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JAPAN

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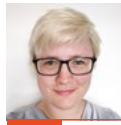
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hen I was a kid, Japan was synonymous with video games. Unlike the home-computer-raised British children of the 1980s, I grew up with Nintendo (and, more reluctantly, with

Sega), and later with PlayStation. My first console was a SNES, my second an N64, my third a PlayStation 2, and my fourth a Dreamcast bought on the cheap just after it was discontinued, and all of my formative gaming experiences were Japanese.

I'm not just talking about the obvious stuff, though naturally Mario, Zelda, and Pokémon were a huge part of my childhood. I used to sit and peruse issues of Super Play and N64 Magazine in the magazine aisle of the supermarket whilst my dad did the weekly shop, poring over tiny screenshots of mysterious imported Japanese games like *64 Ōzumō* and *Harvest Moon*. For my N64, I didn't buy *GoldenEye* (primarily because my mum wouldn't let me, but still) – I bought Konami's *Mystical Ninja Starring Goemon*, a bizarre musical RPG set in a surreal Edo-period-inspired Japan. I bought Treasure's bizarre action game, *Mischief Makers*. On Dreamcast, my introduction to Sega consisted of *Space Channel 5*, *Shenmue*, and *Crazy Taxi*.

Later on, as a teenager, I became a bit of a specialist in digging out obscure Japanese games on the PlayStation 2 and GameCube. I played bizarre evolution game *Cubivore*, innovative music game *Mojib-Ribbon*, even more innovative musical shooter *Rez*, and *Chulip* (a game about arriving in a new town and working your way up to kissing the girl of your dreams, starting with kissing the upside-down gimp hanging around in the sewer). I discovered, and very quickly became obsessed with, Bemani games like *Guitar Freaks* and *Dance Dance Revolution*. I loved the diversity and creativity of Japanese games, and the fact that I often encountered something entirely unexpected in them. Having grown up in a different culture, the



**KEZA
MACDONALD**

Keza MacDonald has been a video games journalist and critic for more than 15 years, and is currently video games editor at The Guardian. She has two small kids and is very tired.

language of their cultural references and their sense of humour was intriguingly new to me.

I learned katakana as a teen so that I could read basic menus and muddle my way through imported games. Later, at university, I studied Japanese so that I could spend a year abroad; when I landed in Nagoya, a city on the coast between Tokyo and Kyoto where I spent some of the happiest and most fun months of my life, I remember being weirded out by a sense of déjà vu. I kind of had been there before, but only in games like *Shenmue*. I had a great time exploring arcades, spending most of my money on random bargain-bin N64 games, travelling the country, and being extremely laissez-faire with my actual studying.

This was in 2008, and what I was witnessing was the tail-end of Japan's cultural domination of video games. My favourite Shibuya arcade has closed now. Some of the others I used to frequent are still there, but increasingly full of UFO grabbers rather than old *Street Fighter* cabinets or mysterious rhythm-action games. Shooters and open-world games were becoming the dominant genres, and Japan did neither of them well. Ahead of Keiji Inafune's famous proclamation that Japan's games industry was dead in 2009, The "Is Japan over?" op-eds had already started, as the publishers and developers that made many of the weirdest games of my childhood started to fold, the industry started to globalise, and online play became the norm.

Since then, indie games have had a resurgence, but Japan has never developed a particularly robust indie scene. Its games industry still revolves around the huge companies that forged it. We've still got Nintendo, Capcom, and Square Enix, but others like Konami and Sega are shadows of their former selves, and we've lost Sony's Japan Studio among many others. Japan hasn't been at the epicentre of the games industry for many years now. But for those who grew up when I did, it will always be its true home. 🇯🇵

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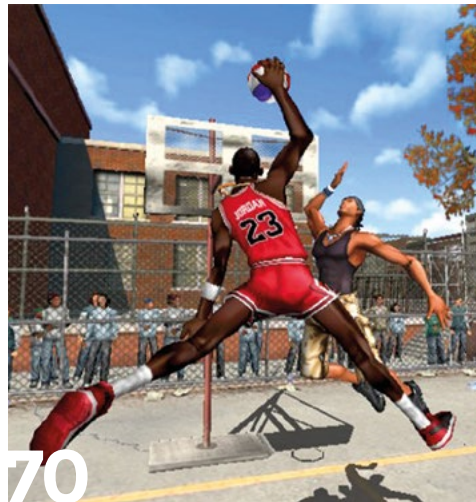
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WELCOME

As you may have gathered from the cover, we have a distinctly Japanese theme going on this month. Specifically, we're looking at how Japan's output has influenced game developers the world over, from the makers of the JRPG-inspired *Cris Tales* in Colombia to the Slovakian studio behind *Bushido Blade* homage, *Die by the Blade*. Then there's Strictly Limited Games, a German firm dedicated to publishing Japanese (and Japanese-inspired) titles on cartridge and disc.

Back in the mists of time, it was Japan's games that really made me fall in love with the medium in the first place. Whether it was such arcade games as *Mappy* or *Final Fight*, or console titles like *Super Mario Bros.* or *Magical Flying Hat Turbo Adventure*, their style, colour, and precision made them immediately stand out. Even a curious little title like Hudson Soft's *Stop the Express* – with its spiky-haired protagonist running and jumping across the roof of a train – stood apart from other ZX Spectrum games of the early 1980s, and still holds up remarkably well today. As this edition of *Wireframe* proves, I'm far from alone in my affection for Japan's illustrious, industry-changing video game history.

Enjoy the new issue!

Ryan Lambie
Editor

TIME CRISIS

Exploring the past, present, and future of JRPG influence with the Colombian-made **Cris Tales**

There's no attempt to hide the many inspirations behind Dreams Uncorporated and SYCK's love letter to the JRPG, with *Cris Tales* proudly wearing everything on its sleeve for all to see.

This is a game that riffs on the crystals, parties, and turn-based battle systems genre stalwarts know all too well, while also being a title the Colombian studio making it is pushing to stand out from the crowd through a few tweaks to existing formulas, the odd new feature, and a bold and gorgeous look.

We had a look at *Cris Tales* back in issue 25 and the feeling was the same then – the game takes a leaf from the likes of *Final Fantasy*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Octopath Traveler*, *Paper Mario*, any *Zelda* game with time-shifting mechanics, and *Persona 5*, among others, but it maintains its own distinct personality. Revolving around protagonist Crisbell, players are soon introduced to the intriguing split-screen mechanic of being able to see the past, present, and future of a scene in 'real' time. While this makes a fine excuse for supping up more of those sumptuous visuals, it also carves out *Cris Tales*' most distinctive mechanic: time manipulation.

Being able to see the past and future of a town as you navigate it is a lovely feature, as well as one that adds a bit of narrative oomph to proceedings – seeing an elderly resident in the present and an empty space in the future is surprisingly moving, for example. But it also leads to distinct choices for players to make as they proceed, and the ability to see how their actions now – or those in the past – can and will impact the present and future.

This of course carries over to battles too, where enemies can be aged or youthed with crystal attacks – younger enemies might be unable to cause much damage, while older ones rely on magic as their weary bones disallow them from using melee attacks. It all threads into things beyond mere visual impact, and it brings together a game that is looking mighty impressive as this is written, mere months before its delayed release.

Making the most of the time we have, we chatted with *Cris Tales*' development team to reflect on the game's progress – Dreams Uncorporated CEO Carlos Andrés Rocha Silva and art director Sebastian Villarreal both had their brains thoroughly wrung out for this one. ➔





So, in a nutshell, how would you describe *Cris Tales*?

CS: Well, I would answer: it's the reason I'm losing so much hair, and I have barely noticed that there's a sort of apocalypse happening in the world (or at least that's what my fiancé tells me). It's also a philosophically made game, which is how I've always approached game creation. In this case, I'd say we can summarise *Cris Tales* by saying: 'Learn from the past, act in the present, create the future'.

This is at the core of the development of *Cris Tales*, be it on the art, the design, the mechanics, the story – everything

must follow this particular way of thinking. Finally, it's also the culmination of a maturation period, of many years making games, both for me – I've been doing this for 13 years – and for the team, who are putting their all into it.

It's a mix between innovation and familiarity, a game that is at the same time a homage to our favourite games from our childhood, and also a new take on classical RPGs.

SV: As a video game, it's a turn-based RPG, along with the ability to see the past, the present, and the future all at the same time, on the same screen. As a developer, *Cris Tales* is a dream that I share in common with my friends. [It's] the game we always wanted to make.

There are influences pulled in from other games, but how much is Colombia – Colombian culture – represented?

CS: Places we've gone, people we've met, anecdotes we've shared... there's a lot of who we are – personally and culturally – in the game. So, be it on the vistas, the places, the people, and even the philosophy you will find in this fantasy world, you will somehow be meeting our home country. We call it 'endemic fantasy', which is basically using everyday elements and making them part of this fantasy world we're creating; like using coffee as an item, or basing Matias (the frog in the top hat) on an actual poisonous frog from Colombia. We wanted to have the familiar elements found in RPGs, to highlight Colombian elements that are rarely shown in media in general. It's sort of taking magical realism – for which Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez is one of the most representative figures – and turning it on its head, because we're not making magic or fantastical elements on everyday occurrence, as that genre does, but making everyday elements from Colombia into fantastical and magical places, people, or even items inside the game. We don't want to spoil a lot of what you will find, but the duality and conflict you will see in many cities is also inspired by conflicts in modern-day Colombia.

SV: Our objective is not to represent Colombia just as it is, [but] rather to extract



▲ On the left, the past. Middle, present. On the right, the inevitable decay of the future. Well, 'the future'. The decay bit is editorialising a smidge.



▲ If you can spot the Persona influence here you win absolutely nothing, because it's so intensely obvious.

the magic of Colombia, to romanticise the world in which the characters live. In *Cris Tales*, you can find many kingdoms based on Colombian cultures, such as the coastal kingdom of St. Clarity, where the Cartagena Clock Tower stands out, or Neva Tulira's dungeons, or the salt mines, based on the salt mines of Zipaquirá.

Where did Crisbell come from, as a character?

CS: I think Sebas can comment a lot more about her, but I can add a bit at least on her growth and path during the game. Writing Crisbell was hard, writing a main

of Las Lajas Shrine. I have always loved designing cute yet powerful female characters, and I always dreamed of one day designing our own Colombian princess/heroine based on the magic of our country. Las Lajas Shrine was definitely the ideal place in which this character would live, so I tried to use it as a reference to some typical costumes from the Shrine area – that being the Nariño Department – without forgetting the main mechanics of time travelling.

How much work went into getting the time-shift-travel-past-future-present element feeling right?

SV: A lot of work! The *Cris Tales* mechanic is one-of-a-kind, and we never had a benchmark for other gameplay mechanics or similar games. It is true that time travel is something that has been done many times in different media such as movies or video games, but not in the way we do it in *Cris Tales*. So every little idea needs to be thoroughly explored as we build the game from scratch.

Definitely, the prototypes, the concepts, and the long design documents have been the most important part to illustrate and balance something that nowadays seems 'obvious', but it really burned our brains at the beginning.

CS: Yeah, what Sebas said. Seriously though,

it is still extremely challenging as a mechanic, and we've done a lot to give the player interesting tools to play with the concept, both in the adventure and the combat, but I also think there's a lot more that can be done with it. There were a ton of implicit and explicit rules that had to be followed, while allowing the player to understand without having to be explicit, making room for some environmental storytelling. And that's just the adventure mode. Combat is a whole different beast with its own rules and balancing, and even if we feel there is a lot to explore and to experiment [with], it's the players who will have final say in how successful we were in giving them enough room, tools, and options to explore the different possibilities of the combat system, and that there are enough dynamics between the characters and their abilities.

How much does the time-impact stuff affect the story?

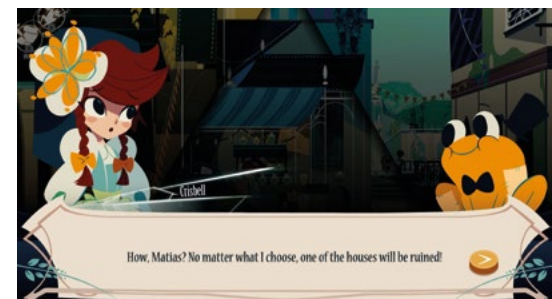
CS: It was *horrible*. In all seriousness though, it is very difficult to factor in all of the decisions the player makes into a cohesive story. Player choices can impact the world, and that introduces a big problem in our game. You have to *immediately* see the change of the choice you just made in the game itself, because of the nature of the mechanic, so it's also very art-intensive.

But it's not only art-intensive – Yaddir Vill, our gameplay director, had to make sure all of the changes made sense and were visible, and also made sense in the grand scheme of things. As if that wasn't enough, the programming team, led by Alvaro ➔

“Our objective is to extract the magic of Colombia”

character is hard. Usually, especially in Japanese media, main characters tend not to have a strong personality – with notable exceptions, of course – and this is to allow the player to project themselves. And since we draw heavy inspiration from our Japanese influence, it was a delicate balance to actually give Crisbell a personality that belongs in the story we're telling, and also allowing for the player to believe the different decisions she could make along the way... Hopefully, we are successful in making the player believe it's Crisbell, a character we've worked a lot on, [who is] the one making these decisions.

SV: I will go back to the original concept that emerged when I saw the photographs



▲ The frog in the top hat and bow-tie is Matias, and not only is he a wee cheeky scamp, he's also Crisbell's guide of sorts into the world of her new-found time powers.

FAVE RAVES

A simple question: what's your favourite thing about *Cris Tales*?

"It's never boring," Villarreal says.

"Maybe today I am working on some animations for an enemy based on plants and flowers, and tomorrow [I'm] drawing the concept art of a kingdom of fire that is inside a volcano. *Cris Tales*' mechanics allow you to tell thousands of different stories and the creativity never ends." Silva goes a different direction, though his pride still shines through: "I really like the core and how it lends itself to many design possibilities," he explains. "It's that blend between the old and the new which makes it so enticing for me as a creator. [I'm] so proud of this team to be bringing such a well-crafted game to the world, without ever having made an RPG before."



Martinez and Armando Calderon, had to make sure all of the side quests actually opened up more options for you as you played through the game, and didn't collide with other options, programming-wise.

With all of this said, we weren't able to put in everything we wanted into how the story could diverge from one playthrough to the next, but we approached it using mostly what the player decided to do, or to ignore. There are different possibilities in each place you visit, and those possibilities open up as you explore and solve issues happening around the different towns.

How satisfied are you with where *Cris Tales* is, development-wise? Is there anything you'd change about where you are right now?

CS: Oh, I think I'm speaking for Sebastian Pedroza, the game's main producer, who would definitely say there are a lot of things we would change in the production. Of course, we're not the same as we were four years ago, when we started playing with the concept. There are more efficient ways of doing things, and a lot of decisions could have made our lives so much easier if we had known the results of some of the things we experimented with. Whether to use the X or Y option, decision, or tool. But I think that's all part of the growth process of making a game. I think we're not only more experienced now, but also wiser as to how to approach projects of such magnitude. And of course, if

we had the ability to see the future that awaited us, we would have started the transition to home office [working] in a more orderly, less apocalyptic sort of way.

The art style is a definite standout element – where did that come from?

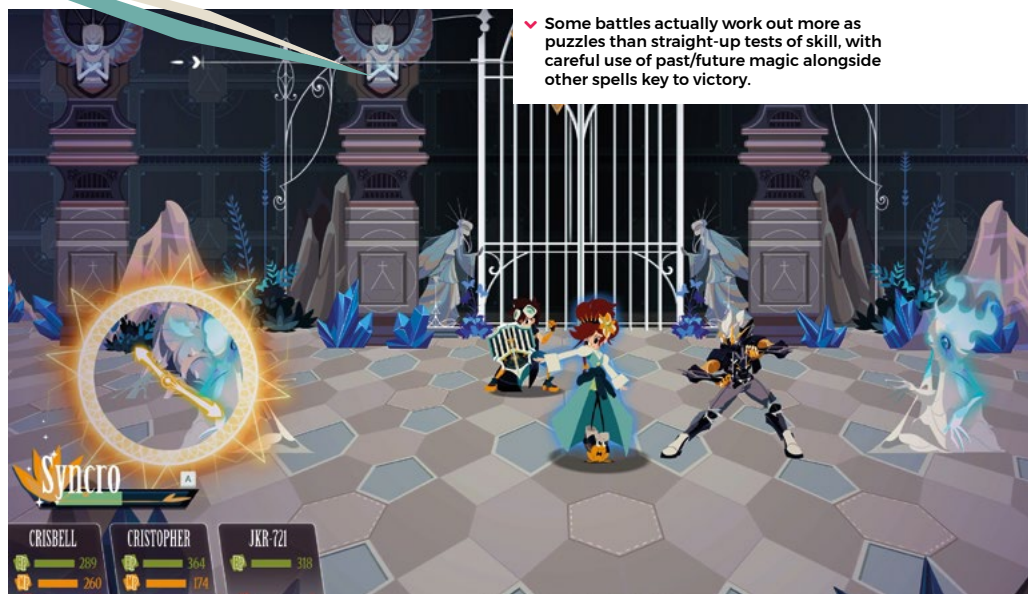
CS: That all comes from Sebas, he has a very unique art style, and he wants to stand out as much as possible, so blame him and all of the art team that help him create that very particular vision for everything you see in the game.

SV: The art style and the character design for Crisbell and Matias was something I did at the same time we developed the core mechanics of time travelling.

At the time, we only conceived the concept of time travelling for adventure mode. *Cris Tales*' time mechanics are so gigantic that just for that we already had a lot to build upon! So, we still weren't thinking about the combat system, the story twists, or even the main villains. It was natural for me to first illustrate the main world of fantasy and adventure.

Was there ever the thought to make it look different – to go for a different style?

SV: Yes, at some point we thought of completely changing the art style and starting from scratch again. The reason was that it seemed for some people the visual style was too 'cute', and it appealed more to a young audience than to a turn-based combat RPG fan. However, instead of



changing the visual style, what I tried was to sketch and incorporate more mature characters, such as the Volcano Sisters, using the same visual style, but with some additional stylisation touches. Seeing how the Volcano Sisters matched perfectly with the style, and performed well with the original cast of characters and environments, I felt this was the right way to go.

In the end, I found a new way to work that mixes my personal style with something that is also appealing to the RPG audience, making me evolve as an artist by discovering the fantastic world of these RPGs and what they represent.

What do you think the art style brings to the overall experience for the player?

SV: If the visual style doesn't properly communicate the mechanics of *Cris Tales*, the player simply won't understand. For example, the most difficult challenge was not to abstract the art too much, since making something very abstract could save production costs – that is, it could draw faster, but some elements would not be



we probably went overboard with how big we wanted to make the game – which to our surprise ended up being even bigger than we imagined. But to be fair, it isn't the first project for a lot of the people in the company, since a lot of us come from Below The Game, a studio I founded twelve years ago, and that managed to release games for both mobile and Xbox One and PS4. This is a game that couldn't have been made if we hadn't been learning so much from making games for such a long time.

better at some point, that 'some point' will probably never come.

CS: Everything takes time, and we tend to [go overboard adding] too many things, so we have to spend a lot of time later on polishing those things we added, and maybe we could have focused on fewer elements, as we've seen other games do recently. It's like making a choice about what you're putting your energy and resources into, and we should have said no to a few more things in the original design that maybe wouldn't have been as noticed by players, but would have improved the development process. But it all comes as an easy conclusion in hindsight.

“We thought of completely changing the art style”

understood correctly. If by the mechanics the player must be made to understand that a tree in the present is lush and beautiful, and in the future, it is withered and without leaves, if the art is very abstract it could be interpreted as anything, except a tree.

CS: Maybe more than the art style itself, it's the art direction of always wanting to tell a story through the characters, even if that story isn't always explicit. It's all those little details, all those small elements that people can piece together that helps the story have impact and makes the player imagine [different] possibilities.

It's an ambitious game – do you feel you've held back at all to make things more manageable?

CS: We're very ambitious. It definitely is the biggest project we've worked on, and

What's the biggest lesson learned that you wish you knew from the start of the process?

SV: Understand that you have to let some things go. We cannot always include everything – although the ideas are the coolest, many times the scope does not allow us to do everything. That's why we have learned to prioritise and let go of some things that, while cool, are probably less relevant to development.

Dedicate more time to pre-production and organising the team, but also be clear that there will be many moments in which improvisation will be key to managing the constant amount of work.

Do not underestimate the 'placeholders'. Some of them will remain the same as they are, some of them can even become an important feature. Therefore, even if we think they will change for something

Overall, has making *Cris Tales* been a positive experience?

CS: Oh, it has been a life-changing experience, and it's been extremely positive. We've grown as a studio, as a team, as game developers, and as creators... Personally, I'm ready to have some rest and let the team rest as well. There aren't many teams in Colombia that have worked on a project with so many elements and with so much visibility, so it's been an exciting and demanding experience, and that has taught us many lessons and made us wiser. So, we will take some rest after we finish, and if we make another RPG, we will definitely apply many of the lessons we learned here. 🍷

***Cris Tales* releases on PC, PS5, XB S/X, PS4, XBO, Switch, and Stadia in July.**



Die by the Blade

Studio lead Peter Adamondy gives us the lowdown on his team's one-hit-kill Bushido Blade successor

Info

GENRE

One-hit-death sim

FORMAT

PC / PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER

Triple Hill Interactive/
Toko Midori

PUBLISHER

Grindstone

RELEASE

TBA 2021

SOCIAL

@dibtgame

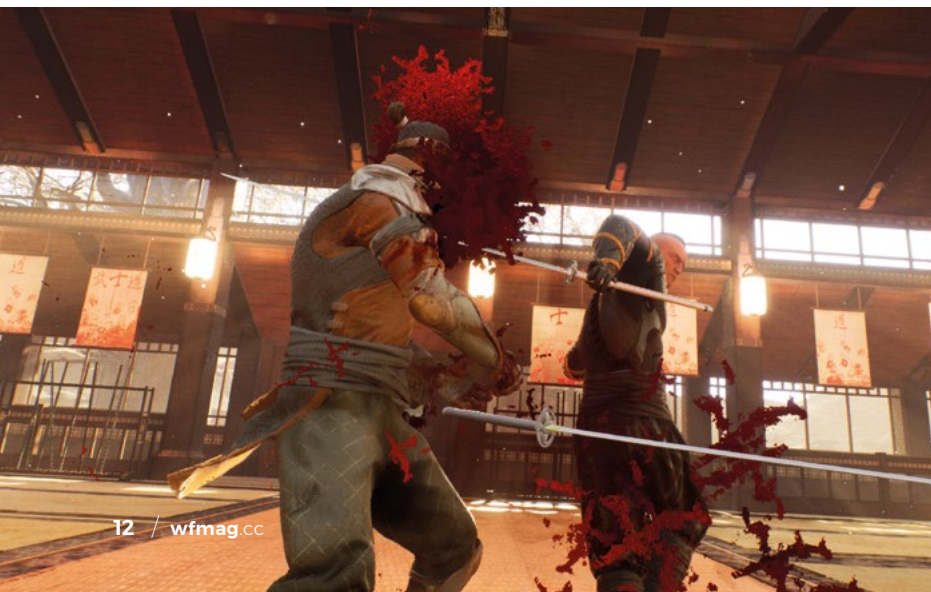
▼ Expect severed limbs and lots of gore in the finished game.

In combat, swords are a great leveller: in the right hands, even a less physically capable fighter can still defeat a highly trained opponent with a bladed weapon – something developer Peter Adamondy knows a thing or two about. “Spears were the main weapon for lots of armies,” he tells us, “because even an ill-trained soldier equipped with a yari (traditional straight-head spear) could kill a highly trained samurai, if he had just a wakizashi (traditional samurai sword) or some other short-range weapon.”

Adamondy knows this because he's the lead designer on *Die by the Blade*, an upcoming one-hit-death fighter in the mode of such bygone corkers as *Bushido Blade* and *Way of the Samurai*.

Like those games, *Die by the Blade* will eschew lightning-fast combos in favour of nervy bouts of feints, parries, and fatal blows: fights will often be over within seconds, and almost always with copious amounts of blood splashed about the place. “It certainly takes some ideas from *Bushido Blade*, although we needed to modernise the gameplay,” Adamondy tells us. “We haven't shied away from the fact that these games were a source of inspiration. The original games were a bit obtuse as you didn't really know what was happening behind the scenes – there weren't any combo lists or strong tutorials.”

So while *Die by the Blade* won't skimp on the complexity you'd expect from a fighting game, it's also being designed so relative newcomers can pick up a controller and get into it. “Aspects such as parrying, blocking, stances, and so on, had to be reinvented so that they work for a contemporary audience,” Adamondy explains. “We've also added mechanics that weren't in these original games. One example would be the advantage mechanic – each attack has a specific amount of frames for which your enemy is stunned when hit, and you have the attack advantage for those frames. Skilled players will know how many [frames] for which attack and could use this information to quickly kill their opponent. If you don't know that information, your first instinct is to go into block instead, to parry a counter-attack. We wish to encourage players to fight to their instincts and learn to use these advantages and similar mechanics.”





^ *Die by the Blade* uses Unreal Engine 4, albeit with a few modifications under the hood for online multiplayer.

Die by the Blade began life as a concept at Japanese studio Toko Midori; looking around for developers who could help them realise their gory vision, the firm turned to Slovakia's Triple Hill Interactive. One 2020 Kickstarter campaign later, and the devs had the funds they needed to hone their fighting sim to perfection. And while Triple Hill is now handling the production side of things, Toko Midori is still working on marketing, game testing, and "cultural feedback" – which is handy, since *Die by the Blade's* identity is rooted in the Far East, from its setting to its weapons and fighting strategies. "Currently, we have katana, nodachi, naginata, and wakizashi," Adamondy says of the bladed weapons currently in the game. "These are the most distinct swords in their fighting styles, so we picked them for that. Nodachi is a type of long sword and it isn't as heavy as you'd expect. Naginata is a polearm-style weapon, so you should hold your opponent far away. Wakizashi is a short, dagger-like sword that you will be able to dual-wield. You need to get closer to your opponents though, but you are more agile. Katana is a 'middle of the road' classic sword. It works as a baseline we use to balance other weapons with. So, I would say that this is close to a 'rock, paper, scissors' system."

Although there'll be a single-player campaign in *Die by the Blade*, it'll be a comparatively brief "in-depth tutorial" – the team's real focus being on local and online multiplayer. It's the technical side of these online bouts, Adamondy says, that has proven the biggest hurdle to clear so far.

"Even an ill-trained soldier could kill a highly trained samurai"

"We want to have an online multiplayer system, but we know it's almost impossible to have an identical physics simulation running on multiple machines," he explains. "Therefore, we have to accommodate implementation and gameplay with that in mind and use a deterministic approach – pre-recorded animations, deterministic character status, etc. Our goal is to make the game fun first, then make the best simulation second."

Development is in its final stages, though Triple Hill recently announced that it'll need a few more months than originally planned – understandably, the pandemic has played a part in the delay. "We've had plans to record

new animations, but the country's now in lockdown," Adamondy says. "We've been in quarantine for some time, so it's slowed

us a bit. Currently, we're working on the tournament system. We're also working with Edgagap on a distributed server system, so that lag in the game will be as minimal as possible. Multiplayer's a big part of our development effort, and we've just finished the weapon customisation system – you'll be able to unlock weapon parts and create your own skins.

"And last but not least, we're also working on the single-player system where you'll be able to freely move and explore the game world a bit more than in usual fighting games. The audio team's also doing their best to get the sounds and music just right too... So I'm pretty excited about the future." 🎮

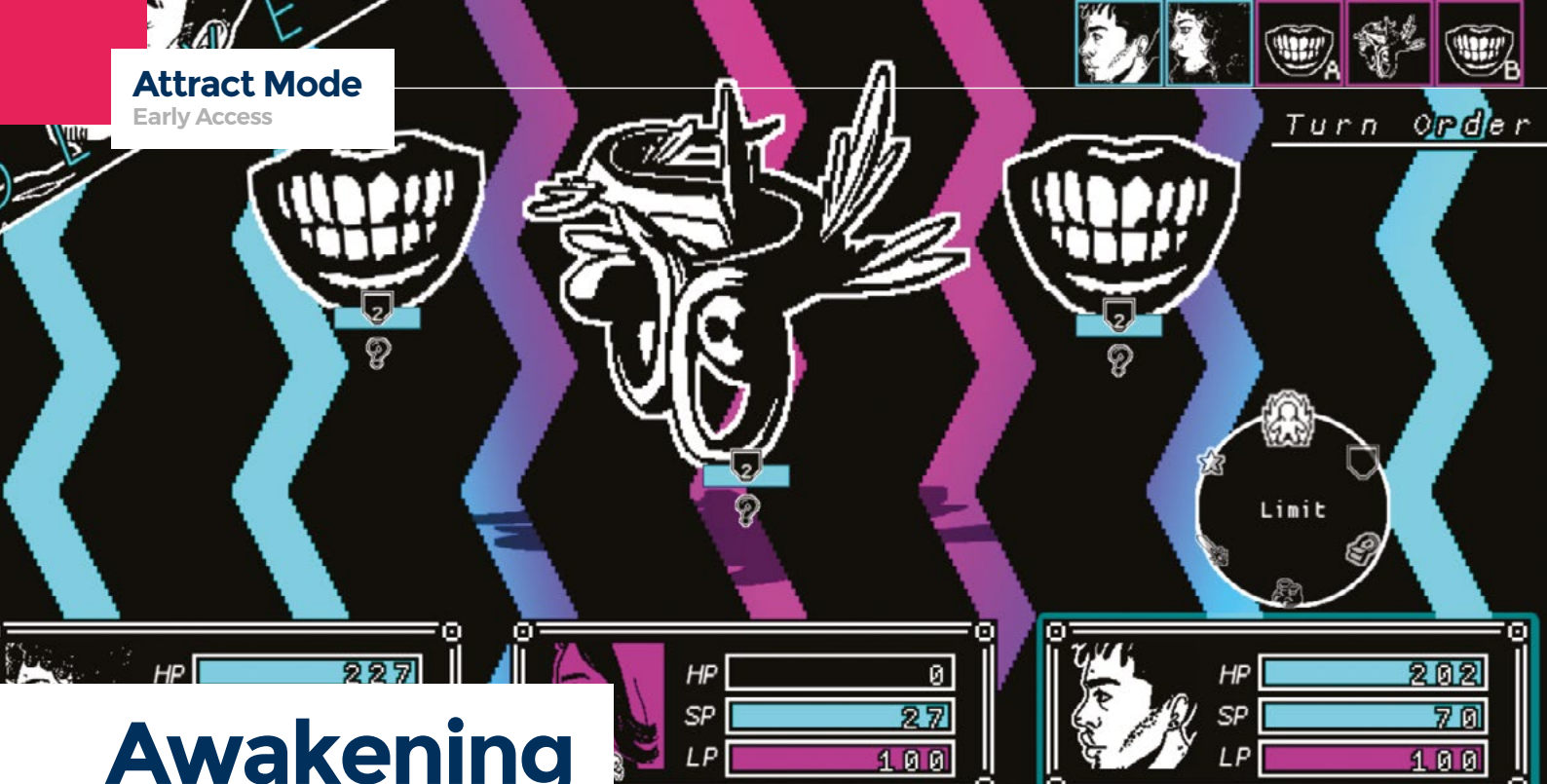


^ Extensive use of motion capture results in some truly lifelike combat moves.

SECRET MOVES

Any fighting game lives or dies by the weightiness of its moves, so what's the key to giving *Die by the Blade's* warriors the solidity and impact they need? "In my opinion, it comes down to two things: timing and inertia," says Adamondy. "Timing decides when your character should move or stop and for how long. Inertia describes how they should move, so stopping the character on a dime is great from a control perspective, but not the best for feeling like you're controlling a real human. However, being unable to control your character when you want to is frustrating, so like with everything, there has to be a balance."

Attract Mode
Early Access



Awakening

Working through a nightmare scenario in *She Dreams Elsewhere*

Info

GENRE
Adventure-RPG

FORMAT
PC / XBO / Switch
/ Mac / Linux

DEVELOPER
Studio Zevere

PUBLISHER
Studio Zevere

RELEASE
Summer 2021

SOCIAL
@studiozevere

W

we all want a bit more sleep, but lead character Thalia's situation in *She Dreams Elsewhere* is taking things to a bit of an extreme. She's trapped, comatose in

a world of nightmares that prevent her from waking up, and looking for any way she can to confront and overcome this state of headriden bedridden-ness. In less powerfully technical terms: *She Dreams Elsewhere* is an adventure-RPG set in a surreal dream world, and it looks fantastically imaginative.

The initial idea came about during senior year in high school for *She Dreams Elsewhere's* creator Davionne Gooden, with that idea brewing over time into the game we see today. "I'd gone through a bunch of neat, but not very interesting prototypes," Gooden explains. "Eventually, I landed on the concept of being stuck in a dream because I thought it had a ton of potential. I've always been fascinated by dreams and what they can reflect about yourself and your environment, plus it allows for virtually endless creative possibilities – so I figured, why not give it a shot?"

The dreamscapes represented in the game jump swiftly from dreary to exquisitely surreal; while at a glance it could well look like a case of style standing tall over substance, the fact is this distinctive visual style came about pretty much by accident. "The original art style was a lot more cartoony, but early on in development, I pressed the wrong button while making some art and it turned everything black and white – which was something that I was immediately attracted to,"

Gooden says. "I kept developing it further, playing around with visual ideas, selective colours, completely butchering/Frankenstien-ing asset packs to my liking, and the rest is history." The move wasn't some bold experiment by a seasoned artist – Gooden admits to having zero artistic training outside of high school classes – but it has worked out very favourably



► The game's distinctive style is thanks to artist Yanina Nesterova.



◀ Probably the most relatable sentiment in any game ever made, anywhere, ever.

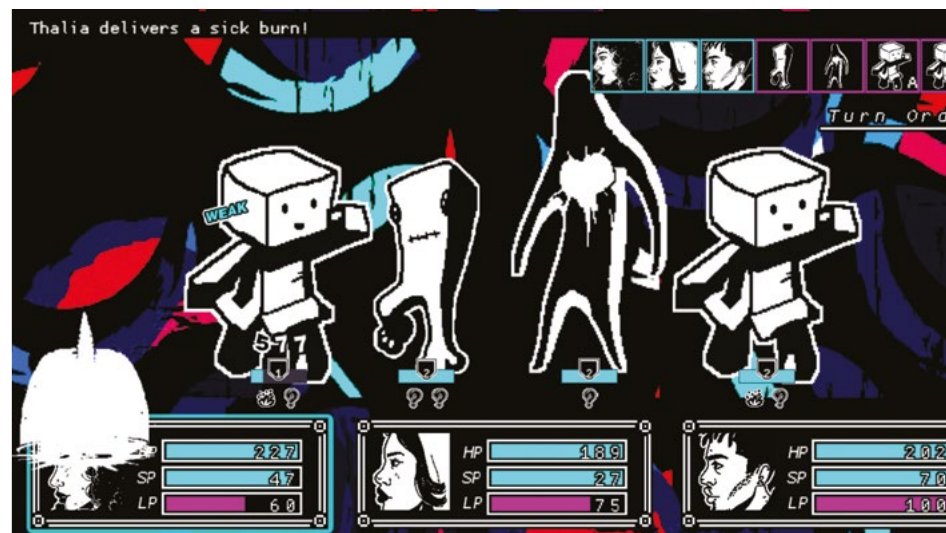
for the game, making it, at times, a striking visual assault. “The fact that people like the art so much is a huge compliment,” Gooden says. “Granted, I can’t take all the credit – my character designer Yanina [Nesterova] has done an absolutely phenomenal job with the full illustrations and even inspired some of my direction with the game, so I’m truly blessed to be able to collaborate with her.”

Collaboration hasn’t just been with the character art – *She Dreams Elsewhere’s* soundtrack was composed by Mimi Page. But when it comes to the game proper, it’s practically a one-dev show, and that personal aspect to things has led to a much more personal story being told as Thalia confronts the dreams – and nightmares – in her way. “I take inspiration from anything and everything,” Gooden says. “Dreams, emotions, real-life experiences, other media, conversations on the street, random shower thoughts, the list goes on. My mind is always in a creative, brainstorming mode, for better or worse.”

Gooden continues: “I pretty much just do whatever. If anything, the hardest part has been trying to put some type of logic or structure in an environment – in a dream – that inherently has none. With the vision I’m trying to go for, though, it’s not too bad and leads to a lot of fun ideas. It does make for a relatively slow writing process, though.”

That writing process, of course, covers many of the surreal events taking place in Thalia’s nightmares. With the game presenting such a personal tale of mental health and self-identity, isn’t there a risk it could alienate those looking for a broader focus to their game stories? “Nah, I don’t really care,” Gooden says. “I’m making this game for me, myself, and I first and foremost, so any worries of putting so much of myself into it hasn’t really occurred. I think that’s why so many

“I’m making this game for me, myself, and I first and foremost”



▲ Graphically, *She Dreams Elsewhere* is stylish and striking; all the better to lure you into its surrealist delights.

people are into the game – it feels so authentic because it is 100% authentic to myself, yknow?”

It’s this focus and single-mindedness that has helped *She Dreams Elsewhere* get to the point it has – we’re mere months from release by the time you read this, and it’s fair to say development has been... a process. On asking Gooden what the most challenging aspect of development has been, the reply came: “Literally everything. Nah, I’m kidding. But only kind of.

Video games are hard and it’s a miracle that any game is shipped at all. For me personally, though, it’s just hard to keep focus a lot of

the time, especially during these days where everything just sucks, and there’s new bullshit to deal with on a daily basis. It’s exhausting. But you’ve just got to be easier on yourself and take it one day at a time, right?”

Once the nose is finally away from the grindstone and *She Dreams Elsewhere* releases, what does Gooden hope for? What does she want to come out of a world where the game is out there, ready to be played and enjoyed by any and all? Well, it should be pretty obvious what Gooden’s hope is: “To finally get some bloody rest for once.”



Flawless execution

Lead your squad to victory – or bullet-soaked doom – in tactical plan-'em-up, No Plan B

Info

GENRE
Tactics/plan-'em-up

FORMAT
PC / Mac / Linux

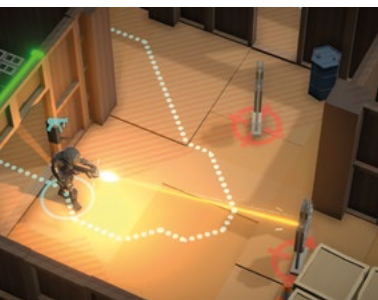
DEVELOPER
GFX47

PUBLISHER
GFX47

RELEASE
Q4 2021

SOCIAL
@noplanbgame

- ▲ “The execution phase is where the juicy explosions, breaching choreographies, and epic gunfights take place,” Dubois says.
- ▼ *No Plan B* is designed with brief and longer play sessions in mind, with individual skirmish missions ideal for a quick bit of tea-break tactics.



It's a sad fact that most of us will go through our entire lives without kicking a door down. Sure, we might occasionally nudge our way into a kitchen while holding six bags of shopping, but we won't ever do that cool cop or elite soldier thing where they smash their way through doorways with an automatic weapon clutched in their fists. Still, we'll always have games like *No Plan B* on hand to give us a vicarious thrill. A tactical title in the vein of *Frozen Synapse*, *Breach & Clear*, and, yes, *Door Kickers*, *No Plan B* has been in the works for almost a decade now; in fact, it was *Door Kickers* that prompted developer Sébastien Dubois to take his initial prototype – then dubbed “*SWATeam*” or something equally clever” – in a different creative direction. “The emphasis at that time was actually more on the collaboration between different operator classes than the planning,” Dubois says of that early build. “I stopped working on it as soon as *Door Kickers* came out, as it already had pretty much everything I wanted to put in my game in a more advanced and awesome version than I could ever do myself.”

The idea was placed aside for a few years as Dubois concentrated on other projects – one of them being another strategy title, *Gladiabots - AI Combat Arena*, released in 2018. But still, the idea of a squad-based tactics opus lingered in Dubois' mind: “I obviously played a ton of *Door*

Kickers and absolutely loved it. There was only one thing missing for me though: proper tools to play the game in the ‘single plan’ fashion, planning the whole mission in one go and then hitting play and watching it play out without any more inputs. I told myself there was a gap to fill and I started to work on *No Plan B*.”

No Plan B, then, is all about flexing the strategic part of your brain rather than your trigger finger: completing each mission is a case of studying the map, carefully planning the positions of your characters, and trying to anticipate what moves enemies are likely to make. Once your orders are locked in, it's time to watch as your immaculately planned gambit comes off without a hitch – or alternatively, devolves into a bullet-strewn mess.

“The game is obviously designed to reward meticulous plans in which nothing is left to chance,” Dubois says. “But I don't want it to be too difficult either – that's why the characters you control are more powerful than the NPCs they face (faster reflexes, better precision, thicker armour, etc). This way, they can survive a few mishandled encounters. But in most cases, you are heavily outnumbered by the enemies. So you may get away with one or two mistakes, but get lazy and the game will punish you. Lose one of your precious teammates and your whole plan could be compromised, leading to your team getting wiped out.”

While there'll also be skirmish missions for quick tactical fixes, losing team members will be especially stressful in campaign mode. "Campaign missions have several strategic layers on top of them," Dubois explains. "First, you need to keep your squad members alive as long as possible. If one of your units gets shot down during a mission, you lose it for the rest of the campaign. If you fail a mission, all the units you deployed are lost – though you're free to deploy as many units as you want in campaign missions. Then you have to carefully manage your arsenal, as each weapon and grenade can only be used in one mission. Finally, you need to wisely decide which path you will take through the different branches of the campaign (a bit like the sectors in *FTL: Faster Than Light*). The challenge here is to optimise your chances of success in the long term, considering the type and difficulty of the missions and the potential rewards they offer."

One particularly enticing aspect of *No Plan B* is its map editor, which will allow us to devise and share our own deadly missions. "It's still a work in progress, but the map editor is definitely one of the pillars of this game. Ideally, I'd like players to be able to not only make their own missions but also their own campaigns and even tell stories with it. I'm also spending a lot of dev time on the map generator I'm using to create the existing missions. Maps are actually randomly generated using content I've designed myself."

Given that Dubois is largely developing the game by himself – he's doing everything from programming to 3D modelling – using randomly generated content has helped him to quickly create missions, test them, and give them the odd tweak here and there when necessary.

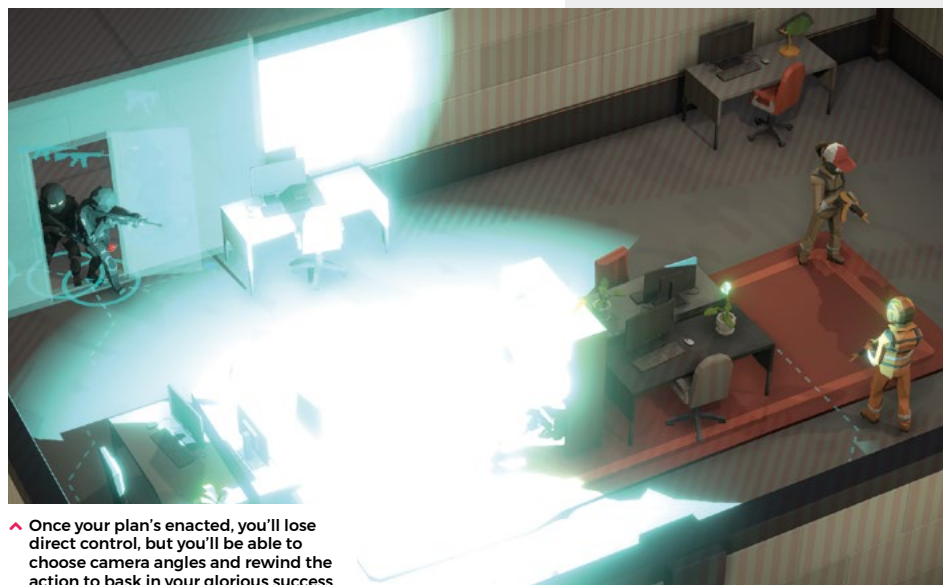
"The game is obviously designed to reward meticulous plans"

"The generator starts by picking a building shape from a pool of manually designed ones," Dubois explains. "This building shape forms a rooms layout that the generator fills with rooms randomly picked from a pool of handcrafted ones. Each room contains slots for props, and each one of these slots is filled with randomly picked props, etc. Now that I've made a lot of content for this system, my process is usually to run the generator a few times until I find an interesting layout, then adjust the content to fit my original idea for the mission."

Dubois hopes to have this tool available to players, too, and he has more goals for *No Plan B*, including console ports and DLC. All being well, Dubois' game will provide an antidote to the faster-paced tactical games currently available. "Most of the tactical games released these days are first-person shooters," he says. "I don't know about you, but my potato aim and bad reflexes make me think I'm getting too old for this. Tactical planning suits me better: I can relax, take my time to analyse the map layout, craft my (presumably) perfect plan, and contemplate my squad executing it flawlessly, checking every corner like pros do, instead of panicking as soon as I see a character, shooting them in the back, then realising it was my teammate..." 🗨

PRETTY POLY

Thankfully for solo developers, the wealth of assets available online means that not everything has to be made from scratch. "I'm using 3D models from Synty Studios for the characters and the buildings," Dubois tells us. "It was just for the prototyping phase at first, but I just love their low-poly art style so much, and it fits the tone I wanted to set in the game so well that I decided to keep them. And I simply realised that neither me nor any pro 3D artist could ever achieve so much content with this quality."



▲ Once your plan's enacted, you'll lose direct control, but you'll be able to choose camera angles and rewind the action to bask in your glorious success.

That was the month that was



03



01



02

01. Cheaters sometimes prosper

For a bit, at least. Chinese cheat-selling outfit Chicken Drumstick made itself a cool £55m by selling subscriptions to its cheating service, which offered exploits for the likes of *Overwatch*, *VALORANT*, and *Call of Duty: Mobile*. But a collaboration between Tencent and Chinese police saw the outfit being taken down, with £33m in assets seized and 10 people arrested, according to the BBC.

It's the biggest cheating case the world has yet seen and shines a light on the problems faced by modern online titles – this was no bedroom-based operation; it was something run by a number of people professionally, resulting in plenty of supercars being bought with the proceeds. In the end, though, China wins again.

02. Let's get digital

E3 will join the Tokyo Game Show this year by going digital, offering a look at titles from the likes of Take-Two, Capcom, Microsoft, and Nintendo. At the time of writing, concrete information is patchy, but the event will run from 12–15 June and should be free for anyone to 'attend'. Best of all for publishers, there'll be no pesky journalists coming around and doing terrible things like *asking questions*.

"We are evolving this year's E3 into a more inclusive event, but will still look to excite the fans with major reveals and insider opportunities that make this event the indispensable centre stage for video games," said Stanley Pierre-Louis, president and CEO of the ESA, in what can only be described as 'a statement'.

03. CD's new project

CD Projekt Red is changing the way it goes about things following the *Cyberpunk 2077* debacle and everything that entailed – according to a group strategy update the company posted publicly. This shift in focus will see the studio moving to work on two franchises at once, a change in how (and when) promotional hype is communicated, and a move to a more 'caring' workplace. It'll be interesting to see how this all plays out.

Elsewhere, plans for *Cyberpunk's* standalone multiplayer spin-off is being 'reconsidered', though no specifics were noted at the time of writing. One thing to consider? Making your games run on the formats they're sold on, waheyyyyyy!



Sony announces PS5-gen VR plans; features suitably weird-futuristic controllers

Ubisoft launches gTV; content surprisingly good so far...



04

04. Store-y ends

As of 2 July, the PlayStation Store will be closing its doors for the PSP, meaning no new purchases will be able to go ahead for one of life's overlooked greats in the handheld stakes. It's not as bad as it could have been, though, with Sony backpedalling on plans to close both the PS3 and PS Vita stores on top of the PSP incarnation following a vocal backlash from the public.

PSP owners' previous purchases will – or should, at least – remain available for download, but this does have the roll-on impact of making a few PSP Store-only games unavailable anywhere else in the world, giving video game preservation evangelists a bit of work in making sure they're held onto for future reference. It's not quite Skynet, but this digital future isn't really working out as well as we might have hoped.

Fun fact: the picture with this story is from about 2007. It's a teenager. Time is a monster and absolutely refuses to stop.

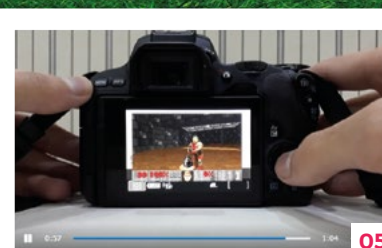
06



05. The month in DOOM

This month's thing that runs *DOOM*: a Canon EOS 200D DSLR camera. There's not much to add beyond that, because we all know the story – that being, the aim of everyone in the world is to get classic nineties FPS *DOOM* running on every *thing* in the world. Funnily enough, the EOS version of *DOOM* – as shown off by Reddit user 'turtius', doesn't run as well as the version of *DOOM* ported to the much older Kodak DC290 digital camera. But hey, what can you do.

So that's *DOOM* on a pregnancy test, running powered by potatoes, on a scientific calculator, on countless computerised systems like McDonald's tills, and *DOOM* on – most surprisingly of all – the SNES. Long may the porting trend continue.



05

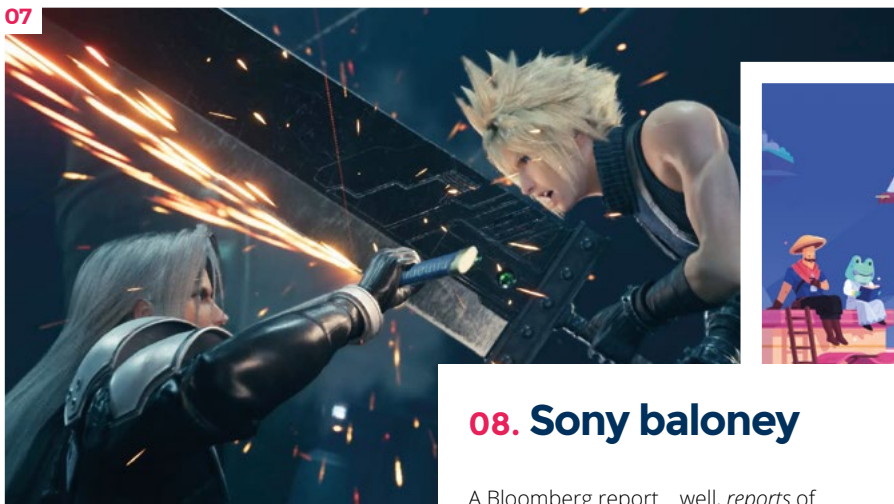
06. Roblox billions

Roblox, the creation tool, game, and batch of stuff that confuses many of us, was valued at £32.8 billion – with a 'b' – after it ran a direct listing on the stock exchange. That's a lot of money for something most of us turned on once, realised we were about 35 years too old for, then never thought about again. For those paying attention? It's not a surprise, apparently. A partnership with Hasbro later saw the stock price rise a fair whack still, and while things will be volatile – and can rarely be predicted with accuracy – it's fair to say *this is all a lot of money, oh, good crikey*.

Ex-*GhostWire: Tokyo* creative director Ikumi Nakamura setting up new studio



Remedy reportedly working on *Alan Wake 2*, to be published by Epic

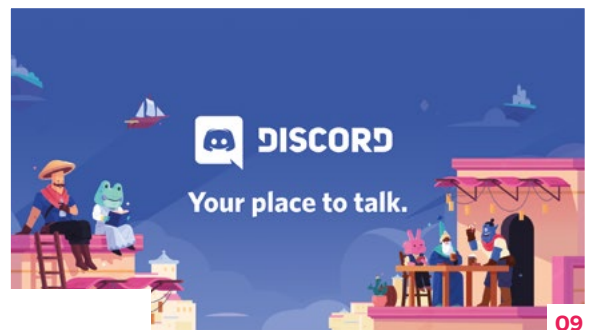


07. Total fantasy

Bloomberg Japan reported banking sources had informed the publication that Square Enix was the target of a takeover from an unnamed company, prompting shares in the *Final Fantasy* creator to rocket some 138%. One problem: it wasn't true, at all – at least according to a rebuttal released by Squenix itself. "We do not consider selling off the company or any part of its businesses, nor have we received any offer from any third party to acquire the company or any part of its businesses," it read. So... there you go.

08. Sony baloney

A Bloomberg report... well, *reports* of unrest within Sony's many studios. According to the piece, a small group of developers from the Visual Arts Service Group – usually used to craft animation and art content for other, more well-known teams at Sony – decided it would start putting together a remaster of *The Last of Us* for PS5. Sony OKed this, but offered zero budgetary aid, and fairly soon after put Naughty Dog on support duties for the project, before later handing it in its entirety to the series' original creator. This has resulted in many of the Visual Arts staff leaving Sony, and word of more disquiet in the company coming to the fore. It's an interesting read, more here: wfmag.cc/VASG.



09. This chord

Discord, the five-year-old chat app originally released to help gamers natter on while playing their games – and now used for all manner of chat, meetings, games, and online communities – is in talks with Microsoft to be sold for £7.24 billion, according to both GamesBeat and Bloomberg. While the service hasn't yet been profitable for its creators, it's a fantastic bit of software and the sort of thing you absolutely would expect bigger companies to have an eye on gobbling up.

If the sale has gone ahead by the time you're reading this, simply switch out all the language saying it 'could' or 'might' happen for terms that confirm it 'will' or 'has' happened. Simple!

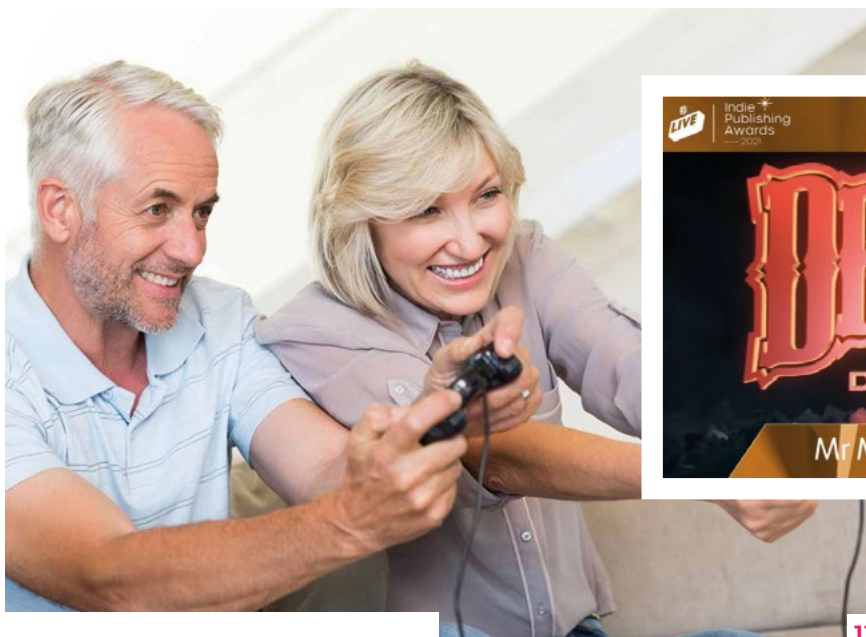


Rumoured Switch Pro to use Nvidia DLSS for effective 4K display on TV

Kojima Productions' next game rumoured to be published by Microsoft



10



10. The deluge

Hidden Palace, the online video game preservation and documentation outfit, has begun the process of posting what it calls Project Deluge: the archiving of over 752 (so far) PlayStation 2 prototypes. As well as early versions of full games, the collection includes the likes of specially made E3 demos and preview builds sent out to gaming publications, among others. It's a veritable treasure trove of curios for those keen to take a look, and it's all being made available via the Internet Archive – plus there's plenty of details being noted for those who can't play the things to pore over. It's all *very interesting*. See more here: wfmag.cc/Deluge.

11. OAGs

A report by GWI claims there's a larger proportion than ever before of older gamers getting involved in that whole 'playing games' things, with a whopping rise of 32% in players between the ages of 55 and 64 since 2018. The pandemic has certainly had an impact here, with boredom pushing people to play, but the growth of gaming's appeal isn't just down to that one global horror, with more internet access, wider mainstream acceptance of gaming, and the ever-present world of mobile titles helping nudge the number of gamers ever upward. Good, we say. *Good*.



12

12. Indie publishing awards

The inaugural Indie Publishing Awards, created by GamesIndustry.biz, has seen its first-ever batch of winners announced to honour the work put in to the world of independent gaming. Devolver Digital was awarded the gong for best indie publisher, while *Fall Guys* was handed the award for best PR and marketing campaign. Victoria Tran of Innersloth won the award for best community management for their work on *Among Us*, and Sabotage Studio's *Sea of Stars* bagged the best crowdfunding campaign of the year. We love us some indies on Wireframe, so would like to extend our congratulations to the winners, those nominated, and everyone else in the indie side of the indie-stry – we love you all. Full winners, here: wfmag.cc/Indiewards.

Nintendo pres Shuntaro Furukawa says company will create new series in future



Binary Domain director Daisuke Sato would "really like" to remaster cult classic shooter

Post Apocalypse

Solo developers, game preservation, retro tech – it's this month's letters...



Issue #49

Want to write to Wireframe?
Message us at wfmag.cc/hello
or tweet us
[@wireframemag](https://twitter.com/wireframemag)



Preserving the past

The March announcement that Sony's closing its PS3 and handheld stores for this summer [a decision Sony back-pedaled on since the writing of this letter – Ed] got me thinking about how easy it is for digital-only games to just vanish. When I think back to the Wii and the titles on its eShop, there were a number that were never released on disc: *LostWinds* was a cracking platformer, but it basically became unavailable once Nintendo closed its digital store. Sure, the game was later made available for PC, but there's now no easy way for gamers to revisit *LostWinds* as it was meant to be played, unless they either already

have it on their Wii or they resort to illegal means to get hold of it. Doesn't this mean that some games run the risk of vanishing forever?

John, Bedford

Ryan writes:

It's something we often chat about here at Wireframe: how many digital-only games will simply vanish into the ether, either due to digital store closures or other issues, like expired licences? M2's superb remixes of Konami's NES-era titles, *Gradius ReBirth*, *Contra ReBirth*, and *Castlevania: The Adventure ReBirth*, died with the Wii's eShop, and haven't been available since. We

chatted about this to Strictly Limited Games co-founder Dennis Mendel (see page 82), and he brought up titles like *OutRun* and *Afterburner*, which both vanished from Steam because they contained depictions of a Ferrari and an F-15 fighter jet respectively. Mendel runs a firm that publishes physical games, so he may be a bit biased, but still – he's right when he says that having a game on a shelf means it's theoretically yours forever (or until it breaks). Also – and if any publishers are reading this – I'd pay good money for a physical release of *LostWinds* or M2's *ReBirth* titles.



Shortcuts

More tech?

I really enjoyed My Life In Gaming's guide to connecting retro consoles to modern televisions last month [see issue 49, page 50]. Given that I've often wondered how to get the best image out of my Sega Dreamcast when connecting it to a 4K TV, the article gave me the perfect introduction to a potentially complicated subject. Having solutions at a range of budget levels was also a nice touch. Do you have any more hardware-related features planned along similar lines?
Dave, London



Ryan writes:
We definitely plan to have more hardware stuff in future issues. If readers have any suggestions as to hardware-related subjects they'd like to see covered (modifications, repairs, custom controllers, and so on) then let us know at wfmag.cc/hello. In the meantime, watch this space...

Flying solo

One of the things I like about Wireframe is the way it seeks out the work of solo developers – *AFTERLIFE*, in the last issue, really caught my eye. How do you choose which of these games go in the magazine, though? Can anyone submit their game to Wireframe?
Sandra, Maidenhead

Ryan writes:
The short answer is yes – anyone can submit their game to the magazine. We do get quite a few submissions each month, though, so don't be too put off if it takes us a while to get back to you. As for how we choose which games go in – it's a mixture of things. We try to choose a diverse variety of genres, but we're also really attracted by original ideas (like

AFTERLIFE's unusual collision of RPG, shooter, and wry black comedy) and also the stories that go on behind the scenes of those games. How do people making a game in their spare time manage to fit it in if they also have a day job and a family to look after? What are the challenges of doing everything from programming to music to graphic design by yourself? Sometimes those stories can be quite inspiring: this month's *Aloof* (see page 76) was in gestation for a decade, but its creator persevered and finally got his match-three puzzler finished and released this year. If you're reading this and working on a game you reckon we'd like, then drop us a line at wfmag.cc/hello.

Because we've gone for a distinctly Japanese theme in this month's issue, we decided to ask our fine readers on Twitter: which Japanese developer is your favourite, and why? Here are a few of our favourite responses:

I'd almost rather NOT choose. But since you asked, I'm going to say Konami, if only because the magical chime that prefaced their early nineties output was a guarantee of video game gold.
@KujiGhost

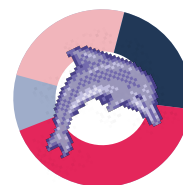
From my youth, Square in the nineties for their RPGs and characters/stories. But now it would have to be Nihon Falcom – love the Ys games and their other games' style of action RPG.
@Talzen

You're making me choose between the blue-skied drifting delight of Sega AM2's superb *OutRun 2* and the gloriously bonkers *Rhythm Tengoku* by Nintendo SPD. (Bunny Hop forever!) I just won't do it!
@CraigGrannell

1. FromSoftware. 2. Sega (but mostly because of Creative Assembly and Amplitude). I'm utterly sick of intrusive menus and cutscenes in all forms of JRPGs, and uninstall most Japanese games before the heavy-handed tutorial is done (examples: *Monster Hunter: World*, *Final Fantasy XV*, *Metal Gear Solid V*).
@PyrOsa

The burning question

With Alex Kidd due to make a belated return, we asked Twitter: which of these forgotten Sega mascots deserves a revival? In the end, Sonic Team's stretchy-armed protagonist was just pipped to the post by the dolphin from designer Ed Annunziata's aquatic explore-'em-up. Poor old Opa-Opa, hero of the *Fantasy Zone* series, barely got a look-in. And yes, the incongruous arsenal of weapons from Shadow the Hedgehog was thrown in because we couldn't think of a fourth option.



Ecco the Dolphin - 32.5% **Opa-Opa - 20%**
Ristar - 30% **Shadow the Hedgehog's Guns - 17.5%**

Looking Forward



Parolives ↗

Finally, something else to give *The Sims* a run for its money, *Parolives* is a life sim/doll-house-'em-up with a fun little development and funding model. Well, Patreon, if you want to call that fun. But thanks to Patreon, this ambitious little indie is, at the time of writing, a team of eight with much bigger plans than initially envisaged, thanks to a very generous audience. Will loadsamoney make it great? We shall see.



Payday 3 ↗

Well this is a turnaround – it wasn't the wildest notion to expect Starbreeze to be long since out of business, but the Swedish studio has instead announced a) it's *alright*, and b) *Payday 3* will be launching at some point in 2023. While the sequel's existence was no great secret, the announcement of Koch Media pumping 50 million euros into development, marketing, and post-launch support of the game has solidified its existence. We're looking forward to what comes out of this one.



SCARLET NEXUS ↖

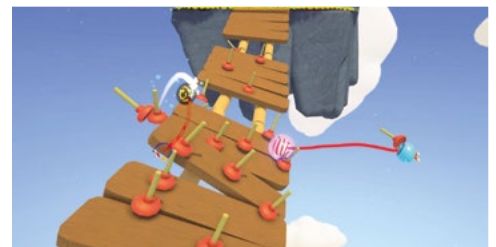
Psionic warriors are tasked with saving the Earth from an invading species of brain-eating mutants, all with an anime sheen. Yep, it's the latest from Bandai Namco, it's not going to go down as high art, and it's got tongues a-waggin'. With a dual story, both playable characters see their fates criss-cross with one another's – neat – while combat looks like... well, an anime *Control/ Psi-Ops*, really. Capping it all off, the marketing spiel refers to it as 'Brain Punk'. Bliss.



Life is Strange: True Colors ↗

It might not be a numbered sequel, but *Life is Strange: True Colors* has all the trappings of a proper, full follow-up to the supernatural narrative adventure series. In development for a few years now, the game is being made by Deck Nine, the team behind 2017's spin-off *Before the Storm* – series creator DONTNOD being notably absent this time around. And yet another change arrives in how *True Colors* will release: in full, at once. No more episodic drip-feeding with the agonising wait between instalments.

It's not all changes, of course: *True Colors* follows Alex Chen as she seeks answers concerning the mysterious death of her brother. Said answers involve Chen using her psychic empathy powers, which allow her to both read *and* manipulate the strong emotions of those around her – while at the same time risking being 'infected' with their feelings. And a nice extra touch is that *True Colors* will be joined by remastered versions of both the original *Life is Strange* and the aforementioned *Before the Storm*, in a handy little package.



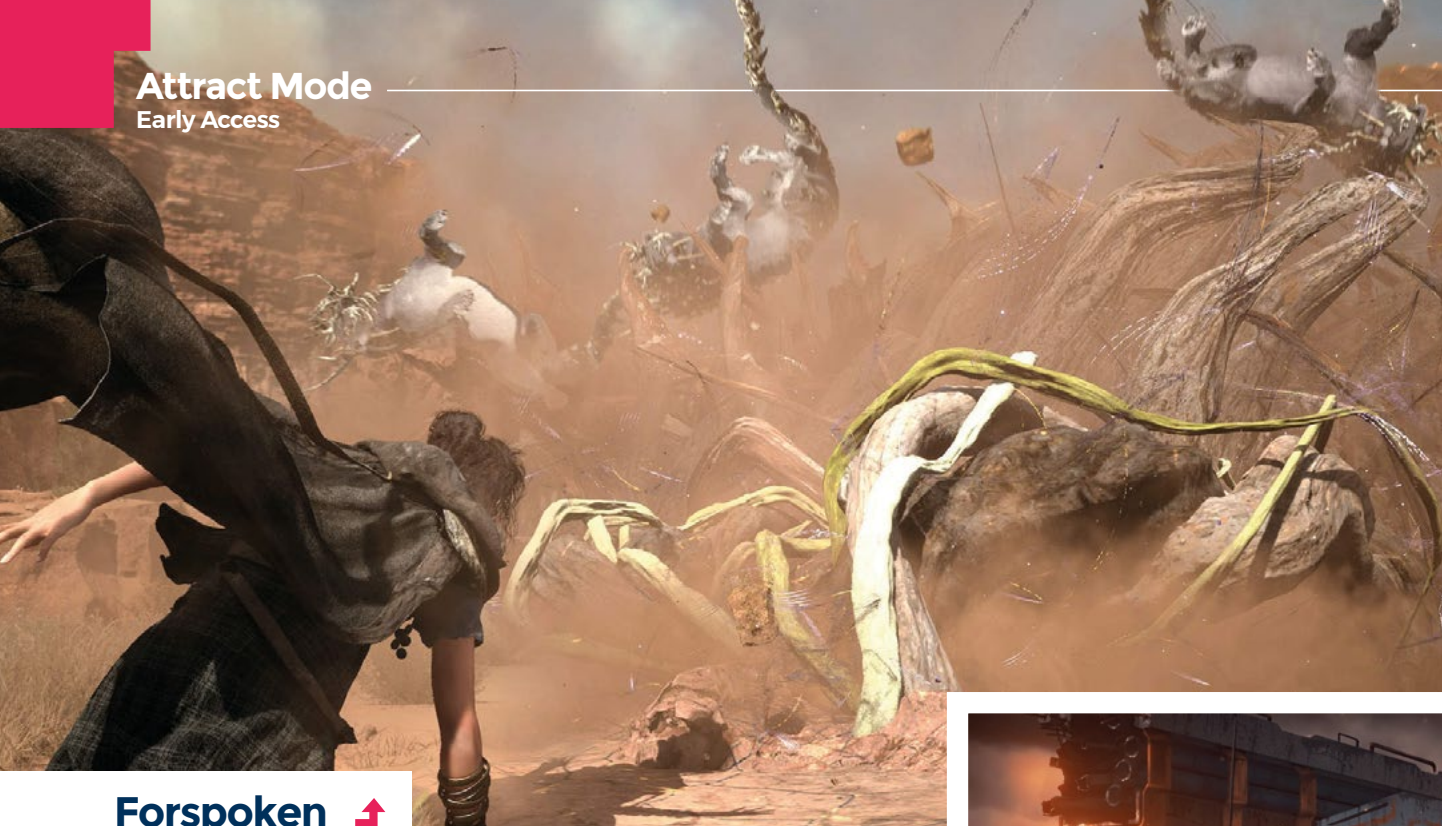
Fling to the Finish ↗

A co-operative racing game with a twist – well, more a twang – *Fling to the Finish* puts one player in charge of one rolling competitor, the other in charge of the other, and both are attached by an elasticated band. It's the three-legged race from summer fairs' past, but with more risk of falling off cliffs. The strategy involved – twanging each other to reach high platforms, say – could make this a standout hoot of a multiplayer game.



Gamedec ↖

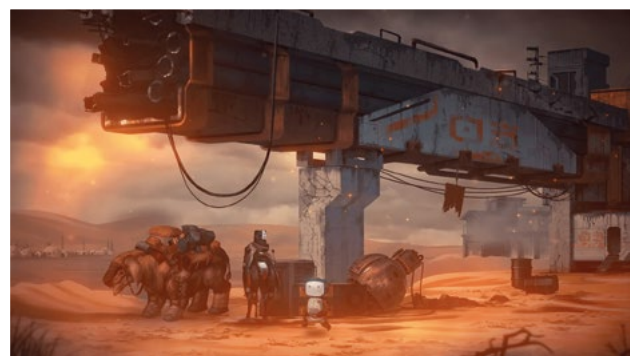
A narrative adventure in a cyberpunk world, eschewing combat in favour of talking, investigating, and deducing, *Gamedec* is definitely aiming high with its ambitions. While what we've played so far – in a decidedly unfinished beta – feels a bit rough, the underlying concept is a strong one; dialogue leads off on surprising tangents but always seems to be leading to something important related to the task at hand. It's smartly done and, as we like to say around these parts, has a lot of potential. *Gamedec* will live or die on the strength of its writing across the whole thing, though, and that just can't be seen until the whole package is polished off.



Forspoken ↗

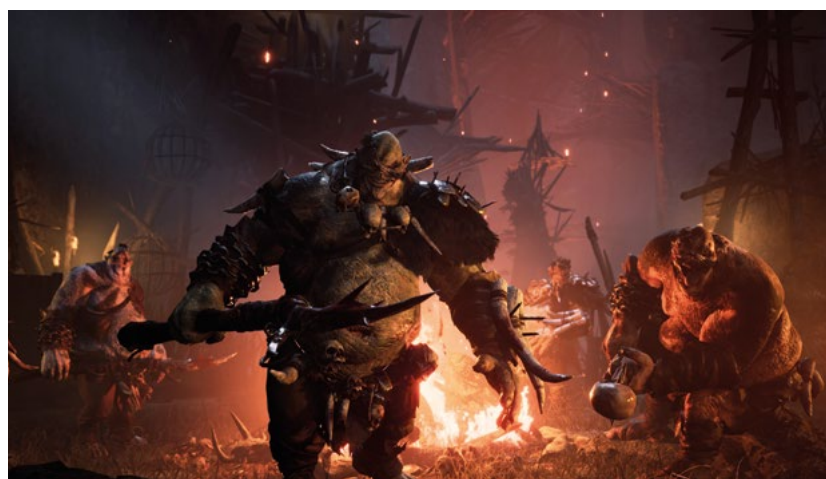
You might have known this one as *Project Athia*, but now we have an actual name: *Forspoken*. Square Enix is on publishing duty for this action-RPG with a focus on fluidity of movement, while Luminous Productions – the team formed initially to work on *Final Fantasy XV*-based projects and staffed by many who worked on the game – is on development duty. Interestingly, Gary Whitta is on writing duties for the game, his first since *The Walking Dead* wrapped up in 2018.

The game proper sees protagonist Frey Holland (played by *Charlie's Angels* (2019) and *Midsomer Murders* alum Ella Balinska) whisked away to a fantasy world of dragons and other such beasts, where she must learn to use magical abilities to... well, survive, really. The game leans heavily on its traversal mechanics from what has been shown so far, but there also looks to be a heavy amount of emphasis placed on the narrative. Hopefully, it'll all be on the right side of fun and daft by the time *Forspoken* releases in 2022.



Life of Delta ↗

Wall-E with a bit of a darker edge, *Life of Delta* sees players controlling a little robot in a post-apocalyptic world, pointing and clicking, solving puzzles, and engaging in warbling conversations with other robots and lizard-people. If there's enough heart in this one – and it avoids too much reliance on the memory/sorting puzzles – it could be a neat distraction from the real-world post-apocalypse we're approaching.



Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance ↖

Somewhat surprisingly, this is the first time Wizards of the Coast has directly overseen development of a video game based on its beloved pen-and-paper RPG. *Dark Alliance* looks like it'll be fairly typical fare; an action-RPG where you harness the specific abilities of your party members, tanks, healers and the rest, oh my... but the general *attitude* behind *Dark Alliance* has raised a few eyebrows. Raised middle fingers and teenage rebellion-level 'anarchy' stands out, let's say.

Vokabulantis ↗

A puzzle platformer starring two youngsters on their way through challenging environments doesn't sound like anything particularly standout, but this game *really* shines when you see it in action. A co-development between *Felix the Reaper's* Kong Orange, animation specialists WIREFLY, and poet/artist Morten Søndergaard, the game mixes techniques such as photogrammetry and fantastic-looking stop-motion animation to bring the whole experience to life. It's hard to overstate how fantastic this all looks – while we've got more of a look at the game's art from page 68, we really do recommend you go have a look for yourself: wfmag.cc/vokab.

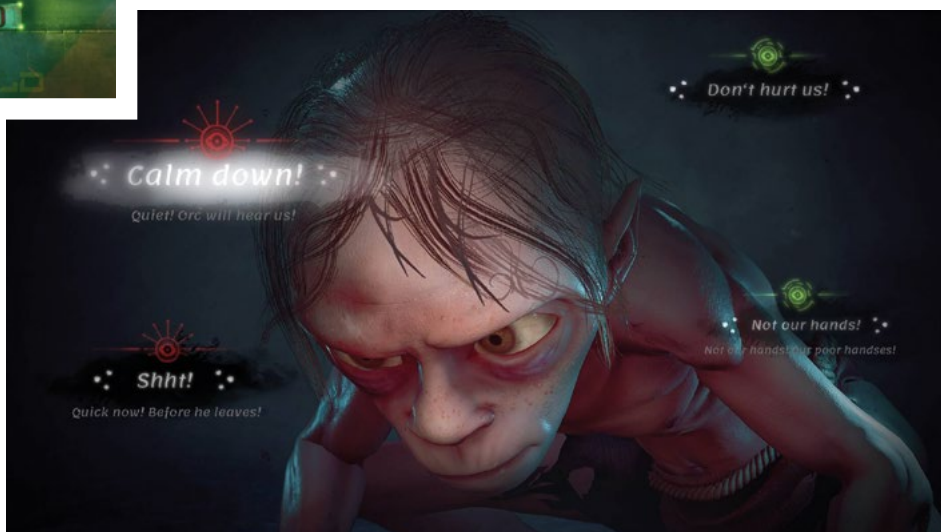


Glitchpunk ↗

Not enough games riff on the excellent, overlooked *Grand Theft Auto 2*. *Glitchpunk* doesn't just riff on Rockstar's sequel: it positively revels in it (then adds a dollop of cyberpunk on top). It's a top-down game of violence, theft, and a camera that zooms in and out in what turns out is a manner that brings about strong nostalgic feelings. Who knew? Developer Dark Lord isn't shying away from the influence *GTA2* has on its game, but all the same, it's looking like there's a fair bit of potential in *Glitchpunk* even without the inspiration behind it.

Lord of the Rings: Gollum ↘

A *Lord of the Rings* spin-off starring everyone's favourite fish-munching monster (or *is he?*), *LotR: Gollum* looks, from an early playthrough of the game we saw, a mite on the basic side of things. There's still time before the game's 2022 release, and a lot of promises have been made surrounding the game's ongoing development, but for the time being, it's not one to get any juices flowing. Hopefully it'll turn a corner, though.





Pursuing the Japanese dream



We meet the expat developers making their mark on the Japanese games industry

WRITTEN BY
ALAN WEN

Players who've completed *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* may have come across Corey Bunnell, listed in the credits as the game's wildlife programmer. The internet soon discovered that a decade earlier, when he was a high school graduate, he'd posted on a translator's forum seeking advice on how to live in Japan and work for Nintendo. It's heartwarming to see that Bunnell was able to fulfil his dream – and contribute to one of the greatest games of all time, no less. He isn't the only non-Japanese person at Nintendo, either; there's also game designer Jordan Amaro, who worked on *Splatoon 2* and its expansion, while his previous credits include Japanese titles *Resident Evil 7* and *Metal Gear Solid V*.

Yet while game development is more international than ever, and even as large

Japanese studios like Sega and Square Enix have studios operating around the world, the country's games industry remains predominantly Japanese. There have always been exceptions, such as prolific Apple II programmer Nasir Gebelli, who went on to work at Squaresoft in the late 1980s, programming the first three *Final Fantasy* games and *Secret of Mana*. Nonetheless, breaking into a Japanese studio can be an elusive dream for foreigners, and that's before taking into account navigating language and cultural barriers.

That dream is undoubtedly down to the enduring perception of Japan as the spiritual home of video games, especially for those raised on Nintendo, Sega, and PlayStation. For developers pursuing that dream, it makes sense to learn from the expats who've made the leap, not only making their home in Japan, but also making a mark on the Japanese games industry.





▲ The Advance Wars-inspired *Skulls of the Shogun* marked the beginning of 17-Bit, made in collaboration with developers Buffalo Vision and Plush Apocalypse.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME

Game developers Dylan Cuthbert (Q-Games), Jake Kazdal (17-Bit), and Mark MacDonald (Enhance) are part of the same generation, having grown up with video games in the 1970s and 1980s, yet their routes to a career in Japan's industry couldn't be more different, each arriving there almost a decade apart from each other.

Working at Argonaut Games, Cuthbert was already part of the UK's computer games industry before he, along with Argonaut's founder Jez San, received the call

from Nintendo to show off their 3D prototypes on the Game Boy at the Kyoto office in 1991. "For me, it was a huge culture shock, as I'd never really seen or even knew about culture outside of the UK," says Cuthbert, recalling his first visit to Japan. "At the time, manga, anime, and games from Japan weren't the big things they would eventually become. I was used to game developers in the UK being small scrappy companies, but Nintendo was huge, with long white corridors, where employees were wearing company dress."

Japan's rise was more keenly felt in the US, especially with Nintendo's dominance following the 1983 video game crash. The NES was how

"MANGA, ANIME, AND GAMES FROM JAPAN WEREN'T A BIG THING"

Kazdal and MacDonald got their first taste of Japanese games, while each would later splash out their allowances on importing magazines and games, back when specialist import stores were a common sight.

Kazdal was also fortunate to grow up in Seattle, home to Nintendo's US office, where he started out his career. "I was a Nintendo games counsellor, which pre-internet was where people would call to ask, 'How do I beat this boss,

where's this damn sword, how do I do this, how do I do that,'" he explains. That early job saw him jump over to the neighbouring

offices of Japanese companies Enix and Irem. "Then I was doing game-focused testing, and that's when I realised I really wanted to get into making games as a next step in my career."

MacDonald also attributes his early fascination with Japanese games and culture to a childhood friend, who was a second-generation Japanese-American.

"I basically lived half the time at his house, ➔

MOBILE SUIT GAME DEV

Despite our nostalgia for Japanese console gaming in the nineties, the reality is that mobile has been the primary market in Japan for decades, and that's where the labour demand is. This in itself is no bad thing, but Kazdal nonetheless laments: "Most of that stuff never makes it to the west, and once servers are turned off, it's just gone. No one will be able to play this generation of stuff, and we can't learn from it – it just breaks my heart."



▲ Dylan Cuthbert, founder of Q-Games. The studio's based in Kyoto, where he first went to work with Nintendo via Argonaut Games.

▼ As well as its own *PixelJunk* franchise, Q-Games also made the Soviet-inspired social collaborative game *The Tomorrow Children* on PS4.



▼ *Breath of the Wild* may take the ideas of open-world games that are popular in the west, but Nintendo's teams remain predominantly Japanese.

and got to know his family and extended relatives," he says. "Growing up, time and time again, from Transformers to Nintendo, it was always Japanese stuff that I really responded to."

EASTBOUND

In stark contrast, Cuthbert didn't grow up with Kazdal and MacDonald's Japanophilia, so it's almost ironic that, still a teenager, he found himself in Japan working for Nintendo, first designing *X*, one of the few Game Boy games to use 3D visuals with wireframe graphics, followed by *Star Fox* on the SNES, powered by the Argonaut-designed Super FX chip.

Given the technological expertise Argonaut provided to Nintendo, it's unsurprising that it was easier for its staff to enter Japan even without any prior knowledge of the country or its language. Cuthbert believes that being foreign meant they also circumvented a lot of the usual Japanese formalities. "The only problem I had was paperwork," he says. "Because I hadn't graduated from a university, it was very difficult to get a full working visa."

As an Argonaut employee, he was able to obtain a business visa when developing *Star Fox*. Later, when he jumped ship to Sony in the US, he found his way back to their Japan offices with a 'transferee' visa, where he was responsible for the PlayStation 2's 'Duck' demo.

Kazdal's first trip to Japan was actually during a college exchange programme, which was when he really fell in love with the country. It wasn't



"GROWING UP, IT WAS ALWAYS JAPANESE STUFF I RESPONDED TO"

long after graduating that a chance meeting with Tetsuya Mizuguchi in 1988 led to an invitation to Tokyo for a psy-trance forest rave. This soon followed with the opportunity of a lifetime: Kazdal joined Mizuguchi's new Sega division, United Game Artists, responsible for the musical avant-garde classics *Space Channel 5* and *Rez*.

"I feel like when Mizuguchi-san brought me to UGA, it was a progressive attempt to bring some western perspective and fresh outside talent," says Kazdal. Yet it was almost certainly a jump into the deep end, especially with little grasp of Japanese. "I didn't really think that through. I had a couple of words, but it was terrible, so when I got there and realised that I was the only white guy with 50 Japanese people, I was like, 'I don't know what's going on in these meetings!'"

While it was a daunting first year, there was some advantage, as UGA was also located in the hip, bustling hub of Shibuya rather than at Sega's head office in Haneda. "Everyone was very gracious and friendly with me," he adds. "I had people that were more



^ Named after the bar where it began, Otaru in Tokyo has game devs and fans meeting up weekly, although it's evidently expat-heavy.

JAPAN FOR LIFE

Japanese game development is a small world, and so it was around 2015 that MacDonald acted as an external consultant for Mizuguchi, whose new company Enhance was developing VR title *Rez Infinite*. Ultimately, he would leave 8-4 to serve as a producer on the game, and is currently Enhance's vice-president of business development and production.

Although a non-compete clause with Argonaut meant that Cuthbert was unable to take up a full-time position at Nintendo, Kyoto left such a big impression on him that he was determined to return after his stint at Sony. "From the first week I arrived, Kyoto just felt good to me," he says. "Something about the deep history mixed in with modern and cosmopolitan values, and a good pace of life. People who leave Kyoto feel strong pangs to return."

Even if there are cases of expats working at the major Japanese studios, it's almost unheard of for any to climb the company ranks like Miyamoto or Nagoshi. For Cuthbert, the impetus to leave Sony was simpler.

"I always wanted to [start up a game studio]," he says, "and from age 13 or so, I was already drawing up logos for 'Unique Productions'. In the end, I only used the Q from that name."

An expat starting their own studio in Japan was certainly a rarity, but Q-Games was a pioneer in this regard, with fellow Argonaut and Nintendo employee Giles Goddard also setting up his own studio Vitei in Kyoto.

Kazdal would also join the fold with his own company 17-Bit, though he came about this differently by first building it back in the US. →

✓ MacDonald estimates 80% of his day-to-day at Enhance being in Japanese. "I fumble my way through meetings as best I can," he says humbly.

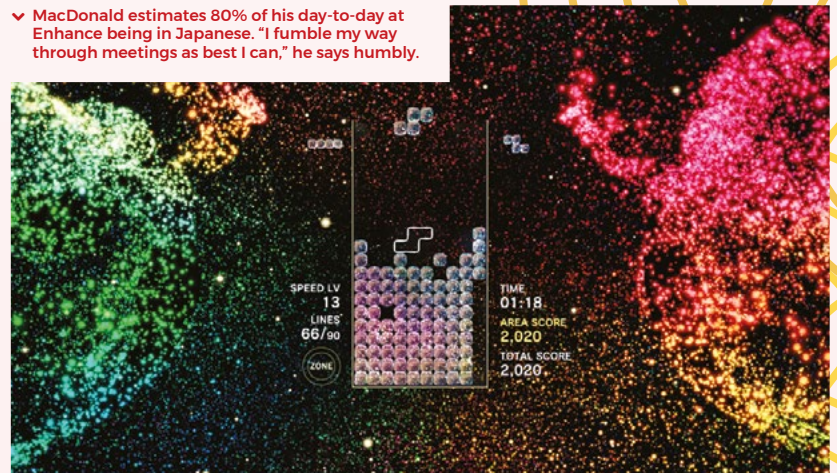
patient that would take me under their wing and help explain stuff. I would take a lot of notes during meetings of stuff that I didn't understand, then do a much slower kind of one-on-one of what we covered. I was basically getting private Japanese lessons from everybody every day."

On a different trajectory, MacDonald's love of Japan led him to study Japanese in college, followed by a career as a games journalist, including working on *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, where he became the designated Japanese games guy handling import coverage and events like Tokyo Game Show. It wouldn't be until 2007, however, that he would relocate to Japan and also enter the games industry by way of localisation company, 8-4. The company was founded by two Japanese and western partners, the latter being former EGM colleague John Ricciardi, which for MacDonald meant it had "a very real western mindset, but also very deep Japanese roots. Every major decision might come from one perspective or culture but also run through the other one."

Because 8-4 began by translating Japanese games into English, it was also entirely staffed by English-speaking expats. This would change over time as the company also began localising western games into Japanese.

JAPANESE CRUNCH

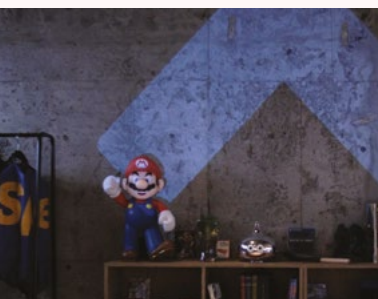
Crunch in the games industry has been a more widespread concern in recent years, but it's arguably worse in Japan, where a culture of overworking is across society – there's even a term for death by overwork: 'karoshi'. That kind of burnout would explain why expats opt to break free of that cultural mindset and start their own studios. "A lot of the guys I have on the team worked at Japanese companies for a long time, and were more than happy to try the non-crunch approach," says Kazdal.





▲ Jake Kazdal, founder of 17-Bit Games, enjoying a beer with SWERY.

▼ Meaning 'play' in Japanese, Asobu's shared space is located in Shibuya and funded by sponsors like Makers Fund and ID@Xbox.



Burned out from the long hours at Sega, he also felt compelled to go back to design school to develop his craft (speaking highly of his Japanese colleagues: "They had so much process in how to get to their goals and how to actually design, I was just sort of winging it"). While his goal was to return to live and work in Japan, he also had other priorities. "I interviewed with quite a few [Japanese studios], but the pay was too low or the hours were insane. I just didn't want to not have a life anymore, I wanted to spend time with my family."

As development teams and budgets rose exponentially, it was also apparent that he'd been unable to have a voice or impact on a large franchise compared to his time at UGA. Instead, while working as a concept artist at EA in the US, Kazdal began collaborating with other colleagues on a project that became the turn-based tactics game *Skulls of the Shogun*, released under his own company, 17-Bit. "From there, 17-Bit built into this entity, and then we moved onto *Galak-Z*, and the teams have sort of grown from there," he explains, adding that he also told colleagues up front that he intended to relocate the company to Japan as soon as possible. "For some of the guys, it took a while – our last guy just got here recently, and I've been here for over five years now!"

It seemed fortuitous that 17-Bit would join Q-Games and Vitei in Kyoto – indeed, Cuthbert was able to assist Kazdal early on with the legal paperwork, introducing him to immigration

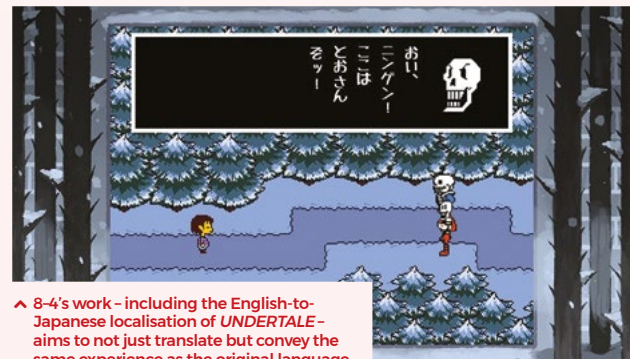
lawyers, brokers, and accountants. "We had a really friendly landing zone to come into, and it just made a lot of sense to start a studio here where the lifestyle is by definition a lot more relaxed, with a lot more nature," he says.

EXPATS TODAY

Along with this kind of support and sense of community between expat developers, game development in Japan is more international than it's ever been, with pockets of non-Japanese indie teams or even western studios such as Riot Games having offices in the country. Nonetheless, Cuthbert still advises aspiring expats to join a Japanese company and learn the ropes and the culture first. "If you are coming just to go indie, you could do that pretty much anywhere in the world," he says. "I think it's better to come to Japan and learn how to integrate with another culture that is vastly different to your own."

Just as Argonaut's technical prowess had been a huge asset to Nintendo, expertise on middleware like Unity and Unreal Engine are certified routes into the industry. "You might have people that are just really fluent in Unreal that don't even speak any Japanese," says MacDonald. "The large companies will just say 'OK, we'll get an interpreter' or 'We'll live with only being able to understand half of what they say and they'll still be worth it.'"

With more expats able to meet together for networking and support, coupled with modern technological conveniences, arguably makes Japan more accessible to foreigners than two or three decades ago, though MacDonald believes it can also be a double-edged sword. "If you get homesick, you can get on Google Hangouts, or you have VPN and stream the same shows



▲ 8-4's work - including the English-to-Japanese localisation of *UNDERTALE* - aims to not just translate but convey the same experience as the original language.



you would have watched back home," he adds. "But it can be very easy not to absorb the language or culture. If you have no interest in learning these, I don't think you're going to do very well within a Japanese corporate structure."

That's partly why Kazdal has been motivated to establish a regular networking event in Kyoto, inviting not only expats, but also local college students, as well as large Japanese companies like Nintendo and Capcom (although inevitably, the pandemic has also put these plans back). "I was one of the founding members of Otaru, which is still going on in Tokyo, where devs and game lovers meet up weekly," he says. "But we want to try getting more crossover between Japanese and foreign developers, sharing ideas and inspirations more often."

GIVING BACK TO JAPAN

Ever the trailblazer, Cuthbert wasn't content with just establishing his own company in Japan and collaborating with long-time partners Nintendo and Sony, but has taken the next step in helping new voices in the industry. This began in collaboration with James Mielke (also a former editor of EGM who transitioned to games production) in late 2012 after an underwhelming trip to Tokyo Game Show. "We were disappointed to see no indie representation, no representation of 'us'," Cuthbert explains. "Everything was just big publishers selling their big wares, and on the way back, we began wondering if we couldn't create an event that could appeal more to people like ourselves."

The result was BitSummit the following year. Beginning as just a small industry-only gathering with fewer than 200 people, subsequent years have seen attendance balloon into the thousands, with 2019's event reaching over 17,000, on a similar scale as the UK's EGX Rezzed, with support from major and international publishers like Nintendo, PlayStation, and Devolver.


While the show floor initially had about 70% Japanese representation, it's grown into a more international showcase. Japan has its indie personalities like SWERY, SUDA51, and Yoshiro Kimura, but with the majority of these exhibits made up of 'doujin' (hobbyists making games for fun rather than for profit), it also highlights how the Japanese indie scene has still yet to truly take off compared to the west.



▲ BitSummit packs indies from Japan and around the world into Kyoto's Miyako Messe, although the pandemic meant 2020's event took place online.

Changing this has been MacDonald's goal, having co-founded a new initiative called Asobu. Initially built around having a free shared space in the Shibuya area, he hopes it can be a small step to systematically lowering the hurdles to becoming an indie developer in Japan.

"It starts with building a community around a physical space for people to come and work, learn, do seminars, and meet other people that are like-minded," he explains. "Maybe they collaborate together, teach people how to use PR, marketing, western-focused testing, best practices, and localisation. There's a larger market out there than just Japan."

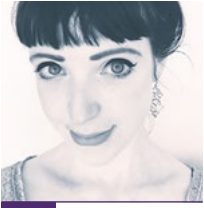
The pandemic has obviously meant they've had to adapt their strategy, such as an online server on Discord, though this has helped expand its reach to the rest of the country. But if Asobu's huge inaugural digital showcase, which took place ahead of 2020's Tokyo Game Show, is any indication, Japanese indies are ready to come of age. That they're being helped by expat upstarts feels almost serendipitous. "The idea is to give back," says MacDonald. "I love Japanese games, I love the Japanese game industry, and it has so much unrealised potential right now." 

IN IT TOGETHER

Being a minority of expats means it can be quite easy to band together during hard times, and it's no surprise that Cuthbert, Kazdal, and MacDonald have collaborated with one another over the years. MacDonald has writing and localisation credits for both 17-Bit's *Skulls of the Shogun* and *Galak-Z*, while Kazdal mentions how the Kyoto-based teams regularly support each other: "We share employees – our engineer went over to Q-Games for a while, then went to help out at Vitei. There's a really nice dynamic between us and a really cool community here, which I'm just super-thankful for."



Lore of Babylon



LOTTIE BEVAN

Lottie's a producer and co-founder of award-winning narrative microstudio Weather Factory, best known for *Cultist Simulator*. She's one of the youngest female founders in the industry, a BAFTA Breakthrough Brit, and founder of Coven Club, a women in games support network. She produces, markets, bizzes, and arts, and previously produced *Fallen London*, *Zubmariner*, and *Sunless Skies* at Failbetter Games.

“Ironically, there is no ring to rule them all with narrative approaches”

Stories are my jam. I make narrative games, I co-host a narrative podcast, and I studied English Lit at university before I got a proper job. But I have different feelings for lore, the pickles in my narrative hamburger. A few lend some much-needed piquancy to an otherwise undersexed sandwich. Too many is like flushing your tongue down a vinegar loo. So I've developed a simple guide to establishing the lore content of narrative games: they can be categorised as Hobbits, LOTRs, or Silmarillions.

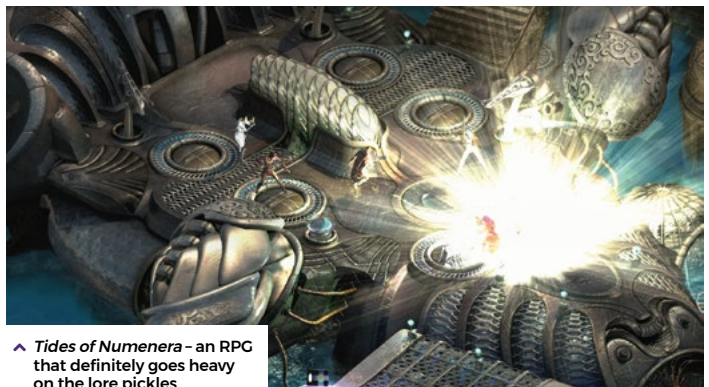
The Hobbit is an approachable, plot-driven story with mass appeal. It entertains children and adults and relies on simple mythic touchstones: a quest for treasure, a slumbering dragon, a great evil bad guy. You don't need lore to read *The Hobbit*. If you have insider knowledge of the Silmarils and the origins of wizards and the Ring, that's great. But you can just as easily appreciate out-tricksing trolls and escaping wood-elves in wine barrels without it. The game equivalent is *Gone Home* or *What Remains of Edith Finch*: well-made, much beloved, and entirely self-sufficient.

The next level up is *The Lord of the Rings*. It's bigger than *The Hobbit* and has more words with Capital Letters. It's no longer 'dwarves live underground' – now it's 'Aragorn, son of Arathorn, is the true heir to Isildor's throne, and that's why he can heal people with his hands (sometimes)'. The narrative spends time explaining the world and how it came to be. Characters' motivations are linked to history and world events. There's *extra* lore available, but it doesn't get in the way of the story – it's tucked away in footnotes and appendices. LOTRs are *Diablo* and *Assassin's Creed*. You can read a bunch of extra stuff in collectable codices, and some bits make more sense if you've played the earlier games, but broadly speaking, it's more about the moment-

to-moment experience. Did you know that Azmodan, Lord of Sin, originated from one of the seven heads of the great dragon Tathamet? For most *Diablo* fans, he's just that spider-lookin' tubster you fight at the end of Act III.

But some people *do* care about the great dragon Tathamet. And for them, there's *The Silmarillion*. How do you know if someone's read *The Silmarillion*? Don't worry, they'll tell you. Silmarillions are the hardcore games, the *Dark Souls* of narrative, the ones whose openings take two hours and are called 'Prologues' and give you a headache because they try to funnel ten years of narrative design through a grommet the lead writer's bored into your skull. They're your *Tyranny* and your *Tides of Numenera*, who boast of word count and whose forums are full of nerds arguing over which war nine epochs ago most influenced the UI. The lore is front and centre. The introductory FMV is a Dadaesque display of proper nouns and references you don't understand, and at some point, there's definitely something on fire. You're here because the Throng of Boo were destroyed by the treachery of Ka'al the Deceiver as he rose to power in the Third Age of Meep. (If tooltips aren't working in your edition of Wireframe, please email the editors to complain.)

Ironically, there is no ring to rule them all with narrative approaches. Some people bloody love a wiki's worth of world-building. Others are driven to drink. But whatever your preference, it's helpful to know what you're getting into – no one likes surprise pickles. 🍷



^ *Tides of Numenera* – an RPG that definitely goes heavy on the lore pickles.

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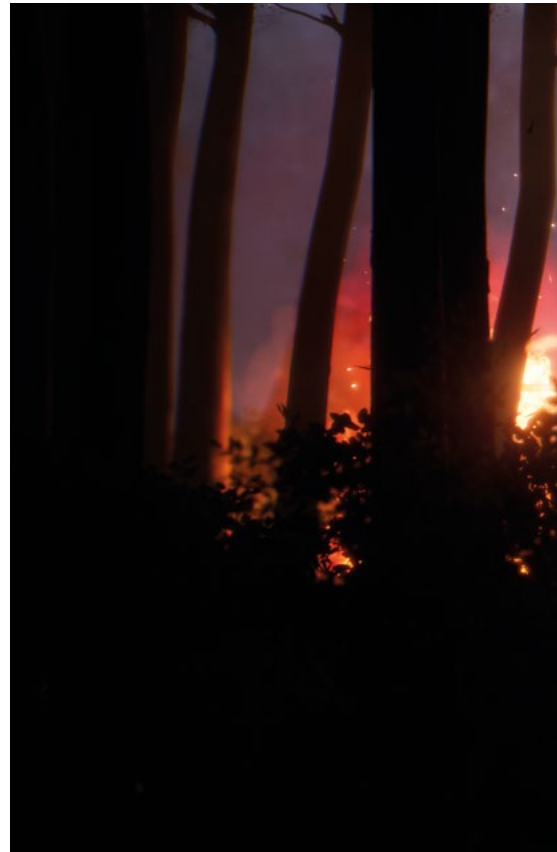


Die by the Blade

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Precise controls and satisfying moves are vital for any fighting game, but so too are the aesthetics. For its upcoming one-hit-and-you're-dead combat sim *Die by the Blade*, Triple Hill Interactive has come up with a distinctive roster of fighters, among them bespectacled assassin, Krasnaja, and a greying samurai and self-described "drunken master" named Ronin. "Designing the characters for the game was pretty much a team effort," says studio lead Peter Adamondy. "We've teamed up with artists from [Slovakian studio] SuperScale for concepts, [artist] Tomas Duchek for the 2D art style, and [outsourcing firm] CassaGI for 3D models. I had an idea of the world, which was this alternative futuristic Japan, and we needed characters to reflect that."

With that concept in mind, work began on the character designs – and it was Duchek who came up with the distinctive black-and-red aesthetic you can see liberally splashed around these glorious pages. "First, we had to create a profile of our main characters – stuff like age, gender, body shape, general attitude, etc.," Adamondy continues. "And from that we collected a ton of references like concept art, images, photos, and so on. Then we created silhouettes of general body shapes to capture his/her attitude. This is important, since it not only creates a general shape, but also a certain feel that emits from the character itself. We've picked silhouettes that matched our vision best and then continued adding details, colours, and materials."





GAME
Die by the Blade

STUDIO
Triple Hill Interactive/
Toko Midori

RELEASE
TBA 2021

WEBSITE
dbtbgame.com

最も影響力のゲーム

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

20 Japanese titles that
changed gaming

[Our pick of the most influential
games to hail from Japan. And no,
they're not all by Nintendo]

WRITTEN BY IAN DRANSFIELD & RYAN LAMBIE



SPACE INVADERS / 1978

By now, there'll be more than one generation of gamers who've never so much as played Taito's *Space Invaders*, let alone wrestled with one of the gigantic cabinets that were ubiquitous the world over in the late 1970s. But as *Space Invaders*' direct cultural influence fades into history, its importance remains: it was the first true gaming phenomenon, proving that a nascent medium could have crossover appeal (seriously, even literary warhorse Martin Amis once wrote a book on *Space Invaders*) and that there was a potential goldmine in pushing the technical boundaries to make new games. Within a year, rival firm Namco brought out *Galaxian*, which had more complex attack waves and full-colour graphics (besting *Space Invaders*' monochrome display). And with that, a video game arms race had truly begun.

PAC-MAN / 1980

Amid a tidal wave of identikit space-themed shooters, *Pac-Man* gave the early games industry a vital shot of personality. The title hero may have been nothing more than a snapping, hungry mouth, but *Pac-Man* – and the army of wide-eyed ghosts who alternately pursued and fled from him – made Namco's game the first to truly qualify as 'cartoon-like'. *Pac-Man* was even loosely inspired by a popular manga/anime, *Little Ghost Q-Taro*, from which designer Toru Iwatani came up with his own ghost-themed premise, and Namco duly cleaned up on the spin-off and merchandising front. *Pac-Man* was gaming's first true mascot, then, and soon, just about every other big game company would want one of their own. Basically, if you hold a lingering resentment towards *Bubsy* or *Croc: Legend of the Gobbos*, blame *Pac-Man*.



SUPER MARIO BROS. / 1985

The game often credited with single-handedly saving the industry (if you're in North America) was, of course, something special. It wasn't the first platformer, but *Super Mario Bros.* raised the bar for the entire genre. Brighter, more detailed graphics. A genuine challenge and feeling of accomplishment. *Buttery smooth* scrolling. It was a delight, and helped steer video gaming onto its current course: appealing to all, providing endless hours of fun, and giving you tunes to hum in your head forever. *Super Mario World* perfected the 2D platformer, while *Super Mario 64* took things – in every sense of the word – to a new dimension. But it was the humble NES game that set things in motion to begin with.

DRAGON QUEST / 1986

Many will argue that *Final Fantasy* should be here instead, but we'd counter that *Dragon Quest* first set the pace for console RPGs. The staples we now unblinkingly accept from the genre were all present and correct in this seminal first outing for the series: the top-down perspective, the sprawling narrative, the side quests, the intricate world-building. Sure, these elements had appeared in various computer RPGs before, but never had they been parcelled up for a console audience so cleanly. *Dragon Quest* would, of course, launch an entire series of sequels, spin-offs, and remakes, but it also defined an entire genre, providing a road map for future developers to follow.



OUTRUN / 1986

OutRun was far from the first arcade racer, and it wasn't even Sega's first pseudo-3D super scaler title (that honour went to 1985's *Hang-On*). But *OutRun* was undoubtedly the first racing game with what we can only describe as *presence*. Eschewing the anonymous motor-sport themes of earlier racing games like *Super Sprint*, *Pole Position*, or the aforementioned *Hang-On*, *OutRun* instead offered an automotive fantasy scenario: you're at the helm of an outrageously expensive sports car, and there's mile after mile of sun-drenched tarmac stretched out in front of you. *OutRun*'s infectious music, jolting deluxe arcade cabinet, and easy-going thrills made it one of the most played – and widely copied – racers of its day.



METROID / 1986

The term 'Metroidvania' gets bandied around a lot these days, but it was *Metroid* that was doing the free-roaming platformer thing for a good few years before Konami got in on the act with the later *Castlevania* entries. Emerging just one year after *Super Mario Bros.*, *Metroid* – along with *The Legend of Zelda* – saw Nintendo try to push the boundaries of the mid-1980s console game. Where *Super Mario Bros.* could be completed in a few minutes, *Metroid* was sprawling and required multiple sittings; where the former was linear, the latter was complex and open-ended. *Metroid* was a brave, important step for console games: it offered a darker, dare we say it, more grown-up scenario than Nintendo had come up with before this point, and the result was an enduring classic whose ideas still reverberate through game design today.

R-TYPE / 1987

We had to include at least one horizontal shoot-'em-up on this list, but which one? Japan's mastery of the genre arguably began with Konami's *Scramble* (1981), which was followed up by its ingenious pseudo-sequel, *Gradius*, four years later. But in terms of worldwide influence, Irem's *R-Type* towered over them both: other studios rushed to copy its ideas, with every shooter that followed needing some sort of novel mechanic (or if you're cynical: gimmick) that doubled as both a shield and a weapon. Its visual ideas were similarly cribbed, borrowed, and stolen, both by other studios and by Irem itself. In short: after *R-Type*, arcade shooters were never quite the same again.

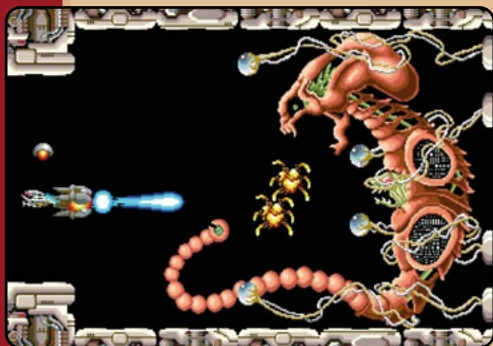


DOUBLE DRAGON / 1987

Irem got the belt-scrolling brawler going with *Kung-Fu Master*, and Technos Japan began experimenting with more complex fighting mechanics with *Renegade* (aka *Nekketsu Koha Kunio-kun*). But *Double Dragon* was the genre's first blockbuster: its gritty, even sleazy gangland atmosphere was matched by an array of scrappy moves, from elbows to the throat and knees in the groin to baseball bats to the nose. Technos' effort was soon bettered by its followers, *Final Fight* and *Streets of Rage*; still, those games wouldn't have been the same without *Double Dragon*'s bare-knuckle blueprint.

STREET FIGHTER II / 1991

It'd be unfair to say that all one-on-ones pre-*SFII* were bad. But its impact on the industry was such that it changed the genre forever – there's a good reason why nobody talks about the original *Street Fighter* in 2021. That earlier effort was like other pre-*SFII* combat games: basic, a bit janky, and lacking in long-term appeal. *SFII*, meanwhile, ushered in a new era of competitive combat, where each playable character was so different in terms of moves, strengths, and weaknesses, that it was possible to engage in long, nerdy conversations about which strategies were best or worst. An entire generation of gamers did; amusement arcades got a late jolt of renewed energy; meanwhile, SNK loitered in the shadows, quietly taking notes.





THE LEGEND OF ZELDA / 1986

Instantly, an entire generation realised it was dangerous to go alone: Nintendo's grand adventure in *The Legend of Zelda* was the first taste many a young console player had of exploration, of discovery, of being expected to figure stuff out for themselves along the way. Stepping aside from arcade-style releases popular on the NES, Link's first foray offered a depth hitherto unheard of – at least in those mainstream, non-computer-based circles. The feeling of grandeur only escalated through the *Zelda* series, with *A Link to the Past* wildly upgrading the formula for the SNES. *Ocarina of Time*, meanwhile, blasted things into the stratosphere with its grand 3D world and gorgeous (very of their time) visuals. Ol' *Link's* had a good run over the years.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG / 1991

What we said about *Pac-Man* also goes for Sonic: he sold a legion of Mega Drives (and other consoles), and triggered a wave of wannabe mascots: Crash Bandicoot, Banjo Kazooie, Spyro the Dragon, *Awesome Possum*. Some tried to replicate Sonic's speed (*Zool*); others tried to mimic its 'attitude' (*Awesome Possum... Kicks Dr. Machino's Butt*). Some were good (*Klonoa*). Many were forgettable (*Awesome Possum*). Not that this was Sonic's fault; with its debut, Sega got so much right. Little wonder other studios circled around the poor hog, trying to figure out how he managed to be so good.

VIRTUA RACING / 1992

To this day, *Virtua Racing* is still an absolute hoot. Those that followed in its path might still be good – *Ridge Racer*, *Sega Rally*, even the more serious *Gran Turismo* franchise – but it's Yu Suzuki's polygonal progenitor that gets the nod here. As with others on these pages, *Virtua Racing* wasn't the first of its type, but it was the first to codify things: the polygons were bold and offered a level of (flat-shaded) detail that lifted the experience; it ran at a quick pace and maintained a stable frame rate, proving polygonal games *could* be relied on to run well; and it immersed players like never before. *Virtua Racing* wasn't just an influence on 3D racers that followed – it was the point when the whole industry realised 3D graphics were *here*.



HONOURABLE MENTIONS

KARATE CHAMP / 1984

Simply put: the first hit one-on-one fighting game. Would you want to play it today? Probably not. Was it a pivotal moment in arcade history? Absolutely.



DONKEY KONG / 1981

One of the earliest platformers, and the game that put Nintendo on the global map as a creative force to be reckoned with. Also launched the career of some odd little fellow with a hat and moustache. Whatever happened to him?

XEVIOUS / 1982

This vertical shoot-'em-up wasn't as big in the west, but its influence among Japanese developers was huge. Just about every shooter that followed, from *Gradius* to the bullet hell blasters of the present, owe something to *Xevious*.

OPERATION WOLF / 1987

Arcade shooting galleries had fallen out of favour by the mid-eighties. But then this beast emerged with an Uzi strapped to the front, and suddenly gun games were all the rage again.

SILENT HILL / 1999

The arthouse approach to *Resident Evil's* B-movie bluster, *Silent Hill* leapt aboard the survival horror bandwagon, but crafted such a distinctive atmosphere that it was impossible to write off as 'just another' genre stablemate.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

ICO / 2001

By the early noughties, video games for the big consoles had to be big, full of explosions, and usually centred around war and killing. *Ico* bucked the trend in spectacular fashion, and while it wasn't quite the influence it should have been, it did result in *Shadow of the Colossus* being made.

SHENMUE / 1999

Blockbuster productions existed prior, but *Shenmue's* budget of around £36m in 2021 money – back then a massive deal – shunted gaming development spending into overdrive. Shame it was a commercial failure, then.



SUPER SMASH BROS. / 1999

It's big, but it's not clever – *Super Smash Bros.* set the ball rolling for what would become a tournament fighting juggernaut. While rarely outright copied, the *Smash* feel is something many a multiplayer game aims for these days.

STAR FOX/STARWING / 1993

It wasn't *Virtua Racing*-levels of smoothness, not by a long shot, but *Star Fox* – *Starwing* on these shores – was early proof console gamers were heading towards a 3D future, and that there was an appetite for it.

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION / 1998

It might not have many imitators, but *DDR* influenced generations of players to a) dance around in public without a care in the world, and b) to use games as a form of exercise. That's our logic; we're sticking with it.



TEKKEN / 1994

There are still serious arguments going on to this day as to whether it's *Tekken* or *Virtua Fighter* that's the better series. We're not about to carry on the argument here, because Namco's title being included isn't about the quality argument – brilliant as King and co's *Iron Fist Tournament* is. No, this is about the impact *Tekken's* home release had on the market, with the System 11 arcade game arriving on the PlayStation in a significantly more arcade-perfect fashion than anyone at the time expected. It wasn't flawless, though it made up for it with additional options and characters available to console players – but the real point was *Tekken* helped to smash open the floodgates in bringing perfect ports to the home; it showed home gaming was no longer in the shadow of its coin-munching brethren.

POKÉMON RED & BLUE / 1996

Often imitated, never bettered, it's difficult to remember a time when *Pokémon* didn't exist. The pre-Pikachu era feels so empty and dark, as though gaming would forever be trapped in the basement and presided over by no more than a committed few (million). But Game Freak's kid-friendly RPG full of creatures and battles exploded onto the scene, caught the imagination of a generation of Japanese players, then did the same again when it arrived in the west a couple of years later. 'Cultural phenomenon' doesn't fully describe *Pokémon's* impact: it was truly world-changing.



RESIDENT EVIL / 1996

And there we were thinking nothing would ever be more terrifying than *Alone in the Dark*, until those bloody dogs jumped through that bloody window. *Resident Evil* – even at the time – was derided for being clunky in animation, script delivery, and storyline. But it was also universally loved from day one for its mix of schlocky B-movie horror and exciting, anxiety-inducing action. Sure, some of the lines were laughable in the out-loud way, but the ambition pointed to something far greater than what the original game pulled off – atmospheric, brooding, and cinematic horror games that would scare people in a way only video games could. Obvious nod to *Resident Evil 4* as well, which reinvented the entire series and single-handedly raised the bar for all games in one fell swoop.





FINAL FANTASY VII / 1997

The RPG was big in Japan – *Dragon Quest* had seen to that, as had the earlier *Final Fantasy* releases – but unless you were a keen importer here in Europe, or a hardcore player-of-the-games over in North America, you were unlikely to really know the Japanese branch of role-playing too well. *Final Fantasy VII* changed that, and with quite some style – it might have been the seventh mainline entry to the series, but it welcomed its millions of new players into the fold with an epic tale of eco-warriors, lies being lived, and talking cats across multiple CDs packed with wonderful FMV sequences. It immediately made prior JRPGs feel quaint by comparison, and helped to kickstart a new golden era for role-playing games of the east – and inspired plenty in the west to boot.

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT / 1997

Obviously *Metroid* got the nod earlier on, and *Super Metroid* will be something in the mind of many a lover of the genre, but we couldn't really sleep easy at night without giving the full-on Wireframe-shaped nod to *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. Aside from the fact that it's an enduringly fantastic game, it's also one that keeps on giving when it comes to influence. Look at the amount of indie titles out there riffing on the formula established by *Symphony of the Night* and, even if you've never played Konami's game, you will understand just how important it was. Bottled lightning in many ways, it has yet to be bettered – but we've had plenty of fantastic titles emerging from its wake, from *Chasm* to *Hollow Knight*, even *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*.



ANIMAL CROSSING / 2001

It took years for Nintendo's gentle life sim to snowball into the global behemoth it is today, but still, *Animal Crossing* has exerted a quiet influence for almost 20 years now. From its Japan-only N64 debut to its wider GameCube release, *Animal Crossing* proved that an unassuming game without fail states or action could have mass appeal. Digging up fossils, collecting shells, running errands, furnishing your house – there was and is an infectious charm to it all, and it's something that's left an indelible mark on the psyches of designers all over the planet. A *Short Hike*, *Ooblets*, *My Time at Portia*... these and other wholesome titles can be traced back to the disarming, witty *Animal Crossing*.

METAL GEAR SOLID / 1998

Had there ever been a game before *Metal Gear Solid* that combined so many idiosyncrasies of its auteur creator with such incredible action and bewilderingly high production values? So is it any wonder Hideo Kojima's worldwide breakthrough came as a result of Solid Snake's jaunt to Shadow Moses Island? Nah, not really. We'd seen hints in Kojima's previous releases of what *could* be done, but *Metal Gear Solid*'s mix of creativity, imagination, and uniqueness made it so very much more than the basic stealth-'em-up it was under the surface. A blockbuster in the truest sense, and one of those games that just came out and changed *everything*.



DARK SOULS / 2011

Common parlance has it that there's a genre called 'Soulslike' these days. Can we just end the entry there? No? Oh. FromSoftware had been trying to nail the formula with the earlier *King's Field* series, almost struck gold with *Demon's Souls*, but then very much wiped the floor with all competition via *Dark Souls*. The intensity of the challenge, the abstraction of the story, the iconography of the always-gorgeous (though often grim) world – it was masterstroke after masterstroke, and single-handedly created not just a wave of inspiration for others to ride, but its own genre norms for others to ape. A classic's classic, of that there's no doubt. 🗡️

Toolbox

The art, theory, and production of video games

46. CityCraft

A quick guide to designing your own dungeon city

48. Design Principles

Howard considers the changing face of the games industry

50. Make a Metroid Morph Ball

Fire up Unreal 4 and recreate a transform-and-roll mechanic

56. Assassin's Creed face-off

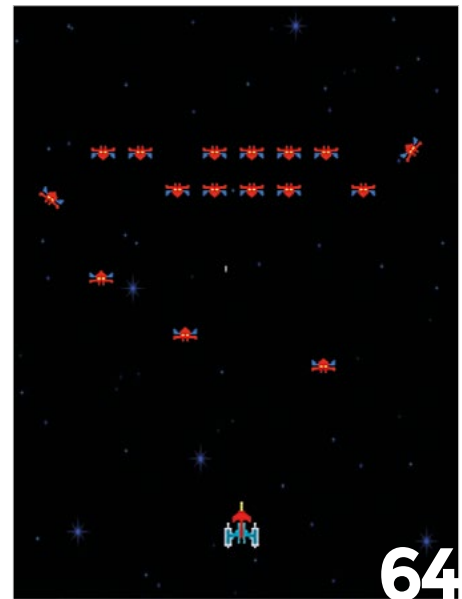
Comparing and contrasting the stories of Origins and Odyssey

58. Game marketing secrets

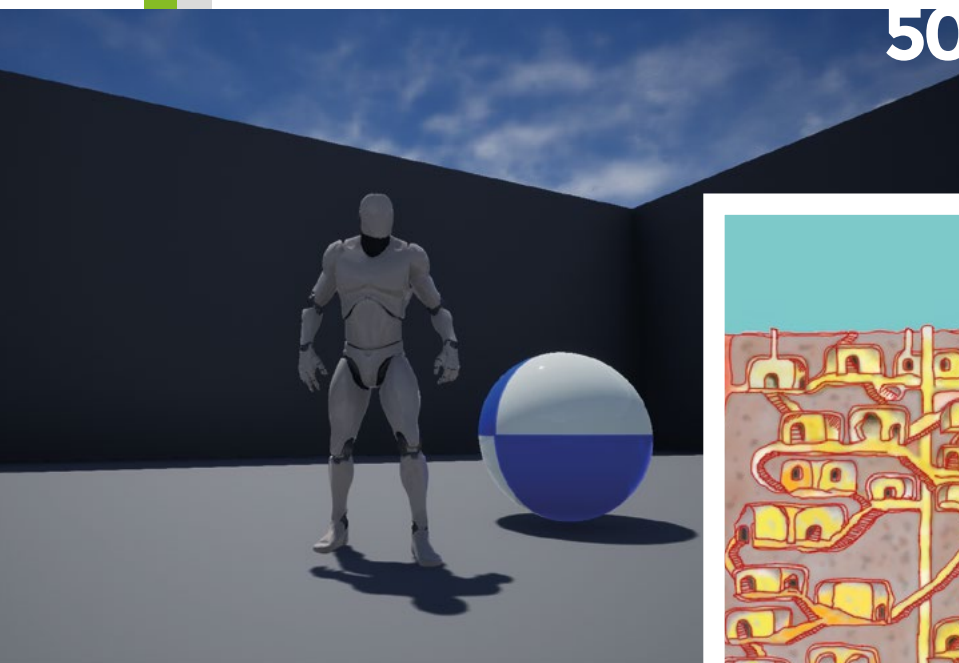
A team of experts assembles to help you sell your video game

64. Source Code

Recreate the swooping alien formations from Galaxian



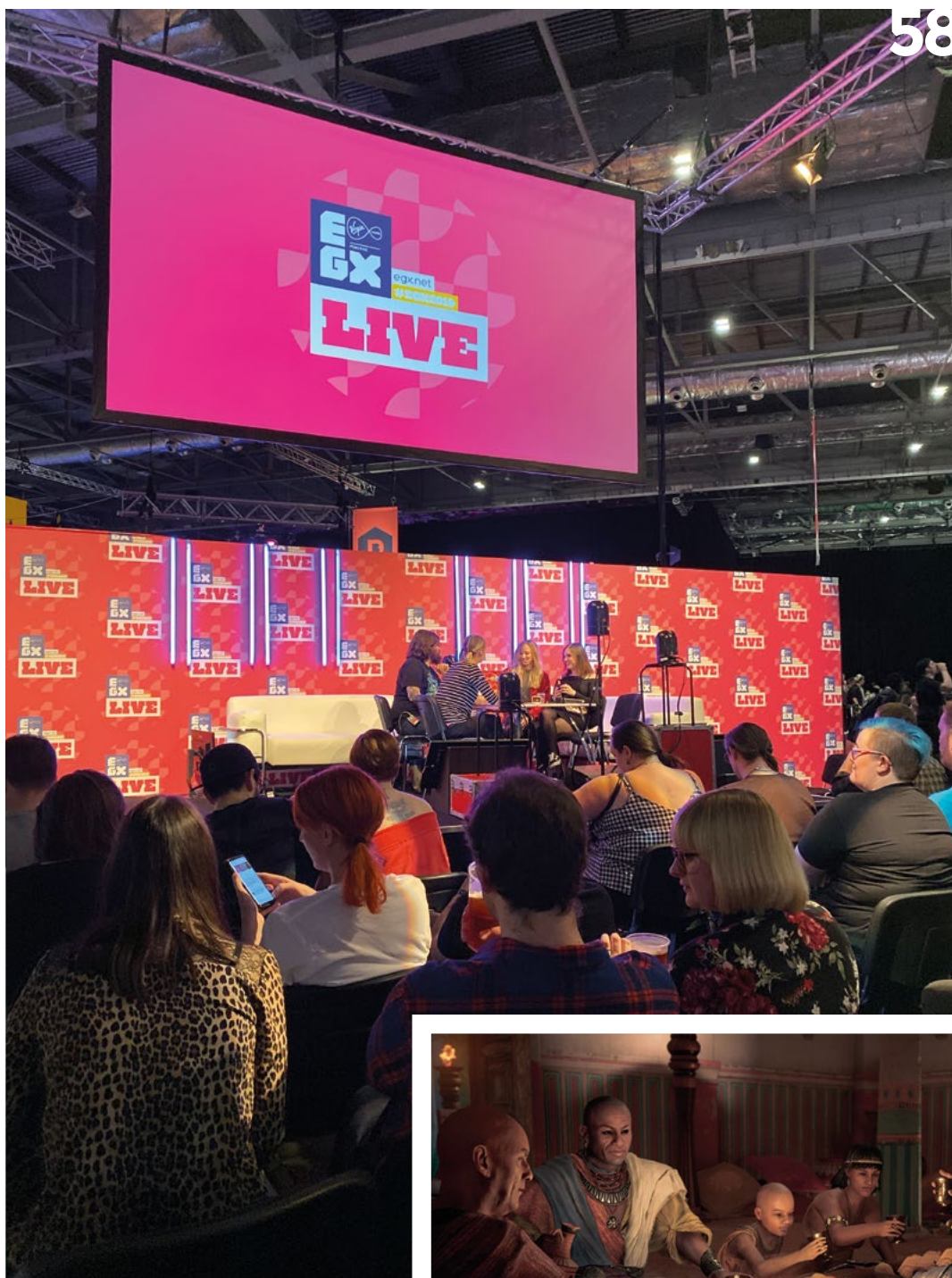
▲ Aliens swoop in deadly attack patterns in this month's Source Code. See page 64.



- ▲ Want to roll around your game level like Samus Aran? Then check out our Morph Ball guide on page 50.
- ▲ Going underground: find out how to craft your own subterranean metropolis on page 46.



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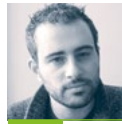
- ▶ Uncover the secrets of video game marketing with our expert guide on page 58.
- ▶ Which Assassin's Creed game had the better narrative - *Origins* or *Odyssey*? We have the answer on page 56.



56

How to design a dungeon city

Thoughts on a locale explored all too rarely in video games: the subterranean fantasy metropolis



AUTHOR
KONSTANTINOS DIMOPOULOS

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Dungeons started defining gaming from the moment *Dungeons & Dragons* set its fantasy adventures in underground caverns. And just as dungeons remain a staple of pen-and-paper gaming, so has our *D&D*-influenced industry been evolving the video game dungeon for almost half a century. The text-only underground spaces of *Zork* eventually led to the ill-lit corridors of *Dungeon Master* and *Eye of the Beholder*, and from there to the architectural delights of *Ultima Underworld*, the undead-infested crypts of *Skyrim*, and the claustrophobia of *Rogue* and *Diablo*.

DUNGEON LIVING

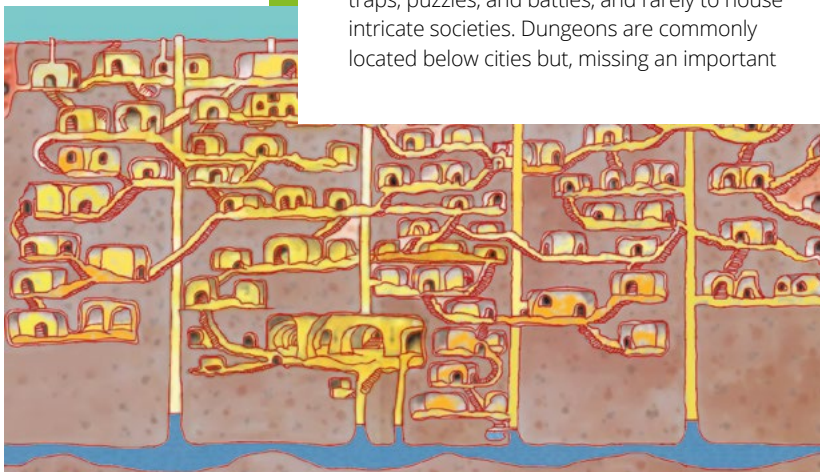
Dungeon cities are, however, a rare sight in video games. For some reason, dungeons seem to be almost exclusively approached as levels fit for traps, puzzles, and battles, and rarely to house intricate societies. Dungeons are commonly located below cities but, missing an important

opportunity, are never envisioned *as* cities. There's no reason why a dark, cavernous dungeon – which also contains deadly challenges and abundant treasures – couldn't also function as a city. Bringing urbanism's ideas to interconnected ruins, mines, tombs, sewers, prisons, and caves will not only create a sense of cohesion, but will also add plausibility to their inhabitants, whether they're demonic or perfectly happy.

Eye of the Beholder, for example, took place in the decidedly non-urbanised dungeons beneath the metropolis of Waterdeep, and this meant its Dwarf and Drow clans always felt a bit out of place. Then again, it's *Diablo* that set the archetype of contemporary video game dungeons. Here, players were meant to exclusively encounter monsters, and all environments were focused on supporting the gameplay rather than on evoking some sort of internal organisation. Even the simple considerations of a basic ecology were often ignored in such spaces. Yet even the nastiest monster has to sustain itself, presumably with food and water. Monsters hunt, are hunted, scavenge, sometimes maybe cultivate, and are always parts of a wider ecosystem – a system not unlike the ones present in *Dungeon Keeper*.

An ecosystem's relations are crucial when designing dungeon cities. If the cave trolls enjoy elf meat a bit too much, for example, it would make sense for the elves living in the dungeon to fortify themselves behind massive city walls, while also making certain they can grow enough fungi for their salad and maintain safe trade routes. Of course, we can always look at Tolkien's *Moria* for

▼ **Figure 1:** A rough sketch of the Derinkuyu underground city based on tourist maps.





▲ The genre-defining *Rogue* came with procedural dungeons that were excellent for hacking and slashing, but cared little for the setting's lore and ecology.

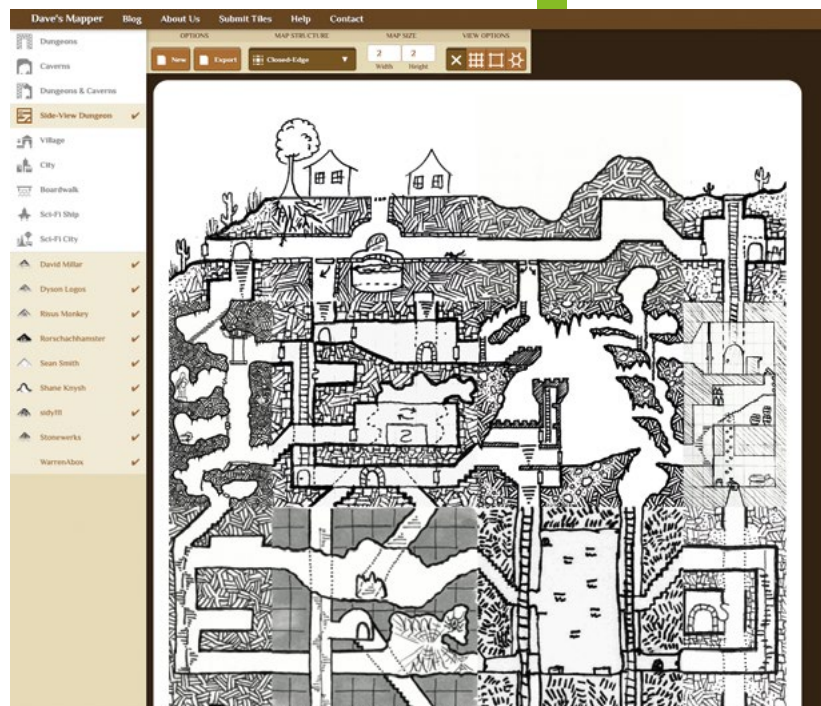
inspiration: a now-dead mining settlement whose surviving halls and burial places are enough to hint at a glorious, industrious past. This is a believable settlement whose underground existence was decided for very specific mining reasons, and which is part of a wider geography. Alternatively, we can glimpse functioning, evolving dungeon societies by examining all those wonderfully detailed towns players construct in *Dwarf Fortress*. Places, I imagine, bound to strongly influence their imaginary inhabitants and institutions.

Dwarf cities, metropolises under the desert, and other takes on the dungeon city, need more than a memorable idea and a strong concept. If they're to feel like real urban settings, they have to come with societies and histories, not just food chains. Dungeons cities have to enable more activities beyond monster-slaying or looting, while obviously also reserving sections for this exact type of experience. Whether they're abandoned or inhabited, though, dungeon cities need to make sense. They need to be able to provide food, water, air, and connections to a wider world.

Next to these fundamentals, the key functions that will define them are creatively crucial too. Are people mining there? Are they hiding from something? Are they honouring a very demanding god? Why has this society gone underground? Is it a nocturnal species? Why does this dungeon city exist, and how are the basics of urbanism transformed to fit an underground habitat, and its labyrinthine nature?

Where the urban core lies and what it's focused on is another important subject to be tackled, perhaps even before deciding whether the city is dispersed or barricaded as a means of defence. Maybe not all of the dungeon is populated, some pathways may have been blocked shut, and it

“Diablo set the archetype of contemporary video game dungeons”



▲ One of the fastest, side-view dungeon design tools I've run into can be played with (for free) at wfmag.cc/Mapper.

might make sense to thematically differentiate the city by depth. What's more, underground construction space would be at a premium, which could lead to high population densities, unique architectural solutions, cramped living quarters, and communal facilities.

Classic *D&D* module *The Lost City* features a city in a vast cavern populated by a drug-addicted species. For further inspiration, however, it's better to explore historical reality. The Derinkuyu underground city, in Cappadocia, Turkey, is a multilevel settlement (Figure 1) that reaches 60 metres deep, and once housed up to 20,000 people with their livestock. Built by Hittites

or Phrygians 3000 years ago, and expanded during the Byzantine era, it was often used as a refuge until the 20th century. Derinkuyu can be closed off from the inside, and each floor can be individually sealed with heavy stone doors. Air circulates via ventilation shafts to the surface, and wells provide safe underground water. Living quarters, granaries, wine and oil presses, chapels, cemeteries, stables, schools, bathrooms, weapon storages, and dining halls have been dug into the volcanic rock. To round off the dungeon-like atmosphere, the city's passages are narrow enough to only allow invaders to attack in single file, and often lead to unexpected dead ends. 🐼

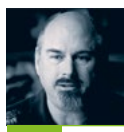
ENTER THE MEGA-DUNGEON

The multilevel behemoths common in video gaming's dungeon crawlers are often much larger than their tabletop RPG counterparts. They could be described as mega-dungeons – as vast architectural creations or cave systems, spanning several levels and packed with all sorts of surprises, often including small settlements and ancient ruins. Researching some of those classic *D&D* mega-dungeons can offer significant insights into matters of scale, design, and variety. I suggest readers take a close look at *The Temple of Elemental Evil* and *Descent to Undermountain*.



The principles of game design

How did the games industry change between the early 1980s and late 1990s? Howard found out at The 3DO Company



AUTHOR
HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Howard is a video game pioneer who authored several of Atari's most famous and infamous titles. His new book, *Once Upon Atari: How I Made History by Killing an Industry*, is out now. onceuponatari.com

After nearly a decade and a half out of gaming, I aspired to return to my beloved industry. I began interviewing. There are lots more companies now, and I wonder what the current video game workplace is like. It strikes me how vast the industry has become... and how narrow.

During one interview, I find myself sitting with the head of game development. We're chatting enjoyably about the company's direction and plans to get there. I'll never forget it.

"Howard, our strategy is pretty straightforward. We're dedicated to continuing our current line of sports titles. That's what we do. It brings us a 1015% return each year, which is what we want. And what we're looking for is the big hit!"

I suppress the impulse to burst out laughing. I'm thinking this guy has a great sense of humour – he could be fun to work with. I'm waiting for the smile (or some indication he's joking), but none

is forthcoming. I brace myself and ask: "So you're saying you want to keep doing exactly what you've been doing all along, and you're looking for a breakout hit?" (Pun intended, but lost.)

"Exactly. Now tell me what part you want to play in this." I don't physically leave just then, but his absurdity assures me the interview is over. Clearly game dev has come a long way since Atari, but I may not care for its sense of direction.

In 1999 I land at The 3DO Company, and begin looking at how things have changed in 15 years. I notice differences in both game making and game makers. One of my first realisations is that 'what a video game is' has changed remarkably. One of my favourite quotes is from Picasso: "Art is not truth, art is a lie that makes us realise the truth". Games are simulations, abstractions, the lie that helps us see. One of the great things about the VCS was you couldn't do reality even remotely, so the challenge was to find the clever lies that

✓ Game development, early-2000s style: it's *Dragon Rage*, developed by The 3DO Company.





◀ Game development, early 1980s style: Nolan Bushnell at Atari.

felt true in a limited context. By the time I reached 3DO, games were still lying, but they were hiding it much better. The simulations and graphics were more believable. The physics engines were doing actual physics, not rough approximations. The lie was becoming the truth and, for some reason, was all the less attractive for it in my eyes. Another thing that blows me away is the sheer scale of it all. My last game had a team of me and a part-time graphics person. Now I'm joining a team of nearly 30 people (including a management structure). Games are now a million times bigger than they used to be (from 4kB to 4GB)! And they're better for sure. But are they a million times better?

Probably not. There are two explanations for this phenomenon. First, you might say things are less creative these days, that people don't try as hard to innovate. Another way to say this is: the industry's matured. Lots of things have been done already. It was easier to do new things in the early days, since many avenues had yet to be explored. Now there is a history, a body of work. Young industries are about innovation; mature industries are about maintenance.

Second, where does the innovation occur? It's easier to innovate in technology than it is to innovate in creativity. That's one reason why you tend to see improvements in graphics and polycounts more than you see new types of gameplay. At Atari, tech and gameplay innovation were on the same path. Now they're parallel lanes on the great development highway.

Another key difference in game making from then to now: hours. Developers always spend

a huge amount of time at work – on that level, things appeared the same. But if you look closer, you see a stark difference. At Atari, we were excited to spend almost all of our time at work. We were inspired because we had total control and authorship. Nowadays, it's not volunteering to be there all the time, it's subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) coercion. Management frequently demands you be there all the time. At 3DO, they went and put clauses in the employment contract like, "We can cancel your vacation if you're on a deadline." That's not the same kind of motivator.

Of course, those of us working at Atari didn't grow up aspiring to be game makers, because no such thing existed as we were growing up.

We grew up with TV and movies. I wanted to be a movie director, or maybe part of a TV production someday. Now people grow up with games.

So naturally they think: 'I love games. I could make them, too. That's what I'll do with my life'. So what?

So this: Atari developers never had to deal with disillusionment. We didn't have a fantasy of what it would be like to make games because we were the first ones to do it. People think it's glamorous to make games because it's fun to play games. Then they show up and encounter the realities of game development, which are brutal, and it's deflating. That can be a heavy burden to carry, particularly when you're being asked to sacrifice your life for something that maybe isn't so satisfying after all.

Making games isn't all fun and games. Why do we do it? It would take a therapist to answer that question. Fortunately, I happen to have one handy, and he'll tell you all about it next time. ☺

“Atari developers never had to deal with disillusionment”

Easy Target

Would you rather be invisible behind the scenes or carry a target on the front line? Anonymity versus vulnerability, that's the trade-off. Do you prefer a work of authorship or a collaborative project? The big difference is there's a lot more work for those ready to be part of a team. If you want to go it alone, you have to *create the work opportunity* in addition to doing the work. That means adding a very tough job on top of another very tough job!

Recreate Metroid's Morph Ball mechanic in Unreal Engine 4

It's one of the most iconic elements of the Metroid series. Here's how to recreate the Morph Ball mechanic in Unreal Engine 4



AUTHOR
RYAN SHAH

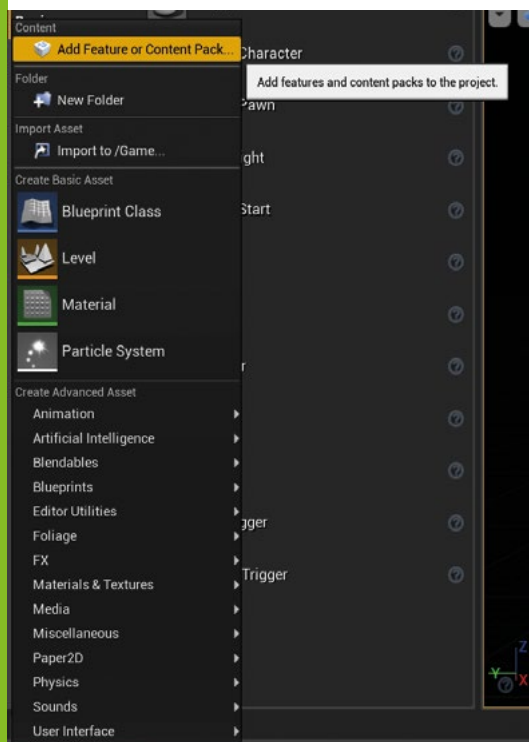
An avid developer at The Multiplayer Guys with a strong passion for education, Ryan Shah moonlights as KITATUS – an education content creator for all things game development.

Metroid is one of the key series in Nintendo's library, and the design of its early entries still informs the free-roaming action platformers to this day. One of its most memorable mechanics was the Morph Ball – an item which allowed bounty hunter

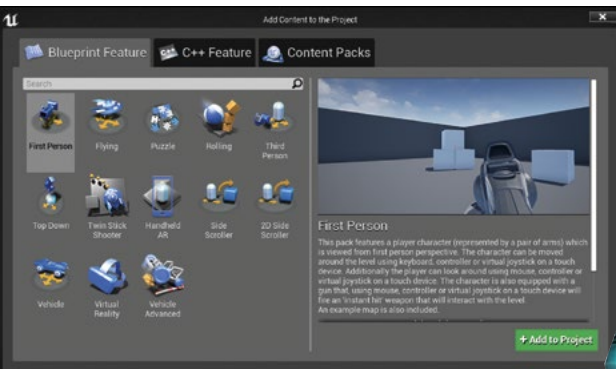
Samus Aran to transform from her humanoid form to a sphere, allowing her to roll through previously inaccessible spaces. It's a mechanic that continued to play a key part in the series as it transitioned to full 3D with *Metroid Prime* and its sequels.

To recreate the Morph Ball ourselves – that is, a character transforming from a walking figure into a sphere – we first have to figure out how both of the different movement modes interact with the in-game world, and how we can add such a change as non-destructively as possible. For this example, we're creating a walking character that can turn into a ball (or bipedal to physics), but this goes for any instance in Unreal Engine where you want to alter the core movement mechanics of a character. An example could be taking a player from interfacing with the default Unreal Engine gravity system to a custom gravity solution on a button press, or when specific triggers are met in the in-game world.

The best way to achieve this is with separate player pawns. With the way Unreal's movement components work, trying to change their default movements, especially at runtime, ends up with us fighting default behaviour and is more destructive than switching between pawns with their own movement mechanics. To make this look convincing, we're going to have to share



> **Figure 1: Unreal Engine 4.26 merged the 'Add' and 'Import' buttons into one green button, but the function of this button still remains the same.**



▲ **Figure 2: The 'Add Feature or Content' window features many helpful examples and code snippets. The main sections of the Content window offer Blueprint and C++ examples of common gametypes.**

data between these characters, but we can do this in a way that doesn't involve sending data between our pawns every tick, which negatively affects performance.

Again, for this example we'll be turning a walking character into a *Metroid*-style ball, but this can apply to other types of movement too.

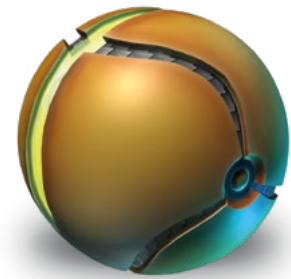
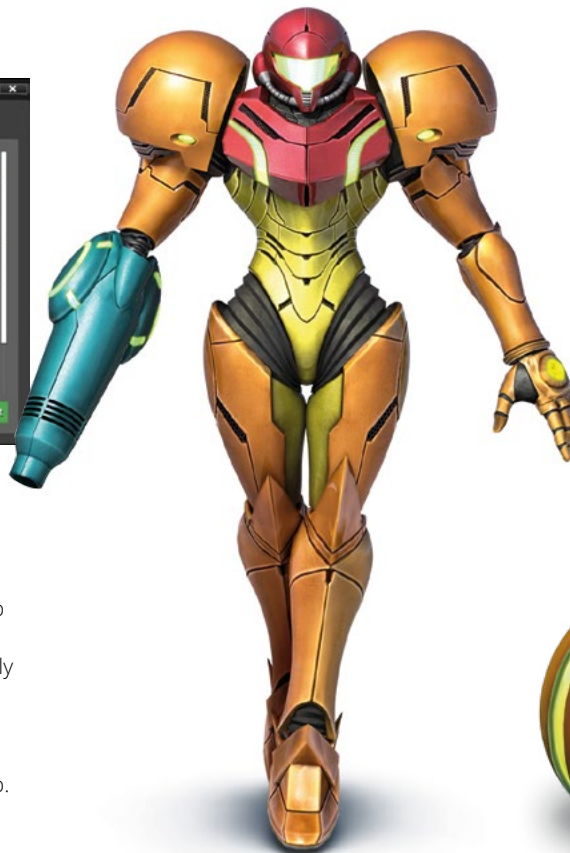
PRESS START

To get started, we're going to need two characters: a walking character and a ball controlled via physics. Fortunately, Unreal includes two premade examples we can use to get started. We can add these to our project using the 'Add/Import' functionality (see **Figure 1**).

With your project open, head down to 'Content Browser' and select the 'Add' button to open the pop-out window for adding content. From there, select 'Add Feature or Content Pack'. You'll now be shown some templates and examples built into the engine. These examples might seem familiar as they're the examples given to you when creating a new project.

As mentioned earlier, we're going to be using a Third Person character and a Physics ball to demonstrate our Morph Ball mechanic. Head into the 'Blueprint Feature' area of the content window and select 'Third Person'. Once selected, press 'Add to Project' and the files will be automatically imported. To bring the Physics ball in, we simply follow the process again (Add > Add Feature Or Content Pack), this time selecting the 'Rolling' template (see **Figure 2**).

We now have both examples imported into our project. You might not be able to easily



▲ **Metroid's Samus, in regular and Morph Ball form.**

locate all the content we've just imported because the Content Browser defaults to hiding the 'Sources' panel. If we head into the Content Browser and click the tabbed list icon below the green 'Add/Import' button, you'll be able to see the folder structure of your project – allowing us to quickly find the files we need.

Before we continue, we want to ensure that everything is set up correctly. To do so, load up the ThirdPersonExample map. To find this, head to Content > ThirdPersonBP > Maps and double-click the ThirdPersonExampleMap to open the level. With the map open, you can press the 'Play' button on the top of your Unreal Engine viewport to have a run around the level as the Third Person character.

So far, we've imported two different examples into our project; a Third Person character and a Physics ball. The two main components we care about from this importing process are two Blueprints in particular: ThirdPersonCharacter (located in Content > ThirdPersonBP > Blueprints) and PhysicsBallBP (located in ➔

“The Morph Ball allowed Samus to transform from humanoid form to sphere”

Content > RollingBP > Blueprints). These two Blueprints hold the functionality to move the character, as well as storing the meshes and cameras they need to function.

Before we continue, we want to bring the PhysicsBallBP into our ThirdPersonExampleMap. Later on we'll be spawning it dynamically, but we first want to establish a proof of concept. To bring the PhysicsBallBP into the level, first make sure you're in the ThirdPersonExample Map level – you can check this at the tab name at the top of your Unreal window. With the level open, head over to the PhysicsBallBP in the Content Browser and click and drag the icon into the level view. For now, the location of it isn't important as we'll be making changes.

BALL AND BACK

When we think about the system we're about to implement – transforming a player into a ball and back – we currently have the core components in our level: the player and the ball. The next step is to understand how we want to transform. The functionality can be tied to anything we want – interacting with an object in our level, or as part of a cutscene, and so on. For this example, we're going to assign the change to a button press. To do this, we're going to create an Input Action. This Input Action allows us to not only fire events off on button presses, but also gives us the power to come back at a later date and change which buttons execute specific Input Actions without having to change any of our code.

“We have the core components in our level: the player and the ball”



Figure 4: More recent versions of Unreal feature a little button to the left of the main mapping of buttons, allowing you to press a button to bind instead of looking through the button list.

To create our Input Action, go to the top left-hand side of our window and select Edit > Project Settings (see Figure 3). When the Project Settings window opens, look for the Input menu on the left-hand navigation bar (it's under the Engine category). Once you've found it, simply click it once to open the settings.

There are a number of settings in this tab, but there's only one area we're particularly interested in at the moment – the Bindings section (see

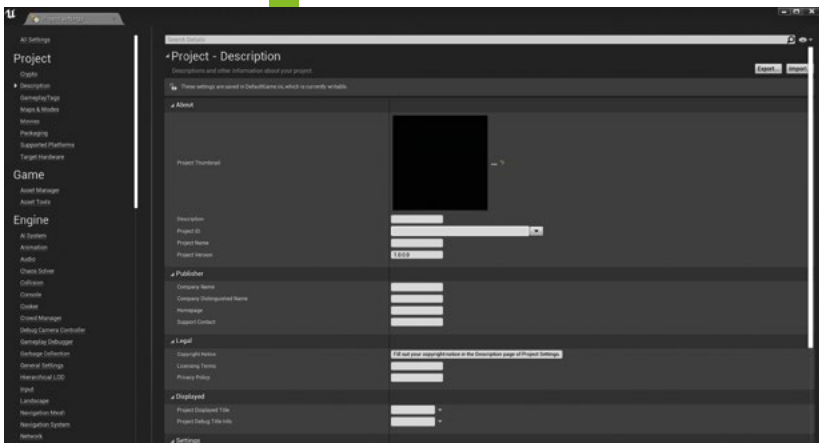
Figure 4). This allows us to create, edit, and delete input bindings for our project. The bindings are split into three main types: Action

Mappings, Axis Mappings, and Speech Mappings. Action Mappings are for Input Events that we want to have a 'Pressed' or 'Released' state for. Axis Mappings are for values between -1 and 1 (as an example, the X axis on a controller's left thumbstick can be mapped to -1 and 1). Speech Mappings are self-explanatory, allowing us to map an Input Event to a speech event.

In our instance, we're expecting to press a button which should execute our transforming code. To do this, we're going to use an Action Mapping, so press the '+' button next to the 'Action Mappings' heading. If you haven't expanded the Action Mappings menu, you might not notice anything has changed. You can expand it by pressing the sideways arrow to the left of the Action Mappings header.

If done correctly, you should see a NewActionMapping_0 in the list of current mappings. If you added the Third Person and Rolling templates to a blank project, this list should be 'Jump', 'ResetVR', and our newly created 'Action Mapping'. Give your mapping a memorable name as we'll be needing it shortly when we code our transformation. The name for this example will be 'Transform'.

Figure 3: The Project Settings window is filled with settings from rendering to input that can be tweaked. These settings are written to your project's INI files.



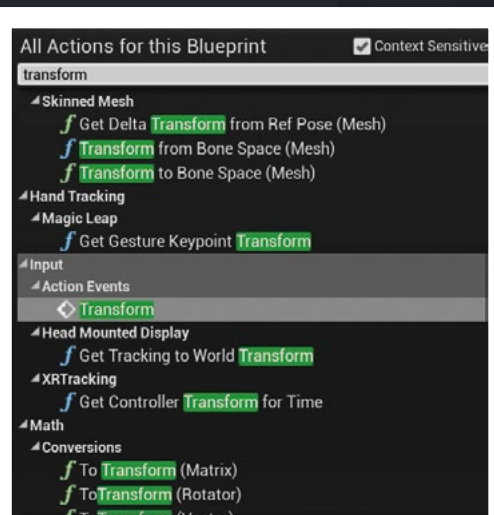


After you've named your mapping, Unreal defaults to showing the actual button mapping ready for editing... most of the time. If this hasn't happened for you, simply select the side arrow to the left of the Mapping to see the buttons that are tied to this mapping (by default, 'None' is selected). You can set this mapping to be whatever button you like by clicking the drop-down. You can even add more buttons by pressing the '+' button next to your Action Mapping (not to be confused with the '+' button next to the Action Mapping's title, which will create a new Action Mapping).

I'm going to add two buttons to this mapping: the number '1' and 'Gamepad Face Button Top'. I'm picking these buttons because I know the existing mappings from the examples don't have these buttons premapped, and they're easy for me to remember. Gamepad Face Button Top is Y on an Xbox controller and Triangle on PlayStation controllers.

With our Action Mapping created and buttons set to trigger it, we're ready to continue. To confirm everything is correctly set up, head to the ThirdPersonCharacter Blueprint and add an Input Event. Close the Project Settings window, then go to the Content Browser and find the ThirdPersonCharacter Blueprint (Content > ThirdPersonBP > Blueprints). Double-click the Blueprint to open the Blueprint Editor.

Usually, when the Blueprint Editor loads up, it will automatically put it in the 'Construction Script' - the place for code that executes every time this code is 'Constructed'. This is basically anything that changes the state of this Blueprint.

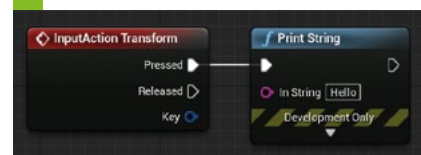


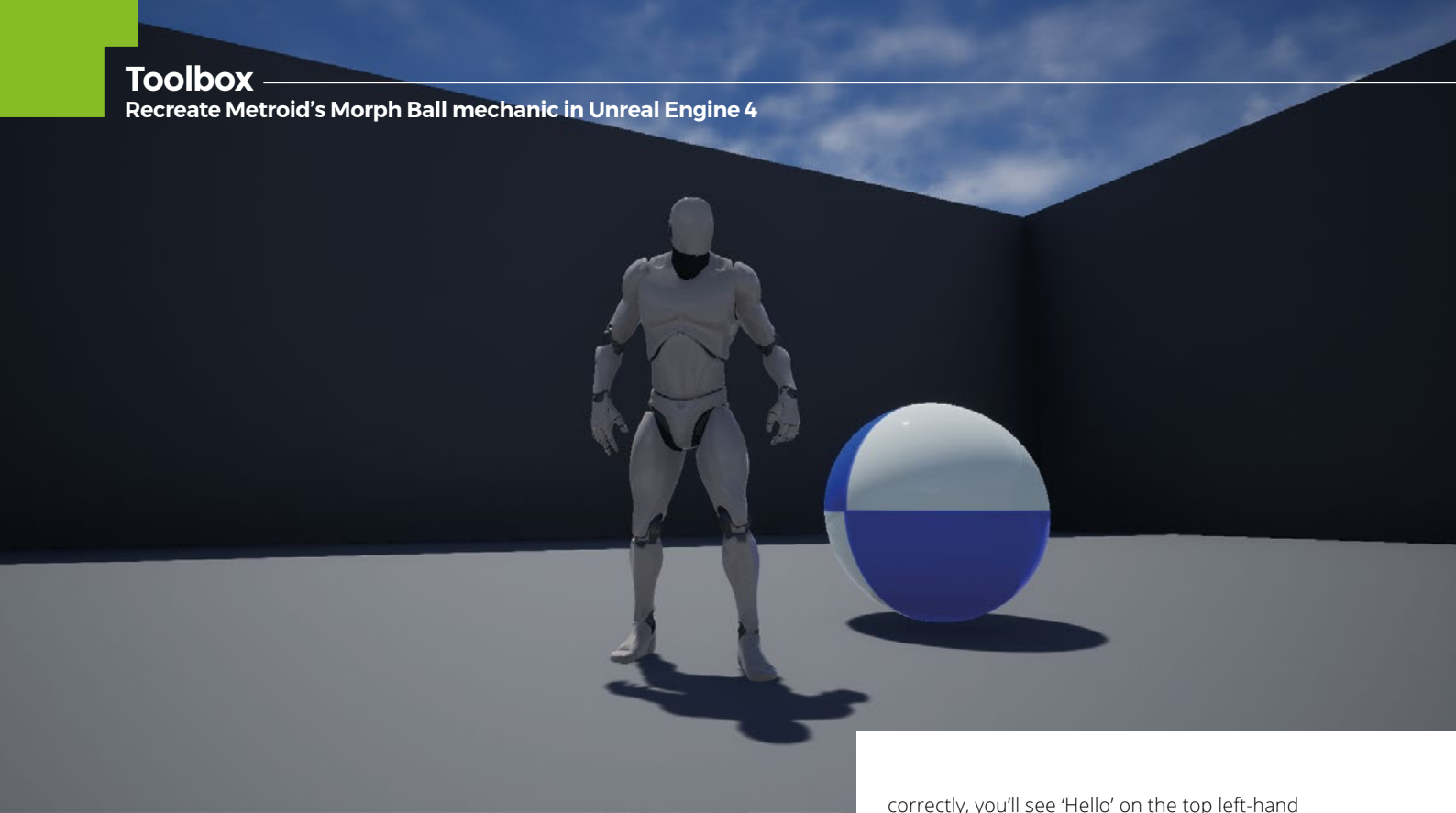
You can check what section you're in by the selected tab name near the top of the window underneath the toolbar, or by seeing the main entry event on screen. If you've loaded into the Construction Script, you'll see a purple node with the term 'Construction Script' written on it. We don't need the Construction Script as we can't fire Input Events in here, so select the 'Event Graph'. You can either do this by locating the graph panel - by default, it's located on the left of your screen - or by changing to the Event Graph tab.

As we're using the Third Person template, you should already see some Blueprints in here - more specifically, there should be a number of Input Events such as 'MoveForward' and 'Jump'. Find an empty space in this graph and right-click (**CONTROL**+click on a Mac) to open the Action List menu. We named the input we created 'Transform', so type in that name and select the

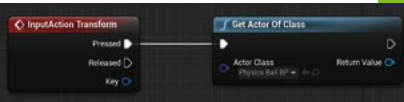
- ^ Unreal Engine 4 makes it quick and simple to get a Third Person character up and running. Now all we need is our Morph Ball.
- < Figure 5: Input Actions and Events have a unique symbol within the Action List to help you identify them among the various options available.

- ^ Figure 6: Print Strings are a very quick way to debug Blueprints to ensure it's functioning as you expect. They don't pause the game like breakpoints do, and you can make them display any message you want.





- ^ With the press of a joypad button (or the 1 key on your keyboard), control will switch smoothly between your humanoid and the ball.
- v **Figure 7:** Later on, we'll be replacing the 'Get Actor of Class' with a variable due to performance concerns with searching the scene every time the button is pressed.

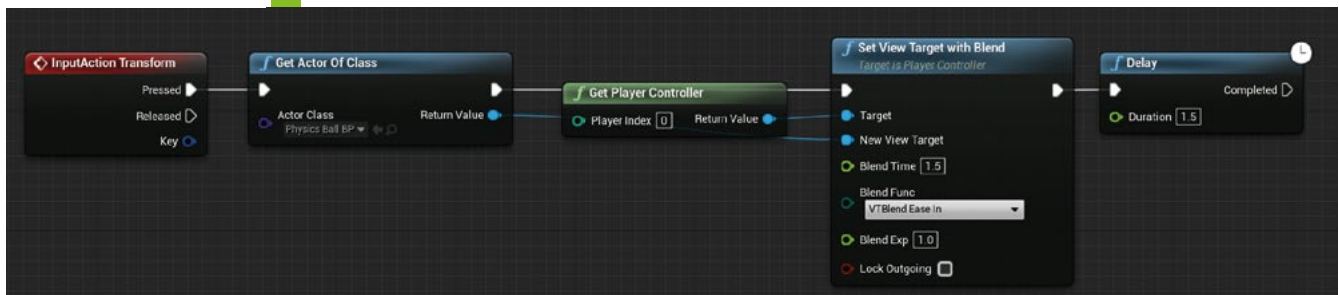


option, beneath 'Input > Action Events'. Naturally, if you named your Input Event differently, simply put the name you chose and select the relevant entry in the list (see **Figure 5**, overleaf).

The Event node that gets created is self-explanatory in terms of the 'Pressed' and 'Released' outputs. We want to confirm the button is firing as expected – one of the easiest ways to check this is to put some text on the screen when it's pressed. Right-click in an empty area of the graph again and type in 'Print String'. Connect the output of 'Pressed' from our Input Action to the input execution pin of the 'Print String' node (see **Figure 6**).

With the Print String connected to the InputAction, compile and save the code via the toolbar. Once you're ready to test, press the 'Play' button and press the button you assigned to the Input Action to confirm it's working. Note that if you're using 'Play in New Editor Window', you might have to click the window first to send inputs into the running instance. If all is working

- v **Figure 8:** Adding a delay allows the transition between modes to play out in full without interruption.



correctly, you'll see 'Hello' on the top left-hand side of your in-game screen every time you press the 'Transform' button.

So, we've created a third-person character, a rolling ball, and set up the input we'll need to transform between them. Let's make the 'morph' happen when we press the 'Transform' button by switching the controlled pawn.

PAWN AGAIN

We've confirmed that our Input Action fires, so let's head back into the Blueprint and remove the 'Print String' node. This is where we're going to add code for our transformation. The solution we're going to start with isn't exactly performant or elegant but will prove that it's possible.

With the Print String removed, we need to find the ball. Later, we'll be using a variable, but for now, this Blueprint has no idea *how* to communicate with the ball. One way to do this is with the 'Get Actor Of Class' node. This searches the current scene for the first actor specified and lets us talk directly to it. An alternative node to use is 'Get All Actors Of Class', which gets all of the specified actors in the level.

Create a 'Get Actor Of Class' node and hook the execution pin into the 'Pressed' output of the Transform InputAction (see **Figure 7**). On the node itself, set the 'Actor Class' to 'Physics Ball BP'. The blue output pin allows us now to talk directly to the Physics Ball (if one is found). As we placed a Physics Ball into the scene earlier, we know we'll have one to communicate with.

Now we'll change the current player camera to the ball's. We want a smooth transition, so we're going to use the 'Set View Target with Blend' node, which changes the position with a blend-style animation. This node is tied to the Player Controller, which means we need to use the function 'Get Player Controller'. Go ahead and create a 'Get Player Controller' node, then click and drag from the 'Return Value' pin in an empty space. When the Action List appears, type in 'Set View Target with Blend' and select it.

“Once this is done, we can freely transform between characters”

Connect the output from the 'Get Actor From Class' node into the 'New View Target' input of the node we just created, then connect the two nodes' execution pins. Our camera will now smoothly transition to this target when our button is pressed. We can also alter the transition time and type, by changing the 'Blend Time' variable as well as the 'Blend Func' variable on our 'Set View Target with Blend' node. For this example, I'll set the 'Blend Time' to 1.5 seconds, and the Blend Func to 'VTBlend Ease In'. I'll also be setting the 'Blend Exp' variable to 1.0, to change the exponent of the curve.

Our transition is now finished! The next step, however, is to wait until the transition is done. This is so that our transition completely finishes as opposed to being cut off when we swap between our actors. We can easily do this by adding a 'Delay' node after our 'Set View Target

with Blend' node, and setting the time to the time specified for our camera transition. As I put 1.5 for the 'Blend Time' earlier, I'll also set the delay's duration to 1.5 (see **Figure 8**).

Once it's completed, we can now possess our Ball actor. This can be done by dragging from the output of our 'Get Player Controller' node and typing in 'Possess' in the Action List. After this, connect the 'Get Actor Of Class' output to the 'In Pawn' input on the node we just created, and connect the 'Delay' node to our 'Possess' node (see **Figure 9**). We're now ready for another test!

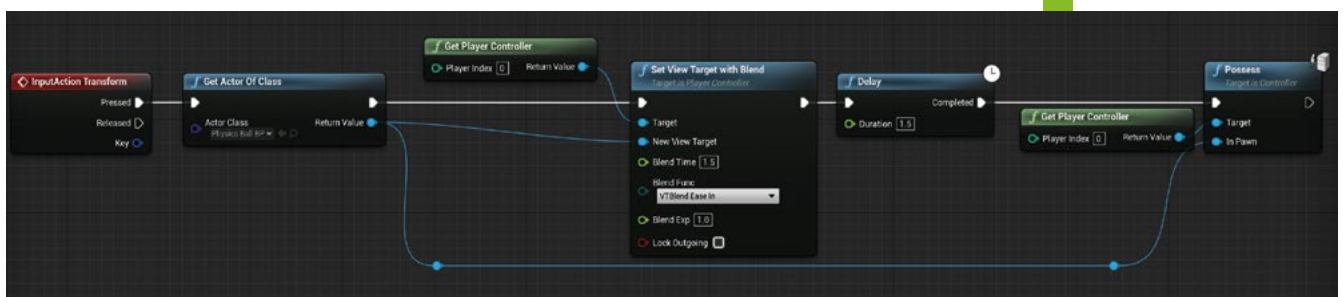
We can now successfully transform into the ball when we press our button. All that we need to do now is duplicate our transformation Blueprint code from our ThirdPersonCharacter into the PhysicsBallBP Blueprint (located at Content > RollingBP > Blueprints), this time changing the input class on our 'Get Actor From Class' node to our ThirdPersonCharacter.

Once this has been done, we can freely transform between characters. From here, there are many different places you can take the concept and add additional adjustments to get the effect you're after, such as moving the Camera to a separate Blueprint and attaching or detaching it to different components as needed. You could also use an effect on the character materials to simulate the transition effect.

From this point, you also have a number of optimisations you can make to improve performance; as an example, Nodes such as GetActorFromClass can be more performance-intensive than storing a reference to the actor on Begin Play.

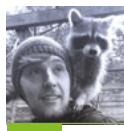
There are all kinds of exciting ways you can take this Morph Ball system and turn it into something special for your own project. 🎮

▼ **Figure 9: The finished node layout for the Transform mechanic.**



Narrative showdown: Assassin's Creed Origins vs Odyssey

The AC games can provide a real sense of place. But which of these two did it better, and how?



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Assassin's Creed is a series that, generally, plays it safe. Instalments release every one or two years, and rarely does one really deviate wildly from its predecessor. This makes it excellent fodder for examining the slow maturation of its design, and in recent years what's caught my eye is the games' changing approach to telling 'regional' stories that evoke a sense of place distinct from the other communities on the maps.

Both *Origins* and *Odyssey* have a more-or-less linear series of quests leading the player through their maps, from friendly or destabilised regions, through more militaristic places and larger cities, and finally into areas over which the enemy faction has an iron grip. Each has you battling the forces of a shadow organisation which later become

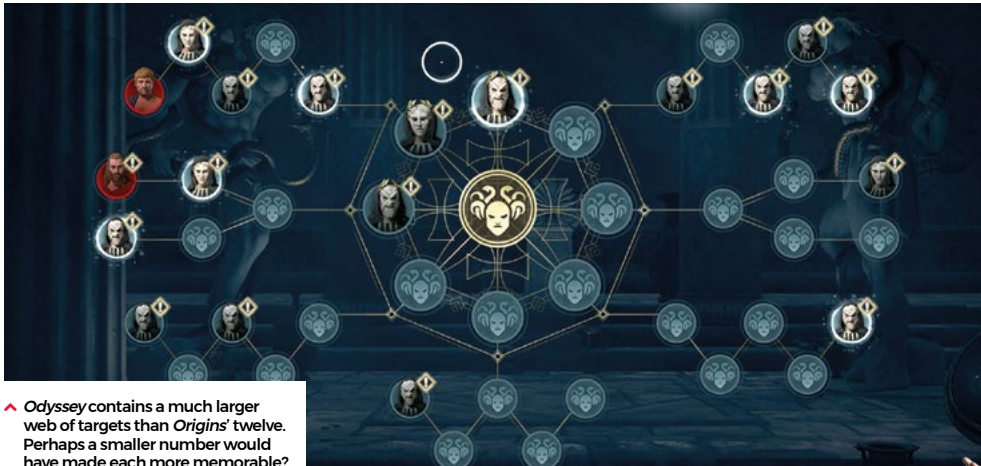
known as the Templars. Some of the main story chapters are broad missions, such as the generic 'Weaken/destroy the Templar presence in X region', and in both games, the steps to doing so will be contained in a substructure of more localised questlines. This, generally, is where the regional stories have a chance to shine.

ORIGINS

In *Origins*, the player rides into a new area, unaware of who the resident Templar is. They've been told there is one, both by some core character and a pause menu 'Targets' screen, which lists the potential targets and their haunts. They will usually find several locals in varying states of distress, often clustered around the largest regional settlement, who each need help with a different problem. The predicaments or their solutions in some way involve one or more of a handful of important community figures. Perhaps the town doctor, a religious leader, and the guard captain. Each is a unique character with varying relationships to the community, each other, and the local mission-givers. But the player *knows* there's a Templar here, that a conspiracy is surely afoot. As they complete each regional quest, rubbing shoulders with the locals, they get to know more about them and their relationships, and begin to narrow down a list of suspects. Is the Templar the town doctor? Or could it be the archaeologist quest-giver? Eventually, they'll have obtained enough information that they

✓ Here, a player unknowingly dines with a Templar in *Origins*. These kinds of interactions humanise the targets, making them memorable beyond their death.





▲ *Odyssey* contains a much larger web of targets than *Origins*' twelve. Perhaps a smaller number would have made each more memorable?

can be sure who the local target is: it was the archaeologist all along! At this point, the quest to finally put that person to rest appears on the map. So ends a compelling whodunit.

ODYSSEY

Assassin's Creed: Odyssey develops this, but also loses aspects of it. The sequel veered towards each area having one 'main' questline, which you started by visiting the big quest marker on your map and compass. The broad strokes are the same, but the structure's different: rather than multiple entry points bringing you closer to a local ending, *Odyssey* had a single entry point which would lead you down a sometimes branching, sometimes linear path towards the inevitable kill. It often tells an interesting character- or plot-driven story along the way, and sometimes a single mission reveals a low-ranking local Templar, and you kill them, but then never need visit that village again. Other times the scope might be grander, spinning a large narrative arc leading to a higher-up target, but generally, it lacks that sense of place, the feeling of an interconnected cluster of people forming a distinct community plagued by a common ill.

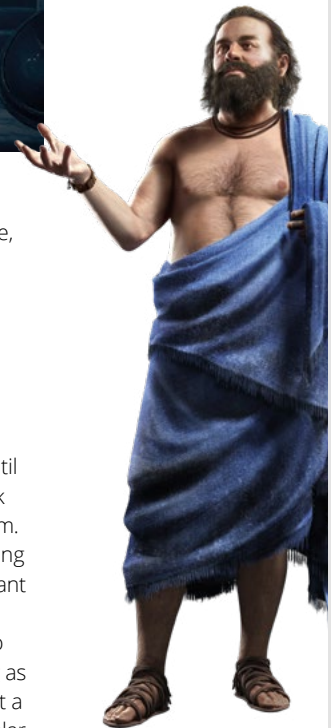
Odyssey's most interesting innovation was its Cultists pause menu. *Origins*' Targets screen had little function, other than a general reminder of where to go in case you'd forgotten. The Cultists screen, meanwhile, is a key tool in taking down the Templar conspirators. Almost every questline in the game, whether a tiny side mission or the main story thread, leads to uncovering one or more 'clues'. Clues are unique items catalogued in the Cultists screen, and will pertain to a specific mystery node in the Templar network. Once all the clues have been collected about any given

“Playing without pressure will often help you find an approach you love”

Templar, they become known. Their face, name, and whereabouts will be listed in the Cultists screen, ripe for the murdering. You'd *think* this would make for more compelling whodunit gameplay than *Origins*, but you'd be wrong: by turning them into inventory collectables, the clues become irrelevant. There was no need to read them or understand the target as an individual. You simply Hoover everything up until a target's revealed on your Cultist screen, mark them, then merk them. Further, the clues being handled this way meant there was little need for local questlines to interconnect. As long as somewhere along the line the player could loot a bit of paper that said something about a Templar on the other side of the region, it was fine. Thus, *Odyssey* lost its sense of place.

WINNER IS...

Almost any of the lesser missions in *Odyssey* could have been relocated to anywhere on the map, and most players wouldn't have noticed. Finally killing a target you'd not met before, simply because their identity had been revealed through clue-hoovering, was nowhere near as heart-wrenching as killing the councilman who, in an early mission, had fed you at his table, whose niece you'd done a doll-fetching quest for, who'd helped a local beggar build a home. On paper, the gameplay system was technically more impressive. In practice, I can only recall one Templar and location from *Odyssey*, the game's main-campaign antagonist Deimos, and Athens, home of unforgettable smooth-talker Sokrates. For me, *Origins* succeeded by foregrounding the narrative links between its quests, whereas *Odyssey*'s mechanical interconnectedness replaced that, rendered it not strictly necessary, and thus left it by the wayside. 🌐

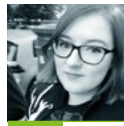


Who/where/whydunit

Origins' locations often offer an intriguing game of Cluedo, of which my favourite was the Letopolis region, but not every place is like this. Sometimes it's obvious *who* the target is, but it's the *where* that requires figuring out, or *how* to draw them out of somewhere impenetrable. This provides vital variety, but what's common to them all is riding in on that camel, completing mutually orbiting little questlines in any order, building a cohesive mental picture of the region, then zeroing in and killing the conspirator.

Promoting your game: tips from the experts

We've assembled a team of marketing superheroes to tell you everything you need to promote your indie game



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W

hen you make an indie game you often wind up spinning a lot of plates. It's entirely possible you'll end up being lead programmer, character designer, community manager, and handling your own PR and marketing. Marketing indie games is a bit of a dark art, with so many moving parts to balance that it can seem extremely daunting, especially if you're someone who doesn't like putting yourself out there. It is, however, essential that you wrap your head around the minutiae of marketing. After all, it would be a tragedy to make a fantastic game and have no one play it.

Have no fear though, I've assembled a crack squad of experts in the field to help with some of the most burning questions indie developers have about marketing their games. Like any band of heroes, they each have their own superpower.

THE MARKETING BIG PICTURE

"Does it really matter what I say as an indie dev? People only care about the games, so why would I talk about anything else?"



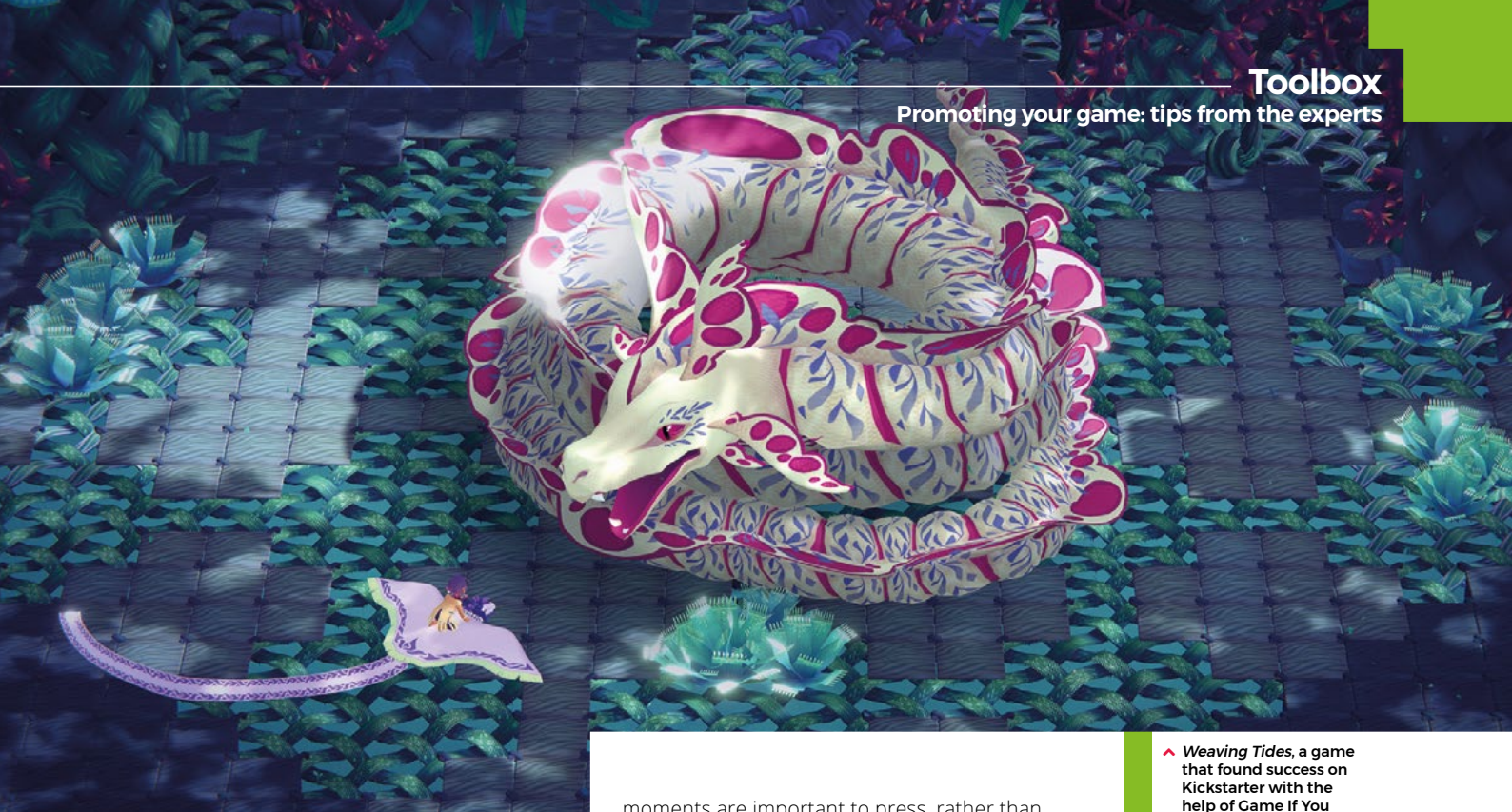
Answer by Marina Díez,
Founder, Three of Cups Games

It not only matters, but it's fundamental. Devs should be mirrors where the community can see themselves, and we also should work on ourselves in order to offer better content to the public.

Your games reflect what's going on inside you, and that will also determine how you behave towards other people on a team, so every single game dev should care about what they say and how they act because we also shape the community.

When we say that games are political, it means exactly that. Games are made by individuals that consciously and unconsciously put their ideas into their creations, and this is part of what you 'say' as a game dev. Keep working on yourself and improve to offer the best version of you to everyone.

"What do you mean I need a strategy? Surely I should just release the game and Steam will promote it for me?"



Answer by Melissa Chaplin, Head of Client Strategy at Game If You Are

Unfortunately (or fortunately, for those of us who make our living from marketing), it's not enough to just release a great game and hope people find it. Exceptions may apply. For example, if you're Beyonce and you've decided to try your hand at game development, you might be able to swing games promotion based on your star power alone. For those of us who aren't starting from that position however, you've got to be strategic. Long before you announce the game, draw out an attack plan for your marketing. By that, I mean a detailed breakdown of everything you're going to do and when. The scope of your marketing campaign will depend on a few different factors, including the time and budget you have available to you.

Generally, I like to think of good marketing as the end product formed from different ingredients. As an indie developer, you have limited resources at your disposal, and you need to employ them effectively. Try to be honest with yourself when you start writing up your marketing plan. If you're low on cash, you may need to invest more of your own time to build up a community and momentum for launch. If you have plenty of money but you're too busy to breathe, it may be worth outsourcing elements of your marketing and PR, either to a contractor or an agency.

A lot of PR hinges on finding the key moments in your marketing road map and using those as a springboard for reaching out to press. The key is developing a sixth sense for which

moments are important to press, rather than being more suited for community posts. Initial announcements, launch date news, and fresh demos or trailers are the kinds of things worthy of outreach to the press. More in-game information, like revealing a boss or character backstory, should be kept within the community, as it requires a bit too much specific knowledge to be appreciated by the wider public.

“Do I really need to build a brand? Can I not just focus on one game in isolation?”



Answer by Haley Uyrus, Brand Communications Director at Tonic Games Group

The problem with focusing on the game's marketing in isolation and not incorporating →

▲ *Weaving Tides*, a game that found success on Kickstarter with the help of Game If You Are's marketing team.

BUILDING A BRAND

It can be tricky to know how to balance a studio brand with marketing a specific game. Even if you're a small studio or solo developer, there are still ways you can do this.

1. Have a studio website, with the individual games as pages within that. The studio website should include information about you and your team, as well as the game(s) you're working on.
2. Consider having a separate studio or developer Twitter account, rather than having your only account be entirely dedicated to one game.
3. Get involved in industry events and discussions as a studio.
4. Have a developer or studio name. Do you want to develop under your own name or have a studio overhead? You'll need to work this out so you can be consistent across platforms.
5. Work out what your values and brand personality are, and connect with like-minded developers. We all benefit from cross-promotion and collaboration!



^ Games, gamers, and abstract shapes at EGX.

studio branding is that you [probably] have plans to make more than one game. Games marketing is tricky enough with the market as saturated as it is, so why not make it a little easier on yourself with each game you make? Investing time into your company's brand means you can accumulate a community of players who'll already enjoy your work and therefore be even more likely to purchase your next game whenever it's ready. Consumers these days are also marketing literate and therefore distrust more traditional marketing output – with studies finding that over half of consumers buy on the basis of their beliefs – so your community will want to understand your studio's values and what you represent. Purposefully engaging and building your studio identity will pay off over time as you develop a loyal and interested community – see 'Building a brand' box on page 59.

"Is it important for me as a developer to be active on social media? How do I go about establishing a 'voice' in the industry?"



*Answer by Rosa Carbó-Mascarell,
Lead Game Designer at Loveshark*

From a career point of view, social media can help you find and secure paid work. Especially as a minority, a portfolio and a CV is often not enough to get you noticed for opportunities. Talking about your discipline on social media can help you get recognised as a professional.

Adding a touch of your own personality to it can also give employers or clients an insight into what working with you would be like. I try to

be optimistic, insightful, and helpful by writing game design threads and making the occasional industry TikTok meme.

However, I think being on social media is about so much more than furthering your career, it's also about shaping the industry into a truly just space. As your profile grows, your voice too starts producing more of an impact. It's very important that we use our voices to call out the systemic racism and sexism in our industry and use our platforms to raise others up. Sharing knowledge, offering bespoke support, or simply being visible as a non-white cis man on social media can contribute so much in making this industry safer and kinder.

"Social media can help you find secure and paid work"

WRANGLING A COMMUNITY

“What’s a community and why do I need one?”



*Answer by Victoria Tran,
Community Director for Among Us*

Games aren’t just a product anymore – they’ve become communities. [A game is] a piece of entertainment that people from all different backgrounds can come together for and bond over. They share fun moments, interact consistently, talk to developers, and form real friendships with one another. Assuming you want to make more than one game and/or continually have people interested in your game, you’re going to need a community. They’ll be the ones that provide helpful feedback, create mods, and spread the word to places of the world you may not have ever reached by yourself. Never underestimate the power of word of mouth!

But not only that – game development can be an isolating, lonely, and frustrating process. Good communities can be some of the best cheerleaders out there.

“I’ve got a community, but now I’m terrified of them. Help!”

Answer by Victoria Tran

Hire a community manager! If that isn’t financially feasible yet, there are loads of resources out there about beginning community management (see ‘Community management for beginners’ box, opposite). Basically, don’t underestimate the necessity of soft skills. Chances are your community isn’t going to bite you, especially when it’s so small, but you do have to mentally prepare for it. What are your community goals? How does your ideal community interact with each other? Have you set rules? But seriously, if it isn’t your thing, hire someone. You will thank yourself now and later.

GOING TO (VIRTUAL) EVENTS

“My ego is fragile, and the idea of going to an event to represent my game terrifies me. Do I have to?”



*Answer by Tom Champion,
Former Head of Content for EGX*

I’m not here to tell you what to do, however, you should know that exhibiting at events is an absolutely brilliant way to bring your game to the attention of a passionate and knowledgeable audience.

And I don’t want to sound like your dad, but if you don’t go, then you’ll only regret it. Not only will you succeed in spreading the word about your game, but you’ll also receive real-time feedback, which may influence its development. We’ve even had indie exhibitors at EGX who have updated their game on their stand and released several different builds during the event.

We can’t promise that all feedback will be useful, and you may find yourself politely nodding at some of the more outlandish suggestions, but for the most part, you’ll come away from events buoyed by the reaction to your game and with a spring in your step. On that note, please do make sure you bring your most comfortable pair of shoes and some blister plasters, just in case!

“Is it still worth going to events even though I’m an indie dev? Also, how can I do an event during the pandemic?”

Answer by Melissa Chaplin

Events can absolutely be rewarding and worthwhile for indie developers. You don’t need to have the biggest or flashiest stand to make an impact. In fact, now that more events are moving online, there are ways to participate as a small indie studio that don’t break the bank. This year, there have been virtual showcases at a range of events. EGX Digital and PAX Online combined forces to host a large-scale online event. LudoNarraCon, which specialises in narrative-driven games, has been online for some time now and will be returning next year. Gamescom had a digital Indie Arena Booth for developers to present their work. Steam has been running regular online ‘festivals’ where upcoming games can highlight playable demos and encourage players to add the game to their wish list. Much as we miss big in-person events, these online options are still a brilliant opportunity for indie developers to network and ➔

COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT FOR BEGINNERS

It’s tough to know where to start with a community, but thankfully experienced community managers are happy to share their tips and advice. The following Twitter accounts are worth checking out if you want to get stuck into community management:

Victoria Tran, Among Us:
[@TheVTran](https://twitter.com/TheVTran)

Mike Rose, No More Robots:
[@RaveofRavendale](https://twitter.com/RaveofRavendale)

Oliver Hindle, Mediatonic:
[@OliverAge24](https://twitter.com/OliverAge24)

promote their games. Attend talks, reach out to speakers on Twitter, and get stuck into this new way of interacting!

FINE-TUNING YOUR PRESENCE

“How do I make a Steam store page that isn't rubbish?”



*Answer by Hannah Flynn,
Communications Director at Failbetter*

So what does a rubbish store page look like? It's one that's out of date or incorrect, where the genre of the game isn't clear, what you're doing in the game isn't conveyed well, and which leaves no feel for the personality of the game. All of these things are easily fixed!

First: when you set up your page, make yourself a schedule for reviewing it. When you do an update to the game, don't let stale information hang around on the page, especially if you're adding a feature that's a yes/no purchase decision factor, like controller support.

Decide which genre your game is in, and make sure the tags and short description state it clearly. People are looking for games that are like other games they've already enjoyed. Help them!

Be clear in your trailer, thumbnails, and long description about what the player's verbs are.

“People are looking for games that are like other games they've enjoyed”

Explore, create, fight? Then illustrate those verbs with gameplay GIFs wherever you can.

When you have all of those fundamentals down, go back over your game and make sure the page has the right tone. Is the game funny? Make the page funny. Scary? Wondrous? Give the potential player something to go on that'll make them feel a bit like the game will when they play it, avoiding in-jokes or things they won't understand without playing first. Good luck!

“I'm on a low budget - how can I use data to guide my marketing?”



*Answer by Kat Welsford, Digital Analyst
at Square Enix*

A good metric to measure videos by is View Rate (that's Views divided by Impressions). If that value is more than 30%, it shows that 30% of people who saw the first second stayed around for seconds 2 and 3.

On some platforms (like YouTube), you're also able to see who stayed to watch the whole video. If people drop off

at a certain point, try to work out why.

Another good thing to study is working out how your website functions. Google Analytics and Tag Manager work alongside each other and are relatively easy to implement into most sites. You can track who takes important actions on your website, like heading to pre-order or signing up for your email.

It's good to make sure that you understand your sales. A good impression rate on Steam or Xbox is nothing if you can't get those people to buy your game.

It's often good to test your content days before a big launch (also called A/B testing). Try different videos, copy, or images and see if you get more wish lists or purchases. If you do, it's a good sign to stick with it.

Finally, you know that small budget you have? Try to work out where to put it. I tend to stick to one platform (Google). If your game isn't exclusively on Steam and doesn't come up when you search for its name, try putting a small amount of money on Google search ads to protect your brand. It can help people who are already interested in your game find it!

KAT WELSFORD'S GUIDE TO MARKETING DATA

When looking at your marketing, you should keep an eye on some important metrics:

- Impressions tell you how many people your work was shown to
- Views tell you how many people have spent a few seconds watching a video
- Likes and comments show engagement

What you want to ensure is that your posts are most often gathering engagement and views. These are the things that tell the algorithms to show you more often to people.



REACHING OUT TO THE WORLD

“Should I do a Kickstarter campaign? That’s a quick way to make money for development and become known, right?”

Answer by Melissa Chaplin

I cannot emphasise this enough: Kickstarter is not a marketing tool. Having a game on Kickstarter doesn’t market itself. In fact, doing a crowdfunding campaign requires careful planning and preparation, usually to the tune of at least six months of building momentum before going live. Press are often reluctant to cover unfunded campaigns, so you need to be creative and find other ways to draw attention to your game.

Kickstarter campaigns live or die on the strength of their community. How strong is yours? Those initial backers make a huge difference to the likelihood of you meeting your goals, because they boost your page organically and because psychologically, people feel much more comfortable backing a project that’s closer to being fully funded.

The actual crowdfunding page has to be impressive. Your Kickstarter needs to leave people without an iota of doubt that your indie game is worth funding. Potential backers want to see a professional-grade trailer, eye-catching GIFs, an appealing layout, compelling copy, and tempting rewards.

“How do I talk to journalists about my game? What’s the etiquette?”



*Answer by Ian Dransfield,
Wireframe’s Features Editor*

Games journalists have a challenge on their hands every single day with the sheer volume of emails that come through. Everyone has a game, and everyone wants that game to be seen. Problem is, the signal-to-noise ratio is all off, and it’s easier to slip through the cracks than it is to catch our attention. Not to be negative, but I’d say go into things *assuming* you won’t get an answer first time.

‘First time’ is key, though: follow up.

The majority of games have caught my eye organically, or because a friend/colleague recommended them, or because a PR promoting something sent a follow-up mail.

Beyond that, it’s just a case of being willing, open, and able. Willing to work with our needs – which are rarely too demanding. Open to both talking about your game and showing it off. And able to probably wait a bit until everything comes together, because there’s often a lot of plates spinning at our end. In short: we need cool games to fill our pages with (ditto websites), and you folks have those cool games, so let us know about them and make *sure* we know about them. The worst thing that can happen is we say “No, thanks”. ☹️

▲ Events are a great way to network and meet new people in the games industry.



> Aliens swoop down towards the player, bombing as they go. Back in 1979, this was a big step forward from Taito's *Space Invaders*.

Source Code

Recreate Galaxian's iconic attack patterns



AUTHOR
MARK VANSTONE

Blast dive-bombing aliens in our salute to Namco's classic

Hot on the heels of the original *Space Invaders*, *Galaxian* emerged as a rival space shooter in 1979. Released by Namco, *Galaxian* brought new colour and unpredictable motion to the alien enemy, who would swoop down on the defending player. *Galaxian* was so popular in arcades that Namco released a sequel, *Galaga*, two years later – that game complicated the attack patterns even more. It's difficult to say how many ports and clones have been made of *Galaxian*, as there are several versions of similar games for almost every home platform.

The player's role in *Galaxian* is similar to *Space Invaders*, in that they pilot a ship and need to destroy a fleet of aliens. With *Galaxian*, however, the aliens have a habit of breaking formation and swooping down towards the player's ship, and dive-bombing it. The aim is to destroy all the enemy ships and move on to the next wave. The subsequent waves of enemies get more difficult as the player progresses. For this sample, we're going to look at that swooping mechanic, and make the bare nuts and bolts of a *Galaxian* game with Pygame Zero.

First, *Galaxian* has a portrait display, so we can set the play area's width and height to be 600 and 800 respectively. Next, we can create a scrolling backdrop of stars using a bitmap that we blit to the screen and move downwards every update. We need a second blit of the stars to fill in the space that the first one leaves as it scrolls down, and we could also have another static background image behind them, which will provide a sense of depth.

Next, we set up the player ship as an Actor, and we'll capture the left and right arrow keys in the `update()` function to move the ship left and right on the screen. We can also fire off a bullet with the `SPACE` bar, which will travel up the screen until it hits an alien or goes off the top of the screen. As in the original *Galaxian*, you can only shoot one bullet at a time, so we only need one Actor for this.

The aliens are arranged in rows and move left and right across the screen together. We'll stick to just one type of alien for this sample, but draw two rows of them. You could add extra types and any number of rows. When we create the alien Actors, we can also add a status flag, and we need to determine which side of the row they're

on as when they break formation, the two sides fly in opposite directions. In this case, there'll be four aliens on the left of each row and four on the right. Once they're set up in a list, we can iterate through the list on each update and move them backwards and forwards. While we're moving our aliens, we can also check to see if they've collided with a bullet or the player ship. If the collision is with a bullet, the alien cycles through a few frames of an explosion using the status flag, and then, when their status reaches five, they're no longer drawn. If the collision is with the player, then the player dies and the game's over. We can also check a random number to see if the alien will start a bombing run; if so, we set the status to one, which will start calls to the `flyAlien()` function. This function checks which side the alien's on and starts changing the alien's angle, depending on the side. It also alters the x and y coordinates, depending on the angle. We've written this section in longhand for clarity, but this could be collapsed down a bit with the use of some multiplier variables for the x coordinates and the angles.

There we have it: the basics of *Galaxian*. Can you flesh it out into a full game? 🙄



Download
the code
from GitHub:
[wfmag.cc/
wfmag50](https://wfmag.cc/wfmag50)

Massive attack

Here's Mark's dive-bombing *Galaxian* code. To get it working on your system, you'll need to install Pygame Zero – full instructions are available at wfmag.cc/pgzero.

```
# Galaxian
from random import randint
WIDTH = 600
HEIGHT = 800

bullet = Actor('bullet', center=(0, -10))
ship = Actor('ship', center=(300, 700))
backY = count = gameover = 0
aliens = []
for a in range(0, 8):
    aliens.append(Actor('alien0', center=(200+(a*50),200)))
    aliens[a].status = 0
    aliens[a].side = int(a/4)

for a in range(0, 8):
    aliens.append(Actor('alien0', center=(200+(a*50),250)))
    aliens[a+8].status = 0
    aliens[a+8].side = int(a/4)

def draw():
    screen.blit("background", (0, 0))
    screen.blit("stars", (0, backY))
    screen.blit("stars", (0, backY-800))
    bullet.draw()
    drawAliens()
    if gameover != 1 or (gameover == 1 and count%2 == 0): ship.
draw()

def update():
    global backY, count
    count += 1
    if gameover == 0:
        backY += 0.2
        if backY > 800: backY = 0
        if bullet.y > -10: bullet.y -= 5
        if keyboard.left and ship.x > 50 : ship.x -= 4
        if keyboard.right and ship.x < 550 : ship.x += 4
        if keyboard.space :
            if bullet.y < 0: bullet.pos = (ship.x,700)
            updateAliens()

def drawAliens():
    for a in range(0, 16):
        if aliens[a].status < 5 : aliens[a].draw();

def updateAliens():
    global gameover
    for a in range(0, 16):
        aliens[a].image = "alien0"
        if count%30 < 15 : aliens[a].image = "alien1"
        if count%750 < 375:
            aliens[a].x -=0.4
```

```
else:
    aliens[a].x +=0.4
    if aliens[a].collidepoint(bullet.pos) and aliens[a].
status < 2:
    aliens[a].status = 2
    bullet.y = -10
    if aliens[a].colliderect(ship) : gameover = 1
    if randint(0,1000) == 1 and aliens[a].status == 0 :
aliens[a].status = 1
    if aliens[a].status == 1 : flyAlien(a)
    if aliens[a].status > 1 and aliens[a].status < 5:
        aliens[a].image = "alien" + str(aliens[a].status)
        aliens[a].status += 1

def flyAlien(a):
    if aliens[a].side == 0:
        if aliens[a].angle < 180 :
            aliens[a].angle += 2
            aliens[a].x -= 1
            if aliens[a].angle < 90: aliens[a].y -= 1
        if aliens[a].angle >= 90 :
            aliens[a].y += 2
        if aliens[a].angle >= 180 :
            aliens[a].angle = 180
            aliens[a].x += 1
    else:
        if aliens[a].angle > -180 :
            aliens[a].angle -= 2
            aliens[a].x += 1
            if aliens[a].angle > -90: aliens[a].y -= 1
        if aliens[a].angle <= -90 :
            aliens[a].y += 2
        if aliens[a].angle <= -180 :
            aliens[a].angle = -180
            aliens[a].x -= 1
```



◀ Our homage to the classic *Galaxian*, with angry aliens that love to break formation.

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GAME
Vokabulantis

ARTIST
Kong Orange, Wired Fly
& Morten Søndergaard

RELEASE
2022

WEBSITE
wfmag.cc/vokabulantis





Vokabulantis

"Ever since I played *The Neverhood* as a child, I've dreamt of making a stop-motion video game. But contrary to *The Neverhood*, we want to create a stop-motion game where you control the character's every move," explains Johan Oettinger, game director on *Vokabulantis*. "*Vokabulantis* is a whole fantasy adventure inspired by a poetic interpretation of the elements of language. We turned it into an actual world. There are Verb Carps, the giant storage City of Noun, and ancient powers like Grandma Marble, the Wordpower, and the Word Führer. We basically take the abstract structure of language and make it actual tangible objects and characters. And what better way than using the technique of stop-motion, where fantasy actually becomes real objects you can hold in your hand?"

"Stop-motion has a magical quality to it; the tactility evokes a fantastical feeling in the audience. That's something I have just realised working in stop-motion for [so] many years, and that really brings it home for me in this project, when it comes together in a video game. All the stars align, so to speak. The greatest inspirations from the visual side of things are my two favourite filmmakers, Andrei Tarkovsky and Hayao Miyazaki – the visual style is somewhat melancholic and fantastical at the same time. While on the game side of things, *INSIDE* is a big inspiration."



EXTREME SPORTS

We talk to former members of EA Canada about the making of the SSX series, and the rise and fall of EA BIG

WRITTEN BY
JACK YARWOOD



▲ One of the simple joys of SSX was finding shortcuts to get an edge on the competition - whether that be smashing glass panels or grinding on a tree.

When EA Canada released *Snowboard Supercross* (better known as SSX) a few months after the launch of the PlayStation 2, it was an instant success. A fast and thrilling snowboarding experience, it paired elements of competitive boardercross with an exaggerated physics system, allowing for more unrealistic tricks and longer airtime. But SSX wasn't just another EA Sports game; instead, it was marketed as the flagship for the newly launched EA Sports BIG label, an original collection of games that took a more arcade-like approach than the company's more realistic offerings. As a result, many of the games EA released under this label became hits with non-sports fans.

That success didn't last, however, and the label eventually lost steam, becoming diluted with several less successful projects that lost sight of what made the earlier games so special. To find out more about the label's rise and fall, we interviewed a number of ex-EA personnel who worked across its library of games, starting with SSX executive producer Steven Rechtschaffner - the person who started it all.

Rechtschaffner's journey into games is an unusual one, since he didn't come from any kind of programming or design background. Before getting into games, he was a competitive skier on the pro-freestyle circuit, devised marketing campaigns for the watch manufacturer Swatch, and worked in TV production. It was during this last job, while working alongside his friend Greg Stump, that he laid the foundation for SSX, a new snowboarding event that would later become the basis for the game. "We did this thing called *Greg Stump's World of Extremes*, which originally was supposed to be part of ABC's *Wide World of Sports*," explains Rechtschaffner. "But that fell

apart and we just made these sequences that were part of this weird stunt show on Fox TV on Friday nights. We had a commitment for eight

episodes and we'd shot seven. We were up at Whistler Blackcomb [in British Columbia]. We needed one more episode and I said, 'I've had this idea for a Motocross-style event. Let's try doing that for snowboarders.'"

They called the event Boardercross, and it quickly exploded in popularity, benefiting from increased exposure on channels like MTV, which licensed the footage. Off the back

"No one thought a snowboarding game was going to do good"



KING OF THE HILL

SSX had many names prior to launch, including *Super Boardercross* and *King of the Hill*. As Adam MacKay-Smith explains: “We called it *King of the Hill* because the original idea I had was to create an open world, where you’re trying to get to the top of a hill by meeting people, by following people, by keeping up, by racing people, and then finally getting to the mysterious powder track, which ended up being *Untracked* [the last track of *SSX*] where there were no rules.”

of this, Rechtschaffner travelled the world, helping others put on their own Boardercross events, before settling down in Vancouver and getting a job at EA Canada, a company that had previously headhunted him for a job at its San Mateo studio due to his experience in marketing and production.

When Rechtschaffner first got the job at EA Canada, he suggested two ideas: an interactive fitness project and a title based on boardercross. But rather than developing either project further, Rechtschaffner worked on the *FIFA* series as a producer, before helping to launch EA’s *Triple Play* series of baseball games. It was this latter series’ sales that gave him another opportunity to pitch his idea for a boardercross game, albeit successfully this time. “EA Canada had this silver bullet rule,” Rechtschaffner says. “As an executive producer, if you made a game and it was successful, you not only could make [a sequel], but you could make something new. And you had the ability to see through that new thing to whatever extent you wanted and you know, if it didn’t work out or if it failed, you lost that silver bullet and you had to have another success before you could get another opportunity. But if it succeeded, you could do it again.”

The beginnings of *SSX* were modest, with *Need for Speed II* designer and Rechtschaffner’s “in the trenches” producer Adam MacKay-Smith assigned

to the project. “I ended up spending a year and a half on that game all by myself,” he recalls. “Steve was still working on [the next] *Triple Play* and I’d meet with him once a week [to discuss things].”

More people eventually joined MacKay-Smith on the project, from other teams inside EA Canada, but confidence was low that the project would get off the ground. “The odds were against us – no one thought a snowboarding game was going to do good,” MacKay-Smith continues. “I think that’s why it was just me for so long until we figured out ‘How can we do →

▼ Tokyo Megaplex is a stage inside both *SSX* and *SSX Tricky*, modelled on the interior of a pinball machine.





▲ Players earned money in *SSX 3* in order to unlock more music, outfits, and tricks. Best of all, no premium currency in sight.

CRANKED

Cranked is a cancelled EA Sports BIG project that the *SSX* team started working on after *SSX Tricky*. It was to focus on mountain biking, but was cancelled after Don Matrick failed to see a market for a game based around the downhill sport. "It was really cool," says Johnny Morgan. "I had a working version on an Xbox at some point, but I don't know where it is."

this properly?', because if it was a team, we would've been shut down."

He cites many influences on the initial design of *SSX*, including Sega's *Top Skater* and Midway's *NFL Blitz* and *San Francisco Rush*, which the team would play in the arcade in EA Canada's lobby. However, MacKay-Smith remembers that it was Psygnosis' *WipEout* that had the biggest influence, informing not only the feel of the game, but its rewards system, and emphasis on electronic music. But these components didn't come together overnight, with constant iteration being key to nailing the game's physics. Says Rechtschaffner: "It took us a long time to figure out how to make the physics and the snow surfaces feel real, like you were in control and you were interacting with them... And we quickly realised we didn't want to keep it as a simulation. One of my gameplay engineers used to say, 'It's got to feel like a toy, like *Super Mario 64*.'"



► *SSX Tricky* introduced a number of new characters, including the unnerving heavy metal fan Psymon Stark, who appeared in every *SSX* title that followed.

During production, the team at EA Canada were constantly tweaking the physics, with MacKay-Smith and *SSX*'s lead programmer Jon Spencer eventually designing the system to favour big air and speed boosts once you hit the ground. "We discovered that what felt the best is when you felt like a plane taking off from the tarmac," recalls Larry LaPierre, *SSX*'s producer. "But the by-product of that was all of a sudden you hit the apex of that jump, and you'd have another two miles before you came back to earth because gravity was so light... What we found was this Wile E. Coyote [approach] – you hit the apex, there's this pause, and then all of a sudden you're dropping like an anchor."

Likewise, audio and music also played a huge role in the experience. Inspired by *WipEout*, MacKay-Smith wanted the music to have big breakbeats and fun bass lines, likening the soundtrack's vibe to "a kid walking down the street trying to act tough". "I started giving music to the team," he says, "and I was like, 'Please listen to this while you're working or while you're testing your tracks, so you get an idea of how everything melds together'. I was given a tiny budget for all the music, \$100,000 [in total]. It was crazy because at the time, *FIFA* had, like, \$100,000 [to license] one song."

Frank Faugno was the audio lead on *SSX*, with former heavy metal musician and DJ Johnny Morgan handling the music side of things, while



▲ Here's some photos of the original SSX team mugging for the camera. The programmers don't look particularly impressed.

Canadian sound artist Kenneth Newby provided additional ideas for the audio design. Morgan composed half of the tracks on the game's soundtrack, and supplied various remixes of artists such as the DJ, Rasmus.

"Working with Rasmus was great because he gave us all his parts," says Morgan. "So we were able to remix and make them fit in an interactive fashion, where we were layering them depending on how well you were doing... We were experimenting with this interactive music tool that we had created called Pathfinder. It was created for *Need for Speed*, and it was a way to change the music depending on where you were going or what was happening."

THINKING BIG

EA Canada released *SSX* in 2000 after a delay of six months to add further polish. Critics gave the game great reviews; as a result, the decision was made to release more games under the new EA Sports BIG umbrella. This included the motocross racer *Freestyle*, a rally game called *Shox*, and a reboot of the snowmobile game *Sled Storm*. Another team at EA Canada also started developing a basketball game, which eventually became 2001's *NBA Street* and led to spin-offs such as *NFL Street* and *FIFA Street*.

"There was a number of us that had been on *NBA Live* for [several] years," recalls Wil Mozell, executive producer on *NBA Street*, "and we wanted nothing more than to create non-sports games, which wasn't something EA did much of. We got to a point where we realised we weren't going to have any success getting support, and we had our day jobs on *NBA Live*, so we basically bridged the gap."

NBA Street wasn't a typical basketball game. It featured a new set of rules, exaggerated physics, and a 'Gamebreaker' mechanic based on *Street Fighter* special attacks, where players could perform a devastating shot to pull ahead

of the opposing team. Much like the *SSX* team before them, Mozell and the *NBA Street* team – comprising Chicago-based developer NuFX and EA Canada staff – drew their inspiration from arcade games, such as *NFL Blitz*. But Mozell remembers there was much internal debate within the studio over how far they wanted to push things, with *NBA Street* at one point having a yeti on its roster of players.

NBA Street's sequel, *NBA Street Vol. 2*, released in 2003, and brought with it new ideas and improvements over its predecessor. It introduced the concept of old versus new, an idea EA product manager David Pekush had pitched in an executive meeting. This pitted legendary figures from the NBA against the legends of tomorrow, and was reflected as a theme throughout the game, from the character roster all the way down

to the mix of old and new hip hop. The sequel also boasted a toon-shaded art style, spearheaded by lead art director Kirk Gibbons and technical art

lead Adam Myhill, and featured the involvement of advertising veteran Jimmy Smith (who worked on the Nike Freestyle campaign) and streetball legend Bobbito Garcia who helped make the project more "culturally relevant".

"I think with *NBA Street 1*, we were successful in creating a fun, more accessible basketball game," says Mozell. "So when we were looking at *NBA Street Vol. 2*, there were so many ideas. I remember an early interview I did on *Street 1*, where I was quoted, and it was true, saying it was five white guys in Vancouver making a streetball game with a developer in Chicago. So we partnered with Jimmy Smith, hired him as a creative director, and we were also introduced to a gentleman named Bobbito Garcia."

As well as greenlighting these other EA Sports BIG titles, the sales and marketing people at EA →



THE SECRET SAUCE

The team also approached world-famous beatboxer Rozell 'Rahzel' Brown and Beastie Boys turntablist Mike Schwartz, aka Mix Master Mike, to contribute to the project, elevating the quality of the in-game audio. Schwartz and Brown collaborated on a number of tracks for the soundtrack, including the main theme, *Slayboarder*. Brown also provided in-game commentary.

"[EA Canada] was like this compound," Brown says. "You didn't really need to leave and go home. They had everything there. From a masseuse to a mini-hotel, tennis courts, basketball courts, a café, a lunch-in diner, a gym. It blew my mind. I was like, 'Can you guys give me a job here? This is a sweet deal.'"

"Me and Rahzel were really tight," says Schwartz. "We weren't just musical partners, we were like family too. You're talking about the best beatboxer in the world, the most legendary, grand architect of beatboxing, Rahzel. Me and him made for a perfect concoction when we got in the studio. It was automatic."

◀ The original *SSX* only had eight characters, including series mainstays such as Elise, Kaori, Mac, and Zoe.

pressured the *SSX* team into making a follow-up shortly after the first game's success. *Tricky* launched in 2001, only a year after the original, but lacked the involvement of *SSX*'s lead designer, MacKay-Smith, who left prior to its release.

Those who remained at the studio made the best of the situation they'd been given, using *SSX Tricky* as a chance to add new courses, introduce more characters, and replace the voice cast with celebrities such as David Arquette, Lucy Liu, and Macy Gray. The team also introduced a new rivalry system, where players could spark feuds with AI opponents by knocking them over. As a result, many of the team that remained at EA Canada highlighted *SSX Tricky* as their favourite

of the original *SSX* games, enjoying the freedom they had to push the experience even further. "*SSX Tricky* ended up being kind of *SSX 1.5*," says LaPierre. "Because we were at the early stage of the console [with *SSX*], there was the opportunity to follow it up with *Tricky*, and that's where it really resonated and solidified itself."

Critics agreed, with Eurogamer and Game Informer awarding *SSX Tricky* a 9/10. Two years passed, and EA Canada released another sequel to *SSX*, *SSX 3*, in 2003. This time around, however, there were some more major changes, with the most prominent being the switch from disconnected stages to a long continuous course down a single mountain. Players could also create their own playlists from a library of licensed songs that would mix together as you boarded down the mountain. *SSX 3* garnered critical acclaim, and was the first game in the series to sell over a million copies, but there was some concern internally about the changes to the formula, including the addition of continuous race tracks and a less cohesive vision for the music.

"[That change to continuous tracks] was a bit opportunistic in terms of technical capabilities," says LaPierre, referring to the new-found ability to stream a world off the PlayStation disc fast enough to have seamless traversal between different areas of a mountain. "So when the door opened on the capability of 'Maybe there's a new experience there in terms of having a 30-minute run'... those opportunities are what drove some of the decision-making around that."

▼ Garibaldi is the first stage of *SSX Tricky*. It begins with a steep 200ft drop, allowing you to perform spectacular tricks right from the off.



HIGHLIGHT REEL



SLED STORM (2002)

Sled Storm swapped snowboards for snowmobiles, and critics were pretty impressed with the results. Confusingly, this was the reboot of an earlier game for the original PlayStation that was also titled *Sled Storm*.



NBA STREET VOL. 2

NBA Street Vol. 2 was a sequel to the hugely successful EA Sports BIG title *NBA Street*. It improved on the original *NBA Street* in many areas, such as with the introduction of NBA Legends Larry Bird, Pistol Pete, and Julius Erving.



FIFA STREET

This one took football onto courts across the world. Much like other games under the *Street* moniker, it was all about skill and showboating, and was backed by an impressive soundtrack, mixing drum 'n' bass with other cutting-edge sounds.



NFL STREET

The most obscure *Street* game, at least in the UK, this did well enough to warrant two sequels, and put a more aggressive spin on American football. It also borrowed the 'Gamebreaker' mechanics from other *Street* games.



◀ Making music for the EA BIG games was a serious business.

“By the time *SSX 3* came, it was a corporate beast,” says Morgan. “Everything changed. EA hired Steve Schnur, and that whole licensing department started up. So Steve had this team of people saying ‘You’re not handling licensing anymore, we’re handling it – we want to make sure we’re putting some placements in for these labels we have deals with.’”

The series continued after *SSX 3*, but none of the subsequent releases reached the same heights, with later games struggling to innovate without detracting from what had made the series so appealing in the first place – tight controls, arcade physics, and curated soundtrack. The EA Sports BIG label suffered a similar fate, with later releases failing to capture audiences in quite the same way. Over the years, there have been a number of attempts to revive *SSX*, but with many of the original developers having left the studio, these projects have mostly fallen short. That’s not to say EA hasn’t made approachable sports games elsewhere: *Skate* and the 2012 revival of Midway’s *NFL Blitz* are BIG in all but name, but the label hasn’t seen an official release for a decade.

Speaking to those on the original *SSX* team, they attribute this decline to the pressure to repeat the formula on tighter schedules. “EA had discovered that it was good at annualising sports games,” says Rechtschaffner. “And they thought that model should fit what we were doing, but I looked towards Nintendo and I said, ‘I think we should bring out a new game every two to three years, and it should depend on when we have a fresh enough game, where it feels like there’s something surprising and new.’ It wasn’t

something that matched [what] the sales and marketing people thought at the time.”

“I think where it ran into difficulty was the enthusiasm about pumping them out,” LaPierre adds. “Repeating the secret sauce was maybe not even as easy as Steve and I thought. And then, as we saw the execution of other games, and even as we worked with other teams trying to execute the *Sled Storms* and other games at other studios, everyone wanted to put their own mark on things, and in a lot of circumstances, they didn’t live up to the same impact.”

Today, the people that defined the EA Sports BIG label are scattered across many different studios. Recently, though, Steven Rechtschaffner and Larry LaPierre have founded a new studio called SuperNatural Games with former EA staff. While it would be naive to assume they’d be working on a sequel to any of the above, it’s still exciting to hear about their plans to work on a new live service project with some of the same people. The legacy of EA Sports BIG lives on. [w](#)

“By the time *SSX 3* came out, it was a corporate beast”

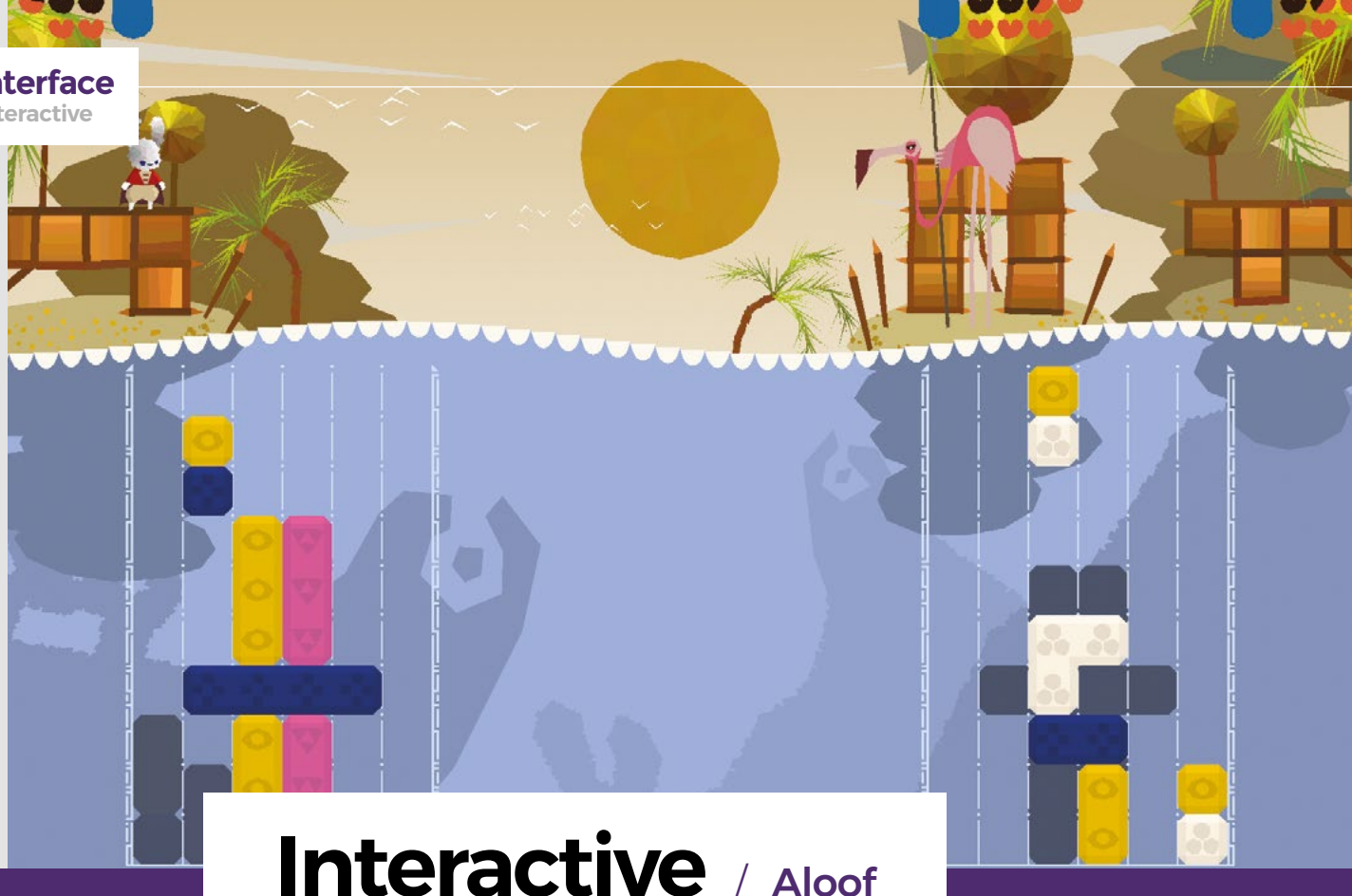
mark on things, and in a lot of circumstances, they didn’t live up to the same impact.”

Today, the people that defined the EA Sports BIG



▲ *SSX Tricky* team Steven Rechtschaffner (top), Larry LaPierre (middle), and lead programmer Jon Spencer (bottom).

◀ Each legend in *NBA Street Vol. 2* had their own unique tricks and shots to unlock for your own create-a-character.



Interactive / Aloof

Joram van Schaik talks us through his match-three puzzler – a game almost a decade in the making

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For Netherlands-based developer Joram van Schaik, much has changed over the past decade. Most obviously, he's become the father of two kids – something that, inevitably, has left him with less spare time to work on *Aloof*, a puzzle game he first started way back in 2011. Far from making development more difficult, though, van Schaik found that his limited time actually helped usher the game through to the final stages. "It forced me into really thinking about what I can and cannot do with my time," he says of balancing parenthood and game dev. "Funnily enough, with less time but better planning, the game progressed way faster. The vast majority of the entire game was made within the last two years."

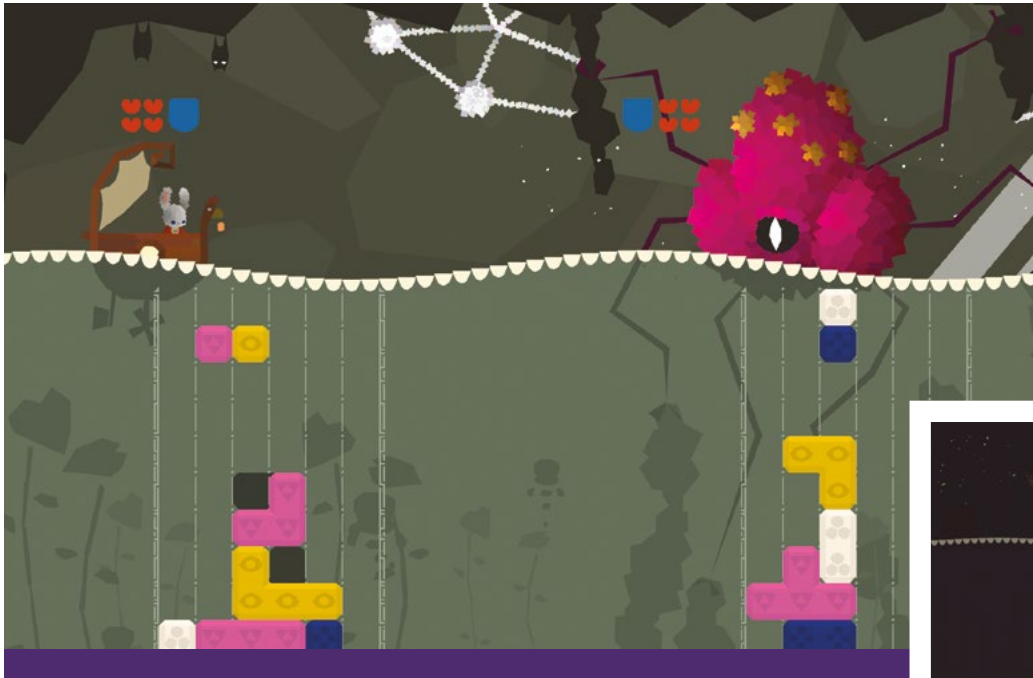
In its early going, *Aloof* began as a fairly straight match-three puzzler in the vein of *Puyo Puyo* – Japanese developer Compile's venerable series that often emerged in the west under different guises, most memorably *Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine*. Gradually, however, and as van Schaik tested out different ideas with his friends, the project began to evolve into something more individual: the aim of the game is to defend your island while defeating your opponent by matching like-coloured tiles and making combos, but there's far more freedom of movement than in your typical game of this ilk. Pieces don't fall

from the top of the screen at an ever-increasing rate, as they do in *Puyo Puyo* – instead, pieces can be moved in any direction, or you can hold onto them and wait until precisely the right moment to position them and unleash a combo attack.

"I wanted to make a game where you really play against an opponent instead of getting defeated by fast-falling pieces," van Schaik explains. "It started with almost the exact gameplay as *Puyo Puyo*, but I knew I wanted this to be its own thing. Some changes seem small, but actually change a lot, like in *Aloof*, when pieces with the same colour are connected, they never disconnect. This makes it possible to make all kinds of weird shapes.

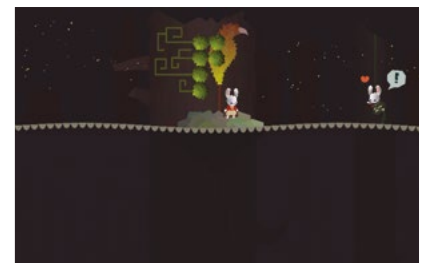
This led to the idea of having to make specific shapes – at first, you could make a plus shape to heal yourself. Later, this turned into the idea of having to create shapes to summon islands. An island can be 'healed' by making its shape again."

There are other rules unique to *Aloof*, too: unlike most puzzlers of this type, your game doesn't end if the player area fills up with pieces. Instead, there's a 'flush' button that lets you remove the screen of unwanted junk. "*Aloof* has multiple win-lose situations," van Schaik says, "but having pieces piled to the top is not one of them. The playing field itself is yours to use however you like. No other player can influence this. *Aloof* has an entire metagame going on where you summon



◀ *Aloof's* rules are only subtly different from other puzzlers, but it still gives the bouts their own unique feel.

▼ "The game's made in Unity," says van Schaik. "I like programming a bit too much, so I use Unity like a framework. I do almost nothing with the IDE, I have zero prefabs, and the game is in one scene."



and defend islands. This is where the interaction with your opponent happens, and adds an extra layer with way more tactical gameplay."

One of the challenges van Schaik faced when making *Aloof* was its AI. At one stage, the computer opponent was so aggressively good that it would immediately annihilate all but the most skilled players. After a bit of head-scratching, van Schaik got around this by dialling down (or 'nerfing') the number of combos the AI player was capable of making in the game's earlier stages. "Before this nerf, the AI would do the

biggest combo it could find," he says. "This resulted in accidental combos of four, which would overwhelm and completely destroy beginners. *Aloof* can

be pretty hard for beginners who don't yet know what all their possibilities are and how to react to their opponent. I realised I could never perfectly balance this. This is why I added an AI-speed slider that can be changed at any time during the campaign."

RAINBOW ISLANDS

Any decent puzzler needs some sort of visual identity, and *Aloof's* is a captivating one: with a few simple shapes, it depicts a gentle fantasy world of wide-eyed animals and leafy islands. To

our surprise, van Schaik tells us that he's "not that good at drawing", so to get around this limitation, he used a mixture of Illustrator and Blender to create his assets using vector graphics. "I wanted vector graphics so the game would scale nicely from 720p up to 4K. To optimise the game and eliminate loading times, I wanted all graphics to be code... All the animations are also real-time deformations of the mesh. A separate thread that runs at 60 fps updates all the animations. These animations are things like walking, blinking eyes, wobbly clouds, waterfalls, rain, and so on."

"It started with almost the exact gameplay as *Puyo Puyo*, but I knew I wanted this to be its own thing"

Converting all these assets into code caused its own problems (see box), but the results are undeniably charming – indeed, *Aloof* is such a polished game, it's easy to forget that it's

the product of one developer, with van Schaik handling everything from the programming to the music ("I haven't played the piano for decades, but with good MIDI software I can draw the notes that I want"). *Aloof* may have been a long time in development, but there's another benefit to it being a solo project. "For certain, figuring out the gameplay [was the biggest challenge,]" says van Schaik. "This took years. But it's a big advantage that this was a hobby for me – I imagine most studios don't have the money to shape an idea for such a long time." 🐰

TOO GRAPHIC

Aloof is a pretty-looking game, but van Schaik says that he wouldn't approach the visuals in the same way again. "Here's how not to do graphics for your game," he tells us. "I've made Illustrator plug-ins (in JavaScript) that can create polygons inside an Illustrator shape or along a line. When I run this plug-in, I can choose how many polygons I want, what shape they are, what direction the light comes from, what the lightest colour is, and so on."

From here, the graphics are saved as SVG files, then converted to C# using another of van Schaik's self-penned tools, called Festoon. This code is then pasted into Unity – the downside being that any changes to the graphics almost certainly mean going back to Illustrator, making the adjustments, and then turning it all back into code again.

"Yes," he concedes. "This is a bad idea."



^ LucasArts gems like *Monkey Island* and *Day of the Tentacle* were creative touchstones for *Lucy Dreaming*.

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Interactive / Lucy Dreaming

A point-and-click adventure with the look of a LucasArts game, but with its humour lying closer to home

From its pixel art to its point-and-click interface, *Lucy Dreaming* looks every inch a LucasArts adventure – but this is a game that literally speaks with a British accent. Title character Lucy is a bright young thing who lives a typical middle-class life in the north of the UK – though there are signs everywhere that things in the family home are ever so slightly askew. Lucy's brother is permanently holed up in his bedroom, and has a faintly sociopathic streak (throws hamsters out the window, hangs Lucy's teddy bear from a noose, that sort of thing). Her mother enjoys shooting various luckless animals as a hobby, as the assorted stuffed heads hanging from the walls attest. Meanwhile, Lucy's father seems to have disengaged from reality altogether, and appears to spend his waking hours squatting on a yoga mat in the living room, meditating to relaxation tapes.

Such is the backdrop for a playfully surreal adventure, which takes place in Lucy's day-to-day reality and deep inside her recurring nightmares. *Lucy Dreaming* is the work of husband-and-wife duo Tom and Emma Hardwidge (full disclosure: Tom Hardwidge is the brother of Ben Hardwidge, editor of Wireframe stablemate Custom PC), and the debut title from their new studio, Tall Story Games. The Hardwidges both come from

creative backgrounds (brilliantly, Emma once worked as a set and prop-maker for TV's *Pingu*) and now run their own digital agency – and it was at their agency that they made their first point-and-click adventure, *Where's my Cloak?*, for a museum in Bath. That project eventually led to *Lucy Dreaming* – a much larger game, but one that shares the same affection for classic LucasArts adventures, and a quintessentially British sense of humour. “The humour is very much a consistent theme in the games,” explains Tom Hardwidge. “We needed to avoid any bad language for *Where's my Cloak?* as that was aimed at younger players, but the manner in which all of our characters observe and comment on the world has become something of a trademark across the games. I grew up watching *Blackadder* and *Monty Python*, and their surreal and sardonic wit has heavily influenced my writing.”

The game's dream setting allows them to move the story between an unpredictable array of settings, from a haunted house to the depths of space, but tying everything together is a classic assortment of puzzles: the playable demo sees Lucy make creative use of a badminton racket in order to make her pillow comfier. “In my opinion, there's no such thing as an obscure puzzle,” Hardwidge says. “People talk about ‘moon logic’,



► Recurring nightmares provide the foundation for *Lucy Dreaming*. We've also just realised its title is a clever pun (lucid dreaming, geddit?).



where the solution to a puzzle simply cannot be worked out by any reasonable means. For me, any level of obscurity is acceptable as long as you include the right hints and signposts along the way. The situations that Lucy finds herself in are, by definition, obscure. There are scenarios, characters, and objects that, out of context, just don't make any sense. As the designer of the puzzles, it's my job to ensure that the player is able to figure it out without resorting to using every item with every other item."

For the game's development, the pixel art assets are created in Photoshop ("It does everything I need in terms of the sprites, animation, and backgrounds"), while the environments are built in Visionaire Studio. "It's a game engine designed specifically for creating 2D and 2.5D point-and-click adventure games," says Hardwidge. "It offers the functionality you'll find in the LucasArts classics, as well as more complex interface options, custom scripting, and shaders to create beautiful, modern adventure games."

With the demo providing a proof of concept, Tall Story Games have turned to Kickstarter

"For me, any level of obscurity is acceptable as long as you include the right hints and signposts"

to get funding for the full game. As with any crowdfunding campaign, there's an element of uncertainty involved, and preparing for it has required a considerable amount of research and planning. "We've read books, examined blogs, chatted to other developers, and done a lot of second-guessing," Hardwidge says. "We think we're ready, but time will tell."

Assuming it all goes well, though, Tall Story has big plans for *Lucy Dreaming*, including a fully-voiced track that runs through the entire game – as Hardwidge points out, there over 1000 lines of dialogue in the demo alone.

And speaking of the demo, readers should look out for a hidden surprise tucked away in its campaign. "It's worth mentioning that, as a prequel, the demo contains completely unique puzzles and no spoilers for the full game," Hardwidge explains. "There's also a competition running until later this year – if you find the hidden Easter egg in the demo, you could win a starring role as an NPC in the full game. It's not easy to find, but there is a logical sequence of events that will lead you to it if you pay close attention."

The demo's available now from lucy-dreaming.com, where you'll also find links to its Kickstarter campaign. 🐾

TEST FLIGHT

"Some of the most useful things to come out of the testing phase are the recommendations," Hardwidge tells us. "Testers might tell us that they were disappointed when they used the Gerbil with the Piranha because it gave them a default response that could have been funnier."

"Equally, they might say something like, 'I was trying to fry an egg on the lightbulb, but it wouldn't let me'. This could be frustrating for a player as, in theory, it might be a valid solution to the puzzle."

"A simple response like, 'I can't, it's an energy-saving bulb', or 'It's not hot enough' reassures the player that they weren't being stupid for trying it, and stems their frustration until they discover the intended solution."

Online Diary

GITTIN' GUD

Ready or not, here they come! It's zombie time, aka *Zombie Army 4: Dead War*

WRITTEN BY IAN 'SHAMBLES' DRANSFIELD

This mishmash of attempts to play one thing or another online and stick with it might not have arrived at any grand conclusions as of yet, but it has taught me – and I hope you, dear reader – one thing: competition isn't my strong point. But it's also shared another slice of fried knowledge-gold with us all: that the world of online gaming is absolutely riddled with examples where you can, would you believe it, *work together*. That wasn't the logical train of thought that brought us to the station of *Zombie Army 4*, mind – it was free on PlayStation Plus.

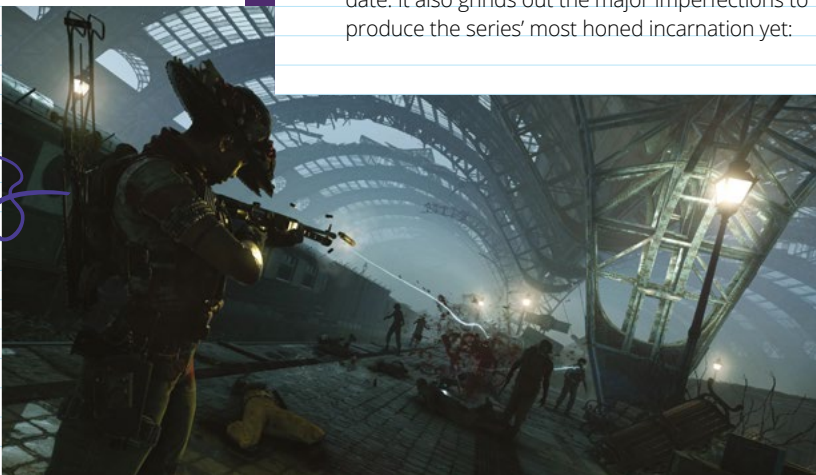
But *ho*, what a hoot. A hoot and, indeed, a holler. Rebellion's fourth spin-off of the *Sniper Elite* series brings Hitler's army of the undead (there's a story, but just ignore it) into its shiniest form to date. It also grinds out the major imperfections to produce the series' most honed incarnation yet:

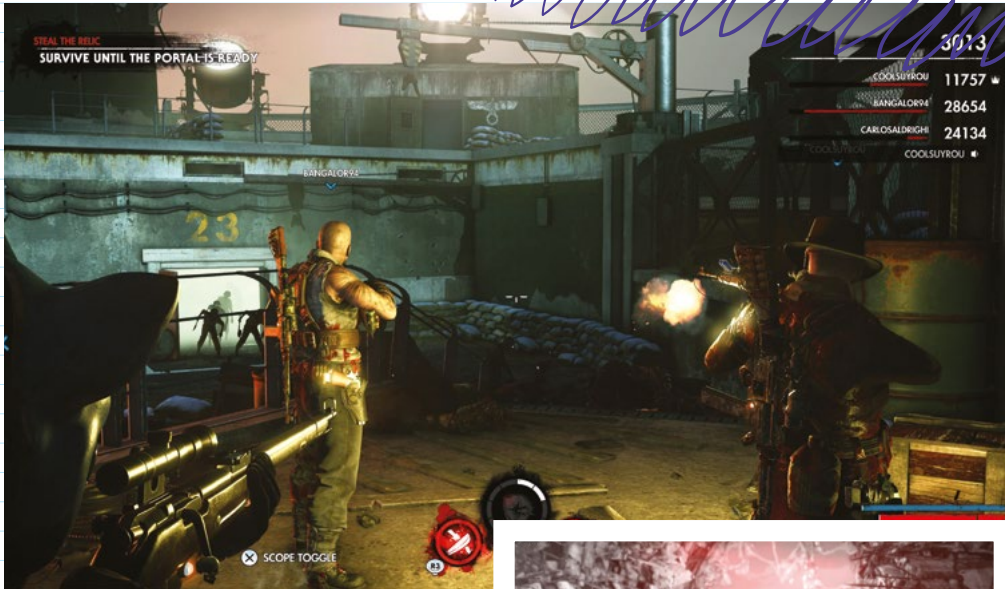
you're a squad of up to four people, and you shoot zombies together. It controls snappily, levels are large, open, and fit to be explored and strategised within, and it absolutely nails the ever-pushed-back nature of a stand-up fight against a never-ending zombie horde.

My time with the game saw a lot being pushed back, but with a different air to it when compared to other games that have adorned these pages. Whereas elsewhere I would see this as failure, here I saw it as a) what's meant to happen, and b) something we as a squad could actually pull ourselves out from, because refer to a). The shambling hordes overwhelm given half a chance, sure, but you can overwhelm them just as swiftly with the cleansing fire of concentrated bullet-blasting. Talk to your teammates, work together, and maybe you'll get out of this without turning into one of the horde you're battling against.

I didn't play a single round of the game with friends – not for these pages, at least. *Zombie Army 4* is infinitely better with people you're freely able to chat to, who don't run the risk of being *internet people*, who can take criticism, and offer joshing feedback with abandon. It also helps to ramp up the tension as a friend screams for help from the other side of the map and you laugh heartily at their plight. That's definitely the way to play the game if you can. If you can't? It's still a lark, so I found. Running in circles around the host who seems to not understand that we all need to converge on one point for the level to progress, accidentally shooting a teammate in

✓ Weapon power-ups shouldn't be overlooked, mainly because they can make lots of zombie heads pop at once.



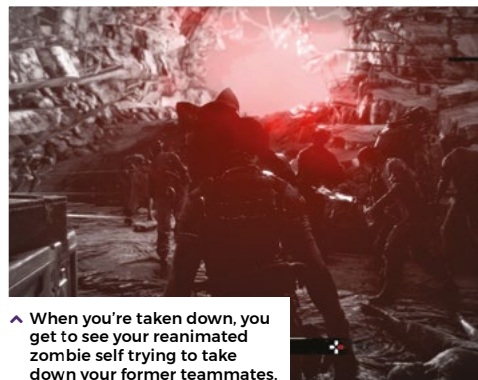


the face and them thinking you did it on purpose because there's no communication, being *absolutely annihilated* score-wise in your foursome – ah, bliss.

It's a coming together of things, the appeal in *Zombie Army 4*. It looks nice *enough* to have that visual oomph you might want from a game. Atmosphere-wise, it's fantastic – a superb pastiche of every B-movie and zombie horror film released, especially in the outrageously fitting soundtrack. Solid shooting mechanics riding on the back of *Sniper Elite 4*, meaning the sniping is phenomenal and the other gunplay is actually bloody good fun too (unlike every other prior *SE* title). And that aforementioned onrushing horde design, where before you know it you are surrounded and overwhelmed – escalatory in the best sense, it always keeps you on your toes, keeps up the pressure, keeps the tension very much alive in a sea of the undead.

Connection issues plagued some days, though I'm not sure what that was down to. And while I never struggled to find a game, I did get booted from a few for unknowable reasons – perhaps they were offended by my cat-like gas mask, who knows? But generally speaking, for such a dark and violent (and silly) game, *Zombie Army 4* was roundly a positive, affirming online experience. Even without much contact between the beautiful strangers in my many squads, there was always the odd "Good shot!"

"Roundly a positive, affirming online experience"



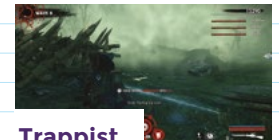
▲ When you're taken down, you get to see your reanimated zombie self trying to take down your former teammates.

or similar when a kill-cam-worthy takedown was achieved. The objective is to survive, but the secondary objective is to try and get the highest score – so I lied, there is some competition here. But it's healthy. It's like Gershwin and Thargoid or whatever they're called from *Lord of the Rings*, competing over who can violently murder the most orcs. You're competing, but it's all for the greater good (said greater good being wholesale murder). It meshes, it's *fun*.

And so I arrived at the simple conclusion that I really liked *Zombie Army 4*, and I will play it again online – hopefully more with friends, but really with anybody if I'm in the mood. It's a grand old way to spend half an hour of your day, and should be celebrated as such.

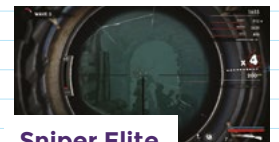
It will not, however, be returning to these pages again, because honestly, it's hard to think of anything to say beyond 'Zombie face go boom ha ha ha'. 🗨️

Shufflin' shooter skills



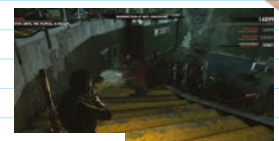
Trappist

Traps aren't just an also-ran element in *Zombie Army 4* – they're key, both in the ones you can place around the maps at will and the fixed positions you shoot to engage. Don't overlook them: they can make a gigantic difference in your favour.



Sniper Elite

It can be tempting to ignore sniping as the horde rushes toward you, given the limited *scope* of vision it offers. But don't, because sniping isn't just useful – it's essential. Especially with explosive and electrical rounds.



Twitch

Watch your teammates when you're downed. OK, so this is generalist online gaming knowledge, but seeing how other players respond to situations you might otherwise flail and fail in is genuinely helpful.

Studio Profile

Strictly Limited Games

Studio co-founder Dennis Mendel chats to us about the growth of his physical publishing house, and preserving video game history

The first thing you need to know about Dennis Mendel is that he's a big video game collector. Wireframe knows this because, when Mendel chats to us over a video call from his office in Stuttgart, Germany, we can see entire shelves of classic games lined up behind him. "Oh yeah, this is one of three rooms full of games," he tells us. "Mega Drive, PC Engine, PC-FX, Virtual Boy... it's

the source – or let's say the inspiration – for many of our products."

Mendel's passion for video games – particularly Japanese ones – is worth noting, because it's what has driven Strictly Limited Games since he co-founded it in 2017. For the past three-and-a-bit years, the firm has specialised in putting out physical releases of both original indie games and updated takes on eighties and nineties classics.

▼ Strictly Limited's first release was SMAC Games' gorgeous isometric shooter, *Tokyo 42*. It established the distinctly Japanese vibe Strictly would soon become known for.





◀ An early game from Digital Illusions, *Ultracore* (originally called *Hardcore*) might have vanished into oblivion without Strictly Limited Games' efforts.



And while Strictly Limited is far from the only company to put out short-run, physical versions of games – there's also Limited Run Games, and the UK's Super Rare Games, to name but two – Strictly's games feel of a piece with one another, since they're either directly from Japan or created by developers inspired by the country's output. This means you'll find the likes of Taito's *Bubble Bobble 4 Friends* and *Darius Cozmic Revelation* sitting alongside *Tokyo 42* and *Velocity 2X* in Strictly Limited's back catalogue. "My focus has always been on Japanese video games," Mendel says. "I mean, the Japanese market brought the games industry back to life after the video game crash [of 1983]. I love Japanese video games, and so we got in touch with many Japanese developers and publishers – that's where we are now. We now have a lot of Japanese titles in our portfolio – some are from independent developers, and some are from more famous companies like Taito or Westone."

"It was just the two of us, so we couldn't do any harm"

GETTING STARTED

Strictly Limited began life in 2017 as a conversation between Mendel and another avid video game collector, Benedict Braitsch. At the time, Mendel and Braitsch were work colleagues at a digital distribution firm in Stuttgart, when the pair talked about their shared love of physical games – and it was here they first thought of starting a publishing company of their own. They took the idea to their CEO, who liked it enough to give what would soon become

Strictly Limited Games the go-ahead. "Benedict and I [began] this project basically like a startup within a company," Mendel tells us. "It was just the two of us, so we couldn't do any harm – it wasn't a big risk. We started with a digital [game], *Tokyo 42*, from a UK publisher. And then every month we released a new title. At first, it was mostly indie games. And of course, we didn't have a name at that time – we were completely new."

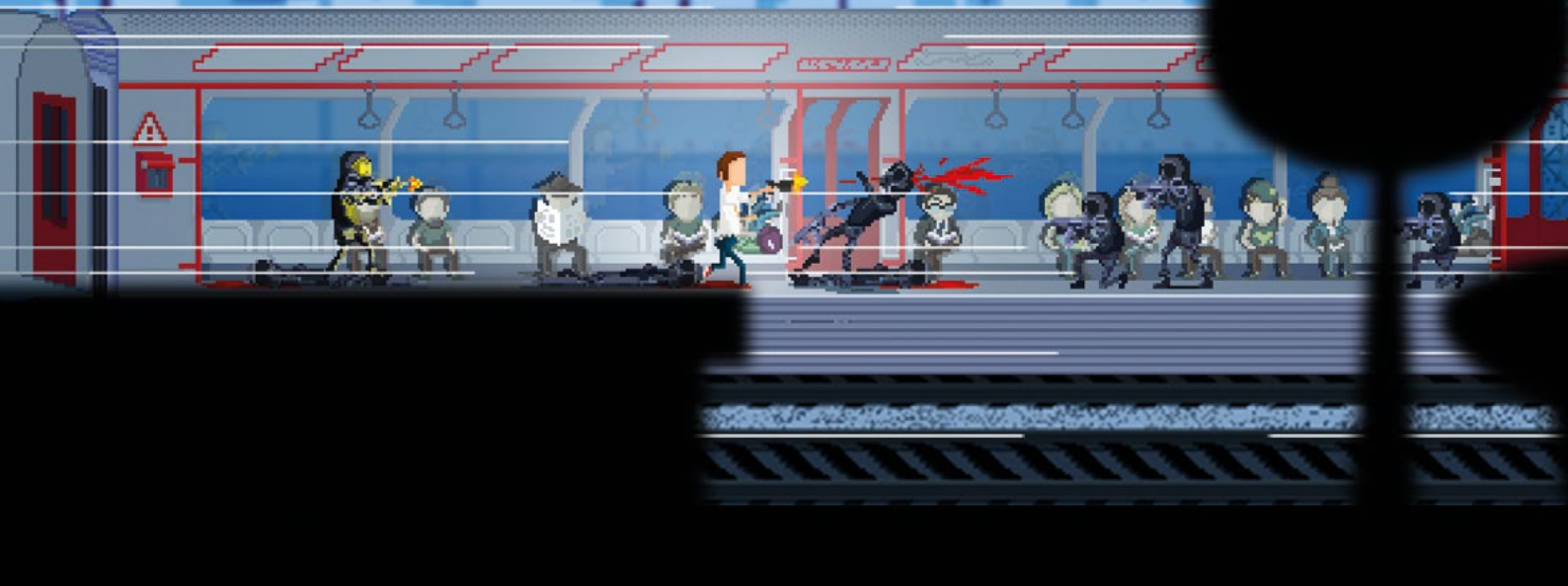
Strictly Limited's first direct contact with the Japanese games industry came ➔

Life before Strictly

"I've basically dedicated my whole life to games, first as a gamer, and then during my studies at university," Mendel tells us. "I was fortunate enough, for every subject, to focus on video games. So for example, in Japanese studies, I was able to focus on video games in Japanese history. For media science, I was able to focus on video games, media effects, and such... And that brought me to the Fraunhofer Institute – if you have heard the name before, they invented the MP3 codec and such. So there, I was still focusing on Japanese game history, or media effects, or video game effects, and one of my most heavy subjects was basically game literacy."

Just when Mendel started his PhD thesis, however, he began to run out of funding. Looking around for work, he found himself at Square Enix's offices in London, where he worked on translating in-game text from English to German.

When Mendel's Japanese wife struggled to get a new visa, however, the couple decided to move back to Germany, where Mendel got a job at a digital distributor in Stuttgart – and it was here, when Mendel met co-founder Benedict Braitsch, that Strictly Limited Games was born.



^ A number of once digital-only indie games have now appeared on disc thanks to Strictly Limited; Gamechuck's hectic action title *Speed Limit* is one of the most recent.

about thanks to Mendel's lingering affection for *Umihara Kawase* – a series of action platformers that began on the SNES in the early nineties, and whose cult following has grown steadily since. “This was our first title where we reached out to a Japanese developer with a game that I really loved,” Mendel explains. “I played it on Super Famicom, and then I had it on the PlayStation and PSP.”

Licensing issues meant that the original *Umihara Kawase* was firmly out of Strictly Limited's reach, but after negotiations with developer Studio Saizensen, they were able to secure a deal to publish a physical version of the multiplayer spin-off, *Umihara Kawase BaZooKa!*. “[Toshinobu] Kondō-san – the CEO of Studio Saizensen and the creator

of *Umihara* – he was so super-helpful,” Mendel recalls. “For us, one important point is that you speak Japanese... I think it's so important to understand your partner in that specific territory. We explained that we would love to bring out *Umihara* in the west as a physical limited release. So he helped us a lot with creating those new masters that needed to be submitted, just to get this physical release out.”

With the release of *Umihara Kawase BaZooKa!* under its belt, Strictly Limited began reaching out to other Japanese companies, which eventually led to a pivotal meeting with Taito at the Tokyo Game Show. “It was around that time where [Taito] announced officially that they were going back to the home console business,” Mendel recalls. “And fortunately, they accepted our meeting invite. We talked about their great heritage, and about the titles they have, and how important it is to bring these titles to a western audience after that long sleep, shall we say.”

It was this meeting with Taito that led to the western releases of *The Ninja Savivors: Return Of The Warriors*, *Bubble Bobble 4 Friends*, and *Darius Cosmic Collection*, while a similar deal with Japanese developer Westone led to Strictly Limited's physical release of *Wonder Boy Returns*. What these releases all have in common is a lavish array of extras, including translated versions of

v More fiery mayhem in Ultracore.





^ With the help of its original developers at Westone, cancelled arcade action game *Clockwork Aquario* is finally getting a release this year.

the Japanese versions' art books that provide a behind-the-scenes look at how the games were conceived. For Mendel, these extras are more than just pretty-looking filler – they're a means of giving fans a perspective on game development that's often overlooked. "When we saw the Japanese version [of the *Bubble Bobble* art book], we said, 'We need to translate this and bring it to a western audience'. Because this is so important for understanding these titles – a lot of people don't know how games get started. It's another thing the industry hasn't done that often so far, which is a pity. I mean, we have a few stars, like Kojima and Miyamoto, but beyond that, it's just a black hole – the games are the stars, but nobody knows who created them."

LIKE CLOCKWORK

More recently, Strictly Limited has also begun reviving games once thought lost to time, beginning with *Ultracore*, a 2D action game developed for the Amiga

and Sega Mega Drive by Digital Illusions (later better known as EA DICE), and continuing with *Clockwork Aquario* – an arcade action-adventure from *Wonder Boy* designer Ryuichi Nishizawa at Westone. Both were cancelled before release in the early 1990s, and left languishing in digital hell until Strictly Limited stepped in. *Clockwork Aquario*,

"The games are stars, but nobody knows who created them"

in particular, acquired an almost mythical status among devotees of Japanese game history; after a couple of field tests in arcades, it was cancelled, and other than one or two pictures in magazines, little evidence of its existence remained. "I knew that it was tested in some arcades," Mendel says. "They put an arcade machine in a video game centre, and tried to find out how people reacted to it. But it was bad timing, just like with *Ultracore*, because 3D games came up, and people were more attracted by [those] or fighting games. So [*Aquario*] got cancelled, even though it was a beautiful game with great gameplay."

Japan's Impact

Although Mendel's first console as a youth was an Intellivision, he soon became fascinated by Japanese games like *Bubble Bobble* and *Rainbow Islands* on the Commodore 64 and Amiga respectively. "With not much hardware power, they created lively and beautiful-looking characters that stand out from the crowd," Mendel replies when we ask him about Japan's impact on the games industry. "They're perfectionists – and they're a visual nation. They have manga, they have anime, and even kanji are very visual. So with not much, they create a lot of beautiful content... After the video game crash, especially in the US, there was Nintendo coming back with the NES, and people fell in love with the *Super Mario* design and with *Zelda's* complex gameplay. At the time, it was so complex that many people didn't understand it – that's how the Nintendo Hotline came about. So they really understood how to make good games, and they had the perfect idea and the perfect way to visualise it."



^ Cute-'em-up *Cotton Reboot* is one of several modern Japanese games to get a western release via Strictly Limited.

German game development

Released in 1990, *Turrican* wasn't developer Manfred Trenz's first game – he'd previously made *The Great Giana Sisters*, a game infamously similar to *Super Mario Bros.*, among other things – but *Turrican*'s strong platformer design and sheer polish helped put Germany on the map at a time when its games industry was still comparatively tiny. "Compared to the UK, Germany was really, really late with supporting developers," Mendel recalls. "There was no Rare Ltd in Germany. Most of the famous big companies started in France and in the UK. Because in Germany, it took ages to even accept Japanese anime and manga... so it's a sort of miracle that a company like Factor 5 [who developed the Amiga version of *Turrican*] rose in Germany. I mean, the only other German company that got such international fame, but much later, was Crytek. Other countries were already funding their developers with funding and such. Now, things are getting better in Germany. Chancellor Merkel opened Gamescom – back when there was still a physical Gamescom. But there's still a long way to go."

Having retrieved the original source code from Westone's archives, the difficult process of finishing the game then began. "I was actually surprised that it wasn't as finished as I'd hoped," remembers Mendel. "But maybe this was because the source code was lying around for so many years – maybe it got corrupted somehow, because it was missing quite a few graphics... At that point, it was a big risk, because you put a lot of effort into something and you didn't know how it [would] turn out. So we got the source code, and we put a lot of effort into getting it to run. And then after a few weeks, when I got the first working video of the game, I was completely flushed – I think I really had to cry. It was a big moment for me, because it's a game that we were hoping would be great."

For Mendel, preserving games like *Ultracore* and *Clockwork Aquario* is important work: he draws parallels between video games – a medium in its relative infancy – and cinema in the early

20th century, where hundreds of movies were lost due to a lack of preservation.

"It's important that we're not just another publisher, copying what others do, but going [the] extra mile and doing something different," he says. "And one of the things we wanted to do was give something back to the community by seeking out titles like *Hardcore* or *Aquario*... we used the money that we earned to back some history. And it's a bit selfish as well – I'd love to be able to say this is only about the history of games and game preservation, but of

course, it's also about me, because I love these games, and I want them back."

The growth of Strictly Limited has more recently led to the founding of ININ Games – a separate, retail arm of the company devoted to putting out wider releases. As Strictly Limited's name implies, its original aim was to publish short print runs of niche games; by setting up ININ, Mendel says, they're able to push games to a wider audience – an example he cites is *Turrican*, a

**"It's also about me...
I love these games, and
I want them back"**



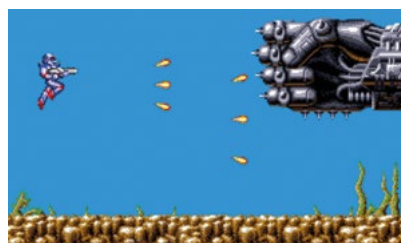
nineties series that was a hit in Europe, but less successful in the United States and Japan. “[We’re trying] to reach out to a broader audience with our sister company, ININ,” he says. “Because, for example, if you want a sequel to *Turrican*, we first need to spread the word about the history of *Turrican* and the quality of those earlier games. And if we’re successful in that, then we can talk about a sequel.”

FUTURE OF PHYSICAL

As Mendel notes, the industry’s gradual move towards digital-only releases might imply that the days of physical games in boxes are drawing to a close, but he says that while console manufacturers have released driveless systems like the PSP Go or Xbox Series S, it’s the hardware capable of playing physical media that frequently sell out more quickly. Besides, Mendel argues, owning physical games is very different from a digital game on a hard drive, which is essentially a licence that could theoretically be withdrawn at any time. “*OutRun* vanished from Steam and other stores; *After Burner* vanished [too],” Mendel points out. “It’s logical, because [Sega] couldn’t get the licences for these cars and airplanes forever. But these

games are so great. I bought them for my Xbox 360, but if my hard disk dies, or if Microsoft shuts down Xbox Live, then that’s it. This is really a terrible thing, and so many people aren’t aware of it yet... [But with physical games], you have those titles on your shelf. You can give them to friends. They make a nice present. A download code is completely different. Having these games in your digital library is super-convenient, but you don’t really have the same attachment to them.”

Here, Mendel motions to the colourful array of game boxes lined up behind him. “When I look at my shelf, taking out these packages, looking at the manual [and] the design, I get the impression that this is something important, something of worth,” he says, enthusiastically. “Whereas those downloads – it’s just an icon, nothing else.”



▲ Taito returned to its eighties back catalogue in 2019 with the surprisingly great *Bubble Bobble 4 Friends*.



▲ Although available in more conventional retail boxes, Strictly Limited’s games also commonly come as lavish collector’s editions, like *Darius Gozmic Collection*.

◀ A 21st-century *Turrican* sequel? Mendel hints that it could happen if enough people buy *Turrican Anthology* volumes one and two.

Phones on Computers



STEVE MCNEIL

Steve isn't making the most of his RTX card. But he's happy.

"I swear this isn't an ad. I wish it was"

► **Crash Bandicoot: On The Run!** – now playable on your desktop PC.

I've never been more certain that one of my columns is going to make people think I've lost it...

At home, I'm lucky enough to have a very nice gaming PC with one of those snazzy ray tracing thingamajigs. I've categorically not been making the most of it as, over the past few weeks, I've almost exclusively been playing Android games on it. *Wait, don't go!*

If you're not familiar with the emulator, BlueStacks, which I imagine many aren't, it's a Windows-based application that, once you've faffed around a bit with Hardware-Assisted Virtualization settings*, lets you sign in to your Google Play account to access all the games you've bought over the years on your phone, as well as the Play Store itself should you want to grab some new titles.

It's endlessly customisable in terms of controls so, whether the title you want to play suits keyboard, mouse, or even wireless controller, it's really simple to get set up for each game. In fact, the emulator seems to automatically recognise a game and apply a solution right off the bat without you having to do anything. It even lets you set up macros for repetitive tasks you might do in more complex menu-driven games, should that be the sort of thing you're into. I didn't know it was the sort of thing I was into, but it turns out it is, and I've been wasting my life.

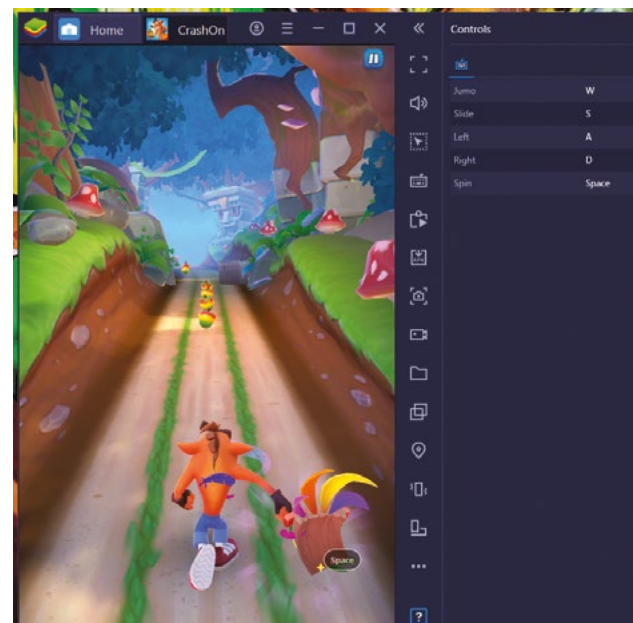
Of course, many games available on smartphones are ad-filled, free-to-play nightmares, or touchscreen adaptations of games you can already play on PC or console more comfortably. As a result, you might wonder why on earth anyone would bother but, as a result, I can now play titles like *Super Mario Run*, *Crash Bandicoot: On The Run!*, and other games that don't have anything to do with running using a gamepad, on my PC, which would otherwise be unavailable to me on a traditional gaming setup.

My favourite so far has been *South Park: Phone Destroyer* – an RTS/deckbuilder hybrid which, as a big fan of other *South Park* games *The Stick of Truth* and *The Fractured but Whole*, has essentially given me a third title that scratches the same itch, without having to squint at a tiny screen.

BlueStacks is great for other stuff, too. It essentially gives me PC access to any of my favourite apps, should it be more convenient for me to access them from my desktop, and in some instances, the mobile implementations are superior to what you can get on PC. The big one for me in this regard is *Marvel Unlimited* – the Android app is much more intuitive and pleasurable to navigate than the in-browser version on PC.

I swear this isn't an ad. I wish it was. I've just bought a load of kitchen appliances on a credit card and I'd be glad of the cash. 🤖

** I'll level with you, still not sure what that is, but there's some good step-by-step guides online to get you set up.*



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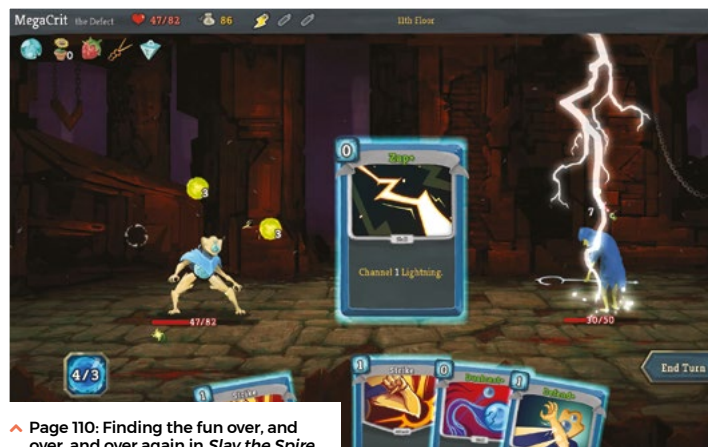
OUR SCORES

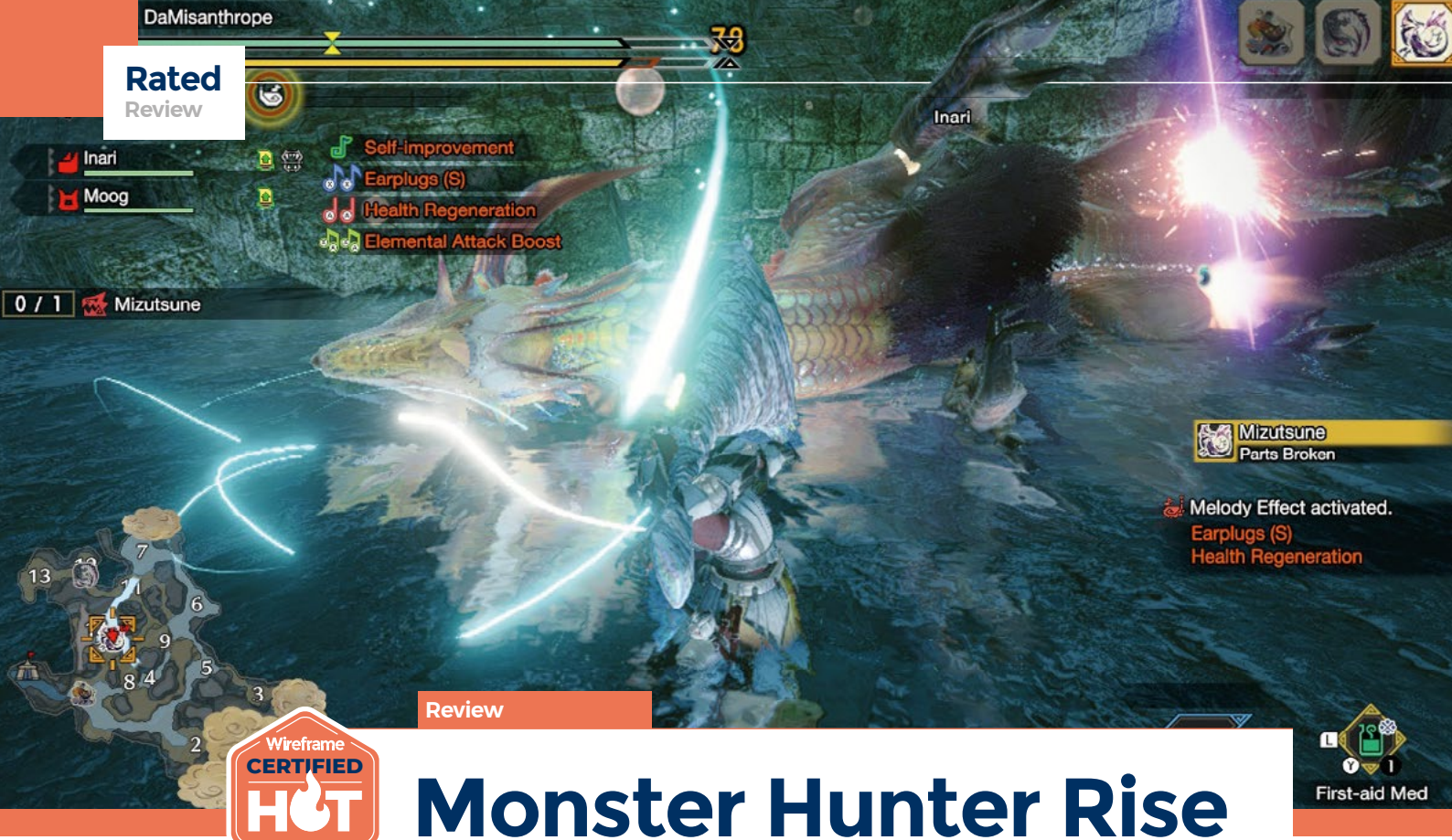
- 1-9**
Trash. Unplayable; a broken mess.
- 10-19**
A truly bad game, though not necessarily utterly broken.
- 20-29**
Still awful, but at a push could be fun for two minutes.
- 30-39**
Might have a redeeming feature, but otherwise very poor.
- 40-49**
Adds in more redeeming features, but still not worth your time.
- 50-59**
Average. Decent at best. 'Just about OK'.
- 60-69**
Held back by glitches, bugs, or a lack of originality, but can be good fun.
- 70-79**
A very good game, but one lacking spit and polish or uniqueness.
- 80-89**
Brilliant. Fabulous fun. Everyone should at least try it.
- 90-99**
Cutting edge, original, unique, and/or pushes the medium forward.
- 100**
Never say never, eh?



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- 108. **Now playing**
Endlessly card-battling up a certain Spire, and the glorious strangeness of Wattam





Review



Monster Hunter Rise

Capcom's gargantuan series reaches new heights

Info

GENRE
Action RPG

FORMAT
Switch (tested)

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Alan Wen

Monster Hunter Rise is an apt title given the game's greater verticality in exploration and traversal, as well as a theme taking inspiration from the Land of the Rising Sun itself. Yet it would be equally appropriate had Capcom chosen to call it *Monster Hunter Turbo*.

Although the series' reputation is assured, veterans will know that *Monster Hunter* has traditionally involved a lot of, for lack of a better word, faff. Quests still give you a maximum of 50 minutes to complete, but players who know what they're doing will be able to breeze through a hunt in about ten minutes. It's not simply a case of *Rise* being an easier game, but rather all the ways the experience has been streamlined

to get you into the hunt quicker. These quality-of-life changes were already evident in *Monster Hunter: World*, which became the series' first global success, but *Rise* doubles down on the approach. You don't even have to track monsters anymore, they're just marked on the map – first as a question mark, but then as an icon in subsequent encounters. Traversal is also sped up thanks to the introduction of rideable dog companion Palamutes (in single-player, you don't need to compete with your regular feline Palicoes as you can opt to take one of each with you), which makes catching up to monsters a cinch. Better yet, you can ride them while still being able to sharpen your weapon or gather materials in the wild, along with other enquickened activities like mining (ore is now in bountiful supply).

The most transformative highlight of all is the Wirebugs. You'll actually find plenty of other life that can grant buffs, but these insects produce iron silk threads, which means you can use them to grapple the air, swinging up and around, and even for climbing up virtually any wall or cliff face, like *Breath of the Wild*, while secrets are hidden around each area to make the exploration worth your while. It also means almost every weapon has an aerial attack instead of just the Insect Glaive, though these Wirebugs also allow you to unleash new Silkbind Attacks that have generous enough cooldowns to make them regularly



➤ Despite the lack of voice chat, communication is clear thanks to hunters' new voice cues, as well as preset messages and stickers that auto-translate.



> Vegetarians will be pleased that meat's off the table, with pre-hunt buffs coming from mixing and matching dango. The accompanying jingle is also wonderful.

HIGHLIGHT

A *Monster Hunter* tower defence mode is something I never knew I wanted, and that's precisely what you get with Rampage Quests. Through two or three rounds, you'll build ballistas, cannons, and artillery to repel hordes of monsters intent on storming Kamura Village. The escalating chaos is brilliantly frenetic, even more so when you dive into the scrum with Wyvern Riding. It's remarkable seeing four hunters taking on five or six beasts on-screen at once while the Switch performance never falters.

viable tactics. With the ability to unlock and switch other skills to fit your playstyle, it makes each of the game's 14 weapon types fresh once more. A few are even easier to use now, such as the Hunting Horn, on which you no longer need to memorise complex notes to perform its buff-giving melodies – and given that forging weapons doesn't require nearly as many materials as past games, again cutting down the grind, maiming multiple weapon types feels considerably more compelling.

Long-time hunters may complain that hunts are too easy, especially the single-player Village Quests where even flagship monster Magnamalo can feel like a cakewalk, although this area feels more purposely designed to onboard new players before the action ramps up with the multiplayer-focused Hub Quests, which are nonetheless still viable for solo play thanks to dynamic difficulty scaling. Of course, it's not really *Monster Hunter* without co-op, and it's incredible just how smoothly online works in *Rise*. Not just for a Switch title but even compared to *World*, whether you're joining the lobby of a friend or a hunter you sent a 'mutual like', or just letting anyone drop into your hunt mid-quest.

At launch, there may not be a need to painstakingly grind for the best gear to survive against the most formidable bestiary – even if that's what compels hardcore players to put in hundreds of hours in the long run. But *Rise*

makes the game so much more accessible to newcomers, making it feasible to pick up the Switch for a quick hunt. Besides, it's hard to complain when all the new tools just make combat feel so much more fun and fluid than it's ever been, with a solid frame rate even in intense multiplayer sessions that feels smoother than its supposed 30 fps. It's a solid foundation to raise the challenge in the endgame post-launch: the first update will have gone live by the time you read this.

Rise isn't just a better game than the already excellent *World*, with

the potential to rise to further greatness with future updates, it's also filled with more of the series' trademark charm. It's not just down to its Japanese theme, from the evergreen cherry blossoms of Kamura Village to the new yokai-inspired monsters like Aknosom and Goss Harag, but also in the unfiltered variety of weapon and armour designs – just a couple of highlights include the Hunting Horn, where one looks like a mariachi's colourful guitar, while the Khezu Horn looks every bit as gross (yet also rather brilliant) as the dreadful monster you'll be carving parts from in order to forge it. Last year, Switch players were spending days building their dream deserted island with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. For those itching for some action, *Monster Hunter Rise's* insatiable loop makes it the perfect desert island game. 🍷

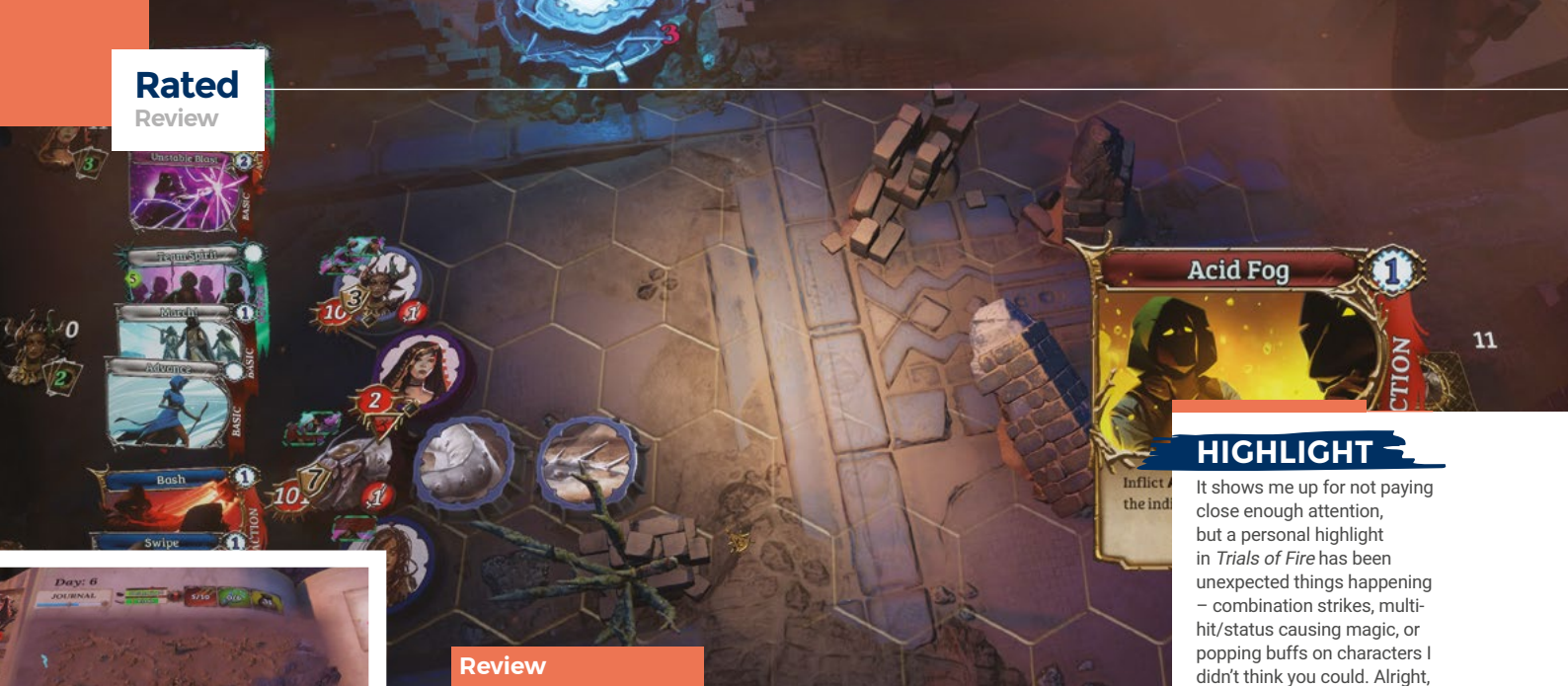
“New tools make the combat feel so much more fun and fluid”

VERDICT

More fun, action-packed, and accessible than ever, *Monster Hunter Rise* raises the bar on what the Switch is capable of, with visuals, netcode, and personality that's truly world-beating.

92%

Rated Review



Review

HIGHLIGHT

It shows me up for not paying close enough attention, but a personal highlight in *Trials of Fire* has been unexpected things happening – combination strikes, multi-hit/status causing magic, or popping buffs on characters I didn't think you could. Alright, so it's just an advert for me not reading instructions, but it's constantly rewarding to see the game cater for and respond to your playstyle.

Trials of Fire

Carrying a card for this card-carrier

Initially a bit confusing, the pages of your many adventure do-overs soon become second nature.

Info

GENRE

Spire slayer

FORMAT

PC (tested) / PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER

Whatboy Games

PUBLISHER

Whatboy Games

PRICE

£12.39

RELEASE

Out now

REVIEWED BY

Ian Dransfield

VERDICT

Smart, deep, and at times unrelentingly difficult, *Trials of Fire* takes greatness from elsewhere and crafts its own distinctive brilliance.

84%

Trials of Fire is like XCOM. Your team moves on an action point-like basis, positioning matters, and the terrain has to be taken into account.

Oh, and it's really hard if you're not thinking about what you're doing. *Trials of Fire* is like *Slay the Spire*. You play a run, upgrade your team to superpowered demigods, win (or, more likely, lose), then start all over again, having a hoot the entire time. *Trials of Fire* is like *Dragon Age* slathered with a post-apocalypse. Dark fantasy, gritty situations, and hard decisions to be made along the way. *Trials of Fire* is also, absolutely and completely, its own thing.

There are hints and nods in the direction of games you've played before, sure – and that's a help, because it can give a bit of grounding in a game that can overwhelm initially. *That's a lot of text*. But looking past my repeated caws of 'It's like *Slay the Spire!*', you see a debut effort from UK studio Whatboy Games that oozes a quiet confidence, but not in a disgusting way like I made that sound. It drops you in there: here's the setting (post-apocalyptic fantasy), here's what you have to do (depends which mode you play, but generally get to a place), and here are all the obstacles in your way (anything from rat-soldiers to giant cave worms). You crack on. You fail repeatedly. But you keep on cracking on.

Battles take place on a hex grid, tokens representing your party and your opposition and cards distributed between your characters. Willpower is required to play cards, which can be earned both through playing certain cards, or by recycling (discarding) cards from your hand.

You can move about the battlefield if you have the willpower (or card) to do so, you can attack with other cards, you can buff and debuff with other cards still. That's your classic card-battling, but it's folly to ignore that battlefield – positioning, distance, line of sight, environmental effects: it all matters at one point or another.

Surrounding an enemy can be important to stop them escaping to hit powerful ranged attacks. Hiding around a corner to avoid a spell might be the difference between victory and starting (yet another) run. Forgetting that big red circle means 'lightning will strike here' can prove a sincere source of embarrassment for some otherwise heroic reviewers. There's a lot going on.

But with so much depth – the tactics of movement combined with the strategy of playing your cards, while also factoring in the cards and moves made by opponents – there's also a hell of a lot of fun to be had here. *Trials of Fire* is almost sandbox-like in its approach to battling, with a level of freedom in your buffing, opening up broader avenues of attack, and the ability to rewind/take back certain moves allowing for little (and some bigger) mistakes to be rectified. It's fair, and transparent, and oh so very difficult at times. And rewarding.

Backed up by a party-building RPG system and a procedurally generated overworld to explore, there's a lot to be had in what first seems to be a rather straightforward package. *Trials of Fire* is a fine example of a game that's been honed to quite a degree thanks to an extended Early Access period, and it's paid off handsomely. 🍷



Review

Pile Up! Box by Box

A new breed of puzzle-platformer unfolds

It's about time we got a game that makes a star out of a humble cardboard box. Sure, we've seen Solid Snake use a box to sneak up on enemies in *Metal Gear Solid*. We've awkwardly shifted them around in *Moving Out*. Boxes pop up in games, alright, but seldom in a leading role. Thank heavens, then, that 3D puzzle-platformer *Pile Up! Box by Box* finally does just that.

Set in a vibrant world where everything happens to be made out of cardboard or paper, it's your job as a sentient box to aid the land's inhabitants by exploring levels and completing several open-ended puzzles. Thinking through these scenarios creatively is key, therefore, especially should you choose to play *Pile Up!* in full four-player co-op. It's here where communication and working together is just as essential as the act of pushing, jumping, and stacking, as some of the boxes you'd otherwise be able to manoeuvre alone in single-player are suddenly replaced by your friends.

Platforming obstacles appear simple at first, with most requiring you to, say, stack up a set number of boxes to form a staircase or use them as a counterweight needed to unlock a door. Don't be fooled by the vibrant colour palette and kid-centric sensibilities, though; *Pile Up!*'s level of challenge swiftly increases in each hub world's later stages as more special box types are slowly introduced. One minute you'll be using a rocket

box to glide from one side of the screen to the other, while the next, you're zipping essential items towards you using the tongue of a box frog. Such inventive ideas may briefly fool you into thinking you're playing a Nintendo title were it not for the slight lack of polish.

While *Pile Up!*'s puzzles do well in making you think outside the box (sorry!), there was the odd occasion where I became stuck on a stage due to an unintended technical hiccup. Be it a platform not moving at the right speed (if at all) or a door not opening correctly, it can be frustrating to not know whether the situation before you is

as tricky as intended or a rogue glitch has infiltrated this carefully constructed setup. Luckily, these brief moments don't distract from the wider sense of challenge

or charm permeating most of the game, even if the 'reset room' menu option indicates that such away instances are somewhat expected. Being too creative sometimes comes at a price, sadly.

Pile Up! Box by Box is co-operative bliss for players of all ages, serving as a whimsical and violence-free alternative to most other 3D platformers that tend to occupy a similar space. Working together as a foursome, either in the main adventure or during the handful of arcade minigames like *Basketball* and *Tic Pile Toe*, never ceases to be fun. There may be glitches, and it can be over all too quickly, but overall, this a solid puzzle-filled package well worth unboxing. 🎮

"It's about time we got a game that makes a star out of a box"

HIGHLIGHT

Encouraging you to seek out hidden collectables and explore levels to their absolute fullest is *Pile Up!*'s suite of unlockable alternative skins. From a traditional TV set to a tasty sushi roll, spend cubes at the hub world store in between levels to outfit your cardboard box however you'd like.

Info

GENRE
Puzzle-platformer

FORMAT
PC

DEVELOPER
Seed By Seed

PUBLISHER
HandyGames

PRICE
£12.99

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Aaron Potter

VERDICT

Pile Up! Box by Box delivers a fun and chaotic time for both teams and solo players craving cute co-operative platforming.

77%

HIGHLIGHT

Each driver on the roster is appealing and charming. Even if you take away their abilities in the arena, it's easy to find someone to love, whether it's Ultimo Barricado, the lucha libre; the Latina wolf-wearing Lupita; Fuego, with his tattoos and gas mask; or Boxtop, who's basically a man wearing a cardboard box on his head.

Review

Destruction AllStars

A sumptuous sports car or a clapped-out old banger? More a Subaru Impreza with a 'Baby on Board' sign

▲ The glitter, the carnage, the pulsing lights. *Destruction AllStars* is a treat to watch.

Info

GENRE
Action racer

FORMAT
PS5

DEVELOPER
Lucid Games Ltd

PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive Entertainment

PRICE
£17.99

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Daniel Lipscombe

VERDICT

This destructive racer revs, growls, and performs, but to a mostly empty arena.

64%

By the time you read this, *Destruction AllStars* will have been out for a while. It will have been picked apart and played by many. Which is good.

The thing about these multiplayer service games is that they're ever-evolving. If I were to have reviewed this PlayStation 5 exclusive in the first few days of release, I would have said '*Destruction AllStars* is a delightful, crunching cacophony of action, featuring a wonderful cast of drivers'. Admittedly, these words still apply, but given we're several weeks from the initial launch, it's safe to say this ode to *Destruction Derby* needs to do a little more before it could be considered a 'must-play'.

The brief is simple: drive around an arena and smash up your opponents, hopefully earning enough points to be declared the winner. This happens over a variety of game modes which emulate stalwarts of multiplayer games like King of the Hill and Team Deathmatch. That this isn't a 'proper' driving game will appeal to arcade racing fans: it's less 'hitting the apex' and more 'hit all the other cars'. There are controls on the right analogue stick which shunt your car sideways or zoom it forwards for a burst of speed. Deft use of these will have you zipping everywhere, scoring hits on others which mete out a numerical score – in one mode you must bank these points yourself at the right moment, or possibly lose them all in a *Days of Thunder*-style pile-up. And if your car's totalled, the action carries on with your driver scrambling around on foot, hopping into

random cars, or using parkour jumps to build energy, which fills an ability meter.

Choosing a driver from the cast is tricky, as each of them come with different skills and their own signature cars, which also have abilities, from spewing fire to turning invisible. It's a diverse cast, and you'll soon have a favourite.

If this all sounds like a lot, that's because it is. There is so much happening, and yet it also feels empty somehow. The arenas are too big, meaning some events see you driving around aimlessly, trying to find someone to bash; the events themselves host different rules but are still just 'drive around and smash cars'. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but there needs to be more to it – more modes, more reasons to play.

Perhaps the biggest issue here is the exclusivity to PS5. With no other platforms to cross-play and no PS4 support, a game which would be ideal with a bunch of mates can feel too solitary. If you're the only one in your friendship group who could get the console, then you're reliant on playing with randoms. And at the time of writing, there were no penalties for those randoms hopping out of the game if they're losing.

What we're left with is a game that should be a huge success, but is let down by a handful of decisions which indirectly harm the experience. Sure, the game looks incredible: tiny bits of metal fly off damaged vehicles, and the handling feels great, but all this bravado and spectacle needs a crowd. And right now, there just aren't enough reasons to keep playing for long. 🎮

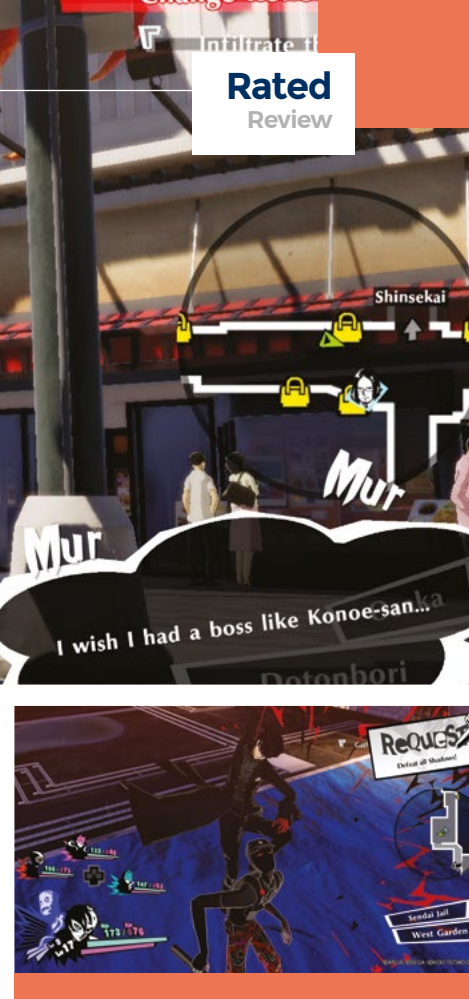
HIGHLIGHT

Strikers is enjoyable on its own, but *Persona 5* fans will definitely feel strong pangs of nostalgia the moment you step back into Leblanc and see old friendly faces (or hear familiar music cues), complete with delightful silly banter. New cast members also earn their keep, notably the inquisitive Sophia, an AI personified as a pigtailed girl who wields yo-yos as deadly weapons.

Review



▲ *Yakuza* fans will likely recognise this part of Osaka. It's just one of a few other real Japanese city centres *Strikers* covers.



Persona 5 Strikers

The Phantom Thieves strike back for summer shenanigans

Ironically for a series that began as a spin-off, *Persona* itself is no stranger to spin-offs. Yet start up *Persona 5 Strikers*, with its irresistibly funky title screen number and stylish graphic design even in its menu screens, and you'd be forgiven for believing you're playing a mainline *Persona* game.

Taking place a few months after the events of *Persona 5*, the Phantom Thieves are back in action when they're framed for a new change-of-heart epidemic sweeping Japan. No longer just stealing hearts of Tokyo's corrupt adults, this sets up the perfect opportunity for a road trip, just in time for summer vacation. For those of us who'd been planning a holiday to Japan before the pandemic scuppered all that, this almost feels like the next best thing, especially with all the emphasis on local cuisines.

Visually and structurally, this feels every bit like a direct sequel, from exploring dungeons to fusing personas. No doubt this is because this is still an RPG from P Studio, with Omega Force – the team behind other licensed Musou spin-offs like *Hyrule Warriors* and *Fire Emblem Warriors* – on board as co-developers, lending their expertise for the game's switch to real-time action.

You might even call this the least Musou game ever, since it's neither a copy/paste of the genre's 1 v 1000 formula nor a cynical mashup of past *Persona* games for the sake of fanservice. Instead, battles have a start-stop structure as you attack

one field enemy to trigger a spawn of enemies which then sets up a mini-arena. But instead of mashing out your Phantom Thieves' combos, it's far better to use persona skills, pausing the action as you select the right skill, similar to the combat system in *Final Fantasy VII Remake*.

However, this is somewhat detrimental to the hack-and-slash pleasures of a Musou, though critics of the genre's shallow nature probably won't mind. Even then, over-reliance on persona skills, especially with the spongy bosses, will have you quickly burning through your SP gauge, while recovery items are both rare and miserly in effect. Adding to the annoyance is the inability to swap out party members mid-battle, so if you'd left someone with the right persona skill in reserve, you'll have to wait until you've been wiped out before you're given the prompt to retry and rearrange your tactics – by which time you might opt to turn down the difficulty instead.

It's by no means a flawless transition, yet *Persona* fans in it for the characters and story will nonetheless find much to love. Even if certain plot beats feel like a retread, there's a softer touch where the antagonists are portrayed as victims not beyond redemption, while the premise of a helpful AI and social media app being abused to brainwash the masses feels awfully timely. Now if only the Phantom Thieves can change the hearts of whoever's in charge at Sega and Atlus to bring *Persona 5* to the other platforms, too... 🙏

Info

GENRE
Action RPG

FORMAT
PS4 (tested) / PC / Switch

DEVELOPER
Atlus (P Studio), Koei Tecmo (Omega Force)

PUBLISHER
SEGA

PRICE
£54.99

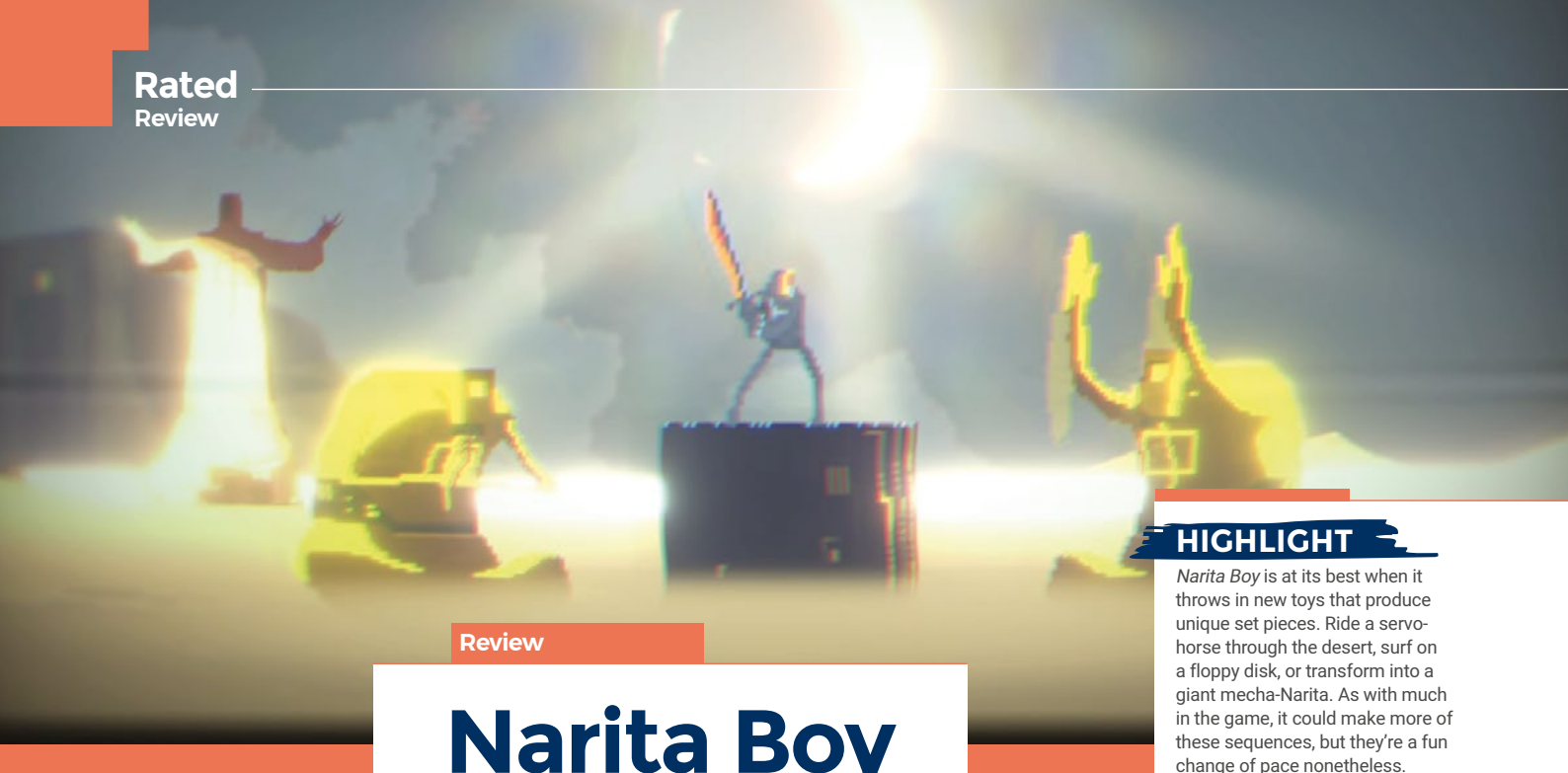
RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Alan Wen

VERDICT

A terrific summer reunion for *Persona 5* fans, though Musou fans will be left wanting.

74%



Review

Narita Boy

HIGHLIGHT

Narita Boy is at its best when it throws in new toys that produce unique set pieces. Ride a servo-horse through the desert, surf on a floppy disk, or transform into a giant mecha-Narita. As with much in the game, it could make more of these sequences, but they're a fun change of pace nonetheless.

Saving the world – 16 bits at a time

Info

GENRE
Platform/action
FORMAT
PS4 (tested) / PC /
Mac / Switch /
Xbox One
DEVELOPER
Studio Koba
PUBLISHER
Team17
PRICE
£19.99
RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Jon Bailes

VERDICT

An inoffensive adventure made almost very special by mesmerising pixel art and music.

66%

Is it a back-handed compliment to say your favourite part of a game is its title music? In the case of *Narita Boy*'s electro-funk opener, it shouldn't be taken as such. There's plenty to like here. The audio-visual work is stunning throughout, and while its 2D action isn't quite so rich, it does hit some memorable notes. But that music is really catchy. When you find yourself loitering on the title screen instead of pressing start, you have to give credit where it's due.

It sets a tone for what's to come, too, because often in *Narita Boy*, it's worth stopping what you're doing to listen or look around. The soundtrack is a vitalising force, powering up with moody synths, then detouring into chill-out tunes, playful organ melodies, and disco grooves. It's matched by exquisite pixel art, evocatively retro, like *Another World* meets *TRON*, but modern in quality. The beauty is in the drawing but also in the contrast of glare and gloom. Patches of cold shadow and searing heat from partially eclipsed suns, heightened by a dusty CRT overlay, projecting washed blacks and mirage blur.

It's an intense rendering of surreal virtuality, for a quest set inside the guts of an 1980s computer where algorithms form into characters and kingdoms. The plot it invokes is jumbled with new-age cyber-jargon, as you battle monstrous strands of corrupt code and restore the memories of an enigmatic creator. Hard to absorb, easy to forget. But with it comes endless possibility, a hallucinatory world of cubic sheep and psychedelic prayer, giant robotic carp, and silicon forests.

If only the game underneath had quite the same energy. The sword-based combat comes close,

at least, with a flexible moveset that grows as you progress, and a sizeable array of uniquely testing digital fiends that gang up in increasingly eclectic combinations. While control is a little twitchy, and the visual blur subtracts a little precision from your flow, most scuffles are pleasingly tactical, especially against moderately tricky bosses.

When you aren't fighting, however, the freeform layouts have you running around a lot, doing a bit of this and that – a little platform work, chatting with NPCs – but nothing of much substance. Like a rambling stoner, *Narita Boy* hits on moments of joyous inspiration then lapses for periods into inconsequential mumbblings. Some of its great musical and graphical feats feel unloved because so little happens around them. There are literally points where you find a key to a door, and behind that door is a single NPC, who hands you a key to another door. As much as this meandering melds with the trippy complexity of your digital quest, it feels bitty and, well, half-baked.

Still, there are worse crimes, and *Narita Boy*'s aesthetic splendour is hard to repress for long. Touring its locations is worthwhile regardless of vague design. Come for the combat. Stay for the visual feast. Leave humming that theme tune. 🎧

✓ The most interesting part of the story is walking through the memories of the creator.



HIGHLIGHT

While lost during the fourth night's heavy downpour, I stumbled across a solitary glowing tree somewhere in the Silent Peaks. *Titan Chaser* peppers its more remote locations with similar little landmarks. Unattached to any particular objective, these are useful reminders that the environment doesn't need to serve a utilitarian purpose to warrant our attention.

Review

Titan Chaser

Lockdown reveries

A year ago, as *Titan Chaser* was rolling out on Early Access and our pandemic ordeal just started, who could have predicted that a game about driving around a deserted countryside in search of wandering behemoths while the rest of the world remains under lockdown for unspecified reasons would, by the time of its full release, tap into a near-universal yearning? Attuned to our recent woes and guided by obvious ecological preoccupations, Stas Shostak's pensive walking simulator rents you a room at a roadside motel, hands you the keys to a barely running jalopy, and tasks your nameless heroine with shooing those stray giants away from the critical infrastructure that keeps nearby Bright City running.

It's a menial job, as the quality of your accommodation and transportation unambiguously suggest, but scattered monologues leave little doubt as to the privilege of being able to roam free, a process that *Titan Chaser* instills with a rare sense of wonder. Everything in that ravaged, post-apocalyptic landscape operates in an order of magnitude that lies just beyond human comprehension: wind turbines rise from the mists like flailing Cyclopes; jumbo jets emerge from low-hanging clouds with a deafening roar, off to who knows where; ancient lizards perch atop suspension bridges that buckle under the weight. A colossal universe going about its inscrutable business pays little attention to your adjusting a couple of cogs in the clockwork.

"It often feels like a lo-fi riff on *Death Stranding*"

The humility inherent in that role perfectly complements *Titan Chaser's* understated moments of awe, as when first encountering any of its four titans. You aren't there to hunt those scared and disoriented creatures, but to gently guide them elsewhere, typically through a series of simple puzzles involving the use of light and sound as distractions. Such pacifist leanings are further reinforced by the gentle downtempo electronica that accompanies each short assignment and, more often than not, by Ira Lobanok's slightly bemused voice acting, even if her delivery veers dangerously close to frivolity.

Needlessly repeated dialogue and a denouement aiming for an ill-advised twist aside, *Titan Chaser* is a brief, tranquil experience that often feels like a lo-fi riff on *Death Stranding*. Both games operate on a similar set of clearly delineated moral principles – above all, faith in small acts of kindness and an eagerness to uncover the hidden connections binding together the living things caught in a decaying civilisation's ruins. The forlorn 'monsters' here are less prone to explosive violence and more likely to repurpose the gaping wounds in their habitat to satisfy primordial needs: a floating whale circles a cluster of skyscrapers as if protecting its pod, and a gargantuan cephalopod mucks about with a stranded oil tanker like it's preparing a new home. But like Kojima's oddity, *Titan Chaser* finds glory in a modest line of work and extracts beauty from the fragments of a broken world. 🐾



Info

GENRE
Colossus-tracker

FORMAT
PC (tested) PS4 / XBO / Switch

DEVELOPER
Stas Shostak

PUBLISHER
Stas Shostak

PRICE
£3.99

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Alexander Chatziioannou

VERDICT

Moments of hushed awe more than compensate for *Titan Chaser's* rough edges.

72%

HIGHLIGHT

The most effectively unnerving character is Flurina, a young girl who never speaks. She has a habit of turning up in places you wouldn't expect, like the passenger seat of your vehicle, with a glowering glare. But maybe she just wants to help and has trouble expressing herself. It's the uncertainty that gets you.

Review

Mundaun

Drawn to death

Info

GENRE

First-person horror

FORMAT

PS4 (tested) / PS5 /
PC / XBO / XB X/S /
Switch

DEVELOPER

Hidden Fields

PUBLISHER

MWM Interactive

PRICE

£16.99

RELEASE

Out now

REVIEWED BY

John Bailes

VERDICT

A visually unsettling horror story that blends genres to great effect.

76%

Mundaun is a horror tale that feels more strange than scary. It's a sense that emanates foremost from the game's appearance – a first-person view of rural isolation scratched into life with charcoal. Swiss hillsides that should shine with snow, vibrant pasture grass, and sprouting daffodils, are instead scarred with primal pagan unease. The grey renders the huts and haystacks alien, the goats a little sinister, the locals as eerie sketches. You realise how much you rely on contrasts of colour to orient yourself. If you get a fright, it's usually because your eye is filling in gaps, and takes an innocent shrub for a threat.

Of course, it doesn't help that some of the haystacks really are trying to kill you. *Mundaun* isn't exactly survival horror, but neither is it quite the walking sim it initially appears. As Curdin, a young man returning to the tiny mountain community where his grandfather recently died, you should expect the unexpected. It's not long before you're being taunted by a devilish old man, experiencing First World War flashbacks and following a headless goat. To get by, you'll need to fend off or creep past zombie-like straw men, as well as dabble in puzzles, driving sequences, shooting galleries, and more.

Mundaun succeeds by organically blending its parts, in line with a reality that blurs the ordinary and uncanny. The disparate activities keep you shifting in your seat as you navigate the cunningly

plotted mountain paths, but also intertwine with mundane routines that neatly ground you, and the game logic, in the world. Maps of the area are obtained by having Curdin sit on an overlooking bench and sketch the view. A stat upgrade requires finding the tools and ingredients to brew a cup of coffee. These processes, along with your need to seek shelter at the end of each episodic day, refuse you the comfort of escaping character.

It takes time for the elements to gel, however, due to a rushed opening act that squanders some big reveals. Curdin takes too much in his stride, to almost comic effect, not least seeing his hand horribly disfigured by a curse. Part of

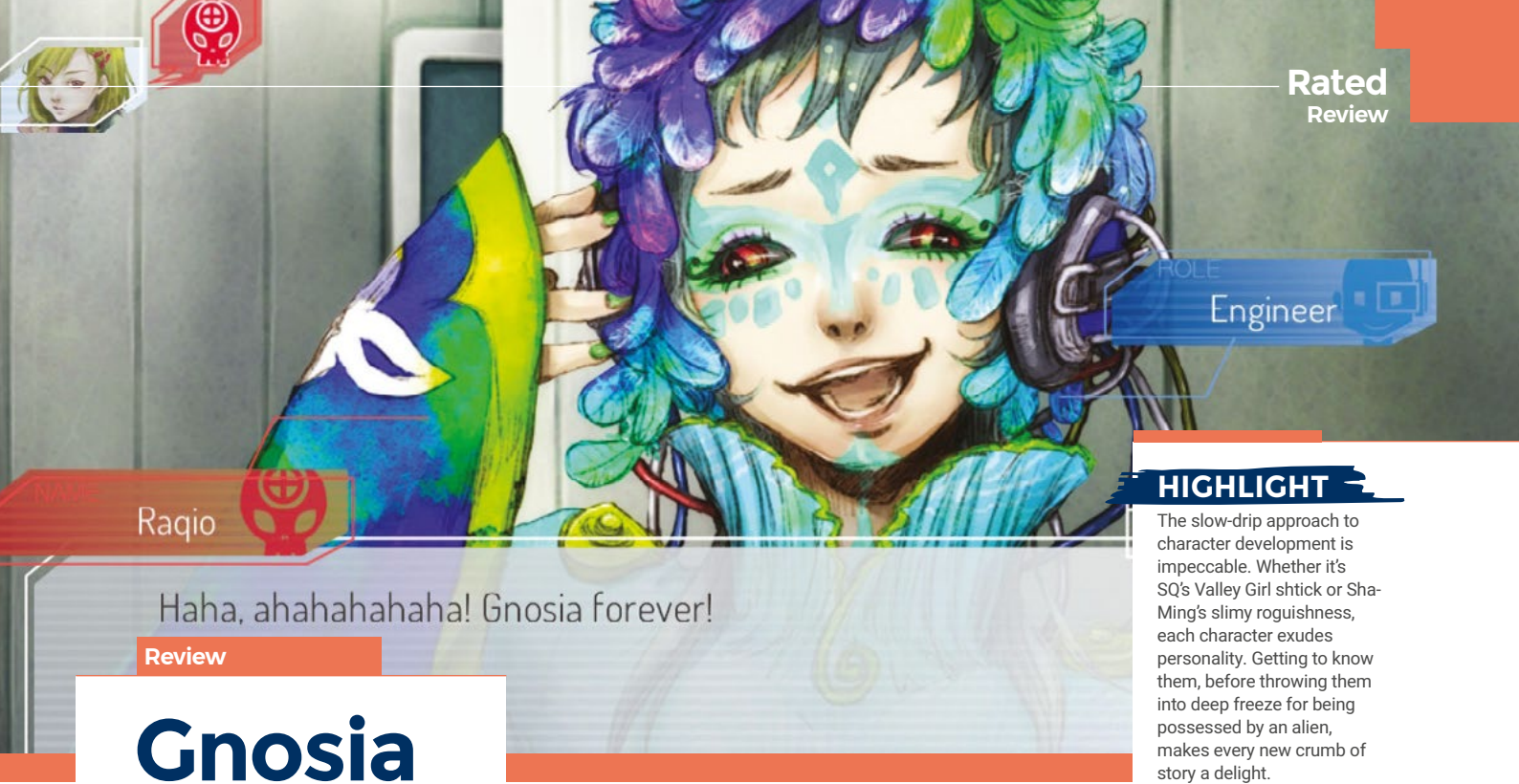
the strangeness? Perhaps.

But more than anything, it feels clumsy. Indeed, there's a general roughness here, from the silly men-in-costumes design of the lumbering haystacks, to the lethargic controls as you prod

them into submission with a pitchfork. Plus the monochrome visuals are sometimes a little too indistinct, as you can't quite tell what's happening or what to interact with.

Yet as you near the mountain's looming peak, *Mundaun* summons real momentum. The unease oozes through the hand-pencilled imagery, while haunting scenes and delicious twists drag you into its inverted rationality. Most enticingly, even as the story clarifies, you're never sure what you're going to see or do next. A devilish desire to place eclectic design over tested horror tropes makes *Mundaun*'s strangeness all the more chilling. 🗿

"If you get a fright, it's usually because your eye is filling in gaps, and takes a shrub for a threat"



Rated
Review

ROLE
Engineer

Raqio

HIGHLIGHT

The slow-drip approach to character development is impeccable. Whether it's SQ's Valley Girl shtick or Sha-Ming's slimy roguishness, each character exudes personality. Getting to know them, before throwing them into deep freeze for being possessed by an alien, makes every new crumb of story a delight.

Haha, ahahahahaha! Gnosia forever!

Review

Gnosia

We can't go on together, with suspicious minds

Despite being about social interaction, no game makes me despair of humanity more than *Among Us*. Players will gang up on others for no reason, vote them out with no evidence, and turn on you at the slightest provocation, twisted by their own suspicion and fear into the least aware and rational human beings alive. For better or worse, *Gnosia* manages to capture that feeling perfectly, despite being an entirely single-player game.

Gnosia is a visual novel that borrows from social deduction games like *Town of Salem*, *Mafia*, and the aforementioned *Among Us*, setting you and a number of NPCs the task of finding and eliminating the aliens hiding among you. There's more than the Gnosis threat lurking, though, as you and your crewmates have to work together to understand why you're trapped in a time loop, and how to break free of it once and for all. Each loop randomly decides who are the Gnosis – who kill one person at a time – and who are humans. From there, you make deductions across a series of debates, forge alliances, and hone your rhetoric skills to uncover more of the mystery... or work with your fellow Gnosis to take out the rest of the crew and avoid suspicion.

While *Gnosia's* key marketing point was "single-player *Among Us*", it's the story that really sets it apart. Characters' histories are teased out in non-linear orders throughout the loops, and learning something new about someone always feels like a major progression, no matter how minor the information is. There's a fully fleshed-out sci-fi world here, and the brief glimpses you get

between the debates over who's killing who add so much more to the experience. I often found myself skipping the debate sections, hoping I'd be rewarded with more of that story.

But here lies *Gnosia's* major pitfall: the actual deduction aspect of the game is so flat and repetitive it makes getting between the story beats a slog. This isn't a *Danganronpa* or *Phoenix Wright*-style trial, it's just the NPCs throwing the same lines of dialogue at each other until you luck out and vote for the enemy. Once you learn each character's personality, manipulating them to vote the way you want becomes a rote loop of skipping unnecessary dialogue before hitting the story sections between voting rounds.

I went into *Gnosia* hoping it was more *Danganronpa* and less *Among Us*. And, for the most part, it is. Likeable characters forced to kill each other while solving an overarching mystery is exactly what I was after... but it's buried under a sea of repetitive, procedurally generated trials that suck the life out of the world Petit Depotto has built. If only *Gnosia* had been made as a straight visual novel. 🗣️

Info

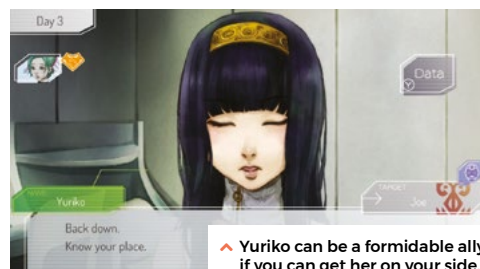
GENRE
Visual novel
FORMAT
Switch /
PlayStation Vita
DEVELOPER
Petit Depotto
PUBLISHER
PLAYISM
PRICE
£22.49
RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Joe Parlock

VERDICT

Fantastic characters, world, and story weighed down by repetitive and nonsensical trials.

65%



Rated
Review



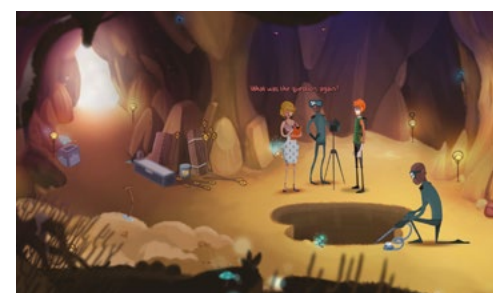
HIGHLIGHT

Mutropolis is a wonderful looking game with beautifully drawn art. It makes use of that to showcase a diversity of environments, from hangers and university labs, to caves, wild forests, and statue-filled villages. This makes it feel varied and supports the idea that you are on a huge adventure to rescue your friend.

Review

Mutropolis

Keeping the puzzles archaeological



Info

GENRE
Adventure

FORMAT
PC (tested) / Mac / Linux

DEVELOPER
Pirita Studio

PUBLISHER
Application Systems Heidelberg

PRICE
£16.49

RELEASE
Out now

REVIEWED BY
Paul Walker-Emig

VERDICT

While it frustrates here and there, some good jokes, likeable characters, and fun puzzling smooths over the odd cracks.

70%

Imagine that the entire human race abandoned Earth for a few thousand years and went to live on Mars. Imagine they started sending archaeologists back in the year 5000 to dig up the junk we left behind. What would they make of it? That's the setup for *Mutropolis*, a point-and-click puzzle game that gets a lot of mileage out of the misunderstandings the humanity of the future makes when trying to understand our contemporary world. More often than not, I find that humour in video games tends to land somewhere on a scale between 'not funny' and 'actively grating', so it's a credit to *Mutropolis* that it has the ability to raise a smile with its jokes about misinterpreted cultural practices and historical figures, and the relative significance of everyday objects lent an aura of prestige thanks to their status as archaeological relics.

A large part of why the humour works is that it is centred around likeable characters. Protagonist Henry Dijon and his colleagues and companions, Micro, Max, Carlata, and co, are not in-depth character studies, but they have endearing personalities and behave in ways consistent with who they are – a character won't tell a joke for the sake of it if that doesn't fit with how they would respond. In a game featuring an outlandish plot about a kidnapped colleague, a fabled lost city, and ancient Egyptian gods, they provide the grounding that makes the world and its story work. Just because a game is light-hearted and silly, that doesn't mean you can get away without applying consistency and care when it comes to creating characters, and *Mutropolis* gets that.

That consistency and care is lacking a tad across the game's puzzles. They follow the traditional point-and-click item puzzle format, giving you an inventory of objects that's added to as you explore locations, and which can then be combined or used to get around whatever it is blocking your progression. For the most part, puzzles are logical, enjoyable, and strike the right balance when it comes to difficulty. However, the game is not immune to the perennial frustrations of item-puzzling point-and-clicks. There was more than one occasion where I missed a vital item I had to pick up, or found a puzzle solution a bit too obtuse, particularly in the game's second half. Mercifully, these instances are relatively rare and, though frustrating, shouldn't be enough to put you off a generally well-designed puzzle game.

In contrast to *Mutropolis*' archaeologists – who sometimes fail to understand what they dig up from the past, in their excavation of 1990s comedy point-and-clicks – this game's developers have showcased not only an understanding of what made those games work, but a clear vision of how to apply that successfully in 2021. 🗨

✓ Almost no one believes in the lost city of Mutropolis, save for your boss Totel, who ends up being kidnapped just as he seems close to finding it.



▶ STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Hannah Rutherford, aka Lomadiah, takes a moment to chat about her favourite gaming things

What's your favourite game?

The 7th Guest by Trilobyte Games (1993).

And why is that? What is it about that particular game that resonates so much with you?

It's an oldie, but a goodie! *The 7th Guest* is an FMV horror puzzle game with a similar premise to the Vincent Price film *House on Haunted Hill*, with a dash of cursed toys and demonic pacts on the side.

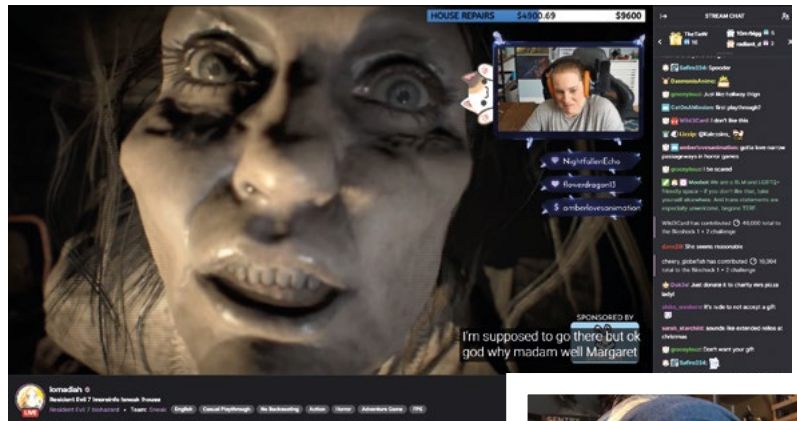
My dad used to bring back DOS games that he thought we could enjoy together, and this was one of those games. Sure, I was far too young to be playing it (I would have been around the age of five), but it was iconic because of the pre-rendered FMVs and the puzzles. I have a great memory of Dad and I huddled over a piece of paper trying to work out a can stacking puzzle, and I think that opened the door for my love of both puzzle and horror games.

The game also implemented exploration similar to the *Resident Evil* franchise and 2017's *Prey*, solving puzzles to access new areas, and this is still something I absolutely adore when it's done right in modern games.

What game was it that got you into gaming to begin with? What are your enduring memories of it?

Most people that know me would say *Tomb Raider*, but the *Jill of the Jungle* trilogy (1992) beat Lara to it by several years. She was the gaming equivalent of *Xena: Warrior Princess* several years before the show aired, and I loved her and the games to bits.

Jill was a sassy wench in a leotard with massive thighs, who stomped her way through platforming levels, fighting a variety of enemies with a variety of weapons. She could turn into a frog, a fish, and even a phoenix to get around various obstacles; in the third part of the trilogy, she even saves a prince! GOG has had the trilogy



available for free since 2018, so I hope that a few people reading this will go and check her out (which you can, here: wfmag.cc/JotJ).

Has there ever been a point you've been put off gaming? If so, why?

No, there hasn't been that moment for me. Not making content due to online harassment of women? Sure, I've had weaker moments where I've considered it. But stopping gaming? Never.

What's the appeal of playing games for an audience - whether that's pre-recorded or livestreaming?

I moved away from pre-recorded for various reasons, but one of the main ones was because I enjoyed the live element of streaming. Pre-recorded content is sitting in a room for hours, potentially shouting into the void; depending on how quickly you're uploading the content, some chatter might be outdated or irrelevant.

Instead of showing people your holiday pictures from last week, you're bringing them along for the journey itself. It's so much more fun to have an actual back and forth with viewers and build a community that way; it also means we've been able to do some amazing things for charity and showcase titles in a way that my older content wouldn't have done. 🐦

You can watch Lomadiah streaming five days a week over on Twitch: wfmag.cc/Lomadiah

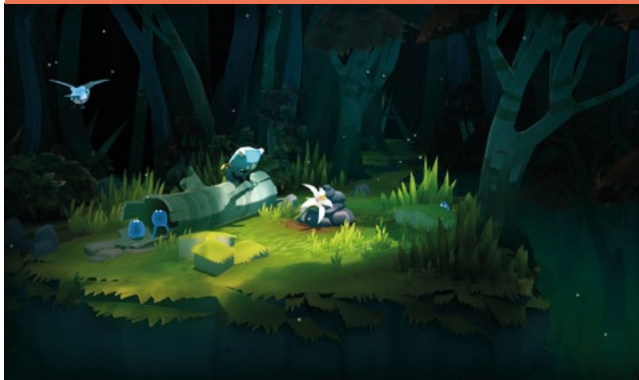


“I have a great memory of us huddled over a piece of paper, trying to work out a can stacking puzzle”

The Wireframe **HOTLIST**

Come one, come all: our pick of the best PC games, whatever your mood might be

The games for... **BIG ADVENTURES**



Assassin's Creed Odyssey / *Ubisoft* / **93%** (Issue 1)

Yakuza: Like a Dragon / *Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio* / **90%** (Issue 45)

Amnesia Rebirth / *Frictional Games* / **87%** (Issue 46)

^ **The Last Campfire** / *Hello Games* / **86%** (Issue 47)

Resident Evil 2 / *Capcom* / **86%** (Issue 7)

Far Cry New Dawn / *Ubisoft* / **85%** (Issue 9)

Journey to the Savage Planet / *Typhoon Studios* / **84%** (Issue 33)

The Outer Worlds / *Obsidian Entertainment* / **84%** (Issue 28)

Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom

/ *Game Atelier* / **84%** (Issue 6)

Nioh 2 / *Koei Tecmo Games* / **80%** (Issue 38)

The games for... **REPEATED PLAY**

Hades / *Supergiant Games* / **94%** (Issue 44)

They Are Billions / *Numantian Games* / **88%** (Issue 20)

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice / *FromSoftware* / **87%** (Issue 11)

Streets of Rage 4 / *DotEmu/Lizardcube/Guard Crush* / **86%** (Issue 40)

Katamari Damacy REROLL / *Monkeycraft* / **84%** (Issue 4)

Spelunky 2 / *Mossmouth* / **83%** (Issue 44)

Hitman 2 / *IO Interactive* / **82%** (Issue 3)

Alba: A Wildlife Adventure / *ustwo Games* / **82%** (Issue 46)

Slay the Spire / *Mega Crit Games* / **81%** (Issue 45)

Manifold Garden / *William Chyr Studio* / **80%** (Issue 29)

The games for... **SOLID STORY TIMES**

Disco Elysium / *ZA/UM* / **94%** (Issue 28)

Mutazione / *Die Gute Fabrik* / **86%** (Issue 26)

Whispers of a Machine

/ *Clifftop Games/Faravid Interactive* / **85%** (Issue 14)

Mythic Ocean / *Paralune* / **84%** (Issue 36)

Sunless Skies / *Failbetter Games* / **83%** (Issue 7)

Arise: A Simple Story / *Piccolo Studio* / **82%** (Issue 31)

Assemble with Care / *ustwo games* / **81%** (Issue 27)

The Walking Dead: The Final Season

/ *Telltale Games/Skybound Games* / **81%** (Issue 11)

The Procession to Calvary / *Joe Richardson* / **80%** (Issue 40)

Outer Wilds / *Mobius Digital* / **80%** (Issue 17)

The games for... **FIRING UP BRAIN CELLS**



Telling Lies / *Sam Barlow* / **92%** (Issue 24)

Kentucky Route Zero / *Cardboard Computer* / **90%** (Issue 33)

Heaven's Vault / *inkle* / **89%** (Issue 12)

The Pedestrian / *Skookum Arts* / **84%** (Issue 35)

The Legend of Bum-Bo / *Edmund McMillen* / **83%** (Issue 31)

A Monster's Expedition / *Draknek & Friends* / **82%** (Issue 47)

Total War: Three Kingdoms

/ *Creative Assembly/Feral Interactive* / **82%** (Issue 16)

Wanna Survive / *PINIX* / **80%** (Issue 42)

Superliminal / *Pillow Castle* / **80%** (Issue 34)

^ **Automachef** / *Hermes Interactive* / **80%** (Issue 19)

The games for... **HIGH-INTENSITY PLAY**



Tetris Effect / *Monstars Inc./Resonair* / **90%** (Issue 4)

Sayonara Wild Hearts / *Simogo* / **89%** (Issue 25)

Star Wars: Squadrons / *EA* / **86%** (Issue 45)

Devil May Cry 5 / *Capcom* / **84%** (Issue 10)

Black Bird / *Onion Games* / **84%** (Issue 3)

BPM: Bullets Per Minute / *Awe Interactive* / **83%** (Issue 45)

Catastronauts / *Inertia Game Studios* / **82%** (Issue 1)

Olija / *Skeleton Crew Studio/Thomas Olsson* / **81%** (Issue 48)

DUSK / *David Szymanski* / **81%** (Issue 7)

DOOM Eternal / *id Software* / **80%** (Issue 36)

The games for... **CURING THE INDIE ITCH**



If Found / *DREAMFEEL* / **92%** (Issue 44)

Can Androids Pray
/ *Natalie Clayton/Priscilla Snow/Xavier Nelson Jr.* / **90%** (Issue 21)

Tales From Off-Peak City Vol. 1 / *Cosmo D* / **89%** (Issue 39)

Baba Is You / *Hempuli Oy* / **88%** (Issue 10)

Afterparty / *Night School Studio* / **86%** (Issue 33)

Witcheye / *Moon Kid* / **86%** (Issue 30)

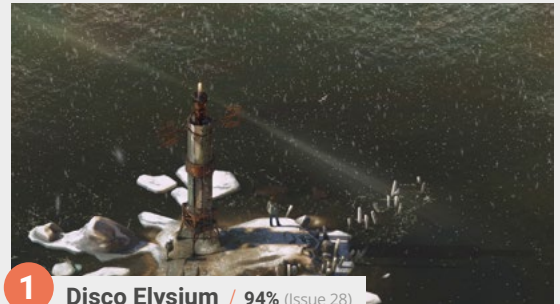
Hypnospace Outlaw
/ *Tendershoot/Michael Lasch/ThatWhichIs Media* / **86%** (Issue 11)

Haunted PS1 Demo Disc / *The Haunted* / **85%** (Issue 39)

Xeno Crisis / *Bitmap Bureau* / **81%** (Issue 33)

Art of Rally / *Funselektor Labs* / **80%** (Issue 45)

PC Top 10



1 Disco Elysium / **94%** (Issue 28)

Smarter and deeper than anything else; truly an RPG in a class completely of its own.

2 Hades / **94%** (Issue 44)

Proving 'roguelike' isn't a dirty word, learning-and-dying is a joy from start to finish.

3 Assassin's Creed Odyssey
/ **93%** (Issue 1)

The point where Ubisoft realised over-the-top adventures were the right direction.

4 Telling Lies / **92%** (Issue 24)

This FMV mystery asks more of the player than most, with rewards to match.

5 If Found / **92%** (Issue 44)

A compelling and beautifully illustrated narrative, as moving as it is memorable.

6 Yakuza: Like a Dragon / **90%** (Issue 45)

A bold, brash, and joyous rebirth for the long-running gangster series.

7 Tetris Effect / **90%** (Issue 4)

The question is 'how do you better *Tetris*?' The answer is: like this. This is how.

8 Kentucky Route Zero / **90%** (Issue 33)

Abstract style meets concrete commitments in this fantastic magical realist adventure.

9 Can Androids Pray / **90%** (Issue 21)

A healthy dose of existential anxiety in a minimalist, bite-sized package.

10 Tales From Off-Peak City Vol. 1
/ **89%** (Issue 39)

A walking sim/adventure; a work of remarkable imagination and humanity.

Backwards compatible

WRITTEN BY RYAN LAMBIE

Battle of the Mods

Until recently, there was only one choice if you wanted a clear, modern screen for your Sega Game Gear: the modification released by McWill in 2014. As regular readers will know from my exploits on these pages, it's a fiddly install, with numerous components to be removed from the handheld's main board, while there are lots of wires to solder onto very fine data lines. New solutions are emerging all the time, however, and the latest on the market is RetroSix's CleanScreen – a mod that, although far from a straight drop-in swap for the Game Gear's original display, is far less labour-intensive than McWill's offering.

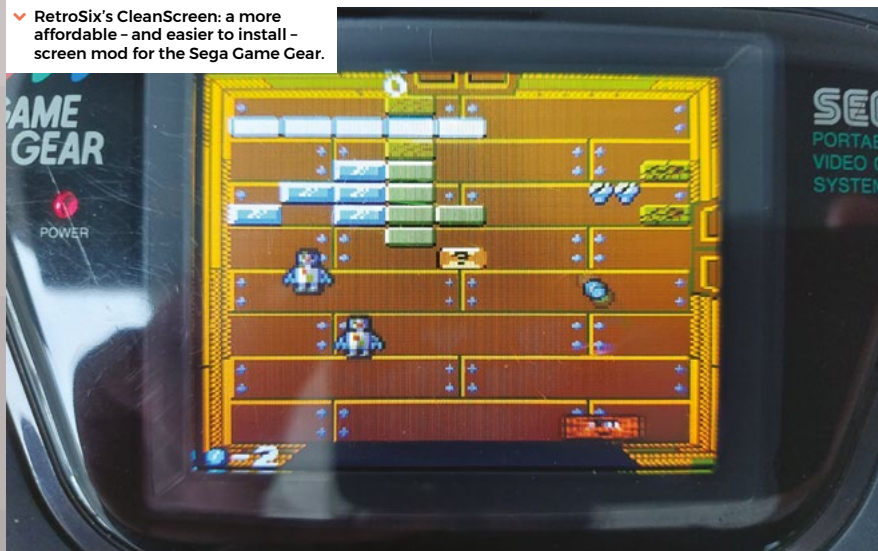
RetroSix kindly sent us a CleanScreen to check out, and I was really impressed with just how easy the screen and its accompanying driver board are to attach to the Game Gear. Unlike the McWill, which had to be soldered to the Game Gear's motherboard – and could sometimes leave you with a slightly off-centre screen – the CleanScreen uses a pair of 3D-printed brackets. This means both the mod and the display can be securely fastened to the motherboard, and better yet, you'll get a nicely centred, square display at the end of it all.

RetroSix has also come up with a neat wire-free install kit, too, which eliminates

the need to solder about a dozen individual wires. It's essentially a flexible board, precisely modelled on your Game Gear's circuit board layout, so make sure you buy the right one for your particular system – they're divided into VA1 and VA0 varieties. With the install kit, the whole mod was soldered into place in less than an hour – that's pretty good going, given my middling soldering skills. Sure, you'll have to weld a few tiny pads to equally tiny resistors here and there, but anyone who's installed a McWill should be pleased at how much easier the CleanScreen is to work with.

The CleanScreen's price point is impressive, too: it's a total of £61.79 for the mod, screen, brackets, and wiring harness – far less than the roughly £100 asking price for the McWill. In fact, the CleanScreen's pricing puts it in the same ballpark as the Chinese clone mods you'll find at places like AliExpress. Just to do a thorough like-for-like comparison, I purchased one of those AliExpress mods, which cost around £50, including shipping. Its install is much the same as the McWill – though the instructions were, incredibly, even less clear – and there's still the issue of getting the screen neatly squared up once it's all soldered together. To sum up, then: with the CleanScreen being almost as affordable and easier to install, there's no point even considering those eastern knock-offs.

✓ RetroSix's CleanScreen: a more affordable – and easier to install – screen mod for the Sega Game Gear.



Inspecting Morse

It's not every day you stumble on something video game-related that's so obscure, even Google only throws up one result, but that's precisely what happened to me this month. While playing a quick game of *S.C.I.* on my PC Engine one Saturday morning, my phone rang and I put the console on pause. After about 15 minutes, something strange happened: the game started emitting a series of beeping sounds. I thought at first that it was a) something wrong with my phone, or b) a noise coming from next door, but then, after leaving the console paused for another 15 minutes, realised that the strange beeping noise was coming from the game, and I recognised it as Morse code. A quick Google search revealed that this is a known Easter egg hidden in Taito's arcade racer/action title, but nobody seems to have tried to translate it before – or, if they have, then they didn't bother telling anyone. So after recording the message and slowing it down in Audacity, I managed to figure out that it's an incredibly brief 'conversation' between two radio operators. "Call to all stations, this is JNKTJ, over," the first operator beeps in code. "This is JW1BLF, over," goes the second operator. "Who's calling me?" asks the first. And, er, that's it. I can only guess that JNKTJ and



JW1BLF are fake call signs of some sort, since Japanese radio communications always seem to begin with J. Or maybe they're impenetrable references to two developers who worked on the game. None of this is earth-shattering, granted, but still a fun oddment that, as far as we can tell, has remained largely unnoticed for the best part of 30 years. You can hear the code for yourself at wfmag.cc/wfmag50 – and if you have an idea of what those call signs might mean, do get in touch with us.



Cresta Jester

PlatinumGames has been responsible for some out-and-out classics over the years, so of course I'm going to pay attention when it announces that it's making a traditional arcade shoot-'em-up. Or is it? Last year, Platinum got in a bit of trouble when it announced *Sol Cresta* – a belated sequel to two 1980s shooters, *Moon Cresta* and *Terra Cresta* – but then revealed that it was an April Fool's Day joke. On 2 April 2021, however, Platinum unveiled a gameplay

trailer, and revealed that *Sol Cresta* is real after all. It looks like a proper 16-bit era blaster, with pew-pew lasers and exploding spaceships all over the place, and it's the first in a planned series of what Platinum calls 'Neo-Classic Arcade' games. "Stay tuned for more games in the series, in which the essential fun and spirit of classic games will be polished with modern technology and skill," the developer says. You can see the trailer at wfmag.cc/solcresta.

Backwards compatible

WRITTEN BY IAN 'BUYER OF THINGS' DRANSFIELD

Shoot them up

It took a while, but the Sinden Lightgun arrived at my door a few weeks before writing these here words. "What are you waffling on about?", I hear you ask – well, there's a fact lamented by many a retro enthusiast: old lightguns cannot function on flat-screen/non-CRT televisions and monitors. They just can't. So we've had to live without proper lightguns at home now for over a decade, and frankly, that's too long to go without playing *Time Crisis* properly. Step forward Sinden Technology, a Coventry-based... well, man, named Andy Sinden – he put together a project for a new style of lightgun that would work on modern screens without the need for a sensor bar (à la the few Wii-style shooters we *have* had in the past decade), which was successfully Kickstarted and is now in the hands of many folks around

the world. Including me! Hence writing this. The basic – very basic – explanation of how it works is: the gun has a camera in the barrel, you use software on your computer to show the camera where the 'active' zone is (it puts a thin border around the screen), and... after a bit of setting up, it just works. It's more accurate than your old lightguns ever were, and – as I picked up the version with recoil – it's got enough kickback in it to bring up visceral memories of being on the front lines (i.e. 'playing *Time Crisis* in the arcade').

It isn't perfect – the software, at the time of writing, can be obtuse and clearly hasn't been refined for use by layfolk like myself. You need to get the right sort of distance from your screen, and lighting in the room can impact things. MAME is treacherous when configuring it at times, though that's on MAME and not the Sinden Lightgun. It



can only – officially – be used with PCs and Linux-based systems at the time of writing, though a working prototype using a Raspberry Pi has been made to allow functionality with both the PSone and PS2. I just need the arcade sorted – which it is, via PC emulators – and a solution for both PSone and the Saturn, then I can probably rest easy.

It's not cheap – £80 plus postage for a gun without the recoil solenoid, £130 with – but it is *incredibly* well-made, sturdy, and designed to function perfectly in the hand; a real love letter to arcade lightguns of the past. As a result of the price – and, let's be honest, the niche appeal – it's not something I can broadly recommend. But anybody who's in the market for replaying *Virtua Cop* for the first time since that summer in Scarborough about 306 years ago: do it. Beg, borrow, save carefully – whatever you do, if you want this in your life, I can only recommend it.

Plus there's always the chance that a resurgence of lightgun tech will mean companies might think it good, fair, and proper to develop, or port, new shooting games for the modern PC system. And that, friends, is something I'm *extremely* keen on. I do sound like a gun fanatic right now, don't I? Ah well.



Remember me

The need for 25 separate memory cards clogging up my desk and drawers has been entirely eliminated: I slapped down the money for a MemCard PRO from UK retro store 8BitMods as soon as they were announced earlier this year... and now I have something like 200,000 memory cards. In one memory card. And I never have to remove it from my machine again to try and find that bloody *Discworld* save I can *never find*.

This nifty little device – designed by 8BitMods itself, it should be noted – uses an SD card as storage; the on-board ESP32 microcontroller has a dual-core processor capable of running at 240MHz (the PSone's CPU runs at 33.86MHz, by the way), the OLED display shows you what game is currently being played (if used alongside an ODE like XStation, MODE, or PSIO), and it automatically creates virtual memory cards for each individual game so you really just don't need to touch anything in the most part. If you're using the disc drive you will need to, as the PRO can't get the data it needs direct from disc, but you still have more memory cards than you will ever

need. You're also able to manage it with a browser-based tool, because the card has WiFi, obviously. It's so delightfully perverse putting something this new and powerful into a quarter-century-old console.

The MemCard PRO is an incredible piece of kit for PSone enthusiasts who still play using their original hardware, and while it does need an ODE to make it *really* worthwhile, that concern falls by the wayside

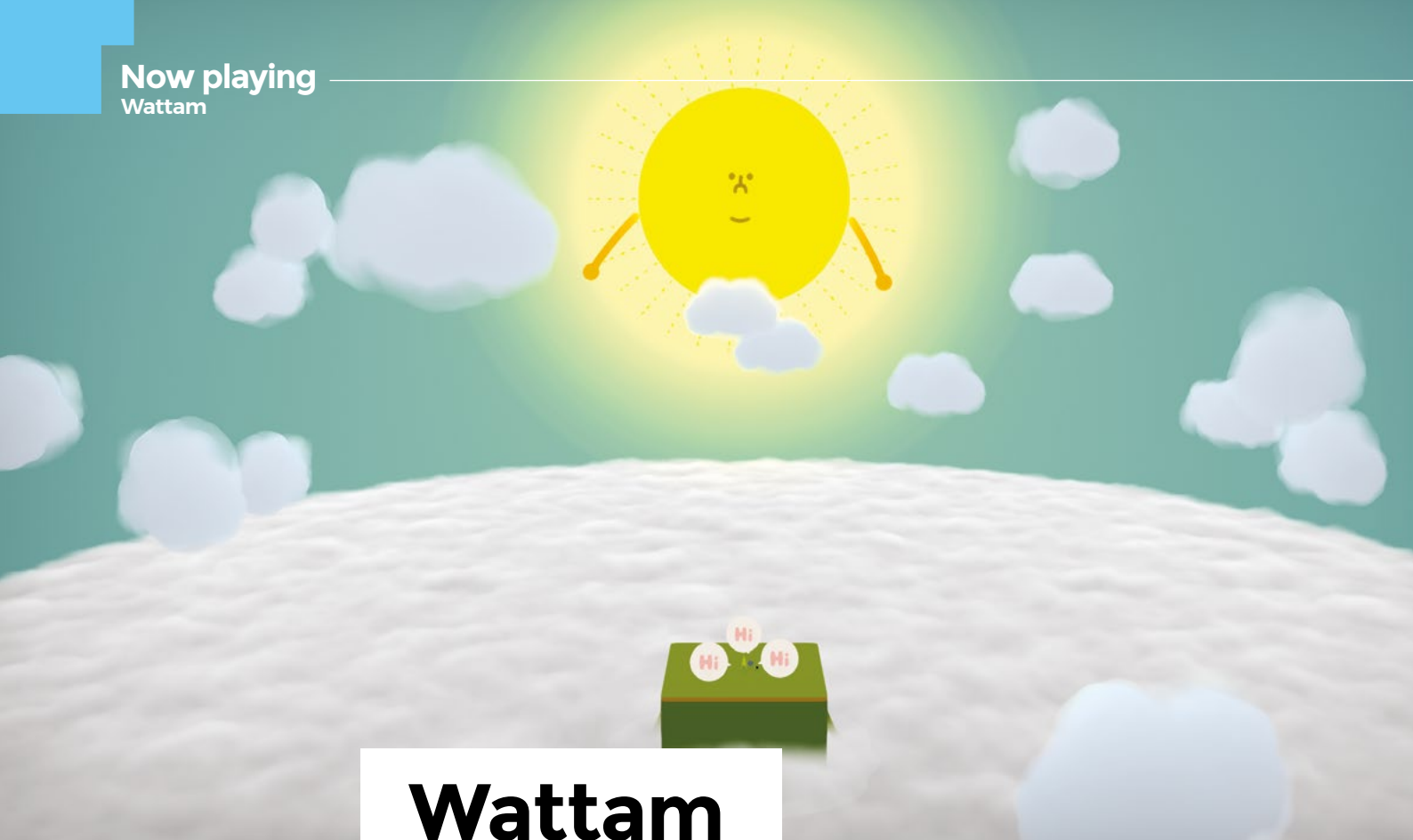
when you see just how much simpler it makes everything. It's not cheap – £59.99 without postage – but it's worth every penny if, like me, you're tired of trying to remember which card is which and where that *damn* Gon save for *Tekken 3* is. I'm sad to retire my main workhorse, the 4MB see-through purple number that's been with me since about 1998, but this update really is so very much better.



Make it again VII

I miss the *Strike* series, and while I wax lyrical about *Future Cop: LAPD* a lot (a spiritual successor to the *Strike* games), it's not quite the one I want to see come back. Nor is it *Desert*, *Jungle*, or *Urban*. Or even *Nuclear*. No, I want *Soviet Strike* back: the first of the series to take things to a stupid, excessively 1990s, FMV-riddled mix of classic *Strike* helicoptering and awful sub-*Tom Clancy* storytelling. It was dumb, full of itself, and pure Americana in game form. I'd love to see some of that make a comeback, and see how wildly off the mark EA could be with any attempt at handling the modern world's political teetering.





Wattam

Explosives under hats, dollops of poop, and togetherness: Ryan delves into the uniquely strange Wattam

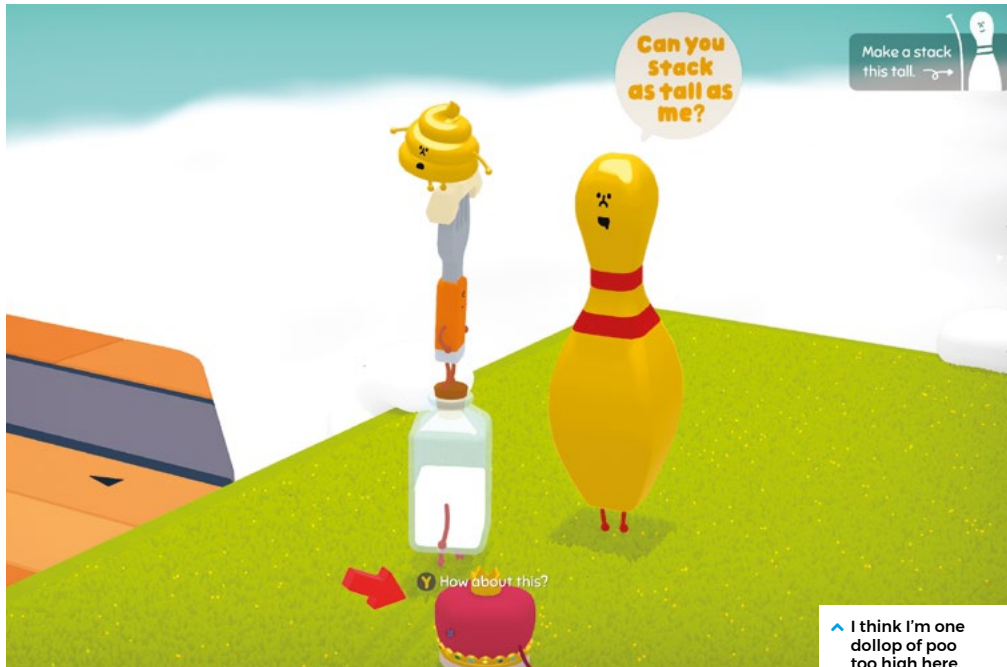
A line from Howard Scott Warshaw's column (see page 48) really stuck in my mind this month: "Young industries are about innovation; mature industries are more about maintenance." It made me think about how rare it is to stumble on a modern game that's completely unlike anything else, either in terms of its concepts or how it plays. This in turn made me think about revisiting *Wattam*. Released in 2020, *Wattam*'s the latest product from the incomparable mind of Keita Takahashi, most famous for his PlayStation 2-era roll-'em-up, *Katamari Damacy*. At its core, I suppose *Wattam* is about friendship: how unity, working together, and making one another happy ultimately makes the world a better, brighter place. That's an easily graspable, human theme, alright, but the mechanics and events that surround it are borderline inexplicable. As the game begins, you control a sentient, moustachioed cube wearing a bowler hat, but the cast gradually expands as you perform various tasks. Before you know it, you're surrounded by an assortment of wide-eyed vegetables, grinning milk bottles, and other mundane items. In essence, the game involves unlocking new characters by solving puzzles or

doing certain odd things when prompted, but this still doesn't really convey *Wattam*'s sheer weirdness. The cuboid fellow with the moustache's signature trick is removing his hat to reveal a bomb; detonating the thing near other characters causes them to bounce around the place, cackling with glee. Other characters have their own abilities – a roving toilet, for example, can pick up other characters and flush them away. You can also climb on top of other characters, hold hands with them by pressing the X or B buttons, which are mapped to the left or right hands respectively, or switch between characters at pretty much any point by moving the right stick. This is probably as good a time

"Making the island happy involves guiding an onion"

as any to mention just how off-kilter the controls sometimes feel. Years of playing modern games have drummed into my skull that moving the left stick on a controller will move my on-screen character; moving the right stick, meanwhile, will control the camera. For *Wattam*, Takahashi and his team decided to wind the clock back to the late 1990s, and have the camera controlled by the left and right triggers, which is something I still haven't come to terms with; even after a good few hours of *Wattam*, I'm still flipping between characters when I really just want to shift the camera a

^ There's a storybook innocence to the imagery in *Wattam*, but some of it is also strikingly pretty.



few millimetres to the right. This might sound like a minor gripe, but it's quite frustrating to be controlling a staring telephone one second and abruptly switching control to a giant skittle on the other side of the map.

It says a lot about *Wattam's* charm that these obtuse controls haven't remotely put me off. Again, it's rare to encounter a game that's so unique, or whose events are so difficult to sum up. One task involves guiding various fruits into an ambulating mouth, which then turns them into dollops of squealing poop. Later, a skittle challenges me to make a stack of characters that match its height, so I soon find myself wrangling three blobs of poop, a spoon, and a disembodied nose into a kind of tottering, whimsical totem pole. Later still,

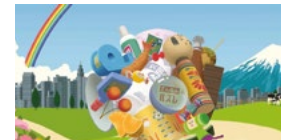


I'm guiding a balloon up to the sun because the sun stole the receiver from my friend, who's a 1970s telephone.

Wattam's brightly coloured world also opens up in unexpected ways, with each new area introducing puzzles of its own: about half an hour in, another blocky landmass appears on the horizon, populated solely by a lonely island weeping about the lack of sea surrounding it. I soon discover that making the island happy again involves guiding an onion from one chunk of the world to the next, on the back of a giant table capable of swimming across the sky.

These are all moments that occur within the first stages of the game, and I won't describe anything that lies beyond this – first, because it's best discovered first-hand, and second, because descriptions on a page don't really do *Wattam's* curious world justice. Suffice to say that what initially looks silly and frivolous soon becomes something far more heartfelt and – dare I say it – thought-provoking by the end of its three-to-four hour play time. Less immediately graspable as an arcade experience than *Katamari Damacy*, but far more involving as a game than the toyetic *Noby Noby Boy*, *Wattam* is another charming oddity from Takahashi. In an industry more focused on maintenance than innovation, *Wattam* offers a rare spark of individuality. 🐾

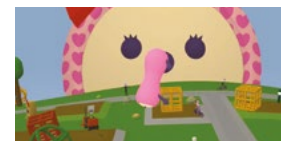
Wireframe Recommends



Katamari Damacy

PS2/VARIOUS

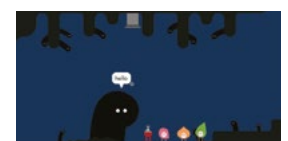
The 2004 roll-'em-up that put Takahashi on the global map, and rightly so: beneath the surrealist wrapper, there's an arcade action game that's as straightforwardly addictive and ingenious as anything developer/publisher Namco put out in its eighties heyday.



Noby Noby Boy

PS3/IOS

More an interactive toy/sandbox than a game as such, *Noby Noby Boy* nevertheless showcased Takahashi's penchant for bold character design, unusual play mechanics, and infectiously catchy music. This was a digital-only release, so here's hoping it survives the closure of the PS3's PlayStation Store.



Pikuniku

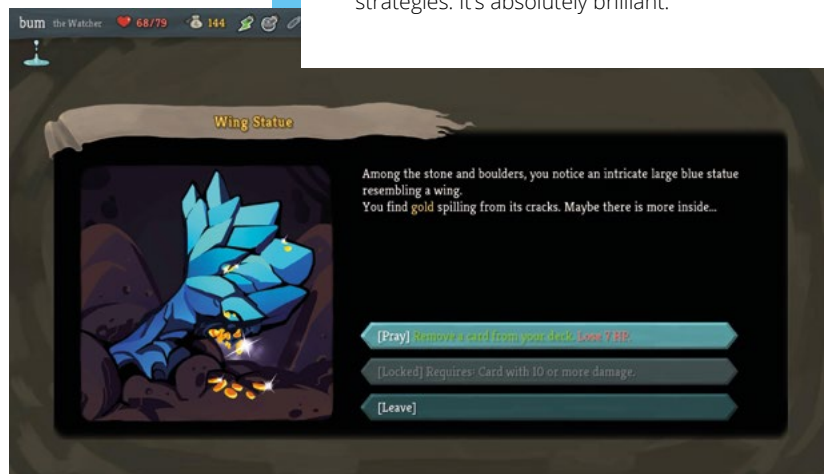
PC/VARIOUS

No, this platform-puzzler wasn't designed by Keita Takahashi, but with its world of bold, colourful shapes and wholesome underlying message, *Pikuniku* certainly feels like it could have sprung from his creative mind.



By the end game, you'll either be overpowered or all over the place. This was the former.

Encounters keep things fresh, with the chance to pick up random buffs and debuffs along the way.



Card carrying

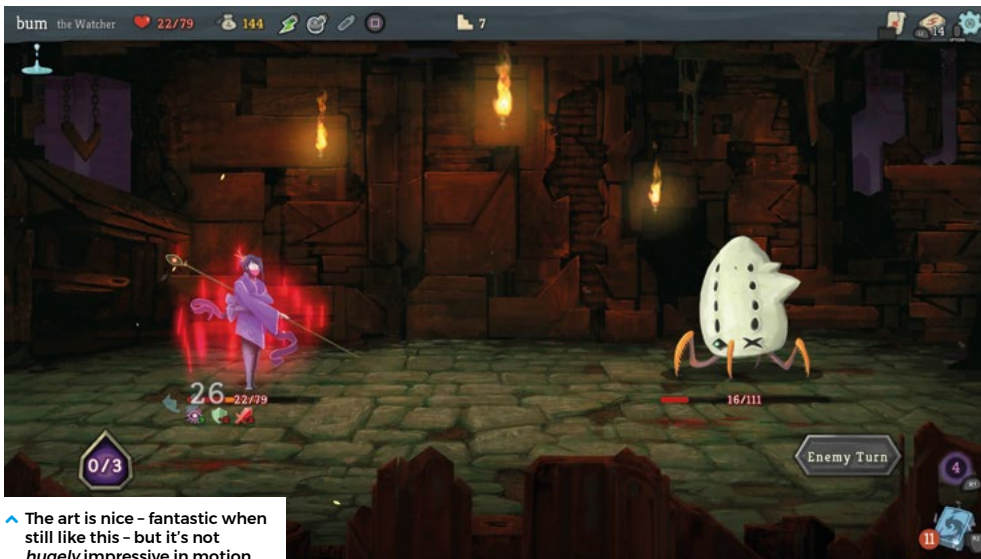
Ian's on an eternal quest to the top in Slay the Spire

Two apologies to lead off with: one, I haven't finished *The Last of Us Part II* yet, so I'm still not keen on writing about it here. It'll happen, just later than promised. Two, I offer a heartfelt expression of regret (thanks, thesaurus!) for not listening to so many of you – our reviewer in issue 45 included – when you were all saying how great *Slay the Spire* is. I was, it's safe to say, a grade-A numpty for passing over this deck-building rogue-ish game of chance, strategy, and chancing your strategies. It's absolutely brilliant.

As I write this, late-lockdown mane resting on my neck, beard reminding me of the bloke from the front cover of *Medal of Honor's* 2010 reboot, I am but one day removed from my first success. My first slaying of the spire. Except... well, that would be telling for the few of you who foolishly haven't followed the instruction of those many orders of magnitude smarter than I. Play the game and see what happens. It's not any sort of spoiler to say this is a game that you won't be done with when you get to the end, and before I had let the relief of making my way through the final boss battle fully pass through my body, I was restarting for *just one more* run.

It's that kind of game, of course, and in the most satisfying of ways. You won't always be dealt a good hand – some might argue a *fair* hand – and sometimes your turn-based card battles will be stacked heavily in favour of the opponent for no reason other than a card you needed wasn't drawn. Conversely, there's plenty of fights where this isn't the case, you win with ease, and you don't even notice because it's more fun to complain than it is to accept victory. At least in my experience.

But at no point does *Slay the Spire* let me feel like I'm being cheated. I've been in a huff, I've exclaimed things aloud no polite member of



▲ The art is nice – fantastic when still like this – but it's not hugely impressive in motion.

society would want to hear exclaimed aloud, quietly, or even inside a person's own head. I've switched the console off in frustration at a run gone sour. But I've not managed to stay away for more than a day each time – in fact, the majority of rage-quits on my part have been followed by a meek return and run starting anew within an hour or so. As I say, it's that kind of game in the most satisfying of ways.

And honestly, that's just picking at the few flaws on show, because *Slay the Spire* errs far more on the side of being thoroughly fair. Enemies are capable of debuffing you, but you are capable of debuffing them. They might have a spell to constantly increase their strength, turn by turn, but that means they have significant weaknesses elsewhere (usually a lack of additional defence). And there's always the chance you've picked up The Bomb card, forgotten you used it three turns ago, and it suddenly explodes dealing 50 damage to all enemies and grabbing your first victory against the Spire in what you had just seconds before accepted was to be yet another defeat. There's always something, always an extra thing, always an additional technique. Strategy pays off, paying attention pays off more, and forgetting about really powerful things you have at your disposal, apparently, pays off the most.

It's strange – I don't consider *Slay the Spire* to be an epic, all-encompassing thing that should dominate all gaming discussion. It's not

“I've not managed to stay away for more than a day each time”

particularly flashy – I'd argue that while the art is well-drawn it has the look of a mobile game – and it certainly doesn't leap off the screen with its Epic Bombast™. It's just sort of *there*, happily blending into the background.

But don't mistake it for a wallpaper simulator: *Slay the Spire* is brilliant. Balanced, smart,

rewarding in the extreme, full of depths I wouldn't even have guessed at, and the sort of thing that even I, Captain Jaded, am excited to jump straight back into and

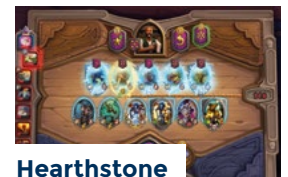
play again, despite a blundering loss against a regular enemy I really shouldn't have lost a single hit point against.

My main problem now, though, is that in writing these pages, I was tempted to pick up *Slay the Spire* on Android, thanks in no small part to a £4 credit on my account. It's something I'd been avoiding. But now I am not avoiding it. Meaning it's now possible for the game to be with me at all times. I never have to be away from it. *Oh no...* 🙄



▲ Yup.

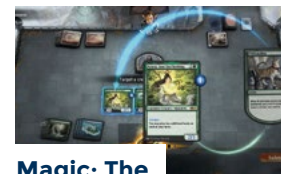
Wireframe Recommends



Hearthstone

PC, IOS, ANDROID

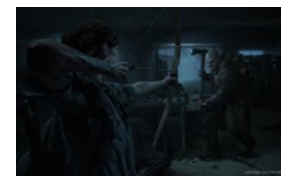
Sort of a starter kit for the world of deck-building games, Blizzard's *Hearthstone* is in no way *simple* – it's just gentler, and easier to get into. And, thankfully, it's also brilliant.



Magic: The Gathering Arena

PC, MAC, IOS, ANDROID

More complex than *Hearthstone*, but *MTGA* is the classic favourite for those looking for some deck-building fun. Just remember to learn all those intricacies, or you'll lose and... not have fun.



The Last of Us Part II

PS4

I'll still say go play it, I've just not put my thoughts on it into a fuller, more fleshed out couple of pages. Violent, grim, and beautiful, it's also not a deckbuilder.



The Ninja Warriors

A quintessentially eighties action game, but one with a striking visual feature that made it stand out in arcades

TAITO / 1987 / ARCADE, PC ENGINE, VARIOUS

In retrospect, *The Ninja Warriors* reads like a compendium of just about every violent eighties pop culture staple you could care to name. It has a lone warrior fighting against a militarised horde, much like the ultimate Reagan-era hero, John Rambo. It has that late-eighties obsession with ninjas that also gave us the likes of *Ninja Gaiden* and *Shinobi*. But what's cooler than a straightforward, kunai-throwing, katana-swinging ninja? Why, a cyborg ninja, of course, which ties this side-scrolling brawler in with another cult eighties touchstone: James Cameron's low-budget sci-fi shocker, *The Terminator*.

Released at a time when arcades were crammed with similar action games, *The Ninja Warrior's* most immediately striking feature was its ultra-wide field of view. Like Taito's own *Darius* before it, *The Ninja Warriors* used three monitors and a couple of mirrors to give the illusion of one seamless, scrolling landscape. It's a technical feat that doesn't add hugely to the gameplay itself, but does at least provide the player with an extra second or so to clock the endless waves of soldiers who flood the screen from left and right.

A far more captivating innovation was *The Ninja Warriors'* damage system. As your title character strode fearlessly on, they'd inevitably take hits from the array of bullets, knives, and gleaming canine teeth that crowded the screen on each stage. A traditional life bar kept you apprised of how close to death you were, sure, but the more obvious gauge was the damage

displayed on your cyborg ninja: if they took a shot to the chest, the gleaming metal beneath would be exposed. An exploding ordnance to the head would reveal a grinning skull. If you were doing really badly, then your ninja's entire body would be reduced to a striding metal skeleton straight out of *The Terminator*.

This might not sound like much in a modern age of detailed 3D character models and elaborate death animations, but in 1987, *The Ninja Warriors'* increasingly bedraggled assassins were fairly unique. Before this, perhaps the only other game where you could see the damage to your character's body was 1985's *Ghosts 'n Goblins* (see Wireframe #14's Killer Feature), though that took the comical form of armour flying off rather than grisly, physical injury.

The Ninja Warriors' effect looked cool, yes, but it also gave you a connection to your character once the initial novelty wore off – getting to the end of the stage without having them denuded of flesh became a goal in itself, especially as, in the bustle of an amusement arcade, passers-by could look over your shoulder and see at a glance just how well (or poorly) you were doing. A cyborg ninja almost reduced to a skeleton was a far more striking visual than a dwindling life bar, after all.

The Ninja Warriors' damage system added to the game's anime-style feel of hacking and slashing nimbly through an entire army. Its obvious progenitor was Konami's *Green Beret*, released in 1985, which also involved slicing and dicing your

“Your ninja’s body would be reduced to a striding metal skeleton straight out of *The Terminator*”



- ▲ Red-clad ninja Kunoichi straight off the production line (top) and with damage to the torso (middle).
- ◀ Take a hit to the head, and Kunoichi loses the swishy blonde ponytail.

way through entire army bases of doomed soldiers. But Taito's dedication to upping the pace and flow, in addition to its then-impressive attention to detail in sprite design, made it a major step forward: as well as the battle damage, check out the curlicues of blood that issue forth as you slay another enemy, or the way second playable character Kunoichi's hair swishes back and forth as she struts through the battlefield. In terms of that effortlessly cool, anime swagger, the only late-eighties ninja game that really came close was Capcom's *Strider* (which was, appropriately enough, also a manga series).

Of course, none of this is to say that *The Ninja Warriors* was a particularly deep game, nor one that you'd want to play for more than a few minutes at a time. But like all good arcade games, *The Ninja Warriors* was designed to thrill you in the moment: in exchange for a shiny coin from your pocket, Taito's game offered you the chance to hop into the tabi shoes of an implacable killing machine, that absolutely would not stop, ever, until it was dead. 🍷

The Other Warriors

Home versions of *The Ninja Warriors* couldn't hope to replicate its three-screen setup, but the best of them retained the damage system we've been banging on about here; the PC Engine version, released by Taito in 1989, featured a particularly nice rendering of the original game's storming soundtrack, and while it had to cut a lot of other things out due to the console's limitations, those exposed cyborg body parts were present and correct. The hack-and-slash antics continued in *The Ninja Warriors Again*, programmed by Natsume for the Super Nintendo in 1994. It was a gorgeous-looking game – so gorgeous, it returned as a souped-up remake in 2019's *The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors* for PS4 and Switch – but it eschewed the first game's damage system in favour of a broader roster of characters whose skin only fell off when they died. They're both still great, beautifully crafted beat-'em-ups, though.

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