?

Narrative-wise, it mostly sets up the events of the first *Darksiders* and starts to build the personality of Strife. In terms of gameplay, who knows what the future holds! ■

Darksiders Genesis is out now on Xbox One. Make sure to swing by page 80 and check out our review.



ABOVE *Darksiders* takes place on a ruined Earth.

BELOW The series is known for its blend of combat, puzzles and exploration.



O X M I N V E S T I G A T E S

THE HISTORY OF MULTIPLAYER ON XBOX

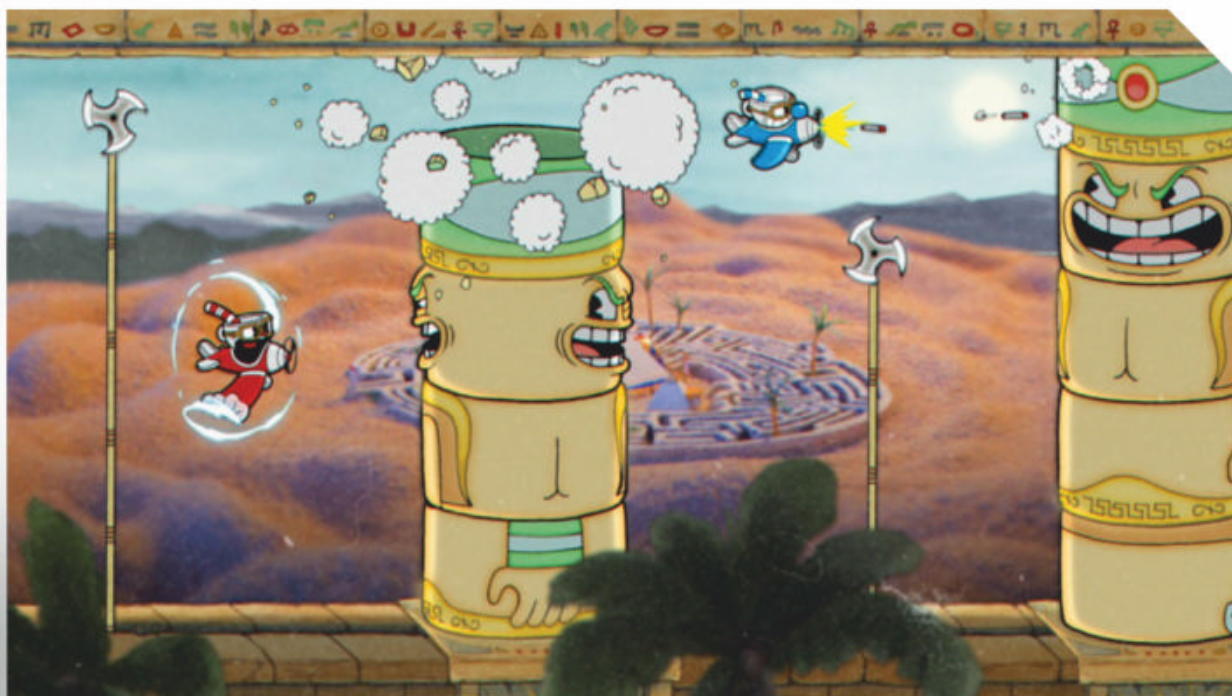
Grab a friend and take a seat on the couch. This is how multiplayer has evolved on our favourite consoles **STEPHEN ASHBY**

There are few feelings better in gaming than beating someone sitting next to you. Stealing the win from them just as you cross the finish line, hitting them with a perfectly timed headshot, turning them into pulp with your digital fists, and then leaping up and roaring like an angry seagull directly into their miserable face. It's euphoric.

The only thing that can vaguely match that feeling is when you and a friend finally pull off the perfect joint combo and beat that stupid sodding boss on the 17th attempt. You couldn't have done it alone, and it's a moment you'll never forget.

From day one, the Xbox was built to be a multiplayer machine. There was an Ethernet port on the back, and





the team slapped four controller ports on the front for players who couldn't afford the new-fangled 'broadband' that all the cool kids were using. Compared to the PlayStation 2's measly two controller ports and separate network adapter, it was set up for friends from the very start – and every Xbox console since then has built on that.

Commander in Chief

How else can you start an Xbox multiplayer feature than by talking about *Halo: Combat Evolved*? The original console's legendary launch title didn't just show what Microsoft's ambitious machine could do, it set the standard for multiplayer shooters on every platform. There were fun modes, perfectly balanced maps and a shooting experience that had no equal.

But the real magic happened when you (somehow) found three Xbox-owning friends, 12 other people and four TVs. *Halo* LAN parties weren't the most accessible of gaming setups, but they delivered a multiplayer experience that was unlike anything console gamers had experienced before.

These were the foundations of Xbox Live. Although it wasn't obvious at the time, its launch in November 2002 was probably the single most important moment in the history of Xbox. It launched with friends lists and voice chat – a technology that was still in its infancy. And it gave you a single, consistent identity: your Gamertag. Over 150,000 people subscribed in the first week.

"We were waiting for a third-party game to really take it and push it," Boyd Multerer, the development manager who hired the entirety of the original Xbox Live team, told *Polygon* in 2013. "That was *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*. That game came out and it wasn't a shooter. It wasn't super-fast action. It was kind of slow. It was perfect for trying to figure out how to do networking when no one really knew how to do it. You weren't as worried about latency."



ABOVE Playing *Cuphead* with a friend makes surviving its levels and bosses that little bit more possible.

It was a good start, but Live was still lacking many of the features we see as standard today. At this point, most games used a lobby system – you'd enter one, try to find a game and hope that the people in there weren't going to kick your ass for the next three hours.

"For *Halo 2* we had our sights set very high on networking," *Halo 2*'s technical lead Chris Butcher told *Edge* in 2007. "We thought about the great LAN parties you can have with *Halo*, and decided to try and recreate that awesome experience of having all your buddies over to play, but using Xbox

still uses. And it set an already outstanding multiplayer console up to become a platform that would dominate. Other exceptional multiplayer titles followed. *Crimson Skies* saw you dogfighting in... well, crimson skies. *TimeSplitters 2* offered some incredibly unique game modes. *Def Jam: Fight For NY* was one of the most unexpectedly brilliant four-player wrestling titles ever. The original Xbox lived up to its day-one multiplayer aspirations, backed by an online system that only improved for the Xbox 360 – partly thanks to one of the biggest multiplayer franchises of all time.

"Everything you add in for a player to do has to be thought about from the other player's perspective"

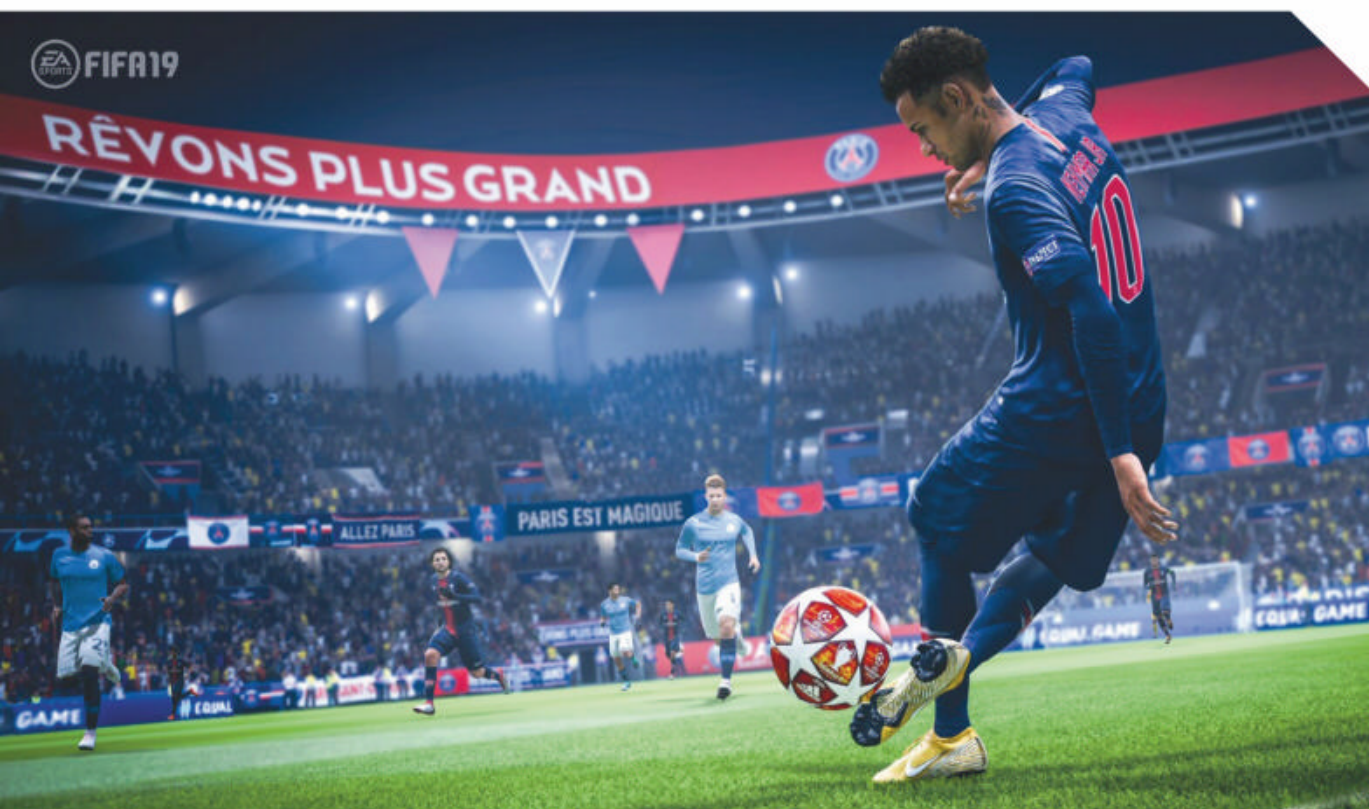
Live instead of having to lug consoles and televisions around."

Halo 2 gave us playlists. It included a party system to help you play with your friends. But most importantly, it had global, skill-based matchmaking. We take these things for granted now... and Bungie invented them.

We don't say this lightly: *Halo 2* changed multiplayer gaming. It set a benchmark for online titles, and it created a system that pretty much every multiplayer game today

"A great multiplayer game, or any great game in general, needs to pull you in quickly but have enough depth to make mastering it take a long time," says Geoff Smith, multiplayer design director at Infinity Ward. "It's that hope that if you just play a bit more, you will get better and win."

For many, no series has nailed competitive multiplayer quite as perfectly as *Call Of Duty*. It has consistently delivered tight, structured gameplay. And most importantly, you always



feel like you can win – at least with enough practice anyway.

“In [multiplayer games], you’re dealing with an ecosystem,” explains Smith. “Everything you add in for a player to feel and do has to be thought about from the other player’s perspective. It might feel great for a player to run at 300 miles an hour, but they’ll have to hit other players moving that fast as well. Depending on the game you are making, that could be very hard to do.”

Making individuals feel strong without making every player overpowered is the key to most multiplayer games’ success. Think about games like *Titanfall 2*, where you’re a puny, meaty human, running around trying to avoid getting stomped by giant robots piloted by competitors. Get the balancing wrong, and the whole premise falls apart.

Getting that formula just right is important, but keeping some consistency between each title is also essential. “Innovation is a bit of a double-edged sword,” says Smith, talking about the most recent *Modern Warfare*. “You need to push the design of a game to keep it feeling fresh and new, but changing it too much alienates some fans. [For *Modern Warfare*] we constantly had to toe a line between old and new. If we just added everything in from the older *Modern Warfare* games, we would have ended up with a game that felt like a remaster. If we made something so different that it didn’t push those nostalgia buttons, then that wouldn’t work either.”

It’s a lot to live up to. Those older titles – especially the first *Modern Warfare* in 2007 – set the bar for all multiplayer shooters. The fast-paced action and tight gunplay is a hallmark of the



series. For some competitors (we’re looking at you, *Medal Of Honor*), finding gameplay that felt as good as *COD* was near-impossible. Others, like *Battlefield*, swung things in other directions, focusing on destructible terrain and epic moments. *Bad Company 2* is a particular Xbox 360 highlight.

But competitive games go beyond shooters. Since 2014, *FIFA* has carved out an entire corner of the market with Ultimate Team, which sees players building their perfect squad – fantasy football style – and facing off in international leagues. And back when Xbox first launched, *Madden*’s online modes made it one of the biggest system-sellers of the generation.

Then there are the racing greats. Series like *Project Gotham*, *Burnout* and *Forza* give us finely tuned cars to drive (and sometimes encouraged us to crash into things on purpose). Ubisoft’s *Trials* series pits riders against each other in one of the best physics-based racers ever. And *Trials Rising*, the most recent title, includes one of the most creative co-op modes out there, putting two players in control of a single bike and



BRIGHT IDEAS

INNOVATIVE TITLES THAT TOOK THE CONCEPT OF MULTIPLAYER IN UNIQUE DIRECTIONS



Take notes

Dark Souls

In this RPG series, you can leave short messages for other players. Maybe you’ll gesture to a hidden path, or be a troll and write ‘jump here’ at a cliff edge. These notes provide comfort in a bleak world.



Forging ahead

Halo 3

How do you improve on an already excellent roster of arenas? You give the community the tools to create its own, of course. Bungie’s Forge editor was an accessible masterstroke of design.



Two minds

A Way Out

Josef Fares’ laser-focused desire to make his criminal adventure game co-op-only helped hammer home the relationship between its two main characters, Vincent and Leo.



Ship shape

Sea Of Thieves

Rare’s co-op nautical open world offers gamers a platform for creating epic stories. Grab a bunch of pals, hop aboard a ship and you’ll encounter an ocean of possibilities. And maybe a kraken...



If you build it...

Minecraft

Want to build a house? Tame some animals? Hunt an Enderman? How about we go to Hell? No other multiplayer game offers the freedom of *Minecraft*, and it’s likely you’ll never run out of stuff to do.



challenging them to remain good friends until the end of the course.

"I'm a big fan of games where success is yielded by teams who work well together as a unit, rather than teams who just happen to have extremely skilled individual players," says Phil Duncan, co-founder of Ghost Town games – the developer behind the *Overcooked* series.

Overcooked is a classic example of a multiplayer game that makes you co-ordinate. "We decided what we really wanted to play was a game where players truly had to work together – where one player couldn't just carry the team," explains Duncan. "And where communication was a big part of the experience. Cooking just seemed to fit that brief perfectly, so we ran with it!"

Better together

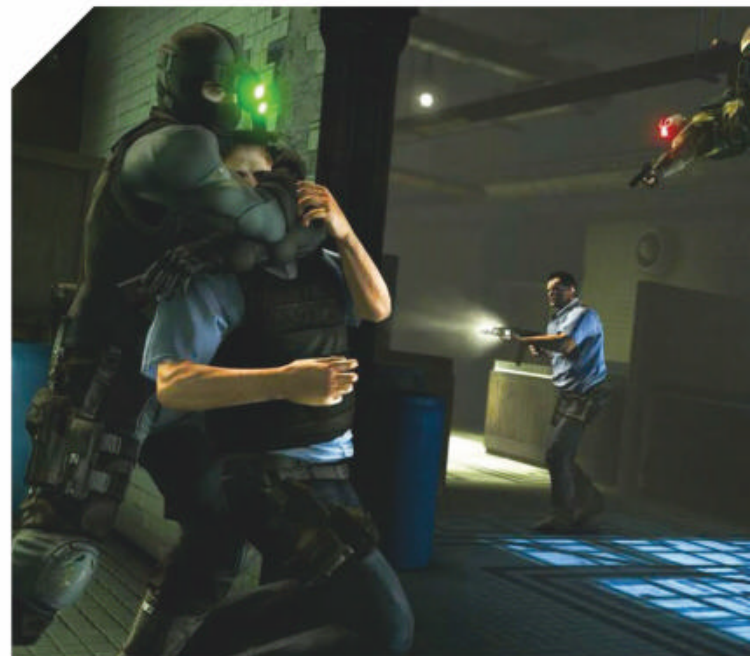
Like all multiplayer titles, co-op games began life on the couch. Sitting next to a friend and discussing your next move in titles like *Diablo III*, solving puzzles in *Portal 2* and the *LEGO* games, or just experiencing a story together in games like *A Way Out* is still one of

the very best gaming experiences. But thanks to Xbox Live, you don't need to invite two friends over to clear a *Destiny* raid, and joining a squad in *Halo* is as simple as hitting a button. But designing a great co-op game presents unique challenges.

"For *Overcooked* we spent a lot of time thinking about what the players were doing outside of the game," explains Duncan. "Any time we introduced a new mechanic or level, we asked ourselves what experience we wanted to give the player. Players interact with games differently when they're playing co-operatively – you have to allow for the fact they're going to spend a lot of time talking to each other and not necessarily following everything that's occurring on-screen.

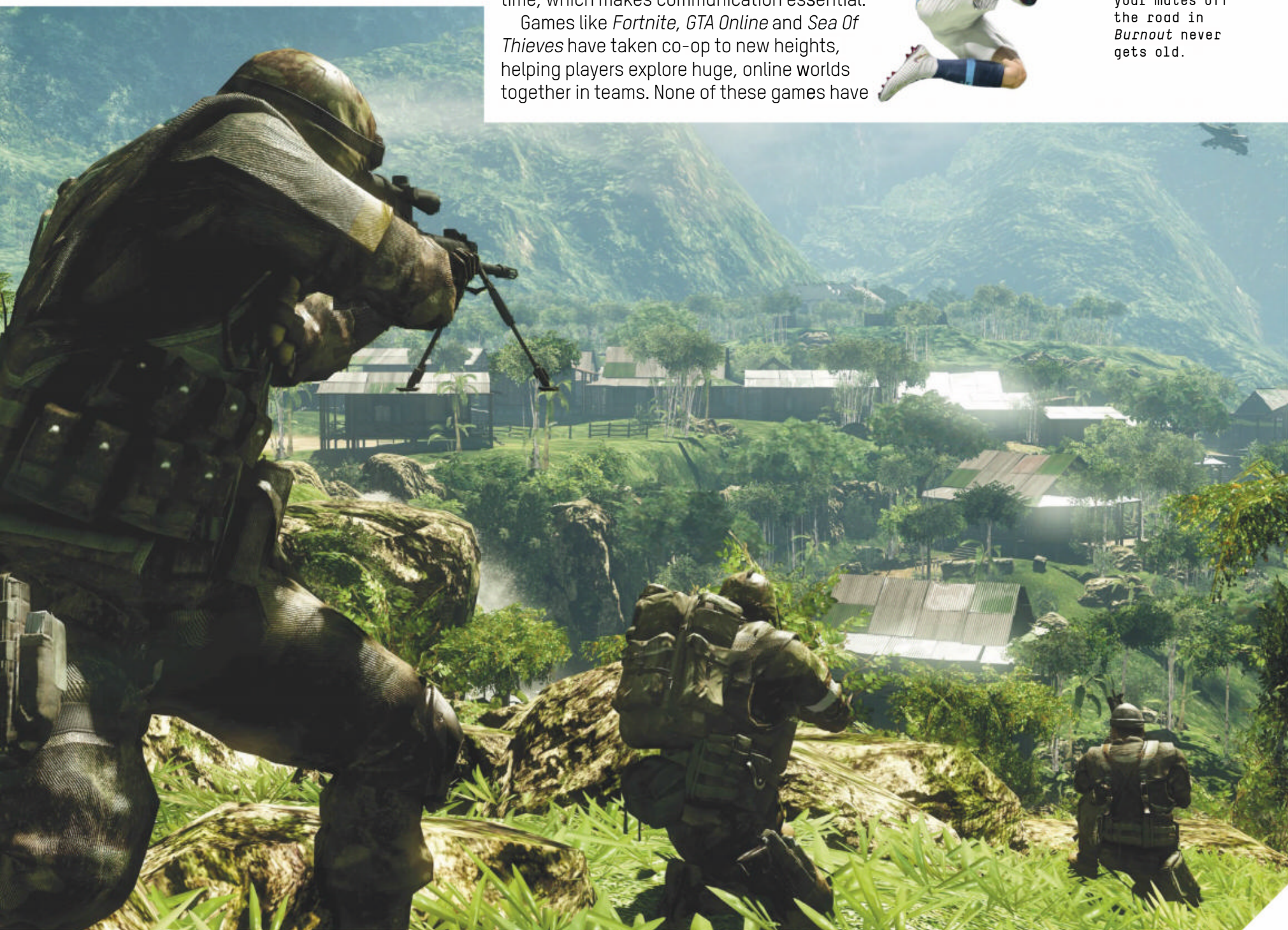
"Recently, I've been playing *Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime*," Duncan continues. "It's a fantastic co-operative game that really encourages communication and co-ordination. I enjoy it so much." It's a great example. The game puts you and a friend in a spaceship, with controls spread across multiple decks. You can only activate one at a time, which makes communication essential.

Games like *Fortnite*, *GTA Online* and *Sea Of Thieves* have taken co-op to new heights, helping players explore huge, online worlds together in teams. None of these games have



ABOVE *Pandora Tomorrow* was an important game for early Xbox Live.

RIGHT Running your mates off the road in *Burnout* never gets old.





"We spent a lot of time thinking about what the players were doing outside of the game"

any real, linear story elements; instead, you build your own adventures. And because they're live services, those stories stay fresh.

"Because *Sea Of Thieves* is an evolving game, we have the freedom to revisit islands to take advantage of new mechanics," says Mike Chapman, Rare's creative director. "Areas on islands which may have once been overlooked by players could take on a new meaning based on added features or elements of lore. If we have a great idea that we know players will love, we can bring it to the game when the time is right."

Express yourself

Those three titles are also the perfect way to illustrate the final piece of the multiplayer puzzle. "I think what makes for a great multiplayer game is one that can allow for players' personalities to be highlighted during gameplay," says Geoff Goodman, lead hero designer for *Overwatch*. "This means personality socially, but also gameplay styles and unique perspectives on the game."

Personalisation has been essential in multiplayer since the MMORPG *World Of*

Warcraft launched on PC in 2004. In *GTA Online*, it means spending too much on a car and painting it bright orange. In *Sea Of Thieves* it means tailoring your ship and pirate get-up. And in *Minecraft*, it means building the most pointlessly extravagant mansion you can think of, and then watching your mates steal bits and pieces of it over time.

While some titles offer character creation tools, or 'skins' for players who want to show off their colours, others offer unique 'heroes'. But giving every character specific traits and abilities causes its own problems. "*Overwatch* heroes are built to all have various strengths and weaknesses, which is a big part of why teamplay is so important," explains Goodman. But buffing a hero by removing weaknesses or nerfing one by removing a strength risks stripping them of their unique identities. "Instead, we tend to focus on making sure every hero is powerful and fun within their role, despite their weaknesses."

Great multiplayer gaming remains at the heart of the Xbox experience. Live changed the industry for the better, popularising online play. *Halo 2*'s huge innovations evolved



multiplayer gaming forever. And through it all, sitting down with mates and blasting through a story mode in split-screen co-op never stopped being awesome.

There's no doubt that all of this will continue with the Xbox Series X. *Halo* could once again show us the future of multiplayer gaming with *Infinite*. We may be hooking up 16 controllers to the same console and playing 16-way split-screen modes on giant 4K TVs, squinting to see what's happening in our tiny square. Whatever happens, there's no doubt that Xbox will maintain its hard-earned crown as the multiplayer monarch. ■

10 best multiplayer games

FROM SHOOTERS TO KITCHEN CHAOS, THESE TITLES ARE BEST PLAYED WITH FRIENDS

Playing's better with friends, so they say. But the people that said that never got shot in the face during a tense deathmatch by their so-called best mate who's not only camping we *sweartogodhe'stotallycheating...* wait, sorry, lost ourselves there. Where were we? Oh yes, so as you've just read over the previous pages, our favourite gaming console was very much made with multiplayer fun in mind, and the Xbox has given us so many great multiplayer experiences, co-operatively or competitively. Here we round up our very favourite multiplayer classics, both split-screen and online, in no particular order. We've spent many, many hours playing these games with mates – and they still keep giving.



10 HALO 2

Have we mentioned *Halo 2* yet? We feel like we maybe didn't talk about it enough. This is the game that literally set the foundations of online gaming that the entire industry builds on today. It created concepts like skill-based matchmaking and made them the standard to which every other game had to live up to. It's the godfather of the modern online shooter. Oh, and it's bloody good fun, too. Incredible map design paired with fantastic physics and a wondrous set of weapons and vehicles make multiplayer a joy to explore – especially for those that fell in love with *Halo: Combat Evolved*. And don't get us started on Ivory Tower. We could talk about that map for hours.

09

TIMESPLITTERS 2

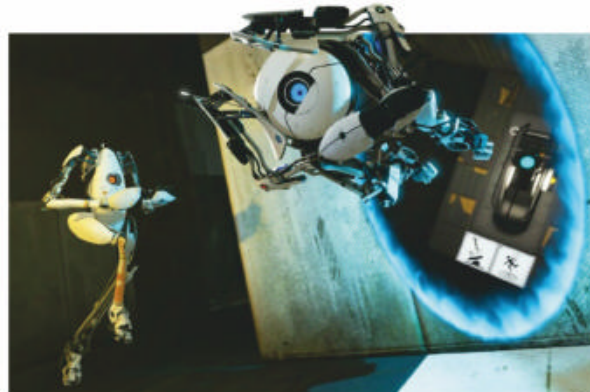
When the brains behind the N64's legendary *GoldenEye 007* shooter left Rare to form Free Radical, there was notable excitement about what they might create. The answer was *TimeSplitters*, a series about time-travelling aliens. The single-player in this sequel is great fun, but the multiplayer is outstanding. You can play as a tiny monkey (which is generally accepted as cheating among friends). You can lob bricks at each other. And there are 16 game modes to choose from, including Shrink, which sees your character getting smaller as you slip down the leaderboard. If it was this good in local split-screen, imagine what it could've done on Xbox Live. Sadly, the series never got a proper shot at modern multiplayer.



05

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

Few games will have you frantically shouting at your TV more often than *Left 4 Dead 2*. You could present us with a face mask full of spiders, and we'd still be less scared than those times we heard a teammate scream, "OH GOD I WALKED INTO THE WITCH!" The first title is great fun, but the sequel turned things up so much the dial came right off in its hand. There are more weapons, more epic levels and more types of zombie for you to face-off against in the co-op campaign, while the versus mode returns and sees players controlling the zombies and trying to eat the humans' faces right off. So good.



04

PORTAL 2

We're just going to say it: *Portal 2* is the best puzzle game ever made. The single-player contains some of the most memorable levels (and characters) of any game, and the co-op modes are just as good. And that's because there's no real divide between the players here. The levels are specifically designed for two people, and they both have vital roles to play. It means you both feel equally useful every time you complete a level – so there's no such thing as 'Player 1' and 'Player 2'. Plus, with an entirely unique story and plenty of GLaDOS gold to listen to as you make your way through the excellent puzzle chambers, it's far more than an afterthought.

03

SEA OF THIEVES

Rare's goal with *Sea Of Thieves* has always been to create a place where players can make their own stories. For a multiplayer title, we think that's a pretty nifty idea. In multiplayer games, you might remember the odd storyline or boss you overcame. What you're more likely to laugh about for years, though, is watching your mate get punched off a cliff, or accidentally explode 50 barrels of gunpowder, or get murdered from behind by a skeleton just as they were munching a healing banana. Who needs to go outside and have adventures when you can literally be a pirate and steal gold from the comfort of your couch?



08

OVERWATCH

Blizzard's hero shooter does so much so well. The modes are simple, but great fun. The balancing is close to perfect, whatever the *Overwatch* subreddit might say. And the heroes are well-designed and oozing with character. Bring this all together in a tight, tactical shooter, and you have a recipe for success. Perhaps the best part is that the game is always evolving. With a whopping 31 unique characters to choose from, it'll take hundreds of hours of play before you've even come close to mastering them all. And by the time you have, Blizzard will have added extra maps, modes and at least one more hero to the roster. It's why we keep going back for more.



07

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

How could we possibly choose just one *Call Of Duty* game to include on this list? Well, we had to because it's literally our jobs, and the arguments were beginning to get so heated we started to worry that upper management were going to drop a tactical nuke on us. In the end, we settled on probably the most-loved of all the *COD* titles. What makes it great is... well, the fact it's actually fairly basic. There are only three killstreaks – a UAV, an airstrike and a helicopter – and while there are plenty of weapons, you can only add one attachment to each. The perks system is fairly basic and easy to understand, too. Everything is beautifully balanced, and it makes for a game so addictive that it kickstarted *COD*'s domination of the shooter genre.

06

MINECRAFT

Right, that's enough shooters for now. Let's talk farming, building and riding minecarts. No Xbox multiplayer best-of list is complete without one of the most popular games of the last decade – not just because it's fun, but because it's important in the Xbox story. *Minecraft* isn't just a game; it's not just a platform where you can fight monsters with friends. It's a place for people to just hang out and chill together. You might work on a creative project, like recreating Master Chief's helmet at a 1,000 per cent scale. You could jump into a premade map and visit a historical location. Or something else entirely. It's a world of your making, and that's why it's special.



02

OVERCOOKED

Listen, we're pretty good in a kitchen. We can make a mean cheese sandwich, but *Overcooked* tests even *our* gourmet skills. Who knew a game about chopping and cooking things could get quite so animated? As Phil Duncan, Ghost Town Games' co-founder explains: "One of the things that surprised us was just how much more enjoyment we could get out of the level layouts and mechanics themselves, rather than from the recipes players were cooking. As soon as we introduced levels which would actively work to divide the player, or force them to rethink their strategy on the fly, we knew we'd hit upon something pretty exciting."



01

APEX LEGENDS

Okay, so we didn't include *Fortnite* on this list, but that's because we prefer *Apex Legends*' gunplay, map design and heroes to Epic's undeniably excellent shooter. In *Apex*, we get a lot of the things that make Respawn's *Titanfall* series so good, but in a big ol' map with unique characters to master. The recent remix of game modes and maps has kept things fresh a year on from the game's surprise launch, and a steady drip of additional content is promised going forward. The high-speed mix of short and long-range gameplay makes this a battle royale title we just can't stop playing. Hey Respawn, please can you also make *Titanfall 3*? The second one almost made this list...



REVIEWS

REVIEW

Your gaming month sorted with
our definitive reviews

Rugby was named after a British school where one time this kid cheated at soccer by picking the ball up and running it into the goal



How we score:

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

- 10 A gaming masterpiece
- 9 An essential slice of brilliance
- 8 Give it a whirl and you won't regret it
- 7 Some minor flaws but still good
- 6 Solid, but not setting any loins aflame
- 5 Average. Not good, but not terrible either
- 4 Honks just a bit
- 3 Look away, lest ye be tainted
- 2 Angry-makingly bad
- 1 Just... no...

Titles with this symbol are on Game Preview, so while they aren't finished, you can still find out if they're worth playing.



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

Co-op shooters are definitely our thing. Especially this month, as we have yet another stylish, schlocky shooter from those splendid chaps at Rebellion.

Zombie Army 4: Dead War does almost everything right, not least in providing us with the perfect shooter fodder - Nazi zombies! Read more on page 74! It's gone all rugby mad round here lately, what with the recent Six Nations tournament and the release of Eko's **Rugby 20**. Poor Meiks has really hurt himself doing a haka, and now he's got funny-shaped balls. Read our review of the running, scrumming and kicking sim on page 78! You may already have read our Big Interview with Joe Mad, creator of the *Darksiders* series, back on page 56. This month we review his latest game, **Darksiders: Genesis**, a smart, funny isometric dungeon-crawler featuring a couple of Horsemen Of The Apocalypse, War and Strife, on page 80! **Mosaic** (p84) is a lovely looking indie game about bleak existentialism, but that's a lot more fun than it sounds. **The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics** (p87) is a turn-based RPG based on the recent Netflix reboot, while smart-looking city-builder **Dawn Of Man** (p89) takes us back to quite early, at least 6.30am, in the evolution of humanity. Finally, **Music Racer** is a bright, loud rhythm-based racer – find out more on page 91.



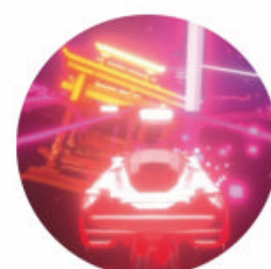
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Rebellion Developments is the owner of classic British sci-fi comic *2000AD*



PUBLISHER REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS / DEVELOPER REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £39.99/\$49.99

Zombie Army 4: Dead War

SCHLOCKY SHOOTER HITS ITS TARGET, BUT RUNS OUT OF AMMO **CHRIS BURKE**

We love a good horde mode here at OXM. In fact, this writer just got through finishing the final Very Hard tier of *Resident Evil*

Revelations 2's Raid Mode and was so happy to find – yesss! – there's *another*, even harder tier called Code Red. Similarly to that game, and in the best traditions of horde modes from *Gears* to *Call of Duty's* Zombies, the latest game from Rebellion involves surviving waves of zombies and related monsters in a series of well-designed arenas that funnel the undead toward you like a relentless line of morons just asking to have their heads exploded.

Between the preceding *Zombie Army Trilogy* and 2018's fun *Strange Brigade*, British developer Rebellion has had plenty of practice shots at making *this* specific game. Safe to say that, with *Zombie Army 4*, the company has more or less perfected the co-op horde

ABOVE Pistols will help you at close range, and you have a melee attack if the undead come in for a cuddle.

LEFT These Nazis may look intimidating, but they're just fodder for your machine gun.

shooter. Really, in that respect, it's faultless. From there, it's only downhill as far as this review goes, though, especially if you've clocked that it's only scored an eight out of ten at the end of it. Where the aforementioned horde modes are just that – *modes* – the question is, does a full-priced game that consists almost entirely of surviving waves of enemies really provide enough to keep you playing?

The Reich stuff

First, the really good bits. Enemies just don't get any more satisfying to kill in huge numbers and dismember in bloody and violent ways than Nazi zombies. That's Nazis who have become zombies, by the way, rather than zombies who have decided to become Nazis. Although, actually, a couple of them do look like they've visited Prince Harry's favourite fancy dress outfitter *after* they died. Either way, taking the most despised

bastards of the last century and removing any remaining sliver of humanity surely creates the most perfect and satisfyingly squishy shooter-fodder ever.

Like *Strange Brigade* before it, *Zombie Army 4* is overloaded with character – from the choice of quirky heroes, complete with top-notch voice acting, to the '80s B-movie horror aesthetic. It's not just the premise or the fantastic old-school synthwave soundtrack that's nostalgic, either. With more than a nod to classic old-school gaming, Rebellion crams its games with over-the-top action, explosions, gore, a ton of pick-ups and score bonuses, all of it dressing a brilliantly simple and addictive gameplay loop.

Visually, it's a lovely game, too. The locations are beautifully designed, from the canals of post-apocalyptic Venice to a Croatian zombie-zoo, via any number of on-fire European train yards. Character designs and



animations are nice, while the gore is almost stunning – if there’s a more splattery game with more detailed and hilarious dismemberments, we’ll eat our own brains.

Weapons are satisfyingly responsive and punchy – and access to different firearm types and mods are the principal way in which the game’s pacing and tactical elements make each session feel unique. There are a pleasing variety of different models of WW2-era handguns, shotguns, machine guns and rifles. Shotguns or machine guns are interchangeable as your secondary weapon, but in addition to three available gun slots, you have a couple reserved for

explosives – various types of mines and grenades. You can pick up heavy machine guns, rocket launchers, flamethrowers etc for occasional use until the ammo runs out. These are sometimes lying around, or dropped by enemy ‘specialists’. There are also mounted machine guns at key points in each map. And there are traps. Oh yes, and they’re really quite brilliant.

Resistance engineers have set up mechanical devices at various points in each level – shoot the target on the trap to activate them, and watch the ensuing carnage. One particularly satisfying machination causes a Spitfire propellor to start up, pulling zombies in and chopping them

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A co-op-based horde shooter with Nazi zombies.

WHAT’S IT LIKE?

Strange Brigade, *Sniper Elite*, or any recent game by Rebellion.

WHO’S IT FOR?

Fans of horde modes and third-person shooters, particularly those involving Nazis, zombies or Nazi zombies.

into chum. And speaking of which, there’s an undead shark that you can get to eat the horde.

Dead’s army

Enemy types mostly follow the usual zombie tropes, but there’s certainly plenty of variety within each mob to cause you to think on your feet. Your regular shuffling zombies are joined by Engineers sporting welding masks to make headshots more difficult; crawling Creepers and Enraged zombies with glowing red eyes come at you quickly; Suiciders are strapped up with explosives. Armoured Giants are clad in a scrapyard’s worth of iron to make them difficult to destroy with bullets; there are big fat titans that take a bit of downing, too. Other more sentient undead know how to use weapons, such as Grenadiers which target you with explosives from behind shields. Demon zombies summon up what can only be described as a fast-moving mess of scrambled darkness – fail to shoot this, or the demon that’s conjured it, and it will catch you and literally suck the life from you. There are also zombie tanks – that’s not a tank driven by zombies, it’s a tank that *is* a zombie. Yes, even the Panzers are undead.

You will quickly establish your tactic in any given level. Arenas are designed so that there are no easily



LEFT Stupid zombies! Look, they’re actually queuing up to get blasted in the head.

Rebellion also made the OG Xbox games *Judge Dredd: Dredd Vs Death* and *Rogue Trooper*



LEFT A red barrel with a warning sign? Gee... what will happen if we shoot it?

FAR LEFT Oh if Jaws wasn't scary enough, he's now freaking undead. Great.



defensible positions, and you need to watch your back if you're playing solo; cooperatively at least you can watch each other's blind spots. Some levels, like subway tunnels, funnel zombies conveniently – but since some Nazis materialise out of nowhere, you can never assume you won't be attacked from behind. Sniping from a distance is the most effective and enjoyable way to dispatch the undead. Pressing the right bumper will put you into the aim-assisted Empty Lung mode (holding your breath). Gory kill-cam cutscenes activate from the most spectacular shots, so you can watch a zombie's testicles get exploded (those x-rays are really graphic). To add to your destructive fun, attachments found in crates can modify your gun temporarily with things like explosive rounds.

There are ammo crates to refill one or all of your weapon types, strategically placed in each area, so you don't need to worry about bullets for too long. If you find yourself running on empty, you have a metered melee attack, and you can perform takedowns on stunned zombies, too – these, and stomping downed-but-not-out undead with LB will gift you ammo and health. Med-kits are available from each safe room where you start the level, but you can only carry one at a time. Also in the safe

WHO'S CO-OPERATING?

The joy of co-op gaming is beating your mates. You heard. Sure, you're all working together to survive, but you really want to get more points than them, don't you? Every kill is worth a certain number of points, so if you can rack up headshots like a GIF of a cute kitten getting social media likes, the game applies a combo multiplier to your score. Once you start getting ahead of each other by potentially huge numbers, that's when the game gets just a little more friendship-testing.

“Arenas are designed so that there are no easily defensible positions”

rooms are workbenches where you can permanently mod your weapons with attachments found in the levels.

Soldier on

Co-op play is where horde mode games really come alive (or dead, if friendly fire is on). It's almost certainly where this shooter's longevity is more assured. The story mode, fun while it lasts, doesn't really add all that much to the game's jump-in horde mode. There's little really in the way of exposition or narrative thrust, it's more a series of maps strung together by a bit of dialogue and a few simple puzzle-based progression elements.

And this is where the game lacks a little bite, excuse the zombie pun. While every aspect of its core gameplay is embellished to create a loud, dumb and mostly slick arcade experience, *Zombie Army 4* lacks real substance. Now, depending on your expectations of a game called 'Zombie

Army', this really may not matter. It's a fun, schlocky, undemanding and at times downright cheesy shooter that's easy to jump into. However, it's never going to command the kind of gaming commitment of a *Red Dead Redemption*, a *Witcher* or even a *Resident Evil*. The slightly repetitious nature of the gameplay means that while it's great for a while, it starts to run out of ammo some time after you've headshotted the millionth zombie. Sure, there are perks and skill trees, but for all that the game throws at us, we're left a little unsatisfied.

So here's the conundrum. Is a shooter great because it aims for the kneecaps and never misses, or should it be aiming for the brain? And are we just thinking too deeply about all this? Whatever. Let's just say that *Zombie Army 4* may be far from the best game you will ever play, but for the game that it is, it does play great. ■



XBOX
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

OXM VERDICT

An extended co-op horde shooter that's action-packed, silly, fun and a bit shallow.

8



PUBLISHER BIGBEN INTERACTIVE / DEVELOPER EKO SOFTWARE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £44.99/\$49.99

Rugby 20

FULL OF EFFORT, BUT STRUGGLES TO CONVERT WHERE IT COUNTS **BEN WILSON**

No sport is tougher to translate into a videogame than rugby union. Two teams of 15 players on the field, all of whom have bespoke roles, slinging around a funny-shaped ball, with the nuances of rucks, mauls and line-outs to consider: little wonder even EA's megabucks haven't gone anywhere near the sport for 13 years. As such, you have to credit Eko Software for even chancing its arm at such a complex pastime. Sadly, games aren't purchased on effort alone.

Those who open their wallets in exchange for *Rugby 20* receive a true oddity in return. Because, well, it's a little bit crap – yet also kind of unputdownable. A bit like sour sweets: with every bite you wince, and yet still you find yourself reaching for another, time after time.

A stubborn battle with the game's mechanics is one of the things that keeps you coming back for more. Clunky passing means that it's often

difficult to whip the ball along your line, from fly-half through the centres and out to the wing, without being chased down by an opponent, or conceding a knock-on. Yet that means the occasions where it does work, and you score after getting the ball out wide before dancing around the last man, feel truly joyous.

Rucking hell

It's a similar story with rucks: every match centres on you moving downfield by getting tackled, swamping the ball and recycling possession. It's laborious. Yet every so often, when you whip the ball out early and nip through a gap in the defence, or overload one side of the line in order to score a try, the triumphant reward just about justifies the painful build-up. Maybe it's an attempt to mimic the real-life battering and bruising that players go through on a Saturday afternoon? Hmm, likely not. It sort of works, though.

Nigh-on every match, regardless of team and individual abilities, plays

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A rugby game (duh) featuring a decent selection of licences, but lacking England and Australia.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Full of broken stuff, and yet curiously amusing to play – for a week or two.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Oval-ball diehards who wouldn't be seen dead near a copy of *FIFA* or *PES*.

out as described earlier. Ruck, pass, tackle. Ruck, pass, tackle. Ruck, pass, tackle. It's a shame because scrums and mauls feature some neat mechanics, such as thrusting both sticks upwards to push, and it's not as through there's a shortage of sides to choose between. Four domestic competitions featuring 56 squads are included alongside 20 national teams. England, Australia and New Zealand feature fake names and kits, but again the lack of discernible differentiation in abilities mean that their genericness is of little consequence.

Most fun – and nonsensical – is the kicking game. In the real sport, a perfectly placed punt downfield can flip defence into attack, while a niftily timed grubber on the run, especially when one-on-one with an opposition full-back, can be the difference between scoring a try and being held up outside the 22.

Rugby 20's kicking mechanics turn a game that wants to be a serious simulator into a playground frenzy. Hold down A for half a second

French dev Eko Software started out in 1999, and is also responsible for *Handball 17* and *Warhammer: Chaosbane*



LEFT The lack of a transfer market and no way to advance past one year is disappointing.

“Everything goes a bit Benny Hill, with players haring in all directions”

to unleash a humdinger of a punt downfield, with minimal backlift, or B to trigger a grubber with barely a change in the running animation. On both occasions everything goes a bit Benny Hill, with players haring in all directions, and zero way of tracking which of your team-mates are onside. Then watch the AI return in kind, triggering the same maddening issues on defence. It’s all a hilarious pantomime, and bears little resemblance to the actual sport.

Get your kicks

Get used to *Rugby 20*’s foibles and longevity comes in the form of a full league season – at least in theory. Various tactics and set plays can be tinkered with between matches, and there’s a degree of pleasure in rotating your squad to keep players fresh for each fixture. But the lack of stat tracking quickly eliminates any sense of individual achievement, and there’s no transfer market or contract negotiations to add a layer of depth. Finish the season, and that’s your lot.

FAR LEFT The action here is fast, frantic and occasionally impossible to follow.

RIGHT Character models fall way short of contemporary genre expectations.

CAULIFLOWER TEARS

Presentation is critical with sports games – and sadly, it’s *Rugby 20*’s biggest failing. Player models wouldn’t look out of place on an Xbox 360, stadiums lack atmosphere and the commentary from Nick Mullins and Ben Kay is... painfully... stitched together... much like this... sentence. There’s also no edit mode, meaning you’re stuck with everything exactly the way it comes. Even modest-budget efforts such as *A0 Tennis 2* and *Cricket 19* are finding their way with comprehensive editing and sharing options. This staggers awfully in comparison.



Game over. Again rendering the entire experience futile.

The other option for long-term commitment is My Squad mode, where you build up to four fantasy sides for online or offline play. It’s clearly influenced by *FIFA*’s hugely successful Ultimate Team mode, with all in-game actions scoring currency which can then be dropped on booster packs or player cards. The team-building aspect makes for a pleasant way to pass a couple of hours – we’re delighted with our back row of Manoa Vosawai, Jarrad Butler and Paul Boyle – but again, attributes mean so little in *Rugby 20* that after a handful of games the lure of finding new players is lost. It’s a tidy idea, but it’s just half-heartedly implemented.

That last sentence is a potted summary of the entire game: other

than an overabundance of rucks there’s nothing here to hate, yet everything feels half-baked. Perhaps that’s inevitable when you have a small-scale game studio trying to develop a complex sports simulator. But it means there’s no way to recommend this as more than an egg-shaped curiosity. Trying times, by both name and nature. ■



OXM VERDICT

The wait for a top-notch rugby game goes on – but this is okay, despite its flaws.



In the Christian New Testament, the Four Horsemen are actually named Conquest, War, Famine and Death

PUBLISHER THQ NORDIC / DEVELOPER AIRSHIP SYNDICATE / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £32.99/\$39.99

Darksiders Genesis

TO HELL WITH STRIFE, WAR AND THE ISOMETRIC CAMERA ANGLE **REBECCA STOW**



Famously, there are Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse but, until now, only three *Darksiders* games. A fourth

game featuring the fourth Horseman as a playable character was perhaps inevitable, then, but what is surprising is how accessible *Darksiders Genesis* is to both long-time fans and newcomers alike.

A prequel to the original *Darksiders*, *Genesis* focuses on Strife and his brother War. Together, the two Horsemen are tasked with thwarting the Demon King Lucifer, a Big Bad intent on upsetting the sacred balance of Hell. Such a plot is pretty standard fare for the *Darksiders* series, but what is new is the isometric, top-down viewpoint. It's quite a departure from the third-person action roots of the previous games. However, it absolutely works, perfectly showcasing the game's beautiful

worlds, smart level design and hinting just the right amount at hidden paths and shortcuts.

Fight like hell

Genesis features levels occupied by swathes of demonic foes, with frenetic combat being the main attraction of the 15-hour campaign. Controlling both Strife and War (you can switch between the two at will) is simple, fluid and intuitive from the off. You can take on the worst beasts that Hell has to offer by favouring just one of the brothers, but *Genesis* is really built around the mechanic of swapping between Strife and War, utilising their strengths and switching at the opportune moment.

Strife is the more agile of the two, armed with a pair of powerful pistols that work best from long range. Different types of ammunition offer unique effects, and charged shots dish out a ton of pain. Though Strife is swift and nimble, some situations

short
cut

WHAT IS IT?

A hack-and-slash adventure through Hell with two Horsemen Of The Apocalypse.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

The *Diablo* games, but with a lot more brotherly banter and horse-mounted combat.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Fans of the core *Darksiders* games, or anyone who loves a good isometric action game.

really require a heavy hitter, and that's when War comes into play. Armed with Chouseater (his signature blade) he is the best fit for close combat. With powerful strikes and much more bulk, this hulky Horseman offers what Strife lacks. Both characters feel great to control though, and they're different enough to make switching out both strategically advantageous and refreshing in terms of gameplay feel.

While combat is at the heart of *Genesis*, exploration and puzzle elements are also present. Every level is beautifully designed, with settings ranging from icy wildernesses to boiling lava pits. Hidden paths lead to secret puzzles that grant the player rare items, potions and, at times, keys to doors that extend the duration of each chapter. There are even platforming sections, and these serve as welcome distractions from the combat. In fact, the levels are so vast and varied that you may feel a strong desire to return to earlier chapters,

“Controlling both Strife and War is simple, fluid and intuitive from the off”

FAR LEFT Strife is the polar opposite to War. He shoots guns and has a sense of humour.



ABOVE If you place Cores strategically into the skill tree, you can unlock matching bonus abilities.

LEFT The *Darksiders* style has transitioned well to an isometric view.



utilising new weapons and tools to carve out paths that were previously blocked off.

Horsing around

Genesis boasts the same quirky humour the *Darksiders* series is known for, with War and Strife bantering throughout most of the game. Strife is easily the funnier of the pair, often joking about the mission and the bizarre characters the brothers meet along the way. War is more of a blunt meathead, often failing to understand his brother’s quips which, of course, only makes them funnier.

As you carve your way through each level, fallen foes will drop loot and Cores. Collecting these items is essential for upgrading and enhancing War’s and Strife’s stats and abilities via a skill tree. Cores come in two types: Minor Cores and the more elite Major Cores that you’ll collect from fallen bosses and stronger enemies. Adding these Cores to the skill

HELL RAISERS

Hell getting too hot to handle? Luckily, *Darksiders Genesis* incorporates co-op play, allowing you to fight with a friend through public matchmaking or via local co-op. Simply locate a Summoning Stone in any level and you’ll be able to play with both War and Strife on the same screen. Not only does this alleviate some of the challenge, but it allows War and Strife to play off each other’s strengths, with one brother/player taking the lead in the situations they’re best suited to.

tree will grant new enhancements, including increased health, gains in attack power and speeding up your accumulation of Wrath Power. Building up the latter results in the option to use special abilities during combat, for example War can summon a formation of rocky blades from the ground. These powers are as visually striking as they are brutal, and they’re immensely satisfying to unleash.

While *Darksiders Genesis* runs smoothly and is graphically beautiful, there is one major flaw. Because of the fixed camera angle and isometric style, your character frequently disappears behind scenery such as rocky outcrops and looming masonry. When this happens you do get a nice highlight indicating just where your character is on-screen, but, unfortunately, the enemies in the game receive no such treatment. This can result in you taking damage and having no idea where your attackers are. If you’re feeling generous, you

could say that this is a feature omitted to make you play more strategically, but in practice it just feels like a frustrating oversight.

Overall, however, *Darksiders Genesis* is a lot of fun. The game takes a new approach to a decade-old franchise, melding the much-loved *Darksiders* combat with a new visual style. Being a prequel also helps make the game accessible to new players, but there is certainly enough of that classic *Darksiders* feel to please long-term fans as well. ■



OXM VERDICT

A bold reinvention, and one of, if not the best, *Darksiders* games to date.





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7th Sector is almost entirely the work of one man, Russian developer Sergey Noskov

PUBLISHER SOMETIMES YOU / DEVELOPER SERGEY NOSKOV / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £16.74/\$19.99

7th Sector

AN INDIE GAME THAT SWIMS AGAINST THE CURRENT ALEX SPENCER

We've controlled our fair share of videogame heroes in our time. Bombermen, walking teacups, Spartans in

both senses of the word... but a bolt of electricity? That's a new one. *7th Sector* opens with your protagonist escaping the static prison of a detuned TV and setting off for a life on the rails. Or, rather, the cables. Because, again, you're playing as a spark of energy.

Controls are initially limited to steering left or right along a wire – the world's first '1D platformer'. This evolves as you push onward, but it's weirdly compelling from the jump, because these cables run through the foreground of a futuristic world, realised with a surprising level of detail. All the events you'd usually, in your soft human brain, think of as important – murders, arrests and robot uprisings – play out in the background. Imagine one of the *Cyberpunk 2077* trailers, except Keanu and all that were in fuzzy soft focus so you could better study each speck of filth and flickering neon tube up-close, and you should have some idea of what it's like to play *7th Sector*.

Cyber one-day

Cyberpunk is a clear influence on the game's setting, with billboards and flying cars off in the distance that look like they could have been ripped straight out of *Blade Runner*. You'll likely spot a splash of *Half-Life* here, a touch of *Fallout*-style retrofuturism there. We're not sure how well it all fits



LEFT People do exist in this cyberpunk world, but you might need to pay close attention to actually spot them.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

Just your standard cable-surfing cyberpunk adventure. Yes, we know, *another* one.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Indie classics *Inside* and *Limbo* meet *Blade Runner* and an electrician's handbook.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Ghosts in the machine, hackers, bright sparks.

“Low-key sinister synths pulse under everything you do”

together – old-timey gramophones sit alongside holograms, neon kanji alongside Cold War soviet posters – but it's done in stylish enough fashion that you probably won't mind. Similar to Playdead's *Inside*, another game that keeps its dystopian setting in the middle-distance, *7th Sector* is full of moody silhouettes and smoky lighting. Low-key sinister synths pulse under everything you do, and even if its world does grab imagery from other sources like some kind of cybernetic magpie, the perspective keeps it feeling novel. Because, again, you're just a spark of electricity.

At least, you are at first. As you travel through the world, hopping from frayed cable ends and overloading junction boxes, you get more and more control over it. You start out switching fuses to, say, power down a fan or open a door. Later, you'll find yourself jumping into a remote control to steer a nearby toy car. Like a hermit crab constantly upsizing its home, you move from one shell to another: a BB-8-style ball droid; one of those terrifying Boston Dynamics robot dogs

that are going to be the end of us all; some other forms we won't spoil, because they provide the game's finest moments.

Unfortunately, some of these bodies fit less comfortably than others. This is a game that feels most at home offering the kinds of challenges you'd find in an escape room – maths puzzles and shape matching – but as you take on a physical form, these give way to sections of platforming, action and, god help us all, stealth. As in Playdead's games, *7th Sector* will frequently kill you without warning, but it lacks the same precision, so it's hard to tell if you did something wrong, or the game is messing with you, or it just bugged out. There are some great set-pieces here, but their charm rubs off when you're playing through them for the dozenth time. It's a shame – there's the bright spark of something truly great here, but it's too often extinguished by poor execution and frustrating repetition. ■



XBOX
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

OXM VERDICT

A charming cyberpunk indie oddity that's held back by some poor design choices.

6



Mosaic is published by Raw Fury, the team behind such indies as *Dandara* and *Atomicrops*

PUBLISHER RAW FURY / DEVELOPER KRILLBITE STUDIO / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £15.99/\$19.99

Mosaic

ALL AROUND ME ARE FAMILIAR OFFICE SPACES AARON POTTER



Living in the golden age of indies means we're frequently given the chance to visit sweeping, fantastical faraway places, or those set in the far future, but also settings much closer to home – sometimes even a little *too* close. *Mosaic* is the perfect example of a game that uses this conceit to great effect, dropping you within a world not unfamiliar to ours to explore deeper themes relating to anxiety, depression and the general monotony of everyday life. While likely not to everyone's tastes, this short adventure had us gripped from beginning to end.

One of the first things you notice about *Mosaic* is just how distinctive its art style is. Set in a brutalist world where people act like drones simply going to and from their day jobs, the polygonal look and grey colour palette merge well to help convey the sense that you and everyone else are merely

cogs in a capitalist machine. This isn't to say that the locations you're required to explore ever become repetitive, just that they share the same oppressive tone *Mosaic* doubles down on. Don't be fooled by the *Inside*-like aesthetic, however, the game deals with far more harrowing subject matter – especially for players old enough to know the regular rhythm of wake up, work, sleep, repeat.

Daily grind

This is the gruelling regime your unnamed character is forced to push through, with only ever a couple of musical moments pulling him out of this grind and into an abstract realm. Until those times, he's merely an anonymous office worker who regularly daydreams of a better life, which you primarily discover by partaking in *Mosaic*'s regular loop of 'go here, check that' style of play. Anyone familiar with the Telltale school of game design will have a

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A minimalist narrative adventure centred on the misgivings of a worker's daily life.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Like if Playdead's *Inside* had a baby with an early episode of *Black Mirror*.

WHO'S IT FOR?

People that enjoy deeply personal and ethereal stories that don't eat up too much time.

good idea of what to expect, except the main hook here is not knowing what all your actions are adding up to.

Mystery is at the very heart of the journey *Mosaic* initially sets you on, that in addition to its willingness to hold a mirror up to some of modern life's main drawbacks. Tech is unabashedly one of these, as evidenced by how you start off each chapter waking up in bed only to immediately check your phone. You can whip it out at any time in between key setpieces, but it's no spoiler to say that you never find happiness at the end of any your phone's preloaded apps. 'Love' is a not-so-subtle Tinder analogue where affection is always elusive, for example, and 'BlipBlop' works only too well as a satire of predatory mobile games.

However, when not combing through apps or reading messages from work about how to improve your employee efficiency, *Mosaic* has you explore its repressive metropolis in a fairly linear

“Mystery is at the very heart of the journey *Mosaic* initially sets you on”

FAR LEFT Despite its low-fi polygonal aesthetic, *Mosaic* is quite the looker.



ABOVE The brutalism and lack of colour is reminiscent of Playdead's *Inside*.

LEFT *Mosaic*'s long stretches of bleakness are punctuated by brief moments of colour.



fashion. Towering megastructures overhang and are appropriately intimidating, the minimalist streets are packed with faceless people, however you occasionally come across some colour to provide some much-needed respite. It's impressive just how much *Mosaic* manages to paint our present day in the bleakest of lights, like something you'd expect to see in a novel based in a dystopia we should attempt to avoid. Only here it all appears oh-so recognisable.

Worked up

Breaking up the regular routine of light puzzle-solving and exploration are the few times you're required to actually sit at your desk and, you know, work. This is when *Mosaic* transitions from its full-3D world to a flat hexagonal grid, tasking you to appease the higher-ups by feeding an ever-building army of nodes upwards in a very basic game of strategy. It's no coincidence that the main job asked

TALKING POINT

Conversations don't play a massive part in *Mosaic*, but every now and then you'll be asked to select from a couple of dialogue options that allude to the main character's outlook on life. A lot of these occur between the worker and his own imaginary goldfish friend, whose presence in the game isn't really explained and left open to further interpretation. All other literal communication is done through the messenger on the smartphone, yet even then it's usually to bombard the worker with stress instead of letting him speak out.

of you in this monotonous world ends up being quite tedious, but thankfully you're only asked to complete a handful of these grids during *Mosaic*'s two-to-three-hour playtime, and even then new obstacles are introduced as a metaphor for your worker becoming continuously 'distracted' from outside sources.

Sadly, when it comes to the technical side of things, *Mosaic* is hampered by framerate drops and stutters. Now, admittedly, we did play through the whole adventure on a standard Xbox One S, but even then, an indie game of this calibre shouldn't require the full power of an X to offer up a seamless experience. Multiple sequences, for instance, require you to walk past a series of lockers as part of your daily slog, and almost always was this moment plagued by the main character's stilted motion as the next area was preparing to load in. Do moments like this ruin *Mosaic* entirely? Not at all. But it is disappointing in

a game that rests so much on its narrative and absorbing atmosphere.

Overall, it's hard to imagine someone playing through *Mosaic* and not getting something poignant out of it. It's clear, even in just the first ten minutes, that this ambitious little indie has a lot to say about the slumps life sometimes brings and the pursuit of creativity. Whether you agree with its commentary is open for interpretation, but this in no way dampens the short but surprisingly prescient trip *Mosaic* has you undertake. ■



XBOX
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

OXM VERDICT

Bar a few technical woes, *Mosaic* is an abstract adventure that does a lot with very little.

8



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Even though there are nine Skeksis, Jim Henson modelled them after the seven deadly sins

PUBLISHER EN MASSE ENTERTAINMENT / DEVELOPER BONUSXP / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £16.74/\$19.99

The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics

TAKE ON THE ROLE OF PUPPET MASTER, WITH VARYING RESULTS **AARON POTTER**

Since doing a prequel to a prequel would be just plain silly, this late-arriving tie-in game to the Netflix series of the same name finds itself in an odd position. Those with an interest in Jim Henson's puppet-based fantasy universe will surely have already seen the show, but then you can't exactly centre on any new events set after it, as that's when the original 1982 movie takes place. All this is to say that *The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics* was handicapped from the start. Despite these narrative drawbacks, though, what you're left with is a competent if unexciting strategy-RPG.

In some ways it's appropriate that a TV series based on a cult classic '80s movie has been translated into a style of game that's now quite cult itself. This is a grid-based tactical RPG akin to early PlayStation classics like *Final Fantasy Tactics*, where you move party members around tiles in an attempt to defeat enemies, though it's not anywhere near as deep. What it does have going for it, however, is a complete dedication to the world of *The Dark Crystal* that should please fans, cleverly translating the lore's concepts – such as female Gelflings being the only ones who can fly – into thoughtful gameplay mechanics.

Every battle begins by having you select specific party members, each of which fall into one of three main job classes: Solider, Mender and Scout. All are suitably useful in their own way, upgradable with new gear and abilities that relate to their specific class as



LEFT Battles take place in a grid-based format, with character abilities able to push enemies around the map.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A turn-based take on Netflix's ambitious prequel series to *The Dark Crystal*.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

A more tactical and combat-heavy version of the TV show, with the odd side-story sprinkled in.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Dedicated fans of *The Dark Crystal* universe wanting to experience the show in an interactive format.

“Your objective is almost always to clear the grid of enemies”

the 15-hour campaign progresses. Soldiers are unsurprisingly great for tackling enemies head-on, while Scouts can move further along the grid and cause the most damage from afar, and Menders act as a healer/mage class, but the truth is that all classes become way more distinct once they hit level ten and you're able to assign to them a second job.

Pull the strings

Soldiers casting spells, Scouts performing shield bashes... it's insanity. But what could be at risk of feeling complex luckily isn't, all thanks to the game's well-laid-out menus and nature to dish out new party members at a gradual pace. It's also nice to be able to change a character's class setup in between battles; the game is highly customisable in this way. Unfortunately, it's not unusual for certain members in your party to become underleveled as time goes on, unless you're willing to grind XP in one of the many side-quests.

The locations you fight in are all based on those seen from the show,

contained enough that the pressure from surrounding enemies is always on, while the battles themselves never last an age. Your objective is almost always to clear the grid of enemies, but sometimes the occasional flair of brilliance creeps in by tasking you to, say, keep a specific party member alive, activate a certain number of levers or take down a Skeksis boss. Almost every map features territory that is higher or lower than ground level, adding a nice extra layer of strategy to skirmishes, with attacks performed from below doing less damage and vice versa.

The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance Tactics isn't a bad riff on the turn-based strategy formula, but it is one that leaves you wondering who it's for. There simply isn't enough depth here to cater to hardcore tactical RPG fans, and on the other side, those with an affinity for *The Dark Crystal's* epic tale are much better off watching the show. ■



OXM VERDICT

A competent strategy RPG, but far less magical than the TV series it's based on.

6



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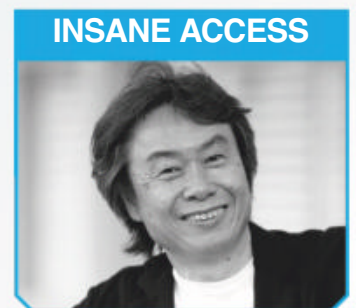


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Madruga Works' previous game was called *Planetbase*: a city-builder and survival experience set in space

PUBLISHER MADRUGA WORKS / DEVELOPER MADRUGA WORKS / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £20.99/\$24.99

Dawn Of Man

WHAT WAS ALL THE RAGE BACK IN THE STONE AGE? REBECCA STOW

This city-builder attempts to replicate the struggles of early mankind as you guide a settlement of prehistoric humans through the ages. Along the way there will be battles with wildlife, disease and even rival tribes.

You're given stewardship of a small Stone Age settlement, and to grow your little tribe and help them survive their first winter there are numerous tasks which must be completed. Basic necessities can be sourced from the wilderness, with flint, sticks and fish at the top of the early game shopping list. Items like flint (and later, ore) can be mined by a single worker, or workstations can be set up in specific locations allowing tribe members to automatically source materials for you.

Once a few essential items have been collected, you can begin to build new types of huts and better hunting tools. While fish provide reliable sustenance early on, rivers and lakes near your settlement can quickly become overfished and unproductive. As your people learn to use better tools, hunting larger prey opens up new possibilities. Not only do animal kills provide enough raw meat to keep the tribe fed for a few days, but bone and hide can be repurposed into cloth and other crafting materials.

A mammoth task

Each milestone you pass leads to the accumulation of Knowledge Points. Specifically, these can be earned by taking down a variety of prehistoric wildlife, by crafting or by building



LEFT Stick with the game long enough and you'll see your small settlement grow into to a bustling, fortified township.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A city-builder that takes a settlement of early humans on a trip through the ages.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Banished, but with a lot more mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses and hunting.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Prehistory buffs or anyone looking for a slick and addictive city-builder.

"The game world is both pleasing on the eye and expansive"

new kinds of structure. You can then spend your Knowledge Points on new abilities for your people, including roof-thatching and long-range archery skills. The game features a nicely paced progression system that moves from the Stone Age right up to the Iron Age, so there are a lot of skills to learn. And they're all important because your tribe will constantly be tested by wildlife, raider attacks and unpredictable weather patterns.

Though there is a lot to manage in *Dawn Of Man*, intuitive menu design and a strong tutorial mean that it's rarely a problem. Supervising your settlement soon becomes second nature, which allows you to spend more of your time researching new technology, experimenting with new kinds of buildings and working towards moving into the next age.

The game world is both pleasing on the eye and decently expansive. By pressing the right thumbstick you'll activate Primal Vision and be able to take a closer look at your immediate area. This highlights animals, plants and objects of interest, colouring prey

animals based on their difficulty to hunt. Primal Vision is extremely useful during the early game in particular as it prevents you from sending your hunters up against prey that is too ferocious to bring down.

Dawn Of Man isn't quite perfect, however. At times the AI can be a little sluggish, leading to frustrations with getting your people to do what you want. At a set point in the game the expectation is that your tribe will source its own food but, occasionally, and regardless of the number of hunting stations you've set up, your people will refuse to hunt without your direct assistance.

These are relatively minor gripes though, and overall *Dawn Of Man* is an excellent experience. The mixture of survival and city-building mechanics makes for an addictive gameplay loop, and moments such as taking down your first mammoth or building your very own Stonehenge are surprisingly exhilarating. ■



OXM VERDICT
This city-building sim is enjoyable and exciting from dusk till the dawn of the next era.

9





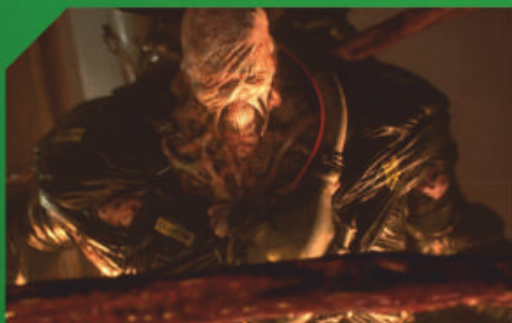
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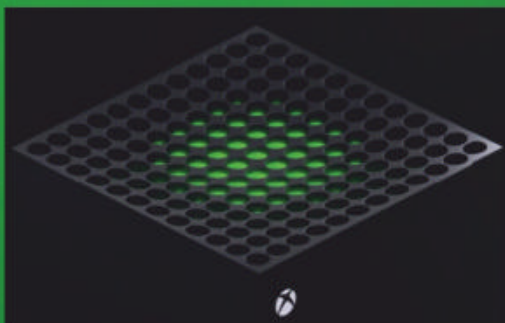
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Thanks to its clear love for '80s culture, the game's neon typography and garish pinks remind us of the fonts used in Ryan Gosling's *Drive*

PUBLISHER SOMETIMES YOU / DEVELOPER ABSTRACTART, LIGHT ROAD GAMES / RELEASE DATE OUT NOW / COST £5.79/\$6.99

Music Racer

THERE'S A BAD TUNE RISING IN THIS INDIE SPEEDSTER **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

Even though certain members of Team OXM are tone-deaf (*cough* Meiks *cough*) we're at least pretty good at driving games. Not that being assured behind the wheel at *Forza* helps our cause in *Music Racer*. The second word of that moniker really is a bit of a fib. This electro-pumping speedster has more in common with *Guitar Hero* than it does *Grid*. While the game's 14 increasingly trippy tracks throw all manner of colour-coded roadblocks at you, shifting between each course's three lanes merely requires you to nudge your thumbstick left or right. *Dirt Rally 2.0*, this ain't.

A rhythm action game on four wheels, *Music Racer* wears its petrol-soaked heart on its sleeve. Its garage is stuffed full of '80s-inspired motors that constantly wink at beloved movies – from a knock-off version of *Back To The Future's* DeLorean, to a streamlined sci-fi bike that tips its hat to *Tron's* Light Cycle.

In motion, *Music Racer's* blistering lane-switching action is quite the thing to watch. Is the bloom effect overdone? Hoo-boy is it ever. So much so, we're pretty sure this musical indie motorist tanned our corneas, it's so glaringly bright. Yet in spite of some overcooked graphical tricks, watching *Music Racer's* contorting highways unfold in blistering fashion is often bewitching. Imagine if *The Lawnmower Man* and Sega's classic blue-sky racer *OutRun* had a baby, slather that confusing abomination in neon, and you've got an average five minutes



LEFT We hope your exhausted peepers can deal with bloom, because *Music Racer* adores the overused effect.

short cut

WHAT IS IT?

A racing mashup that challenges you to pick up beats as you drive along to electronic tunes.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Imagine *OutRun* and *Guitar Hero* got together and sired a racer/rhythm action hybrid.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Anyone who enjoys dull electro 'bangers' and speeding about in a knock-off *Back To The Future* mobile.

"The generic tunes would be at home on PES's awful menus"

in this dizzying rhythm title. It's just a pity the low-res visuals look pretty ghastly on OXM's 4K OLED TV.

Bangers and crash

Cooking up cutesy pop culture nods or generating a compelling sense of speed aren't *Music Racer's* problems. Where the wheels begin to come off this fast and furious hybrid is the unshakable sense the background tracks and the on-road action aren't actually connected. The largely generic electro tunes you race to never really sync up with how your car's moving. These background melodies don't match the on-screen beats you need to drive over. It creates a jarring disconnect that *Music Racer* can't quite speed past.

There's no question this Xbox port is also worse than the Steam original. On PC, you could happily pick any MP3 or WAV file on your desktop and the game would create custom waves of beats for you to chase. It meant that no two songs would ever play out in quite the same way. That constantly changing X-factor is missing here,

and when you throw in those painfully generic tracks, some of which would probably be at home on *PES's* god-awful menus, you're left with an underwhelming audio experience. For a rhythm action game, that's quite the blot in its copybook.

It's bloody hard, too. We're not talking 'trying to perfect *Through The Fire And Flames* on Expert in *Guitar Hero'* difficult, but the default difficulty is more challenging than we'd like. Hard mode is even worse, as crashing into a single pillar on this setting instantly kiboshes your race. Easy is the *just right* bowl of porridge for our ageing sausage fingers. Oh, and pro tip: set the camera distance to '3.0' in settings. The standard view is much too close to the track.

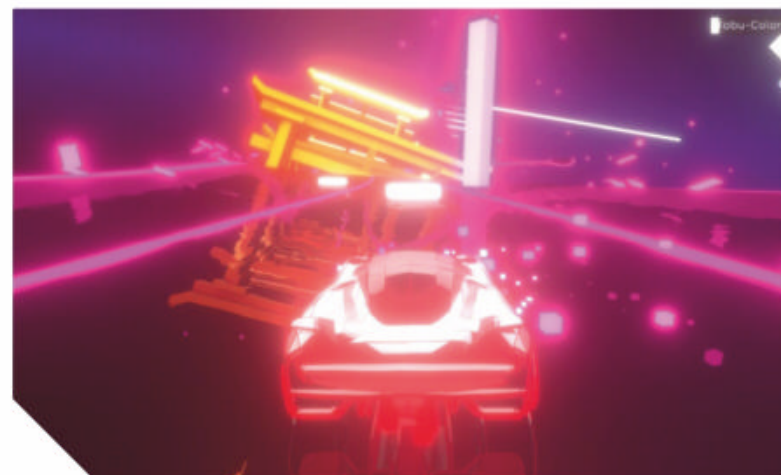
If you're obsessed with electro and cut-price versions of cars from beloved '80s movies, *Music Racer* will grant you the odd moment of fun. For everyone else, the off-key racing will likely kill your enjoyment in a hurry. ■



OXM VERDICT

An interesting indie hybrid that spins off-track due to racing that can't quite carry a tune.

5





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extra

Get more from your Xbox





A certain recent Jedi-focused Xbox game and a certain recent film set in a galaxy far, far away have also reminded us of our *Star Wars* gaming past. In particular, **Star Wars: Republic Commando** (p96), a squad-based FPS set in the Clone Wars era that appeared on the original Xbox. We jumped back into LucasArts' 2005 game this month to see if being a Clone Trooper and kicking Sith butt is still as much fun. In the second of our Now Playing features, we get back behind the wheel of **Forza Horizon 4** (p98). Our writer admits to not being a racing game fan, but is now completely hooked on Playground's UK-based driving, um, playground. Packed with teen angst and feisty retorts, **Life Is Strange: Before The Storm** is the final of our Now Playing features this month, and you'll find it on page 99. As we were in the mood for a little noir, we revisit Remedy's bullet-time sequel **Max Payne 2: The Fall Of Max Payne** to tell the story behind this OG Xbox classic on page 100. Then our resident *GTA* super-fan explains why he's besotted with Trevor, Michael and Franklin in **Why I Love Los Santos' Criminal Trio** on page 104. We're just going to come out and say it. Arachnids make our skin crawl. This month, we run down the **10 Best Spiders on Xbox**. They're scuttling all over page 106. Finally, **Directories** are on page 110!



096



100



104



106



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

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Kicking butt as a team of clone troopers in **Star Wars: Republic Commando** is still thrilling 15 years on **AARON POTTER**

PUBLISHER LUCASARTS / **DEVELOPER** LUCASARTS / **FORMAT** XBOX / **RELEASE DATE** FEBRUARY 2005

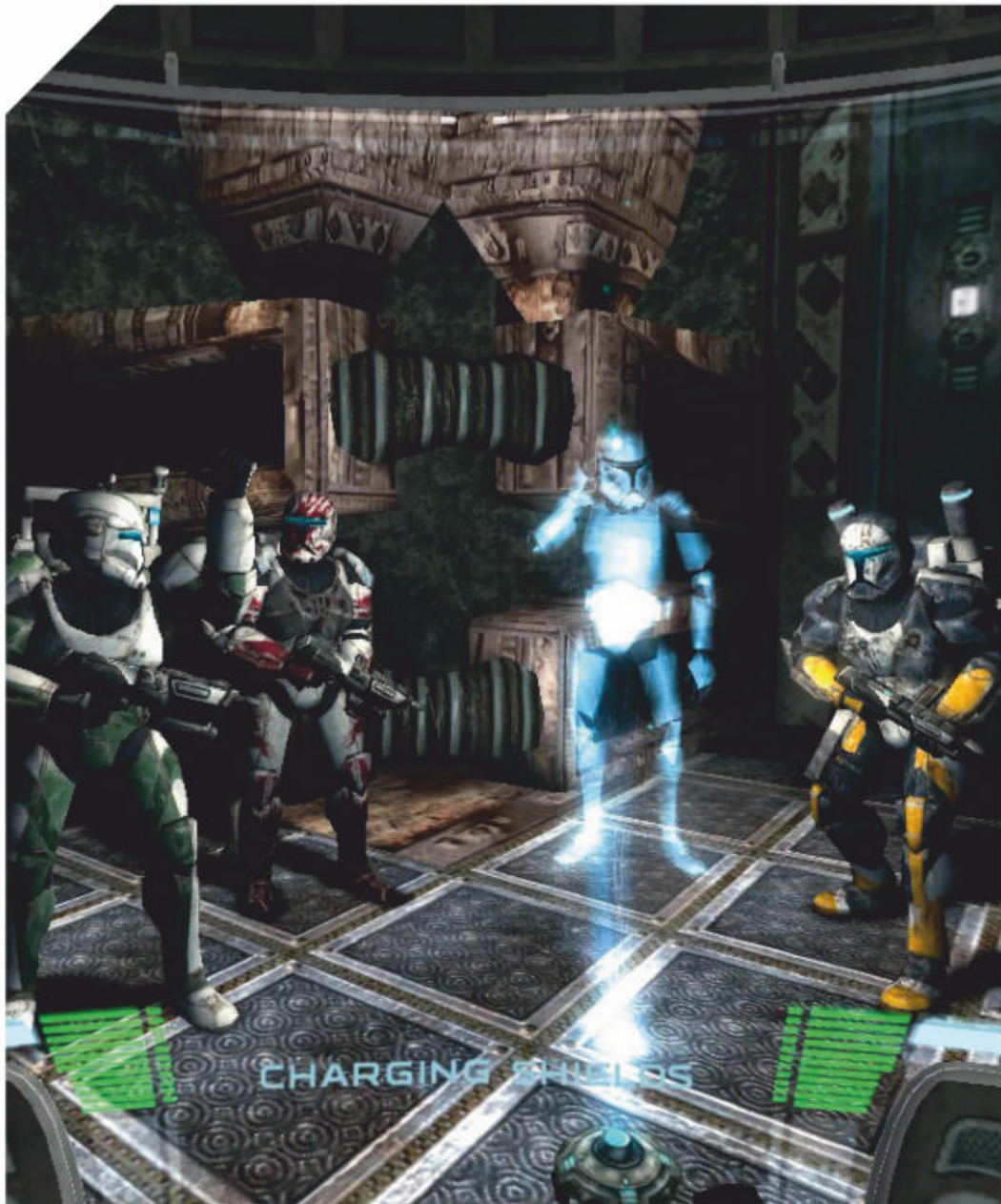


The life of a clone trooper is rough, emotional and can really take its toll. Not that you'd know it after watching *Episodes II and III*

of the *Star Wars* prequels, where these so-called 'boys in white' served merely as the fodder to a wider war concerning the more glamorous exploits of the Sith and Jedi. To some extent it still amazes me that a single throwaway line in 1977's original movie, *A New Hope*, could spawn so much additional media: "You fought in the Clone Wars?" an aspirant Luke Skywalker asks Obi Wan. Indeed he did, and *Star Wars: Republic Commando* was the first videogame to give us a real sense of that conflict.

Of course, before we were afforded the chance to ready-up as part of the Republic's elite clone regiment, original Xbox owners had already exclusively been treated to one of the best *Star Wars* games ever just two years prior. BioWare's *Knights Of The Old Republic* proved that when given enough time and creative liberty, new stories carrying just as much weight as the original trilogy were possible in an interactive medium. *Star Wars: Republic Commando*, however, arguably had the much more difficult task of running parallel to existing events, as one of three games released close to one another, all in the hopes of building hype for the upcoming *Revenge Of The Sith*. I'm pleased to report that this is a tactical first-person shooter that still plays remarkably well 15 years on.

A lot of this is down to the initial setup and characterisation of your squad. *Star Wars: Republic Commando* perfectly sets the stage for what the life of a clone is like by recapping how each one is created in a rather clever way. When first loading up the game it's not bombast and spectacle I'm first treated to, but instead the peering eyes of a Kaminoan scientists staring at me from outside the bacta tank in which I'm being held. "This is your first day," one of them quips



before the game swiftly fast-forwards through training, until I'm eventually introduced to my Delta Squad brothers: Sev, Fixer and Scorch.

While it would have been easy to have all four clones voiced by Temuera 'Jango Fett' Morrison, LucasArts recognised that having players listen to the same Kiwi tone talking over itself would grow tiresome. As such, each member of Delta has a unique voice that makes it much easier for them to develop their own personality, and later helps me differentiate between the four beyond what the HUD displays. Sev is grouchy, Fixer wholesome and Scorch determined. And me? Well, I'm Delta-38 – or 'Boss'. By the time introductions are finished

I already find myself willing to die for these men, which is good because I likely will over and over again before the mission is done.

Clone zone

Just in case anyone needed proof of how epic *Star Wars: Republic Commando* can be, the campaign kicks off proper during the Battle Of Geonosis – the very same conflict we see at the end of *Attack Of The Clones*. In this version, however, there's very few little green men wielding lightsabers and more tactical first-person action. I'm dropped off a transport and required to swiftly track down a chief lieutenant of the opposing force. Doing this involves



blasting my way through legions of ambitious droid units and flying enemy Geonosians, all with the aid of my Delta squad-mates who each receive their own badass introduction.

It's here I'm reminded just how ahead of its time *Star Wars: Republic Commando* actually was when it came out. Where prior to playing I half-expected to have to wrangle with clunky gunplay and endless monster closets, firing from the hip comes incredibly naturally, as does the ability to, what's this, aim down the sights? Not even the *Halo* games allow Xbox players to do this, and yet here the ability to do so truly makes me feel like the elite commando the game tells me I am. Okay, so the enemies do have a tendency to just keep spilling out at me, but having three combat-ready chums around to take some of the heat off renders this less of a sin.

The mission of finding this Geonosian warlord leads me through caverns, Trade Federation huts and even the odd droid factory or two. All this I do while commanding Sev, Fixer and Scorch to take up strategic positions to ensure we rarely get overwhelmed, until eventually we're forced to split up and survive on our

"By the time introductions are finished I already find myself willing to die for these men"

own. Despite being billed as a squad shooter set in the *Star Wars* universe where you are a master tactician, around half of the six-or-so-hour campaign sees Delta Squad separated like this, and it's in these sequences where *Republic Commando* smartly had me feel like I'd lost an extension of myself. You want me to explore this ghost ship, sure, but who will I boss around? Who will I tell to get behind that barrier? And, most importantly, who will revive me should I become downed?

Show of Force

Only in 2005, during a time when online multiplayer wasn't the be-all and end-all, could a squad shooter pull something like this off. It's a reminder that for all its boasting about being a team experience, *Star Wars: Republic Commando* is actually a single-player FPS of the best kind, one where you're imbued with the illusion of military authority but still

with all the spectacle of, say, *Call Of Duty* thrown in. It's part of the reason why this original Xbox gem does, in my mind, deserve to be just as fondly thought of as *KOTOR*. It may not have conjured up a whole new original era of *Star Wars*, but it does add humanity to a familiar side of it by having you care about the entirety of Delta Squad.

This is just one of many ways *Republic Commando* strengthens the clone trooper mythos a full three years before the 2008 animated *Clone Wars* series even attempted to do something similar. By placing you in the shoes of a clone commando from birth to death, you really come to appreciate the scale of that conflict first mentioned in passing by Obi Wan so long ago. If that isn't the mark of a great tie-in game, I don't know what is. It just helps that what's surrounding this effort is an extremely solid shooter that seamlessly balances gunplay and squad tactics. *Republic Commando* is brief but it remains the best FPS experience set in the *Star Wars* universe, pre-Disney era or otherwise. ■

ABOVE The brotherly relationship between the Boss and Delta Squad is established right from the off, particularly via the many mission briefings.

FAR LEFT In the opening mission set on Geonosis, all three of your clone cohorts get an appropriately epic introduction.

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person tactical shooter set in the *Star Wars* prequel era, seeing you undergo a three-campaign-long foray as an elite unit of Republic clone troopers.

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After picking up **Forza Horizon 4** on a whim, I'm now a fully fledged Horizon Festival convert **REBECCA STOW**

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS / **DEVELOPER** PLAYGROUND GAMES / **FORMAT** XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** OCTOBER 2018



Aside from dipping into the odd Formula 1 game and kart racer, racing games have never really been my thing.

However, when *Forza Horizon 4* released towards the end of 2018, the stunning open world, variable seasons and arcade-inspired racing hijinks drew me in. And I'm so glad they did because this is a game that I keep coming back to time and time again!

Set in a world inspired by Great Britain, *Forza Horizon 4* is an open-world racer featuring recognisable landmarks such as parts of Edinburgh, the Lake District and what I'm sure is the soggy old sheep field near my house. Long-time fans will know that *Forza* is split into two distinct series, with *Forza Motorsport* being an in-depth driving simulation, and *Forza Horizon* focused on the Horizon Festival: a giant celebration of racing that pits drivers against one another in hundreds of barmy challenges.

While *Motorsport* is a tightly constructed and highly celebrated sim, the adrenaline-soaked silliness of *Horizon* appeals to me more. I'm not one for worrying about torque or the effect of a track's surface temperature on my tyres, I want to drive a shiny super car up to the roof of a castle, fly off it at top speed and see if I can land in the sea. Luckily, *Horizon 4* lets me do just that, and even rewards me with points for trying it.

In fact, the basic *Horizon 4* premise sees drivers stocking up on these 'Influence Points' to move through the festival ranks. Though there are a multitude of ways to earn points, the easiest way is by winning races, attempting challenges and by completing story missions. Each new chunk of Influence Points unlocks more to do, and exploring what is a beautiful and varied game world in order to find more content is a huge part of the fun.

WHAT IS IT?

An open-world motor racing game set in the UK, with changing seasons and hundreds of bombastic challenges.

"I'm not one for worrying about torque or the effect of a track's surface temperature on my tyres"

Talking of content, Playground Games has consistently supported *Horizon 4* since launch. Whether it be new themed chapters, new cross-country races or even the addition of LEGO cars, things just keep getting crazier. Of course, players can choose

to take the game seriously, systematically completing challenges and tuning up their beloved ride, but sometimes you just want to crash through a farmyard or risk a power slide across a giant frozen lake, you know?

Gear shift

With that said, I think that the standout feature of *Horizon 4* is the game's system of changing seasons, and the difference each one makes to gameplay. The changes massively alter your car's handling and the way you need to drive. The game features 'Seasonal Playground Games', a series of multi-car battles playable in any season. My favourite of these is 'Infection'. One racer starts as the infected, and if any other players

touch the tainted car then they too become contaminated. The aim is to survive without being infected for as long as possible. Playing this game against other people in winter, with your cars sliding and spinning out all over the place, is hilarious!

It's the cyclical changing of the seasons that also keeps me invested in the game long-term. I might be playing something else, or even doing the washing up, and suddenly I'll think, 'I wonder what season it is in *Horizon 4*?' Inevitably, I'll drop whatever I'm doing and rush to load up what is one of my favourite games on Xbox One. And that's quite a statement from someone who's not a big racing fan! ■





Full of teenage angst and feisty backtalk, **Life Is Strange: Before The Storm** is an empowering experience

REBECCA STOW

PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX / DEVELOPER DECK NINE / FORMAT XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE AUGUST 2017



Didn't you always want to be a sassy teenager growing up? You know the kind I mean; the teens in movies who are always

ready with a lightning-fast retort or a bruising one-liner. I was shy when I was younger, so *Life Is Strange's* super-confident quipster Chloe really appealed to me, and getting to play as her in prequel *Before The Storm* was even more exciting.

Before The Storm is set three years before the events of *Life Is Strange*, and the game follows the angsty teenage adventures of Chloe Price, a scholarship student at the prestigious Blackwell Academy. Taking place long before *LIS* protagonist Max arrives at Blackwell, *Before The Storm* is a kind of dialogue-choice-infused indie film without any of the time-travelling hijinks that were such a big part of the original adventure.

Split into three lengthy episodes, *Before The Storm* takes place in the same old Arcadia Bay, a sleepy town that Chloe has outgrown. The plot revolves around Chloe striking up a relationship with charismatic rich girl Rachel Amber (the missing person from the first game), and the two girls soon become closer than they could ever have expected. However, in true tragic romance style, there are a boatload of obstacles and naysayers in the way of their blossoming affection.

As with most of these kinds of games, *Before The Storm* is all about dialogue choices. When Chloe interacts with the people around her, you get to choose responses from four options, shaping her character and narrative in your own unique way. However, in specific circumstances you'll also be allowed to activate the 'Backtalk' option, a dialogue-based mini-game in which you must use Chloe's sass to win arguments. Choose the wrong option and your



"It's impressively engrossing given that we know what will happen to the major players later on"

opponent will get the upper hand, but get it right and you can own bullies and gatekeepers hard. It's a ferociously satisfying mechanic and a brilliant way to gamify the genre.

While Chloe's loud mouth impacts the story, her clothes and previous dialogue choices will subtly shape other people's opinions of her as well. It's player-specific options like this that make the game's narrative so alluring; it really feels like you are in control of the story and informing the opinions of those around you. It really feels like you *are* Chloe Price.

WHAT IS IT?

Before The Storm is a prequel to *Life Is Strange*. It explores the teenage life of Chloe Price as she strikes a friendship with the magnetic Rachel Amber.

Teen spirit

As for the game's narrative, it's impressively engrossing given that we know most of what will happen to the major players later on. But really, this is a character study of a real heroine of mine. If *Life Is Strange* showcased Chloe as Max's sidekick, *Before The Storm* offers up so much more by exploring her roots and digging into

who she is. The story is driven by the types of turmoil that all teenagers experience, and the portrayal of Chloe and her immediate family by talented writers and voice actors really resonates with me. There is even a bonus episode that gives us insight into a younger version of Chloe, and helps explain why her relationship with Max is so important.

Before The Storm may only be a small part of the *Life Is Strange* saga, but I absolutely love it. Perhaps because of my own shy teenage years, Chloe's confidence and sass feels empowering, and taking the reins of such a spirited character is a gaming experience I'll never forget. ■



RETROSPECTIVE

MAX PAYNE 2

THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE





Femme fatales and shady cabals in the most colourful noir you'll ever play **PHIL IWANIUK**

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES / **DEVELOPER** REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT / **FORMAT** XBOX



Everybody remembers the bullet time and the Humphrey Bogart-style monologues, but what really put *Max*

Payne on the map was its unique capacity to go deeper with its fiction than action games had ever thought to before 2001. The first game wasn't just a stylish shooter whose slow-motion gunfights fortuitously mirrored *The Matrix* at the height of its cultural powers, it was an eccentric melange of film noir, *Twin Peaks*, Norse mythology and Hong Kong heroic bloodshed, playing with its influences the way Tarantino might in a movie. This was mind-blowing if you were, say, an impressionable young teenager in the early '00s. But next to its 2003 sequel, the first *Max Payne* was just a prototypical sketch on a napkin.

Max Payne 2: The Fall Of Max Payne was made with a higher budget by a team that already knew how to make this wildly ambitious, narrative-driven action spectacle happen. The irresistibly cool headlong dives through mafia-infested corridors were back, but with them was a newfound confidence in Remedy's unique style that led the team further into uncharted territory. *Max Payne 2* is, simply, the blueprint for everything its creators would go on to do.

When we think of Remedy's creative oeuvre, an interconnected world of dark and eccentric games appears. Games which indulge in creative flourishes that other developers might shy away from for fear of bewildered focus groups: *Alan Wake*'s Anderson brothers, *Control*'s diversions to the Oceanview Motel, the dream sequences and incidental TV shows and songs peppered throughout every title. And that distinctive voice really began in *The Fall Of Max Payne*.

When the credits rolled on the first game, we were left wondering about

Max and Mona Sax. Was the femme fatale just that? And could Max ever piece his life back together after what he'd suffered at the hands of a shadowy outfit called the Inner Circle, and a designer drug named Valkyr?

If *Max Payne 2*'s subtitle didn't give the game away, the first few bars of its score would have. Mournful cello strings and raindrops set the tone for a journey even deeper into the wrinkles of Max Payne's grief. But it's a journey with at least the faintest glimmer of brightness: Max is in love.

Granted, no qualified psychiatrist from here to Valhalla would recommend the bereaved widower Mr Payne should act on his crush and pursue a woman wanted for murder – a woman being held in the police station where he works as, you know, a policeman – but after wandering the formless halls of his nightmares and reliving the death of his wife and kid so many times in the first game, you could hardly hold it against Max for getting himself back out there.

Broadly speaking, it's another story about bad luck getting someone swept up inside a conspiracy much bigger than them, but this time Max isn't an innocent bystander. Called upon by his old associate Vladimir Lem, he willingly involves himself with the Inner Circle once again – this time a group called the Cleaners are wiping out anyone with knowledge of the Circle and Max is hunting them while they hunt high-profile lowlifes like crime lord Vinnie Gognitti.

Sax appeal

But a surface-level recital of the narrative beats doesn't do *Max Payne 2*'s story any justice. Like a great musician, it's the notes *Max Payne 2* plays between the beats that make it special. Your own recollection of its events will depend on which conversations you overheard between the Cleaners, and which unfolding scenes you chose to observe for a

GROWING PAYNE

Five years after *Max Payne 2*, Remedy's IP hit the big screen. Mark Wahlberg took the lead role in a tepid adaptation, but it still grossed \$85 million.

LEFT James McCaffrey returned as the voice of Max, and would go on to voice him again in the 2012 threequel.



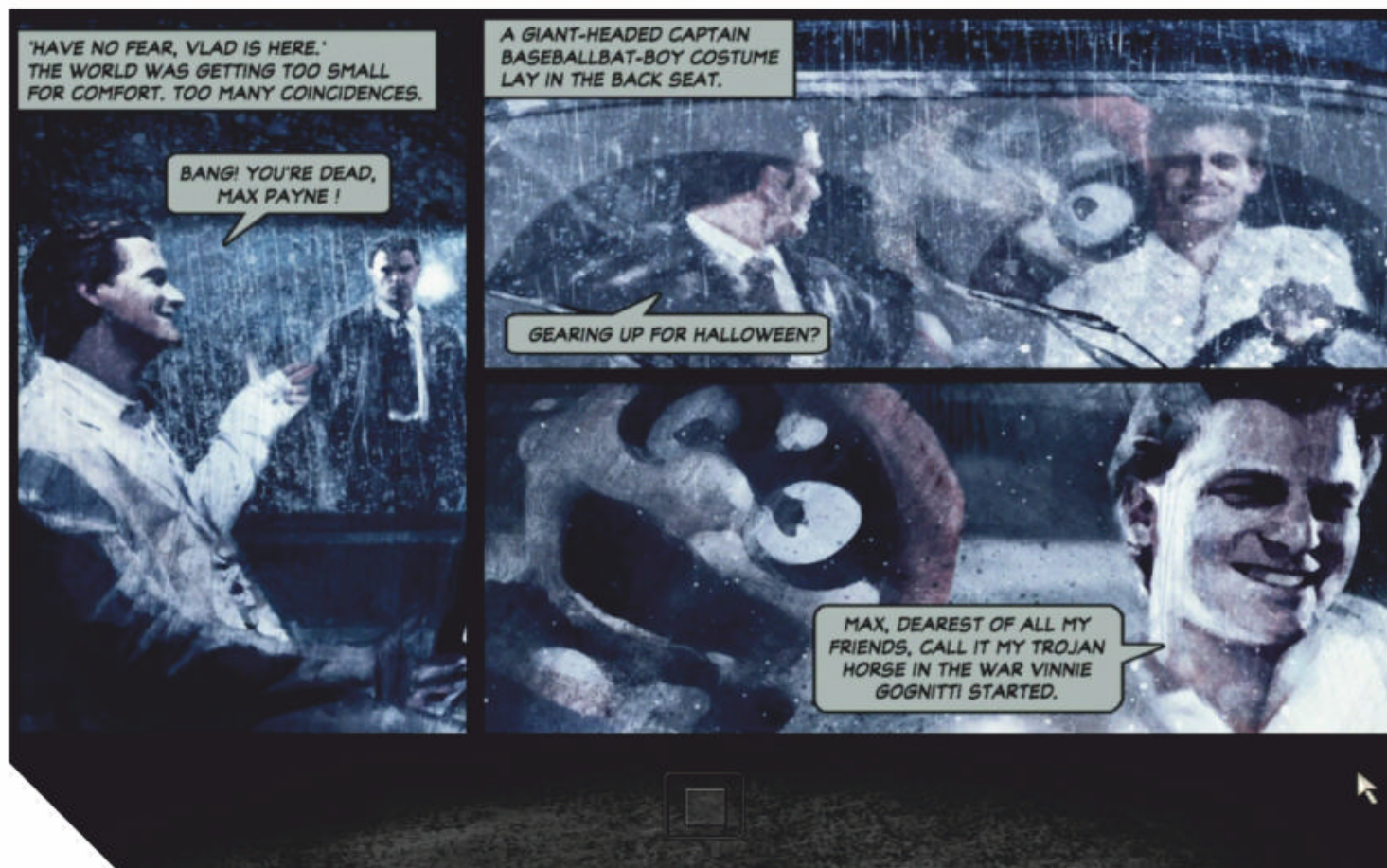
while before diving sideways, twin Ingrams blazing, through the doorway.

Early in the game as you're moving between the residences of a luxury apartment complex, you'll find two mobsters, one playing a delicate piano concerto to the other, by a grand top-floor window. When the piece is finished, they don't say a word, but pick up their guns and clear their throats as if trying to dislodge the sensitivity that might have just crept into them.

Later on in the downtown police HQ, a woman walks up to the reception desk asking for advice. Her boyfriend has been playing videogames nonstop, and he's threatening to kill her if she doesn't stop nagging. Those games are sharpening his skills for killing, she says: "Holding that controller is just like holding a gun."

These moments happen every couple of minutes in *Max Payne 2*, and you'll miss most of them. The devs knew the majority of players wouldn't get to enjoy the surreal, subversive and – to look at it from a business-minded perspective – expensive skits they were crafting, and they filled their game with them anyway.

The real emblem of that attitude is in its TV shows – *plural*. John Mira, the rampant serial killer from *Max Payne 2*'s hammy *Twin Peaks*-like 'Address Unknown', might be the most memorable of all. He speaks in a disjointed drawl, just like the Man From Another Place in the influential TV show. And he speaks to the hero only through the mirror – well, you can guess where that's going. What



ABOVE The stylised cutscenes helped the game stand out from its contemporaries.



you probably wouldn't guess is the fact Mona Sax lives within an Address Unknown amusement ride, full of gruesome cardboard cutouts and jump scares. Contrived, definitely, but the jaunts through its eerie 2D sets are no less enjoyable for it. It's simply another means by which the atmosphere seeps into your pores.

Remedy didn't stop there. Captain Baseball Bat Boy, Lords And Ladies, Dick Justice (a studio in-joke referencing *Max Payne*'s working title, Dark Justice) and Address Unknown all built a wider universe around the jaded characters and grimy East Coast

locales, and gave the writing team a chance to infuse the game with a dreamlike, Lynchian atmosphere without derailing its primary purpose as a gritty noir piece.

It's as involving as its predecessor in this regard, and once again the graphic novel-style panels return to convey a stylised version of events with much more cinematic clout than a cutscene could have achieved at the time. In fact, it was budgetary constraints that led the team to arrive at the static panels in the first place, but with Rockstar bankrolling this follow-up it was a strong vision rather than frugality which ensured the story continued to be told in this way.

Fade to black

The money being pumped into *Max Payne 2* did see to one major artistic change, though: Max's face. Lead writer Sam Lake used colleagues, family and friends for the faces and voices of the first *Max Payne*'s entire cast, and his appointment as the hard-boiled New York cop came about by necessity in the first place. Now able to hire professionals for those roles in the sequel, Lake stepped aside and his inimitable expressions were replaced by actor Timothy Gibbs. Although Gibbs gave a sense of physicality and a seen-it-all furrowed brow to the role, moving away from Lake's iconic look might be one of the game's few missteps.

Ironically, although perhaps not surprisingly for a Remedy action game,

“Combat is about resource management, and every new fight asks you to eke out your bullet time secret sauce more thoughtfully”

HARD BOILED

Have you got an itch for monologues, gravelly voices and violent gun battles? These noir-inspired classics will help scratch that.



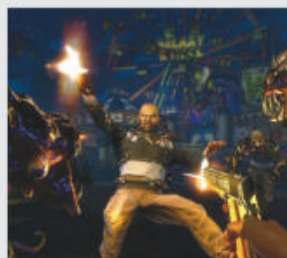
MAKING HISS-TORY CONTROL

The summit of Remedy's output thus far, marrying classic sci-fi from the *Twilight Zone* mould to superpowered combat.



BRICKING IT MANHUNT

Forced into a life of violence, you're doing less slow-mo dives in *Manhunt* and more plastic bag asphyxiations.



REALLY GROWING ON ME THE DARKNESS 2

A grieving protagonist, a rainy city setting, and a toybox of combat options that make you look cool. It's got tentacles, too.



the combat sequences themselves don't jump out and burn themselves into the memory. Although a physics overhaul under the hood gave each encounter a newfound weightiness as bodies dropped, scenery whipped into the air in a hail of bullets and Max's leather coattails flailed around as never before, in truth it's a simple shooter mechanically. Nobody was playing *Max Payne 2* to reach the next gunfight against four goons wielding Kalashnikovs – they were propelled forth by the promise of juicy narrative revelations or the next episode of *Lords And Ladies*.

Except when they weren't propelled forth, but rather stuck fast by a difficulty spike. This was, and remains, a furiously tough game, and often the challenge isn't wrought by a new area introducing a different enemy type or a geographical hurdle to overcome, but by simply multiplying the number of enemies in each encounter and demanding ever-greater levels of efficiency from poor Mr Payne.

And that's even with the ability to control time and tumble around like an Olympic gymnast in slacks. Ultimately, combat in *Max Payne 2* is about resource management, and every new fight asks you to eke out your bullet time secret sauce more thoughtfully, move more deliberately, and waste precisely zero bullets. Ammo's in short supply, after all, so when your last three Desert Eagle rounds disappear harmlessly into the back of a sofa because you opted for a balletic dive,



TOP While the action is fine, it's the narrative and tone that keep you hooked.

ABOVE Max's relationship with Mona is an integral part of *Max Payne 2*.

you can't help but feel like you've let the side down a bit.

Face facts

Hardest of all to get your head around during a modern-day revisiting are the platforming sequences. They're mercifully rare, but when they do happen they're often telegraphed so half-heartedly that you're not sure whether the pile of rubble you're looking at is telling you you've reached a dead end or a climbing puzzle. The

dives and rolls in Max's repertoire are intended for deployment when the air's thick with bullets – not for navigating rooftop ledges on the exterior of a high-rise apartment. Such diversions away from the core shooting and mumbling are much more striking now than they were in 2003 – games still had a compulsion to throw in the odd jump puzzle and balance beam walk every few levels back then, clinging onto the conventions of a simpler design era.

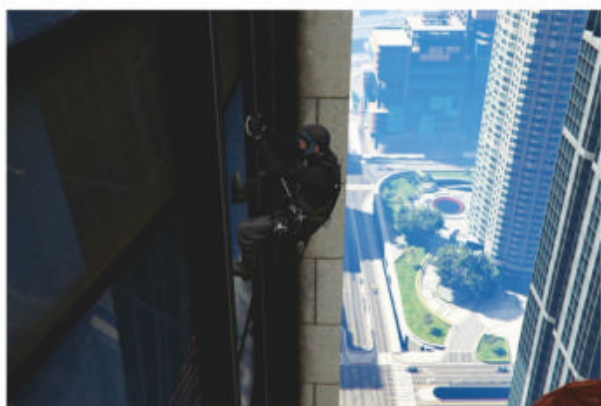
But despite the difficulty (and let's not even mention the manual save feature, it's always jarring when games don't helpfully autosave your progress every ten paces now) and the platforming, *Max Payne 2* is a brooding, immersive and timelessly cool game to replay some 17 years later. Nothing's been lost of its atmosphere, even though the textures we once marvelled at for approaching photorealism now look like kindergarten art class drawings. It's summoned by the ever-present sound of falling rain. The pitch-perfect dialogue between Max and Mona, conveying his desperation and longing without ever having him break that surly poker face. The beautifully illustrated panels and the authentic grime of NYC's condemned buildings and dark alleyways. It's a mood piece you'd never guess had been dreamed up in a studio in Finland, but for anyone familiar with Remedy's later games the fingerprint of its narrative approach is instantly recognisable. ■

WHY I LOVE... LOS SANTOS' CRIMINAL TRIO



Swapping between **Grand Theft Auto V's** trio of crooks makes the sandbox classic's missions truly killer **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES / **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR NORTH / **FORMAT** XBOX 360, XBOX ONE / **RELEASE DATE** SEPTEMBER 2013



ABOVE Several of the game's epic acts of thievery take inspiration from Michael Mann's 1995 crime classic movie, *Heat*.





I normally hate those T-shirts with iconic collections of folk on them. You know the sort... 'John, Paul, George & Ringo'. 'Ross,

Rachel, Monica, Joey, Chandler & Phoebe'. 'Frank, Pat, Bianca & RILICKY'. Alright, 'iconic' might be a bit of a stretch with that last one. The point is, thanks to my continuing, seven-year-long obsession with *GTA V*, I'm seriously considering having a 'Michael, Trevor, Franklin & Meiks' tee made up.

Almost a decade on, I'm still utterly besotted with *Grand Theft Auto V*. Rockstar's open-world masterpiece recently hit Xbox Game Pass, and seeing as I've previously only ever played the Los Santos epic on PC and a certain rival console – naughty, I know – that's all the excuse I need to dive back into what may well be my favourite videogame of all time.

GTA V's story missions are still the best in the biz. Not a single sandbox competitor can match the drum-tight pacing, inventiveness or murderous spectacle the Blaine County adventure produces again and again over its 69 missions. But the real X factor separating *GTA V* from the rest of the open-world pack? Its trio of criminal chums, that's what.

God, I love switching between them. The first mission that lets you swap out Michael, Trevor and Franklin is 'Three's Company'; a daring daytime caper that sees the felons attempting to pluck a witness straight out of the IAA's headquarters. The first part of the audacious kidnap requires Trevor's mad whirlybird skills to land on the roof of The agency's cloud-scraping office. Next up it's Michael's chance to hog the homicidal limelight as he abseils down the building, smashes through a window to grab the target, then busts out his best *Max Payne* impression during a suspended slow-mo shootout. To assist with the IAA slaughter, you can also switch to Franklin who's squatting on the roof of the adjacent FIB headquarters armed

WHAT IS IT?

Arguably the greatest open world of all time, and a game that introduced an innovative multi-protagonist story few rival titles have even tried to copy.



"There's something freeing in being able to chop and change between three very different characters"

with a sniper rifle and one seriously itchy trigger finger. Faced with such unblinking teamwork, those snivelling government cronies never had a hope.

Of heist and men

As the story stakes escalate the criminal-swapping escapades become more and more elaborate. Just take 'The Paleto Score'. One of *GTA V*'s headline-hogging heists, this multitiered mission has the Los Santos cohorts ripping off a bank in a backwater town filled with corrupt cops. Cue a frankly insane job involving full body armour suits, a minigun spree that obliterates several police cars before downing a copper chopper, an escape in a bulldozer of all things, before a final shootout in where else? Why, a Cluckin' Bell chicken factory. Naturally.

Nail Trevor's, Franklin's and Michael's individual roles and a cool \$8,016,020 take swells your criminal coffers. It's a mission of absurd spectacle that I bloody adore.

There's something inherently freeing in being able to chop and change between three very different

ABOVE Whether kidnapping informants or stealing *all* the cabbage, *GTA V*'s trio are killer characters.

FAR LEFT Michael's your slow-mo shootout guy, Franklin's an ace behind the wheel and Trevor's so crazy he eats bullets for breakfast.



characters. Not only does each of the trio's special abilities increase your tactical options when you're causing mayhem on the streets of LS, but it feeds into a quasi role-playing mechanic that allows you to take control of these crooks in a way that reflects their personalities.

I've played through *GTA V*'s story *at least* five times – yes, I've clearly lost the run of myself... for the umpteenth time – and every time the faeces hits the fan in these multi-man missions, it's Trevor I switch to when death needs dishing out. Sure, his health-boosting 'rampage' power isn't as useful in a pinch as Michael's slow-mo shooting, but then again, I just don't see De Santa having that kind of consistent carnage in him. Thanks to *GTA V*'s criminal-swapping capers, I'm given the freedom to roleplay Franklin as the cool-headed getaway driver, Michael as the ice-veined cover-fire enforcer and Trevor as the unapologetic psycho who tips his cap to earlier entries' thirst for cop-swatting rampages.

Shortly after *Red Dead Redemption II* was announced, I hoped its debut trailer hinted that we'd get to play as the entire Van Der Linde gang. As it turned out, Rockstar's epic Western settled on just two characters, and such focus was ultimately to its story's benefit. More introspective than *GTA V*, Arthur Morgan's frontier tale wouldn't have meshed well with chop-and-swap firefights. Still, all these years later, I can't get enough of the trio. Keep the Magnificent Seven; I've got the Los Santos Three. ■

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



10 BEST SPIDERS ON XBOX

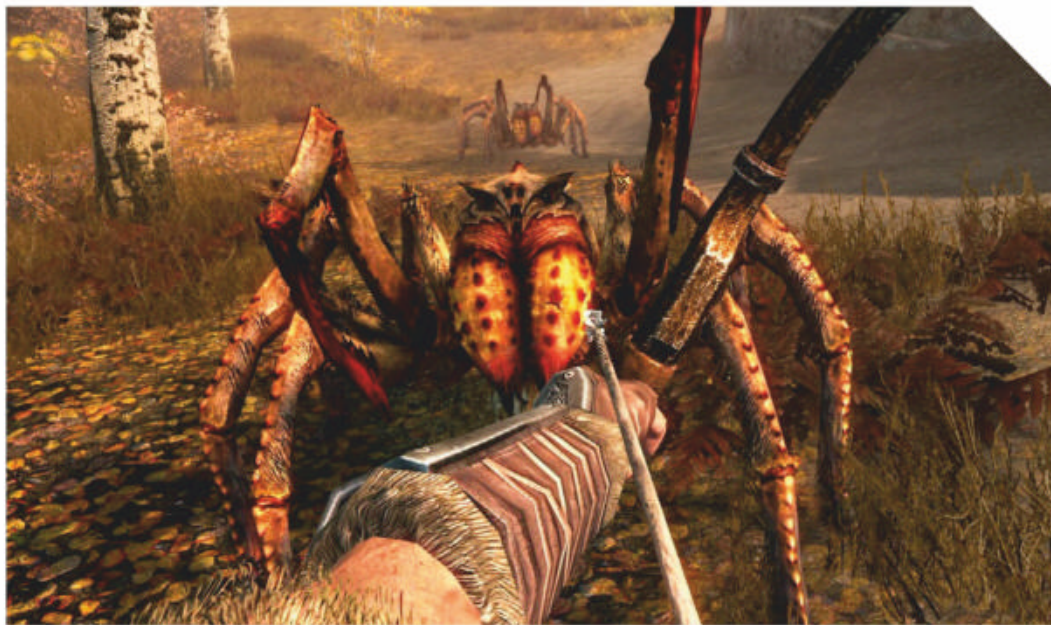


Spiders suck. We don't care how many flies they scoff each year; we'd rather be swarmed by *all* the bugs than deal with the gross arachnids currently crawling around on Xbox **DAVE MEIKLEHAM**

10

FROSTBITE SPIDER – THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

These gruesome customers have some real anger issues. One of *Skyrim*'s most aggressive enemies, they'll pretty much attack anything on sight. They're brave buggers, too. Occasionally you'll see a random Frostbite summon up the courage to attack a giant or mammoth... which always ends with one monumentally squished spider. Silly Mr Frostbite. Your Dragonborn will often encounter them while exploring caves, so if you suffer from arachnophobia, avoid *Skyrim*'s subterranean lairs like the eight-legged plague. Weirdly, just about the only species these fanged fiends seem to get on with is vampires. And here we were thinking Drac and his blood-slurping chums were only besties with bats.



08

GIANT SPIDER – CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

Who needs a faithful steed when you can mount a big ass spider. If Gabriel can lay enough of a creepy-crawly smackdown on a giant spider, a QTE starts that lets the monster hunter tame and ride the large-and-in-charge bug. Once you and your new spidey ally are on good terms, you can use it to attack other enemies or make it fire globs of webbing that can be pulled to yank down trees. Hell, you can even use its silk to craft an impromptu rope bridge. Good spider! Of course, Gabe can also choose to simply murder the spider's face off. Not a bad option considering these gigantic pests can both tie up the future Dracula and poison him with venom. Budding spider friendships sure are hard work.



09

SPIDER-MAN – MARVEL VS CAPCOM: INFINITE

Avengers: Infinity War may have sent the wall-crawler into space, but when it comes to web-slinging weirdness, it's hard to top Spidey's quest in this mishmash beat-'em-up. Teaming with *Resident Evil*'s Chris Redfield, Spider-Man and the muscly agent infiltrate an AIMbrella facility – see what they did there? Not long after they meet *Dead Rising*'s Frank West and *Final Fight*'s Mike Haggar, and soon the foursome are scrapping with various baddies. If you've been gagging for a very specific face-off between Spidey and *Res*'s Nemesis, you're in luck. The slaverling STARS stalker may have killer tentacles and a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher, but he's no match for our web-head main man.



07

PHANTOM – DEVIL MAY CRY

This big-boned brute needs to be killed with *all* the fire... which should be doable, seeing as he has liquid magma for blood. Phantom isn't even a 'mere' six tonne spider: he's actually composed of nasty parts from several critters. While he's mostly a colossal web-spinner, Phantom also has a retractable scorpion stinger and massive crab-like claws. Honestly, Capcom. A bus-sized spider/scorpion abomination with lava for blood? We jump five feet into the air if we see a house spider scuttle across the floor, let alone an arachnid that could swallow our scaredy-cat carcasses whole. He can even birth swarms of 'Phantom babies', because clearly the world needs more spider/scorpion hellspawn.

06

CHAOS WITCH QUELAAG – DARK SOULS

Dark Souls II may feature a more traditional arachnid – lord, do we ever hate The Duke’s Dear Freja – but it’s this half-woman, half-spider demon that truly haunts our thoughts. Quelaag has quite the family tree. As one of the daughters of the Witch Of Izalith, she calls The Fair Lady and the charmingly named Ceaseless Discharge her siblings. What a Christmas dinner that must be. Predictably, the Chaos Witch is a nightmare to fight. If the spider part doesn’t incinerate you with its lava breath, the squishy human part will pelt your face with arrows. After the horror pairing of Ornstein and Smough, this crime against nature is right up there in *Dark Souls*’ crippling difficult hall of fame.



04

WEB SPINNER – RESIDENT EVIL

Resi is obsessed with taking creatures folk are already scared of and ballooning them in size to breed a whole new level of terror. Yawn the 40-foot snake; Neptune the 3,500lb great white shark; Web Spinner spiders the size of grizzly bears. Stop making animals we hate so hideously oversized, Capcom! Our tattered nerves can’t take it. *Resident Evil*’s Web Spinners aren’t even the worst spiders in the remake. No, that silk-covered crown belongs to the Black Tiger. Three times the size of one of Umbrella’s ‘normal’ T-virus arachnids, it has already laid a gargantuan web in the underground caverns beneath Spencer Mansion when Chris or Jill encounter it. We suggest introducing its face to *all* the shotgun shells.



05

SHELOB – MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

In *Return Of The King*, Shelob is a dirty great bug that resembles an elephant-sized trapdoor spider. In *Shadow Of War*, she’s a seductive sorceress. Obviously. Alright, she’s still technically a colossal arachnid, she just so happens to have enough magic juju stuffed inside that mighty spider frame to transform into a raven-haired lass. Looking like the dictionary definition of a tricky femme fatale, this scheming spider-woman sides with Talion when the mood takes her. The ranger is definitely wise to keep Shelob on his side – you’d need a newspaper the size of a bungalow to squish this insidious wall-crawler. It’s a good thing they both hate Sauron, otherwise Talion would make quite the hunky morsel.



03

MUSHROOM MURK SPIDER – TRINE 2

Yet another game on this list that loves making regular-sized beasts obnoxiously giant. In this case, *Trine 2*’s trio of heroes have to solve conundrums involving colossal frogs and snails, though at least these peaceful garden critters don’t want to scoff ‘em whole. The same sadly can’t be said of Mushroom Murk’s huge spider. Hiding away in its misty cavern, the arachnid assassin will lunge forward with the speed of a Black Friday shopper rushing for that last discounted flatscreen. The only way to get past it with your magician/thief/soldier’s torso still intact? Use a series of massive springy leaves to vault over this drooling predator’s pesky trap. One wrong step, and you’re spider brunch.

02

METAL QUEEN – BRÜTAL LEGEND

Or the 'Metal Queen Chrome Recluse', to give this eight-legged Big Bad her full regal title. Whatever name you call this metallic monarch, you're left with a flippin' massive spider to swat. Not only does this arachnid dwarf most dinosaurs, she has a fondness for laying eggs in her victim's eye sockets. Lovely. Capable of sending swarms of smaller spiders after Eddie Riggs, she can also shoot acid... because of course she can. Stop making spiders worse than they are in real life, videogames! They're already awful enough. The bionic bug's name may be a reference to vocalist Lee Aaron, who recorded the album *'Metal Queen'* back in 1984. Though we're guessing the Canadian rocker probably doesn't shoot acid from her eyes.



01

STALKING SPIDER – LIMBO

The most murderously focused arachnid on Xbox. The eight-legged freak Playdead created in its black and white, puzzle-heavy platformer is an utter terror. Pursuing your poor afterlife lad like a Terminator that's just downed 14 cappuccinos, shaking this spider is a daunting task. Not that this giant creepy-crawly doesn't have good reason for chasing you. *Limbo's* lad lops off three of the blighter's legs with the help of a spike trap, after all. When the spider eventually catches up with you, a sticky situation occurs when you're wrapped up in webbing. Thankfully, a quick wiggle later and you're free, with the ticked off beastie eventually biting it after you crush your nemesis with a boulder. Sayonara, you arachnid a-hole.





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TEN XBOX ONE GAMES YOU SHOULD BE PLAYING

games



01

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES



A stone-cold 10/10 classic and the best looking console game there's ever been, with easily the most surprising story in open-world history. Plays best on X, too.

DEFINING MOMENT That incredible, unforeseen twist halfway through.

02

FORZA HORIZON 4

PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS



A must-have experience for every Xbox One owner, not only is the racing excellent and varied, the open-world playground you drive across is one of the most stunning places we've seen on the console.

DEFINING MOMENT Seeing the seasons change for the first time.

03

RESIDENT EVIL 2

PUBLISHER CAPCOM



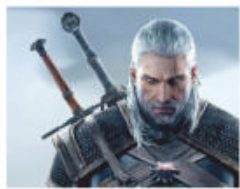
Fantastic reboot of the '90s survival horror classic that perfectly captures the essence of the original while offering something completely new.

DEFINING MOMENT Shooting all the arms and legs off a zombie and realising that it's still coming.

04

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO



Hearts Of Stone and Blood And Wine have made an already outstanding RPG unmissable. One of the most authentic, entertaining game worlds ever.

DEFINING MOMENT Geralt in a bath tub. It changed our lives.

05

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES



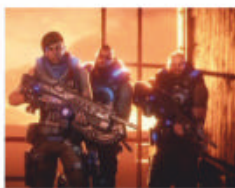
Brutal and beautiful in equal measures, GTA V is so rich in size, scope and spectacle it's hard to believe it was originally built for Xbox 360.

DEFINING MOMENT The last heist is a perfect finale to a game that brought so many memorable moments.

06

GEARS 5

PUBLISHER XBOX GAME STUDIOS



The Coalition brings us a more self-assured *Gears* campaign as new protagonist Kait takes the reins. As for multiplayer, a suite of excellent modes will keep you entertained for months.

DEFINING MOMENT Being forced to make that decision at the game's climax.

07

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

PUBLISHER UBISOFT



Bigger and more epic than even *Origins*, this Ancient Greece-set RPG will win your heart whether you play as Kassandra or Alexios in its vibrant, beautiful world.

DEFINING MOMENT Diving through crystal waters into a submerged Minoan palace.

08

MORTAL KOMBAT 11

PUBLISHER WARNER BROS



NetherRealm has pretty much now perfected the 2D fighter, with a great story mode, characters and really brutal, gory finishing moves.

DEFINING MOMENT Getting a Brutality without even trying, then feeling a bit sick watching it.

09

SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

PUBLISHER ACTIVISION



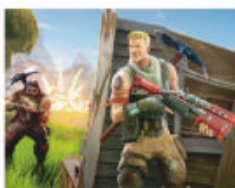
FromSoftware's samurai epic is a fearsome, yet immaculately constructed and cleverly refreshed, test of mettle.

DEFINING MOMENT Actually managing to master the game's hard-as-hell combat makes all the frustration worthwhile.

10

FORTNITE

PUBLISHER EPIC GAMES



Fortnite Battle Royale has launched its second 'Chapter', and it continues to draw a huge crowd thanks to genius new features like its creative mode. *Save The World* is brilliant, too.

DEFINING MOMENT Getting your first Victory Royale, and doing a dance.

→ FOR MORE FILM AND TV REVIEWS, VISIT [GAMESRADAR.COM](https://www.gamesradar.com)

THE BEST FILMS AND TV THIS MONTH

films



TOY STORY 4

FOR FANS OF *Toy Story 3, Up*

Against all odds, Pixar serves up a worthy companion piece to one of cinema's finest trilogies. A fond farewell to Woody, this charming adventure sends the cowboy out on a poignant high note. Not bad for a film about sentient bits of plastic.



UNCUT GEMS

FOR FANS OF *Good Time*

Want to utterly shred your nerves the next free evening you find yourself with? Then get stuck into the Safdie brothers' riveting crime thriller. As forever fidgety jeweller Howard Ratner, Adam Sandler turns in a career-best performance. A terrific flick.



GODZILLA: KING OF THE MONSTERS

FOR FANS OF *Kong: Skull Island*

The critics didn't love the irradiated lizard's sequel, but if you go in with lowered expectations, this is a fun monster romp. Godzilla and King Ghidorah's final-act scrap is a blast, and the closing shot is a corker.



POLAROID

FOR FANS OF *The Ring*

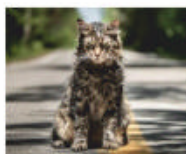
If you've been pining for a gory taken on the *Goosebumps* classic *Say Cheese And Die!* hoo-boy are you in luck. This spooky tale sees a teen unearth a vintage camera, only to discover anyone who has their photo taken with it croaks. Snap's all, folks.



PET SEMATARY

FOR FANS OF *Shattered Glass*

Yes, that bit with the Achilles tendon does happen again. Though this remake plays its scares pretty straight, the acting is a world apart from the campy theatrics of the 1989 adaptation of Stephen King's horror. Now stay dead, kitty!



HORSE GIRL

FOR FANS OF *The Skulls*

This drama stars Alison Brie as an introvert who is losing her grip on reality. Believing that she's a clone of her grandmother, her character is plagued by alarming dreams. Suffice to say, we're not dealing with the spiritual sequel to *Seabiscuit*.



tv



WESTWORLD

FOR FANS OF *Battlestar Galactica*

We're not in a pervy Wild West theme park anymore, Toto. Season three of HBO's genre-straddling smash finds Dolores and a bunch of other robotic hosts out in the real world, while also introducing us to Aaron Paul's new character... b*tch.



HUNTERS

FOR FANS OF *The Man In The High Castle*

Al Pacino is back on the small screen, heading up a gang of fascist-hunters who discovers hundreds of high-ranking Nazis are all hiding in New York circa 1977. In order to stop a Fourth Reich, the group must track down the scheming villains.



CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

FOR FANS OF *Arrested Development*

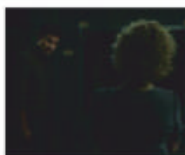
The baldy is back, baby! The irrepressible Larry David returns for a tenth and final season, with the constantly perplexed screenwriter proving he hasn't lost his talent for stumbling into teeth-gnashing, oh-so awkward social situations.



OZARK

FOR FANS OF *Bloodline*

The kinda awful but somehow amazing money launderer returns, with Marty Byrde and family finding themselves down an increasingly slippery slope. It may still be a little overly gloomy in places, but hot damn is that some good cinematography.



INTELLIGENCE

FOR FANS OF *Friends*

David Schwimmer plays an NSA agent who teams up with a put-upon computer analyst as the pair helps front a new branch of UK government. Turns out Schwimmer is still very good at hapless, bumbling comedy. And yes, we're assuming he's been 'on a break'.



ALTERED CARBON

FOR FANS OF *Humans*

Having a lead character who is capable of inhabiting many different bodies sure is handy when you have a major casting change on your hands. Anthony Mackie replaces Joel Kinnaman as Takeshi Kovacs in the second season of this dark sci-fi.



OXM TEAM CHOICE

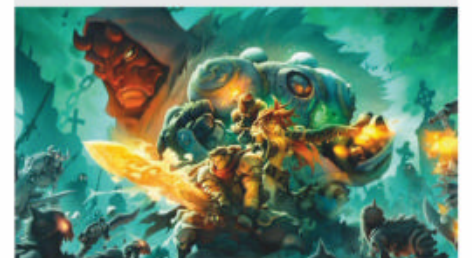
THE BEST GAMES WE'RE PLAYING AND WHY WE LOVE THEM



Chris' choice BATTLECHASERS: NIGHTWAR

Our interview with Joe Madureira this month

inspired me to jump into his very cool trad RPG-inspired 2017 game, currently on Game Pass. A mix of isometric dungeon exploration and turn-based fighting, it looks beautiful.



Dave's choice METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

I've just started my ninth playthrough of

Naked Snake's Cold War classic sneak-'em-up – and yes, you *should* judge me for that ludicrous number. By my count, I've spent a 14th of my life fighting The End.



Adam's choice NBA 2K20

It's been years since I shot virtual hoops in a b-ball game, so with

NBA 2K20 being free over the All-Star weekend, I thought I'd see if I was still any good. I don't mean to brag... but I'm the greatest. Well, aside from all those aliens in *Space Jam*.



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From the best headsets to the best TVs, controllers and accessories you need for your Xbox One

TOP 5 4K TVS FOR XBOX ONE



LG OLED77C9 OLED 4K SMART TV



£5,999/\$4,999 BEST HIGH-END OLED

The finest TV the South Korean firm has ever built. The C9 is a masterful set, combining OLED's peerless black levels and amazing contrast with far better screen uniformity than any LED can offer. LG's signature C9 range is the ultimate in 4K entertainment if you care about squeezing every pixel from your favourite Xbox One X games. If you're lucky enough to have a front room the size of an aircraft hanger, not to mention a wallet that would turn Scrooge McDuck green, the 77-inch model is the version to go for. The 65-inch and 55-inch versions are also incredible sets if you're a little more pressed for space. The best TV money can buy, and a set that will transform your experience with Xbox One.



LG OLED55B9 55-INCH OLED 4K TV

£1,299/\$1,299 BEST MID-RANGE OLED

While it lacks some of the features of its C9 big brother, this is still one hell of an OLED. Blacks are as convincingly inky as you'd expect, response times are competitive, and contrast is more impressive than any similarly priced LED TV.



SAMSUNG QE55Q60R 55-INCH QLED 4K TV

£799/\$699 BEST QLED

Hardcore PvP fans won't find a better panel than Sammy's QE55. With minimised input lag and incredibly vibrant pictures, we challenge you to find a better mid-range QLED TV on the market. Its black could be deeper, though.



SAMSUNG UE55NU8000 55-inch 4K TV

£599/\$649 BEST LED

Shopping around for a reasonably priced LED television? Look no further than this beauty. The UE55NU8000 boasts good screen uniformity, packs in support for HDR 10, while it's also capable of producing stunning SDR pictures. It's an utterly cracking panel.



PHILIPS 43PUS6753/12 43-inch 4K TV

£430/\$540 BEST BUDGET 4K

If you're looking to spend as little as possible but don't want to compromise on quality, then this is for you. Naturally warm colours lend HDR games and movies a really nice tone. Considering it's less than the price of an Xbox One X, the still-respectable input lag of 27ms is a small price to pay.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A 4K GAMING TV

4K (AKA ULTRA HD)

4K refers to the resolution that can be shown by a hi-def TV: 3,840x2,160 pixels. The Xbox One X can output a signal in 4K, and send it to your 4K TV. Almost all 4K TVs come with HDR; the minimum standard for HDR is a brightness of 400 nits, though some TVs now manage 2,000 nits.

RESPONSE TIME

Response time is the speed at which a colour can change on your TV (eg: from black to white to black again). Most 4K TVs have response times quicker than we can perceive them, however, so it makes no real difference to gameplay outside the twitchiest of shooters.

REFRESH TIME

Most TVs offer 60Hz-120Hz. A 60Hz 4K TV refreshes the image 60 times per second, so a TV refreshing at 120Hz will have slicker motion. Many TVs' 'game modes' will boost refresh rate artificially, usually by downgrading other display features such as reducing the brightness.

ACCESSORIES



XBOX ONE ELITE CONTROLLER SERIES 2

£159.99/\$179.99 BEST CONTROLLER

The best just got better. This is the new king of pads... even if you have to pay all the money to become one of its subjects. Wireless charging, rubberised grips and adjustable-tension sticks make this the most customisable controller ever.



SEAGATE 4TB GAME DRIVE FOR XBOX ONE

£109.99/\$149.99 BEST HARD DRIVE

This officially branded external hard drive on Xbox One comes in 2GB or 4GB options. It's basically a regular Seagate drive in a flashier case, so you're paying about \$15-\$20 extra for having the Xbox logo and official case. It's nice, though.



THRUSTMASTER TX

£341/\$484 BEST STEERING WHEEL

We recommend the Thrustmaster TX Racing Wheel Leather Edition, which comes with the T3PA three-pedal add-on. The wheel feels really sturdy and the design is more like a racing car than a road model. The servo itself is compact and has a pleasant weight to it. Clamps easily onto a desk or racing seat.



VENOM TWIN DOCKING STATION

£13.99/\$21.99 BEST RECHARGING DOCK

You won't break the bank with this essential bit of kit. With a cradle for two wireless controllers and a reasonably rapid recharge rate, it comes with two Nimh rechargeable battery packs and has colour-changing LED charge indicators.



RAZER TURRET

£249.99/\$249.99 BEST KEYBOARD

The first official wireless keyboard/mouse combo from Razer, for those who love the twitch-precision of mouse control, The keys' weighting is good, charge time is excellent the magnetized mouse tray makes sitting on your sofa with it comfy. Responsive in high-frame-rate games, it looks great with its customisable backlight.

HEADSETS



STEELSERIES ARCTIS 9X

£179.99/\$199.99 BEST NEW HEADSET

One of the best headsets available for Xbox One, this wireless beauty has a clear mic with more than decent noise-cancelling. These cans' biggest selling point, though? Their booming Sonic Spatial Audio. Your tattered eardrums are gonna love you.



RAZER KRAKEN TOURNAMENT EDITION

£99.99/\$99.99 BEST VALUE

This headset's quality belies its mid-range price point. With a comfortable design and 50mm drivers that deliver a clear, loud THX spacial surround sound that's great for online play, it's the perfect compromise of performance and cost.



SOUND BLASTER X H7 TOURNAMENT EDITION

£79.99/\$99.99 BEST FOR AUDIO

These pro-level headphones boast upgraded 50mm drivers for crystal-clear surround sound, great mic quality and noise cancellation. Adapts to other forms of media well, perfect for *Fortnite* as much as for blockbuster movies. Comfy cans too.



TURTLE BEACH ELITE PRO 2

£229.99/\$249.95 BEST HIGH-END

We're all looking for that competitive edge when it comes to multiplayer games, and if you've got the dosh, this headset is superior. Its spacial sound is really something and it's super comfortable and sturdy, too – with a kind of brutalist, ergonomic yet stylish design.



OFFICIAL XBOX STEREO HEADSET

£39.99/\$59.99 BEST BUDGET

The official Xbox One headset produced by Microsoft – it's cheap, but it delivers a full range of rich stereo audio. It also has a unidirectional mic and handy controls over both game and chat audio volumes. It's light too, weighing just 9oz/255g, with fabric ear cups for comfy long sessions.

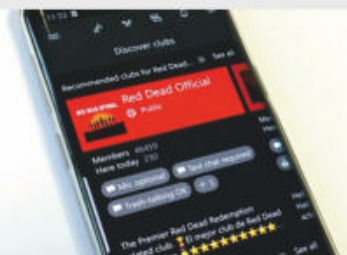


HOW TO...



OPTIMISE YOUR 4K EXPERIENCE

To make 4K games look their best, black levels need to be correctly set. HDMI limited or black-level high is the option you want. Make sure the TV's sharpness slider is set to no more than ten per cent of the max value or you could distort the picture. If your 4K set has a game mode, switch it on: it slashes response times, aka lag. To enable the full gamut of HDR colours, calibrate the HDMI slot your Xbox is plugged into to support '4:2:2 chroma subsampling'. This might be called 'Ultra HD Deep Colour' or 'Enhanced' HDMI – turn it on in your TV's HDR settings. Your Xbox One's 'Calibrate TV' option in Display and Sound settings does a decent job of ensuring your contrast, sharpness and colour settings, as well as black levels, are at the right value.



GROUP UP ON YOUR PHONE

Get the Xbox App and keep track of all your console business away from, or while you're sat in front of, your console. Using your phone while you're playing will let you see who's online, it tracks achievements and you can use it to message your friends. One of the best uses of the app is to find Groups and Clubs related to specific games. Say you're in *Red Dead Online* and you need a posse, you can start a group, and specify things like 'honor players only', that you're a casual gamer, or that a mic is required – and see other groups' suitability for you.

→ FOR GREAT DEALS ON XBOX GEAR, VISIT GAMESRADAR.COM

the disc slot

They make the games we love, but what do they play for fun? We ask developers to pick their faves from Xbox history. This month: **Antonio Cutrona**



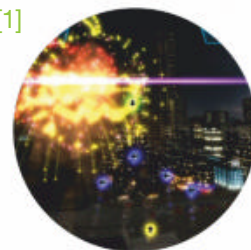
► Antonio Cutrona

Producer at
Stormind Games

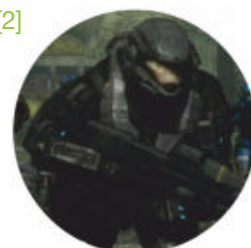
Antonio joined Stormind Games in 2016, following a stint working as a mobile games developer. After one year as a programmer on *Remothered: Tormented Fathers* he became the company's producer. He's currently working on the studio's next title, *Remothered: Broken Porcelain*.

Firstly, I'm a simple guy: I like explosions and classical music. **Boom Boom Rocket** [1] perfectly combines these two things. You can't not love it. It's one of the best rhythm games I've ever played on Xbox 360. Next up is **Halo: Reach** [2]. This is the best multiplayer shooter I've ever played – and I'm not a big fan of first-person shooters. Despite this, I really loved its intense customisation, and I *still* remember the 'pizza and *Halo*' nights. I think **Grand Theft Auto V** [3] is one of the titles with the highest production values in the history of videogames. It's a must for any kind of gamer, because everyone can find something interesting to do in it. Personally, I love to do yoga in the desert and, immediately after that, destroy Venice Beach. **Silent Hill 2** [4] is one of the games that influenced my childhood the most (and that says it all). Everything, from its soundtrack, to the environments, to the graphics at the time, is awesome. When it was released on Xbox with rare extra content, there was only one thing to do... **Lost Odyssey** [5] is the sole reason why I bought an Xbox 360 in the first place. I'm a *Final Fantasy* aficionado, so I couldn't miss this masterpiece by [*FF's* original creator] Hironobu Sakaguchi. It's a return to the origins of old-school Japanese RPGs. Also, its soundtrack by Nobuo Uematsu is probably one of the best ever. Unforgettable.

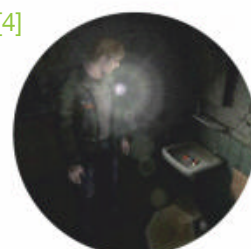
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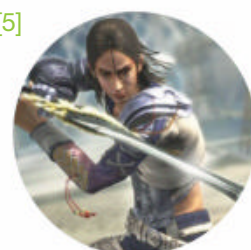
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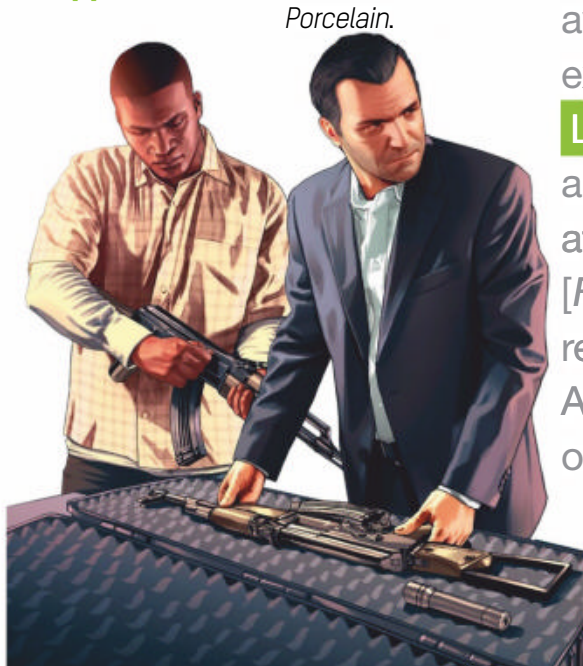
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[5]



[3]



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